

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: INTERPRETING AMERICA'S FIRST  
GRECIAN STYLE HOUSE: THE  
ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY OF GEORGE  
WASHINGTON PARKE CUSTIS AND  
GEORGE HADFIELD

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Arlington House, located within Arlington National Cemetery and now managed by the National Park Service, was built in a three phase, sixteen-year construction sequence (1802-1818), and is considered the first American example of adapting the principles of Grecian style architecture to a domestic building. Despite its historic designation as a National Monument in 1925, the interpretation at Arlington House does not adequately portray the significance of its early history and architecture nor its contribution to the development of the nation's capital. Federal legislation requires the site interpretation to portray the period of April 1861, when its last occupants, General Robert E. Lee and his family, departed following Virginia's secession from the Union. The emphasis on Lee's tenancy overshadows the early

history of Arlington House and the contributions of its owner, George Washington Parke Custis, and architect, George Hadfield.

By providing a comprehensive historical overview of the development of Arlington House, this research is intended to: (1) outline the major factors that shaped its history to promote a broader understanding of its national significance as a historic site; and (2) promote a greater appreciation of architect George Hadfield's professional accomplishments and his contribution towards developing an American vernacular form of residential Greek Revival architecture. This paper will argue for a more broadly representative site interpretation that expands the current interpretation by placing greater emphasis on the significance of its early history and architectural design. Identifying the factors that have shaped the historical and architectural significance of Arlington House is critical in advocating for a comprehensive approach to its public site interpretation. Ultimately, this research questions the relevancy of the existing federal legislation that mandates the interpretation while advocating a policy change that seeks to incorporate a broader approach to how site interpretation is presented at house museums managed by the National Park Service.

INTERPRETING AMERICA'S FIRST GRECIAN STYLE HOUSE: THE  
ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY OF GEORGE WASHINGTON PARKE CUSTIS  
AND GEORGE HADFIELD

By

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Overview

Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial is a public house museum located within Arlington National Cemetery. Designated a National Monument in 1925 and opened as a house museum in 1933, Arlington House is now managed by the National Park Service (NPS). The administration and public interpretation policies that govern this house museum are the result of its designation as a National Monument.<sup>1</sup> At the time of its designation, the property was administered by the War Department as an integral component of Arlington National Cemetery; it was used as a residence for the on-site superintendent and groundskeeper.

In presenting the history and interpretation of Arlington House, it is critical to consider federal legislation and the manner in which the site was originally designated. Federal legislation enacted in 1925 authorized the restoration of the house, known as the Lee Mansion, to portray the time period of April 1861, when Robert E. Lee and his family departed following Virginia's secession from the Union. In 1933, Executive Order No. 6166 consolidated all federally-administered parks, monuments, and reservations under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service.<sup>2</sup> This change in administrative oversight transferred stewardship responsibility from the War Department to NPS.

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<sup>1</sup>(The Antiquities Act of 1906 authorized the President of the United States to declare by public proclamation landmarks, structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest situated on lands owned or controlled by the government to be national monuments).

<sup>2</sup><http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/06166.html>.



Despite this administrative change, the property has retained its designation as a National Monument and has not been considered for National Historic Landmark (NHL) designation; America's pre-eminent listing of nationally significant historic resources. As a National Monument it contributes to public misconceptions that it serves as our nation's memorial to General Robert E. Lee, despite other designated historic resources and sites, such as Stratford Hall and the Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University that can and do serve this role. The renaming of "Lee Mansion" to "Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial" is indicative of how political actions can manipulate and reshape the representation of history. Political and social ideologies were a driving force behind the establishment of public house museums during the nineteenth and a significant part of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Historic house museums seek to convey history that emphasizes events, places, and persons that have defined our nation's history while attempting to balance an aesthetic experience. While contemporary museum officials and historic preservation practitioners strive to promote a broad-based and culturally inclusive approach to presenting the historical value of heritage resources, the policies that govern Arlington House contribute to its very restrictive "time capsule" interpretation. A multi-faceted collage of cultural, economic, and political issues has continued to influence and shape the site's interpretation under federal stewardship.

David Lowenthal has written extensively on cultural heritage values and the importance of understanding and appreciating the lessons of our past and how they can serve to inform current interpretation practices. He argues that our past is taken for

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<sup>3</sup>Quinn, *Telling it Slant: Historic House Museums and the Re-Creation of the Past*, 8.

granted within the context of our media- and entertainment-driven society and that we shortchange ourselves in not realizing the importance of how the past actually contributes to our individual well being and that of our collective society. It is imperative that our historic house museums present a culturally broad interpretation that strives to emphasize the value of our past and its contribution and relevance to modern life.

The architectural design of Arlington House and the collaboration of its owner, George Washington Parke Custis, and architect, George Hadfield, is not adequately portrayed in the current site interpretation. By focusing exclusively on the Lee's tenancy in 1861, the legislation ignores the overall national significance of the site's early history and the influence of its architectural design. Hadfield chose to manipulate the use of Greek design elements into a bold, new building form for the largest plantation in the nation's capital. In fact, its neo-classical, temple-style portico, adapted into a vernacular residential building form, is a uniquely American interpretation of classicism.

Visitors unfamiliar with Arlington National Cemetery are surprised to learn that the house with the magnificent view is a memorial to Robert E. Lee. Some visitors learn that the house was constructed by Lee's father-in-law, George Washington Parke Custis, the adopted grandson of President Washington, if they engage the Park Service interpreters. As a first time visitor, I sought a greater understanding of and appreciation for the historical significance of this extraordinary house and the lives of those who contributed to its existence. Subordinating the relevance of its early history and development does not reflect NPS cultural resource management guidelines.

In attempting to develop a historical context of Custis and Hadfield, the absence of written records in the form of journals and correspondence presents research

challenges. A review of journals from the contemporaries of George Hadfield, including those of Dr. William Thornton, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, and President Jefferson, provided information to support and provide clarification to the life histories of these individuals. This research and documentation provides the ability to confirm and question previously drawn conclusions on the early history and architectural design of Arlington House.

Furthermore, the absence of construction drawings continues to allow speculation on the building's construction sequence. Some historians have questioned whether Hadfield designed the entire house, or whether his artistic influence was limited to the temple-front portico. Hadfield's obituary of 1826, followed by an oratory presented to the Columbian Institute, provides factual evidence confirming his overall design of Arlington House.

This paper will reassess Arlington House's current interpretation while advocating for greater recognition of its full historical and architectural significance. The current interpretation, focused on Robert E. Lee, remains narrow and conventional, instilling an idealized past rather than accurately portraying its multiple and often conflicting histories. I will argue that the federal legislation that mandates the present interpretation is misguided and although unintentional, misconstrues the history of the site and does not reflect contemporary approaches to conveying the history of one of our nation's important heritage resources. Furthermore, this paper will advocate a policy change that seeks to incorporate a broader approach to how site interpretation is presented at house museums managed by the National Park Service.

The remainder of the introduction presents a historical and cultural context of the building's early history and development, as well as exploring the factors that influenced its design. Chapter II provides a historical overview of owner and patron George Washington Parke Custis, and the factors that shaped his decision to construct Arlington House. Chapter III, a historical and chronological overview of architect George Hadfield, explores his contributions to the development of the nation's capital as one of its first professional architects. Chapter IV provides a building chronology of Arlington House and a discussion of the factors that have shaped its architectural design and construction. Chapter V presents a historical perspective of Federal stewardship of the property. Chapter VI, the conclusion and recommendations, includes an evaluation of the current interpretation, in addition to a series of recommendations intended to solicit legislative and public policy support for a broader presentation of the site's history.

Arlington House is one of our nation's most misunderstood heritage resources and this paper attempts to convey the importance of reconsidering the historical context of its current interpretation.

## Historic and Cultural Context

“Arlington House, an image of classical perfection to the eye was built somewhat like a stage set. That which is seen by the viewer was of greatest importance and concern; that which was supporting the classical façade, both on the interior, as well as the exterior, was of decidedly secondary importance.”<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1: Arlington House East Elevation – View from the Memorial Bridge entrance to Arlington National Cemetery.**

(Source: Author – August 2009)



Arlington House was the former nineteenth-century plantation home of George Washington Parke Custis (1781-1857), the adopted grandson of President George

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<sup>4</sup>National Park Service, *Arlington House, Historic Structures Report, Architectural Data Section (Phase I), Structural Data (Part I)*, 55.

Washington. The house was designed by architect George Hadfield (1763-1826).<sup>5</sup> Built in a three phased, sixteen-year construction sequence (1802-1818), it is the first American vernacular building form adapting Grecian style architectural elements to a domestic building. When construction commenced in 1802, the property comprised 1,100 acres, one of the largest parcels in the District of Columbia (refer to Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Map of the City of Washington in 1800.**

(Plan of the city of Washington: now building for the metropolis of America, and established as the permanent residence of Congress after the year 1800 / B. Baker sculp. Islington. <http://memory.loc.gov>.)



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<sup>5</sup>(This research focuses on the construction of the house and does not include the remaining two dependencies on the west elevation).

In 1800, Congress relocated from Philadelphia to Washington. With a population of 3,210, the newly established capital consisted of nearly four hundred brick and frame buildings. The major building activity focused on the construction of four principal government buildings along with speculative residential building to accommodate the growing population. The men involved in the design and construction of the government buildings comprised Washington's first group of professional architects; the transition from a master builder tradition to the architectural profession coincided with this construction activity. This group of architects, including George Hadfield and his contemporaries, James Hoban and Benjamin Henry Latrobe, as well as amateur architect, Dr. William Thornton, each had immigrated to America to practice architecture and take advantage of the professional opportunities in the new capital.

George Hadfield, an Italian born English architect and star pupil at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, was awarded the Academy's first Travelling Fellowship to undertake a four-year study tour of Italian architecture, archeological sites, and ancient ruins. This fellowship provided him with first-hand knowledge of ancient Greek ruins, enhancing his familiarity with popular architectural pattern books, such as Stuart and Revett's, *Antiquities of Athens*. Upon his return to London, he served as an apprentice in the office of architect James Wyatt. His credentials were nearly unmatched to his contemporaries when he arrived in the capital in the fall of 1795 to serve as the Superintendent of Construction for the Capitol. After being dismissed following a bitter disagreement with the capitol's architect, Dr. William Thornton, Hadfield eagerly pursued other professional opportunities and firmly established his architectural practice in the capital. He quickly became an American citizen, was elected to local public office,

and served as an active member of the Columbian Institute, an organization that sought to reduce the influence of European cultural heritage on American culture.

Hadfield obtained several high profile commissions for new public buildings, including designs for the remaining two principal government buildings: executive offices for the Treasury and War departments. Hadfield also received a number of commissions to design civic buildings and a theatre project as a prelude to his work on Arlington House, his first residential commission. His design for the Custis plantation house was untested in the context of its adaptation and application of Grecian style architectural elements.

George Washington Parke Custis, a member of the Virginia aristocracy, was raised by President and Mrs. Washington at Mount Vernon. His personal admiration of President Washington and a desire to secure treasured family heirlooms were primary motives for building a new home on the property he had inherited.<sup>6</sup> Custis' choice of location and architectural style suggests that his design decisions were intentional; he attempted to replicate the features of Mount Vernon's architectural design, site placement, and use of building materials. As such, Custis' decisions were influenced by his desire to memorialize President Washington. Custis sought to pay homage to his memory while being able to display and protect the Washington family heirlooms he had inherited and acquired. Custis' decision to forgo the use of traditional Palladian design and Roman and Renaissance precedents, popularized by Thomas Jefferson, and favored by many wealthy patrons, enabled his house to infuse the symbolism of Washington into a building form that would serve as a memorial to the first president.

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<sup>6</sup>Nelligan, "The Building of Arlington House," 11.



Hadfield's design of a temple-shaped portico with flanking wings, characterized by the use of exaggerated and unfluted Doric columns, and the use of scored stucco over brick, provided a bold appearance that broke with past architectural principles. The architecture of the house is characterized by its rectangular shaped building form and bilateral symmetry, along with the monolithic quality of the Archaic Doric-style columns. Its location overlooking the Potomac ensured it would be clearly visible on the capital's western horizon. Hadfield's use of Grecian architectural forms adapted into a framework of English classicism resulted in a unique vernacular building form for a plantation house.

The architectural style of Arlington House was distinctly different from the typical homes built for wealthy landowners within the Chesapeake Tidewater region. Federal style architecture, along with Flemish bond pattern brick construction, was the prevalent residential building form. The residential work of Dr. William Thornton and Benjamin Latrobe in the capital continued the popularity of Federal style architecture. Their individual artistry and expressive use of classical elements resulted in distinctive differences in architectural style. Conservative patrons, coupled with the general absence of available skilled labor in the construction trades, were contributing factors to the prevalence of traditional building forms and materials. A majority of the available skilled and slave labor were already employed in the construction of the principal government buildings, thereby limiting the availability of skilled labor for the construction on more ornate residential buildings. This shortage also contributed to a continuation of existing building techniques and practices that would sustain Federal style architecture for another decade or two.

The phased construction sequence of Arlington House was not unusual in the early nineteenth century. A somewhat similar building sequence transpired in the construction of Tudor Place, in nearby Georgetown, designed by Dr. William Thornton, for Custis' sister, Martha Custis Peter and her husband, Thomas Peter. And at Riversdale, in nearby Maryland, the plantation of George Calvert was constructed in a five part plan like Tudor Place. George Washington Parke Custis' wealth was tied up in land and slave holdings, so despite a grand vision for his new home, he had financial limitations. The prolonged construction of Arlington House was dependent on the use of his slave labor and the natural resources available on his land to provide the majority of the building materials. Continued financial challenges inhibited his ability to fully complete the interior of the house. It was only after Custis' death in 1857, that his daughter, Mary Randolph Custis, and her husband, Robert E. Lee, had completed the unfinished work. The Lee's would commence a series of modernization and renovation activities to accommodate changes in the use of interior spaces and the incorporation of mid-nineteenth-century technology, such as indoor plumbing and a hot-air furnace for central heating.

### **Neo-classicism in American Architecture**

Alexander O. Boulton's statement, "In its majesty and in its simplicity, the Greek Revival house seemed to echo America's belief in the past and hopes for the future,"<sup>7</sup> provides a glimpse into the visionary collaboration of George Washington Parke Custis and George Hadfield. The construction of Arlington House established the beginning point for the early development of Greek Revival architecture which lasted until the

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<sup>7</sup>Boulton, "From the Greek", 80.

beginning of the Civil War. Arlington House is the first domestic building to use a temple-front Doric columned portico, a feature that would become readily adaptable by architects and builders. In addition, Arlington House served as a prototype for other architects, such as Ithiel Town, and patrons, such as Nicholas Biddle, who incorporated temple-front porticos into their plans for domestic buildings.

Early American architecture in the Chesapeake Tidewater region was greatly influenced by English classicism, also synonymous with English Palladianism. American building design was shaped by a range of factors from economics, availability of skilled labor, building materials, and cultural efforts to emulate English style architecture, particularly among those who had the financial resources. English cultural influence began to diminish following America's independence from England when the leaders of the new nation sought to develop an American style of design. The classicism of English Georgian architecture that had slowly evolved into the American Federal Style offered an adapted and simplified interpretation of classical design while retaining the strong symmetry of the façade and balance of the doors and fenestration. Although high-style buildings designed by master builders and carpenters retained English classical building forms and stylized preferences, the majority of domestic buildings were vernacular designs incorporating local practices and building materials. The influence of vernacular building forms that adapted design elements freely resulted in few buildings being constructed in a strict or accurate replication of stylized building forms. Architectural pattern books provided ready references for those seeking knowledge of current building practices.

Architectural historians throughout the twentieth century have offered divergent perspectives on the evolution of Greek Revival architecture in America. Beginning with Fiske Kimball and Talbot Hamlin, and continuing through Roger Kennedy and W. Barksdale Maynard, including architect Allan Greenberg, each have offered their perspective on the extent of the influence of English design principles on early American architectural design. While there is consensus that America was intent on developing its own set of cultural values as a young nation, English precedents continued to influence architectural design both prior to and after the American Revolution. The nation's political leaders attempted to instill the democratic values of the Constitution in the design of public buildings, drawing inspiration from ancient Roman and Greek civilizations. The founding fathers desired the formation of a national style of architecture enabling the country to break with the cultural influences of Western Europe.

Historians have argued that the founding fathers, particularly George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, whose influence guided the design of the first government buildings, desired new traditions in building design. The architecture of the nation's new government buildings was an attempt to distinguish the U.S. democratic values from those of England and the constitutional monarchies of Europe.<sup>8</sup> Greenberg explains that the founding fathers purposely sought "to modify the meaning and symbolism of existing architectural forms to articulate new meanings."<sup>9</sup> To do so, they sought to balance past precedents and identify new design elements that would result into a distinguishable new building form. In the early nineteenth century, the paradigm of English cultural

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<sup>8</sup>Greenberg, *The Architecture of Democracy, American Architecture and the American Revolution*, 127.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.

influences continued to exist as America embraced English traditions. The fact that the majority of the American population was of English ancestry, posed a difficult challenge in developing new cultural traditions.

In summation, Arlington House was once the largest plantation in the nation's capital. Custis was intent on building a home for himself and in promoting the memory and political ideology of President Washington. It was also his intention to construct a spectacular house that was commensurate in size and architectural merit to compliment the physical development of the new capital. Hadfield's design offered a rationale solution to Custis' desire to emulate the physical setting of Mount Vernon and its visibility from the Potomac River while providing him with professional rewards that extended beyond a prestigious commission. Hadfield's ability to redefine the building typology of domestic plantation architecture signifies the transition towards the establishment of the early Greek Revival period in American architecture.

## Chapter 2: George Washington Parke Custis, Owner and Patron (1781-1857)

### Historical Overview

Arlington House was formerly sited on a 1,110-acre tract that George Washington Parke Custis inherited following the death of his father, John Parke Custis. The son of Martha Washington and her first husband, John Parke Custis purchased this tract of land in 1778.<sup>10</sup> When John Parke Custis purchased the property, he named it “Mount Washington,” out of reverence to General Washington. Following Custis’ unexpected death in 1781, his infant son, George Washington Parke Custis, was brought to Mount Vernon to be raised by George and Martha Washington.

Upon Martha Washington’s death in 1802, Custis inherited seventeen thousand acres of land in eastern Virginia, known as White House and Romancock. While he wanted to remain at Mount Vernon, his attempts to purchase the plantation from Bushrod Washington were unsuccessful. Forced to leave Mount Vernon, Custis moved to the small four-room house that was located on the “Mount Washington” property inherited from his father. In *Arlington Heritage, Vignettes of a Virginia County*, Eleanor Lee Templeman describes the wood frame cottage as being approximately 80 years of age when Custis took up residence in 1802.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Nelligan, *Lee Mansion National Memorial*, 3. (The property acquired by John Parke Custis was once a portion of a 6,000 acre land grant that Captain Robert Howsing received from Sir William Berkeley, Royal Governor of Virginia).

<sup>11</sup>(National Park Service research reports that after Custis moved out of the frame cottage it was occupied by his plantation manager. War Department engineering maps indicated that the house was still standing in 1892. Park Service officials report that all remains of the former cottage have disappeared).

George Washington Parke Custis was fiercely proud of his admiration for President Washington and this small cottage provided a temporary place to store his family heirlooms. However, he quickly came to realize that dampness and mold were beginning to deteriorate his belongings, accelerating his desire to build a new home.<sup>12</sup> Custis chose a building site that offered an extraordinary vista of the Potomac River and the nation's capital, while providing a backdrop for the conspicuous placement of his house; visible not only from the capital but from the highly traveled Alexandria-Georgetown Turnpike that crisscrossed his property alongside the river. Its location on top of a bluff offered a location that was approximately 210' above sea level, a more suitable site for a house than the cottage's location alongside the swampy backwaters of the Potomac.

Custis likely sought a building site that would offer a comparable setting to Mount Vernon. The site also provided a panoramic vista of the capital and its level land would support the construction of dependencies and landscaped gardens. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, wealthy Tidewater landowners intentionally sought prominent locations that would visibly convey the design aesthetics of the house while maximizing natural vistas. Custis' site selection may also have been influenced by its picturesque slopes. Their setting provided a backdrop of woods that evoked English-inspired naturalistic landscape design principles sought by wealthy landowners.<sup>13</sup> His determination to build a new house was the factor that precipitated the renaming of the property to "Arlington House" commemorating the Custis family homestead on the

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<sup>12</sup>National Park Service, *Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial Cultural Landscape Report*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

Eastern Shore of Virginia. However, given his strong admiration for President Washington it is peculiar that he would have changed the name given to the property by his father.

Arlington House was built in a three phase construction sequence from 1802-1818. The construction of two single-story wings, followed by the center section and portico, suggests that Custis had limitations impeding his ability to have the house completed all at once. Historians argue that it was not an uncommon building practice during this time period to construct a home in a phased sequence based on available resources and the desire for additional living space.<sup>14</sup> Because Custis' wealth was comprised of mostly land and slaves, he most probably lacked the available finances to fully execute Hadfield's design at the beginning. Murray Nelligan, former National Park Service historian at Arlington House, has described the period in which Custis commenced construction of the first wing of his house as coinciding with the beginning stages of developing a plantation that was not yet self-sustaining.<sup>15</sup> Plantation owners generally used their slave labor for construction and since Custis was just establishing the groundwork for his plantation, he was limited on how he could disperse his resources to meet both of these requirements.

The absence of Custis' journals and other correspondence pertaining to the construction of the house makes it difficult to determine specific aspects of the construction process and in particular, who supervised the construction. One thing is for certain, Hadfield provided some as yet undetermined level of professional oversight during the construction phases to ensure that his design was executed as planned. His

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<sup>14</sup>Nelligan, "The Building of Arlington House," 12.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 11.



involvement with the design and construction of the Capitol and the Executive buildings indicates that he preferred a proactive oversight role on each of his designs and responsibilities.

Although the exterior construction of the house was completed in 1818, the interior was not completed until after Custis' daughter, Mary Custis Randolph, married Robert E. Lee in 1831. Being an only child, Mary may have influenced Lee's choice of making Arlington their home rather than seeking a residence of their own. When Custis died in 1857, Mrs. Lee inherited a lifelong interest in the plantation, along with 196 slaves, and other property.<sup>16</sup> In "*On Hallowed Ground: The Story of Arlington National Cemetery*," Robert Poole describes the complexity and dire financial affairs that the Lees faced in sorting out the distribution of financial legacies bequeathed to their children, property ownership, and the financial consequences of Custis' request to have slaves freed within five years of his death.<sup>17</sup> The Lees would remain at Arlington House until Virginia seceded from the Union in April 1861, prompting the family to depart on April 22<sup>nd</sup>; the Lees never returned to Arlington.

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<sup>21</sup>Poole, *On Hallowed Ground: The Story of Arlington National Cemetery*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

## Chapter 3: George Hadfield, Architect (1763-1826)

### Introduction

George Hadfield, an Italian born Englishman, immigrated to America in 1795 to serve as the Superintendent of Construction for the U.S. Capitol building. Hadfield was one of our nation's first professionally trained architects. Although he possessed the requisite skills of a professional architect, Hadfield did not have the practical experience of overseeing the implementation of his own building designs.

In America, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, men who referred to themselves as architects were generally amateurs or master carpenters, very few were professionally trained.<sup>18</sup> The architectural profession was in its infancy and while those who dominated the construction building profession used the term “architect” to describe themselves, they seldom possessed formal training and their architectural designs were based on existing buildings, pattern books, and the desires of patrons. One observer of American architecture wrote in 1815 that most of the country's domestic architecture copied from English pattern books was not well executed.<sup>19</sup> The use of pattern books continued a trend initiated during the eighteenth century and later expanded by publications of architect Asher Benjamin. George Hadfield's formal education and apprenticeship with the office of James Wyatt exposed him to a variety of pattern books, for example Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* that may have provided him with a framework of Grecian architectural forms.

George Hadfield's commissions in the U.S. capital came from influential politicians and social elites. Despite the accolades of his designs by historians, his

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<sup>18</sup>Fazio and Snadon, *Latrobe's Colleagues in the Federal Period*, 1.

<sup>19</sup>Maynard, *Architecture in the United States, 1800-1850*, 25.

professional accomplishments have been overshadowed by those of contemporaries, Dr. William Thornton, James Hoban, and particularly that of Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Although each of these men contributed to the designs of the nation's first principal government buildings and the houses of the capital's prominent social elite, the architectural career and the caliber of Hadfield's designs deserve closer examination. Hadfield's architectural education at the prestigious Royal Academy of Art in London provided diversity and experience; his fellowship to study archaeological and ancient ruins in Italy provided first-hand knowledge of Greek architecture.

Hadfield spent his entire career in America working in the capital city designing a variety of buildings for public, civic, and domestic purposes. Despite his contributions to the physical development of the capital, his work is generally less well known and understood than those of his contemporaries. The majority of his buildings have been demolished and since there are few written records and drawings, the physical traces of his works have nearly vanished.

### **Biographical Overview**

George Hadfield was born in Leghorn, Italy, near Florence, in 1763 to English parents who operated an inn. Following his father's death in 1779, the family returned to England. In 1781, Hadfield enrolled in the architectural department of the Royal Academy of Arts in London where he soon earned the dubious distinction of a "star pupil." According to Michael Richman, Hadfield was successful in his drawing and design work winning medals for his design of an observatory and greenhouse, and a national penitentiary.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Richman, "The Early Career of George Hadfield in America 1795-1804," 6.

Following his formal studies, Hadfield was awarded the first Traveling Royal Academy fellowship in 1790, providing him with four years of study in Rome. While there he had many opportunities to visit archaeological sites and ancient ruins, such as Paestum, across central and southern Italy. Following his return to London, the drawings he completed during his time in Italy were exhibited by the Royal Academy garnering much attention for and recognition of his artistic talent.<sup>21</sup> Hadfield's works solicited much acclaim and were recognized for his proficiency in understanding classical building forms, notably those of temples.<sup>22</sup> The exhibition caught the attention of architect James Wyatt who offered Hadfield an apprenticeship in his London office. Wyatt was well regarded as having perfected revivalist architectural forms in both the Gothic and classical tradition.

It is likely that Hadfield was introduced to the American painter and diplomat John Trumbull through Wyatt. Trumbull had recently received a letter from the District Commissioners in the capital asking him to recommend an architect to supervise the capitol's construction. Following Trumbull's discussion with Wyatt and Benjamin West, he wrote to Tobias Lear, secretary to General Washington, in 1794 recommending Hadfield for the position.<sup>23</sup> Even though the Commissioners were eager to hire a new architect, they were awaiting an additional appropriation from Congress to continue funding the capitol's construction which necessitated their delay in offering the position to Hadfield. Trumbull eventually received the Commissioners' reply to extend the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 9. (Hadfield's drawings were publically exhibited including those for the Sanctuary of the Fortuna Primigenia at Palestrina, an archaeological site, sketches of the Basilica of St. Peter's, and the designs of the ancient ruins of the Temples of Mars and Jupiter Tonans).

<sup>22</sup>Beane, "George Hadfield, Forgotten Architect," 3.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 4.

employment offer to Hadfield, and replied that “I trust you will find in Mr. Hadfield a very agreeable acquaintance, as well as a very complete professional man.”<sup>24</sup>

When Hadfield arrived in Washington to assume his position on October 15, 1795, he entered a professional environment quite different from that of London. The nation’s capitol was in its earliest stages of development and there were very few professional architects. Hadfield had been advised by Trumbull that Pierre L’Enfant would be the only one in the capital with equal knowledge of architecture as a profession.<sup>25</sup> Trumbull advised Hadfield not to be too critical of the work of others implying that he would need to develop friends in America and to tread lightly when communicating his recommendations.<sup>26</sup>

Hadfield’s position as Superintendent included serving as an overseer of the skilled masons and carpenters, along with the use of slave labor. His evaluation of the building’s design and construction progress revealed flaws and inconsistencies that he felt must be addressed. Taking Trumbull’s advice, he was initially careful in the manner in which he communicated his concerns. However, he was presented with a professional challenge in overseeing the building’s construction, as Dr. Thornton’s drawings were critically incomplete. He decided to develop a proposal that would not only rectify the inconsistencies with the building’s intended design, but would also save money. Despite his rationale approach, his proposal drew immediate fire from Thornton, and he soon learned that Thornton’s political influence was no match for his professional competency.

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<sup>24</sup>Harris, *Papers of William Thornton, Volume One 1781-1802*, 300.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 304.

Despite his plea to President Washington to intervene, he could not obtain the political support to overrule Thornton or the support Thornton received from James Hoban.

During his tenure as Superintendent, Hadfield secured his first commission to develop plans for a pair of buildings that would house the executive office functions of the Treasury and War departments. His drawings, dated 1796-1797, depict two classically styled, rectangular shaped buildings with Ionic entrance porticoes, intended to flank the President's house; President Washington approved the plans on March 3, 1797 (refer to Figure 3).<sup>27</sup> His request to oversee the construction of these two buildings was not approved by the Commissioners since they intended to have James Hoban serve as Superintendent. After realizing that he would not be able to oversee the implementation of his designs, he refused to relinquish his drawings to the Commissioners. This incident led to his dismissal as Superintendent on May 28, 1798.

Following his dismissal, it is difficult to piece together all aspects of his commissions and activities. In 1800, he received a patent for the first brick and tile-making machine in America.<sup>28</sup> Following Jefferson's election as President in 1801, Hadfield anticipated being restored to his former position as Superintendent of the Capitol. Jefferson had recently dismissed the District Commissioners, including Dr. Thornton, and was seeking to establish a new position entitled Surveyor of the Public Buildings. This position would require oversight of all construction activities on government buildings. Hadfield wrote to Jefferson offering his professional services while defending his reputation after having been discharged by the Commissioners.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 460.

<sup>28</sup>Hunsberger, "The Architectural Career of George Hadfield," 56.

<sup>29</sup>Beane, "George Hadfield, Forgotten Architect," 31.

**Figure 3: United States Treasury Building Drawing, George Hadfield, 1796-1797.**

(Washington: treasury office (elevation), recto, 1796-1797, by George Hadfield. N414; K180 [electronic edition]. *Thomas Jefferson Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Boston, Mass. : Massachusetts Historical Society, 2003. <http://www.thomasjeffersonpapers.org>.)

Walker's research discusses how Hadfield sought Jefferson's patronage to secure government commissions through his sister, Maria Cosway, a confidante of Jefferson's in France. Hadfield had hoped to obtain the commission to design the south wing of the capitol only to be disappointed when contemporary Benjamin Henry Latrobe was awarded the position.

During Jefferson's presidency, Hadfield received simultaneous commissions between 1802-03 to design the Marine Barracks and Commandant's House in the Navy Yard south of the Capitol. In 1802, he received the commission to design a civic building to house the city jail at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and G Streets, NW. This was an important commission since Jefferson sought to implement his prison reform ideals through the design.<sup>30</sup> In 1803, Hadfield received the commission to develop plans for the Arsenal that would serve as a munitions center located on the former Greenleaf's Point, now referred to as Fort McNair. He also secured a private commission through John P. Van Ness to design the Washington Theatre. The building, completed in September 1803, was located at the northeast corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and C Streets, NW.<sup>31</sup>

Within the same time period, Hadfield obtained the commission to design Arlington House. NPS research by Murray Nelligan documents that the single-story north wing was completed in 1802, followed by the south wing in 1803. The center section and portico was completed by 1818. With respect to the completion of the center section of the house, considerable construction delays are probably explained by material and financial limitations imposed by the War of 1812. It is similarly probable that limited construction work was performed in the capital during this turbulent wartime period.

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<sup>30</sup>Richman, "The Early Career of George Hadfield in America 1795-1804," 63.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 65.



Hunsberger suggests that the Treaty of Ghent which ended the war with England began the slow economic recovery that enabled building construction and reconstruction efforts to resume.<sup>32</sup> For example, Hadfield secured the residential commission to build a house for Commodore David Porter on Meridian Hill in 1816.

Shortly thereafter, he received a commission from the District of Columbia to design the City Hall building (since renamed the District of Columbia Court of Appeals). His plans were approved on April 1, 1820, after having been requested to modify them for greater practicality since the cost estimate exceeded the available funding.<sup>33</sup> Hadfield's design for the city's first municipal building reflects a three-part plan featuring a center Ionic portico. The building was originally constructed of brick and stucco plastered. The center part of the building was begun in 1820 and the east wing was completed in 1826. The building was completed in 1849 following construction of the west wing. Cunningham's article on the history of Hadfield's City Hall building, published in *The Architectural Review* in 1915, was intended to draw public support to save the building, then proposed for demolition. Eventually saved from demolition the building underwent substantial renovation that involved the reconstruction of its exterior walls in which the brick façade was reinforced with concrete and steel and then dressed in stone. The building was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1960 (refer to Figure 4).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Hunsberger "The Architectural Career of George Hadfield," 58.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>34</sup>(The District of Columbia's former City Hall Building is Hadfield's only building to be designated a National Historic Landmark).

**Figure 4: Former District of Columbia City Hall Building.**

(Source: Author – April 2010)



Hadfield's last commission prior to his death in 1826 was a family mausoleum for John Peter van Ness. The mausoleum, originally located on H Street, NW, was moved to Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown where it remains (refer to Figure 5). Fazio and Snadon identify its form and style as similar to that of the Temple of Vesta in Rome.<sup>35</sup> Local historian Pamela Scott suggests that it is quite likely that Hadfield designed a number of domestic buildings that remain undocumented.<sup>36</sup>

Hadfield's membership in the political and socially active Columbian Institute provides an additional aspect to his life in the nation's capital. The Institute was formed

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<sup>35</sup>Fazio and Snadon, *Latrobe's Colleagues in the Federal Period*, 8.

<sup>36</sup>(In a discussion with historian Pamela Scott on February 27, 2010, she indicated that Hadfield's footprint on Washington's built environment remains undocumented. She is currently writing a book on the design and construction of the U.S. Treasury Building that will include Hadfield's original design for the building.)

in 1818 to promote the arts and sciences in the City of Washington. Hadfield's membership was sponsored by George Washington Parke Custis' brother-in law, Thomas Law, a prominent city developer. The organization was comprised of prominent and influential men, including honorary members, such as President's John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Following Hadfield's death on February 5, 1826, his obituary appeared in *The National Intelligencer* on February 13, 1826:

It is a duty we owe to the founders of our city, when any of them are called from the scene of their former usefulness, to do honor to their memory, by recording with truth, whatever they have done in laying the foundation to our infant metropolis, or promoting its welfare. It is but doing justice to the dead; and it is to be hoped, when such men die, that it will excite the living to emulate them. Amongst this class may be placed the late Mr. George Hadfield, Architect, who died at his residence in this city, on Sunday evening, the 5<sup>th</sup> instant, aged about 62 years.<sup>37</sup>

His obituary reflected his appreciation of the fine arts and his love of liberty and independence and cited his desire to bequeath his drawings as a student of the "Ruins of Premaeste, near Rome" to the Columbian Institute in which he was a member.<sup>38</sup>

In summation, when George Hadfield immigrated to America, he had purposeful goals of establishing himself professionally as an architect and in becoming an American citizen. He actively engaged in the city's political and social arenas and despite the appearance of professional setbacks following his disagreements with Dr. Thornton and the District Commissioners, he persevered and continued to build his career. He could have chosen to return to England or move to another city and start over but he chose to

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<sup>37</sup>Internments in the Historic Congressional Cemetery, <http://congressionalcemetery.org/>

<sup>38</sup>Ibid. (Records of internments at the Historic Congressional Cemetery state that Hadfield's drawings as a student at the Royal Academy, specifically those of the Temple of Palestrina, are in the possession of the Royal Institute of British Architects).

remain in the nation's capital. His contribution toward the physical development of the nation's capital deserves greater attention.

**Figure 5: van Ness Mausoleum.**

(Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wik/File:Van\\_Ness\\_Mausoleum\\_-\\_Washington,\\_D.C..jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wik/File:Van_Ness_Mausoleum_-_Washington,_D.C..jpg))

## Chapter 4: A Building Chronology of Arlington House (1802-1818)

### Historical Perspective

In Daniel Reiff's, *Washington Architecture 1791-1861: Problems in Development*, he identifies six critical factors which shaped the early physical development of Washington: (1) lack of public resources to construct the key government buildings, as well as the necessary infrastructure and securing resources from Congress; (2) doubts that Congress would officially move the capital from Philadelphia to the District of Columbia; (3) general hesitancy among the populace and elected officials of a strong national government; (4) lack of Congressional interest in the capital's development and assumption that the municipality would fund the necessary public improvements; (5) lack of skilled tradesman; and (6) establishing respective roles of the politically appointed District Commissioners and their influence over architects in designing government buildings.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the impediments cited by Reiff, George Washington Parke Custis was intent on building a home for himself on one of the largest tracts of land in the capital. Custis was devoted to promoting the memory and political ideology of President Washington and he envisioned his new home as a place to display and protect family heirlooms acquired from the estate of Martha Washington. It was his intention to construct a spectacular house that "was commensurate in size and architectural merit" to compliment the development of the nation's new capital.<sup>40</sup> In determining the physical appearance of his home, he drew inspiration from Mount Vernon since he was intimately

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<sup>39</sup>Reiff, *Washington Architecture 1791-1861 Problems in Development*, 25-26.

<sup>40</sup>Nelligan, *Arlington House – The Story of the Robert E. Lee Memorial*, 70.

familiar with its architecture and the modifications performed by Washington. Since Washington served as a father figure on many levels, his influence on Custis was likely significant and it is not surprising that Custis sought to emulate the design elements of Mount Vernon.

Custis' building requirements were likely to have included the design characteristics of Mount Vernon, such as its portico fronting the river. Of greater importance was locating a suitable building site that would overlook the capital and afford views of his house from the capital. The site chosen, on the highest bluff overlooking the Potomac River, allowed him to closely replicate the visual prominence of Mount Vernon. Custis' desire to immortalize Washington's memory may have influenced him to construct a house that appeared monumental when seen from afar.

Custis' ambitious plans for a new house were realized after he commissioned George Hadfield to assist with his efforts. Hadfield and Custis had a mutual friend in common, the painter John Trumbull, known for his portraits and history paintings of Revolutionary War scenes. Trumbull had assisted Hadfield in securing the position at the U.S. Capitol building that precipitated his immigration to America. Custis became friends with Trumbull as a young boy growing up at Mount Vernon that continued through his adulthood.<sup>41</sup> Trumbull had painted a full length portrait of General George Washington in 1790 that was followed by a series of paintings including one of President and Mrs. Washington in 1794. This mutual connection with Trumbull is the likely source that

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<sup>41</sup>McGroarty, "A Letter and a Portrait from Arlington House," 53.

facilitated the collaboration between Custis and Hadfield on the design of Arlington House.<sup>42</sup>

The use of a Grecian styled building form offered by Hadfield provided an opportunity for Custis to contrast his socio-political values from those of the “Jeffersonian” politicians in the capital whom he detested.<sup>43</sup> His political beliefs strongly differed from those of President Jefferson and his regard for President Washington’s political values may have prompted an uncharacteristic and somewhat foreign choice for his home’s architectural form. Despite his best intentions and vision for his new house, he had limited cash reserves that required the house to be constructed in phases rather than having it built from start to finish.

Hadfield’s knowledge of archeological and ancient Grecian ruins in Italy provided him the practical experience of understanding the monolithic qualities of the Grecian order and the visual appearance from a distance. Hadfield likely contributed the choice of a classical Grecian inspired building form, a temple front portico that was unambiguous in its design while possessing equally convincing attributes of its solid and heavy appearance. Hadfield was well acquainted with the influences of Palladianism and the Greek Revival from his work in England although the latter was unfamiliar to most in America. In Kennedy’s analysis of the building’s architectural style, he argues that architects of Hadfield’s generation believed that Grecian forms to be the most appropriate style for a new democracy.<sup>44</sup> This argument continues to be debated since Washington

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<sup>42</sup>(Historians have only speculated that Custis and Hadfield became acquainted with one another through social circles. This research suggests that Trumbull may be the likely source of this connection).

<sup>43</sup>Kennedy, *Architecture, Men, Women, and Money In America 1600-1860*, 206.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 221.

and Jefferson chose classical Roman forms for the design of the Capitol and the President's House.

Hadfield's design offers the rigid symmetry of the building form and fenestration of other large plantation houses while still maintaining the traditionalism of Federal style design elements. His use of stucco plastering over the brick construction was intended to ensure greater visibility than if the house had been constructed of red brick. Rather than using handmade bricks by slave labor, Hadfield's recently patented brick machine could have been operational. Despite this sophisticated brick machine, the bricks may not have been aesthetically pleasing so the alternative was to have them painted. Custis' familiarity of Mount Vernon and Washington's manipulation of wood frame construction that appears as cut stone was similarly adapted in the design of Arlington House. The parged stucco façade enabled the building's exterior surfaces to be scored to resemble cut stone. Although not visible from a distance, it provided the same trompe l'oeil effect that Washington achieved at Mount Vernon.

The radical design element of Arlington House was Hadfield's manipulation of the Doric order in relationship to a more refined balance between the column, capital, and entablature. From a distance these inaccuracies are blurred and it is only upon closer examination that the tapering of the column width becomes most pronounced. The rudimentary appearance of the columns reveals Hadfield's brilliance of manipulating their form in order to ensure their visibility from a great distance.



William Elliott, a fellow member of the Columbian Institute, is quoted as remarking that Hadfield designed the portico for Arlington House from drawings made of Temple of Poseidon at Paestum near Naples, Italy (refer to Figure 6).<sup>45</sup>

**Figure 6: Temple of Poseidon at Paestum, Italy - 450 B.C.**

(source: <http://www.GreatBuildings.com>)

Hadfield may have also drawn inspiration from architectural pattern books, such as Thomas Major's *Ruins of Paestum* (1768), or Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* (1762), whose publications were very influential.

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<sup>45</sup>“Arlington House,” *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, 158.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor in describing the extraordinary location and visual prominence of Arlington House across from the nation's capitol argues that Hadfield's use of Grecian style architectural elements was intentional in order to impose a monolithic quality to the structure that would match the visual presence of the early government buildings in the capital. Hadfield executed a masterful plan in the placement of the house and its design in maximizing its visibility from the nation's capital. Within a contemporary context, Arlington House has retained its visual prominence that has been further enhanced by the construction of the Memorial Bridge across the Potomac River in the 1930's connecting the site with the Lincoln Memorial. The significance of its architectural design is demonstrated by its use as a prototype by architects and builders during the first half of the nineteenth century that inspired a building wave of American vernacular interpretations of Grecian styled architecture defined by the design's prominent temple-style portico. The immense popularity of Greek Revival architecture resulted in the development of an architectural style that would retain its dominance until the start of the Civil War.

### **Construction Period**

The single-story north wing, measuring 40 feet in length and 25 feet in width, was completed in 1802, followed by completion of the south wing of identical size in 1803. The main level of the north wing consisted of one large banquet hall with a kitchen and laundry in the basement below. The banquet hall was subdivided into three living spaces when Custis married Mary Lee Fitzhugh in 1804. The south wing was divided into smaller spaces, consisting of a large parlor for entertaining, and a smaller-sized room for use as a study. Each wing had a hipped-style shingle roof, indicating that he did not

anticipate constructing the center part of the house for some period of time.<sup>46</sup> The wings were constructed of brick and finished in a stucco plaster finish that was scored to resemble stone blocks.

Nelligan explains the delay in the construction of the center block and portico as being prolonged due to the scarcity of building materials and construction delays caused by the War of 1812, particularly the British assault and burning of Washington in 1814. Construction of the two-story center section and portico, measuring 60 feet in length and 40 feet in width, commenced in 1817 and was completed in 1818. In plan, the first floor consists of a center passage that extends from front to rear. On the north side of the passage was the family parlor and dining room separated by an arcaded partition. On the south side of the passage was a large parlor. To the rear of the passage through an arched opening are two separate staircases that run parallel with the exterior wall; one serving as the main staircase to the second floor and the other as a service staircase. The second floor plan consists of four bedrooms, two on either side of the center passage, including several storage closets.

The center section was constructed of brick and parged in a stucco plaster finish and scored in rectangular blocks to replicate the appearance of the adjoining wings. The steps leading up the portico were constructed of wood. Originally, the rear west elevation and the two brick chimneys that adjoin the center block with each wing were not parged. The portico consists of a 25 foot projection from the building's center section supported by eight Doric columns, 23 feet in height and approximately 5 feet thick at their base. The columns are constructed of brick and parged in a stucco plaster finish streaked with

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<sup>46</sup>Nelligan, *Arlington House – The Story of the Robert E. Lee Memorial*, 75.

color to provide the appearance of marble. Early photographs indicate that the wooden portico pediment was also plastered and scored in rectangular blocks and that the wooden capitals were painted to match the façade. The roof line that adjoins the center section and portico is slightly misaligned. The roof was originally wood shingled. A low balustrade constructed of wood was erected around the roof on the adjacent wings.

Robert E. Lee, who took up residence at Arlington House following his marriage to Custis' daughter, Mary in 1831, is credited with completing the interior work while initiating a series of building modifications that consisted of the addition of arcaded brick loggias to the west elevation on both the north and south wings. Originally designed to be open, they were eventually closed with wall partitions constructed to provide transition into the center section stair hall. In 1837, the installation of a bath tub and water closet required the reconfiguration of the north wing loggia. In 1851, a hexagonal design brick floor was installed under the portico and the wooden steps were rebuilt.

During Robert E. Lee's extended leave of absence from the Army following Custis' death in 1857, he initiated a series of improvements to enhance the physical condition of the house and the landscaped gardens that had fallen into disrepair. This work included completing the plastering of the large parlor on the south side of the passage hall; installing new first floor marble mantelpieces with carved oak leaf motifs, inspired from popular Victorian décor; installing a hot-air furnace in the basement; and reconfiguring two storage closets off the second story passage hall for use as a guest room. In 1858, exterior modifications included replacing the wood shingled roof with slate and removal of the wooden balustrades on the two wings.

## **Building Description**

Arlington House is a rectangular shaped building, comprised of a two-story, five bay center block and portico. On the flanking north and south elevations are one-story, three bay wings. The center block and portico has a slate roof. There is a slight visual misalignment in the roof line of the portico that separates the portico from the center block roof line (the phased construction sequence may have resulted in the misalignment). The roofing surfaces of the adjacent wings are covered in a plastic membrane with an epoxy sealer that retains the white gravel covered surfaces. The building is constructed of brick with a stucco plastered finish, scored in rectangular blocks to appear as stone. The portico is supported by Doric style unfluted columns constructed of brick and stucco plastered; the column surfaces are streaked to resemble the appearance of marble.

The front façade is defined by a large two-story portico with a brick floor comprised of hexagonal shaped bricks. Wooden steps lead up to the portico on three sides. The triangular pediment is supported by eight Doric columns and two pilasters. Six Doric columns appearing evenly spaced extend across the portico's front façade, with a row of single columns directly aligned between the front corner column and the rear pilaster. The column capitals are wood. The entablature contains an exaggerated size frieze consisting of triglyphs and metopes with a smaller scale architrave.

The building has a symmetrical façade. Entrance into the building is through a set of double paneled wood doors containing a combination of smaller sized panels. The fenestration of the center block consists of wood double-hung windows. The first story

## Figure 7: Arlington House East Elevation

(Source: Author - August 2009)



**Figure 8: Arlington House, South Wing**

(Source: Author – August 2009)



**Figure 9: Arlington House West Elevation**

(Source: Author – August 2009)





contains pairs of twelve-over-eight sash windows to the left and right of the entry doors. Each window opening contains a pair of operable raised panel wood window shutters. The second story contains pairs of eight-over-eight sash windows symmetrically placed above the first story windows. Above the entry doors is an eight-over-eight sash window balanced with adjoining two-over-two sash windows. Panels are symmetrically placed between each first and second story opening. Jack arches are placed over each window opening. Crown molding adjoins the portico ceiling.

The north and south elevation wings contain three symmetrical, Palladian style double-hung wood windows, set with an archivolt. The soffit contains dentil style molding. The wood sashes consist of an upper semicircular sash divided into eight lights with seven lights created by the vertical mullions. The lower sash contains eight lights. A string course extends the width of the archivolt, with a pedestal that adjoins the socle which is distinguished by its textured stucco plastered finish. Within the socle on the north elevation wing, are six light wood windows that are symmetrically placed below each first floor opening. On the south elevation wing, there is a single six light wood window below the center first floor opening.

The configuration of Arlington House's three-part building form is similar to the five-part building forms commonly found on Chesapeake Tidewater plantation houses. The architecture of Arlington House is based on classical precedents and does not attempt to use historical accuracy with its adaptation of Archaic Doric-style columns. Its architectural design is characterized by its rectangular form, bilateral symmetry, recessed arched, palladium style double-hung windows of its two wings, and a prominent temple-style portico. The fenestration of the wings set within enlarged round arched frames is

one of Hadfield's signature design elements which also appeared in his design of the District's City Hall. The design for Arlington House is characterized by its monolithic quality is expressed through the continuity of its building materials. The portico's exaggerated and massive unfluted Doric columns are its most defining architectural element. The portico's frieze is disproportionately large in relation to the architrave and the triglyphs and metopes. Furthermore, the scale and massiveness of the front façade along with the use of a stucco plastered finish, reinforces the building's magnitude while enhancing its appearance from a distance.

Hadfield's design of the center block and wings possess English Palladian elements conveyed through symmetry and calculated design features. The temple front portico defines the architecture and aesthetic appearance of the house. The portico is not faithfully based on a prototype by the fact that Hadfield manipulated his use of the Doric order in order to ensure that the columns were visible from a great distance. It was his intention to interpret Grecian architectural forms freely without regard to precision or based on archeological precedents. Hadfield's choice of a bold design coupled with its ability to convey a visual impact persuasively suggests an attempt to seek inspiration from the past while reinterpreting specific stylistic qualities within a modern context to serve an intended purpose and function. The fact that the house was constructed over a sixteen year period may to some degree have contributed to its uniquely vernacular form of American classicism. The building instills a simplicity and austerity through its rigid symmetry. If the portico had not been built, the building's classical composition and its Palladian design elements would reveal a rather distinctively three-part Georgian style building form.

## Chapter 5: The Tenure of Federal Stewardship

### **Historical Perspective**

The story of Arlington House under Federal stewardship is interwoven with the history and development of Arlington National Cemetery. Its history and function as a historic site museum is a direct result of its location across the Potomac River from our nation's key government buildings and memorials. The turmoil of its history and the socio-political factors that have reshaped the physical context of the former plantation into a cemetery and now as a memorial to Robert E. Lee does not place sufficient emphasis on conveying the early history and architectural design of Arlington House. Legislation requires that the house be presented in the time frame of April 1861 when Robert E. Lee and his family vacated the house following Virginia's secession from the Union; the Lees never returned.

The historical significance of Custis and Hadfield's architectural legacy in designing the first domestic building in America incorporating a temple-style portico with Greek Doric columns for the largest plantation house in the capital does not receive the level of recognition it deserves. NPS visitor interpretation materials do not emphasize the historical significance of its former location in the District of Columbia; the Virginia portion of the District of Columbia was ceded to Virginia in 1846, renaming the jurisdiction Alexandria County. The General Assembly in Virginia changed the county's name to Arlington County in 1920.

The illegal acquisition of Arlington House by the Federal government is a story that is not clearly conveyed to visitors but its relevance is critical in understanding the ownership and use of the property and the house. Following the secession of the

Confederate States, legislation enacted in 1862 by Union lawmakers allowed for additional taxes to be assessed on real estate owned by those supporting the rebellion against the Union. For property located in designated “insurrectionary districts,” the legislation required the tax payment in person by the property owner and prevented payment by a third party. Since Mrs. Lee could not safely travel from Richmond to Alexandria to pay the taxes, she was in default and the legislation enabled the federal commissioners to acquire the property for \$26,800.<sup>47</sup> Influential politicians and military leaders felt that Lee had betrayed the Union when he sided with Virginia’s secession, contributing further to the desire of the federal government to acquire ownership of the property.

**Figure 8: Union Soldiers on Portico of Arlington House – 1864.**

(Source: Courtesy of Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial)



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<sup>47</sup>Poole, *On Hallowed Ground: The Story of Arlington National Cemetery*, 55.

Following the acquisition, the Army set aside 200 acres as burial ground for Union soldiers and the former plantation house officially opened as a military cemetery in June 1864. In Robert M. Poole's, *On Hallowed Ground: The Story of Arlington National Cemetery*, he notes that the federal government needed to identify additional burial space since the city's existing cemeteries could not accommodate the anticipated casualties.<sup>48</sup> The government's slow actions to obtain proper burial grounds for soldier remains increasingly drew criticism from the press. Another factor in using the property for burials was the disdain Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and Brigadier General Montgomery C. Meigs had for General Lee, despite the fact Lee himself did not own the property and that his wife had a life tenancy she inherited from her father. In matter of fact, Meigs was strategic in the placement of the tombs in close proximity of the house to ensure that the building could no longer serve as a residence.<sup>49</sup> The hatred for Lee clouded the judgment of lawmakers including military leaders and President Lincoln.

Following the war, the military continued to expand burial space and in one interesting occurrence, Meigs solicited the assistance of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. in developing a landscape plan within the cemetery. Olmsted cautioned against any elaborate plans and recommended simplicity with respect to the how the burial space would be expanded and visually presented by burial markers.<sup>50</sup> As Poole describes, Meigs had his own goals for fulfilling a grand vision of a national cemetery despite the

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 74.

advice he received for simplicity and a subdued approach to ensuring its future use as a military cemetery.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, General Lee quietly consulted with trusted family lawyer, Francis L. Smith, to determine how the family might reacquire Arlington House. Respectful of how his actions might be seen and misinterpreted, he proceeded with caution despite the apparent lack of hope. Upon the death of General Lee on October 12, 1870, Mrs. Lee continued the family efforts to gain ownership despite the unlikely prospects and the fact that several thousand Union soldiers had been buried around the perimeter of the house. In addition, the property also contained a Freedmen's Village inhabited by former slaves and six military forts. She was unable to garner the necessary congressional and political support to mount a legal court battle. Following her death in 1873, her eldest son, George Washington Custis Lee became the legal heir to Arlington.

George Washington Custis Lee began a lengthy legal battle to reacquire the family property and obtain his rightful inheritance shortly after his mother's death. Legal maneuvering favored Lee when the case was decided in his favor by both the Circuit Court of Alexandria, Virginia, and in the U.S. Circuit Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. Both courts upheld the ruling that the Lee family had their property illegally taken without due process. The government appealed the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court who heard the case in April 1879 and ruled in favor of Lee. Since the house was essentially no longer inhabitable because of its close proximity to burial sites, the federal government agreed to pay Lee the sum of \$150,000 to obtain legal ownership. The 47<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 74.

Congress of the United States on March 3, 1883, appropriated funding to purchase the property, and the government acquired legal ownership on May 14, 1883.

The War Department who had administrative responsibility for the national cemetery and Arlington House undertook a renovation in 1884 that modernized the residence into two units for use by an on-site cemetery manager and groundskeeper. Photographs indicate that the house had been painted yellow and that the brick chimneys and the west elevation rear façade (that had not been stuccoed during construction) were plastered with stucco and painted. By the end of World War I, the condition of the house had deteriorated further drawing the attention of a senator's wife. After her article appeared in *Good Housekeeping* magazine, it generated a wave of public and congressional interest in preserving the house.

Congressman Louis C. Cramton, a Michigan Republican, introduced legislation requiring the house be restored to a pre-Civil War time period in an effort to recognize the tenure of Robert E. Lee at Arlington House. Not until federal legislation was enacted on March 4, 1925, by a joint resolution of Congress, designating the house as the "Lee Mansion National Memorial" were major repairs and restoration contemplated. This legislative action initiated a physical restoration that was intended to return the house and the remaining dependencies to their appearance in April 1861 when the Lee's departed Arlington House.

Eventually, a broad policy of restoration was promoted by a committee tasked by senior War Department officials to assess the condition of the house and to identify proposed restoration activities. The committee was comprised of the serving Quartermaster General of Arlington Cemetery; Colonel Mortimer, Quartermaster Supply

Officer, Washington General Depot; Dr. Charles Moore, Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts in the District of Columbia; and Mr. Walter Peter, architect. In early 1925, a special committee was established for implementing the restoration and refurnishing of the house that included retired General William H. Horton, former Chief of Construction Division in the War Department, and Mr. Edward W. Dunn, architect.

According to discussions with Mr. Andrew Wenchel, a National Park Service Historical Architect, the Army lacked expertise with historical restoration and consulted with Charles Moore and the Commission of Fine Arts. Moore advocated that the interior restoration work emulate the popularity of Colonial Revival design. Despite the congressional resolution to restore the house to its approximate appearance in 1861 and the committee's unfamiliarity with the construction history of the house, Moore continued to advocate for a historically inaccurate restoration. In matter of fact, Moore firmly objected to creating "a national memorial to a Confederate General" and advocated for an interpretation that reflected the building's architectural heritage as one of the country's first Greek Revival buildings. He advocated for changing the name of the site to "Arlington Mansion."<sup>52</sup>

Moore's influence was not sufficient to prevent President Coolidge from signing legislation in March 1925 establishing the memorial as Lee Mansion. The bill authorized the Secretary of War to restore the house "to the condition in which it existed immediately prior to the Civil War, and to procure, if possible, articles of furniture and equipment which were then in the mansion and is use by the ... Lee family."<sup>53</sup>

Restoration was slowed by absence of a congressional appropriation of funding. It was

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 165.



not until late 1929 that Congress appropriated \$100,000 for the renovation and acquisition of furnishings. Under the direction of architect Luther Leisenring, Office of the Quartermaster General, the restoration work was not completed until late 1934.

Executive Order 6166 issued by President Roosevelt on June 10, 1933, transferred ownership of national memorials, reservations, and other property assets including the “Lee Mansion,” to the Bureau of National Parks within the U.S. Department of the Interior. Despite fierce resistance within the War Department, the transfer was complete and the mansion along with twenty-eight acres became part of the National Park Service. In 1937, measured drawings of the house and its two remaining dependencies were prepared through the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS).

A joint congressional resolution passed on June 29, 1955, dedicated the site as a permanent memorial to Robert E. Lee and the house became known as the “Custis-Lee Mansion.” Congressional legislation enacted on June 30, 1972, changed the property’s name to its original historical name, Arlington House, followed by the explanatory memorial phrase, “The Robert E. Lee Memorial.”

For nearly the past forty years, the interpretation of Arlington House has focused on Robert E. Lee, and this has influenced all restoration related activities. Currently, the interior of the house is undergoing substantial renovation to install new mechanical systems, including heating and air conditioning, along with fire suppression. There is a multi-year capital improvement plan to continue restoring both the exterior and interior elements of the house. Prior to spending more money on restoring the house to the period of 1861, an assessment should be completed to consider the full extent of all these past restoration activities and how these efforts have affected the historic fabric and character

of the house. The majority of the house's interior remains closed to visitors to accommodate ongoing construction that is anticipated to continue over the next twelve to sixteen months. Although visitors have an opportunity to view both the passage hall and the two public rooms that flank its sides, the interpretation and greater access to the house and its history is severely curtailed.

Despite the best intentions of the NPS site interpreters, the history of Arlington House remains narrowly constrained by the legislative language. Discussions among NPS officials and those who may seek a broader interpretation of the site's early history recognize the importance of ensuring that visitors are presented an accurate portrayal of its history. Unless new legislative action is proposed, NPS interpreters will be required to interpret the site as the Robert E. Lee Memorial.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

Arlington House is one of several historic resources within the George Washington Memorial Parkway system administered by the National Park Service (NPS). Its interpretation as a public house museum is restricted by federal legislation requiring the site to portray the time period of 1861, in recognition of General Robert E. Lee's departure from Arlington House. The site's early history and contributions to the development of the nation's capital, as well as the national significance of its architectural design, is not adequately considered or portrayed in the current interpretation. NPS describes the interpretation of Arlington House as follows:

“Arlington House was the home of Robert E. Lee and his family 30 years and is uniquely associated with the Washington and Custis families. George Washington Parke Custis built the house to be his home and a memorial to George Washington, his step-grandfather. It is now preserved as a memorial to General Lee, who gained the respect of Americans in both the North and the South.”<sup>54</sup>

As such, the legislation impedes the presentation of a broader interpretation that is representative of its nearly two hundred years of history. Arlington House is comprised of twenty eight acres set within Arlington National Cemetery, our nation's most coveted military burial grounds (refer to Figure 11). The cemetery contains more than 300,000 grave sites and is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the nation's capital. By restricting the interpretation of Arlington House to a specific time period and placing considerably less emphasis on other aspects of its history, such its connection with Arlington National Cemetery, the cultural and political debates that surround this site

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<sup>54</sup>National Park Service, “Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial,” <http://www.nps.gov/arho/index.htm>

continue unabated. In so doing, it questions the legitimacy of interpretation at other federally administered historic sites.

**Figure 11: Arlington House surrounded by Arlington National Cemetery – Fall 2008 Aerial Photograph.**

(Source: <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/>)



As a National Monument, the site pays tribute to General Robert E. Lee while subordinating the national significance of its overall social history and architectural design. Arlington House was once the largest plantation in the nation's capital when the city's boundaries extended across the Potomac River to Virginia. Its monolithic appearance set against the western horizon of the capital reflects the artistry of architect George Hadfield. His design for a three-part building form, characterized by its temple-front portico and supported by exaggerated Doric-style columns, fulfilled the goal of its owner George Washington Parke Custis, who intentionally sought to build his house in view of the capital's principal government buildings.

Arlington House has four periods of historical significance: (1) construction of the plantation home for George Washington Parke Custis (1802-1818); (2) tenancy of his daughter, Mary Randolph Custis and her husband, General Robert E. Lee (1857-1861); (3) the Civil War (1861-1865) and its transformation into Arlington National Cemetery; and (4) its use as a public house museum administered by the National Park Service (1933-present). The emphasis on the Lee's short tenancy prevents the NPS from offering a more expansive interpretation. Consequently, the heritage value of the building's architectural design and its contributions toward the early development of Greek Revival architecture in America is not well presented.

Despite its historical significance on both a national and local level, the current interpretation portrays an imagined past based on a single individual and time period, rather than one based on authenticity and accuracy of the site's multi-faceted history. Contemporary museum methodology and interpretation practices advocate for an inclusive and culturally representative portrayal of site's heritage value. Past practices

that dictate the commemoration of national figures and events, and associate them with historic buildings, is not in keeping with professional practices of the twentieth-first century. Outdated practices that currently dictate the site's interpretation further inhibit the ability to promote a broad-based approach to interpretation that also contributes to its disconnection with other historic resources within the surrounding metropolitan area.

For example, greater emphasis should also be placed on the social and material culture of slavery when Arlington House was the center of plantation life up until the beginning of the Civil War. In addition, Union military officials purposefully established a military cemetery during their occupation of the plantation when they initiated burials around the perimeter of the house to ensure that the Lee family would never again be able to occupy the house. Both of these examples deserve a more robust interpretation.

Currently, visitors receive a biased and filtered presentation that focuses on General Lee without understanding the broader implications of the site's complex history. The paradigm over public perception of Lee's association with Arlington House promotes a distorted interpretation since the site pays tribute to a national figure whose association with the site is very limited within the context of its more significant periods of history. Visitors anticipate seeing the plantation house of Robert E. Lee, when in fact the house was constructed by Custis, Lee's father-in-law; Lee himself was absent from Arlington House for extended periods of time while he served in the Army Corp of Engineers.

At Arlington House, conflicting values exist between balancing prescribed public policy within the context of the site's larger historical presence. House museums are designed to portray the constructed past to a larger audience in which visitors, acting as passive participants, are provided with an interpretation that serves to form the memory

of their visit. This passive approach instilled by legislative and institutional status quo policies, continue to reinforce a nostalgia-based practice to interpretation rather than one that is historically fact-based. As a federally administered and supported public house museum, current interpretation practices conflict with NPS guidelines for cultural resource management. For example, NPS guidelines state the following:

“According to both federal law and NPS Management Policies, all historic structures in which the Service has a legal interest are to be managed as cultural resources. Regardless of type, level of significance, or current function, every structure, is to receive full consideration for its historical values whenever a decision is made that might affect its integrity.”<sup>55</sup>

Existing federal legislation inhibits the ability to apply NPS cultural resource management policies and procedures to the interpretation of Arlington House. NPS guidelines promote the retention of the physical attributes of a cultural resource since it is recognized that the integrity and historical value of the resource is nonrenewable. Architectural integrity is a key characteristic in the ability of a building to convey its significance.

Historic buildings that possess national significance and retain architectural integrity of its design and materials may be designated as National Historic Landmarks (NHL). The NHL program is America’s pre-eminent listing of nationally significant historic resources. Buildings, particularly houses, represent the core of this inventory. There are fewer than 2,500 historic places across America designated as NHLs. Arlington House was designated as a National Monument in recognition of its association with the establishment and development of Arlington National Cemetery. Designation as a

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<sup>55</sup>U.S. Department of the Interior, *National Park Service Cultural Resource Management Guideline NPS-28*, [http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/nps28/28chap8.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/nps28/28chap8.htm).

National Monument is confusing since this designation is typically associated with National Parks, natural landscapes, and archeological ruins. National Monuments receive less funding and have fewer restrictive protections, impacting the long term integrity and sustainability of their physical structures.

Arlington House possesses the characteristics and qualities that meet the evaluation criteria for eligibility as a NHL. Although designation requires meeting at least one of the identified criterion of significance, Arlington House demonstrates the ability to address three of the following criterion - evidencing its statute as a building of considerable historical significance:

Criterion 1: Event. For its outstanding representation and association with the Civil War and for its establishment by the federal government as a national military cemetery;

Criterion 2: Person. For its association with George Washington Parke Custis and Robert E. Lee, two figures of national significance whose specific achievements and contributions are integral to the development and history of Arlington House; and

Criterion 4: Design/Construction. For the exceptional importance of the building's architectural design and artistic value as the first house in America to incorporate a temple-front portico. The structure served as a prototype for architects and builders to design vernacular adaptations of its Grecian style architecture. In addition, for its association with George Hadfield, one of the nation's first professional architects, and his contributions toward the early development of the nation's capital.

This research has provided a comprehensive historical overview of the early history and architectural design of Arlington House in order to support the argument that



the site's current interpretation is inadequate and ineffective in conveying the broader significance of one of America's most important houses. The lives of George Washington Parke Custis and George Hadfield and their contributions toward the development of Arlington House warrant considerably greater attention and study. NPS interpreters are limited by mandated federal legislation resulting in a shallow and misrepresentative portrayal of the site's history.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are designed to solicit legislative and public policy review and evaluation to promote a broader site interpretation of Arlington House. These recommendations are identified as Levels I and II: Level I identifies initial action steps to facilitate a dialogue to break the "business as usual" perspective on the site's interpretation, identify key participants, and solicit visitor feedback. Level II identifies implementation steps to include drafting new legislation, and a series of National Park Service programmatic efforts inclusive of a Historic Resource Study and a strategic planning effort to address the four proposed historical themes outlined above.

#### Level I

- Initiate a dialogue with senior Park Service officials – on-site Park Service staff and interpreters recognize that the interpretation should be expanded but feel powerless to do so.
- Conduct a survey of visitors to Arlington House and Arlington National Cemetery. Solicit recommendations from Park Service staff on existing interpretation aspects that could be used to inform the development of a new interpretation strategy.

- Form an advisory committee chaired by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to include National Park Service officials, public and private officials who have stewardship of house museums, state and local preservation professionals, and other stakeholders to make recommendations that could be used to inform legislative and policy makers.

### Level II

- Solicit political support necessary to propose new legislation to broaden the scope of the site interpretation.
- Request that the National Park Service initiate a Historic Resource Study (HRS) to assess and evaluate the site's multifaceted historical significance. The projected outcome(s) could be used to guide and inform Park Service officials with interpretation requirements and with future resource management goals.
- Reclassify Arlington House as a National Historic Landmark. Rename the site as "Arlington House" and remove reference to the "Robert E. Lee Memorial."
- Initiate a strategic planning effort to develop an Interpretation Plan that considers the four proposed historical themes identified through this research.

The field of historic preservation in America continues to evolve as we seek new ways to balance and convey the significance of our nation's cultural heritage.

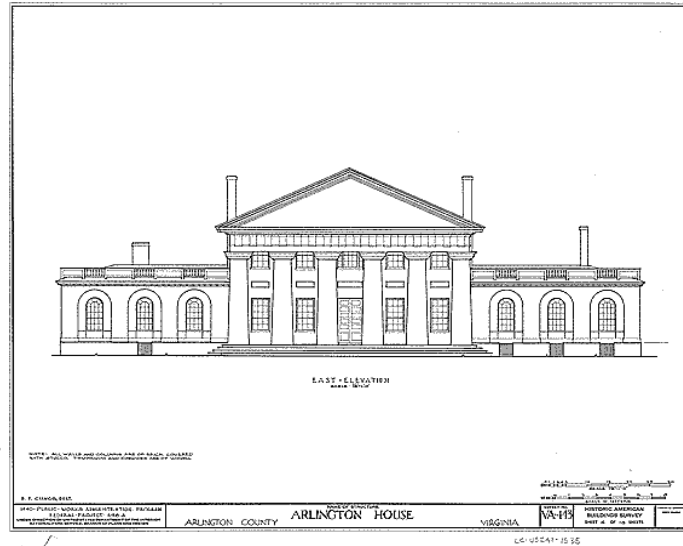
Preservation professionals are constantly faced with the challenges of conveying the relevance and value of our nation's historic resources within the contemporary context of our multi-media frenzied mass culture. Arlington House as a public house museum is one of our nation's misrepresented heritage resources. The enactment of new Congressional legislation is required to enable Park Service officials to apply agency practices with

respect to visitor education and interpretation. By doing so, Arlington House can serve as a case study model to reassess interpretation practices at other house museums. Visitors to Arlington House deserve an authentic and accurate interpretation of the site's two hundred years of American history.

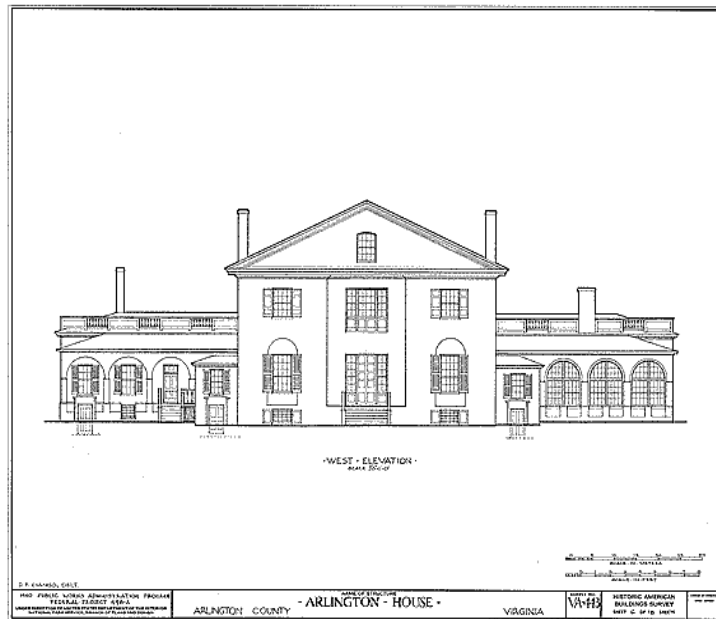
# Appendices

Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) Drawings - 1937

**Figure 1: Arlington House East Elevation**



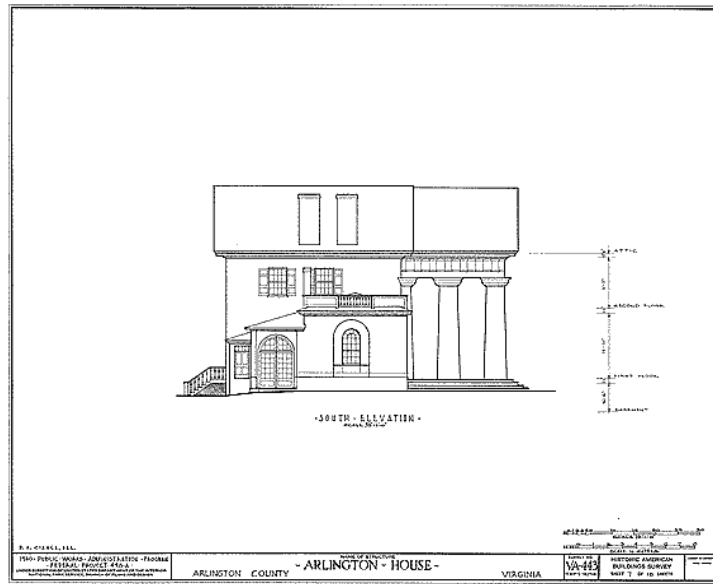
**Figure 2: Arlington House West Elevation**



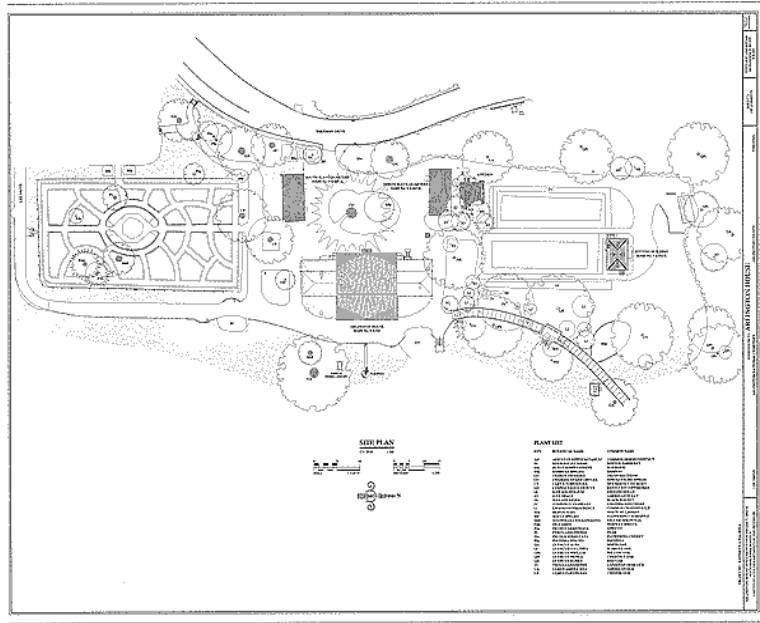
**Figure 3: Arlington House North Elevation**



**Figure 4: Arlington House South Elevation**



**Figure 5: Arlington House Site Plan**



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