

## Menokin, Piece by Piece

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*Menokin Afield*, January, 1999 (This article was written before Menokin's interior woodwork was returned to Menokin. The woodwork is now on display at the King Conservation & Visitors Center.)

Menokin's distinctive architectural character and dramatic recent history make it one of the most intriguing 18<sup>th</sup>-century buildings in Virginia. The Menokin Foundation has begun to secure endangered parts of the house ruins and has engaged Colonial Williamsburg's architectural research staff to study and draw together the disparate pieces. The analysis will result in a much greater understanding of the building and its position in the history of early American housing—which will in turn aid the Foundation in making informed preservation decisions.

As explained in Camille Wells' observations elsewhere in this issue, the house constructed for Francis Lightfoot Lee and his new wife Rebecca Tayloe about 1769-73, has close connections to Mount Airy, and stucco once gave it a similarly lively variation in color. An 18<sup>th</sup>-century design drawing from the Tayloe collection at the Virginia Historical Society shows both the house and two support buildings with rusticated stonework around the windows and doors. When executed, only upper windows on the land side were framed with such costly details, raising interesting questions about whether the design evolved soon after preparation of the drawings or later, as construction began and the Lees and John Tayloe confronted the cost and difficulty of sculpting classical details from coarse stone. In either case, by using a few Renaissance elements and confining visible brickwork to the chimneys, the builders created an edifice that seemingly stood, with Mount Airy and the now-lost Mansfield, outside the Virginia tradition of elite building. The starkness of the exterior was enhanced by using fashionable recessed window frames, so that the openings were almost entirely filled by sash, as done earlier at Rosewell and later at Blandfield and a number of big Annapolis houses.

Inside, the house was more patently a product of its region. The first-floor plan is linked to those at some of the Annapolis houses, and it is especially reminiscent of larger house plans at Shirley and Kenmore. All three have a land-side doorway leading to a circulation space extending no more than half the depth of the house, not carried through to a doorway facing the river. The Virginia as well as late-colonial Maryland houses of this group have pairs of entertaining rooms on the water side, the largest room in each suite having direct access to the outside. Fielding Lewis' probate inventory records the largest room at Kenmore as being used as a dining room, and the early Menokin drawing identifies the corresponding room there as a dining room.

Both Menokin and Kenmore have relatively specialized routes for carrying food from kitchen to dining room. At Kenmore slaves carried food across the side yard, through a

side door into a closet-like space between the dining room and best bedchamber, and then into the dining room. Menokin had a comparable side door leading to a lobby, called “closet” on the plan, but here the dining room was located on the opposite side of the house, and the food was carried through a chamber en route to the dinner table. Shirley is an earlier house, and while it too has a secondary side door, there the food had to be carried through the grand stair hall or around the river side of the house.

In all three Virginia houses, the suites were unified by a decorative grammar not used elsewhere in the buildings, and the larger room of the suite was the most enriched. Themes presented in the smaller room (parlor by the 1850s) at Shirley were elaborated in the bigger space next door, with more carving. Both entertaining rooms at Kenmore have carved mantels and molded plaster over-mantels, the more lavish ones in the dining room.

At Menokin, the most fashionable woodwork was confined to the two river-side rooms. Both have wainscoting of a variety considered very refined in the late 1770s, with plain boards glued and held together with long dovetails driven in along their rear face. While window seats were used in some Menokin bedchambers, here the recessed walls below the windows were left straight to avoid confusing the classical language of the wainscot. Similar cornices were used in the two river-side rooms, that in the dining room decorated with small tooth-like elements appropriately called dentils. Comparable entablatures with dentils and rounded pillow-like elements were placed over the dining room doors and windows, underscoring the superior status intended for the dining room.

Some of the woodwork is very similar to that Robert Beverley installed at Blandfield in the late 1770s and that was removed in the 1840s, particularly in the manner the faces of the chimney projections were sheathed and decorated with raised panels or applied moldings. The dining room mantel sported some of the most remarkable carved adornment known from an early Virginia house, carved very shallow and glued and tacked to a flat field. The dining room’s overmantel was first constructed with four raised panels, three small ones below a long rectangular panel. As at Brooke’s Bank across the Rappahannock River, the overmantel was later elaborated with moldings nailed over the upper panel. The result appeared richer than the single large panel over the carved mantel next door.

Much of the house, including the dining room, gradually collapsed between 1942 and its acquisition by the Menokin Foundation in 1995. As a result, 1940 Historic American Building Survey drawings and photographs of various dates are useful in piecing together the physical history of the house. Remarkably, most of the interior woodwork survives, disassembled in the 1960s and now stored at Bacon’s Castle. One of our tasks is to study these pieces, along with elements in the ruins, to develop an understanding of how the various rooms were finished, and how they evolved during the house’s use over more than a century and a half.

Our work amongst the fragments at Bacon’s Castle has first focused on the dining room woodwork, helping conservator Rick Voght find all the relevant pieces, fit them together

like a large unfinished puzzle, and decide how best to treat them, in discussion with Martin King and Hugh Miller. Rick has gently conserved the dining room trim, without removing the later finishes and scars that illustrate its long life, and he has carefully added missing pieces in a manner that completes the ensemble without hiding what is new. The Menokin Foundation has loaned this woodwork from the best room to the Virginia Historical society, which now has it reassembled as a featured room in its Story of Virginia exhibit, scheduled to remain in place for a decade.

There is, of course, a long tradition of 18<sup>th</sup>-century woodwork being installed in exhibition spaces at American museums. Important Virginia rooms were carried off earlier in this century like the Elgin marbles to the British Museum. The Menokin dining room installation represents a more responsible and happier development. In it, we see a significant step being taken toward the careful study and conscientious care of those pieces of Menokin that have survived, against all odds. Eventually the room will make its way back to the original site, where other pieces will be likewise studied and conserved. Whatever form the Menokin museum ultimately takes, these remarkable elements will contribute much of the story.