

## Menokin: An Essay

By Dr. Camille Wells, Distinguished Lecturer, University of Virginia School of Architecture

*Menokin Afield*. January, 1997.

One of the great houses which survive from Colonial Virginia's age of dominion by a wealthy landed elite, Menokin is the result of a unique collaboration between John Tayloe II of Mount Airy and Francis Lightfoot Lee, the new husband of Tayloe's daughter Rebecca. Instead of the cash dowry he bestowed on the husbands of seven other daughters, Tayloe gave Lee a life interest in 1,000 acres of his vast Richmond County estate and agreed to build thereon a gentleman's seat—a house, domestic outbuildings, and plantation structures for a man of high social and political rank.

The design which Tayloe and Lee selected for the house and its formal flanking offices survives in a sheet of carefully drafted plans and elevations, the only presentation drawing known to exist for any house built during Virginia's colonial era. This drawing, probably executed in 1769-1770, strongly suggests the involvement of the talented English immigrant William Buckland, who had remained in Richmond County after completing the interior of Mount Airy in 1764. Buckland often promoted his work among the gentlemen of the Northern Neck through the drawings of his own architectural schemes. There is also circumstantial evidence that Buckland was involved in construction at Menokin until 1771, when he left for Annapolis to complete the interior of a house recently purchased by another son-in-law of John Tayloe II. By this time buildings at Menokin were sufficiently far along to permit Francis Lightfoot Lee and Rebecca Tayloe Lee to set up housekeeping there, but building on the site was still underway in 1773, when a passage in the will of John Tayloe II confirms that the houses at Menokin were still unfinished.

After Buckland's departure, the supervision of construction at Menokin apparently fell to William Wright, a brick and stone mason of considerable skill. He and his crew of workmen may have remained on the site until 1777. The result is a house of remarkable qualities. Built of the local iron-infused sandstone which distinguishes Mount Airy, Menokin's white plastered elevations leave the dark-brown stone exposed only where the masons shaped it into quoins, architraves, and unusual double beltcourses. The effect is a visual inversion of Mount Airy's masonry color scheme which underscores a complex parent-offspring relationship between these two grand houses. Menokin is also one of the few Virginia great houses to abandon the scheme of nearly identical- or comparably finished- land and river façades. Menokin's north elevation is manifestly superior to the other three sides of the house in both composition of its stonework and the quality of its embellishment.

Excepting the years between 1775 and 1779 when his term of service in the Continental Congress drew both Francis Lightfoot Lee and Rebecca Tayloe Lee to Philadelphia, the couple lived at Menokin for the rest of their lives. Thus the house earned status as the

dwelling of a founding father and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. After the Lees died in 1797, Menokin reverted to the ownership of the Tayloes of Mount Airy. By 1809 it was the residence of their kinsman John Tayloe Lomax who was arranging to purchase the property when he realized that it was too isolated for his burgeoning law practice. Lomax moved to Fredericksburg in 1819 and then to Charlottesville in 1826, when he accepted Mr. Jefferson's invitation to become the University of Virginia's first professor of law. John Tayloe III then sold Menokin out of the family. Benjamin Boughton, a former overseer of Tayloe plantations, bought the property in 1823. Boughton refurbished and reorganized the house and enjoyed a stylish life with his wife there until her death in 1836. Having no further heart for Menokin's rich appointments or its prosperous farmland, Boughton sold everything and moved to Fredericksburg where he lived in retirement for the rest of his life. Richard Harwood of Essex County was the next owner of Menokin. He lived in the house and farmed the land until his death in 1872, after which the property passed to his descendants—all members of the Belfield, Peyton and Omohundro families. They occupied the house through the 1940s. Menokin thereafter stood vacant and untended. It was in a ruinous state by 1995 when the owners donated it to Menokin Foundation, a nonprofit organization devoted to the rescue and analysis of the Menokin great house and its surrounding landscape.