

A Tale of Two Houses: Menokin and Mount Airy

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By Dr. Camille Wells

Among many fond beliefs concerning Virginia's eighteenth-century mansions is that they often were constructed by a father for his son. This statement is resonant, if not accurate, for it does justice to the dynastic aspirations of those Virginia gentlemen who built spacious, fashionable houses as centerpieces for the fields, orchards, yards, gardens, and outbuildings of the plantations where they dwelt. Such concern for a family's intergenerational welfare and prestige certainly is inherent in the request Lewis Burwell of James City County presented to the Virginia General Assembly in 1735. Burwell asked for permission to sell some of his entailed lands in Prince William County to offset the "great sums of money" he had spent "in building a mansion-house, and other out-houses, and in making gardens, and other considerable improvements...intending the same for the seat of the eldest son of the family." Creditably situating his first-born son may have been Lewis Burwell's eventual goal, but Kingsmill figured as Burwell's own elegant place of residence until his death in 1744.

Recent scrutiny of circumstances surrounding the origins of specific Virginia great houses has established what colonial Virginians knew very well: that expensive house-building was a once-in-a-lifetime ordeal. Not even the wealthiest gentlemen commanded the resources to fund and direct multiple building campaigns of such ambitious proportions. Landon Carter of Sabine Hall addressed the matter well in 1777. Upon learning that his third son John was dissatisfied with his material circumstances, Carter grumbled in his diary: "as to a house he has the same as Landon [the second son], an overseer's house to live in." Carter had given both young men extensive plantations and numerous slaves, thus they had "an estate to build with," and they should be content—even grateful. "Besides," Carter continued, "can any man provide dwelling houses of taste for all or for any son but the eldest? Was I otherwise treated by my father being a younger son? He gave me an estate and I contentedly thought I ought to build my self" after his own prudent plantation management had generated the "wherewithal".

Menokin is thus unique in its origins: the design and construction of this gentry house were authorized by a Virginia patriarch for...not his son but his son-in-law. In 1768 Francis Lightfoot Lee asked John Tayloe II for permission to marry Tayloe's second daughter Rebecca. No account survives of their negotiations, but surrounding events indicate that Tayloe saw in the circumstances of his daughter's suitor both a problem and an opportunity. Frank Lee was the child of privilege—his father was Thomas Lee of Stratford—but as a younger son, his inheritance was limited to several thousand acres of largely undeveloped land above the Fall Line in Loudoun County and a gang of slaves with which to transform his tracts into productive plantations. Lee had spent the previous decade living simply and working diligently on his backcountry estate, and he had prospered—both economically and politically. Yet there was little or nothing in the way

of polite society in Loudoun County, and John Tayloe knew that his daughter's careful upbringing—her education and refined manners—would be wasted in such a landscape. If Tayloe did not fancy the future Rebecca Tayloe's marriage to Frank Lee would likely entail, neither did he fancy the future which then loomed at Mount Airy. Tayloe had spent his entire adulthood working hard and shrewdly to expand and diversify the productive resources left to him by his father. As a result he could count himself among the wealthiest and most influential members of Virginia's elite. By 1765 Tayloe had also completed on the highest elevation of his Richmond County estate a "daring scheme of a mansion" surrounded by every structure and planting agreeable to genteel living and lavish entertaining. Tayloe had also been fortunate in his choice of wives; Rebecca Plater was the daughter of Maryland's colonial governor, and she was as capable of bearing healthy infants as she was of running a hospitable household. Tayloe's only complaint in the world was that all of his seven children were girls. There was still reason for optimism in his wife's continuing pregnancies, and indeed in 1771 she at last presented her husband with a baby boy. But during the 1760s, little John Tayloe III was still a parental yearning, and no fourth-generation Virginia gentleman could take lightly the lack of a son to whom he could proudly convey the developed core of his formidable estate.

In 1767 Tayloe began to garner a new kind of confirmation of his enviable social status when his eldest daughter Elizabeth received court from Edward Lloyd IV of Talbot County, Maryland. Young Lloyd was rich and well-connected with a bright political future, so Tayloe agreed to the marriage and offered the handsome dowry of £2000 sterling. Without a son, however, Tayloe confronted at least six more such hefty gifts of cash and no male heir to take his place at the grand entrance of Mount Airy. In this context, Frank Lee and his request for Rebecca Tayloe's hand may have looked like a singular opportunity.

At the age of thirty-three, Frank Lee was a mature suitor who had already distinguished himself in many venues. Contemporaries often remarked on his gentle disposition, thoughtful behavior, and probative analysis. Perhaps, if Madam Tayloe's pregnancies continued to result in daughters, this younger man might prove a tractable son-in-waiting and ultimately a reliable new master for Mount Airy. In any case, John Tayloe decided to keep Frank Lee close by, and the two men struck a unique bargain. Lee could marry his young Becky if he agreed to turn his Loudoun County plantations over to tenants and abandon his social and political primacy there. In return, Tayloe would use his wealth and influence to compensate his son-in-law with similar assets in Richmond County.

Francis Lightfoot Lee married Rebecca Tayloe at Mount Airy on May 25, 1769. Within the year, and in part through the maneuverings of his father-in-law, Lee had attained political positions comparable to those he had relinquished in Loudoun County. He also had received from Tayloe the gift of Menokin, a thousand-acre plantation located near Mount Airy, a work force of twenty slaves, and the promise of the resources to build thereon a suitably genteel house and outbuildings. At about the time of their marriage Tayloe composed a deed of gift for Menokin, and in the following year, Tayloe's daybook began noting allocation made for workmen "at Menokin." Then in his will of

1773, Tayloe not only mentioned Rebecca Tayloe Lee's legacy in terms of "the deed I have made" for Menokin, he also specified: "the buildings to be finished at the expense of my estate." All of this seems quite agreeable and straightforward, an agreement struck and honored on both sides. Beneath the surface, however, there lurked indications of discord devolving from Tayloe's impulse to play the domineering patriarch.

The first clue that all was not harmony and contentment is that Tayloe's deed of gift for Menokin was to Rebecca Tayloe and her heirs alone. The document also contains several passages restricting Frank Lee's interest in the property to a life estate. Tayloe further retained control of the situation by enacting the agreement—that is, he gave the newlyweds possession of their plantation and involvement with its new buildings—but he kept the documentary proof of its conveyance among his private papers. Not until October of 1778, six months before his death, did Tayloe give his deed of gift presented in court. Even then, Tayloe permitted the recording of the deed only on condition that the Lees relinquish their right ever to sell Menokin by instantly conveying the property in trust to a neutral party. Tayloe correctly surmised that after nine years of marriage, Frank and Rebecca Lee were not going to have any children to whom Menokin might descend. He thus was gambling that the terms of his deed of gift would hold and upon Rebecca Lee's death, Menokin would return to her Tayloe brothers and sisters.

If John Tayloe's control over Menokin the plantation persisted into eventual repossession, his imprint on Menokin the house persisted into crisp indelibility. The substance of the house, the iron-infused sandstone from which Mount Airy itself was built, came from a vein of the native stone on Tayloe's land. Furthermore, the design of the house appears to have been Tayloe's own selection—not only because the unique presentation drawing for "Monokin House & Offices" survives among John Tayloe's personal papers, but also because the house so closely resembles Mount Airy's two flanking dependencies.

The architectural messages which Tayloe's design decisions conveyed were several. First, there was the insisted-upon association of Menokin with Mount Airy through the use of identical stonework in a region where most important buildings—including Stratford and Sabine Hall—were made of brick. Then there was the comparable, if not identical, juxtaposition at both houses of brown-and-white color schemes. Although the precise ashlar stonework suggests that Mount Airy's brown walls always were meant to be on view, subtle details of preparation indicate that the house and its offices were initially built to receive plaster. The result would have been a striking pale edifice: creamy stucco walls enframed by classical embellishments carved from light gray Aquia sandstone. The two flanking offices also apparently were to receive plaster over the stippled surfaces of their dark sandstone ashlar, but their brown quoins were to stand out in sharp relief—emblems of status secondary to that of the central house.

Although this was the original intention, Mount Airy never received its finishing coats of stucco. Apparently Tayloe decided that the appearance of his house benefited from its sharp contrasts in color. Whether or not Tayloe had reached this conclusion by 1769, it is clear that he approved a design for Menokin which was meant to draw attention to other-

than-architectural relationship between his son-in-law's house and his own. The presentation drawing depicts a white house with dark accents. If Tayloe still intended to stucco his own house and dependencies, then Menokin, with white plastered walls and chocolate brown detailing, would have explicitly called to the minds of the brown ashlar walls of his mansion house, then the connections between Menokin and Mount Airy were even more wittily articulated in the way the brown-trimmed-white scheme of Lee's house precisely reversed the white-trimmed-brown scheme of Tayloe's.

The subtle expression of Menokin's architectural fealty to Mount Airy extended beyond the matters of color schemes and façade compositions to include matters of dimension and scale. Menokin's site is too distant and imposing for any visitor to have mistaken it for an actual outbuilding in the Mount Airy complex, but the nearly identical ground dimensions of Mount Airy's formal offices and Menokin's principal dwelling speak forcefully in an architectural language almost any eighteenth-century Virginian could grasp of patriarchal primacy and filial deference. In these ways, the houses at Mount Airy and Menokin articulated the familial bonds and intergenerational obligations as firm and obvious as stone and mortar could make them.

Menokin gave John Tayloe II the satisfaction of knowing that the agreeable situation in which he had placed the Lees was entirely visible and comprehensible to his friends and competitors, for whom Menokin must have looked like the ultimate in conspicuous dowering. While the 1767 marriage of Elizabeth Tayloe to Edward Lloyd IV told Tayloe's associates that he was wealthy enough to attract the most privileged of mates for his girls, Menokin said—loud and clear—that Tayloe was so affluent that he was hardly obliged to fret over the matter. So financially secure was he that he could receive a worthy and talented young man of substantial but lesser means and—quite literally—make his Tidewater fortune. Moreover, Tayloe could reap all the benefits of his apparently unconditional generosity to Rebecca and Frank Lee, but by withholding the deed of gift from the official record he indefinitely kept these members of the next generation in a form of social and economic thrall.

Frank Lee was too circumspect a gentleman ever to speak—or at least to write—about such things, but clearly he chafed under Tayloe's presumptions and found relatively harmless though architecturally articulate ways to subvert the full realization of his father-in-law's half-gracious offerings with their entangling strings attached. He did this in his role as overseer of Menokin's construction. In April of 1770, Lee told his new neighbor Landon Carter that he had “intirely laid aside all thoughts of a crop of tobacco” for he was “building and intend[ing] to make use of his hands to assist his building.” Confronting a house design he did not necessarily approve, receiving building materials he did not necessarily prefer, supervising workmen he did not necessarily choose, Lee proved a desultory site manager.

Menokin itself bears witness: the idiosyncratic juxtaposition of elaborate and plain, polished and rough elements indicate that the initial shaping of stones on the ground drew on a much more elaborate, academic vision for the house than that which was ultimately executed. The sophisticated double architraves and quoins which surround two of the

second-story windows almost certainly were meant to distinguish all of the openings—at least all of those on the façade. The carved keystone over the north doorway represents one of the few instances of such embellished stonework to survive in colonial Virginia, yet this crowning component of the entrance was flanked by windows outlined with heavy, starkly unmolded architraves. The rare and complicated double-hipped roof surmounted a building composed mainly of humble, nearly uncoursed rubble. Perhaps most resonant is fact that Menokin never received its intended finish of plaster during the lifetimes of John Tayloe and Frank Lee. The single application of stucco neatly conforms to the edges of nineteenth-century porches, thus confirming that the house stood stolid and brown throughout the colonial and early national periods.

Clearly, at some moment in Menokin's construction, an authoritative voice and hand—those of Frank Lee—halted the elaborate preparation of building components and ordered instead the rapid completion of the house. Lee and “his lady” had moved to Menokin in 1771, but the house and its complex of buildings were still unfinished in 1773, when John Tayloe II wrote his will. Although this document confirms Tayloe's sustained interest in achieving domestic gentility at Menokin, the engaging presence of his little son, whose promising vitality had occasioned the writing of the will, may have diminished significantly Tayloe's patriarchal investment in the visual messages Menokin might convey.

For Lee's part, there were more pressing matters afoot. Life in Loudoun County had taught him that an impressive house was but one way of achieving or articulating status and influence. Furthermore, by the time he took up residence in Richmond County, Lee was accustomed to devoting his considerable energies to straightforwardly profitable ventures such as cropping, milling, and trading. Then of course there was his political career in Williamsburg which increasingly drew him into a momentous cycle of revolutionary vents. By 1775 when he departed Menokin to take his seat in the Continental Congress, politics were engrossing nearly all of his time. Traveling with him to Philadelphia was his beloved Becky, and excepting one short visit in 1778, neither returned to their commodious house, with its “deputized” relationship to Mount Airy until John Tayloe II had gone to his grave.