

Menokin: Prospect, Orientation, and Outside Finish

By Edward Chappell, Director of Architectural Research, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Menokin Afield, Autumn, 1999

People who built large, formal houses throughout the 18th-century English-speaking world displayed an intense concern with views of and from their abodes. The prospect of a large body of water was highly valued, whether it was the English Channel or the Caribbean Sea. When George Washington briefly rented a house on Barbados with his brother Lawrence in 1751, he described the prospect of Carlyle Bay as the property's chief appeal. In many places beyond the home counties of England, an expansive view could suggest that the master of the property owned everything in sight, a world without obvious boundaries. While 17th- and early 18th-century Virginia houses often hugged the river banks, the drama of high elevations was increasingly sought by the quarter-century before the Revolution, an era when architectural consumption grew in general and the largest landowners built most of Virginia's famous houses. About 1770, for example, Robert Beverley abandoned the old family house beside the Rappahannock and built his much larger new mansion a mile and a half away, on the edge of a long ridge. Monticello became the ultimate Virginia expression of the lofty rural seat. Thomas Jefferson ensured his control over the mid-range landscape by purchasing all the parts of Carter's Mountain visible from Monticello, and none of the parts he could not see.

John Tayloe II built Mount Airy on a 140 foot-high hill, with a dramatic view over low ground and marshes stretching three and a half miles to the Rappahannock River. He and Francis Lightfoot Lee located Menokin on 130 foot-high land two and three-quarters of a mile to the north, above Cat Point Creek and Menokin Bay. Assuming selected trees were cut, the Lees would have had a dramatically long view south and southwest to the river, and the two houses would have been within sight of one another, cultivating the theatrical quality of the Tayloe estate.

Carefully selecting their elevated locations, contouring the land for terraces and gardens, marshalling secondary buildings, and rigorously ordering the shell of their houses, Georgian house owners expressed great devotion to how they were seen as well as what they saw. Architectural historian Dell Upton describes Mount Airy as a series of impressive scenes the visitor encountered along the carefully structured route to meet John Tayloe II.

Most of the largest Georgian houses in rural Virginia used terraces and gardens to cultivate the immediate setting of the sides overlooking water, while principal support buildings faced a flatter land approach. At Menokin three terraces descend just beyond the river side of the house, with a road and uneven ground falling beyond, while the relatively flat land on the opposite side was framed by a kitchen and office. The Menokin arrangement is a miniaturization of the more expansive landscape at Mount Airy. Even considering the large terraces and gardens at Carter's Grove and Sabine Hall,

Mount Airy's landscape seems to have been the most elaborate found on the late Colonial Virginia plantations. It is all the more grand if Menokin functioned as an element in John Tayloe's prospect.

Georgian houses were often double-fronted, with a balanced façade hung on both long walls. Virginia houses like Shirley, Kenmore, and Wilton have – or originally had – virtually identical faces, while at Westover and Rosewell the long walls were differentiated only by decoration around the doorways. Owners had a clear sense of what was front and what was rear, but the signals outside could be subtle or non-existent. At Carter's Grove only the use of seven bays (rows of windows and a door) on the river side distinguishes it as the front, with a richer appearance than the five-bay land side. After entering the front door, the visitor finds the orientation made patent, by turning the stair to face the viewer and sometimes framing it with an arch on pilasters.

While Carter's Grove and Westover look toward the James River, Menokin and Blandfield followed the more widespread Virginia choice of facing the land approach, in spite of testimony in Landon Carter's diary that the prominent visitors sometimes approached the houses by water. Blandfield and Mount Airy's flanking support buildings have connectors with shed roofs and less formal masonry facing the river, providing clear signals for the primacy of the land approach. This is particularly useful at Mount Airy, where the remarkable richness of all four elevations makes it difficult to read which is better or best.

Menokin undeniably has a front and rear. The land side, to the north, had two belt courses rather than one and an exotically mannered door surround combining a heavy arched opening with delicately carved moldings, brackets, and flowers. Its upper floor had classical window frames, much richer than the plain stone surrounds used on the river façade and the side walls.

Deterioration often reveals otherwise hidden clues in old buildings, and the loss of stucco on Menokin's walls offers more evidence of orientation and perhaps more on the nature of its planning and construction. Most obviously, the land front is built of squared brown sandstone blocks, while the other three exterior walls are built of rubble with cut stone confined to the projecting horizontal courses, edges of openings, and quoins--big rectangular blocks—at the corners. The masonry is laid with tan mortar containing only enough shell lime to make it secure. On the land front, the masons recessed the mortar joints and finished them with white, harder, projecting joints one-half inch and wider, contrasting with the uneven and rudimentary joints on the interior and other exterior walls. In short, the land front was distinguished with more elaborate stone trim and laboriously cut stones with sharp, white joints making them appear more precisely cut than in fact they were, while the lesser walls were intended to be stuccoed between the areas of finished stone.

But a close look suggests a more complex story. At Mount Airy, the house is built of similar brown sandstone blocks with cream-colored Aquia stone trim, while its two-story wings have walls entirely of brown sandstone blocks. Scoring on the on the commons

stones and small flat edges on the stones on the quoins indicate that at Mount Airy the flankers at least were intended to be stuccoed, so cream-colored or white walls with brown trim on the flankers would play against brown walls with cream trim on the house.