

**FAMOUS
COLONIAL
HOUSES**

*BY
PAUL M. HOLLISTER*

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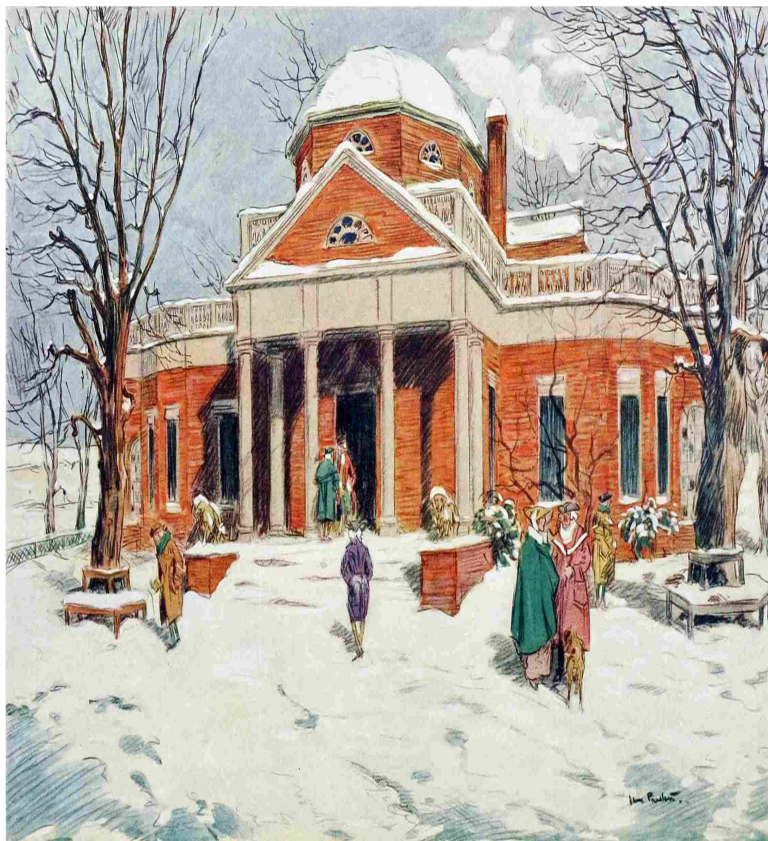
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MONTICELLO

“Mr. Jefferson,” said one of Rochambeau’s aides, “is the first American who has consulted the fine arts to know how he should shelter himself from the weather.” With no continental travel for background, with only the meager

pictorial record of the period to draw upon, he somehow responded to the simplicity and useful beauty of the classics, and translated it to his castle.

TO
MARION

FOREWORD

There is no bibliography in this book. I confess freely to a snapping-up of ill-considered trifles where I found them. Those that rang true are here, those that proved false upon closer examination are not. Some were gifts, some purchases, some thefts—the latter are now shamelessly confessed, on the plea that as a citizen I have the right of eminent domain to the story of my country. I cannot put the volume out to shift for itself without blanket acknowledgment of the generosity of the people who put me in the way of finding reliable information. Several of them are the owners of the houses; some of them have even read this manuscript.

—*Boston, September, 1921.*

INTRODUCTION

As I read in Mr. Hollister's chapter on Mount Vernon of Washington's long absence from the home he loved and of the eagerness with which he returned to it after the tumultuous years of the Revolutionary War, I was caught by the fancy that lovers of books have recently gone through a somewhat parallel experience. Dragged away by the Great War from the books they cared for, plunged into continual war reading, they now find, to their infinite relief, that they are getting home again—back to Mount Vernon, as it were. And it seems to me the change could not better be exemplified than in this charming, gentle book of Famous Colonial Houses.

While we were fighting to preserve the heritage and the traditions left us by Washington, Jefferson, Carroll of Carrollton, and other great figures of their time, whom we find in these pages, we were too busily engaged to give much thought to the origins of the things we fought to save. Not that the forefathers of the nation were forgotten, but that historic men were, in that time of stress, overshadowed by historic principles laid down by them. We put them aside tenderly, as books are put aside when the sword is taken up. Yet now that we have vindicated in battle the freedom that they gave us, we find them more than ever with us. For a just war fought through to victory sheds glory not only upon the men who fought it and the nation for which they fought, but also upon the nation's ancient heroes, whose stature is increased with that of their country.

Wherefore this book, telling tales of old houses in which early American history was made, and of men who made the houses and the history, is even more welcome today than it would have been before the Great War.

It is welcome, too, for another partially extrinsic reason.

In the face of mutterings of anarchy—that Russian importation which is so much less satisfactory than the caviar—there is reassurance in these sturdy calm old mansions which are the monuments of the sturdy calm old patriots who raised them—men having a rare sense of proportion which they exercised not only in building their houses but in building the nation on lines equally clean, sound and beautiful. Fancy a shaggy Bolshevik, his mouth full of broken English, his head full of sophistry, and his heart full of greed for the possessions of others, being led up Mount Vernon, Monticello or Doughoregan Manor! Could any contrast make a picture more grotesque? Could there be conceived a background more serenely sane, more perfectly American, against which to display the distortion of this foreign madness? Every stone and brick and timber of such houses preaches a sermon on Americanism.

It is a sermon not only for aliens, but for all of us. We should all see these houses, or if we cannot see them, we should know them as some of them are made known to us in this book. Our land is a better land for having them within its borders, and we will be better citizens for an acquaintance with them.

The day on which I went to Monticello was beautiful, yet, save my companion, no one else was there. I wonder how many of the politicians who, with the *vox humana* stop pulled out,

acclaim the name of Jefferson as founder of the Democratic Party, have made the short pilgrimage from Washington to Charlottesville to visit the house he lived in and the grave where he is buried.

In curious contrast to the large investment of the nation in National Parks, is its apparent indifference in the matter of the homes of its historic figures. Not one of the houses dealt with by Mr. Hollister in this book is the property of the nation. Two of them are, to be sure, houses which, though their story is interesting, are not involved with national history; and some of the others are not of sufficient importance, from the purely historical point of view, to make them national monuments of the first order. But two are, on the other hand, the homes of early presidents, and neither of these is owned by the nation. For all practical purposes Mount Vernon is as free to the public as though the nation did own it, but the fact remains that the title to it is vested in a society; while as for Monticello, it is owned by a private individual, not a descendant of Jefferson, into whose hands it came by inheritance from a forebear said to have secured it in a not too creditable way. It is difficult to understand why the State of Virginia or the Nation has not bought the place, which, I am told, the owner has declared his willingness to part with—at a price.

The census of the twelve houses described and pictured in this book is worth completing. One, Mount Vernon, is, as I have said, owned by an organization of patriotic women; two are owned by their municipalities and are cared for by patriotic organizations; one only is the home of a lineal descendant and namesake of the builder—though three others belong to

persons having in their veins blood of the first masters of their houses. And one—a most interesting, but not historic house—is a poor battered tenement. Seven of the houses are situated in Northern States, one in a Border State, and four are in the South. The builders of two of the houses, the first and third Presidents of the United States, are buried on the grounds nearby, and in one case the builder is buried under the chancel of a private chapel, a part of the house itself.

These historic houses may well be regarded as taking the place with us of the crown jewels of an empire. I am thankful to have seen eight of the twelve. For, like one of Goldsmith's characters, "I love everything that's old—old friends, old times, old manors, old books, old wine."

Therefore I find myself particularly pleased at being associated with this book, though in so slight a way. The two men who created it—for in this case the author and the artist surely stand on equal footing—are my old friends. Obviously, the book is one of old times and old manors, and if that does not make it an old book, what could? Only the old wine is lacking to complete the quintet. And even that may some day be accessible again. Who knows?

—*Julian Street.*

*NORFOLK, CONN.,
September, 1921.*

MONTICELLO

Famous Colonial Houses

MONTICELLO

In Thomas Jefferson's boyhood imagination the hill had seemed to climb like Jack's beanstalk to the infinite clouds. The view from his Father's dooryard across the Rivanna registered each day through the clear lenses of his eyes upon the sensitive plate of his memory, and so upon his heart. As a lad he staged mental melodrama upon its symmetrical slopes and built an air-castle upon its summit. Every engagement of Caesar's conquests, every adventure of the pious Aeneas found on Monticello a proper setting. If his schoolbooks had not been burned in the fire at Shadwell we might expect to find, on the margins of his Horace, a sketch of the castle of his dream, for Jefferson drew rather well and probably sketched just as well during study hour as any other boy of his age.

He was nineteen when his dream promised to materialize. That summer and the next, when he was at home for the long holiday, he would cross the Rivanna in his canoe and climb the slope to see how the workmen were getting on with the levelling for his castle. As the boy had grown towards manhood the hill no longer towered into the skies, but whatever the picture lost in size, it gained in rich associations. It was still *his* mountain: *Monticello*—"little mountain"—he called it. "Our own dear Monticello, where Nature has spread such a rich mantle under the eye, mountains, forests, rocks, rivers. There is a mountain there in the opposite direction of the afternoon's sun, the valley between which and Monticello is five hundred

feet deep.... How sublime to look down upon the workhouse of Nature, to see her clouds, hail, snow, rain, thunder, all fabricated at our feet.”

In all weathers, under all trials, his heart took refuge on the hill. He was admitted to the bar in 1767, made headway in his profession, and was sent to the House of Burgesses, honors which only quickened his impatient accomplishment, and his desire for a home upon his mountain. In 1769 its plans were ready, and work began. Thirty years later it was finished. During those years he wrote his country’s bill of divorce from her harsh proprietor, and was nearly captured at Monticello by British raiders. Monticello saw him ride down the winding road as a Burgess, to ride up again as a member of the Continental Congress; honored him as Governor of Virginia, and waved him Godspeed as he left to succeed Benjamin Franklin as envoy to France; hailed him home as Washington’s secretary of state, and then reluctantly surrendered him to eight years in a new White House that stood in a sandy wilderness somewhere down on the banks of the Potomac. But when his active life was done, after he had not only written the Declaration of Independence but prosecuted it, added half a continent to its jurisdiction, and administered the doctrine that all men are created free and equal, he came back to the mountain of his memory to gaze down upon the workhouse of Nature.

“While it is too much to say,” writes Julian Street, “that one would recognize it as the house of the writer of the Declaration, it is not too much to say, that once one does know it, one can trace a clear affinity resulting from a common origin—an

affinity much more apparent, by the way, than can be traced between the work of Michelangelo on St. Peter's at Rome, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and in his 'David.'

"The introductory paragraph to the Declaration ascends into the body of the document as gracefully as the wide flights of easy steps ascend to the doors of Monticello; the long and beautifully balanced paragraph which follows, building word upon word and sentence upon sentence into a central statement, has a form as definite and graceful as that of the finely proportioned house; the numbered paragraphs which follow, setting forth separate details, are like rooms within the house, and—I have just come upon the coincidence with a pleasant start such as might be felt by the discoverer of some complex and important cipher—as there are twenty-seven of the numbered paragraphs in the Declaration, so there are twenty-seven rooms in Monticello. Last of all there are two little phrases in the Declaration (the phrases stating that we shall hold our British brethren in future as we hold the rest of mankind—'enemies in war; in peace, friends'), which I would liken to the small twin buildings, one of them Jefferson's office, the other that of the overseer, which stand on either side of the lawn at Monticello, at some distance from the house."

The house which inspired and witnessed the activities of so prominent a figure could hardly lack distinction, and this, of course, Monticello has. What is more, Monticello is a monument of technical architecture which attracts the eager attention of every student of American domestic building. The question they all ask, and the question that cannot be answered, is: "Where could this farmer-lawyer boy have got his

expert training in architecture?” His library might have given us a clue, but it was burned at Shadwell in 1770. We know he felt this loss acutely, for, next to his house, Jefferson loved his books. He asked anxiously of their fate. An old slave answered: “All burnt, my young master, all burnt. But never mind, sir”—and his wrinkled face broke into a broad smile—“we saved your old fiddle!” The new house at Monticello was even then far enough along to take in his mother’s family, evicted by the fire. The building continued. It was slow work, on an extensive plan.

“Mr. Jefferson,” said one of Rochambeau’s aides later, “is the first American who has consulted the fine arts to know how he should shelter himself from the weather.” With no continental travel for background, with only the meagre pictorial record of the period to draw upon, he somehow responded instantly to the simplicity and useful beauty of the classic, and translated it to his castle. By the Greeks, for example, it was thought improper that a roof should indicate anything but a glorification of the heavens; the idea that human feet might be walking on the upper side of a ceiling was sacrilege. This (and other more practical engineering reasons) dictated single-story buildings. Jefferson’s eye for balance caught the pictorial advantages of one-story construction, but he needed two stories for Monticello, and by his shrewd planning both the pure classic tradition and pure American comfort were reconciled.

At the end of a broad lawn, in full relief against the distant sky, stands a red brick house with a clean, tall portico. The four gleaming pillars stand guard like peace-time sentinels. A white

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