

"Oak Lawn"

Material collected by Frederick D. Nichols

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PART I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The estate presently known as "Oak Lawn" had its beginning in a patent that was granted to Joel Terrell and David Lewis in the 1730's.¹ Subsequently, part of this tract was conveyed to Micajah Chiles by the executors of Joel Terrell's estate in 1784.² It is not until 1815 that a parcel of land which antecedes Oak Lawn is conveyed, by auction, to Henry W. Alberty,³ and is again conveyed by the same Alberty (alias Henry Chiles) to General Winston Garth in the same year.⁴

Banker, planter, lawyer, soldier, and a cousin of Patrick Henry, Gen. J. Winston Garth was born and reared in Albemarle County. He was a friend and classmate of Jefferson Randolph and was often at Monticello, where he became acquainted with Thomas Jefferson. He served in the Virginia militia and was elected to represent Albemarle County in the Virginia House of Delegates in 1815.⁵ General Garth is recorded by deed as having sold "...a 394 acre tract near the town of Charlottesville..." to one Col. Nimrod Bramham for the amount of \$4,984.75.⁶ It is to Colonel Bramham that the construction of the house still standing at Oak Lawn, then known as Oak Grove, is attributed.

Colonel Bramham figures in the early history of the county as a successful merchant and man of affairs. He was a magistrate, and succeeded Francis Walker as Colonel of the Eighty-Eighth Regiment of the Virginia Militia.

Elected to the House of Delegates in the Virginia Legislature as a representative of Albemarle County, Colonel Bramham was, as James Alexander recalls him, a popular man and one of Virginia's hospitable noblemen.⁷ The ground for Priddy's Creek Baptist Church was given by him, and he was a trustee of the Charlottesville Baptist Church. On March 22, 1847, Oak Lawn was sold by Colonel Bramham's executor to the Rev. Mr. James Fife.⁸ The estate thus conveyed included the present house and the burial plot of the Bramham family, for whom access to the plot continues to be provided by deed to the present day.

The Reverend Fife, born in Scotland, emigrated to America in 1811 and settled in Virginia to become one of the state's leading Baptist ministers. For a while he lived in Richmond, holding also the position of City Engineer. It was while in Richmond, on November 26, 1826, that Reverend Fife became a citizen of the United States. Not long afterwards, he moved to Goochland County and resided there until about 1839. He then came to Albemarle County to live and purchased Rock Hill, at the end of Park Street, from Meriwether L. Anderson, prior to the purchase of Oak Grove, whose name the Fife family subsequently changed to Oak Lawn.^{8.1} The Fife family has continued uninterrupted ownership of Oak Lawn through five generations to its present occupant, Mrs.

Shelton S. Fife, who has resided at Oak Lawn since 1921.

While the numerous accounts that make reference to Oak Lawn differ with regard to the precise date in which the mansion at Oak Lawn was constructed by Colonel Bramham, the Albemarle County Land Tax Book provides a conclusive clue to the year of construction. In the Tax Book for the year 1822, there is an entry which indicates that an \$8,000.00 valuation was added to the tax record of the estate for a new building.⁹

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Little is actually known about the particular circumstances in which the house at Oak Lawn was constructed, for its designer and builder are unknown at this time. Yet, there is much about its very appearance that is profoundly revealing. The house derives clearly from the influence of the architecture of Thomas Jefferson. As his architectural genius exerted a prominent influence upon American architecture in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising to find Jefferson's work the dominant force in the buildings of Charlottesville, the town with which he was always so closely associated.

It was in Charlottesville and Albemarle County that the germ of Jefferson's architectural inventiveness was firmly planted with the construction of Monticello and the University of Virginia. For the completion of both, skilled craftsmen were brought to this area and the proper materials were procured and manufactured. In the process, the use of many of these craftsmen and materials was extended over to the construction of houses for Jefferson's friends and colleagues. In this manner, even though Jefferson was personally responsible for but a few of their designs, these houses were imbued with planning and detail that were either implemented or supervised by craftsmen that were or had been directly under Jefferson's tutelage. It should be noted that, in

those instances where workmen were insufficiently versed in a particular style and therefore appeared incapable of executing "correct" detail, the houses were full of interesting provincialisms as the result.

Such is the case with Oak Lawn. However, its particular architectural expression cannot be said to have suffered appreciably; for its handsome blend of the vernacular and the formal, interpreted vividly in native brick and white painted wood, marks its distinction as a significant house of its own time.

Oak Lawn is exemplary of the initial phase in Jefferson's architecture which was influenced by the adaptations of Palladio's Roman Country House style, as rendered in Robert Morris' book, Select Architecture, published in London in 1757 ¹⁰ (see Plate 18). As is typical for this particular style, the plan for Oak Lawn is composed of a central block with a gable front, treated with a pediment, which is balanced by connecting smaller wings (see Plate 6). A simple and symmetrical "T" arrangement, this plan permits maximum ventilation and minimizes the upper story. In this type of house, the stairs were no longer the chief ornament of the Hall. However, the plan for Oak Lawn is particularly unusual in Virginia for its two enclosed dog-leg stairs, one off the Hall and the other off the Dining Room, each serving one of the upper bedrooms (see Plates 4 & 5).

. In addition to providing customary utility space, a

half-submerged cellar serves also as a pedestal upon which the house is positioned. The plan of the cellar follows the initial outline of the house, not extending under the kitchen that was added in later years (see Plate 3). The only connections are provided between the two rooms that are formed in the center block. Each of the remaining two rooms, located under the connecting wings, provides its own access to the outside, but to no other part of the basement. These low-ceilinged rooms were probably used to house domestics and to store house goods. Illumination is provided by the ground level windows that penetrate into the rooms under each of the connecting wings and the Dining Room, respectively. With no windows, and but a single door leading to the adjoining room under the dining room, the basement room under the Hall was probably a storage area for wines and other goods sensitive to light.

The two-story center block is projected sixteen inches, the effective thickness of the masonry walls, beyond the face of the facade walls of the single-story connecting wings. Such a projection articulates the temple form Tuscan portico that marks the major entrance to the house. The one story Tuscan portico has four columns across the front, with no corresponding pilasters against the wall. The portico is treated with a rather simple entablature that is presently crowned by a cast-iron ballustrade. Its flat roof serves as

the terrace off the front upper bedroom. The moldings that comprise the entablature of the portico are somewhat elementary and are not quite up to rigid academic standards. However, the overall proportions, especially of the impeccable columns, are superb (see Plate 8). The cornice of the entablature on the portico continues along the walls of the connecting wing, and is terminated by the barge board at the side gables. As regards the present cast-iron ballustrade, one not customary in this style, it was probably used to replace a rotted wood Chippendale ballustrade. The white Chippendale ballustrade was a favorite application in this period.

The roofs of both the two-story center block and the single-story connecting wings are simple gable. However, only the front gable is treated formally with a pediment, complementing the formal composition of the templar front portico. The remaining gables, at the ends of the two side wings and the center block, are treated without any pediment. The gables at the ends of the two connecting wings are crowned with a vernacular barge board. (see Plate 7). However, the gable at the rear of the center block, because of its chimney, encased within the wall and flanked on either side with two small attic windows, is reminiscent of the Georgian style (see Plates 9 & 10). Instead of the customary raking cornice the same barge boards that are used on the gables of the connecting wings are applied here, though terminating in

appropriately Georgian fashion upon reaching the stack at the crown of the gable. The two other chimneys, located on both sides of the center block and centered on the connecting wings, are applied here in a distinct vernacular manner to the outside of the wall (see Plate 7).

The native red brick walls, some sixteen and one-half inches in thickness, are laid in flemish bond and utilize a strikingly simple quarter-round shelf waterline molding. However, it should be noted that the brickwork is common bond below the waterline molding.

A cellar hut, an enclosed access into the cellar, is attached to the west wing of house (see Plate 11). Initially open at the front, with only one door through the wall of the wing, the cellar hut was fitted with a double door approximately twenty years ago in order to provide a temperature lock.¹¹ Two other cellar huts were attached to the house, but have been removed. Double-hung wood storm shutters once flanked all the windows, though a number have been removed at this time.

The interior of the house, reveals a handsome, well-proportioned spatial composition and detail. The windows and doors are uniformly treated with a simplified Georgian architrave that consists of an ogee backband, a double-stepped plate, and bead molding which turns the corner. It should be noted that the second, smaller cyma has been omitted. As was

customary, the chair rails served also as the window sills. There is a difference in the chair-rail moldings both in the Hall and in the Library which corresponds to the treatment of the mantle pieces. The chair-rail moldings on the walls with the fireplaces utilize comparable simple Greek moldings, while the chair-rails on the other walls implement an earlier Georgian variant. The same is true of the bases. At the same time, it should be noted that the general silhouettes and proportions of the two chair rails are similar, and the difference in derivation is only slightly evident to the eye.

The doors all employ flat panels that are recessed to the center of the sash with well-proportioned ogee moldings symmetrically on both sides of the door (see Plate 29). The doors from the Hall into the Library and Sitting Room, respectively, employ deep panel casings that are the width of the sixteen inch masonry wall and whose panels are treated identically to those which appear on the doors. The windows are double-hung, nine over nine lights, with broad wood sills and deep panel casings. The ceiling is only a few inches above the top of the window architrave. There is a small architrave-like molding on the walls, about one inch from the ceiling, which serves as a picture molding. In the Hall, there is an elegant Federal plaster molding pattern traced around the periphery of the ceiling, with a rosette in the center. In the remaining rooms, the ceiling is joined to the walls by an architrave-like molding. The cast-iron fireplace facings, with

their simple geometric designs, are set in wood mantle pieces with simplified Greek colonial entablatures. In the Hall, the entire fireplace, including the mantle piece, has been painted black, contrary to customary treatment. The heavy monolithic visual impression detracts from the delicate balance in the interrelationship of its component parts (see Plates 13 & 14). The wall and ceiling surfaces are entirely of plaster. Uniform width pine flooring is used throughout.

The house is well situated to take excellent advantage of the moderate slope of the grounds. The architectural significance of Oak Lawn is further enhanced by its site -- not only by the size of the lot and especially the placement and orientation of the buildings upon it, but also the relationship of the property to its surroundings.

Originally, there were a number of outbuildings on the property to service the estate¹² (see Plate 1). Only the simple but attractive one-room brick building to the rear of the house remains (see Plate 17). Initially, the kitchen was contained in an outbuilding. However, at the turn of the century, the kitchen was dismantled and its materials, the same which had been used to construct the house, were used to construct the kitchen that is presently attached to the rear; of the center block, behind the dining room (see Plate 9). During the first decades of this century, an open wood porch behind the west wing of the house was enclosed, also in wood, and a bathroom provided. Access to this was provided by converting the north window in the old parlor into a door.¹³

Subsequently, this wood addition was continued around along the length of the west side of the center block, terminating flush with the north wall of the kitchen (see Plate 10).

However, this wood addition was integrated neither to the fabric nor to the intrinsic design of the house, as was, for example, the added kitchen.

RESTORATION

RESTORATION

Oak Lawn illustrates an important stage in the architectural development of Virginia. This value, discussed in preceding sections of this report, is compounded by the rarity and age of the house, which is one of the few surviving examples of this style. In it are incorporated the principles and qualities of design that reflect thoughtful, skillful, and sensitive conception and execution. Fortunately, these qualities are clearly evident in the original fabric of the house which remains preserved to the present day. All this recommends strongly that concerted efforts be initiated to ensure the preservation of Oak Lawn.

Because the use to which any restored building is put should be as compatible as possible with the intention of the original designer and builder, the house at Oak Lawn will doubtless best be preserved if it continues in use as a residence. Fortunately, Oak Lawn is in the hands of an old Virginia family that ^{has} owned the estate for five generations and, more important, one which keenly appreciates the circumstances by which Oak Lawn has derived its significance for the present age and for the future as exemplifying a particular period in the historical and architectural development of Virginia. For this reason, it would be as desirable as it would be appropriate that the Fife family

continue ownership of Oak Lawn and that it be encouraged to continue to maintain it in the character, quality, and spirit of its time.

At the same time, the age and condition of the house is such that it requires a concerted restoration that will once again revive the house to a level commensurate with its inherent high quality of architectural expression.

For this reason, it is essential that a comprehensive plan be developed for implementing an appropriate program of restoration and preservation that will revive the inherent qualities of the house. The following items are suggested to define the scope of such a plan:

Because the present area of the site is already considerably less than that on which the house and its operations were initially contained, caution must be exercised against any further reduction in the present area of the property. Any such alteration of the area of the property is likely to alter appreciably the quality of the environment for which the house at Oak Lawn was expressly designed and might thereby render it out of character with its setting.

The existing masonry structure should be stabilized to prevent further change or deterioration. All the brickwork should be carefully repointed. The window shutters should be repaired or replaced on all windows. All architectural trim

and woodwork should be checked for any deterioration and carefully replaced by members with a matching profile. The old coats of paint should be removed, and new coats of paint applied to restore their crisp profile. Hardware should similarly be checked for durability and repaired or suitably replaced as necessary.

It is recommended also that the appearance of the house be restored as nearly as possible to its initial character. First, the wooden addition, on brick piers, which is located at the southwest corner of the house should be removed. This addition is not generally well-coordinated to the design of the building and detracts significantly from the over-all visual effect. If the space and facilities currently provided by this addition are necessary to the continued use of the house, their accomodation should be designed in a manner that would make the addition as compatible with the fabric and inherent character of the design as it would be functional. The kitchen that has been added to the rear of the house, while it is not to be considered an ideal application, is nevertheless one which is significantly more in keeping with the character of the house.

Despite this wooden addition, the house at Oak Lawn is fortunate in having undergone no major alterations, additions,

or changes that would have drastically, perhaps permanently, changed its initial design. Other modifications that have been noted are minor; their reparation should therefore present no appreciable difficulties. The first concerns the existing cast-iron ballustrade of the terrace on top of the portico. This ballustrade should be removed and be replaced by a wood Chippendale ballustrade of the type employed in numerous comparable applications in buildings of the same general period and style. Rather than having only one center post in the front balluster, there should be two, each located directly above the interior columns of the portico below. The second item on the exterior that requires attention is the careful reworking of the drains off the terrace on top of the portico so that they will no longer alter the impeccable silhouette of the two exterior columns of the portico. Consideration ought to be given to the eventual replacement of the metal roofing by shingles that will reflect the original treatment of the house.

The interior of the house must be restored carefully. Due to the advanced state of deterioration of the plaster ceiling in the Hall, it is recommended that the room be replastered by a highly competent craftsman. No other treatment

can restore the foundation contact of the plaster to the lath behind it. However, care must be taken to produce accurate profiles of the handsome ceiling moldings in order that they be duplicated in the restoration. All piping and other mechanical equipment should be reworked as necessary in a manner that will not detract from the restored appearance of the rooms. Where any trim and moldings are to be replaced, care must be exercised to make certain that they are replaced with members of the same profile. It is recommended also that no moldings be updated unless there simply is no other reasonable recourse, for these moldings are part of the irreplaceable documentation provided by this house. All woodwork, including mantles, should be painted white. Particular note should be made of the mantle in the Hall, presently painted entirely in black. While a flat black is appropriate for the cast-iron face plate, the black color of the mantle detracts from the effectiveness of its decorative elements and is not a color that is appropriate to this period. Pastel colors may be used for walls and may be selected from among those colors which were then in use -- and are still employed in accurate restorations today. The ceilings should be white and the floors stained a dark tone and waxed.

Regarding the grounds, it is ever so strongly recommended that all of the magnificent trees be retained, for they

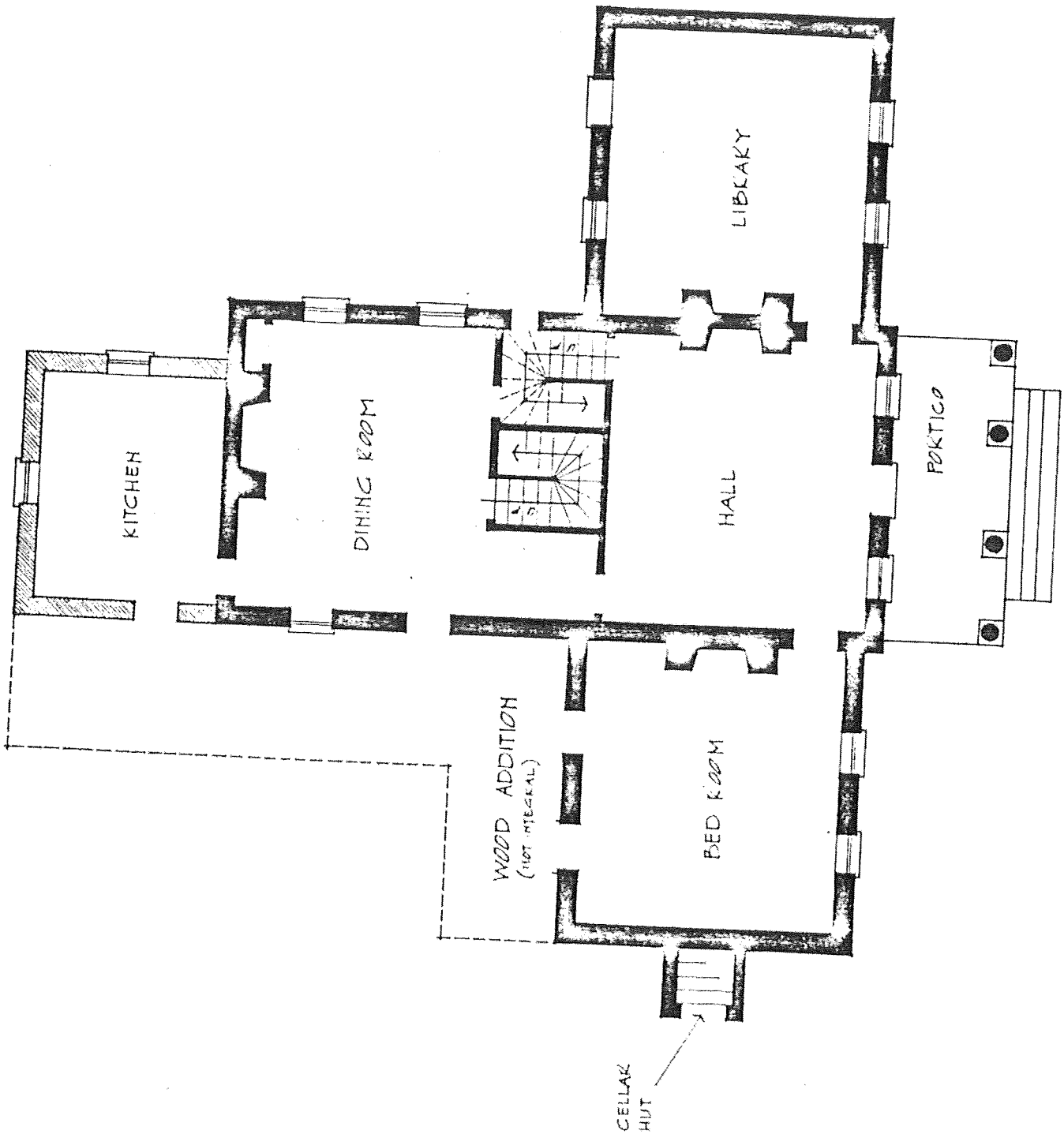
accentuate the scale, texture, and beauty of the natural environment within which the house is situated. Existing foundation shrubbery should be pruned and additional planting should be introduced; both should be combined in a single landscape which will complement the visual stature of the house. Consideration should also be given to the planting of appropriate foundation shrubbery along Cherry Avenue and the road that leads to Buford School, as well as along Ninth Street. Moreover, such a development should incorporate an appropriate treatment which will accentuate the entrance into the drive toward the house which, because of its excellent approach, must be preserved. The minimal proper maintenance of the grounds and the addition of other suitable landscaping and gardens would certainly enhance the appearance of the house.

The white brick building behind the house should be preserved not only because it is the sole surviving out-building, but because it is a handsome replica of such facilities.

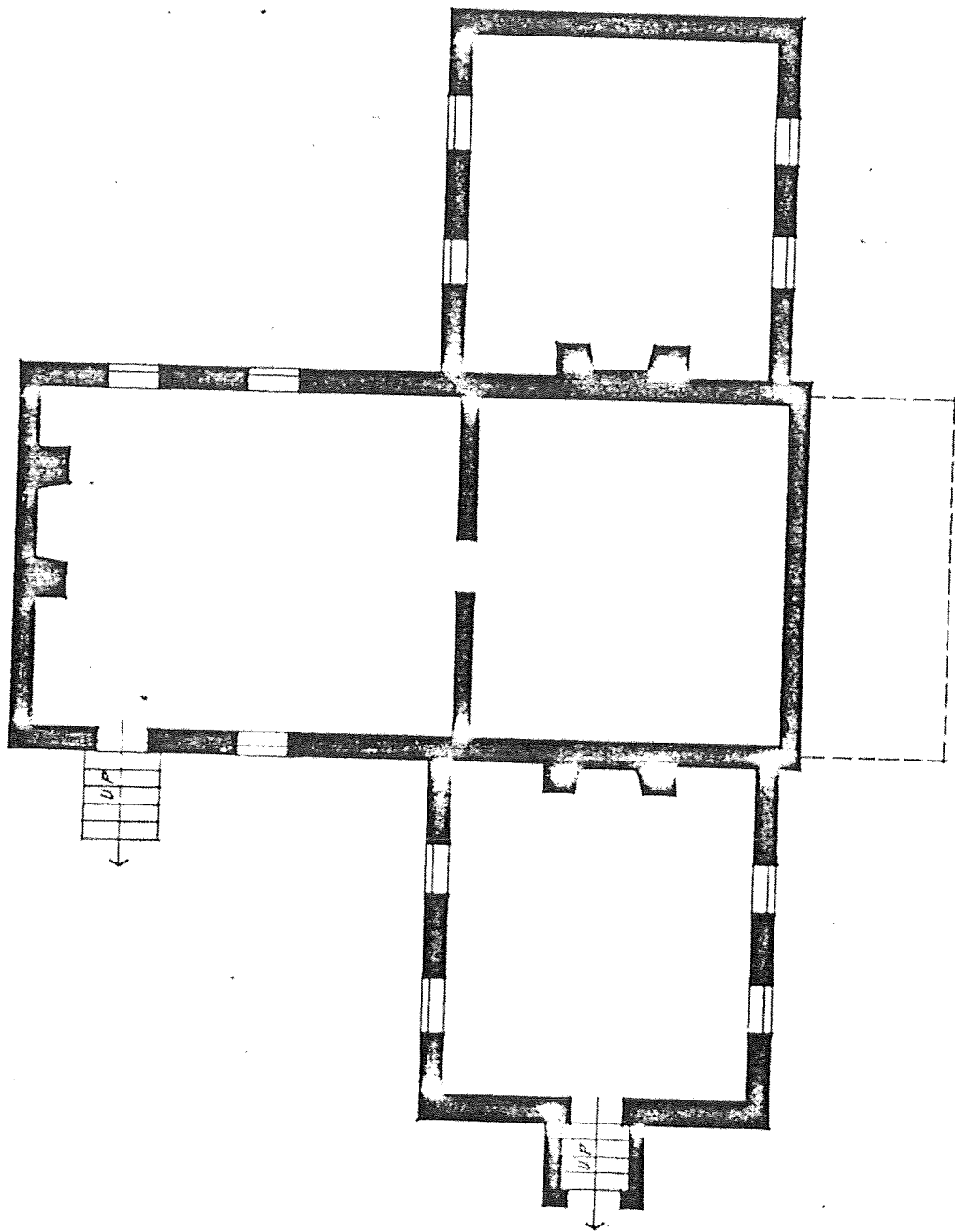
Mention should be made of the advisability of developing a comprehensive maintenance program, whose periodic application will greatly minimize the effort and expenditure required for appropriate upkeep of the house by checking any deterioration before it becomes serious and therefore assure a sound perpetuation of Oak Lawn.

Finally, it is respectfully recommended that, if at any time the Fife family decides, for any reason, to relinquish

ownership of Oak Lawn, it give serious consideration to conveying the property to those parties or foundations which can and will provide for the continued maintenance of the estate. Or, it may give serious consideration to developing a variety of suitable leasing arrangements which can provide for the use and exhibition of buildings by private individuals. Such arrangements can insure the preservation of the property in perpetuity and provide appropriate financial remuneration, while serving the dual purpose of public education and private accomodation.

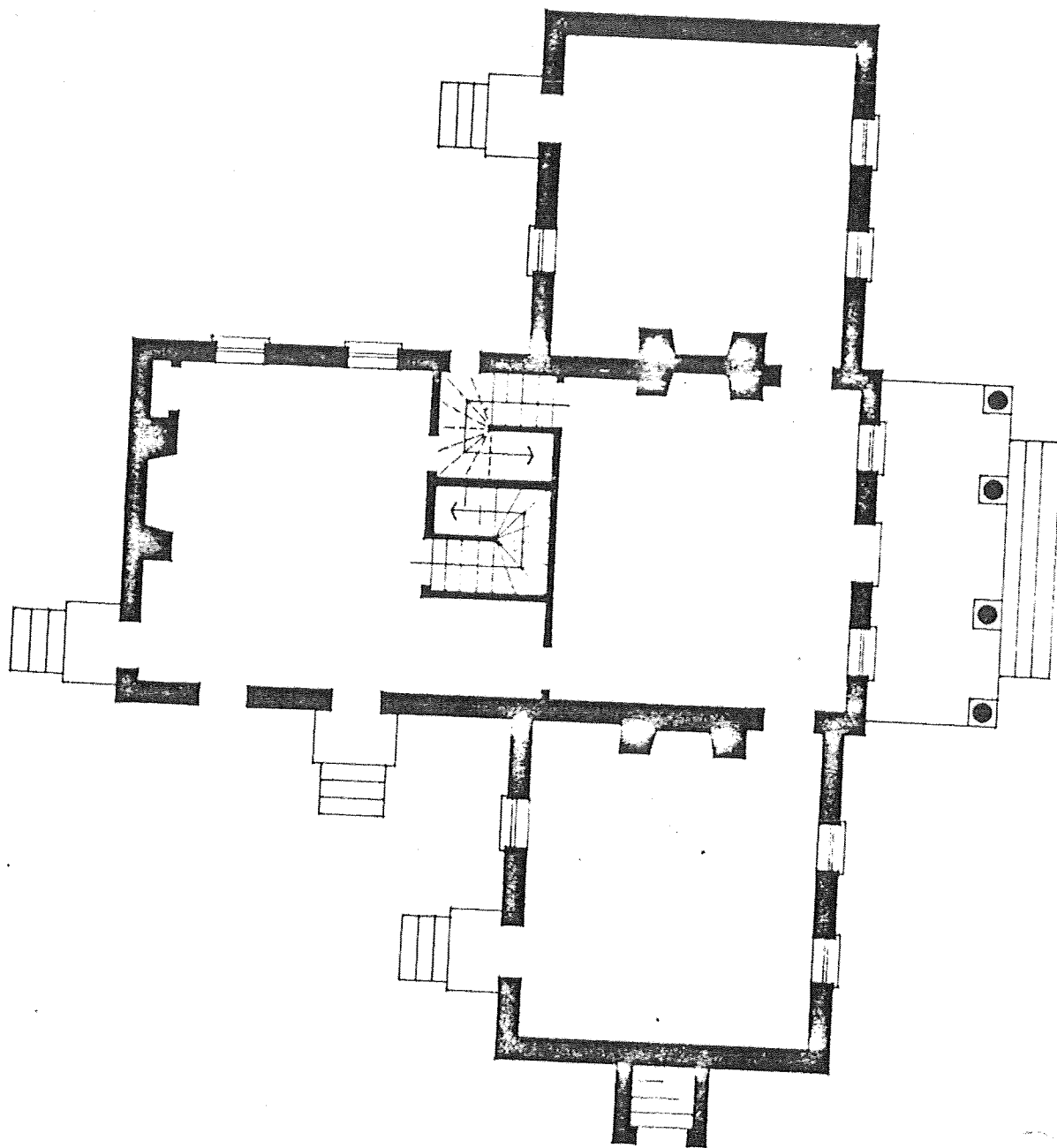


FIRST FLOOR (AS IS)

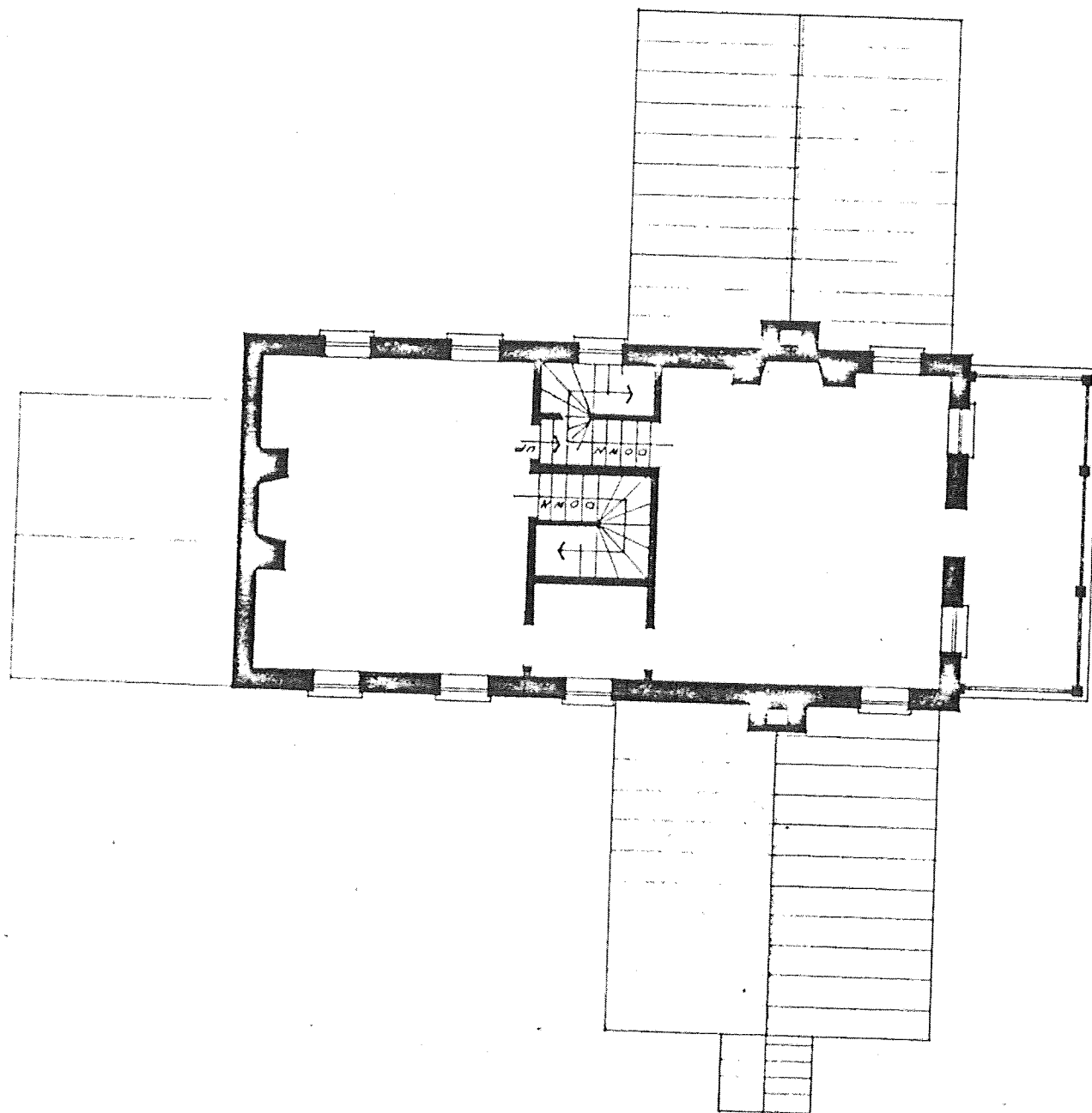


CELLAR

PLATE 3

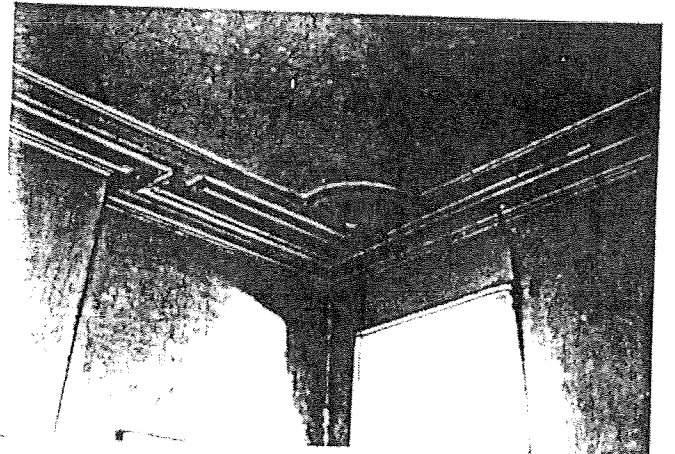
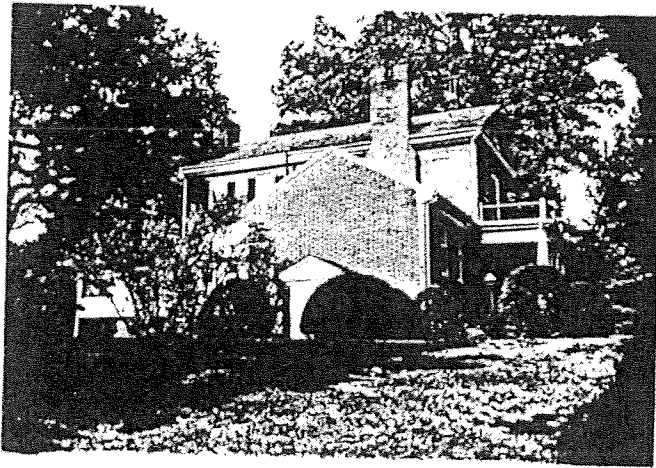


FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR

PLATE 5



"Oak Lawn"

Material collected by Anne Freudenberg

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I. Legal Background of Property

The original "Oak Lawn" tract extended approximately from Ridge Street along the south of West Main Street to Frys Spring. It was inherited by Henry West Alberty (alias Henry Chiles) from his father Micajah Chiles, was sold in 1815 to Jesse Winston Garth who in turn sold the 394 acres to Col. Nimrod Bramham in 1818. In 1847, the Reverend James Fife purchased it and the house which Bramham had built on the property from Bramham's son-in-law (William A. Bibb) for \$6000.

The property was originally called "Oak Grove" and there may at one time have been a house by this name on the property. But tax records at the Virginia State Library show that in 1822 Nimrod Bramham added a new building valued at \$3000. This was undoubtedly the brick house now known as "Oak Lawn."

II. Nimrod Bramham - The Builder

Nimrod Bramham appears in local history when he operated a store on the road over Turkey Sag near where it joined the Barboursville road. He was active in county affairs succeeding William Wirt as lieutenant in the Militia in 1800 and Francis Walker as colonel of the Eighty-Eighth Regiment in 1806. He was appointed a magistrate in 1801 and represented the County in the Legislature from 1811 to 1813.

He was also interested in religious affairs becoming one of the first trustees of the Charlottesville Baptist Church. After he moved to Charlottesville, he ran a business, first known as Bramham and Jones and afterwards as Bramham and Bibb. This store was located on the west side of Court Square.

Col. Bramham's name appears in numerous old papers and documents. He was treasurer of the Albemarle Agricultural Society and a director of the Rivanna Company in which capacity he was associated with Thomas Jefferson. He died at "Oak Lawn" in 1845 and is buried, along with other Bramhams and Bibbs, in the "old graveyard" there.

III. James Fife

James Fife was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1794. Along with his two brothers he inherited property in Middlesex County, Virginia from Dr. Robert Spratt. He came to Virginia at 18 in 1812, residing for some time in Goochland County on a plantation the site of which is still officially known as Fife, Virginia. There he married Elizabeth Miller, had one son, and became a Baptist minister. Thereafter he was generally called "Elder" Fife.

Following his first wife's death he moved to Charlottesville where he purchased "Rock Hill" at the end of Park Street in 1839, and in 1847 he bought "Oak Lawn" from the Bramham estate. His second wife was Margaret

Whitler Herndon of Spotsylvania County by whom he had two children (Mary Catherine and Robert Herndon Fife).

He travelled extensively in his work for the Baptist Church, and in 1823 with two other ministers organized the Baptist General Convention. At the Semi-Centennial of that organization in 1873 he was the only survivor of the founders to attend and was given an ovation by the 1700 members. As representative of The Religious Herald he obtained over 1000 subscribers to that journal.

James Fife was equally a business man and a farmer. He owned real estate in Richmond and Charlottesville (including the block now occupied by Keller and George and C.H. Williams). As a farmer he was interested in all of the latest developments in agricultural science, particularly the benefits of the use of guano fertilizer. In 1851 he wrote to a friend, "I am glad you are pleased with your farm for while farming is not profitable yet if it be enjoyed it is more than wealth for that is the reverse of enjoyment. I have such a propensity to improving worn out land that I believe if it were not profitable I would still pursue it. To see wheat growing finely where nothing would grow before excites me to take a walk that way even in bad weather and so of everything else all the season round."

His first son operated a bookstore, known as Wertenbaker and Fife in Charlottesville during the 1950's and was engaged in many cultural affairs in the town.

Elder Fife died at the age of 83 in 1876. The newspaper reported that his funeral "took place at his residence on Saturday morning, and was attended by a large concourse of people. The services were simple and affecting, being conducted by Professor N[oa]h K. Davis of the University." He was buried in the "new" graveyard at "Oak Lawn."

IV. Robert Herndon Fife

Robert Herndon Fife, or "Herndon" as he was called, inherited "Oak Lawn" from his father. He was born in 1843, entered local academies and Alleghany College, and entered the University of Virginia in March 1862. Almost immediately afterwards he joined the Confederate States Army (Charlottesville Artillery-Carrington's Battery, Cutshaw's Battalion, 2nd Jackson's Corps) with the rank of First Corporal. He served until the surrender in 1865, taking part in many important engagements. Following Appomattox he walked the distance home from that place with Captain Micajah Woods.

Two years after the War he married Sarah Ann Graves Strickler of "Locust Hill," Madison County. They had met while she was a student at the Albemarle Female Institute. Writing in her diary in November 1867, the bride expressed pleasure with "Oaklawn":

"I must tell you about my new home--it is very sweet, the trees around it are oak & it reminds me of an English residence. The house was built at the same time with the University....It is halfway between Charlottesville & the University--half mile from each. Herndon's father is a Scotchman & has the full accent; he is a minister & a man of very fine sense & instruction. Mrs. Fife is perfectly amiable & gentle, & so kind--she is devoted to

her two children; always cheerful, always the same, intelligent & cultivated."

As his family grew, Herndon Fife had to find more profitable means of support than farming. In 1882-1883 he served as Bursar of the University of Virginia and in 1883 was appointed Postmaster of the University. Later he became superintendent of transportation for the Charlottesville-Albemarle Railway. Meanwhile over the years following the War parts of the property had been developed into building lots (in order to pay the taxes on the remaining property), and the section known as "Fifeville" came into being.

Like his father Herndon was active in the Baptist Church. For thirty years he was superintendent of the Sunday School of the First Baptist Church.

He died in 1919 and his wife's death occurred less than a year later. They left seven children.

V. Children of Robert Herndon Fife and Sarah A.G. Strickler

1. Mary ("Daisy") Graves Fife m. 1. Dr. Charles W. Rinehart
2. Col. Francis Morgan
[Secretary to Judge R.T.W. Duke. Secretary of
Retail Merchants Association]
2. Robert Herndon Fife m. 1. Sarah Gildersleeve
2. Hildegard Wischert
[Chairman of Department of Germanic Languages, Columbia
University, N.Y.C. President of Modern Language
Association of America]

3. James Douglas Fife m. Katherine Ruth Reynolds.
[Colonel in Medical Corps, U.S.A. Acting Surgeon General,
U.S.A.]
4. Margaret Whitler Fife m. Judge William Crump Tucker of
Richmond.
5. William Ormond Fife m. 1. Sarah Garland Maupin
2. Mary V. Bailey
[Commonwealth's Attorney for Albemarle. Partner in firm
of Paxson & Fife]
6. Ella Katherine Fife m. Richard Freudenberg.
[Nurse in Base Hospital 41, World War I. Etc.]
7. Shelton Stricker Fife m. Mildred Irving Hill.
[City Manager of Charlottesville]

VI. Shelton Strickler Fife

Shelton Strickler Fife returned with his wife (Mildred Irving Hill of Richmond) to live at "Oak Lawn" in 1921 until his death in 1937. Mrs. Fife is the present owner and occupant of the property. Her two sons (1. Shelton Douglas Fife m. Gail Good and 2. Francis Harrison Fife m. Virginia Byrd Hart) have six children. *2m. Nancy O'Brien*
Both Charlotte Mary org.

Five acres only remain with the house from the original tract, the remainder having been taken by the City several years ago for the site of Buford Junior High School.