

MENOKIN: VIRGINIA'S MOST UNUSUAL PRESERVATION ADVENTURE

by CALDER LOTH*

BANNER LECTURE PRESENTED AT THE
VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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I want to thank the Menokin Foundation and the Virginia Historical Society for giving me an opportunity to share with you a very different preservation project; a truly unusual one. Many have said it's a crazy one. It involves a place many of you have probably never heard of, and most have probably never visited: Menokin.

Menokin is an Indian name. Nobody's really sure what it means. But Menokin is a place, originally a colonial plantation located on Virginia's Northern Neck, in Richmond County, near Warsaw. It's situated on the high grounds above tiny Menokin Bay, a tributary of the Rappahannock. This small body of water is one of the cleanest and most unspoiled in Eastern Virginia. The focal point of this plantation is the ruins of a colonial house.

Why are we drawn to this place?

First and foremost, this house has history. It originally was the home of Francis Lightfoot Lee, a signer of the Declaration of Independence—the document that created this nation. I will talk more about Lee later.

Next, it's a singular work of colonial American architecture. The noted architectural historian Thomas Waterman said that Menokin is unusual in possessing the qualities of a mansion although modest in its actual dimensions. Also, it's unusual for Virginia for being a stone house, where nearly all other masonry structures of the period were brick.

Its stucco is a later addition but it may have been originally intended.

A distinctive feature is the use of rustication to decorate the second-floor front windows. This type of treatment for openings was popularized by Palladio two centuries earlier, as in the Palazzo Thiene in Vicenza.

What makes Menokin especially intriguing is that it's one of the very few colonial houses in all America for which the original architectural drawings survive. They were discovered in the Tayloe Papers and presented to the Virginia Historical Society by the Tayloe family some 35 years ago.

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Also, Menokin is one of the best documented colonial houses in Virginia. We know a lot about this structure and are learning more every day. I will talk about that aspect in minute, but I've gotten ahead of the game.

Finally, Menokin presents a challenge—a really special challenge because, alas, beginning in the early 1960s Menokin gradually fell into ruin, getting worse and worse as the years went by.

Why am I involved with Menokin?

Well, back when I was a student in the U.Va. School of Architecture, in the early 1960s, a couple of my classmates and I decided to take a grand tour of Virginia's colonial landmarks. We wrote the owners of Blandfield, Sabine Hall, Brooke's Bank, Mount Airy, Elmwood and so on, asking if we could pay visits. All the owners at that time couldn't have been more cordial; they all made our visits memorable.

We didn't know the owners of Menokin but we knew roughly where the house was and we knew it was not occupied. Driving near where we thought it was we saw a woman walking along the road. We asked if she had heard of Menokin. She replied that it was down at the end of a long lane, just up the road. So we trespassed. And this is how we found the house then—abandoned, wide open. The ugly porch had fallen off by then. We took lots of pictures inside and out, thinking these might be the last. The house apparently hadn't been occupied since 1941 because that was the date on a calendar.



Menokin in the early 1960's

Courtesy of Calder Loth

Two years later, pressing our luck, we went back, only to find that all the woodwork had been stripped out. The house was an empty shell.

From that time on, the house slowly crumbled. The rear corner had fallen by 1969. More came down in the 1970s.

I started work with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources in 1968. With some regularity we received inquires about Menokin—expressions of concern, saying that something should be done to save it. All we could say is that the owners, the Omohundro family, do not respond to inquires.

Finally, one day in the mid-1980s, I received a call from a Mrs. Dora Ricciardi. She explained that she and her brother, Edgar Omohundro, owned Menokin. She said that the property had been tied up in an estate for many years and couldn't be sold, but now she and her brother were the sole owners and were in a position do something. She said she was very troubled by the condition into which the house had fallen. She said she and her brother realized it was important and that they would only consider selling it to an organization that would preserve the place as a historic shrine. They would not sell it to a developer. But they couldn't donate the property; she needed the money to care for an elderly sister in a nursing home.

What led to her call was a letter from the National Park Service informing her that the Park Service was considering removing Menokin's National Historic Landmark status because of loss of integrity. Mrs. Ricciardi did not want that to happen, and asked if I could help her find a solution. I said I would, but that it would take a long time.

For the next several years we pondered the problem, forming ad hoc committees involving the APVA, Mary Washington University, Stratford Hall, local preservationists, and other groups. All were interested, and all agreed that this was a unique preservation challenge, but no funds for purchase, much less for establishing a viable program for the place, were forthcoming.

Mrs. Ricciardi was extraordinarily patient. She kept saying how regretful she was that the place was in such terrible condition. I begged her not to feel guilty. I said its condition just makes the project more interesting, and that it gives us the opportunity to do something different. I told her we really appreciated her patience and willingness to cooperate.... What else could I say?

The best thing to come along throughout this period was Martin King, a retired Exxon executive who lived in a historic house, Grove Mount, very near Menokin. Martin had the time, interest, personal resources, and administrative skills to take on the Menokin challenge as a personal challenge. Thank goodness for him. Many of you knew Martin. He was a trustee of the Virginia Historical Society and the APVA, as well as a member of the Virginia Board of Historic Resources. He really loved Virginia history and its old houses.



Downstairs Hall and Dining Room

Courtesy of the Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress

In the meantime, Richard Rennolds, an employee of the APVA, and I paid a visit to Mrs. Ricciardi's brother, Edgar Omohundro, who lived just outside Warsaw. While discussing the property and what might be done with it, I happened to ask Mr. Omohundro if he knew whatever happened to the Menokin woodwork; we all assumed it had been sold or stolen. To my great surprise Omohundro told me that he had had the woodwork removed to keep it from being stolen since he was unable to secure the house.

I asked him where it was. He said it was in an old house down the road. I asked if Richard and I could see it. He said "sure."

We then went to an old bungalow house at the Lyells crossroad, a house I had passed many times. And there inside, like King Tut's tomb, was the Menokin woodwork: the front doorway, mantels, stair paneling, wainscoting, chimneypieces, shutters, window trim and so on and so on.

The front of the house was in a state of near collapse and some of the woodwork was spilling through the front wall. Richard Rennolds said gently that the woodwork was not safe here, and asked Omohundro if he would consider giving custodianship of the woodwork to the APVA. Richard said the APVA could store it in a secure barn at Bacon's Castle. Mr. Omohundro said "sure". So the woodwork was all carefully removed and taken to the Bacon's Castle peanut barn where it remained for the next decade.

Now, fast forward several years. Mrs. Ricciardi died and Edgar Omohundro inherits Menokin as sole owner. Martin King realizes that any money raised to purchase the property would be money unavailable for stabilizing the ruins. With the most exquisite diplomatic skill Martin convinces Omohundro, an

elderly bachelor with no heirs, to leave the property to the Menokin Foundation on the condition such a foundation is created.

The foundation subsequently was created. Then Martin, with evermore exquisite tact, says to Omohundro, you have no need of Menokin, why don't you just give the property to the Foundation now and enjoy the honor for having done so. Omohundro says "OK, I will." Then Martin says, "oh by the way, why don't you give us the woodwork too?" Omohundro says "Sure, OK." Then Martin asks Omohundro if he knew what happened to the carved key-stone over the front door before it disappeared. Omohundro says, "It's here under my back porch, you can have that too."

So now we are faced with owning the crumbling ruins of a National Historic Landmark, most of its original 18th-century woodwork, and 500 acres of fields and woodlands with waterfront! Thus the Menokin Foundation officially received title to Menokin on July 4, 1995 with all these extraordinary assets and with no staff and little or no money. And sadly, Edgar Omohundro suddenly died, just a couple of months later.

So we got it; now what are we going to do? What's our purpose? What's our mission?

Well, even long before the Foundation took possession of the property, future board members, advisors, scholars, and friends spent considerable time contemplating how Menokin might be used. Out of these discussions developed the general concept of establishing Menokin as a field school and study center. Our goal was not to restore the house and develop it as a conventional house museum. Stabilization and restoration of the ruin could take place not as a goal but as a process. As Martin liked to say, it was like life, the process is what is important, not the final outcome.

Menokin's ruins could give us the rare opportunity to conduct above-ground archaeology, ruin stabilization, and study and conservation of the literally tons of architectural artifacts that had fallen into the ruin.

We could undertake the conservation of the woodwork and the study of colonial joinery.

We had the opportunity to conduct extensive below-ground archaeology: the study of the plantation layout, the sites of the outbuildings and farm building and slave occupancy. We have potential prehistoric archaeology. The property is called Menokin because it's believed to have been the site of Indian settlement. We have colonial agricultural patterns: the fields have been minimally disturbed over the past 250 years.

We have ecology. The property is an exceptionally important bird habitat, a fact that greatly benefited us later on as I will mention in a few minutes. And we have exceptional potential for colonial garden archeology which I also will discuss in just a minute.

We want to do all this with the latest scientific and innovative methods. Many of the same computer techniques for analyzing stone fragments and determining their original positions can be used at Menokin as was used for restoration of the Parthenon.

All of this activity would be shared with students. I said often that many American universities have on-going archaeological field schools in Turkey, Egypt and Greece; why can't we have a similar field school to study our own heritage? This is our heritage. Menokin is one of America's premiere cultural landscapes.

Well, this is how we wanted to use poor crumbling Menokin.

I noted earlier that what makes Menokin exceptional as well as an excellent candidate for study is that it is one of the best documented colonial houses in Virginia. As I've said already, it is one of the few American houses of the period for which original architectural drawings survive.

In 1932, architectural historian Thomas Waterman published measured elevations with the dependencies in his pioneering book on colonial Virginia mansions.

In 1940, the Historic American Buildings Survey undertook an extensive recording project of the house. Architects made some 20 sheets of measured drawings, recording the exterior, floor plans, stone and wood details and so on. It also took extensive photographs inside and out. These records are in the Library of Congress and are all on online. You can look at them on your home computer.

Numerous other historic photographs have surfaced in the course of our study and research projects. As I noted earlier, during our student visit to the



Top of Stair 2nd Floor



Second floor room with mantel.

Courtesy of Bob Nylander

house in the early 1960s Bob Nylander took numerous photographs of the interior, including the second floor, rightly believing that few people ever take second-floor images. He was correct. The Historic American Buildings Survey did not take second-floor photos. The second-floor mantels are not beautiful, but they are Menokin's. Bob's are the only photos of them in situ.

And remember, not only has the building been extensively recorded, we have most of the original woodwork. Bottom line: there is little conjecture about Menokin's original appearance. And we are learning more about it every day.

Moreover, various pieces of trim and hardware have been returned by well-meaning souvenir hunters since the Foundation acquired the property. I recently returned an early 19th-century dictionary and a brass frame that I "rescued" during my 1960s visit. They form the sum total of our Menokin furnishings collection.

Although we want people to study the ruins, this couldn't be done until we secured them from the weather and made them safe. First we had to clear out the trees and other growth, and then construct some temporary interior scaffolding. All this was done under Martin's direction.

Next, through the good efforts of Delegate Tayloe Murphy, the Foundation was able to secure a state grant that enabled us to put the ruins under a huge roof to keep out the rain and snow that was rotting fallen timbers.

Even with this shelter, the ruins remained very unstable, if dangerous. The southwest corner had serious cracks and was about to fall. Just this year we contracted with restoration specialist John Lee of Annapolis, Maryland, to



Menokin "under roof" with shelter and skylights.

Courtesy of The Menokin Foundation

slowly coax the corner back into place and stabilize the foundation.

It's been very difficult for the Foundation to have any type of program or on-site administration without on-site facilities. For a few years we operated with the limited conditions of a trailer. In addition to a proper office and meeting room, we desperately needed a building where we could store the woodwork and treat and store artifacts as they were taken from the ruins.

The Foundation has been very fortunate with grants and donations to be able to build an office/reception center/storage facility. Sadly, Martin died suddenly just months after the groundbreaking.

The new building, now called the King Center, enabled us finally to get the Menokin woodwork out of storage at Bacon's Castle and return it to Menokin some forty years after Omohundro had it removed from the house. Inventorying and cataloguing all this stuff is an ongoing project.

As some of you may know, not all of the woodwork is at Menokin. When the Virginia Historical Society's north wing was being erected in 1998, it was decided that the dining room woodwork could be better appreciated installed here rather than sitting in the Bacon Castle peanut barn. So it's now on exhibit on long-term loan at the Virginia Historical Society.

Some day it will probably go back to Menokin, but its being here has been a wonderful way to cultivate interest in Menokin. So please go to the Virginia Historical Society and visit this room and look at this important colonial woodwork up close, especially the fine carving in the chimneypiece frieze. And you can also see the Menokin keystone on display.

During the past year, through the generosity of board member Andy Williams, we have been restoring and conserving specific other elements of the woodwork. The first was the first-floor chamber chimneypiece, now erected



Martin Kirwan King Conservation and Visitors Center

Courtesy of The Menokin Foundation

as a focal point in the King Center. We are careful to retain the early paint; it's only been painted twice. We can sense Francis Lightfoot Lee's presence in the burn marks on the chimney piece frame, resulting from candles set on the mantel shelf years ago.

We have just finished conserving and reassembling the front door frame, which recently has been installed against another wall in the King Center. These elements will enable students to study colonial joinery. The next project will probably involve portions of the stair.

John Lee's project to stabilize the southwest corner of the house and other sections of the ruin required the removal of much of the material that had fallen into the basement areas. We needed to get these fragments away from the elements and stored where they could be catalogued and studied, and perhaps be restored for future reuse. This required the construction of yet another building. This big storage building was completed just this year and now houses hundreds of architectural artifacts removed from the ruins. All the wooden elements have been fumigated for insects and mold, and are now stable. It takes a lot of wood to make a house, even a stone house.

Also, any stones removed during this project have been carefully recorded where they fell. Their locations have been studied and photographed prior to removal. These stones are also housed in the new storage building. These can be put back in place as part of the long-term study of this project, teaching



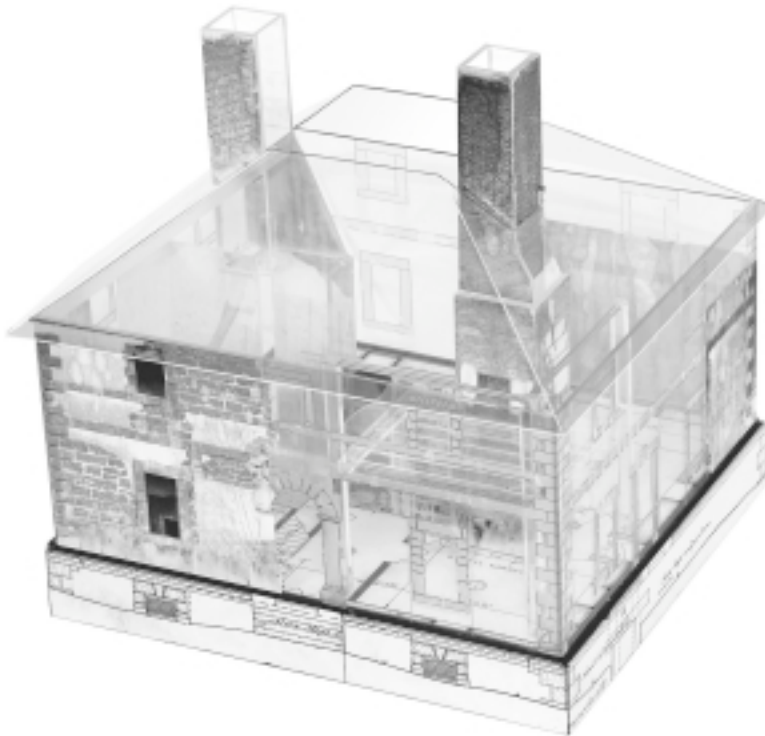
Interior of new Storage Building.

Courtesy of Calder Loth

students about colonial masonry in the process. The same goes for all the wooden elements. While there is no hurry, and no specific schedule, we want the option of reusing as many of these wooden elements as possible.

Some are so deteriorated that they will need to be replicated. Others can be restored and reinforced and put back in their original locations. Again, the goal is not to have a fully restored Menokin anytime within the next fifty years or so, but to use the slow, deliberate process of analysis and reconstruction as a teaching tool for conservation and traditional building arts. We want to apply the latest scientific methods in this process; so the slower we go the more technologically advanced we will be. Who knows what technology will be available to us thirty years from now?

We are currently investigating more innovative ways in which to stabilize what's left of the ruin and also to make it more visually interesting and informative. People need to understand the scale and volume of the house's original appearance. One of the concepts being given serious consideration is to reproduce the missing walls in glass panels and marking architectural elements on them. This model was prepared by John Lee to show this idea. Missing features can be etched onto the glass. Panels can be removed as various original features are put back. I think this concept has a lot of merit. It would be an



Model of the Glass House concept.

Courtesy of the Menokin Foundation

engaging and indeed a unique form of interpretation.

But it's important to complete the initial phase of stabilization. The ruins are not really safe. We have to be very cautious about allowing students and others access to them until we can be assured that things won't fall on people. Also, much fabric, such as plaster and wood, has deteriorated just in the eleven years the foundation has owned the ruin. Halting the ongoing process of decay is our greatest challenge at the moment.

One of the most interesting study efforts we've embarked upon has been the development of a 3-D computer model produced by Earl Mark who teaches computer modeling at the University of Virginia. He has undertaken a virtual reconstruction of the house, which can show the angles of the sun for any day of the year on any side of the house. The actual program has the image whirling around showing the various sun angles. We can also open the door and step into the center passage and ascend the stair. This is just the beginning of this project. As we can pay for it, we can add to this computer model. We can take you through the rest of rooms and furnish them as well, that is let the computer furnish them. So far, however, we have no Lee furnishings.

Menokin is not just a ruin, it's a multi-faceted resource. A very exciting discovery made soon after acquisition is the outline of a remarkable garden. Martin King started clearing out the undergrowth and saplings around the ruin, and low and behold, on the south side of the house he revealed an amazingly complex series of terraces. Straight terraces are pretty standard for colonial gardens, but Menokin's go this way and that way in an asymmetrical fashion down the slope. This area holds great potential for garden archaeology. It will require a detailed topographic map to understand the layout and rationale of the terraces. Evidence of fences, walks, flower beds and so on will likely be revealed during archaeological investigation.

Other archaeological sites include the office ruins. Interestingly, this building contained a Chinese stair railing, recorded by HABS before it collapsed. The archaeological site of the kitchen outbuilding opposite also holds much potential for study, to say nothing of the various other plantation buildings. Fortunately we have some 1960s slides of some of the farm outbuildings taken before they disappeared. There was a plank outbuilding, a shed, and a small barn out in the field.

Other archaeological features include the traces of the rolling roads, where the tobacco hogsheads would be rolled down the slopes to the landing on Menokin Bay and loaded on boats. The landing site, which we also own, could hold much archaeological information as well.

Another significant aspect of Menokin is its natural resources. Our 500 acres is one of the most important bird habitats in eastern Virginia, including bald eagle nesting areas. This was made evident to us when the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service approached us a couple of years ago. The Service offered to purchase an easement on about 200 acres of wooded slopes bordering Menokin Bay. The funds we received for the sale of this easement have enabled us to establish a much-needed endowment for the foundation, to leverage capital for matching grants, and also to help us pay for a full-time director, Sarah Pope, and an assistant.

However, as you know, fund-raising is a never ending process. We will need constant cash flow if we're to have the educational programs and field-school activities we envision. Incidentally, one of our board members is the president of the Rappahannock Community College in nearby Warsaw. We are hoping that many of our educational programs can be channeled through that institution. However, we will be glad to partner with any institution of higher learning for projects at Menokin.

It's important that whatever activity we undertake be shared so others can learn from our experience. Again, Menokin is not, and never should be, a typical historic site. It's a unique vehicle for learning and hands-on work whether it's measuring, computer analysis, data entry, historic fabric conservation, or archaeological digging.

I've talked about Menokin primarily as a material culture artifact and cultural landscape, which indeed it is, but it also has a history and associations with people, people both important and anonymous.

As I have said, Menokin was the home of a colonial leader and patriot, Francis Lightfoot Lee. Lee's childhood home was Stratford, about fifteen miles away. He married Rebecca Tayloe ("Becky") of Mount Airy. Mount Airy's great Palladian mansion is just down the road. Menokin was a wedding present from Becky Tayloe's father, John Tayloe II of Mount Airy. Menokin was begun in 1769 using the same brown sandstone as Mount Airy, taken from a nearby quarry. The two houses probably shared some of the same masons. We don't know Menokin's architect (the drawings are unsigned) but whoever designed the house was likely influenced by engravings of house designs available at the time.

The joining of the Lees and the Tayloes was one of Virginia's most patriotic unions. Unfortunately their marriage was without issue. Frank and Becky Lee both died in 1797, and Menokin reverted to the Tayloe family. The Tayloes then allowed the house to be occupied for a time by a cousin, John Tayloe Lomax, a distinguished lawyer. It was Lomax who was asked by Thomas Jefferson to be the first professor of Law at the University of Virginia. Except for Lomax, all of the other original faculty members at U.Va. were Europeans. Jefferson strongly believed that law must be taught by an American. Lomax can thus be claimed as the progenitor of the University of Virginia School of Law, one of the country's most distinguished law schools. We thus hope U.Va.

Law alumni will think kindly towards Menokin.

But we have anonymous inhabitants of Menokin. As I have said, Indians were its first occupants and we expect they have left archaeological evidence. Also, black slaves tended Menokin for several decades. We accidentally discovered the site of slave quarters when grading for the King Center. We relocated the building so as to avoid further disturbance of the site. More intense investigation of the sites of these inhabitants will be necessary in time. Various other families have owned Menokin, down to the Omohundros, and we need to find out more about them and how they used the property.

But first and foremost we must always respect the fact that Menokin is a nationally significant patriotic site. We must preserve and celebrate Menokin to pay a debt. Francis Lightfoot Lee put his life on the line by signing the document that created this nation. We owe our effort to him. Until it was acquired by the Foundation, Menokin was the only home of a Virginia signer of the Declaration of Independence that was not secured. All the other homes of Virginia's signers: Monticello, Berkeley, Elsing Green, Stratford, the Nelson House, and the Wythe House have all been secured. Only Menokin, of the surviving homes of the signers, remained at risk. That risk is now removed, but we have a long way to go towards developing the site and gleaning all that this intriguing place has to offer.

Sometimes I've had people ask me what's the big deal? The place is a wreck. Who wants to go there? What's there to see? It's not pretty.

They say Menokin is just two corners of a ruin under a big hanger with a lot of stones lying about. Well, I hope I've made the case that it is a good bit more than that, and that it's a place that will provide benefits different from the standard historic house.

Don't come to Menokin expecting to see costumed hostesses telling you about Chippendale highboys. Come instead to use your imagination and to think about the potential of a wide range of learning activities.

And come to get the feel of it. The ancient Romans talked about the *Genius Loci*, the spirit of the place, the effect a place has on one's psyche. Menokin, its house and land, nurtured the mind of a man whose signature helped change the course of world history. I don't know exactly how Menokin made that happen, but I do know that this place has a special spirit about it, a spirit that has certainly affected me over the course of forty years, and affected many others as well.

Menokin is indeed Virginia's most unusual preservation adventure, but one that I trust will be rewarding and enriching for Americans for years to come.

So now I hope you understand what we are all about, and can appreciate Menokin's slogan: **Rubble with a cause!**

Editors Note: For further information on Menokin, see *Menokin Yesterday and Tomorrow: The Revival of a Great Virginia House* by Martin K. King in the December 1996 (Volume XLVI) issue of the *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine*, pages 5339-5347.

Also contact The Menokin Foundation at P.O. Box 1221, Warsaw, VA 22572, (804) 333-1776 or www.menokin.org for membership information and current activities.



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