The Mystery of the Jefferson Room Windows

Noah Duell | Thursday, October 30, 2025

Thank you Susan for that very kind introduction. Susan has been a wonderful supporter of my research, and I'm very glad that I have the opportunity to thank her publicly for that. Thanks also to the Farmington Historical Society and especially Melissa Young and Punkie Feil for having me tonight. You can all probably imagine my joy and excitement when they asked me to do this talk. This Club and this city is better and more intellectually stimulating thanks to everything that Punkie and Melissa do, and I'm deeply grateful for this honor. I also want to thank my beautiful girlfriend Jane, who is in the audience tonight. Jane listened to me practice this presentation five times, I think, and I hope she'll like the sixth time the best. Lastly, I want to thank all of you for joining tonight. It was a great pleasure for me to undertake this research, and I hope it is as interesting for you to listen to as it was for me to write.

Agenda

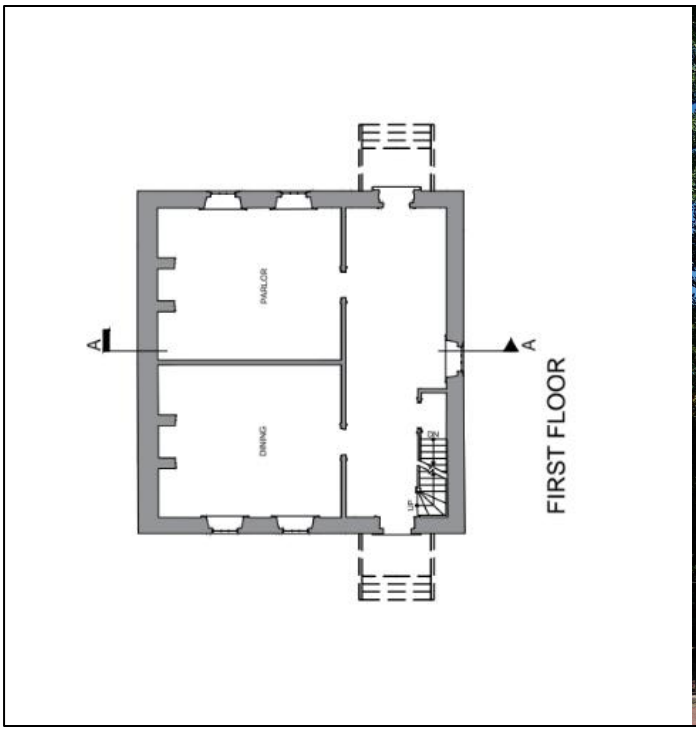
1. The Architectural Influence of Thomas Jefferson
2. Farmington's Architectural History
3. History of Circular and Oxeye Windows
4. Palladio, Gibbs, Paris, and Jefferson's Influences
5. The Design Process
6. The Construction Process
7. The Continuing Appeal of the Windows

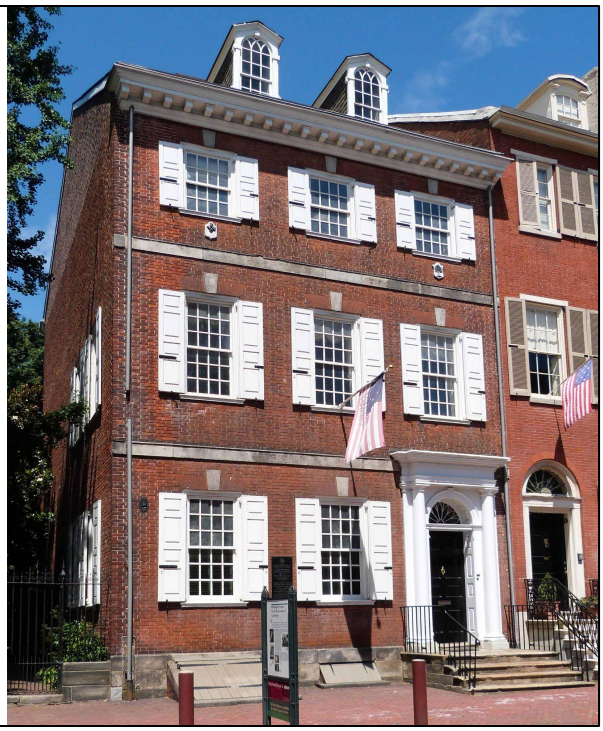
Our discussion tonight centers on the circa 1802 Jefferson-designed addition to Farmington, now aptly called the Jefferson Room. I'll start off with a brief overview Jefferson's influence as an architect, followed by a summary of Farmington's architectural history. I'll chart the history of the oxeye window before turning to Jefferson's own influences and his process of designing the space. I'll then talk about to the process of construction which, as always, differed from the design in several notable ways, and I'll conclude with a mystery presented by the Jefferson Room, which is particularly striking in the room's present configuration.

To start, I want to address something that a lot of us take for granted, which is the influence of Thomas Jefferson and his architecture on our area. You're probably familiar with all of these buildings. We have Monticello at the top left, which is Jefferson's mountaintop home and, if I may say, a wonderful historic site; you have my alma mater, the University of Virginia, at the top right; Poplar Forest, Jefferson's villa retreat and another great museum, at the bottom left; and of course our very own Farmington on the bottom right. These buildings comprise a major part of Jefferson's work as an architect, especially in our area.

But we also have a number of buildings designed or constructed by builders employed by Jefferson—men like James Dinsmore, John Neilson, James Oldham, and William Phillips. These men comprised a sort of Jeffersonian architectural school in practice, where they became trained in constructing buildings in the Jeffersonian style and then received commissions across central Virginia. Their buildings are even more numerous than those designed by Jefferson, and they demonstrate his contemporary aesthetic influence. At the top left is Montpelier, with its Tuscan portico designed and built by Dinsmore and Neilson; at the top right is Oak Lawn, probably designed and built by Dinsmore and now owned by UVA Health; on the bottom left is Upper Bremo in Fluvanna County, designed by Nielson and John Hartwell Cocke, among others; and on the bottom right is Christ Church Glendower in Keene, designed and built by William Phillips. Together, these buildings and others offer a grouping of historically significant Jeffersonian structures that make our area architecturally distinctive and unlike any other, even in Virginia. And in the decades since, Jefferson's architectural influence has continued to exert itself—so much so that we often take for granted the frequency of Jeffersonian architectural motifs in our landscape, especially in unusual or unexpected places.

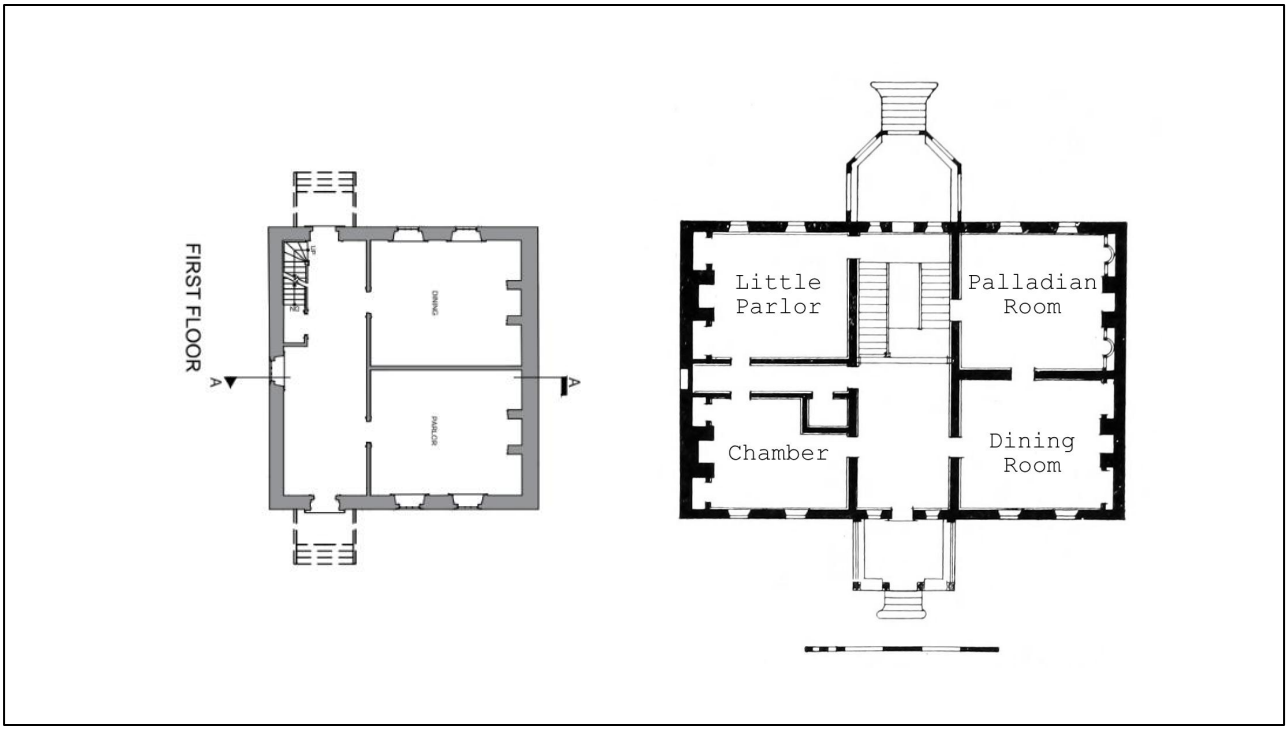
Like the Wawa on Pantops, for example. Where else in America can one find a gas station and convenience store that explicitly references Jeffersonian motifs in its design: the three-part form, the Chinese railing, and the elevated, quasi-dome-like pyramidal roof. We are all part of a landscape where architects feel compelled to at least *reference* Jefferson in their buildings. Examples like this show that Jefferson's influence continues to exert itself in our area, and it demonstrates why it remains important to study the man and his architecture. And I should mention, this Wawa is the only place in the world where you can order—and eat—a hoagie on land once owned by a Founding Father.



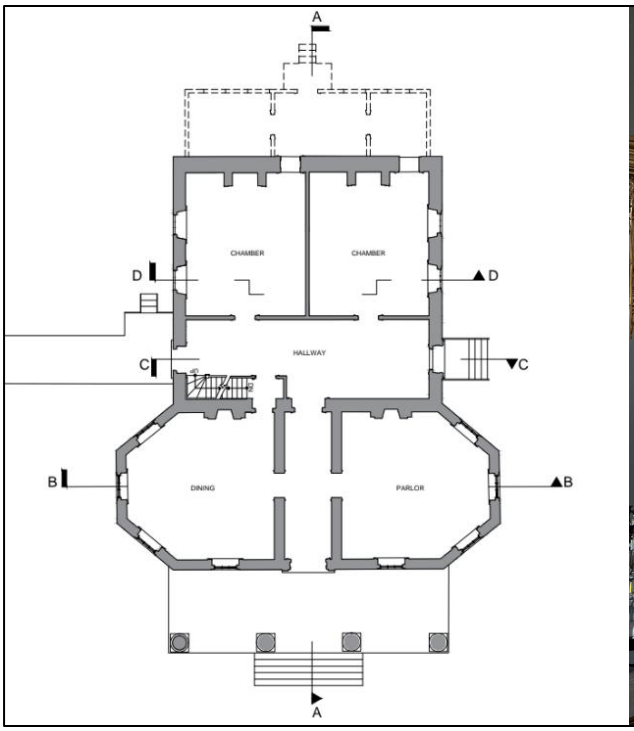


I'd like to turn now to Farmington itself, a property with quite a storied architectural history. The first house at Farmington was probably constructed at the behest of George Divers, who acquired the surrounding acres from Francis Jerdone, Jr., in 1785. That house was a brick side passage dwelling, the plan of which is shown is here at left. It had a dining room, parlor, and passage on the first floor and bedchambers on the second, with a few plastered rooms in the attic. This side passage form was more common in urban areas like Philadelphia, where the Powel House, pictured here at right, still stands today as a historic house museum. You can see how the plan and elevation correspond, with the door set to one side and two windows beside it to light the front room.

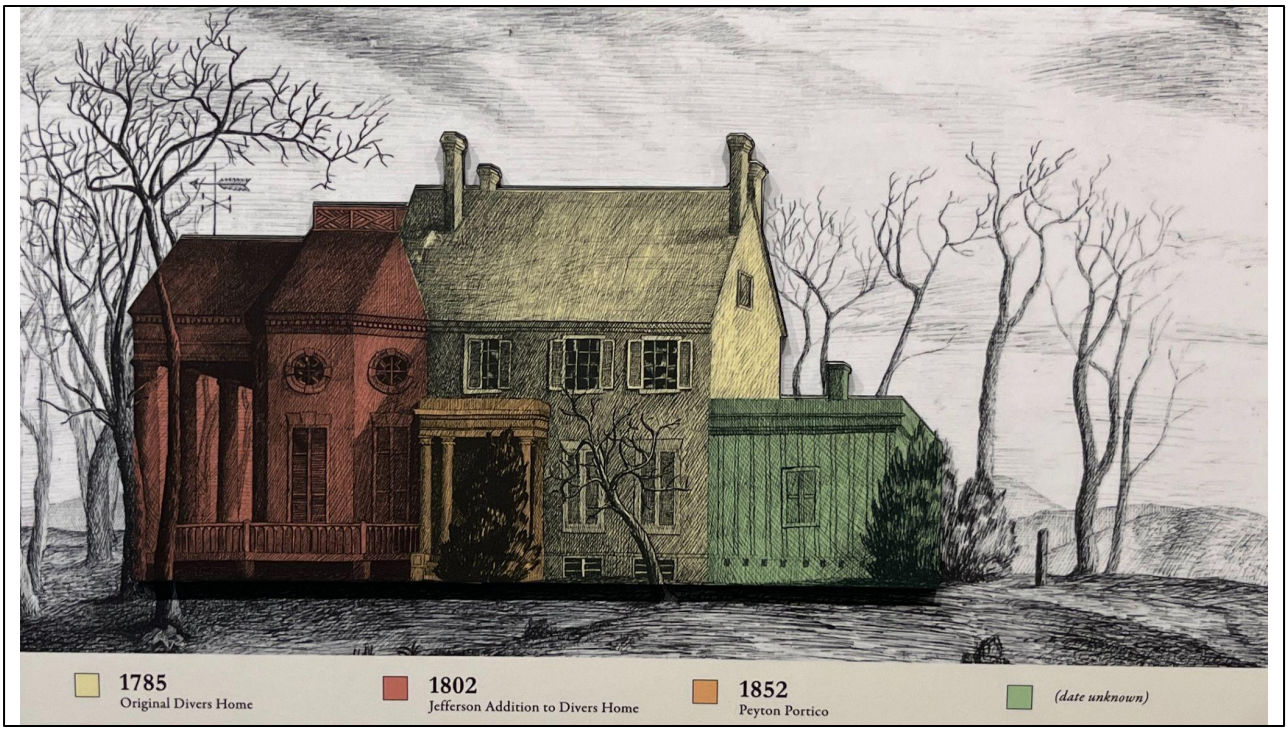
How Divers or his builders settled on this plan rather than the more common central passage plan is not clear, but the form was not completely unheard of in the upper South. It was used for example at Foscue plantation on the left, located near New Bern, North Carolina; and also at the Moses Myers House in Norfolk, Virginia, pictured here at right.



The side passage house at Farmington seemed to suffice for some time, but by the end of the 18th century, Divers and his family were evidently in need of more elbow room. The limitations of this side passage plan are not immediately obvious until you compare the house to a more customary central passage house like George Mason's Gunston Hall in Fairfax County, the plan of which is pictured here at right. At Gunston Hall, the rooms on the east side of the central passage—that's on the left here—provided the Masons both a first-floor bedchamber and a "Little Parlor," which they used variably as a family space and as Mason's office. It seems that Divers was interested in expanding his own house to offer spaces like these, and around the turn of the century he wrote to his friend and neighbor Thomas Jefferson to ask him to design an expansion to the house. Divers and Jefferson knew each other since at least 1771, and they were additionally close because Divers married Martha Walker Divers, the daughter of Thomas Walker of Castle Hill, who had served as a guardian to Jefferson after his father Peter's death in 1757. Divers contacted Jefferson for the job because Jefferson's architectural interests and skills were well established by that point, most especially through his work at Monticello, where free and enslaved workers were then undertaking an even larger expansion. It is worth noting that Jefferson accepted this commission despite running for and later serving as President of the United States, proving that work—even important work like being President—is not a good enough excuse to get out of helping your friends.

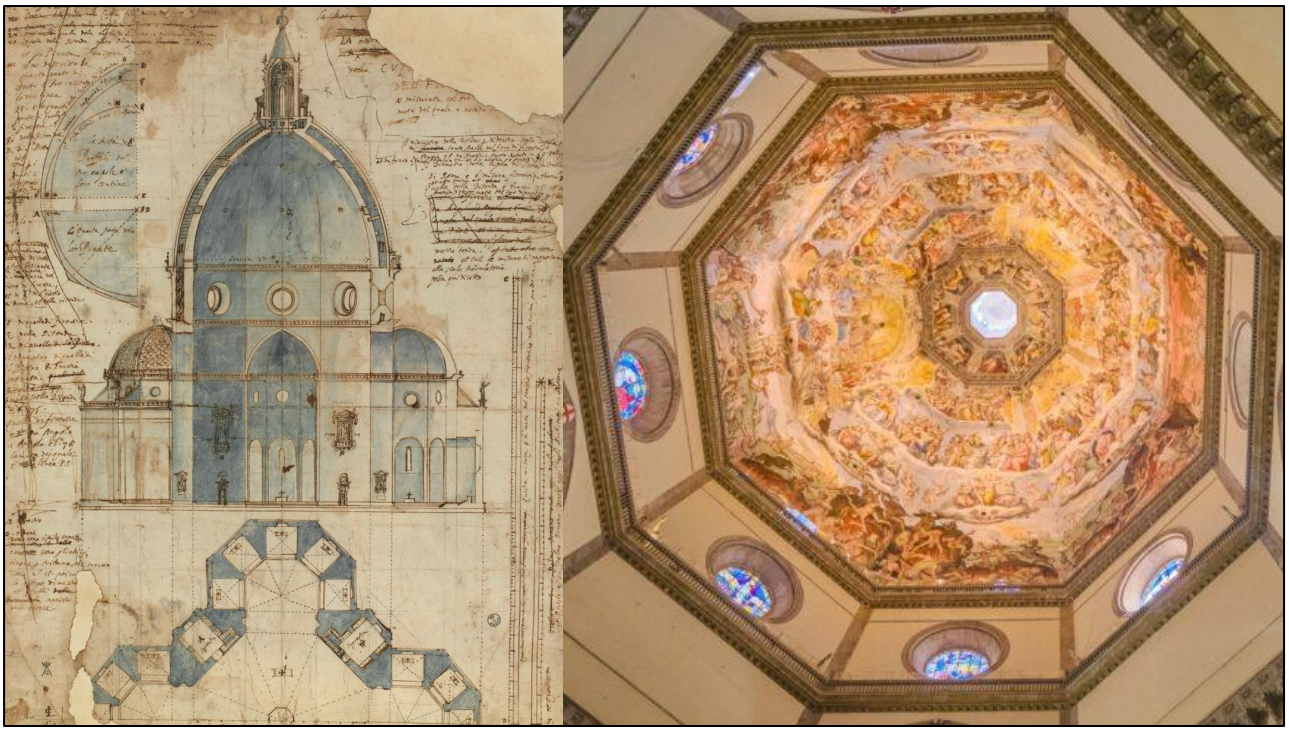


What Jefferson ultimately designed for Farmington was a long and tall octagonal addition, with a four column or tetrastyle portico that reoriented the house to face east rather than north. Jefferson intended the new octagonal space to comprise two rooms, separated by a wall on the north (or right) side. This fashionable new wing permitted Divers to convert the existing parlor and dining room into bedchambers and move the entertainment spaces into the new wing. To light the rooms, Jefferson ordered circular windows containing twelve panes of glass arranged in a handsome oxeye or bullseye pattern similar to those he had designed for Monticello. These windows give the space a distinctive look and make it among the most—if not *the most*—beautiful room in the Piedmont.

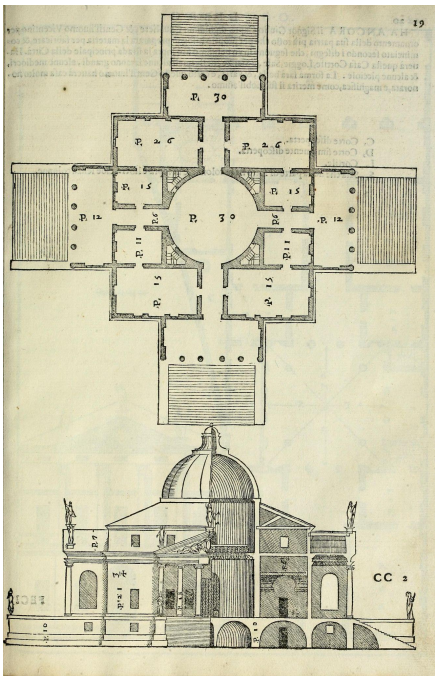


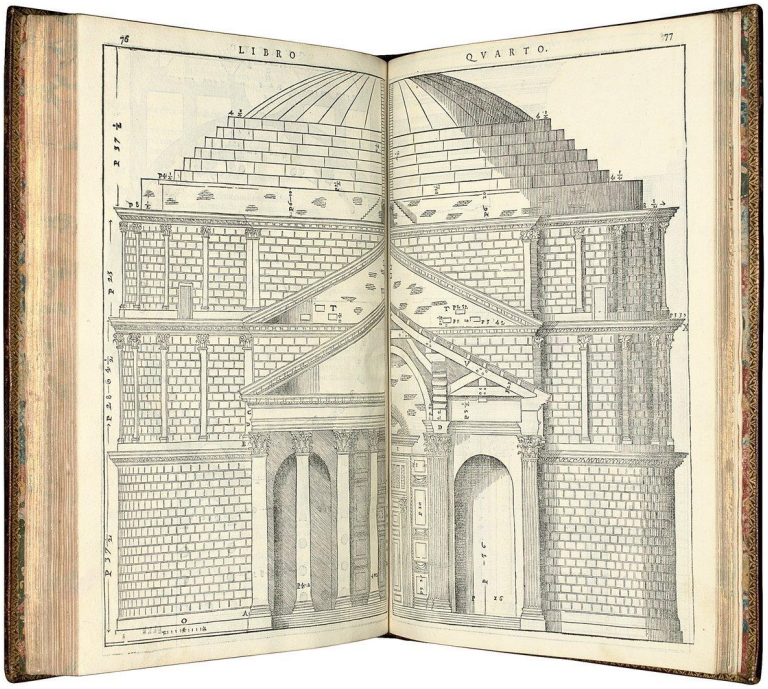
We can see the phases of the house plainly enough from the exterior. The original side passage house is at the center in pale yellow, followed by the Jefferson addition on the left in red. The house had two other additions which proved nearly as interesting as the Jefferson addition, but those unfortunately aren't the focus of our talk tonight. I should mention for those who haven't been that I acquired this image from the wonderful exhibit on Farmington's history in the cellar, which I highly recommend checking out if you haven't already.

So now that we have parsed out the individual phases of Farmington's construction, one pertinent question still remains: where did Jefferson get the idea for the addition and its oxeye windows? For that, we have to start with the Christian architecture of Europe. The oldest Christian church in France is the 4th century Baptistery of St. John in Poitiers, which has the circular windows pictured here. As with later examples of these round windows, their purpose is to light double height spaces. It is one of the oldest examples of this form of window opening, which as far as we know did not exist in earlier periods.

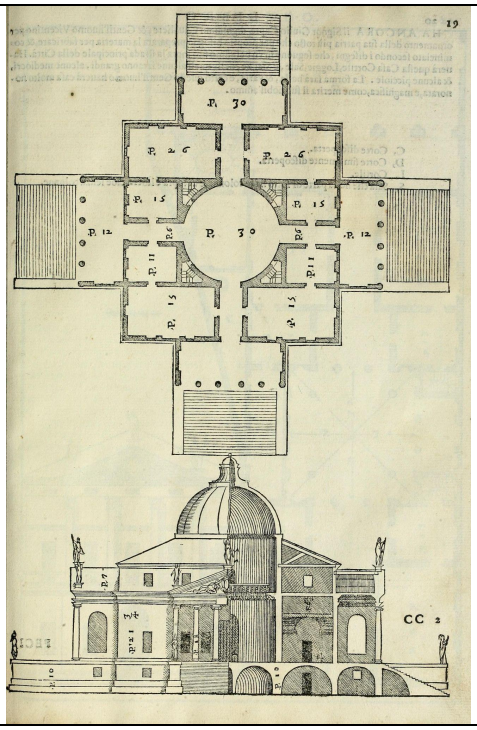


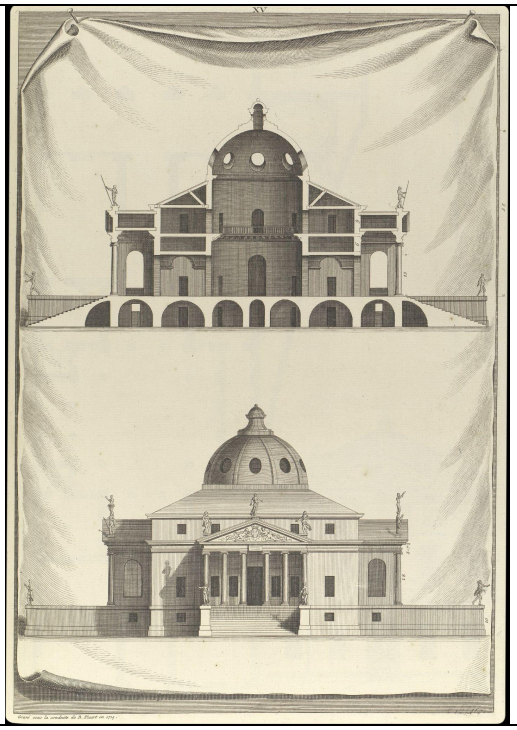
Circular windows nevertheless found their highest articulation during the Renaissance, with domes like this one at the Duomo in Florence. Brunelleschi designed this octagonal space in the 15th century with eight circular stained glass windows and an oculus at the top. Il Chigoli undertook the section drawing on the left in the late 16th century. The drawing shows how the larger dome interacts with the smaller domed spaces, which have circular windows of their own.



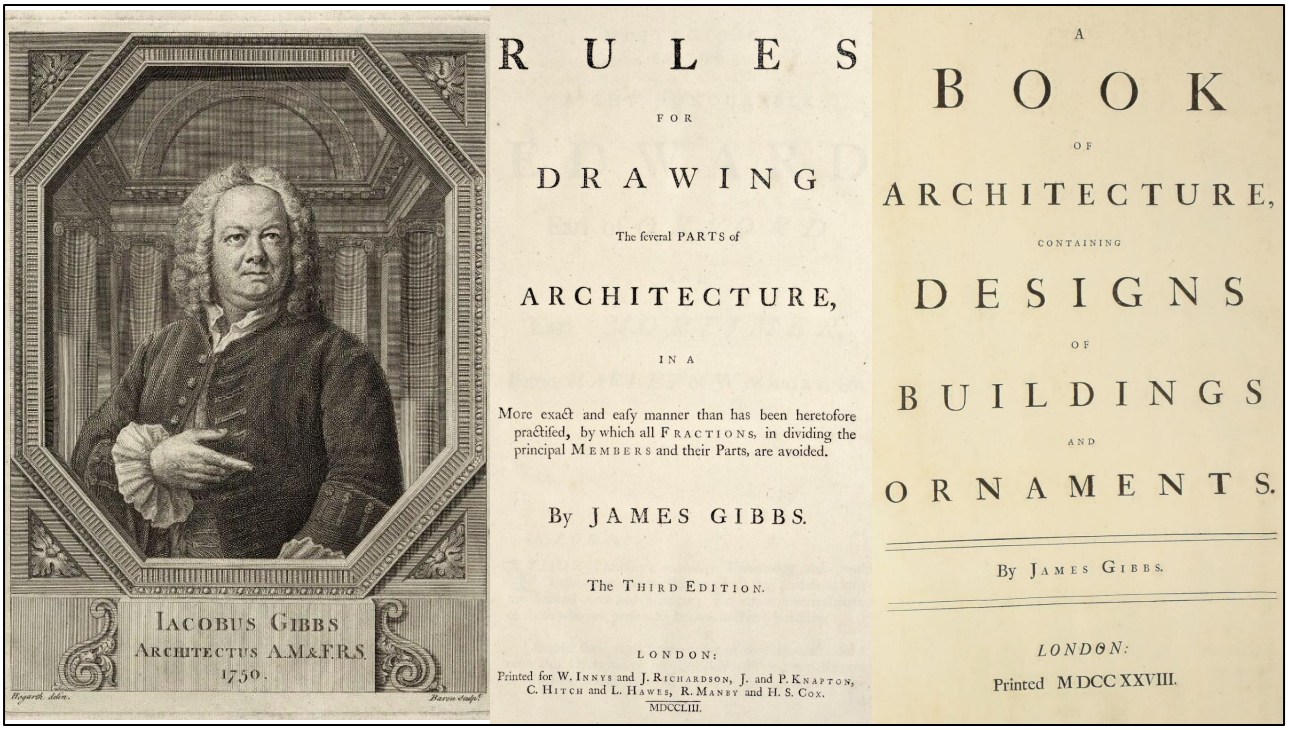


Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio put his own spin on the dome when he designed perhaps the most famous private dwelling in the world: the Villa Rotonda just outside Vicenza in northern Italy. His 1570 treatise, *The Four Books of Architecture*, featured a plate of the Villa Rotonda, pictured here at left, as well as archaeologically accurate reproductions of many ancient Roman structures like the Pantheon, pictured here at right. Palladio's first book laid out mathematical rules and instructions for reproducing the five classical orders of Roman architecture, while the second book reproduced many of Palladio's own villas, palazzos, and townhouses. The third book covers urban planning and basilicas, and the fourth book contains reproductions of 25 Roman temples. Drawn from this rich Ancient Roman precedent, Palladio's architecture prioritized order, geometry, and symmetry and adapted it to the needs of both builders and the contemporary Venetian elite.

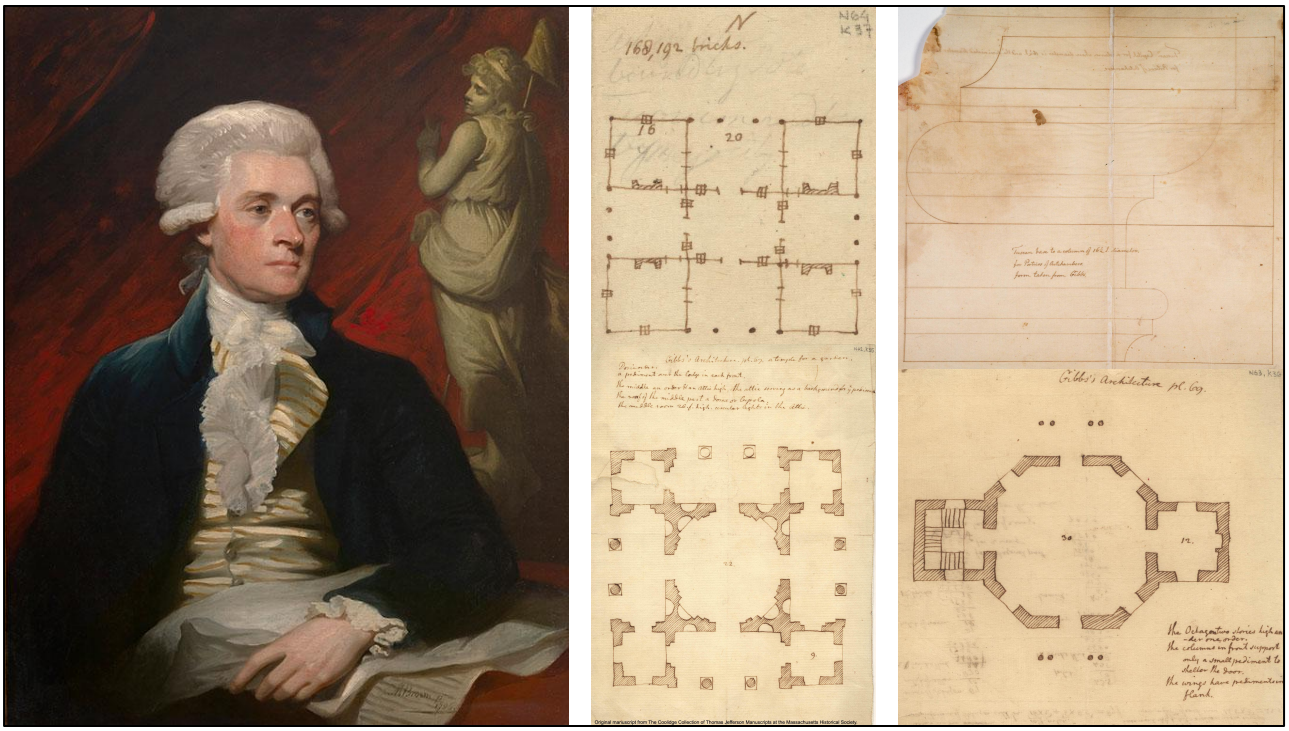




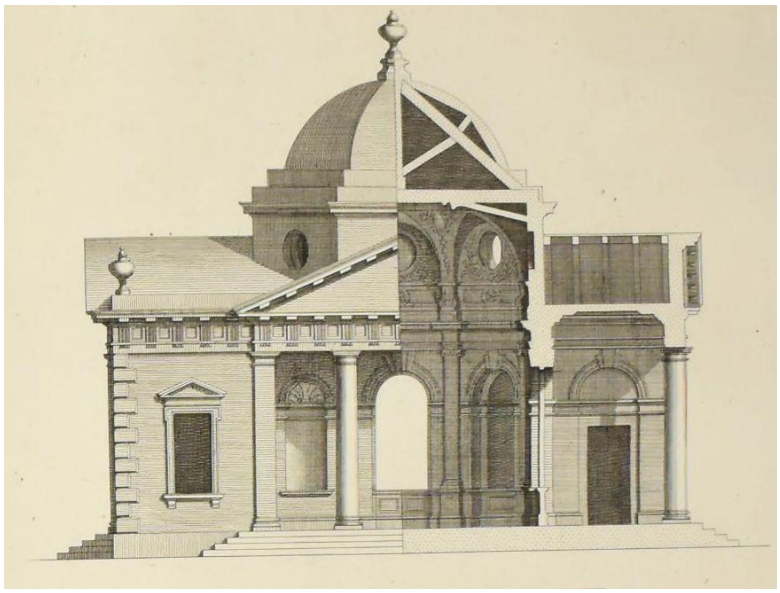
Palladio's approach proved to be tremendously influential, most especially in England, where the style took off beginning in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Between 1715 and 1720, Giacomo Leoni published the first English translation of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* with new copperplate engravings to replace Palladio's woodcuts. In the process, he took some artistic liberties— adding, for example, these circular windows to the dome of Palladio's Villa Rotonda. Leoni's translation was widely popular and helped spread the style across the British Isles as well as their American colonies.

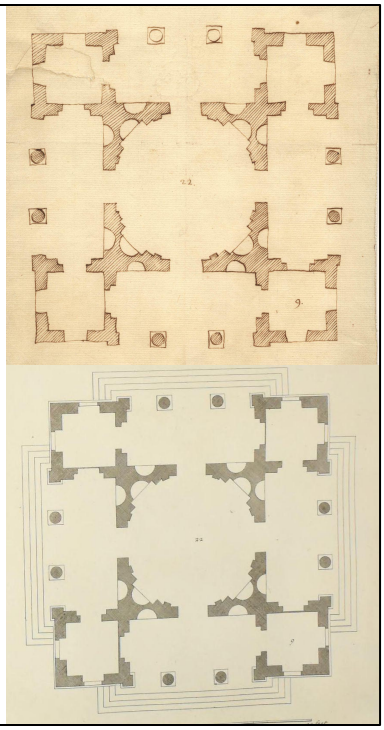


Leoni was not the only architect to publish Palladian pattern books, however. Influential English architects like James Gibbs—pictured here at left—published books that adapted Palladio's Renaissance principles to contemporary British taste. The book on the left, *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture*, dates to 1732 and offered simpler mathematical formulas for producing the five Classical orders. The second book, *A Book of Architecture*, dates to 1728 and included, among other things, measured drawings of Gibbs's great works as well as ideas for country houses, garden pavilions, and townhouses. With Leoni's translation, these books traveled across the Atlantic, first showing real influence on American colonial architecture in the mid-18th century.

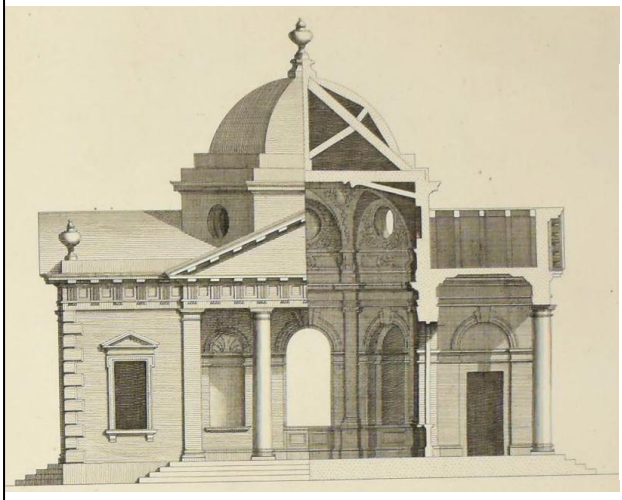


It was not until the 1760s, however, that these books landed in the lap of the precocious Thomas Jefferson, who was then thinking about a future house on his mountaintop near Charlottesville. Indeed, the first architectural volume Jefferson acquired was likely Gibbs's *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture* or perhaps Leoni's translation of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture*, supposedly from a gatekeeper at the College of William & Mary while Jefferson was in his mid-twenties. He certainly owned or had access to both of Gibbs's books before 1778, and these early drawings show him copying several plates while in the process of designing Monticello. On the top left, bottom left, and bottom right are drawings for garden pavilions from *A Book of Architecture*, and on the top right is a drawing for a Tuscan base and capital from *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture*. Jefferson did not end up using Tuscan columns for the house at Monticello, but he did use them at Farmington as well as at Poplar Forest and the University of Virginia, as we shall see later.





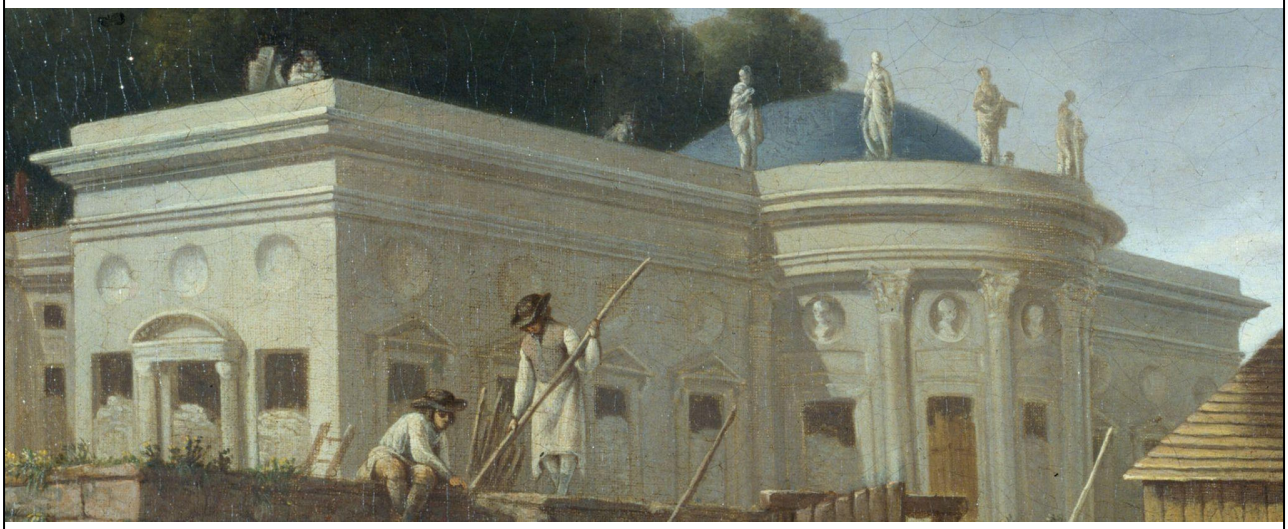
It was in Gibbs that Jefferson first came across the circular window opening, which the English Palladians probably inherited from their Renaissance forebears. Pictured here is Plate 67 in *A Book of Architecture*, which Jefferson drew twice: once to sketch it and calculate the number of bricks necessary for its construction—168,192 bricks, if you're wondering—and again to copy or trace it precisely. As you can see, Gibbs's garden pavilion contained four corner rooms connected by open air loggias to a large, double height central room, which contains four circular window openings and four circular niches or blind windows like those in Leoni's version of the Villa Rotonda.



You might recognize this scheme from the final version Monticello, the central block of which is pictured at right. The Doric portico, stepped octagonal dome, and circular windows are nearly identical, and the two compositions really only differ in ornamentation and in the the central room and portico, which projects outward onto the West Lawn at Monticello.

But as we know, Jefferson was not only inspired by Gibbs and Palladio, he was also inspired by the neoclassical architecture he saw while serving as Minister to France from 1784 to 1789. One of his favorite buildings was the Hotel de Salm, pictured here. Constructed between 1782 and 1787 on the Left Bank of the Seine in Paris, the Hotel de Salm was on the cutting edge of prevailing French fashion and the object of Jefferson's gaze. In 1787, when Jefferson was in Nimes visiting the Maison Carree, he wrote to the Madame de Tesse to describe his admiration of French art and architecture. His first love, he wrote, was "with a Diana at the Chateau de Laye Epinaye in the Beaujolois, a delicious morsel of sculpture, by Michael Angelo Slodtz. This, you will say, was in rule, to fall in love with a fine woman: but, with a house! It is out of all precedent! No, madam, it is not without a precedent in my own history. While at Paris, I was violently smitten with the hotel de Salm, and used to go to the Thuileries almost daily to look at it. The loueuse des chaises, inattentive to my passion, never had the complaisance to place a chair there; so that, sitting on the parapet, and twisting my neck round to see the object of my admiration, I generally left it with a torticollis."

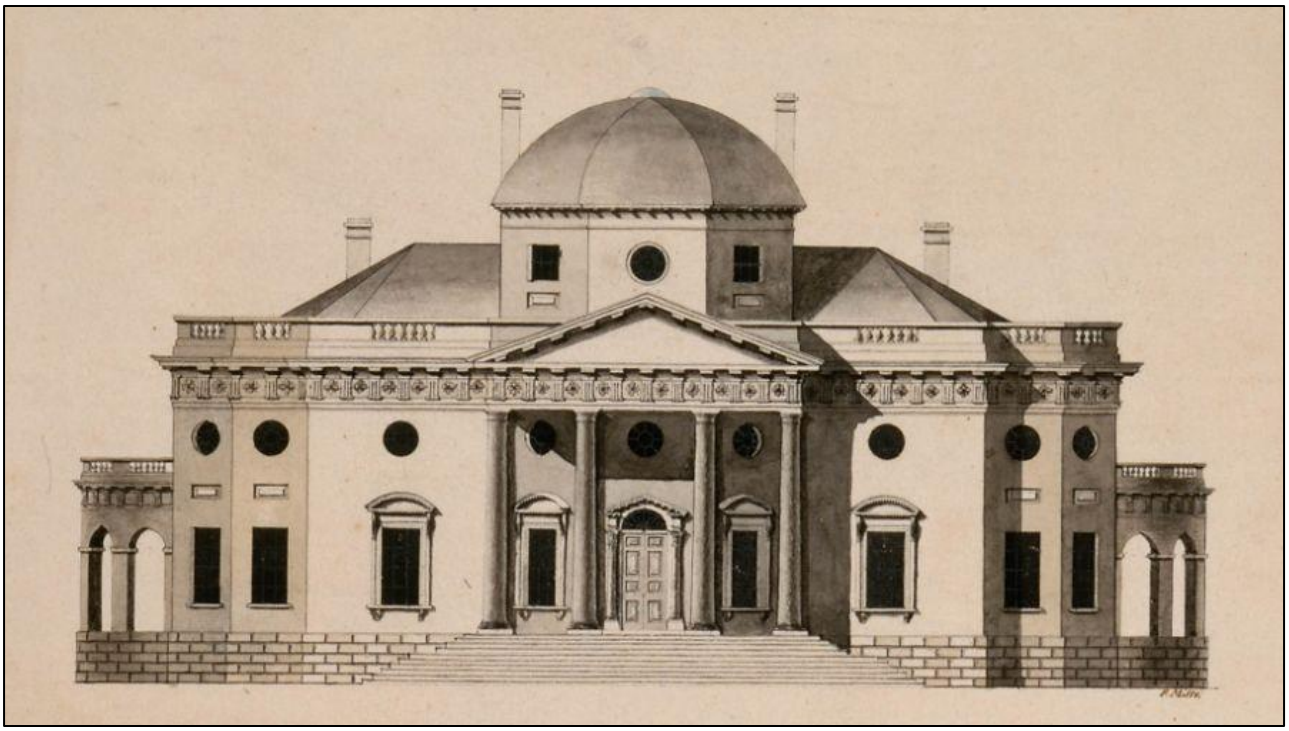
In fact, if you go there today, as I know several people in this room have, you too can stare lovingly at, or, if you'd like, be violently smitten with, the Hotel de Salm. It seems that the folks controlling the chairs in Paris are a little kinder these days than than they were back then, and there is even a statue of Jefferson near where he watched the construction. On the left is an image Melissa took on her trip to Paris a few years back.



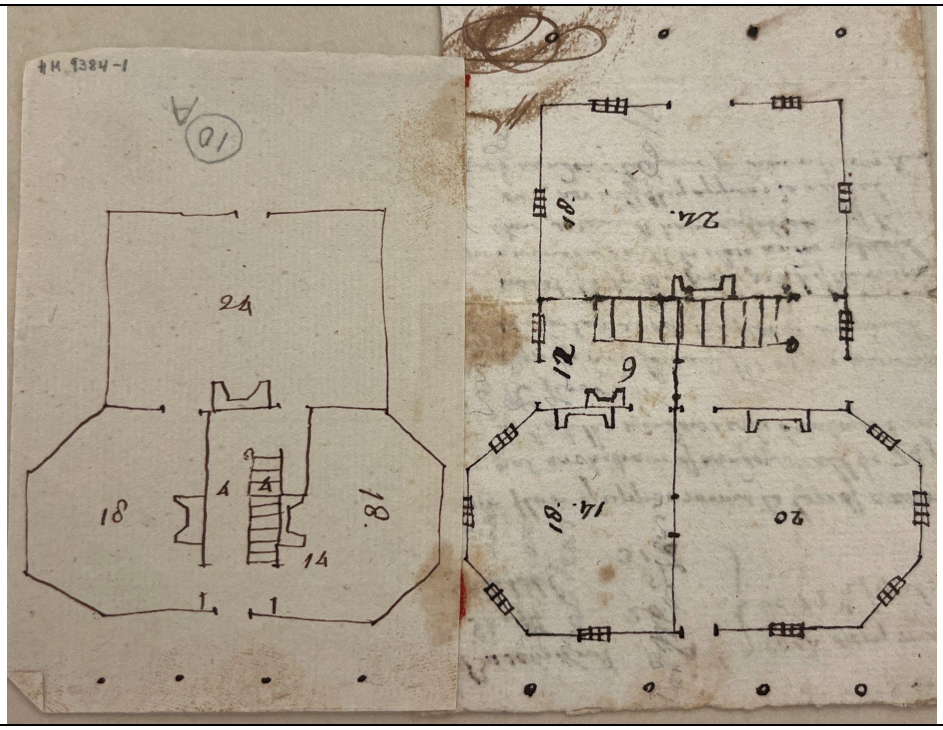
Looking more closely at the painting, however, we can see circular niches surrounding the house above each door and window. These circular openings may have served as inspiration for Monticello and, as we shall see, for Farmington. Of Parisian townhomes, Jefferson wrote that, “In Paris particularly all the new and good houses are of a single story. That is of the height of 16. or 18. f. generally, and the whole of it given to the rooms of entertainment; but in the parts where there are bedrooms, they have two [tier] of them of from 8. to 10. f. high each, with a small private staircase. By these means great staircases are avoided, which are expensive and occupy a space which would make a good room in every story.” Jefferson designed both Monticello and the addition to Farmington in this fashion.

When Jefferson returned to Virginia, he decided to place a dome atop his own house. This space, which Jefferson called his “sky room,” was used mostly for storage. The room is lit by four oxeye windows like those in Gibbs’s plate as well as three lunette or half-round windows, which Jefferson designed to accommodate the roofline and pediment above the portico. Jefferson ordered these plates from D. Trump, interestingly enough. Daniel Trump was a talented Philadelphia house carpenter, and in February 1801, Jefferson wrote him to say that “I shall be obliged to you to make & send me immediately 6. circular, & 2. semicircular mahogany sashes, radius 26. I. clear.”

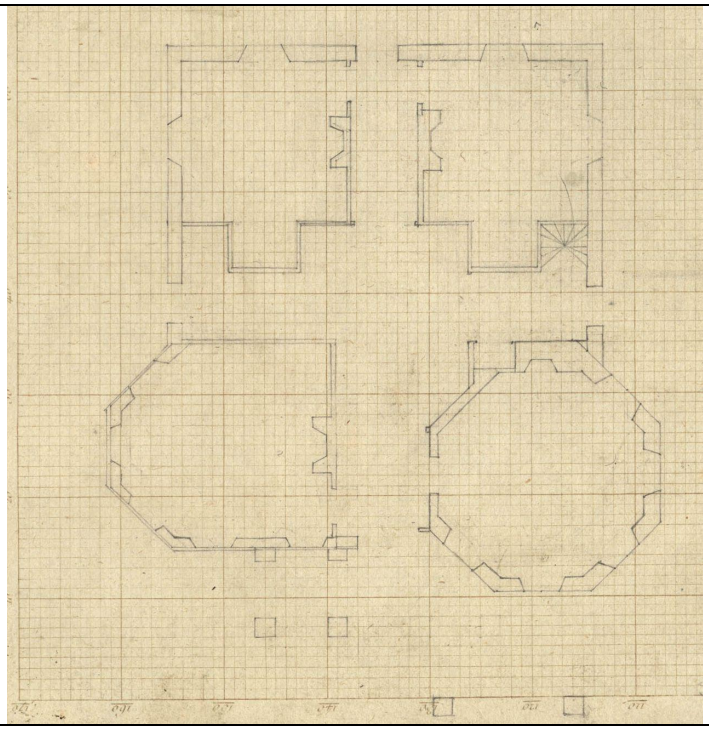
“the circulars had better be in the form in the margin,” Jefferson wrote, “because should a pane get broke, we can cut one of the center panes from one of 12. I. square, and one of the outer ones from a pane of 12. by 18. I. these being the two sizes of which I must always keep a stock.” I reproduced Jefferson’s drawing in the margin here on each window. Thus we discover that Jefferson chose the shape of these windows—now ubiquitous in our area, as mentioned earlier—because of the risk of breaking larger pieces of glass. Jefferson closed his letter to Trump mentioning one other order of business: “a friend of mine has desired me to have such sashes as mine made for a house he has built. he is to send me the particulars soon, or perhaps will give them to me when I go home. I shall forward you the order, which will be considerable.” This friend, of course, George Divers.



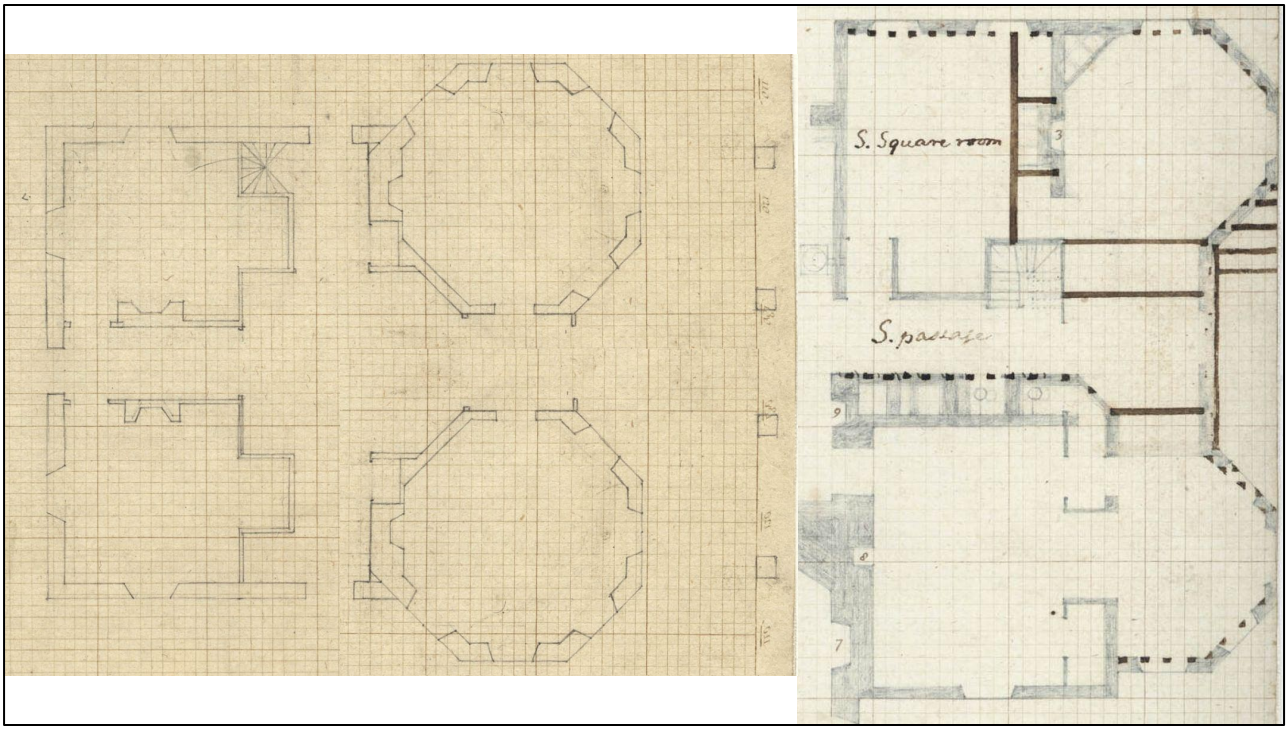
Jefferson may not have always intended the Dome Room to appear as it does today, however. In this perplexing ink and wash drawing by Robert Mills dating to around 1803, we see a house that was perhaps not fully fleshed out. Mills took some artistic liberties in the drawing, most strikingly with the niches or circular windows above each door and window like those in Gibbs's plate and at the Hotel de Salm. Whether this was a choice by Mills or the result of a conversation with Jefferson, this drawing complicates our understanding of Monticello and suggests that Jefferson may have wished oxeye windows to play a larger part in its final design.



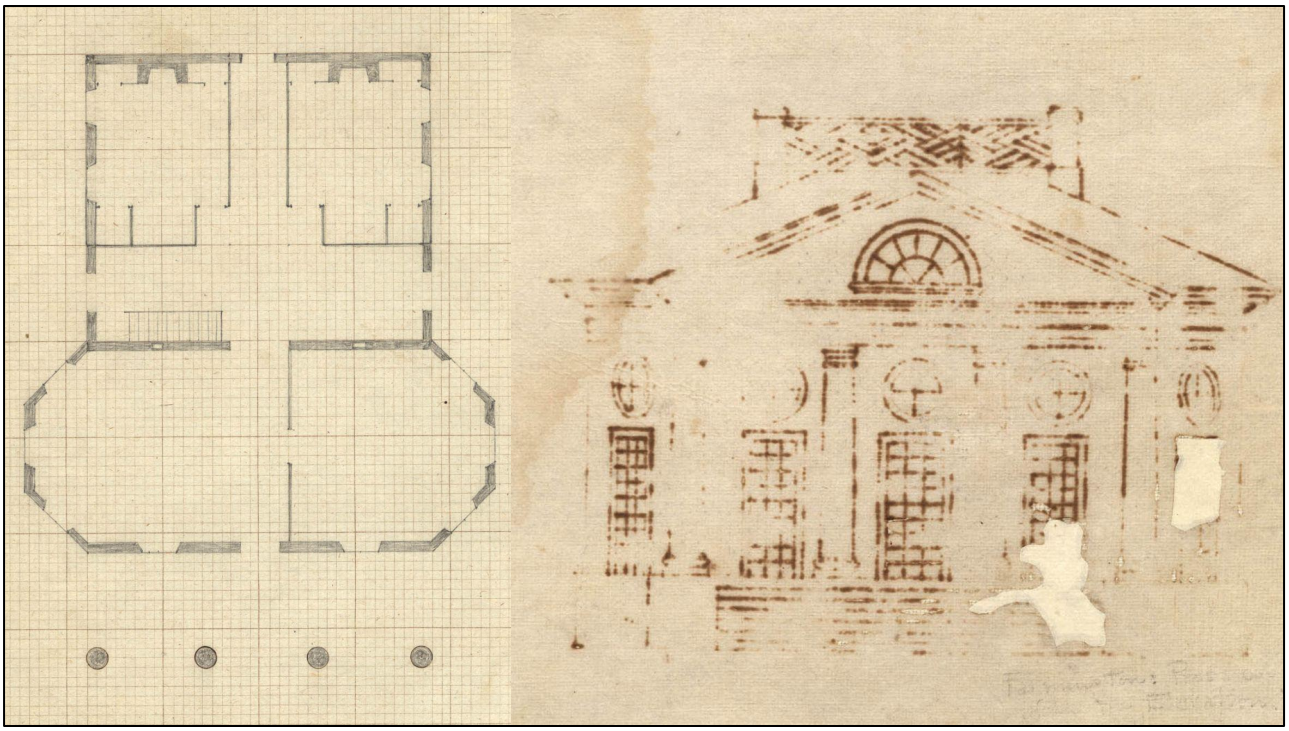
Around the time that Jefferson was sorting out those details, he turned to design the addition to Farmington, which he seems to have developed over a series of drawings. While at The Huntington Library near Pasadena this summer, I came across these two drawings, which I believe may represent the first for the addition at Farmington. In these drawings, we see Jefferson experimenting with the space by moving chimney stacks, adjusting wall partitions, and thinking about where best to place windows. It is likely he started with the more rudimentary drawing on the left before turning to the more detailed plan on the right, which maintains much of the original structure of the existing house.



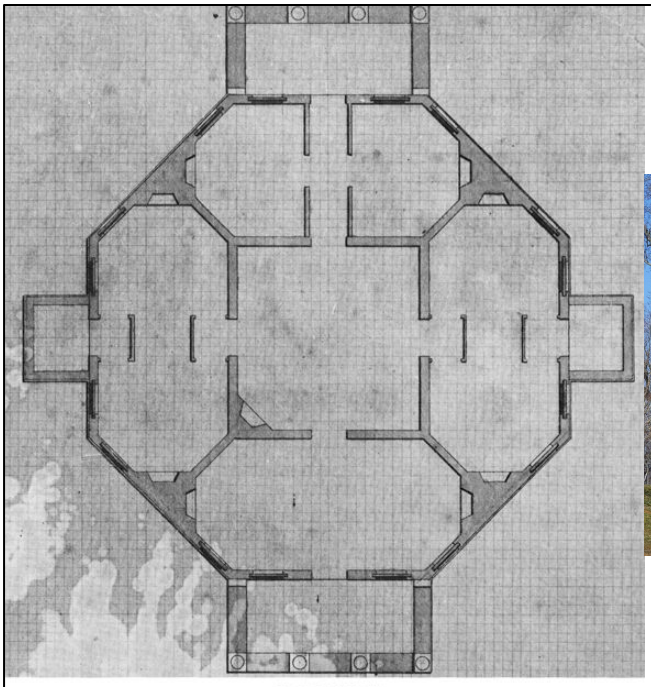
Another drawing, this one in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, may have come later. Jefferson's use of the coordinate or graph paper he sourced in Paris suggests some degree of finality, but we can also see that he is deciding between with two very different kinds of rooms. The scheme on the right would have made for two separate octagonal rooms, while the other was a long octagon of the kind he eventually settled on.



I altered the image to show what the double octagon design might have looked like. This scheme is similar to the north and south ends of the expanded Monticello, which as I mentioned was then under construction. The drawing on the right shows this plan of Monticello, with the octagonal library and semi-octagonal cabinet office suite largely as it appears today. At Monticello, Jefferson had to adapt his expansion to the existing house, essentially the form below the dotted line just below the south passage. At Farmington, Jefferson could largely work from scratch with his addition, and he may have seen the addition as an opportunity to develop a purer plan of that which he pursued at Monticello.

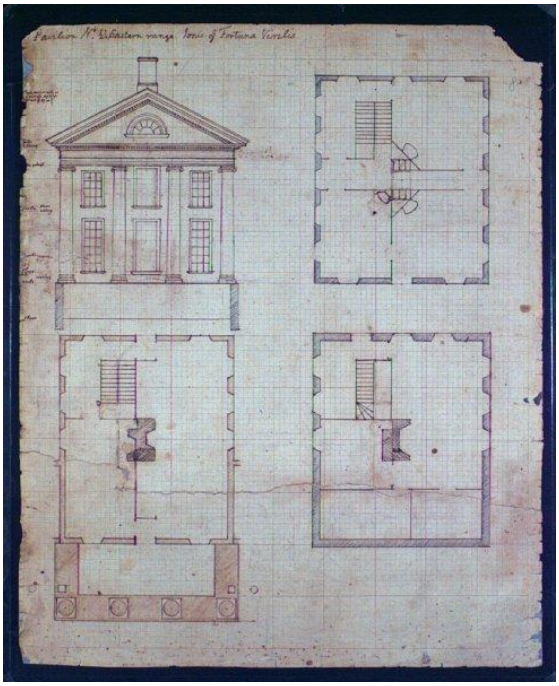


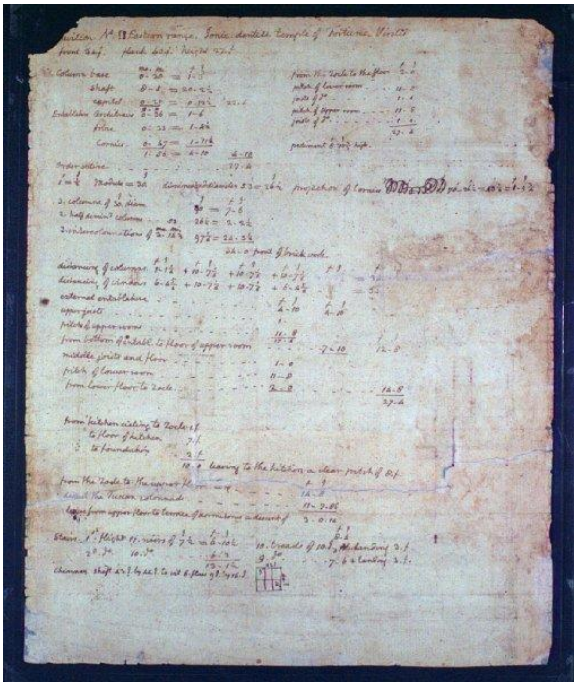
The final plan and elevation for Farmington developed after these drawings nevertheless adopted the long octagonal form. It synthesized the virtues of the existing building with Jefferson's own idiosyncratic love of the octagonal form. In part Jefferson loved octagons because of light and ventilation. Around 1815, Isaac Coles reported to John Hartwell Cocke on a conversation he had with Jefferson. "He is a great advocate for light and air," Coles wrote, "[and] as you predicted he was for giving you Octagons—they were charming [and] they gave you a semicircle of air & light." But it would paint with too broad a brush to say that this design is merely a culmination of the previous drawings we discussed, because Jefferson's experimentation with octagonal forms was a love affair that had been going on for over thirty years at this point. The Jefferson Room at Farmington instead represents the culmination of Jefferson's work and was his the purest octagonal composition yet—until, of course, he designed Poplar Forest a few years later.



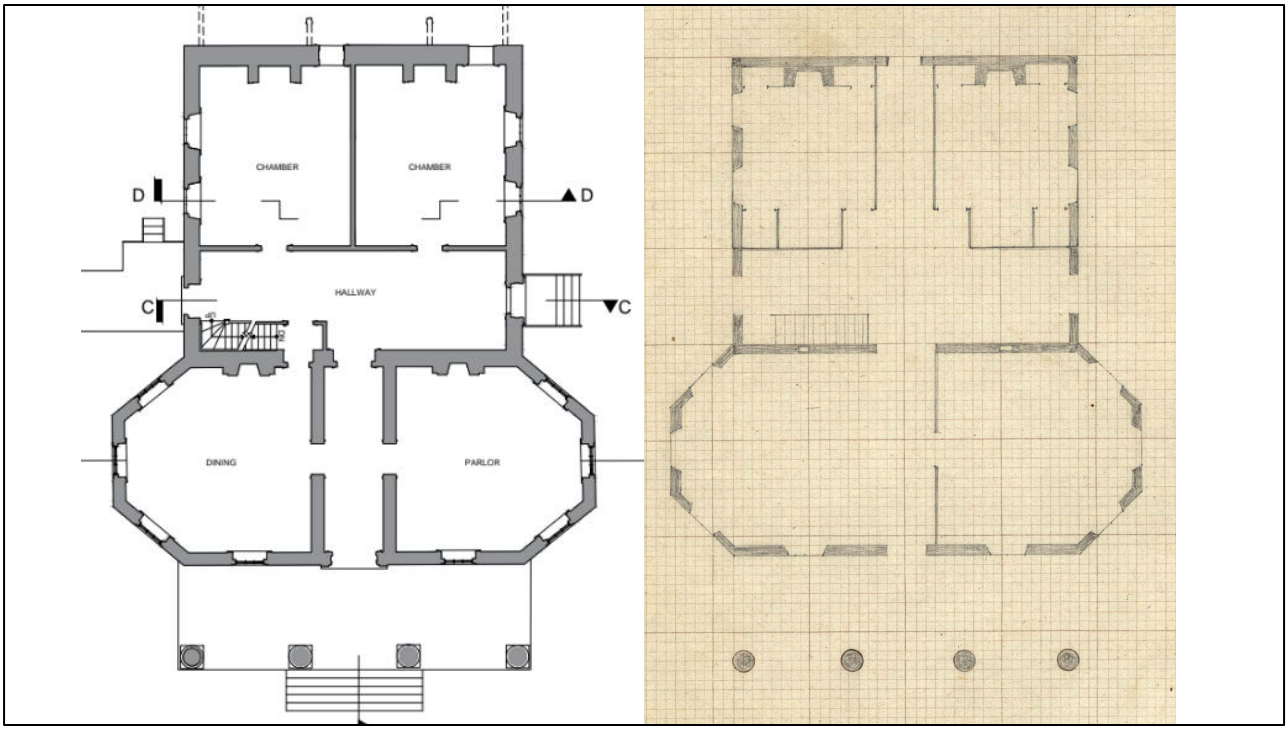
FIRST FLOOR PLAN
ORIGINAL DRAWING

And indeed, when Jefferson did design Poplar Forest, he used four such long octagonal forms for the villa's bedchambers and parlor, probably inspired by the addition to Farmington. You'll notice at the top of this drawing by John Neilson that Poplar Forest has a central passage cutting through a long octagon, which as we'll remember was a change made by Divers to the final plan of Farmington. Thus here we may be seeing how the construction of the addition to Farmington informed Jefferson's later work at Poplar Forest.

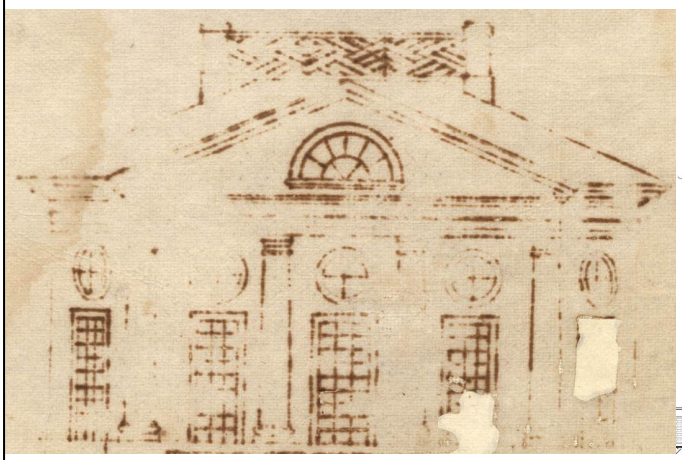


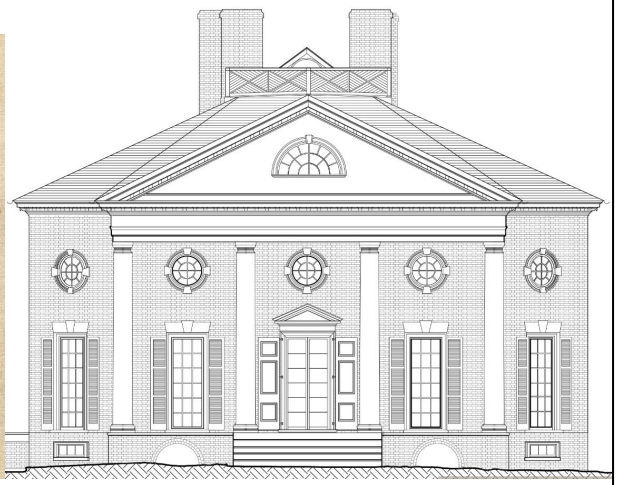


With the final designs in hand, Divers's builders could commence construction, which they did sometime in 1802. It is important to note however that the final drawings I showed earlier were most likely not the drawings used for construction. With wear and tear, these construction drawings have a habit of being lost to use, and indeed this was probably the fate of the Farmington construction drawings. At the University of Virginia, however, many of these drawings have survived, and I've included an example of one—in this case, for Pavilion II. On the front or recto of the sheet are a set of measured plans and an elevation, and on the reverse or verso, a set of instructions for the builders. We know these were used for construction because, as Louis Nelson has noted, there are crease marks in the drawings themselves, suggesting they have been folded and unfolded several times. Jefferson probably did not provide this much detail for Divers, but he certainly would have had suggestions and measurements for certain elements of the addition.



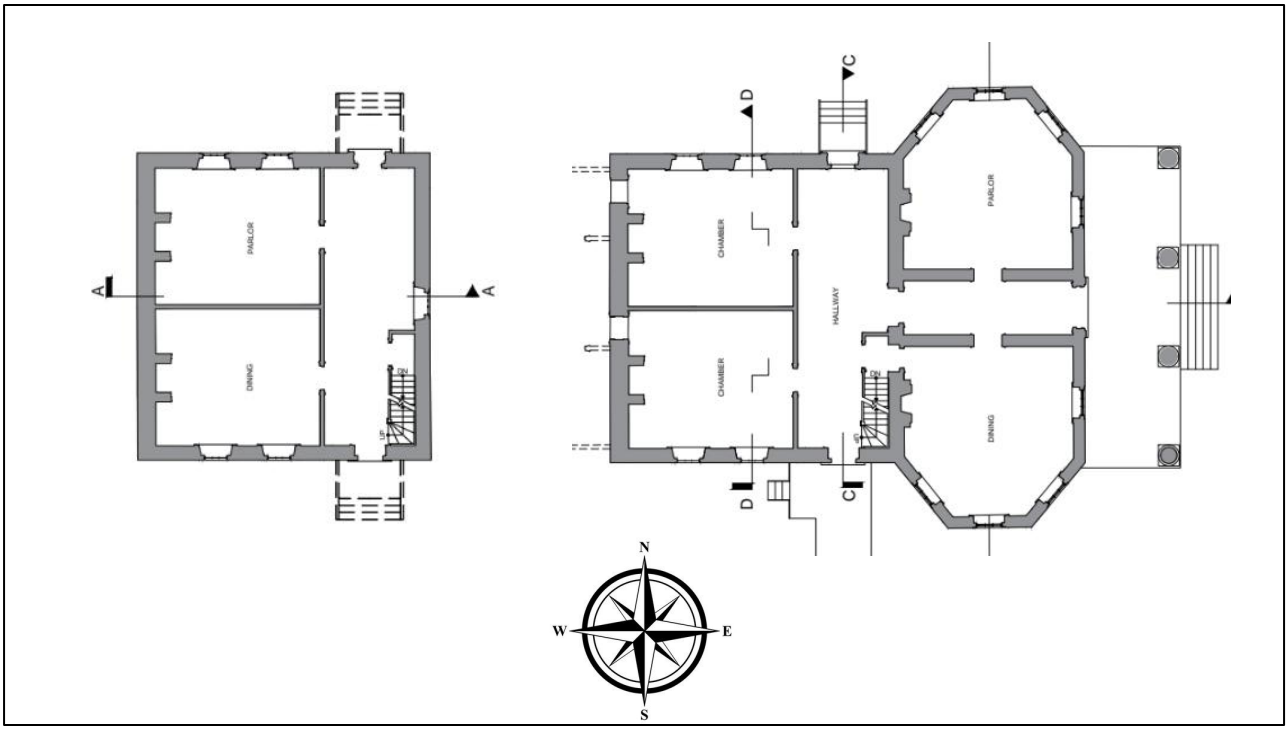
Comparing the addition as constructed on the left to Jefferson's final drawing on the right, we can notice some differences. The first and perhaps most obvious is the wall on the south side of the addition. As we saw earlier, Jefferson intended for the front or east door to open into the dining room itself, but Divers must have at some point instructed his builders to add another wall to create a proper central passage, one that opened to the existing stair passage. Jefferson's plan also included alcove beds and built-in closets of some kind, which Divers evidently chose not to have constructed. This was fairly common practice for structures that Jefferson designed for others. Jefferson's quirks were well known and in some cases even celebrated by his friends, that did not necessarily mean that they were shared by them. The last thing I'll note about the differences is the size of the addition. Although I sized these images to parallel each other, Jefferson actually misjudged the size of Farmington, and the builders had to adjust by making a larger addition and portico to match. In my opinion, it is these differences—and not the purity of the original design—that provides the most interest to the space. It illustrates a fundamental dynamic inherent to 18th and early 19th century design: that the will of the architect and even of the patron are not inviolable. Houses like Farmington are the product of builders, both free and enslaved, who largely worked within the confines of the design provided to them but who also applied their own knowledge about building and construction in early Virginia to create the spaces we know today. The construction process is perhaps even more important than the design process, because it is here that the humanity of the building shines most brightly.





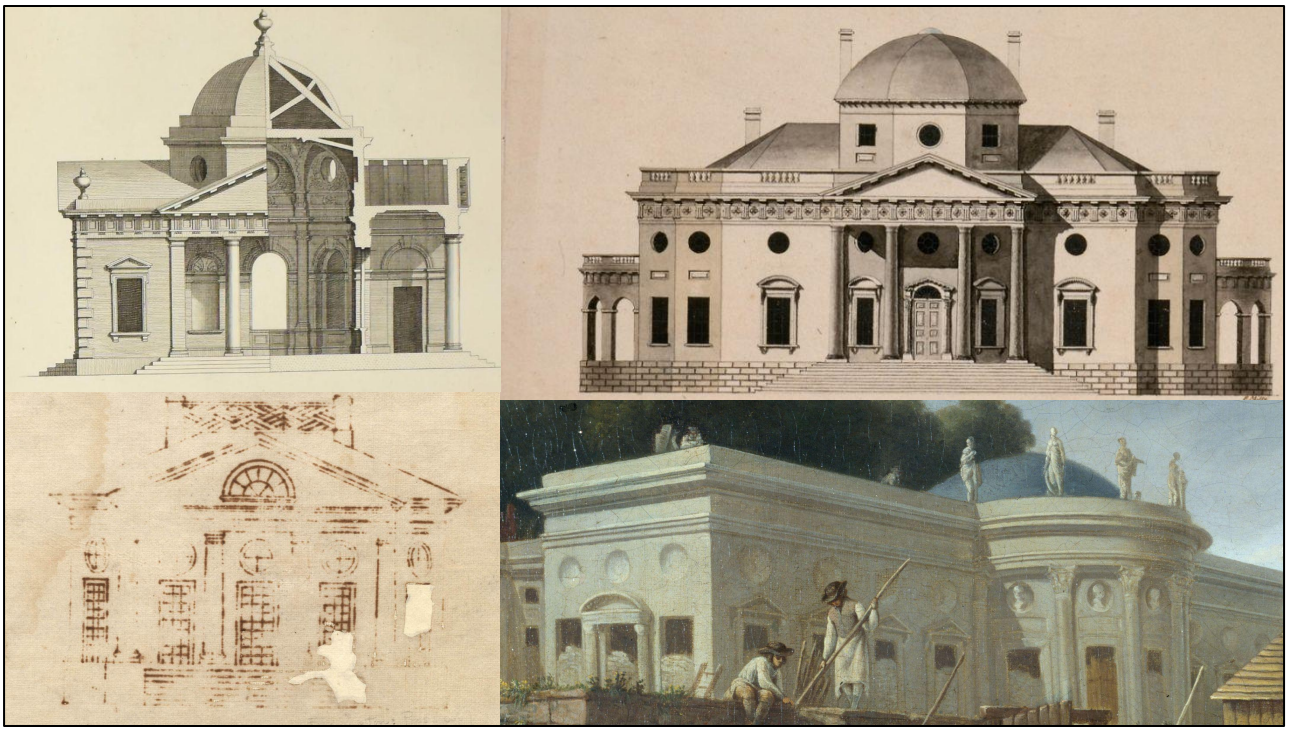
While much of the correspondence between Divers and Jefferson as it relates to Farmington is lost, we do have one surviving February 1803 letter to Daniel Trump to order the windows for divers. “Two or three years ago,” Jefferson wrote, “I informed you that Mr. Divers, a neighbor of mine, who was building a good house, would [want?] his windows from you. He is much [later?] about his building than was expected. However he is now ready for the windows. I must pray you therefore to have them executed according to the memorandum enclosed...” That memorandum included “[8]. windows 9 f.—7 I. high; 9. circular sashes 3 f—6¾ I diameter finished, glazed with best glass; 2. sashes 3 f—4¾ I square, to be placed over doors; and 1. semicircular sash 4 f—3 I long on the straight edge when finished; 1. semicircular window sash 6 f—7 I long on the straight edge, glazed as above; and 24. panes window glass 12. by 10 I. for repaining.” Jefferson asked that Trump forward them to Richmond “with as little delay as possible” and to “pray you to have them done in the best manner... the circular windows you had made for me all gave way. They have cost us a great deal of work in repairing, and I am afraid will never be made to stand at all.”

We know the Jefferson addition served several purposes since its completion in 1803, including perhaps most interestingly as bedchambers while the Peyton family owned Farmington in the beginning in the 1850s. This photo shows how the oxeye windows would have lit the upper floor bedrooms at Farmington in a similar manner to how the low sashes light the mezzanine-floor bedrooms at Monticello. While probably inadvertent, these lower ceilings, pictured in the dining room at right, actually made the addition more closely align with Jefferson's comments about fashionable Parisian townhouses.



The walls and upper floors of the Peyton bedchambers were removed during the transformation of the space for the Farmington Country Club beginning in 1927, and this is the form the addition has taken to this day. But it was recent restoration work undertaken by Peter Post that raised questions about the orientation of the space. Post suspected that perhaps the reorientation of the house to face east—aligning with the compass, as I have done here—may have had something to do lining up the oxeye windows to the morning sun. From time immemorial, man has combined architecture, astronomy, and geometry to produce both beauty and mystery. We all know the story of Stonehenge being oriented to the solstices, and there has been a great deal of work about Poplar Forest to this end. The recent work by Post left some folks around here wondering whether the addition to Farmington was so constructed.

So Punkie and I decided to test the theory. If anybody still somehow questions Punkie's dedication to Farmington, let them dispel their doubts now, because she was up well before dawn on a cold winter solstice last December to meet me in the Jefferson Room. Under the cover of a light flurry of snow, we watched the sun rise through the oxeye windows and captured these photos that proved—not without some regret—that the Jefferson addition and its windows are *not* perfectly aligned to the rising solstice sun. I remain skeptical, but we nevertheless we hold out hope for the equinox this spring and the summer solstice next June.



To summarize: the Jefferson Room and its oxeye windows are remarkable for the wealth of inspiration they draw upon. From the works of English Palladians like Gibbs to the rich neoclassicism of pre-revolutionary France to 18th and early 19th century building customs in Virginia, the room is both a forceful assertion and a poetic synthesis of Jefferson's aesthetic principles. I think the real mystery of the oxeye windows, however, is in their relation to the redesign of Monticello. Given the uncertain date of Mills's drawing on the top right and the concurrent expansion of Farmington and the second Monticello, the Jefferson addition ought to have a more prominent place in our discussions of the design of Monticello as well as Jefferson's development as an architect. This is a thread that I will continue to explore, but in the meantime, I hope that our discussion tonight allows you to look at that room and its oxeye windows with a newfound appreciation. If we're lucky, maybe this discussion will inspire us to wonder what other mysteries small details like these might offer for those curious enough to look deeper. Thanks very much for your time tonight, and I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.