

### *Architectural Description:*

probably the best known of Chesterfield's colonial plantation houses. The farm derives its name from its early owners, the Eppes family of Bermuda Hundred, who were major landowners in the area as early as the mid-seventeenth century.

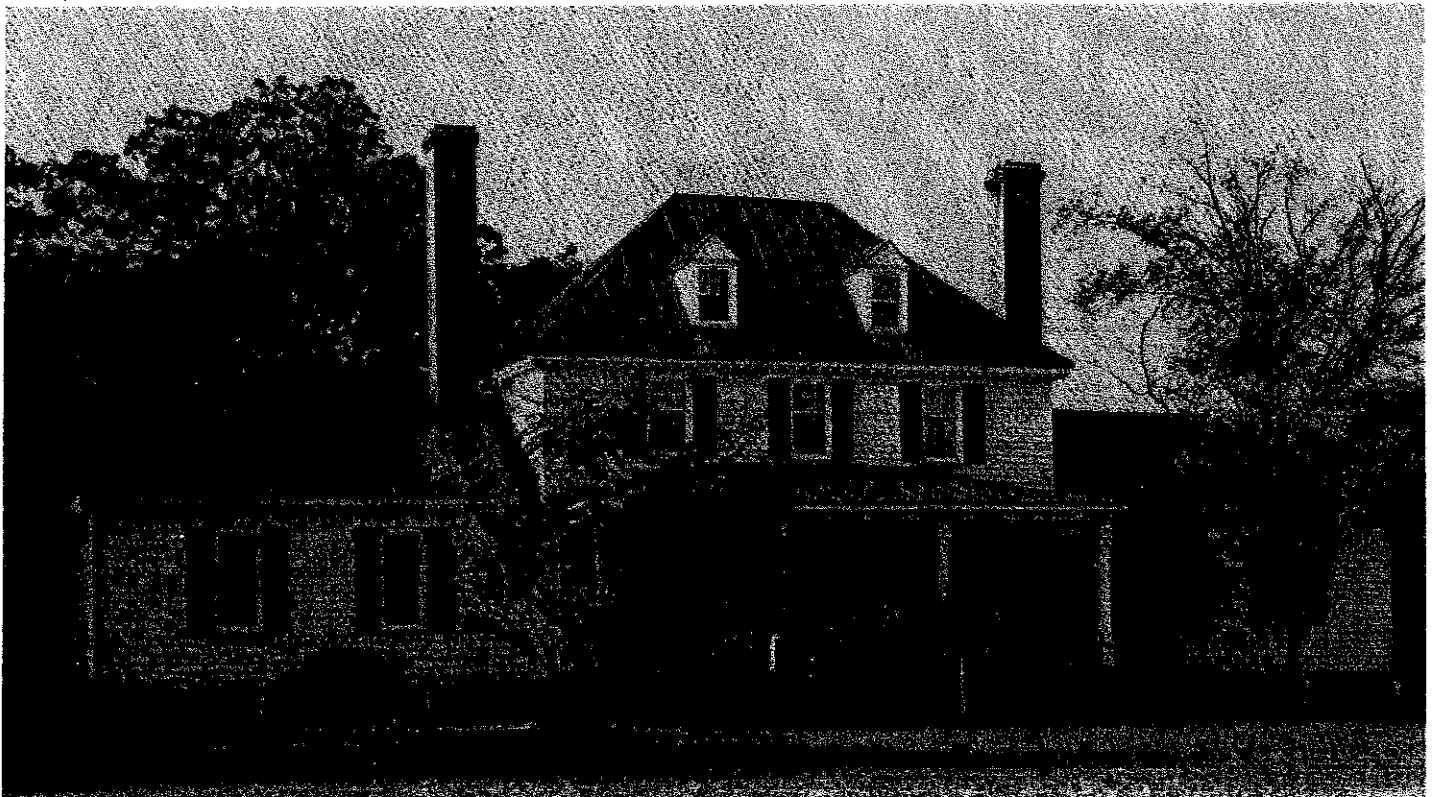
The present house, which has seen virtually no substantial alterations, was built by Francis Eppes ca. 1765-75.<sup>1</sup> Both the plan and elevations are unique among early Virginia dwellings. A formal three-part house, Eppington features a rectangular 2½-story central block with hipped roof flanked by slightly inset one-story hipped-roof wings. The composition is reminiscent of other contemporary multi-unit neo-Palladian houses in Virginia such as Brandon and Battersea, and its form was probably influenced by them.<sup>2</sup>

The plan of Eppington's main block might be seen as a variation on the traditional hall-parlor scheme, created by adding a narrow stair passage along the north side of the larger room. The front door opens into this passage, which communicates directly with both rooms of the main block and with the east wing, which contains the largest room in the house. A modest openstring dogleg stair with two turned balusters per tread ascends to the second floor along the inside wall of this passage.

In contrast to the one-room east wing, the west wing has a highly articulated plan featuring a single moderate size chamber with a closet-like room at the far end, plus a narrow passage across the front. An exterior door probably once opened at the west end of this passage. Early nineteenth century insurance policies suggest that the kitchen stood on the west side of the house;<sup>3</sup> it seems

### *Eppington*

Located in southwestern Chesterfield on a level ridge overlooking the Appomattox River valley, Eppington is



likely, therefore, that the small room at the west end of this wing was originally a pantry for storing food and eating utensils and for making final food preparations before serving in the dining room, which probably occupied the west room of the main block.

Both Eppington's interior and exterior detailing survive largely intact. The front porch may be a late nineteenth century replacement, but if so it follows the lines of the earlier eighteenth century "piazza" appearing in a 1796 sketch of the house. The exterior of the dwelling is sheathed in its original molded-edge weatherboards, but the area under the front porch has been re-sheathed with vertical siding with molded battens. A modillion cornice carries around the entire house, and the pedimented dormers are original.

While Eppington's exterior form followed the newly-fashionable multi-unit "Palladian" scheme, its interior detailing is relatively conservative, playing on decorative themes that had been employed in large houses in the area for two generations or more. Not only is the workmanship clearly that of local craftsman, but it is markedly non-academic in form and execution. For example, the most elaborate chimney treatment in the house — that in the east room wing or "ballroom" — features an unconventional and rather clumsy composition in which highly attenuated pilasters are placed so tightly against the mantel they seem to squeeze it forward into the room.

The varying degrees of symmetry of the interior paneling may be considered an index of the craftsman's technical expertise as well as of his adherence to pattern-book formulae. The paneled chimney walls in the two rooms of the main block suggest that symmetry was loosely aimed at but not always achieved. For example, paneling on the outer wall of the west room is *conceptually* symmetrical, with two sets of panels on either side of the fireplace, but these panels vary in width due to the slightly different distances between the fireplace and the doors flanking it. (This lack of consideration for the internal symmetry of the rooms may indicate the house was constructed by one carpenter and trimmed by another.) Given the asymmetry of the room itself, a more balanced effect might have been achieved by standardizing the width of the panels. As it is, the paneling appears to have been executed with little consideration for its ultimate visual effect.<sup>4</sup>

Colonel Francis Eppes (d. 1734), a Burgess from Henrico, was the earliest traced owner of the property. His Appomattox river lands were inherited by his son Richard Eppes (d. 1765), who served several terms as Burgess from the newly-formed county of Chesterfield. Richard Eppes' 4,000 acre holdings descended to his son Francis (1747-1808), who built the present dwelling around 1770. Francis Eppes became one of the wealthiest men in Chesterfield; in 1790, during the first state-wide census, he was listed as the owner of 125 slaves — the largest number recorded in the county.

Eppes was noted for his expertise in horticulture and agronomy. His grandson, Francis Eppes, in a letter to

Thomas Jefferson's biographer Henry Randall, painted a picture of Eppington as it appeared during the senior Francis Eppes' tenure:

The mansion house itself, an old-fashioned, two-story building, with hipped roof in the centre and wings on the sides... and with piazzas front and rear, was placed at the extreme side of a large level or lawn, covered with green sward, extending to a considerable distance in front, and in the rear to the low grounds of the Appomattox, a mile off. In front, over the neighborhood road which skirted the lawn, was situated the garden, long famous in the vicinity for its fine vegetables and fruit; and to the right of the lawn, as you entered, was an extensive orchard of the finest fruit, with the stables between....

The mansion, painted a snowy white, with green blinds to the windows, and its rows of offices at the end, was almost imbedded in a beautiful double row of the tall Lombardy poplar — the most admired of all trees in the palmy days of old Virginia — and this row reached to another double row or avenue which skirted one side of the lawn, dividing it from the orchard and stables. The lawn in front was closed in by a fence with a small gate in the middle and a large one on either extremity, one opposite the avenue of poplars, and the other at the end of the carriage-way which swept around it.

The plantation was quite an extensive one, and in the days of my grandfather, Francis Eppes, Sen., was remarkably productive. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise, under such management as his; for he was eminent for his skill both in agriculture and horticulture; and I have heard Mr. Jefferson, who knew him intimately, say he considered him not only "the first horticulturist in America," but a man of the soundest practical judgment on all subjects that he had ever known.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Jefferson had strong links with Eppington and the Eppes family. Both he and Francis Eppes married half-sisters, the daughters of John Wayles of "The Forest" in Charles City County. In 1782, after the death of his wife, Jefferson brought his two young daughters to Eppington to be raised by Francis Eppes, while he served in Paris as Minister to France. One of the daughters, Lucy, died of whooping cough and was buried at Eppington; the other Maria (Polly), married Francis' son John Wayles Eppes, and lived at Eppington until her death in 1804.<sup>6</sup>

John Wayles Eppes (ca. 1772-1823), as son-in-law and protégé of Jefferson, rose to a place of importance in the new federal government, serving in both the U.S. House of Representatives and later the Senate. In order to outbid the popular and never-defeated John Randolph of Roanoke

for his seat in the House, Eppes moved to Buckingham County and established residence in his opponent's home district. Due in part to Randolph's opposition to U.S. involvement in the 1812 war with England, Eppes achieved the distinction of defeating Virginia's greatest nineteenth century orator.

During the tenures of Francis Eppes and his son John Wayles, Eppington attracted a number of well-known visitors. The English architect and engineer Benjamin Latrobe, who had a major hand in building the State Capitol in Richmond and U.S. Capitol in Washington, stopped at the Eppes farm during his 1796 tour of Virginia. He writes in his journal: "After a grateful adieu to Mr. Walk... we proceeded to Eppington, the seat of Mr. Francis Eppes. Here all is good humor, kindness, and mirth. We breakfasted with him and his charming family, and forgot ourselves so far as to stay almost till noon." Before leaving, Latrobe sketched the house.<sup>7</sup>

Francis Eppes' two daughters, Lucy and Mary, married respectively Archibald Thweatt and Richard N. Thweatt (of nearby Mantua). Eppington is listed as the property of Archibald Thweatt from 1810 until 1836, when Richard N. Thweatt acquired it. The farm left the family in 1862, when Henry Cox bought it. After the Civil War, the house is said to have been abandoned and left open to the elements. Hogs were living in the basement when William Hines of Pittsburgh bought Eppington in 1876 and renovated it. Hines descendants continue to occupy the house today.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>This date is based on the architectural evidence; the traditional date for the house is ca. 1730.

<sup>2</sup>Brandon, Battersea and several other related multi-unit Virginia houses were based on plates in Robert Morris' *Select Architecture*. (Waterman, *Mansions of Virginia*, pp. 341-42; 363-68.)

A similar relatively small scale example of the three-part house is nearby Belnemus (1790s) in Powhatan County, which has only one room per unit, gable-roofed wings, and no dormers on the main two-story block (NRHP report, VHLC).

<sup>3</sup>Mutual Assurance Society policies of 1806 and 1815 show that a 16' x 40' kitchen with central chimney stood on the west side of the house. Nearby stood a schoolhouse of similar form.

<sup>4</sup>As was often the case in the eighteenth century, different persons may have been responsible for the construction and the interior detailing of the house. It would nonetheless have been possible for the carpenter or joiner finishing the interior to have moved one of the doors in the west room a few inches in order to place symmetrical paneling about the fireplace. Such an alteration would have been both technically feasible and relatively inexpensive. That the problem was resolved in the manner it was belies the popular notion that rigid symmetry was a fundamental objective of eighteenth century Virginia housebuilders. Indeed symmetrical paneling tends to be the rule in only the largest and most elaborately detailed 18th century Virginia houses. (See Waterman, 1945, for examples). Even in those houses, symmetry often gives way to practical considerations.

<sup>5</sup>Lancaster, pp. 111-12.

<sup>6</sup>For a description of the house during Maria Jefferson's tenure, see Bettie Weaver, "Mary Jefferson and Eppington", *Virginia Cavalcade*, Autumn 1969, pp. 30-35.

Sally Hemings, alleged by some historians to have been Thomas Jefferson's slave mistress, lived at Eppington with Jefferson's two

daughters in 1783-85. (James A. Bear, Jr., "The Hemings Family of Monticello," *Virginia Cavalcade*, Autumn 1979, p. 84.)

<sup>7</sup>Latrobe, Benjamin H.; *The Virginia Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1795-98*, ed. Edward C. Carter III and Angeline Polites. (New Haven, 1977), Vol. 2, p. 529. Latrobe's sketch of Eppington appears on the cover of the second volume.

## General references:

Lancaster, pp. 110-12.

Lutz, pp. 131-32; 147-48.

Romaine, Craig, "Eppington" (WPA, 1936).

Upton, Dell "Eppington" (field notes, VHLC, 1977).

VHLC, "Eppington" (NRHP report, 1969).

Wyatt, E. A. IV, (1955, p. 34).

## Interviewees:

Annie V. Scott (Chesterfield).

## Architectural Description:

20-25. (Winterpock Quad). *Farm dwelling*: frame w/ ovolo-edge wdbs.; 2½-story, 3-bay central block w/ matching 1-story, 2-bay wings set back slightly from main block; raised bsmt. of Flem. bond; 3-room-plan main block, one-room plan east wing, and west wing w/ one large room, large closet, and front passage; hipped roofs w/ modillion cornice (main block has 2 ped. dormers on front and rear slopes); int. brick chimneys whose stacks rise outside main block. *Dims.*: 28'-0" x 20'-2" wings; 36'-3" x 24'-4" main block (92'-3" total length). *Clg. ht.*: 10'-8". *Orient.*: N-S. *Ext. detailing*: modillion cornice on all sides; 9/9 sash; molded wooden window sills. *Interior*: all detailing original. Arch. trim; 6- and 8-r-p doors; heavily-molded cornices on main floor; r-p wainscot w/ one tier of panels above chairrail in E. main block room; dbl. bdd. chairrail elsewhere; paneled chimney wall in same room; partly paneled chimney wall in W. main-block room; main-block mantels w/ narrow arch. surround, single r-p frieze and molded shelf; E. wing has paneled chimney breast w/ narrow fluted pilasters, crosssetted plain-board overmantel, and mantel w/ pulvinated frieze and double dentil bands; W. wing mantel has arch. surround and 2-r-p frieze, dogleg stair w/ 2 turned bals. per tread, sq. newel and molded rail. *Built*: ca. 1770. *Additions*: ca. 1915 2-story ell at rear; late 19C front porch rebuilt; front veranda w/ board-and-batten wall cladding. *Alterations*: none significant; fdns. rebuilt under wings; openings altered at W. end. *Outbuildings*: early 20C barn. *Cemetery*: inscribed 19C stones. *Listed on NRHP*.