



A view from the back of Poplar Forest shows the wing of offices that included a kitchen and smokehouse. Construction on Poplar Forest started in 1806.

Bedford's Poplar Forest offers place for reflection, celebration

By Mark Thomas, Community Relations Coordinator

It was where Thomas Jefferson came for quiet time to read, think and write. It was where he enjoyed gardening and spending time with his grandchildren.

Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest in Bedford County was a retreat for the man who authored the Declaration of Independence and served as America's third president. When his second term ended in 1809, Jefferson visited Poplar Forest three or four times a year, staying a week or as long as two months.

Today, visitors still come to Poplar Forest and have a seat in a reproduction Campeche chair to quietly read and consider the day's events. They also tour the octagonal house, learn about the architecture, watch the restoration and walk the grounds, which now total more than 600 acres.

However, on days and evenings throughout the year, Poplar Forest, with its festivals, dramas, lectures and celebrations, turns into a gathering place for the community.

"Absolutely we want people to see this as an open and welcoming place," says Jeffrey Nichols, the historic site's president and chief executive officer.

Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC) has nearly 9,000 active services in Bedford County, including in the Forest, Huddleston and Moneta communities. Among its 18 counties, SEC has the most active services in Bedford.

Jefferson and wife Martha inherited the almost 5,000 acres at Poplar Forest from her father in 1773. Construction on the eight-sided house began in 1806, and Jefferson last came to the working plantation in 1823, three years before his death at age 83. In 1828, the property passed into private ownership, where it stayed until 1984, when the Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest purchased the site. It then included a house in need of repair and nearly 50 acres.

Since then, Nichols notes, the nonprofit corporation has worked to restore the house and grounds to the way they would have appeared in Jefferson's time. Work has been purposely slow and meticulous, and completed largely on site by hand with reproduction tools in the way 19th-century craftsmen would have originally done it.

"It's been one piece at a time," says Nichols, who has been at Poplar Forest five years, coming from the executive director's post at the Mark Twain House & Museum in Connecticut.

Poplar Forest, named prior to Jefferson's arrival for the abundance of tulip poplar trees in the area, is an ongoing exploration of history and a recognition of the people who lived and worked there.

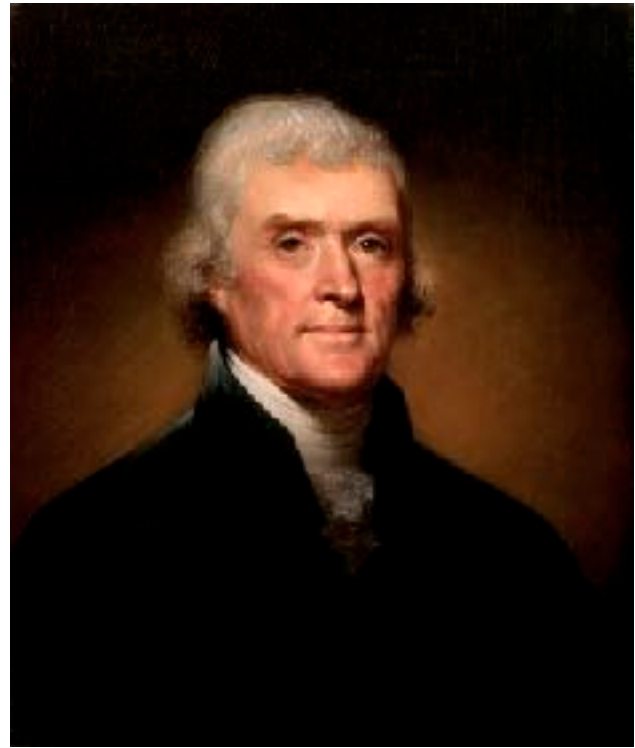
A part of restoring Poplar Forest to Jefferson's time has involved and continues to involve some 30 archaeological digs on the property, followed by detailed analysis. This work has told what buildings were located on the property, their sizes and how they were used. It has led to the discovery of shards of china and glass, nails, coins and other items. Poplar Forest has more than 300,000 artifacts in its collection. Early work unearthed a wing to the house that included a kitchen and smokehouse. The cabins where Poplar Forest's enslaved community lived have been discovered as has a barn used for processing tobacco. Archaeological work also found the oldest, living tree on the property, a tulip poplar that goes back to 1806. Jefferson had at least 14 species of trees on the ornamental grounds.

Current projects are examining the trees and shrubs that were planted in Jefferson's time. Two rows of paper mulberry trees have been replanted to one side of the house. Work continues on restoring the circular carriage turnaround in the front of the octagonal villa.

"This is a major research project that has years to go," Nichols says.

Exterior restoration of the brick house, which totals nearly 4,000 square feet on two floors, has been completed. This included repairing and replacing some of the bricks and mortar in the house, along with redoing all of the woodwork.

Inside, walls that were added by post-Jefferson owners have been removed, and the oak floors have been restored, and so have the baseboards, chair rails and trim for the windows and doors. Ten walnut doors have been crafted to match two original walnut doors in the house.



A portrait of Thomas Jefferson.

Craftsmen are now working on the molding and entablature around the ceilings in the house. Painting of the entire interior will then be done. Nichols says Poplar Forest is also following Jefferson's method of completing one construction item throughout the house before going to another.

Nichols says Jefferson incorporated things he learned at Monticello and in France, along with ideas he saw in other buildings, in designing Poplar Forest.

"He's bringing the best of all he knew into this house," Nichols adds. Poplar Forest and Monticello were the only houses he designed for his personal use. Poplar Forest was inspired by neoclassical and Palladian architecture. The landscape was patterned after Roman villas.

Some of the more interesting features in the house include tall windows in the parlor that let Jefferson go from the inside to an outside porch and a skylight in the ceiling of the house's center room.

One of the exciting things for visitors, Nichols says, is that craftsmen are at work every day in the house and the workshop.

“They are more than willing to chat with visitors about what they’re doing and why they’re doing it,” he adds.

Nichols says Poplar Forest is continuing restoration, but is also moving into conservation. He adds, like any presentday homeowner, there’s always required maintenance and upkeep.

“It’s always going to be something,” he says. “And it’s still a number of years to go on the restoration.”

Something on the horizon at Poplar Forest is a new entrance/exit for the property that will offer scenic views and walking trails. Ground will be broken next spring and the road completed early in 2019.

Besides having some solitary time at Poplar Forest, Jefferson worked on the design for the University of Virginia, which he founded, and calculated the height of the nearby Peaks of Otter. He once thought it was the highest peak in Virginia, but after climbing the mountain and studying, he learned it wasn’t.

At Poplar Forest, Jefferson also oversaw the working plantation. One of the principal crops was tobacco, which, according to Nichols, Jefferson didn’t use nor did he like that it depleted the soil. But it was a money-making enterprise. The tobacco grown at Poplar Forest could be packed in hogsheads, taken to nearby Lynchburg, loaded on a bateau and floated down the James River to Richmond.

Work on the plantation, including in the fields and in the house, was done by slaves owned by Jefferson. Nichols says Jefferson felt trapped by slavery. He needed slaves to run the plantation, which was his primary source of income, but he also disliked it.

“He knew it was wrong, but he kept it,” Nichols says.

In 1814, Jefferson wrote, “There is nothing I would not sacrifice to a practicable plan of abolishing every vestige of this moral and political depravity.”

Poplar Forest doesn’t hide the fact that Jefferson bought and sold people. But the historic site puts a face on the enslaved community by exploring and sharing about slaves’ lives. Visitors will learn about Hannah, who was one of the cooks at Poplar Forest, and read a letter she wrote to Jefferson. They’ll find out about Phil Hubbard, who worked in the fields and was skilled at plastering, and John Hemmings, who was a talented carpenter.

“We want to tell that full story,” Nichols says. Much of that information has come from the archaeological work done at Poplar Forest.

About 30,000 people annually visit Poplar Forest. Many come for the candlelight tours during December, July 4th celebration, Shakespeare performances, naturalization ceremony, beverage tastings, 5K run and student history programs. Upcoming is the Nov. 18 Thomas Jefferson Wine

Festival. Running from 11 a.m.-5 p.m., the festival will include tastings of Virginia wines and ciders, concessions, works by local artisans, live music and house tours.

A National Historic Landmark, Poplar Forest is open most days from mid-March through Dec. 30 from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. The historic site is seeking volunteers to provide tours and work in the gift shop.

For more information, visit www.poplar forest.org. A virtual tour of Poplar Forest is available at Google Street View.

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