

A periodic newsletter chronicling the preservation of Menokin Plantation.

Winter 2002



### From the president

If you saw the headline in the October 27 Fredericksburg Free-Lance Star which read "Grant 'treasures' Lee home," perhaps you shared my reaction that it was a Yankee trick. But of course the sub-headline - "Park Service funding will promote study of Menokin"- gave it away: The story was really about Menokin Foundation's receipt of a \$366,000 "Save America's Treasures" grant from the U.S. National Park Service. (The Washington Times' article on the event was also headlined somewhat mysteriously as "Historic encyclopedia gets grant.")

We are proud of this very good news, and we hope that you and other supporters and friends of Menokin will share that pride. The grant was written by our Board member and architectural historian Camille Wells. It is a giant step towards fulfilling our mission to preserve, protect and

interpret this very special place.

The Board and staff are now busy developing a plan for major work on the historic Menokin building. And a new conservation laboratory will enable us to bring back home the interior woodwork of the mansion that was removed some years ago and is now housed in a peanut barn at Bacon's Castle.

The ancient curse was "be careful what you ask for; you might get it." All the satisfaction we feel over the receipt of the Park Service grant is accompanied by the sobering understanding that it is now up to us to match the Park Service grant.

We have about 18 months to accomplish that task, but we hope to do it in less time. We have \$100,000 of the needed funds already - it came from supporters of Menokin like you. What we must do is raise an additional \$250,000 in 2003.

So we are calling on you for help. We hope that you will be able to make a special generous contribution that will enable us to complete this historically and culturally important project.

We thank you for the help you have already given us and hope you will be able to make an important contribution to the successful completion of the Menokin project.

Sincerely,

Martin K. King, president

### Grant propels Menokin into next phase

The U.S. National Park Service has taken a major step towards making possible the preservation of Menokin as a national monument and center for teaching and development of historic preservation science, technology and art. It has bestowed a \$366,000 Save America's Treasures grant on the Menokin Foundation.

We received notice of this award in September 2002. Menokin is the 1773 home of Declaration of Independence signer Francis Lightfoot Lee and his wife Rebecca Tayloe. Original pen and ink drawings of the home were discovered in 1964 by Polly Montague Tayloe of Mt. Airy. The discovery of these original drawings, rare indeed, heightened national interest in Menokin and, in 1969, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1971 the Secretary of the Interior designated Menokin a National Historic Landmark.

The home, however, had deteriorated until 1995, when the property was conveyed by its late owner, T.E. Omohundro, to the Menokin Foundation. The Foundation began stabilization measures and conducted in-depth research on the building and its environs. In 2000 the Foundation erected a large roof over the ruin to better protect it from the elements.

Continued on next page

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The Save America's Treasures grant enables the Menokin Foundation to take substantial steps to preserve, conserve, and interpret the story of this remarkable site. With the grant, the Menokin Foundation will focus on three primary activities: 1) preservation, conservation, and stabilization of the ruins of the Menokin great house inhabited by the Lees; 2) construction of a conservation laboratory to house and care for the interior woodwork taken out of Menokin years ago and now housed in a peanut barn at Bacon's Castle; and 3) begin extensive archeological research of the area where activities of colonial era peoples of the 17th and 18th centuries took place, and, beyond that, of native Americans who inhabited the area centuries earlier.

Board member and architectural historian Camille Wells wrote the successful grant application, that calls for a match by the Foundation. "We're indebted to Camille, and the Menokin Foundation is aggressively moving forward to obtain the match," said Menokin's president Martin King.

The story of Menokin is a work in progress, and a work of art. It is a treasure trove for architects, architectural historians, students, builders, archeologists, and anthropologists. But it is even more than that - it is a place with a major story to tell about the life and times of leading families in colonial America, and of the people who worked on the buildings and plantations that enabled the leaders to plant the new country. The archeological component allows us to delve into the lives of native Americans who inhabited the site centuries before the Europeans first settled it.

"It's a great beginning," said Martin King, "and we have miles

to go, well beyond the scope of this grant. But we are really on the way."

The Foundation intends to break ground for the conservation building in early spring. Work on the historic structure will commence shortly after that.

### Under their own vine

By Camille Wells

College of William and Mary

Colonial Virginia mansions, built in an age of handcraftsmanship, involved the work of masons, carpenters, joiners, plasterers, blacksmiths, painters, carvers, and many other trades besides. Some of these builders were confident and versatile masters of their craft, while others were less adept in the use of their tools to complete a task. In addition to these skilled builders, of course, were those many laborers who hauled loads of brick to the building site, reinforced or dismantled scaffolding, and helped to heave unwieldy stones and beams into their proper places.

Perhaps more than any other surviving house in Virginia, Menokin bears the marks of various building trades as well as differing levels of skill. The stonemason who squared up and positioned the ashlar blocks of Menokin's facade may have left to less experienced colleagues the laying up of the coursed rubble that forms Menokin's other three exterior walls. The brick mason who erected Menokin's interior walls and chimney stacks quite possibly had little or nothing to do with the stone perimeter of the house. Menokin's architectural details are equally eloquent in revealing the work of different hands. Clear differences in the size of molding profiles suggest that the joiner who built the frames for

Menokin's windows was not the same individual who executed the rest of the interior woodwork.

When Menokin stood, freshly completed and crisply delineated, on its site above Rappahannock Creek, one of the most arresting details of its facade was the keystone centered above the main entrance. Certainly the composition of this opening invokes the classical tradition, announcing the importance of this doorway with stolid Doric pilasters to support the compass-headed arch and scrolled brackets set beneath a molded cornice. The carving on the keystone, however,



Menokin's exceptionally elaborate main entrance drawn in 1940 before deterioration began. Courtesy of the Historic American Buildings Survey.

belongs to a decorative tradition that predates any familiarity, in England or its American colonies, with the ancient Greek and Roman architecture that had come to be widely accepted, by the time Menokin was built, as the proper referents for fashionable architecture.

Continued on next page

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In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English masons who wanted to distinguish their buildings in decorative ways chose legible figures or familiar shapes: lozenges, crosses, pinwheels, intertwining initials, dates of construction, hearts and—yes—even vines and blossoms. This tradition is often called "representational," for it involves decorative elements shaped to call to mind something that is familiar. In some respects, this form of architectural embellishment is related to the practice of embellishing coats of arms with identifiable images: the paw of a lion, the contours of a flourishing tree, the head of a unicorn. Of course, the Lee family crest is famous for its squirrel sitting upright, attention on an acorn in its paws, tail in a graceful curve.

A connoisseur who lightly glanced at Menokin's keystone might dismiss as naive the curling roots, the meandering vines, the rounded leaves, and the saw-tooth shape of the flower petals, but this would be a mistake. The craftsman who executed this design was an artist of considerable skill, for his medium, the iron-infused Choptank stone from which Menokin largely was built, has such a coarse and varied texture that delicate detailing and shallow relief carving could not have been achieved without careful and sensitively angled strikes with a frequently sharpened set of chisels. Even more remarkable is the carver's success in shaping his composition twice on the same surface without significant variations in design forced upon him by flaking, spalling, cracking, or any one of the several other means of sabotage characteristic of this locally quarried sandstone.

Menokin's keystone manifests not only the excellence of the carver's skill but also the craftsmen's active involvement in the enhancement



Menokin's keystone, salvaged from the house site after the north wall partially collapsed. This extraordinary artifact is on loan to the Virginia Historical Society from the Menokin Foundation. Photo courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society.

of Menokin's original design. The presentation drawing for Menokin's facade represents its main entrance as a compass-headed arch, but one entirely surrounded by plain stone blocks of alternating width. When stonemasons began to transform this drawing into a substantial and well-detailed facade, they replaced the stones of the architrave—the sides of the doorway—with those Doric pilasters. The voussoirs, or wedge-shaped components of the arch—all became uniform in size, excepting the keystone which one of the stonemasons, with an eye for delicacy of finish, decided to enrich with his sinuous flowered vines.

In 1771 Francis Lightfoot Lee wrote to his brother William: "[i]n three or four weeks I shall be under my own vine & shall remember to drink health & every blessing to my dear connections [William Lee and his family] in London." With this metaphor, Lee meant that he and his

bride Rebecca Tayloe Lee could leave off staying with relatives at Mount Airy and Lee Hall, as they had been doing since their wedding in 1769, settling instead on their own land and in their own household. Evidence is strong that the couple did indeed move to Menokin plantation that summer.

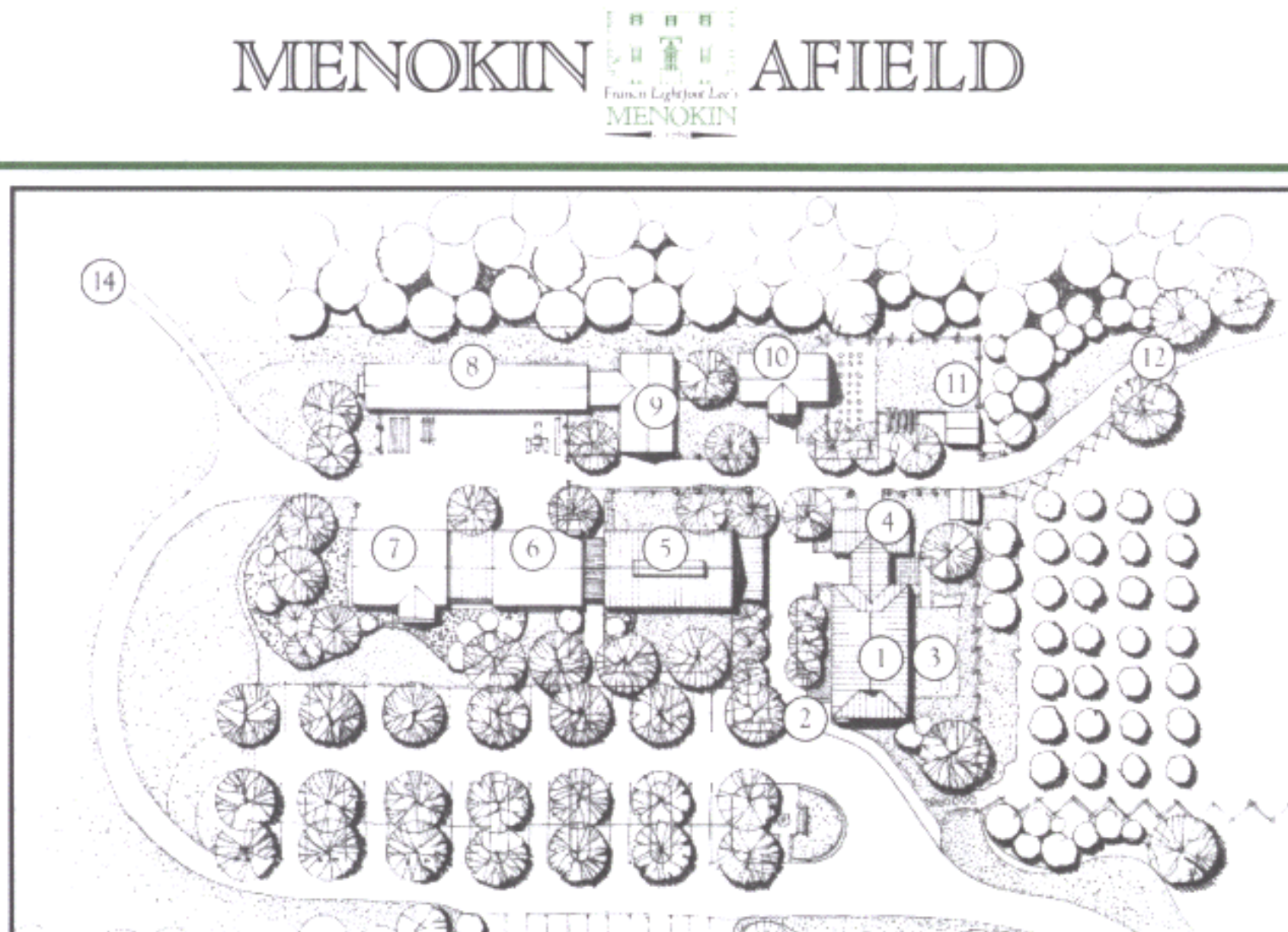
Francis Lightfoot Lee's use of the phrase "under my own vine" was Biblical in origin: under the reign of Solomon, "Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree" I Kings 4:25. It also was quite popular among the gentry of Virginia, who liked it because it fit their perception of themselves as self-sufficient, prosperous members of an agricultural society who were quite firmly yet benevolently and peacefully in control of all their affairs. For the most part, they were right. Thus it is fitting, though almost certainly a matter of coincidence, that a stonemason at work on the Menokin great house chose trailing vines as most suitable for the crowning embellishment of Menokin's grand doorway.

### We're on the Web

Thanks to the talent and expertise of board member J. Tayloe Emery, Menokin has a Web site. Visit us at [menokin.org](http://menokin.org) to learn more about our historic property and our plans and activities for the coming year. You can send us an email from the site. We'd love to hear from you!

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1. Classroom/Lecture Space Changing Exhibits
2. Pedestrian Entry
3. Tent Reception Space
4. Restroom
5. Exhibit/Office
6. Preservation/Storage
7. Shop
8. Pole Barn
9. Office
10. Library/Archives
11. Shelter
12. To Mansion
13. Access Road
14. Plantation Trail



Proposed Preservation and Research Campus

Conceptual plan developed by Williamsburg architect Carlton Abbott. The Foundation hopes to erect the first building - a conservation laboratory - in 2002.

### Do you know Mr. Lee?

We all should know him because Menokin - the ruin of which the Menokin Foundation is dedicated to preserving and making the centerpiece of an institution devoted to the study and maintenance of historic buildings and places - was his home.

Writer Mark Twain certainly knew him. He wrote an article about

Lee in 1877 that was published in the "Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography."

Here's part of what Twain wrote about the singer of the Declaration of Independence:

"He did no brilliant things, he made no heroic speeches; but the enduring strength of his participation was manifest, his fearlessness in confronting perilous duties and compassing them was patent to

all, the purity of his motives was unquestioned, his unpurchasable honor and uprightness were unchallenged..."

Read all of Twain's article and learn more about Francis Lightfoot Lee by visiting our newly designed Web site, [www.menokin.org](http://www.menokin.org).

If you'd like a copy of the article, call us, (804) 333-1776.

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