5-2011

The Staircase: Evolution of Design and Use in Elite, Domestic Virginia Architecture 1607-1812

Erin Marie Holmes  
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation  
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/399

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
The Staircase:
Evolution of Design and Use in
Elite, Domestic Virginia Architecture
1607-1812

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from
The College of William and Mary

by

Erin Marie Holmes

Accepted for High Honors (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

James P. Whittenburg, Director

Carl Lounsbury

Edwin Pease

Williamsburg, VA
April 2011
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................. iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ........................................................................................................ iv
ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................... v
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 2
CHAPTER II. THE FIRST STEP – 1607-1650 ........................................................................... 7
CHAPTER III. A STEP FORWARD – 1650-1700 ......................................................................... 14
CHAPTER IV. STEPPING UP – 1700-1750 .............................................................................. 24
CHAPTER V. STAIR MASTERS – 1750-1776 ............................................................................ 40
CHAPTER VI. STAIRWAYS TO HEAVEN – 1776-1812 ........................................................ 47
CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSIONS .................................................................................................. 56
APPENDICES ............................................................................................................................. 58
BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................................... 73
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would never have even begun without the support of my thesis director and academic advisor, James P. Whittenburg, who continues to believe in me no matter how many emails he gets from me between four and six o’clock in the morning, and without whose encouragement I would have fallen more times than even I can imagine. I would also like to say a special thanks to the members of my committee, Edwin Pease and Carl Lounsbury, for their time and insights on this project.

I would be remiss if I did not also thank those scholars who helped me along the way: Robert Self, Director of Preservation at Monticello; David A. Brown of The College of William and Mary; William M. Kelso, Director of the Jamestown Rediscovery Project; Jamie May, Staff Archaeologist for the Jamestown Rediscovery Project and excavator at Arlington; Paul Mark, Director of Preservation at Stratford Hall; Kim Adkins Schmidtmann, Museum Collections Supervisor at Shirley Plantation; Suzanne T. Savery, Director of Preservation and Collections at the Wickham-Valentine Museum; Melissa H. Sleeth, Director of Visitor Services at the Wickham-Valentine Museum; Katrina White-Brown of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Susan Kern of The College of William and Mary; Edward A. Chappell of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Besides providing me with direction and resources for my research, many doors to some truly magnificent historic sites were opened to be during the course of my research because of these amazing individuals and I cannot begin to say how greatly I appreciate their help.

A further thanks must be said to the family and friends who made certain I ate and slept while researching and writing, despite my protests. A special thanks to my parents, John and Kathryn Holmes, for believing in me despite their skepticism that there were fifty pages to be written about stairs and to my dear friends for supporting me through sleepless weeks of writing and especially for continuing to be my friends no matter how many bruises I brought home from falling up stairs.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS & TABLES

Measurements of Bacon’s Castle Stair Tower ................................................................. 18
Bacon’s Castle First-Floor Passage, Historic American Building Survey ......................... 58
Bacon’s Castle, Garret Landing, Historic American Building Survey ............................... 59
Bacon’s Castle Stair, Balusters, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ............................................. 60
Bacon’s Castle Stair, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ............................................................ 60
Peyton Randolph House, West Stair, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ..................................... 61
Peyton Randolph House, Center-Passage Stair, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ......................... 62
Thomas Nelson House, Main Stair, Historic American Building Survey ......................... 63
Thomas Nelson House, Main Stair, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ........................................ 63
Shirley Plantation “Floating Stair” from Below, Courtesy of Shirley Plantation .................. 64
Carter’s Grove, Main Stair, Historic American Building Survey ..................................... 65
Westover, Main Stair Looking Down, Historic American Building Survey ....................... 66
Westover, Main Stair Baluster Detail, Historic American Building Survey ....................... 66
Westover, Main Stair, First Floor Passage, Historic American Building Survey ............... 66
Stratford Hall, Northwest Stair, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ............................................. 67
Stratford Hall, South Stair from Ground Floor to First Floor, Photo by Erin M. Holmes .......... 68
Stratford Hall, South Stair from First Floor to Attic, Photo by Erin M. Holmes .................. 68
Stratford Hall, Ladder from Attic to Catwalk, Photo by Erin M. Holmes .......................... 68
Stratford Hall, Catwalk between Chimney towers, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ..................... 69
Monticello, South Stair, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ...................................................... 70
Monticello, North Stair, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ...................................................... 70
Woodlawn Plantation, Main Stair, Historic American Building Survey ........................... 71
Wickham-Valentine House, Main Stair from above, Photo by Erin M. Holmes ..................... 71
Wickham-Valentine House, Main Stair, Photo by Erin M. Holmes .................................... 72
ABSTRACT

The staircase provides a pivot point for understanding human interactions with and within public and domestic spaces – they simultaneously act as barriers and conduits to movement while affecting how people react to the space as a whole. The physical impact of a staircase on the people who interact with it should not be underestimated as it influences the way people react to a space and the people within it, as well as their gaits as they walk through it. This study, in contrast, hopes that by focusing on the evolution of the staircase specifically in Virginia, a more comprehensive study of the staircase’s greater context may be achieved.

The interaction of those inhabiting spaces and how they felt the impact of a staircase will be addressed through considerations of placement and design – the transition from a staircase as something simply functional to a space for lavish social display could be considered an important step toward an increasingly static society. The connection between the Old and New Worlds is particularly clear when comparing the placement and construction the staircase in the Jacobean Bacon’s Castle in Surry, Virginia, which has a separate, enclosed stairwell ascending the back of the elegant brick mansion with eighteenth century examples, such as those at Tuckahoe and Shirley Plantations, and even later examples like Monticello and the Wickham-Valentine House.

The goal of exploring the origins, development, and impact of the staircase in Virginia between the founding of Jamestown and the early national period is to produce a tangible link to a past that often seems overwhelmed by dust and decay. It is often difficult to reconcile material culture with social history to produce something that is relatable and evocative, but in a staircase the historian finds the perfect merging of social meaning and tangible form – not just tangible, but touchable. In moving up and down the staircases that remain from this period, we walk in the steps of history – the stairs force us to change our movement so we do this quite literally – and can take hold of the very banisters that supported generations before us.
The Staircase:
Evolution of Design and Use in
Elite, Domestic Virginia Architecture
1607-1812
CHAPTER I: Introduction

Stairs are important. In the course of a life, we use them daily, we fall up them and down them – both literally and metaphorically – but rarely do we stop to think about them, despite the careful consideration that goes into their construction and placement. Until the nineteenth century and the introduction of the passenger elevator, stairs were the most common form of communication between floors. Though the majority of innovations in staircase construction had been introduced by the time the first multi-storied buildings were constructed in the Chesapeake, the staircases of Virginia provide an important study in the influence that stairs had upon the movement of people and things through a house and the way in which they reflect societal change and economic or class-based divisions, primarily in the interaction between formal stairs and backstairs.

The influence of stairs upon the movement of people and things through a space is twofold. In their oldest forms, stairs acted as the primary means of communication between spaces within a house, taking the place of the modern hallway. Nicholas Cooper, author of *Houses of the Gentry: 1480-1680*, writes that as the important rooms of the English house moved from the ground floor to the first floor, they took on greater ceremonial function and were treated as a formal space with the requisite embellishment. The formalizing of this space led to the distinction between spaces for the upper classes and spaces for those who served them. According to historian Mark Girouard,

The gentry walking up the stairs no longer met their last night’s faeces coming down them. Servants no longer bedded down in the drawing room, or outside their master’s door or in a truckle bed at his feet. They became, if not invisible, very much less visible.

Some form of backstairs had existed in France since the sixteenth century. In England they appeared in embryo in the first half of the seventeenth century, but their

---

systemization seems to have been the work of the great innovator Roger Pratt. He wrote down the principles in 1660, when he had already carried them out at Coleshill… In general, a house should be ‘so contrived…that the ordinary servants may never publicly appear in passing to and from for their occasion there.’…The servant, the contents of the close-stool, and anything that was undesirable or private could move or be moved up and down the backstairs.\(^3\)

This distinction between formal stairs and backstairs was transferred to Virginia as part of the cultural baggage of the colonists, although it would be developed differently and ultimately the most significant statement is reflected in the rejection of the back stair in favor of practical and aesthetic considerations.

The secondary influence of stairs upon movement throughout the house is more important, but remarked upon less. Well-constructed buildings are a series of vertical and horizontal lines. They may have the occasional curved line used in an arch or a window, but the boldest statement comes in the diagonal of the stair. These diagonals are central to the experience of the individual looking at them and using them as stairs. While placed and designed according to architectural rules and aesthetic inclinations, according to historian John Templer, “stairs engage the user’s motions and their senses to a remarkable degree – perhaps more so than any other architectural element.” For Templer, “the enclosing balustrades (or walls) of the flight control the stair user’s movement through the space, and the dimensions of the rises and treads strictly govern the cadence of gait.”\(^4\) A careful examination of the staircases constructed between 1607 and 1812 in elite homes throughout Virginia suggests that this would have been the experience of those individuals utilizing those stairs.

While it is impossible to speak to whether stairs were consciously or unconsciously utilized with these matters in mind, they were taken into consideration by architects to some

---


degree, as demonstrated in Chapter XXVIII of the first volume of Andrea Palladio’s classic, *Four Books on Architecture*:

Staircases will be perfect, if they are spacious, light, and easy to ascend; as if, in some sort, they seem’d to invite People to mount. To make them lightsome, they must have a perfect light, that, as I said, disperses it self equally to all parts. As to their spaciousness, twill be enough, if in respect of the bigness and quality of the fabric, they do not appear too little, or too narrow. Nevertheless they must never be narrower than four foot, to the end that if two Persons meet, they may commodiously pass one by the other. They will be convenient enough with regard to the whole building, if the Arches under the steps are made so large as to hold some Goods, or other necessary things; and convenient likewise for the Persons that come up and down, if the Stairs are not too steep, not the steps too high. Therefore they must be twice as long as broad. The Steps ought not to exceed six Inches in heighth; and if they be lower, they must chiefly be so to long and continu’d Stairs, for they will be so much the easier, because one needs not lift the foot so high: but they must never be lower than four Inches. The breadth of the Steps ought not to be less than a foot, nor more than a foot and a half. The Ancients used to make the Steps of an odd number, to the end that beginning to ascend with the right foot, they might end with the same foot, which they took to be a good Omen, and a greater mark of respect to enter into the Temple. It will be sufficient to put eleven or thirteen Steps at most to a flight, before one comes to half-pace, thus to help weak People, and of short breath, that they might rest a little, and that if something happens to fall from above it may stop there.

Though Palladio built on a much larger scale, his instructions on the construction of stairs are an important articulation of the problems faced by the people using them on a daily basis, reflecting the importance of considering the physical demands that a stair places upon the individual.

Uniting architectural theory with the reality of the people using staircases, John Templer presents a vivid picture of how stairs moved the people using them:

Strictly utilitarian stairs, both ancient and modern, with comparatively small treads and large rises, act to propel us along the stair at a comparatively brisk and business-like pace. Stairs with larger treads and smaller risers encourage us to employ a more leisurely gait, permitting us to linger longer on the stair, to pass more slowly, and to spend more time in sensing the nature of the stair’s setting and its spatial and decorative qualities. Consequently gentler slopes appear early where ceremonial and monumental stairs. They

---

5 Andrea Palladio, *The architecture of A. Palladio; in four books. Containing, a short treatise of the five orders, and the most necessary observations concerning all sorts of building. As Also The different Construction of Private and Publick Houses, High-Ways, Bridges, Market-Places, Xystes, and Temples, with their Plans, Sections, and Uprights. To which are added several Notes and Observations made by Inigo Jones, never printed before. Revis'd, design'd, and publish'd by Giacomo Leoni, a Venetian; Architect to his most Serene Highness, the Elector Palatine. Translated from the Italian original.* (London, 1715), 50.
are the design choice where a visually interesting architectural scene warrants a slower pace or where the stair itself is expected to be impressive.\(^6\) Virginia staircases reflect these very observations in their construction and setting. Throughout the course of this study, the staircases of Virginia reveal tellingly how Virginians altered their homes to reflect societal changes and developing ideas about the construction and decoration of domestic spaces.

Important to note is that observed patterns of movement on stairs demonstrate a consistency between all users. This is most clearly shown through John Templer’s study of how stairs erode in a regular pattern, demonstrating regular wear along particular paths.\(^7\) Further support of this can be seen in architect Francis D.K. Ching’s *A Visual Dictionary of Architecture*, which defines a specific “walking line,” as “A line 18 in. (457 mm) in from the centerline of a handrail, along which the run of a winder is the same as a flier. Also called line of travel.”\(^8\)

From the utilitarian staircases constructed in the first elite houses at Jamestown Island to the elegant curved flight of the main stair in the early Wickham-Valentine House in Richmond, Virginia, in second decade of the nineteenth century, there is a progression in terms of space, design, and orientation. This progression had an impact on and was in turn affected by other changes in the house, as discussed by historian Mark Wenger in “The Central Passage in Virginia: Evolution of an Eighteenth-Century Living Space,” such as the creation of the central passage during the eighteenth century and the orientation of the chimneys in a peripheral

---


manner, creating social boundaries from what was once a simple means of moving between
domestic spaces.9

Ultimately, space is power. It represents the opportunity to assert oneself over something,
potentially to the exclusion of others, impressing one’s own personality and intentions upon
one’s environment. This development of space is overwhelmingly organic, shaped by what
makes sense and reflecting perceived needs rather than actual needs as the design is developed to
accommodate the demands of the environment and the influences of the time. Though the
development of space is organic, the use of space is deliberate; demonstrating an active
accommodation of the space one has to work with: whether it is to be used as a formal or private
space, how furniture is to be arranged within it and who has access to it determining its
arrangement.

This analysis of Virginia’s staircases is a study of this dichotomy between the
development of architectural space and the use of social space. On an individual level, this study
hopes to illuminate the experience of the people using the stairways in elite Virginia homes, with
special focus on the physical impact that stairs had upon the individuals using them. From a
broader historical perspective, however, stairs offer insight into themes of social change within
the household and reflecting social change throughout Virginia. Staircases offer an evocative
glimpse into the experience of the household, revealing change over time – both as part of the
larger theme of the evolution of the staircase and within the houses themselves, where staircases
were changed or moved – and the impact that communicating passages had upon social
connection and social exclusion within the household.

---

*Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, II*. Edited by Camille Wells, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,
1986), 139.
CHAPTER II:  
The First Step – 1607-1650

As with all things Virginian, to go back to the beginning requires stepping back past the obvious beginning—May 1607 when the first colonists arrived at Jamestown Island—to the English precedents that those colonists (and the ones that followed them) brought with them when they first stepped ashore. This is applicable to the structures that they built once they finished fortifying the fort at Jamestown Island and includes the construction of the stairs they used once they began to build structures containing two stories. The first years of the colony’s foundation were fraught with political tensions and more basic concerns for survival, but it was apparent from the beginning that this was not a temporary venture and the colony at Jamestown was meant to grow, thereby placing importance upon the construction of impressive and, if not permanent, long-lasting structures for the purposes of organization and governance. To this end, the 105 men and boys who first stepped onto Virginia’s shores and those who followed them would have turned to the architecture with which they were familiar.¹

The established precedent for staircases in English architecture evolved significantly and strategically during the course of the sixteenth century, resulting in a change from a narrow stair that conserved space or a straight flight of steps that was exceptionally steep and narrow to a more formal, spacious stair. The early sort of functional stairs served merely as a means to move from one level to another. The later type of formal staircase incorporated important elements of public space and often of social presentation. Nicholas Cooper notes in *Houses of the Gentry:*

The very scarcity of surviving staircases before the sixteenth century demonstrates how unsatisfactory later generations found them.” This scarcity, while detrimental to those seeking to study extant examples, provides a clear understanding of the social transitions reflected in the greater household – changes that can be dated back to the shift from the medieval hall and parlor, wherein the household formed one community under a single roof, to much more elaborate uses of space that included more and more specialized rooms.

Recognizing the strategic role that this transition played in the progression of English understanding of the proper construction of domestic architecture for elite households is key to interpreting the changes that developed in the North American colonies much later. In a medieval household, there would have been substantially less incentive to utilize structural means of communication that implied exclusivity when the common practice was to entertain all visitors, family, and servants in the communal hall. However, the need for space and for more impressive structures invariably pushes builders out of the confines of the basic plan – often in a vertical direction.

Expansion into this space during the medieval period likely derived from the coincidence of several practical considerations. As Mark Girouard has it in *Life in the English Country House*:

The position of the great chamber on the first floor, or even higher, probably originated partly because first-floor rooms were drier, partly for reasons of security; a great chamber up a narrow newel staircase was easier to defend in an emergency, and the higher it was placed the larger windows could be without making the building it was in vulnerable to attack. But when defense became of less importance, the position retained a ceremonial aptness. The retreat of the lord from the hall to the great chamber may have led to a lessening of the sense of community in the household, but it accentuated its sense of hierarchy.

---

The introduction of the elevated great chamber diminished the importance of the communal hall and placed greater emphasis on the progression from the ground floor to the first-floor, leading to the broadening of the stairs leading to this floor and their enclosure as a separate, clearly defined space. For Girouard, this definition of the stair as a separate space seems to reflect the development of formal stairs leading to the great chamber in the middle of the sixteenth century, a change that also produced variation in the materials used to construct and embellish this space.

Up till the end of the century, main staircases were usually of stone, and turned in broad flights round a square stone newel. At Montacute the newel is decorated with shell-headed alcoves; at Burghley the staircase has a stone vault, magnificently coffered in the French manner. In the early seventeenth century improved techniques of joinery produced the open-well wooden staircase, and such staircases, often resplendently carved and painted, became so fashionable that stone ones were sometimes taken out to make way for them.4

While it is tempting to interpret the new prominence of the formal stair as a step toward the designation of stairwells as those for the use of family and guests and less formal stairs as those for servant use, it is important to note that the traditional construction of stairs regularly produced paired stairs, often in turrets at the back or end of the house or mirroring one another at opposite ends, and as reflected at Chastleton House in Oxfordshire, where according to Nicholas Cooper, “Though the best stair … is an open well, an architecturally more dramatic form than the closed well at the low end, the low-end stair would not have disgraced the owner in his daily use of it.”5

It is impossible to apply the English precedent to the elite domestic spaces of Jamestown without considering the vernacular architecture of England during the same period. Although the elites would have directed the planning for construction, it would have been executed by men of the common sort coming from a number of different places throughout England, each with its

---

4 Ibid, 93.
own building tradition. This transfer of building practices has been thoroughly documented within the fort by archaeologist William Kelso in *Jamestown: The Buried Truth*, which describes the use of “mud-and-stud” architecture for the fort’s barracks – a building practice used for many centuries that was common to eastern Lincolnshire. As slow and insubstantial as the evolution of stairs in elite houses was between the medieval period and the late sixteenth century, vernacular architecture changed even more slowly, though the commonsense changes in the space allocated to the stair seem to have progressed at the same rate.

The significance of vernacular English architecture as a precedent for construction at Jamestown is seen in the close resemblance it bears to forms interpreted by the gentlemen who populated the fort during its earliest period. It is difficult to identify the staircases of elite English architecture in the cramped spaces of the fort period, but their vernacular counterparts are much more easily recognized. As R. W. Brunskill explains in the *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture*:

The vernacular counterpart of the stone spiral staircase of the medieval castle is usually found alongside a fireplace where its steeply tapered steps describe on half revolution in rising from one floor to the other. Quite often, and especially in the north-west, such a staircase was fitted into a projecting turret and, following an earlier architectural fashion, developed into a series of straight flights of solid stone or timber steps around a solid core.

This description reflects that of the three-sided foundation adjacent to Structure 176. Councilor’s Row (Structure 175) and Governor’s Row (Structure 176) at Jamestown Island, together, were the first examples of elite domestic architecture in Virginia and likely built between 1611 and 1614 as the result of Governor Thomas Gates’ arrival in the colony, with a later addition being

---

made between 1617 and 1619 at the direction of Captain Samuel Argall.\textsuperscript{8} The construction of a formal residence for the governor was an indication of the transfer of real power to the governor in Virginia, a departure from the governing council that would earlier have been reliant upon the direction of the king himself. This formal residence had been called for by the 1609 Virginia Company charter vesting the Company with the commercial and governmental affairs of the colony, and its execution demonstrated their commitment to a permanent settlement.\textsuperscript{9}

Interpretation of Councilor’s Row suggests staircases first described, a “spiral staircase…alongside a fireplace,” placed against the three H-shaped hearths that created six separate fireplaces to heat the living spaces. Governor’s Row, however, poses a challenge in interpretation as the result of the placement of the chimney upon a filled well (Structure 177), into which it collapsed. Further, a unique feature of Structure 176 is a three-sided projection from the south wall. According to archaeologists William Kelso and Beverly Straube:

A three-sided brick foundation was found attached to the exterior of Structure 176’s south wall. The foundation extended 4’ beyond the south wall line, 10’ from the southeast corner of Structure 176, and 4’ from the southeast corner of Structure 175; it was not centered in the south room. The south wall foundation was uninterrupted where it was attached…

The bricks…secured by shell-tempered mortar, were low fired and soft, and some appeared underfired. This kind of soft brick appeared occasionally in the double hearth…The foundation was two brick-courses wide on all three sides with a width of 1’7”. While the south side of this feature was parallel to the south wall of the building, the other two walls were set at roughly 45 angles from the wall. Because its location and elevation would have provided a view of nearly the entire interior of James fort, this feature may have been the foundation of a bay window or balcony, or possibly an elevated gun mount.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{9} William M. Kelso, Jamestown: The Buried Truth, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 23.
The evidence produced by this feature suggests multiple possibilities, including the possibility that the feature accommodated a staircase, indicated by its interpretation as the “projecting turret” of the English vernacular and the advice offered by Andrea Palladio that stairs should never be made narrower than four feet so that if two people meet on them they can comfortably pass each other.¹¹

A further interpretation of this feature as a possible location for a staircase in this building – a necessity for a structure intended to convey the permanence of English settlement in the New World and the authority of the governor or his deputy – can be drawn from the presence of the soft-fired brick, which occasionally appears in double hearths. This could suggest that the staircase was initially intended to rest against the end of Structure 177 (the chimney base that descended into the well), but upon the determination that the foundation was not substantial enough (indicated by a pit cellar, Pit 13, dug at that same end of the chimney for an earlier earthfast structure) was moved to a more sound location in line with another vernacular practice.¹²

With the interiors of Structures 175 and 176 undefined, it is difficult to offer an interpretation of this early period of elite architecture, though the elite and vernacular English precedents offer some insight. It is clear, however, that they had continued to use English forms when constructing staircases within these structures, in regards to their utilization of space and form, at least in part because no one thought to remark upon them. Since a simple ladder, while serving its purpose, would have failed to convey the permanence, authority and social elevation

¹¹ Andrea Palladio, *The architecture of A. Palladio; in four books. Containing, a short treatise of the five orders, and the most necessary observations concerning all sorts of building, As Also The different Construction of Private and Publick Houses, High-Ways, Bridges, Market-Places, Xystes, and Temples, with their Plans, Sections, and Uprights. To which are added several Notes and Observations made by Inigo Jones, never printed before. Revis'd, design'd, and publish'd by Giacomo Leoni, a Venetian; Architect to his most Serene Highness, the Elector Palatine. Translated from the Italian original.* (London, 1715), 50.

necessary for the Governor’s House at Jamestown, we can interpret the findings at Jamestown the earlier precedents as confirmation that the early English form – a cramped, but serviceable, stair – was retained.

This earliest period of English colonization in Virginia offers few extant buildings to consider and only the foundations of the buildings at Jamestown offer a hint of what elite domestic architecture would have looked like during the period – not necessarily “polite” architecture, but elite because of its use and its inhabitants. To go beyond that hint historians must rely heavily upon circumstantial evidence. However, the lost staircases of Jamestown during this period serve as an important reminder that although they no longer remain – in fact did not even leave behind foundations for historians to interpret – they were in fact present, for contemporary accounts make it certain that these structures had two stories, and a second story makes very little sense unless one can reach it.
CHAPTER III:
A Step Forward – 1650-1700

The second half of the seventeenth century provides the first examples of what later observers think of as elite Virginia architecture. These homes, notably the John Page House, Bacon’s Castle (alternately known as Arthur Allen’s brick house), Arlington, and Fairfield Plantation represent the domination of the landscape by plantations centered on massive brick mansions. Of these examples, only Bacon’s Castle in Surry County survives to demonstrate the Jacobean cross-plan later supplanted by the symmetrical designs of the Georgian period.

The continued use of the hall-parlor design and the introduction of the cross-plan design into elite homes of the period are indicative of the slow changes being made as society became less fluid and sought a degree of stability. The construction of significant brick structures, both public and domestic, reflects this increasing permanence, as noted by architectural historian Carl Lounsbury, in “In the absence of a convenient supply of stone, brick became the symbol of permanence in Williamsburg, and every public building of consequence was constructed of this material.”¹ Thus, by articulating the wealth, power, and determination to create a lasting impact upon the New World, the brick, cross-plan house was a statement that would have required little clarification for those who encountered it in the Virginia landscape.

The John Page House excavated at Bruton Heights in Williamsburg, Virginia provides a clear representation of the potential of this form. The cross-plan of Jacobean architecture provides for the placement of the stairs within a tower to the rear of the structure, enclosing the multi-level, half-turn stair within a space completely separate from the rest of the house. The archaeological excavations at Bruton Heights have determined that the structure likely rose a

story and a half, with the towers rising to a full two stories. Additionally, evidence for steps leading to the stair tower suggests a back door that entered directly into the stair tower.

Further evidence from the archaeological excavations identifies access to the finished cellar by means of the stair tower:

There were two ways to enter the cellar: through an outside entrance known as a cellar cap (Fig. 30) that was located on the back of the house and featured brick steps with wooden nosings, or by descending a wooden staircase in the stair tower located at the back of the house. Evidence for a staircase on the right side of the tower comes from two holes chopped in the northern wall for framing and a small hole in the tile floor that supported a newel post around which the stairs wound (Fig. 31). The cellar rooms beneath the towers were separated from the rest of the cellar by wooden partition walls, with the porch tower wall later being encased in brick. Entry into the main part of the cellar would have been through wooden doors.

This, in combination with the back entrance into the stair tower and the tower’s extension beyond the one and a half stories of the main structure reflects the utilization of the stair tower as the main means of communicating between floors and rooms. As historian Dell Upton has noted, “Virginia's early hall-chamber houses, although lacking a passage on the first floor, often had one on the second floor to separate the sleeping chambers from the stair landing.” Upton further suggests the identification of passageways with stairs and entrances, placing a greater emphasis upon movement through those spaces than upon those spaces as social barriers.

The hall-parlor layout of the space, as well as the finished cellar, reflect the communal and convivial nature of social interaction during the late seventeenth century and the construction of the house itself – its style, materials, embellishments, and furnishings – conveyed Page’s status within the community without relying upon the clearly defined social barriers that would

---

mark the solidification of social stratification in the eighteenth century. The definition of the staircase, and the surrounding space, as a barrier between the formal and the familiar can be recognized in the eighteenth century changes to another cross-plan home originally constructed only a few years after the John Page house was completed at Middle Plantation.

This house, originally known as “Arthur Allen’s brick house,” is Bacon’s Castle in Surry County, Virginia – so named during the eighteenth century for the brief period of time in 1676 when it was taken over by rebels as part of Nathaniel Bacon’s rebellion. Bacon’s Castle, constructed by Arthur Allen in 1665, is a cross-plan structure and the only significant brick home still remaining from the seventeenth century, making it an invaluable resource. Laid in English bond, the brick structure rises three stories, including the garret, and has a habitable cellar that was primarily used for storage according to the inventories of Arthur Allen II and Arthur Allen III and may have also served as a kitchen for some period of time. The Research Bulletin for Bacon’s Castle, published by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA), summarizes the earliest history of the home thus,

On October 3, 1661, Allen purchased 500 acres from John and Peleg Dunstan, the sons and heirs of John Dunstan between Lower Chippokes and Lawn Creek adjoining his other land. Four years later Arthur Allen built his magnificent brick home, Bacon’s Castle, on this tract. It was 1665 and he was 57 years old. Why he built such an elegant house in the wilds of Virginia when he was relatively old man is unknown. Also unknown are the models Allen used to design his house, the names of the builders and workmen and how long it took to complete the house.\(^5\)

The dearth of written records regarding the house’s construction has been largely overcome by the APVA’s efforts to preserve the structure, revealing information about the original construction of the home and subsequent changes.

There is, however, a notable lack of information regarding the stair tower – as far as can be ascertained, it has not been substantially changed between the first floor and garret since the seventeenth century, though the garret itself shows evidence of alteration, likely from the mid-eighteenth century. The handrail and balusters were altered during the eighteenth century as part of Elizabeth Bray Allen’s modernization of the structure during this same period, which also included the creation of a central passage between the hall and parlor of the earlier cross-plan design. The run of stairs between the cellar and first floor, however, has been completely removed and replaced. The APVA Research Bulletin provides only a brief mention of the work to restore the cellar stair, “The stair tower has had at least two different runs from the cellar to the first floor, nothing of which remains. Three missing ceiling joists have been replaced in their sockets to support a reconstructed stairway and the flooring above.”

An examination of the exterior of the structure reveals the extent of Elizabeth Bray Allen’s determination to change Bacon’s Castle as architectural ghosts representing exterior manifestations of interior changes over time – the addition and repositioning of windows to create a more symmetrical alignment within the interior is especially marked in the exterior brickwork. The stair tower, however, shows no such changes despite the off-center placement of the windows, though the exterior doors providing access to the stair tower may have been blocked at this time. This placement of these windows would not have impacted the interior as noticeably as those in the hall and parlor (which would be then divided by a central passage) as only the windows on the north side of the tower would have been visible through the open doorway to the stair tower. Additional windows on the east side of the stairs would only have

6 Site visit to Bacon’s Castle, Surry County, Virginia. September 18, 2010.
been visible upon entering the stair tower, placed at the head of each landing and illuminating the staircase throughout the day.

A careful study of the construction of the staircase itself reveals a curious disparity between the rises of the individual flights of stairs. The run of each tread is consistent at 8.5” but as the stairs increase, the rise increases. These measurements exclude the basement stairs because of their origin during the most recent restoration. The total difference in height between individual flights is nearly unnoticeable, but the total difference in height between the steps of the first flight of stairs (which is visible from the central passage and entrance) and those leading to the garret is a full inch. The stairs also become wider as they go higher, with the difference in the length of the tread of the first flight being 3.5” narrower than that of the flight of stairs leading to the garret (Figure 2.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flight</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Rise</th>
<th>Run</th>
<th>Length of Tread</th>
<th>Number of Stairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flight 1 (1st floor entrance) quarter-turn</td>
<td>6.75”</td>
<td>8.5”</td>
<td>30.5”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight 2 quarter-turn</td>
<td>6.75 - 7”</td>
<td>8.5”</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight 3 quarter-turn</td>
<td>7”</td>
<td>8.5”</td>
<td>33.5”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight 4 quarter-turn</td>
<td>7.5”</td>
<td>8.5”</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight 5 quarter-turn</td>
<td>7.75”</td>
<td>8.5”</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight 6 (top)</td>
<td>7.75”</td>
<td>8.5”</td>
<td>34”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basement (restored)</td>
<td>6.5”</td>
<td>9”</td>
<td>29.5”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is difficult to interpret how this would have affected the individuals inhabiting Bacon’s Castle, but the records of how the garret was used provide potential insight into the difference in height between the stairs on the lower floors and those on the upper floors. In his 1991 History Ph.D. dissertation, Alexander O. Boulton notes that:
Although the house no doubt had auxiliary structures surrounding it, the house’s attic with its unfinished timbers and its fireplaces was likely the sleeping space for many of the workers on the estate. These workers descended the single stairway, along with other members of the household, and some of them likely worked in the ground level kitchen with its large fireplace. The structure of the house as it has been preserved makes it clear that workers and family members of the household had constant and continual contact with one another.  

These conclusions are supported by the lack of detail and rough finishing of the structure of the garret itself, which is mostly unheated, poorly lit, and characterized by the exposed timbers that were covered during eighteenth century renovations on the lower floors. Further, Arthur Allen’s initial property acquisition upon his arrival in Virginia in March 1650 included 200 acres “for the transportation of three servants and Alice Tucker, who either was – or would shortly become – his wife.”

Though no inventory was taken following the death of the first Arthur Allen, subsequent inventories in 1711, 1728 and 1755 reflect that garret was used for storage (lumber, various textiles, and an assortment of old furniture appears on the lists), but that it also housed servants or household slaves as various beds and bedding are noted in each inventory.

Even as the construction of the stair tower clearly demarcates the difference between elite and servant living spaces, it also provides an undeniable link between all the space of the household and the people who inhabited them. The living spaces for those who worked for the Allen family would have been rougher, the stairs being higher and more uncomfortable to climb than the much lower ones on the first floor, but there would have been a significant degree of interaction between members of the household as they moved between the kitchen in the

---

basement, the formal rooms on the first floor, the family rooms on the second floor, and the storage and additional living spaces in the garret.

Historian Edward Chappell, notes that Arlington, the Custis mansion constructed in the 1670s in Northampton County, Virginia, represents a variation on the Jacobean tradition,

There is a relatively strong tradition among Chesapeake, Bermudan, and English houses of Arlington’s era to locate the stair in a separate rear space rather than in the hall, or best room. Bacon’s Castle (1665) in Surry County and John Page’s 1662 house at Middle Plantation illustrate one means, using a narrow rear stair projection, while the 1658 Priory at Brant Broughton, Lincolnshire and c.1700 Verdmont in Smith’s Parish, Bermuda, have a stair passage between two rear rooms (Barley 1961:219, Carson 1994:632-33).…Accepting the walls of the larger (east) cellar as the supports for first-floor walls at Arlington would seem to place a generous stair passage at rear center, between two rooms that are slightly deeper but nonetheless smaller than the west rooms.11

Chappell further suggests that the 2’3” by 4’6” cellar extension beneath the northeast room could have served as an internal stairway between the kitchen and its communicating storage space. This small staircase and the substantial one at the rear of the building would serve as the only means of communication between the floors of Arlington. As the remains of Arlington are predominantly archaeological, architectural interpretation of the structure has been drawn heavily from the vestiges of the ground floor.

Chappell’s conjectural drawing of Arlington’s ground floor suggests that the stair passage incorporated an open well, half-turn staircase accessed from each of the four ground-floor rooms. The front rooms are arranged in a hall-parlor floor plan that prevents direct access to the staircase (as by means of a central passage or exterior door). Additionally, the staircase would not have been visible to visitors to the home unless they were invited to the upper floors, precluding the need for the elaborately carved embellishment that would come to decorate the staircases of the eighteenth century.

The flow of traffic throughout the house would likely resemble that at Bacon’s Castle, with all the members of the household interacting in the same 13’ by 15’ (approximate) space whenever they moved between floors. While Bacon’s Castle demonstrates the change created by the construction of a central passage leading to the staircase, it is possible to infer that the lack of an additional communicating space would have resulted in greater interaction between members of the household on the substantial back stair. Further, if the northeast room was the kitchen and the extended cellar space below was utilized for storage the small staircase between them would have been predominantly used by slaves and servants using the kitchen rather than the family and visitors – an interpretation more in line with the constricted space below.

Transition toward spaces used exclusively by servants and, more commonly as the seventeenth century progressed, slaves is recognizable in the creation of staircases principally for communicating between work and storage spaces. Though such passages would not have been off-limits to family, they created a demarcation between public and private spaces as evidenced by their rougher and less commodious construction and appointment. The separation of public and private spaces and the creation of multiple publics for different genders, classes, and races demonstrate a move away from the home as coming together of different groups as part of the same household – a key part of the ideology behind elite housing in the early days of the colony and in England prior to colonization at Jamestown, emphasizing the inclusion of all members of the household under the protection of a single patriarch. The creation of multiple staircases in elite domestic architecture of Virginia reflects the transition away from the unceremonious hall and parlor arrangement toward a more formal spatial composition.

In the very last years of the seventeenth century, the construction of Fairfield Plantation in Gloucester, Virginia by Lewis Burwell II forecasts many of the architectural changes that would come in the first half of the eighteenth century. Burwell’s fortuitous marriage to Abigail, the only daughter of Nathanial Bacon Sr., nearly doubled the family’s fortune, and following her death in 1692, he began extensive construction on the plantation. The mansion is dated by a cartouche (to date unrecovered, but appearing in numerous recollections and photographs) inscribed “L.A.B. 1694” high on brick chimneys.  

Burwell, who was active in the planning and construction of the College of William and Mary, incorporated some innovative architectural features more commonly recognized in the Georgian period of the early eighteenth century and produced a composite of Georgian and Jacobean forms. Archaeological evidence has confirmed that Fairfield originally followed a T-shaped plan with a symmetrical, five-bay façade, a hipped roof, dormer windows, triple diagonally-set chimney stacks, and a two story extension of the south wing as well as a vaulted cellar.

An interpretation of the interior is difficult, though archaeologists Thane Harpole and David A. Brown note that “The basement plan likely formed a footprint for the room divisions of the first floor, resulting in a hall or parlor or central hall organization.” In terms of the placement and impact of the staircase, the determination of whether the rooms were divided in a hall and parlor plan or a two rooms with a central passage is significant as it effects how it was

---


15 Ibid.
first viewed by visitors to the home, how it was used by the household, and whether a secondary staircase was required. Harpole and Brown provide further insight on this placement, writing that

The symmetrical layout of Fairfield’s north façade suggests a similarly symmetrical interior, possibly divided into two main rooms with a central hall leading to the southern wing. The staircase was likely situated in this central hall, or perhaps in the chamber beyond.

Willie Graham’s conjectural drawing of the first floor plan corresponds with this interpretation and appears to acknowledge the possibility of a secondary staircase in the south wing. The possibility of this final step in the direction of the eighteenth century and the solidification of Virginia’s social stratification identifies Fairfield as a point of transition between the Jacobean cross-plan and its consequentially unified household and the Georgian separation between visitor, family member, and slave.
CHAPTER IV:  
Stepping Up – 1700-1750

The prevalence of Georgian architecture during the first half of the eighteenth century resulted in a significant change in the design, placement, and therefore the use of the staircase in the homes of Virginia’s elite. These changes, large and small, produced the showcased staircase which demonstrated the owner’s wealth and taste. Upon entering the Georgian home, the staircase was the first architectural feature to be encountered by any visitor, drawing the eye toward the second floor and emphasizing the grandness of scale of both the house and the staircase – better accomplished in some houses than in others. Further, the main staircase became both an access point and an obstacle to slaves working in the house, providing them with an easy route to the upper floors while forcing them to move around it during formal occasions.

But even as the standards for the typical Georgian stair were being set, a number of staircases during the first part of the eighteenth century challenged these standards with innovative designs or a greater reliance on earlier designs’ composition and orientation within the house. There is no clear progression from one style and orientation to another, merely a point of introduction for features that affected the placement or design of the staircase and its subsequent appearance in structures thereafter. The most significant of these features, the central passage, had little obvious relationship to the staircase itself and is typically interpreted as an independent change to the floor plan of the structure, but is an important factor in determining the staircase’s placement and therefore had a considerable impact upon the movement of people and things throughout the space.

Historian Mark Wenger offers the most comprehensive statement on the significance of the central passage in Virginia architecture, identifying the central passage as having evolved “from its beginnings as an agent of social control to become a viable living space and, ultimately,
an icon of status—a symbol of the social distinctions it had once enforced.”¹ Wenger’s analysis interprets the evolution of the central passage as social barrier resulting in the formalization of domestic spaces. However, the completion of this formalization of domestic spaces continued through the second half of the eighteenth century.

On the subject of the stair as a component of the central passage, Wenger notes how distinct it becomes from the central passage as the terminology for that space changed

Concurrent with this change in nomenclature was a tendency to give the passage—or hall—an identity of its own, separate and distinct from that of the stair. George Mason’s stair at Gunston Hall stands beyond an archway, expressing, if only equivocally, its separateness from the rest of the passage. In some instances, the stair was removed from the passage altogether, as at Sabine Hall or Mount Airy.²

Wenger bases this observation on historian Dell Upton’s study of early vernacular architecture in southeastern Virginia, which suggests that an effort was made to deemphasize the stair and to emphasize the passage as an entry to the first floor but acknowledges that some builders chose to treat the stair as a “dramatic element” though he suggests that the stair was placed as inconspicuously as possible. Unfortunately, his sample is dominated by vernacular, rather than elite, examples—structures that served a much smaller audience than those whose staircases were showcases.³

Elite domestic spaces took advantage of the practical opportunities for space and circulation of air offered by the central passage⁴, but further utilized the passage as space to prominently feature the staircase, which included elaborate carving and ornamentation and the

² Ibid, 141.
incorporation of costly woods. The most exemplary of these for which there is a known date of construction is also among the earliest – Tuckahoe plantation, constructed by Thomas Randolph at Manakin in Goochland County begun in 1733, and later expanded after 1730, likely during the 1750s. Tuckahoe features two staircases situated across from one another on a central hall. The north stair is smaller, but demonstrates a greater application of decoration, while the south stair is larger and has a simpler design.

Tuckahoe’s two staircases express their intended use in more subtle ways than their decoration, however, as the north stair rises in two long flights with a broad half turn landing in between, producing a stair that ascends at a more leisurely pace and lends itself to a pause between flights. The south stair, in contrast, ascends in three flights from the first floor to the second with two quarter turn landings in between. These landings, “divide straight flight stairs into areas of activity and pause” according to architect John Templer in his study of the staircase throughout history. With this in mind, the south staircase becomes a place for a great deal more activity – in keeping with the interpretation that can be drawn from its beautiful, but comparatively less elaborate, decoration.

A clearer example of the relationship between the main stair and the subordinate service stair is found at the Peyton Randolph House in Williamsburg, Virginia. Originally constructed in 1715 by William Robertson, it was purchased by Sir John Randolph in 1721. Sir John Randolph bought the adjacent plot and constructed a home there as well, but it was not until his death in 1737 that his son, Peyton Randolph, built a two-story structure between the two homes

8 Site visit to the Peyton Randolph House, Williamsburg, Virginia. November 2, 2010.
connecting them in 1754.\textsuperscript{9,10} The original structure, later the west wing or the building, utilized a spiral stair interrupted by winders to reach the second floor and a second straight flight of stairs accessed by a door beside the second floor entrance to the open staircase to reach the garret (this staircase no longer exists and has been converted to a storage space). The stair between the first and second floors has since been rebuilt, but the tight space demonstrates how the stair would have confined the movements of the individuals utilizing it as well as the choices of the builders constructing the stair.

This narrow spiral with its high stairs was the only means of communication between the first and second floors in the earliest part of the Peyton Randolph House and contrasts eloquently with the wide dog-leg stair constructed in the central portion of the structure following Sir John Randolph’s death. This open-well, dog-leg stair ascends in two straight flights, the bottom flight having fourteen stairs and the upper flight having ten stairs, interrupted by a half-turn landing 12’ long and 41.5” (approximately 3.5’) wide. The stairs of the lower flight have a rise of 5 ¾”- 6” and a run of 11” and a width of 44”. The stairs of the upper flight have a rise of 5”, a run of 11” and a width of 43” culminating in a top step that rises only 4 ½”. At the head of the lower flight is a massive, compass-headed window 12 panes over 16 panes and the woodwork of the stairwell (apart from the rail and treads) has been painted a soft blue corresponding to the elaborate wallpaper that covers the walls of the passage and stairwell.

The later addition of the center hall and passage provides insight into the way the needs of the Randolph household changed over the course of the first part of the eighteenth century.

When the west wing was initially constructed, it was intended for a much smaller household, one in which people would have been forced together in a much less stratified community. By the time Peyton Randolph constructed the center hall, the household – and its master’s importance – had expanded significantly, becoming more stratified in the process. Randolph was known to be among the largest slaveholders in Williamsburg, owning twenty-seven domestic slaves in addition to other slaves residing on his rural properties\(^{11}\) and became Speaker of the House of Burgesses in 1766, serving as Williamsburg’s representative in that body prior to that time.\(^{12}\)

The stair in the center hall is as spacious as the stair in the original portion of the structure is narrow, its low broad steps offering easy passage to those using the stairs and inviting appreciation of the simple, though elegant woodwork and expensive wallpaper – as well as the view of Peyton Randolph’s extensive Williamsburg property from the massive window at the head of the stairs. The hall itself is sufficiently wide to allow furniture to be situated within it and connects the west wing to the center hall by way of the parlor.

The multiple uses of this space included social activities and a kind of climate control, encouraging the circulation throughout the central passage and adjoining rooms by means of open doors at either end of the passage. Historians Karen Kupperman and Mark Wenger each touch on the potential climate control offered by the central passage, but while Kupperman suggests that houses in the Chesapeake were deliberately constructed to encourage such air circulation\(^{13}\), Wenger argues that while the warm climate of the Chesapeake affected how Virginians used the central passage its role in the actual construction of Chesapeake houses has

---


been overestimated. Regardless, in 1732, William Hugh Grove notes, "The Manner of Building is much alike. They have a broad Staircase with a passage thro the house in the middle which is the Summer hall and Draws the air" demonstrating that the relationship between the stair and passage had been established during the first half of the eighteenth century.

An additional component of such spaces during this period is the presence of large windows. Earlier Jacobean houses of the seventeenth century placed windows in the stair tower as a means of providing light, but later buildings lack windows in secondary stairs. From the windows that provide light to the base and head of the Peyton Randolph service stairs, it is possible to interpret the staircase’s progression from main stair to service stair. The Nelson House in Yorktown, Virginia, provides an example of the standardization of the central-passage form and its subsequent implications for the staircase.

The Nelson House, constructed in 1730 by Yorkton merchant, Thomas “Scotch Tom” Nelson, shows the perfection of many of these design components – a broad staircase in a central passage, lit by two large windows at the top of the stair. The central hall is broad enough to accommodate various activities and reflects Wenger’s analysis of the passage as a social barrier preventing progress deeper into the house. Architectural historian Thomas Waterman offers some useful notes on the Nelson House staircase,

Except for the balustrade of the great stair the interior of Nelson House remains almost intact. The stair apparently was damaged during the active years of the Civil War in Yorktown, but is now restored…There are two rooms on the east side with a lobby and service stair between them, and tow square rooms to the west…The second floor repeats the first except that space for a stair is borrowed from the east rooms…

---

The stair ascended in three flights, an initial long run against the west wall, a short cross run on the south all, and a final run on the east wall. The stair treads, risers, and stronger are original, the balusters and handrail being reproductions of the old. It is exceptionally broad and easy and has a particularly fine terminal scroll.\textsuperscript{18}

This description provides an understanding of the scale, ornamentation, and orientation of the staircases in relation to one another. An examination of the original portions of the staircase reflects Waterman’s comment that the stair was “exceptionally broad and easy” – all three flights of the main stair have an 11 ½” run and the first two flights, visible from the first floor, are 57 ½” wide, with the third flight being 57” wide. The stairs of the initial flight have a rise of approximately 6” with the rise of the second flight decreasing to 5 ¾” and the third flight decreasing to 5 ½”. The run and width of the stairs are consistent with general trends in other main staircases, but the rise contrasts, making the stairs easier to climb as the top is reached.

The other stairs of the Nelson house are reconstructions, but all are poorly lit and comparatively cramped, particularly the service stair that parallels the main stair on the east side of the house. It is not lit by windows and rises in a tight spiral. This relationship between the main stair and the secondary stair is further established in the few records that remain of Nomini Hall, constructed in Westmoreland County between 1725 and 1732 by Robert “King” Carter for his son, Robert Carter II, upon whose death in 1732 the estate would pass to “King” Carter’s grandson, Robert “Councillor” Carter III.\textsuperscript{19} Waterman cites notes taken by Dr. Beale of Westmoreland County describing a secret stair to the attic, which Waterman suggest would have been located in the east end of the southwest room. Waterman further notes that “The children’s


dining room probably was located in the southwest corner, accessible to the exterior through the service stair door, as well as to the second floor without using the main stair.\footnote{Thomas Tileston Waterman, \textit{The Mansions of Virginia: 1706-1776} (New York: Bonanza Books, 1955), 141-143.}

The stairs of Nomini Hall and Nelson House reflect the significant challenges and advantages in researching staircases of the period. Numerous staircases have survived intact – in part, it seems, because they were built to last and maintained as such – and where they have been moved or altered, the surrounding framing reflects the change as construction marks define the rise and run of the original risers, thereby allowing them to be accurately reconstructed. However, the documentary record provides almost no information about the staircases of elite domestic Virginia homes, ostensibly because they were an accepted feature of every multi-story space. One fascinating mention of Nomini Hall’s staircase is found in the writings of Philip Vickers Fithian, tutor to the children of Robert “Councillor” Carter at Nomini Hall.

This passage, from a journal entry on Monday, September 5, 1774, describes a commotion the previous night when someone snuck into the bed of one of the Carter family slaves, Sukey, who was sleeping in the nursery,

That the doors & windows were well secured, but that by some secret manner, unknown to all, the \textit{Thing} opened the Cellar door, went through the Cellar, \& up the narrow dark Stairs (which are used only on necessary occasions, as when the great Stair is washing or on some such account) --- That it left the said Cellar door standing open, \& besides unbar’d \& threw open the East Window in the little Room, in order, as they wisely supposed, to have, if it should be hurried, a ready passage out --- That it had previously put a small wedge in the Lock of the Nursery Door, where several of the young Ladies, \& the said \textit{Sukey} sleep, so that when they were going to Bed they could not Lock nor bolt the door, but this they all believed was done in mischief by the children, \& went thereupon to bed, without suspicion of harm, with the door open --- That Sukey some time in the Night discovered Something lying by her Side which she knew to be a Man by his having Breeches --- That she was greatly surprised, \& cry’d out suddenly to the others that a Man was among them, \& that the Man \textit{tickled} her, \& said \textit{whisk, whisk} --- That on this She left the Bed \& run \& squeezed herself in by the side of Miss Sally the House-keeper, but that by this time the whole Room was awake \& alarmed --- That when the thing knew there was a discovery it stamped several times on the floor, shook the Bedstead by the side of which it lay, rattled the Door several Times \& went down Stairs.
walking very heavy for one bare-foot --- That on its leaving the Room, the House-keeper went to Ben Carts Chamber, & that he rose & they all went down & found the Doors and window as I have mentioned.21

From Fithian’s description, it is possible to interpret that the service stairs of Nomini Hall provided an easy and unseen passage from cellar to attic, with an exterior entrance to the cellar providing access to those stairs. Fithian further notes that those stairs are “used only on necessary occasions, as when the great Stair is washing or on some such account,” suggesting that he would otherwise have been using the main stairs, leaving the “narrow dark Stairs” to the Carter family slaves.22

At another Carter family property often compared to Nomini Hall, the floor plan has been altered to eliminate the secondary staircase. Sabine Hall reflects the consideration given to light the staircase naturally by the use of tall windows flanked by a single window on each floor. Architectural historian Thomas Waterman notes that while the door to the east stair hall remains, it is impossible to establish the original configuration on the west wall because of alterations. Waterman also provides insight into the configuration of space behind the west wall (where a staircase would have been located if there were east and west stair halls),

A more perplexing problem is the space between the chimneys. This is now inaccessible for examination except from the attic and the second floor, where the walls are furred and plastered. It appears that there was a secondary stair here, perhaps reached from the exterior door. However, this now gone, but in the attic can be seen a square brick shaft descending to the north of the southwest chimney, the use of which is unknown. It may be that this area was occupied by a small pantry on the first floor, from which ascended a narrow service stair…The creation of a large drawing room in the first floor could have eliminated this feature except for the utilization of the space between the chimneys, where a “ship’s stair” could have been contrived.23

22 Ibid.
Waterman’s description of the secondary stair reflects the exclusionary tactics inherent in the construction of a secondary stair during this period, which would have heightened the social stratification endemic in this period when Virginia’s gentry sought to establish their dominance of Virginia society in various ways. Delineating between service spaces, public spaces, and private spaces would have further established the hierarchy and the expense required to maintain it, a trend remarked upon by historian Rhys Isaac in *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790*, and further highlighted by an examination of the trends in spatial configuration of homes constructed during this period.\(^{24}\)

Sabine Hall continues the story begun at the Peyton Randolph House by demonstrating the impact of stylistic and social preferences on the placement and use of staircases over time. Sabine’s main staircase is located in a separate stair hall connected to the central passage, but the service stair is accessed only by the conjectural exterior door in the west wall and the doors to individual floors, now long since gone, suggesting that its only use was as a means of separation, giving house staff a means of moving throughout the house without being seen by or interacting with members of the household and visitors. Only later was the service stair closed, making the main staircase the only point of access to the upper floors.

In contrast to the dichotomy of the main stair and the service stair is Shirley Plantation, whose single staircase ascends from the first floor to the third floor through the front hall of the mansion.\(^{25}\) In their article “Shirley Plantation in the Eighteenth Century: A Historical, Architectural and Archaeological Study,” archaeologists Theodore Reinhart and Judith Habicht address many of the questions about the construction date of the “Great House” of Shirley Plantation, disproving Thomas Waterman’s later estimates and establishing that the mansion was


\(^{25}\) Site visit to Shirley Plantation, Charles City, Virginia. October 7, 2010.
completed in 1738.\textsuperscript{26} The grand stair of Shirley plantation demonstrates how a floor plan can be changed, despite convention, to suit a particular feature. Shirley’s construction during the later part of the Georgian period would have implied the creation of a central hall through the center of the house. Instead, one enters directly into a large hall housing the “floating staircase,” which rises directly overhead without visible support. A secondary door in the west wall provides additional access to this hall and its grand staircase.

Remarkable for seeming to float through the three stories of the hall, the stair rises in a series of long, broad flights separated by landings. The initial three steps that precede the first long flight of stairs are particularly low, measuring 6” in rise and 13” in run, with a 47” width, culminating in a quarter-turn landing. The first long flight of eleven stairs has a rise of 6 ½”, a run of 12 ½” and a 47” width, culminating in a quarter-turn landing. The second long flight of nine stairs culminates in a half-turn landing that spans the breadth of the south wall of the main hall, its stairs having the same measurements of the previous flight of stairs. The third long flight has nine stairs, but a rise of only 6” a run of 12 ¾” and a 45” width. The fourth flight has six stairs, each of which has a rise of 6”, a run of 11 ½” and a width of 43 ½”, ending in a quarter-turn landing. The culminating flight of nine stairs progresses along the east wall of the hall, each stair having a rise of 6”, a run of 12 ½” and a width of 43 ½”.

Architectural historian Thomas Waterman offers a few notes on the decorative aspects of the main stair and its construction, which, in combination with the low, wide stairs from top to bottom, produces an exceptional staircase.

The construction is difficult to determine, but the soffits of the steps are so boldly scrolled cross the entire width of the stair that there is scarcely room for even a metal stringer. It seems that a series of wrought-iron straps must have supported blocking for

the treads and risers. This scrolled soffit is a type of free-hanging stair construction employed in fine work in England, but the Shirley stair seems to be unique in this country.

Although the first long flight here is supported by a spandrel partition, three of the four flights from the second landing to the attic floor are flyers. In their sweeping movement they make a spectacular ensemble. The feeling of motion which they impact is accentuated by the rich walnut balusters, the turnings of which parallel the rake of the stair, instead of each tread, as is usual. A continuous diagonal pattern is thus formed by the balusters, and this paper is uninterrupted even by minor posts from newel to the third floor. Not content with the tour-de-force of this great flowing design, the designer then enriched it with a baluster also unique in form.27

Waterman continues with an elaboration of the unique qualities of the balusters that, despite the loss of some features over time because of their impermanent application with glue28, enhanced the impression made by the flowing stair despite its right-angle turns. The underside of the staircase, completely visible from the ground floor, adds to these impressions through the elaborate scrolling of the open soffit.

Though the main staircase at Shirley offers the only route between the first and third floor, the house possesses two additional staircases in more service oriented spaces. The attic stair, reached by a door on the third floor landing that spans the south wall, has a step into the stair itself, before rising in fifteen winding steps, each having a rise of 7” and a run at its narrowest only 1” and at its widest 8”. The entrance to the unlit spiral is 24 1/1” wide, making it impossible for people to pass on the stair. Further, as there is no handrail, the stairs require a degree of concentration just to climb, making carrying loads up and down extremely difficult.

A third stair providing access to the basement runs along the north wall. It has not been established whether this staircase is original, but since it parallels the first long flight and its initial run of three stairs abutting the front windows to take advantage of the natural light, it seems likely. This staircase has a long run of fifteen stairs, each of which has a 7” rise, 10” run,

28 Ibid, 357.
and 35” width, as well as a conveniently placed handrail. It ends on the basement floor with three winders, each of which has a 6” rise. An exterior door in the west wall provides additional access to the basement and is reached by a set of modern concrete stairs.

The three staircases of Shirley plantation demonstrate a change in emphasis toward the end of the Georgian period, making the value of an exceptionally executed form greater than that of underlining the social stratification so important at the beginning of the eighteenth century when the social structure was still in development. The staircases of Shirley plantation, while in quality defining space as service space or a space accessed by the household and its visitors, create a more unified household and utilizing other means of spatial separation, such as separate doors to maintain control over access to particular spaces.

Continuing the emphasis on an exceptional execution of form is Rosewell Plantation in Gloucester, Virginia, begun by Mann Page I in 1725 and completed by Mann Page II in 1737. Though it burned in 1916, the ruins of the house and information collected prior to its destruction continue to provide insight into this impressive colonial home.29 Fortunately for modern historians, a photographic record persists of Rosewell and its staircase prior to the 1916 fire. These photographs reflect architectural historian Thomas Waterman’s assessment of Rosewell’s great stair,

Unrivaled as the finest of all American examples, the stair at Rosewell ascended in an initial long, broad, straight run with a short one under the great arched window and another to the second floor line. All of the finish except that of the stringer and balustrade was destroyed in the alterations, but some details are preserved at Shelly, a Page house nearby, where other fragments from Rosewell may be seen. The balustrade was formed of three turned and spiraled balusters to a step supporting a richly moulded handrail and resting on superb carved brackets. The form of the bracket was that of a scrolled console feathered with acanthus leaves. These were supported on a fine moulded architrave paralleling the soffit of the stair. The triangular spandrel under the first run was fully paneled. The stair was initiated with an intricate volute like those in Salmon’s Plate.

XXXII, terminating in a post carved with tendrils and vines. The newel within the scroll was so large and open that a person could stand by it. The minor posts of the stair were also carved, as were the beautiful pilaster wall responds, preserved at Shelly. The most elaborate motive of the staircase, however, was the fascia board around the well, and this was carved with scrolled leafage, flowers, and rosettes. This carved fascia, almost a repeat of that still remaining at Tuckahoe, was a fine example of the high craftsmanship of the period. The design consisted of scrolled strapwork, with leafage and blossoms, and as a center there was a basket of flowers. The full coverage of the design, the disposition of the accents, and the crispness of the carving were notable features of the fascia. Some of this carved finish may have been imported from England, inspired by the designs of Daniel Marot.30

This description, along with a study of the photographic record, which further attests to the low, broad steps of Rosewell’s great stair, produces a stair at the height of fashion and elegance – in contrast with, yet seeming to reconcile, the disparity between Rosewell’s exterior and floor plan. The exterior implies a Georgian central-passage layout with rooms on either side of that passage, while the floor plan produces the interior layout of a much earlier hall-parlor division of space. Thus, the placement of east and west stair halls midway through the house would have controlled points of access to private spaces. These stair halls were lit by tall windows, like those at Sabine Hall, though they were flanked at each floor by windows on either side. Though it is not clear whether the stairs could be accessed by means of the exterior doors below the large east and west windows, both stair halls were accessible from Roswell’s entrance hall.

Waterman notes that the tall windows in the “pavilions” lit the “landing of the east stair and the hallways of the west stair.” From this it is possible to interpret the east stair as the minor stair, which rose in “two reverse direction flights in a narrow hall.”31 A comparison of the photographs of the east and west stairs demonstrates that the minor stair was not as heavily

31 Ibid, 112,120.
embellished as the great stair and ascended at a much steeper angle, resulting in a faster paced movement up and down stairs.\textsuperscript{32}

The first half of the eighteenth century offers some of the most elaborate staircases of the colonial period while reflecting the striving for status of Virginia’s gentry – in the intricate carving, expensive woods and architecturally sophisticated construction it is possible to interpret the desire of Virginia elites to establish themselves within their own society and within the social spheres of the British gentry. They accomplished this through importing ideas, materials and artisans, but also reaffirmed the social hierarchy through spatial specialization. This spatial specialization is reflected in the points of access to service spaces and private spaces by means of secondary staircases.

If it were not enough to reaffirm the social stratification of this period by emphasizing where one could and could not go within a domestic space, the manner in which main stairs and secondary stairs differed would have made such divisions clear. In their very construction, secondary stairs did not permit leisurely activity, forcing those using them to move at a brisk pace using comparatively high, narrow steps.\textsuperscript{33} Further, the lighting of the purposely-built service stair discourages lingering on the staircase making it an even more uncomfortable space than created by the confines of its walls. At the same time, great stairs of the period have low, broad stairs rising at a leisurely pace and invite those using them to examine the intricate carving of the stairs, elaborate wallpaper, or impressive paneling and are lit by large windows specifically included for that purpose in some cases. The first part of the eighteenth century offers an opportunity to view Virginia society in transition – in the expansion of earlier-constructed domestic spaces, changes that highlight social stratification and the importance of


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
the men creating that space become even more significant, while homes constructed during various points during this period exhibit the priorities of that particular time.
CHAPTER V:  
Stair Masters – 1750-1776

The central passage would continue to have an important impact on the placement of staircases during the three decades encompassing the Pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary periods. During this period, the Georgian plan becomes increasingly predictable – a two-room, double-pile floor plan around a central-hall housing a staircase behind a symmetrical façade. The staircases of this period demonstrate a moderate point in the elaboration of the staircase itself, without the intricate carving of earlier staircases like those at Rosewell and Tuckahoe. At the same time, the broad, sweeping staircase becomes a much more impressive feature of domestic spaces – instead of being tucked into a completely separate stair tower or into a stair hall reached by means of the central passage, the staircase became the defining element of the central passage, even when a degree of separation was achieved through aesthetic interruptions of the passage.

The staircases of this period are remarkably similar, with low, broad steps and a flowing balustrade. The earliest example from this period demonstrates how the rest of the hall was embellished as an extension of the staircase, mimicking the motifs and design choices of the stair to create a sense of unity in the space. This staircase at Carter’s Grove Plantation in James City County utilizes an arch to delineate between the center hall and the slightly smaller stair hall that continues the center-passage. Heavily paneled in dark wood, the main stair at Carter’s Grove ascends in three flights divided by quarter-turn landings to reach the second floor. It hearkens to the heavier ornamentation of the earlier part of the eighteenth century, especially at the landings and in its brackets, which replicate those at Tuckahoe.¹ In his description of the stair, Thomas Waterman makes special note of some of the more unique ornamentation,

Great attention was lavished on the detail of the stair, even the dowels which fix the walnut nosings to the pine treads being covered with plugs in the form of fleur-de-lis. The landings, perhaps unique in America, are inlaid with a geometric pattern in Walnut, like English examples of the period. Like them, too, they may once have been covered with leather, except on occasions of state...As with most other Virginia and English mansions, the great stair terminated at the second floor, though it has now been extended to the third. A unique feature of the Carter’s Grove stair is the broad band of carved fret that defines the soffit of the old curved stair well.²

These exceptional features of the Carter’s Grove stair produce a particularly forceful impression on visitors in terms of the sheer richness and expenditure of material.

After Carter’s Grove, many houses of this period appear to reflect a moderation of scale and elaboration without losing the value of the more heavily elaborated stair. Westover Plantation in Charles City, Virginia has been dated through dendrochronology to 1750, challenging earlier dates attributing its construction to William Byrd II and firmly establishing its construction by William Byrd III.³ Its staircase is simple compared to many others of the period, but nonetheless elegant and its paneling is continued throughout the hall, completed by the plastered ceiling of the hall, which interprets a floral motif in the same flowing pattern of the scrolling on the stair balusters and brackets.

Thomas Waterman offers a brief description of the staircase at Westover, providing a context for the staircase within the scope of Virginia architecture of the colonial period,

The hall is paneled and has a moulded chair rail and a full cornice. On the west wall the stair ascends to the north with a long initial run, then turns on a short cross-run and returns to the south. The balustrade and stringer is all of mahogany, having a moulded handrail, scrolled at the newel, turned and spiraled balusters, as at Sabine Hall, and brackets carved with tight scrolls and leafage. This stair and that of Shirley are the only two major stairs that ascend to the third floor, and, together with the Governor’s Palace, are the only mansions with habitable attics.⁴

² Ibid, 189-190.
Westover’s staircase is a return to the staircase as a unifying feature of the household. An examination of the extensive diaries of William Byrd II, though not useful for understanding the present mansion at Westover Plantation, demonstrates how scattered references can reveal the shape and character of a house – not least of which is determined by its possession of multiple stories. The unification of all three stories of Westover by a single staircase once again throws all those who live and work in the household into the same relatively confined space. Though it would have been easy enough to wait until visitors or members of the household passed by, slaves would have likely encountered their master or mistress on the stairs with some regularity and required them to more carefully consider the timing of their movement through the house.

In his Ph.D. dissertation on the architecture of slavery, Alexander Boulton draws attention to the fact that “Byrd’s relations with his slaves were part of a pattern of social relations that encompassed everyone in William Byrd’s world. The boundary between Byrd’s public and private spheres was extremely fluid.”5 This evaluation of the events and musings illustrated in Byrd’s *Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover* leads Boulton to describe Byrd’s perception of himself as that of “biblical patriarch or as a feudal lord,”6 an interpretation in keeping with the household he created and the one passed on to his son – William Byrd III, who built the current mansion of Westover. This mansion reflects a Virginia gentry more at ease in their social position than at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when it was more important to rely on artificial means of establishing the social structure – seen in the introduction of the secondary staircase – than later in the century when that position becomes more secure and regular.

---

6 Ibid, 38.
interaction with those in positions above and below one’s own offers opportunities for a more subtle reinforcement of the social hierarchy.

This reliance upon more subtle means of communicating control and hierarchy through access and acceptance is reflected in two other houses of the period, the Wythe House in Williamsburg, Virginia and Gunston Hall in Fairfax, Virginia. Both stairs are located in the central passage and begin with a long flight of low, broad stairs. The Wythe House, completed in 1755 by Richard Taliaferro, who also designed several other extant Virginia houses of the period, was bequeathed to Taliaferro’s son-in-law, George Wythe for the duration of his life. Architectural historian Thomas Waterman offers some consideration on Taliferro’s that provides a useful context for considering many of the elite domestic structures produced in Virginia during this period.

It is possible that Taliaferro received his architectural stimulus, if not actual training, from a sojourn in Great Britain, as John Ariss is known to have done at a later date. In this case, he may really have been responsible for the design of Rosewell, Christ Church, and Sabine Hall; but if not, he may have participated in the building of the structures under an English architect or building. The more formal and highly articulated planning of these buildings suggests the latter course. However, it may have been merely a period of transition between building in a manner not extravagant for England by over-extravagant in the Colonies, and to one normal to the fortunes of Virginia planters. It is known that the building of Rosewell, the most English of all American houses, impoverished Mann Page’s estate, though Robert Carter’s fabulous wealth apparently sustained the building of Corotoman and Christ Church and provided means for building his children’s houses as well. The mansions subsequent to Sabine Hall are more indigenous in their planning an decoration, and though simpler than Rosewell and its English equivalents, are more elaborate and spacious than mansion of the period in other areas of the eastern seaboard.

Placing the houses of the Wythe House’s period into this context provides an explanation for the transition to a less heavily embellished stair, emphasizing instead the quality and sweep of the stair than its elaboration. The Wythe House stair is particularly simple, only partly paneled, with

---

8 Ibid, 218.
unembellished stair brackets and elegant, but simple balusters without the spiraling or carving of earlier periods.

Gunston Hall, built by George Mason between 1755 and 1758 with fine architectural detail added by William Buckland, draws attention to the stair by means of a double arch beginning at the base of the stair. The space under the stair is left open and while the stairs have the low rise typical of main stairs, Waterman notes that Gunston Hall’s stair “lacks the deep treads of the usual Virginia stair, and in consequence has only two balusters to each step.” These heavy balusters are tapered in a manner that reflects the carving of the double arch and the stair brackets are ornately scrolled.

The final example of this period of transition is Mount Vernon. The core of the house was constructed by Augustine Washington between 1734 and 1735 and inherited by his eldest son, Lawrence, who then continued expanding the original structure until bequeathing it to his half-brother, George Washington, following his death in 1752. However, the structure has been so significantly altered that it fits more closely to the period of its greatest modification, 1758-1759. In 2009, the Mount Vernon Ladies Association Restoration Department began an intensive study of the staircases in preparation for restoration work required by the huge numbers of visitors to the property each year that sometimes force stairs originally designed for residential use to accommodate thirty persons at a given time. The report of the Restoration Department provides significant information about the stairs’ construction and appearance,

The grand staircase in the Central Passage of the Mansion was constructed in 1758-1759 during an overall renovation campaign where George Washington raised the existing house, which he had unofficially inherited from his half-brother Lawrence in 1753 (fully inheriting the property in 1761), to two full stories and reappointed most of the interior

---

spaces in preparation for his marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis. Under the supervision of Washington’s master builder, John Patterson, joiner Going Lanphier was responsible for the construction of the Central Passage staircase. To make room for the new stairs, the existing stairs were removed and parts of them re-used on the second floor for access to the garret. A wall partition originally dividing the Central Passage was removed at this time as well…

The staircase is approached at about the center point of the south wall of the Central Passage space. It ascends with a straight run of eleven risers to a first landing in the southwest corner of the space. It then ascends with five more risers along the west wall of the space to a second landing in the northwest corner, where it turns again and ascends via four risers to the upper landing on the second floor. The handrail system begins its ascent with a generous curule-form ease-off, rises continuously to each landing (passing over the newel posts rather than being interrupted by them), and terminates into the south wall of the upper landing.12

Over time, these stairs have required extensive repair because of heavier than normal traffic. The staircase itself, while well-crafted and suitable for a Virginia mansion of the time, lacks the embellishment of earlier staircases and serves as yet another step between the elaboration of the eighteenth century and the economy of space and fluidity of movement preferred in post-Revolutionary staircases.

A back stair was constructed during the addition of the south wing of the house between 1773 and 1775 and the report notes that “Its primary purpose was to provide access between the first and second floors of the private wing of the house- namely the Study and General Washington’s Bedchamber.”13 This back stair was of similar quality as the great stair in the central passage and was lit by inset windows, but was markedly more narrow. Two additional stairs reaching the garret exist within the structure: the Garret Stair Passage and the Back Garret Stair.

The “Garret Stair Passage” was originally located in the west end of the central passage when the structure was inherited by George Washington. Upon the removal of the main stair of

---

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
the original structure during the 1758-1759 alteration of the home, this stair was moved to a room on the second floor and enclosed behind a door. It is an awkwardly situated dog-leg stair that reaches an abrupt half-turn landing after just four stairs before continuing with a second long flight, leading the report to speculate that the original stair may have been too long for the space and was partially dismantled and reconstructed to accommodate its new situation. The “Back Garret Stair” is an enclosed, winding stair with an L-shaped design beginning at the head of the back stair. This stair was likely constructed in place during the addition of the south wing.

The back stairs of Mount Vernon are particularly interesting in the evolution of the staircase in elite domestic Virginia architecture because they were not created specifically as service stairs. Though they would likely have served this purpose, it is more important that they provide a direct link from General Washington’s study to his bedchamber – two rooms that are specifically designated for his personal use. In this, we can see the movement away from the main stair as a mark of status or exclusive access toward its function as a formal feature of the home like the dining room or formal parlor. Guests to the home would have had no reason to use the back stairs or either of the garret stairs, being able to reach the necessary rooms by means of the main stair, but it is not unreasonable to consider that the Washingtons would have regularly encountered those who worked for them – slave or free – in the confines of these other stairs. These changes to the internal workings of the household would continue to develop throughout the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods.

---

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
CHAPTER VI: 
Stairways to Heaven – 1776-1812

Following the Revolution, the steps in the evolution of the stair came rapidly; initially adhering to the tenets of the classical texts of architects like Andrea Palladio, before transitioning with the rest of the home to the stair as a simple means of movement between floors as the household became increasingly less formal. At the same time, this period produced a kind of “staircase as art” that serves as distinguishing feature of formal spaces. The intermediary phase between a socially stratified household and a more informal one is distinguished by the collision – at times this was likely a literal collision – of all members of the household in the confined stairs idealized by Palladio’s subordinated stair that served simply to move people between floors rather than to make any statement of social division or grandiosity

Though originally constructed by Thomas Lee in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, Stratford Hall in Westmoreland County, Virginia was, like Mount Vernon, changed in integral ways during the course of the eighteenth century. The most significant of these changes, for the purposes of this study, occurred during the 1790s when the house was occupied by “Light Horse” Harry Lee and his wife (and cousin), “the divine” Matilda Lee.¹ The earlier house had included the stair in the south wing that reached from the basement level to the attic, but between 1796-1800, “Light Horse” Harry Lee created a two-flight staircase separated by a quarter-turn landing level with the sill of an exterior landing.² This staircase in the northwest passage provided access from ground floor bedrooms and work rooms to the bedrooms on the first floor. Additionally, the first floor of the northwest passage included a closet housing a ladder to the

² Carl Lounsbury and Mark R. Wenger, Date of the Northwest Stair – Great House, March 12, 1998.
attic. These changes reconfigured Stratford Hall into a more conventional house and created an ease of access between floors that was previously lacking.

Though none of the staircases and ladders used to communicate between one floor and another of Stratford Hall are original, they have been reproduced as closely as possible – copying ladders found on the property that fit the parameters of the original ladders (both from the first floor and the attic), utilizing photographic evidence and the architectural remains of the northwest stair, and taking advantage of clues left in the stair passage’s woodwork by the stair’s construction. The northwest stairs of Stratford Hall are the only ones that resemble the spacious stairs of the eighteenth century, while the other passages demonstrate an extreme interpretation of Palladio’s preference for the subordination of the stair within the overall design of the structure. The passage reaching from ground floor to attic re-creates a high stair with a narrow tread in a tightly enclosed space, thus requiring an economy of movement and encouraging one to progress quickly, so as not to block another’s use of the passage.

Upon reaching the attic from the south stair, it is possible to proceed onto the roof by means of a broad ladder. Contemporary accounts offer stories of dancing and musicians high up on the “catwalk” between Stratford’s chimneys – a point high above the humidity of the region where it is possible to enjoy a fair breeze. Further, from the vantage point of Stratford’s chimney, it is possible to appreciate a 360° view of the Lee’s property.

The catwalk is also accessible from the north end of the first floor by means of a ladder in the northwest passage closet that ascends to the attic where another ladder spans the distance between the attic and the catwalk. As it was the ladies of Stratford who regularly took advantage

---

4 Site visit to Stratford Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia. October 12, 2010.
5 Ibid.
of the catwalk’s breezes, it is imperative to consider how they would have perceived climbing the wooden rungs of a narrow ladder (or two) to reach the catwalk while wearing bulky skirts of the period. Additionally, because the catwalk became a social space, slaves would have been required to carry food and drink, possibly chairs for the musicians, and other amenities up these precarious passages. These various points of access are easily reached from anywhere on the first floor, being located at the ends of the house, and are also accessible by means of exterior doors on the ground floor. In fact, unless someone was already in the wings of the house, a person moving between the ground floor and the roof might not even be seen as the stairs themselves are not visible from the central hall that served as Stratford’s main entrance.

Another fascinating aspect of the reconstructed stair in the northwest passage included in the “Stratford Preliminary Reconstruction Design Study” provides information that shows the northwest stair, despite being placed in a distant corner of the house, conformed to many of the construction norms of the traditional main stair in other buildings,

Dimensions of the treads and risers can be determined from the tread fragment and from the ghost of a riser on the corner baluster (11-1/4 inch tread, 6-3/4 inch riser). These dimensions work perfectly for the steps up to the first landing and from that landing to the second landing. However, the combination when calculated for the long run above the second landing results in a difference of about 2 inches. The assumption is that the risers of this run varied from the others by about ¼ inch because the number of treads and risers matches that number shown on the Fiske Kimball demolition drawings.6

Thus, it is possible to interpret Lee’s balancing of the desire for and expectation of a “great stair” for use by guests with the preference for a subordinate stair in keeping with the rest of the house.

The subordinate stair in its perfected form can be found at Monticello in Albermarle, Virginia.7 Designed and built by Thomas Jefferson in various incarnations, Monticello’s stair changed substantially and moved to their current location following the rebuilding begun in the

7 Site visit to Monticello in Albermarle, Virginia. November 18, 2010.
1780s and completed between 1797 and 1809.\textsuperscript{8} Though the stairs represent a clear interpretation of Palladio’s preference for the subordinate stair tucked out of sight and used only when necessary, the most interesting part of a study of the stairs is the significant difference between Jefferson’s drawings for the stairs and their actual execution, which is reflective of much of the material published in design books of the period on the subject of stairs. Many of the architectural texts studied by Jefferson and others – notably the writings of prominent English authors including Sir William Chambers, James Gibbs, and William Salmon – reflect the disparity between what was planned and what was ultimately constructed once left to the direction of the builders. One such text produced by William Pain in 1799 even details how much the construction of a stair – in labor and materials – would cost.\textsuperscript{9}

Jefferson’s earliest drawings “planned a large room with a staircase to one side, separated from the parlor by a thick masonry partition” and “another of these early concepts, dating before the fall of 1770, included what was presumably a large central entrance hall.”\textsuperscript{10} His original drawings dictate thirty-one risers to the second floor, each step rising approximately 7 ½”.\textsuperscript{11} Further, additional notes on the staircase in the southeast room “indicate the staircase was to be 2’0” wide, with risers of 8” and treads of 8”. This staircase is particularly interesting as the Monticello Historic Site Report notes that, “If this stairway ascended to the second floor it could have provided Jefferson with direct access to his study (library); without it, he would have been forced to cross the “public” vestibule…and ascend to the second floor using the public stair.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{9} William Pain, A list of prices, for materials and labour, and labour only, adapted to The practical house carpenter. By William Pain. With references to the respective designs. Corrected to 1799. (London, 1799), 13-14.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Monticello Main Stair,” N50. K25, 1771.
The historic site report and the findings of this study demonstrate Jefferson’s calculations
to have been ignored in favor of a stair whose treads have a much higher rise and a slightly
deeper run. The historic site report describes the portion of the north stair between the basement
and the first floor,

The stairs of the first run are 2’ 3 ½” wide, the tread perpendicular to the northeast wall is
2’ 2 ½” wide, and the top run is 2’ 6 ¼” wide. The risers vary between 8 ½” and 9-7/8”
high. The regular treads are approximately 9” wide with bullnosed nosings that vary
between ½” and 1”.

The historic site report further demonstrates that the portion of the north stair ascending from the
first floor to the second shows that “the risers are approximately 9-1/8” high. The treads of the
straight runs are 8” deep plus a 1” projecting bullnose nosing.” It continues with a description of
the ascent from the second floor to the third floor, noting that the risers range from 7-7/8” to 8-
1/2” high while the run of the treads are 8” deep with a 1” projecting bullnose nosing.

Also important to consider when interpreting the north stair are the findings of the
historic site report that suggest the central part of the treads show signs of being covered in the
past. As this staircase ascends from the formal dining room and first floor guest room to
additional guest rooms on the second floor, these observations seem very reasonable and indicate
a higher level of comfort and ornamentation.

The south stair rises in a similar U-shaped configuration from the basement to third floor.
The portion of the stair between the basement and first floor begins with an initial run of stairs

“2’ 3-3/4” wide, the tread perpendicular to the northeast wall is 2’3-1/8” wide, and the
top run is 2’8” wide. The bottom riser is 10-1/8” high; the remaining risers vary between
8-5/8” and 9” high. The rectangular treads are approximately 9” wide with bullnosed
nosings that vary in width from ½” to 1”.

\[\text{13 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{14 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{15 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{16 Ibid.}\]
From this point, the stairs from the first floor to the second floor are as follows:

The stairs are approximately 1’ 10-3/4” wide. There are 1” wide bullnosed nosing returns at the edges of the treads. Portions of many of these are not missing. The risers are 9” high. The treads of the straight runs are 7-1/4” deep plus a 1” projecting bullnosed nosing.\(^{17}\)

This trend continues as the south stair rises to the third floor as the risers are “approximately 9” high. The treads of the straight runs are 8” deep plus a 1” projecting bullnose nosing.”\(^{18}\)

The north and south stairs of Monticello are twins, despite the variations in the height and depth of their treads and risers, featuring the same applied molding beneath the nosing of each tread, identical scrolling on the fascia of the open string. Both stairs are U-shaped and center on an open well lit by overhead skylights. There are no doors preventing access to the stairs at any level and both stairs run from the basement of the home to the attic, providing easy access to Monticello’s slaves via the underground service passages should they need to move unseen through the house. Despite being interrupted by landings to accommodate the narrow space, the balustrade unifies the structure through a sinuous design that flows smoothly over the newel posts rather than being interrupted by them.

Though the adherence to Palladio’s tenets regarding the subordination of the stair would decline with the passing of the eighteenth century, the introduction of a more fluid stair would coincide with the creation of the new republic and its neoclassicism. A transitional example of this can be seen at Woodlawn plantation, constructed by Dr. Thomas Thornton in Alexandria on property bequeathed to Major Lawrence Lewis and Eleanor (Nelly) Parke Custis in George Washington’s will. Thornton had designed the first U.S. Capitol and completed Woodlawn between 1800 and 1805.\(^{19}\)

---

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

A five-part Palladian mansion utilizing elements of the traditional Georgian manner and newer Federal style, Woodlawn centers around a central hall featuring a curved, U-plan staircase around an open well. The fascia exhibits detailed carving and provides a degree of intricacy to the otherwise uninterrupted flow of the stair which appears to descend from a second floor carved out to accommodate the curvature of the stair. Though it demonstrates in its style the progression toward a more artistically composed stair, the placement of the stair in the central passage and the continued use of secondary stairs in the wings of the house and as a means of reaching the basement and attic reflects an adherence to a more traditional movement between spaces established by the introduction of the central passage in the early part of the eighteenth century.

The perfection of this form can be seen at the Wickham-Valentine House in Richmond, Virginia. Constructed by housewright Alexander Parris on behalf of John Wickham in 1812, it was long believed to have been the work of Robert Mills, but has since been identified as an early work of Alexander Parris, whose design for the impressive stair was dismissed by architect Benjamin Latrobe, who wrote,

Your circular stairs without one Landing. The Tarpeian rock was safety itself compared to such a staircase in the business of breaking necks. Niches again! or of a window in a corner! IF you want a thing for show only let it be faultless, not an attempt at beauty, if it be beauty, which has miscarried. Your stair is altogether bad.

Though Parris took some of Latrobe’s criticism in regards to the stair into consideration when actually constructing the house, he ignored the charge that his stair was unsafe with its curves.

20 Ibid, 6-10.
21 Ibid, 9-10.
and without a landing.\(^{24}\) One of two original staircases remaining in the house, the main stair of Wickham house exemplifies the potential impact that a stair has on those using it and viewing it, as described by Mrs. Ashby Wickham,

> Among the famous men who were entertained in this house were: Henry Clay, whose booming voice asking for Mrs. Wickham at the front door could be heard all over the house; Daniel Webster; John C. Calhoun; John Randolph, who read Mrs. Wickham and Mrs. Leigh, Scott’s *Marmion* when it first came out; Gen. Winfield Scott, who waited at the foot of the stairs for Mrs. Wickham, his plumed hat under his arm, while she swept down, gorgeously dressed. This last was just after the Mexican war, and made a great impression on two of the children who watched from the upstairs hall.\(^{25}\)

The magnificent, winding stair immediately draws the eye upon entering the hall as the balustrade emphasized the elegance of its construction and the embellishment of the stringer and fascia draw attention to the curious palette cut-out of the ceiling that allows it to descend in a luxurious curve lit from above by the hall’s chandelier. The measurements of the stair’s rise and run contribute to the elegance of the curve – unlike the uneven winders of earlier spiral stairs confined to service passages, this stair descends in twenty-five steps whose rise is between 7” and 7 ¼” and whose run is 9” at its most narrow and 15” at its widest, the mid-point of the stair having a run of approximately 12” and the entire flight being 45” in width. The balustrade changes subtly to accommodate movement along the stair ranging from 29 ½” to 33 ½” with a 35” newel post completing its length. Such proportions would have produced a graceful and measured descent in keeping with the sophistication of the stair and its setting.

A service stair in the western portion of the home consisting of two straight flights connected by several winders has been reconstructed in the narrow passage using the ghosts of

\(^{24}\) Site visit to Wickham-Valentine House, Richmond, Virginia, September 30, 2010.
\(^{25}\) “Mrs. Ashby Wickham’s Recollections – concerning the Wickham House,” “Room 201/Hall 207-A, Bedroom/Service Stair; Document 201, Wickham-Valentine Museum, 31 October 1928.
the original stair uncovered in the woodwork during the restoration of the residence. Its stairs are neither exceptionally high or narrow, nor low and broad. Its straightforward communication between the daily-use areas of the house – John Wickham’s study, the upstairs bedrooms, dining room, garret and basement – suggests that it would have been more heavily used than the grand staircase in the main hall, more likely reserved for special occasions. The basement stair has been reconstructed in place and is narrow, but fairly short and, at its base, well-lit by windows in the basement. The garret stair is original and also a winding stair, providing access to John Wickham’s wine cellar and storage space in the garret by way of high, narrow stairs only 30” wide with a run of 11 ¼” at their widest point and 2 ¼” at their narrowest.

The Wickham House makes a clear statement of the changes to the revolutionary and post-revolutionary household, with the movement away from a formal household to a household with formal spaces that highlight specific exceptional features. This begins a transition that continues throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries toward the identification of elite domestic spaces as primarily domestic spaces that may accommodate formal spaces within their confines, rather than the formal showplaces that offer their inhabitants real privacy only in specific places.

CHAPTER VII: Conclusions

The staircase evolves slowly – unlike other aspects of domestic spaces, the evolution of the staircase is so slow, so measured, that like the stair itself it can be overlooked in the bustle of daily life. Nevertheless it changes, even if that change is unnoticed until completed. Beginning in the first part of the seventeenth century, the stairs of elite domestic spaces in Virginia have a distinctly medieval feel and reflect their utilitarian purpose rather than any kind of aesthetic preference or social influence.

In the second part of the seventeenth century, Virginians relying on the Jacobean cross form in elite architecture united their household, regardless of social divisions, under a single roof and though the floors of the house were divided – as at Bacon’s Castle into service spaces in the basement, public spaces on the first floor, private space on the second floor and storage and sleeping space for indentured servants and slaves in the garret – they were united by a single means of communicating between floors of the house. Even as society began to divide itself, the wealthy and those who served them – free, indentured or slave – would have interacted multiple times throughout the day, simply by virtue of moving past one another on the stair.

At the very end of the seventeenth century, Fairfield Plantation offers a glimpse into the social stratification of the eighteenth century by at least acknowledging the potential for a secondary staircase in the two-story extension to the more formally planned front part of the house. The eighteenth century continued the evolution of the secondary staircase into a means of clearly stating the social stratification of the period – in the earliest examples, the secondary stair is simply less heavily embellished, but the introduction of the central passage afforded Virginians the opportunity to reinforce the social structure by turning the secondary stair into a service stair. Such stairs, with their close quarters, lack of lighting, and high, narrow steps that
compelled movement at a steady, if not fast, pace, starkly contrast with the increasingly low, broad stairs of the main stair that were embellished through woodwork, ornamentation and sheer presence to make them a statement of wealth and power in the midst of the central passage, itself a means of controlling access and defining who belonged and who did not.

As Virginia society becomes more settled, so do its stairs. The stairs constructed after 1750 and prior to the Revolution express the comfort of Virginia’s gentry in their social position, rejecting the heavy embellishment in favor of stairs that express their sophistication more subtly. Additionally, the explicit service stair disappears, reflecting the ease of social position for this new generation that no longer needs to emphasize the stratification of the household to know it exists.

Ultimately, the Revolution and the period that followed produces a household more comfortable within itself, regardless of the politics and tensions outside of it – staircases are occasionally formal, near-art, but they become more functional as the steps of the most commonly used stairs are more even and seem to neither encourage nor discourage a fast or slow pace. The formal staircases are less heavily embellished and the informal staircases receive their own share of ornamentation as in the twin staircases at Monticello.

The evolution of the stair offers a glimpse into the household that even its inhabitants may not have recognized as they went about their daily activities. They moved up the stairs, down the stairs, through the hallways to rooms unreachable if not for those stairs. They likely never stopped to consider why they moved a particular way on one stair as opposed to another. Nonetheless, the stairs undeniably functioned to move certain people through particular spaces in a specific way.
APPENDIX A
BACON’S CASTLE PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Building Survey 1: Bacon’s Castle, First Floor Passage
Historic American Building Survey 2: Bacon’s Castle, Garret Landing
Photo by Author 1: Bacon's Castle Stair

Photo by Author 2: Bacon's Castle Stair
APPENDIX B
PEYTON RANDOLPH HOUSE PHOTOS

Photo by Author 3: West Stair, Peyton Randolph House
Photo by Author 4: Center-Passage Stair, Peyton Randolph House
APPENDIX C
THOMAS NELSON HOUSE

Historic American Building Survey 3: Thomas Nelson House

Photo by Author 5: Thomas Nelson House
APPENDIX D
SHIRLEY PLANTATION

Courtesy of Shirley Plantation 1
APPENDIX E
CARTER’S GROVE

Historic American Building Survey 4: Carter's Grove
APPENDIX G
STRATFORD HALL

Photo by Author 6: Northwest Stair, Stratford Hall
Photo by Author 7: South Stair, Ground-First Floor, Stratford Hall

Photo by Author 8-9: South Stair, First Floor-Attic, Stratford Hall; Stair to Catwalk from Attic
Photo by Author 10: Catwalk between Chimney Towers, Stratford Hall
APPENDIX H
MONTICELLO

Photo by Author 11: South Stair, Monticello

Photo by Author 12: North Stair, Monticello
APPENDIX I
WOODLAWN AND WICKHAM-VALENTINE

Historic American Building Survey 5: Woodlawn Plantation

Photo by Author 13: Wickham-Valentine House
Photo by Author 14: Wickham-Valentine House
BIBLIOGRAPHY

HISTORIC SITE VISITS:

Bacon’s Castle, Surry County, Virginia, September 18, 2010

Monticello, Albemarle County, Virginia, November 18, 2010

Peyton Randolph House, Williamsburg, Virginia, November 2, 2010

Shirley Plantation, Charles City, Virginia, October 7, 2010

Stratford Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia, October 12, 2010

Thomas Nelson House, Yorktown, Virginia, November 22, 2010

Wickham-Valentine House, Richmond, Virginia, September 30, 2010

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS:


“Mrs. Ashby Wickham’s Recollections – concerning the Wickham House,” “Room 201/Hall 207-A, Bedroom/Service Stair; Document 201, Wickham-Valentine Museum, 31 October 1928.


Palladio, Andrea. The architecture of A. Palladio; in four books. Containing, a short treatise of the five orders, and the most necessary observations concerning all sorts of building. As Also The different Construction of Private and Publick Houses, High-Ways, Bridges, Market-Places, Xystes, and Temples, with their Plans, Sections, and Uprights. To which are added several Notes and Observations made by Inigo Jones, never printed before. Revis’d, design’d, and publish’d by Giacomo Leoni, a Venetian; Architect to his most Serene Highness, the Elector Palatine. Translated from the Italian original. London, 1715.
UNPUBLISHED MATERIALS:


ARTICLES:


"Peyton Randolph: The Colonial Williamsburg Official History Site," Colonial Williamsburg


BOOKS:


Kelso, William M. Jamestown: The Buried Truth. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press,
2006.


