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"I CAN LIVE NO LONGER HERE"

ELIZABETH WIRT'S DECISION TO BUY A NEW HOUSE

by

Jill Haley

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

Summer 1995

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"I CAN LIVE NO LONGER HERE"

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by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Researching and writing are never solitary pursuits, and I am indebted to many people for their time, assistance, and patience. Mr. A. R. Bowles, III, generously took a Sunday morning out of his schedule to take me through his Richmond house and shared his information on the Wirt family. Mary Alice Cicerell at the Winterthur Library filled my requests for interlibrary loans, making this long-distance thesis topic possible. Damie Stillman of the Art History Department of the University of Delaware provided me with a last-minute photograph. Barbara Batson and the staff at The Valentine Museum in Richmond and the staff at the Virginia State Library and Archives furnished me with invaluable materials on nineteenth-century Virginia.

I must extend special thanks to several people for their help in seeing this project to its conclusion. Neville Thompson at the Winterthur Library read my manuscript, and her comments and suggestions enabled me to develop Elizabeth and William's personalities more fully. My brother, Patrick Haley, spent countless hours translating cryptic plans and sketches into clean computer-aided designs. My advisor, Professor Bernard Herman, has been a
source of encouragement throughout my two years in the Winterthur Program. His knowledge, insight, and guidance have helped me to grow as a scholar, and I owe the completion of this work to his support.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to Sean, Malcolm, and Sadie for their moral support.
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ABSTRACT

On a cold January evening in 1816 Elizabeth Wirt wrote a letter to her husband William from their Richmond home insisting they buy a new house, and her story provides an example of how an individual used architecture to express personal and cultural values. In a series of letters to William, Elizabeth voiced her discontent with the inconveniences in their present house and the benefits of the new one. By organizing her discussions about the two houses into the categories of communication and accommodation (based upon her own frequent use of these terms), this thesis explores Elizabeth's needs and expectations in housing.

The first section discusses houses and the landscapes they inhabit as communicators of information and examines houses and neighborhoods as public commodities to be read and visually consumed by the community. This thesis argues that Elizabeth recognized the ability of the style and location of a house to communicate information about the owner's status. By selling their pre-Revolutionary Era house near a commercial area and buying a more fashionable federal townhouse in a predominantly residential area populated by merchants, she attempted to define her family's
rank within Richmond society and strengthen their social alliances.

The second section explores houses as accommodations. Here the discussion turns to the private life of the household, examining Elizabeth's concerns over separating the activities of her children, slaves, and husband in order to provide her family with comfortable and convenient living spaces. To aid in this separation she selected a new house with a central passage plan which could facilitate movement more efficiently than the plan of the old house. In addition, this new house contained more interior space and outbuildings.

This thesis underscores the complexities in decision-making behind an action as ordinary as selecting a new house. Elizabeth Wirt's decision to buy a new house provides an understanding of the role women played in determining their family's housing, and she demonstrates the power of women to make such architectural choices.
"I CAN LIVE NO LONGER HERE"

ELIZABETH WIRT'S DECISION TO BUY A NEW HOUSE

Richmond Jan 7th 1816 Sunday night

My Beloved Husband,

I had crouched myself up in my easy chair determined to take a nap if possible, for my head ached and little master being asleep, and the room quiet, I thought such a thing might be. But I got to thinking upon a subject that was discussed here today, until I became so anxious upon it, that I could rest no longer, but determined to write to you immediately. I have experienced so much inconvenience in this house--and am so fixed in the opinion that I ought to have a better one...my heart is set upon buying the one offered for sale by the Marx's--(the house built by Hancock). I tell you I can live no longer here."

Elizabeth Wirt needed a new house--and she needed one soon. Her present one, purchased in 1809, no longer comfortably accommodated her household which had grown to include her husband William, eight children (all under the age of thirteen), at least eight slaves, and herself. This overcrowding caused noise, disorder, and a lack of privacy, contributing to her headache and fatigue and compounding her

1 Elizabeth Wirt to William Wirt, January 7, 1816. The Wirt's correspondence is located at the Maryland Historical Society and is available on microfilm.
domestic worries. Her concerns with the inconveniences in her Virginia house were not new; upon her recommendation the house had been remodelled and enlarged in 1812. Four years later, however, the house once again could not meet the family's needs, and Elizabeth decided to find one that could.

In examining Elizabeth's decision to buy a new house, several questions emerge: Why did she want a new house? Why did she choose one located only three blocks from her present one? And more broadly, what issues came into play as individuals, particularly women, selected a new house? Elizabeth did not remain silent on these questions, and through her lengthy and detailed correspondence with her husband, she cited numerous reasons for buying a new house. However, after examining the old

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and new houses themselves, it becomes apparent that Elizabeth did not address all her motivations. Through two sets of values that she introduces in her correspondence, "communication" and "accommodation," the following study examines Elizabeth Wirt's articulated arguments for changing houses and through an examination of the old and new houses hypothesizes about her unspoken ones.

Communication investigates the public character of landscapes and the power of houses and their neighborhoods to impart information about their occupants. The style and location of Elizabeth's present house relayed inaccurate data about her family's social status and kinship alliances, and she sought a new home that better reflected them. She rejected her eighteenth-century house and its rural, plantation analogues in favor of a new-style, federal townhouse similar to ones her father and peers owned. She also examined the location of her house, finding its proximity to commercial activity in conflict with her definition of genteel surroundings. The new house and its location in a completely residential area provided her family with quieter surroundings and placed them among similarly-ranked citizens.

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4In her study of the Cabell family's choice of Palladian style architecture in Piedmont Virginia in the early nineteenth century, Marlene Elizabeth Heck demonstrates how architectural style was utilized to confirm social standing. Marlene Elizabeth Heck, "Palladian Architecture and Social Change in Post-Revolutionary Virginia" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1988).
Accommodation, on the other hand, looks at houses in terms of human and spacial interaction. Here the discussion turns inward to the private life of the household and examines Elizabeth's concerns over separating household activities—those of the children, slaves, and William—in order to provide her family with comfortable and convenient living spaces. To aid in separating these functions, she selected a house with a central passage plan which could facilitate movement more efficiently than the plan of her old house. In addition, the new house contained a larger interior space and more outbuildings.

The interpretation of Elizabeth Wirt's decision to change houses requires an examination of the relationship between Elizabeth and William, as well as a basic understanding of the social and economic positions of the family. The Wirts were married on September 7, 1802. They married soon after William was elected by the Virginia State Legislature to the post of Chancellor. Before his election William served as the clerk of the Virginia House of Delegates, and according to a friend of the family, Elizabeth's father, Robert Gamble, hesitated to approve the marriage. Only upon William's promotion did Robert support the union.5

5 John Kennedy, a friend of the Wirt family, wrote a two-volume biography on William, using conversations with the family and letters kept by them. Most of the correspondence used by Kennedy is now part of the Maryland Historical Society's collection of the William Wirt Papers. John P. Kennedy, Memoirs of the Life of William Wirt.
In 1803 William resigned from the Chancellorship, finding the $1,500 yearly income insufficient to support the lifestyle his family enjoyed. He turned to a private law practice and engaged in literary pursuits during his spare time. Friends of the Wirts recognized Elizabeth's contributions to William's professional success during the years of their marriage. Margaret Bayard Smith, a neighbor and close friend of the family during their residence in Washington, D.C., during the 1820s, wrote of Elizabeth in a letter, "She...has made Mr. Wirt the useful and respectable character he now is" (William held the position of Attorney General of the United States at that time, having been appointed in March of 1816). Smith goes on to say that William: "was an almost lost and ruined man, both in morals and fortune, when he married the excellent wife, whose prudence and affection snatched him from the dangers that surrounded him and has since been his guard and support." Another friend seconded Smith's observation:

---

William to Dabney Carr, February 13, 1803.

William's writings include The Letters of the British Spy (1803), The Rainbow (1805), The Old Bachelor (1811), and perhaps his most famous volume, Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry (1817).

Hunt, 317.

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"All he is now, he owes to his wife."\textsuperscript{10} Smith credited Elizabeth qualities—her "common sense," capacity as a "great manager and economist," and devotion to her husband and children—as the force behind the family's respectability. In her opinion no other family superseded the Wirts in this quality: "The domestic habits, style of living, and character of this family, come nearer to my beau-ideal, than that of any other I know."\textsuperscript{11}

The Wirts enjoyed a high-rank among the members of Richmond's society. They owed their elevated status to changes in the social and economic structures which redefined elite membership in the period following the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{12} Many professional men like William enjoyed financial success in the emerging professions and seized the opportunity to join the ranks of the new Southern elite. Formerly, these ranks were dominated by planter aristocrats and defined by eighteenth-century notions of hierarchy based on land ownership, lineage, and knowledge.

\textsuperscript{10}Hunt, 317.

\textsuperscript{11}Hunt, 244. Smith used the Wirt family as her model for the Seymour family in her novel \textit{A Winter in Washington, or Memoirs of the Seymour Family}.

of polite culture.\textsuperscript{13} In the face of older definitions of
gentility, newly gentrified families such as the Wirts were
compelled to promote their position and utilized material
displays of wealth to do so.\textsuperscript{14}

In terms of personal property, the Wirts owned
expensive, high-status goods. The 1815 Richmond personal
property tax, which assessed rates based upon the ownership
of sixty-six household items, listed the Wirt's tax as
$40.66 3/4 (appendix B).\textsuperscript{15} Only twenty-seven of the 1,493
Richmonders on the roll owned more goods and paid a higher
rate, placing the Wirts in the top two percent of taxpayers.
The average assessment was a only fraction of the Wirt's-
-$6.42. The major portion of the Wirt's assessment derived
from their ownership of mahogany furniture, silver plate,
and pictures. They owned no "house in the country exceeding
$500," and, according to Richmond land records, little real
estate in the city. That they chose to invest in
presentation goods rather than appreciable land demonstrates
the importance they placed in creating and maintaining

\textsuperscript{13}Wood, Section i.

\textsuperscript{14}Carson, 12; Richard L. Bushman, The Refinement of
America, Persons, Houses, Cities, (New York: Vintage Books,
1993), 181-82. Neither William, the son of a German
immigrant tavern keeper, nor Elizabeth, the daughter of a
Richmond merchant, could claim gentility based upon these
eighteenth-century standards.

\textsuperscript{15}Richmond Personal Property Book, 1815. For additional
information on the 1815 tax see Ann Morgan Smart, "The
Urban/Rural Dichotomy of Status Consumption: Tidewater
Virginia, 1815" (M.A. Thesis, The College of William and
Mary, 1986).
status. Elite status, however was not limited to display; it also required a commitment to a pattern of living which recognized the primacy of family intimacy and leisure activities.\textsuperscript{16} Elizabeth's decision to buy a new house reflects the elite's concepts of the outward and inward refinement by communicating rank through style and location and by accommodating household functions through spatial arrangements.

Having given an introduction to the Wirt family and its circumstances, it is time to turn to the houses themselves.\textsuperscript{17} The old house, located at the corner of G (today Grace) and Sixth streets, embodied a pre-Revolutionary building style, built possibly between 1765 and 1775, but no later than 1796 when it was described in a Mutual Assurance Policy (figs. 1, 2).\textsuperscript{18} Insurance policies listed the house as a wooden structure, covered by a wooden roof. It consisted of a main two-story body, measuring 21 by 32 feet, flanked by a pair of one-and-a-half-story, 32 by 18 feet wings that connected two 20 by 12 feet "covered ways" to the main structure. A two-story portico extended across the front of the central structure, and a 13 1/2 by 8 foot porch extended off the front of each of the two

\textsuperscript{16}Bushman, 256-57.

\textsuperscript{17}For further information on the Wirts, see Appendix A.

\textsuperscript{18}Between 1796 and 1816 four insurance policies were taken out on the house by its owners. Mutual Assurance Society Policies #71, 1796; #906, 1808; #987, 1810; #1721, 1815.
wings. The house measured an imposing 125 feet along the street line, occupying nearly 85 percent of the 148 foot length of the property.\(^{19}\)

The particular plan of this house, characterized by a central block connected to smaller units, represents an American interpretation of an English adaptation of Palladio.\(^{20}\) Architectural historians credit Englishman Robert Morris's 1750 volume *Rural Architecture* (reprinted in 1755 as *Select Architecture*) as the source for this plan in tidewater Virginia (fig. 3).\(^{21}\) Morris's volume presented a collection of plans and elevations for English country houses and villas, marking a departure from standard architectural books which illustrated monumental, stately mansions appropriate only within English or Continental contexts. The reduced scale of Morris's structures appealed

\(^{19}\) Mutual Assurance Policies #71, 1796; #906, 1808; #987, 1810; #1721, 1815. The house disappeared from this location sometime between 1851 and 1856. Samuel Mordecai states that "it has of late years changed its location, and retired to one of the suburbs." Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days: Being a Reminiscences of an Old Citizen* (Richmond, VA: G. M. West, 1856), 79.


to Virginia planters, who, wealthy though they were, desired more modestly proportioned designs for colonial living.\textsuperscript{22}

The Palladian-inspired plan advanced by Morris and embodied in Elizabeth's old house relates to a series of Virginia plantation houses built during the third quarter of the eighteenth-century.\textsuperscript{23} Located in Jefferson County, West Virginia, Harewood represents the earliest example, dating to as early as 1756.\textsuperscript{24} However, the majority of this select group of Virginia houses—which includes Chatham in Stafford County, Brandon in Prince George County, Belle Isle in Lancaster County, Laneville in King William County, the Randolph-Semple House in Williamsburg, and the early Monticello in Albemarle County—appeared between 1760 and 1775 (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{25} All share the characteristics of a central body flanked by smaller segments, with Belle Isle, Laneville, the Randolph-Semple House, and the early Monticello consisting of three sections (main body and two hyphens), and Harewood, Chatham, and the old Wirt House containing five (main body joined to two wings by two hyphens). Brandon represents the largest and most complex massing of this group; it comprises seven sections.

\textsuperscript{22}Waterman, 341.

\textsuperscript{23}These houses appear throughout the Middle Atlantic and South. See Pierson and Waterman for individual descriptions.

\textsuperscript{24}Waterman, 325-26.

\textsuperscript{25}Waterman, Chapter 5; Pierson, 119-23, 292-23.
Battersea, a five part Palladian-inspired structure located near Petersburg in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, resembles the Wirt's house in shape and size and offers an idea of its possible appearance and floorplan (figs. 5, 6).

The Palladian-inspired plan of Elizabeth's old house presented her with three problems. First, although its origins rested with Palladio in sixteenth-century Italy, Morris's interpretation looked to English Palladian mansions of the early eighteenth-century, rendering his plan essentially an English type. During the Colonial period when these houses appeared, Virginia planters welcomed an association with English homes, and this affiliation most likely fueled the adoption of the plan. With the Revolution, however, Americans severed political ties with England and attempted to break cultural ones as well. Many rejected purely English associations in architecture and looked to the designs of classical antiquity and France for the buildings of the new American Republic.

The second problem Elizabeth encountered in the plan of her old house arose from its utilization for plantation or plantation-inspired country houses. However, neither Elizabeth nor William could claim eighteenth-century planter lineage. Their connections to this world were social and marital; Elizabeth's sister married William Cabell, member

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26 Pierson, 121.
27 Pierson, 210-11.
of an influential Virginia planter family and owner of a plantation in Buckingham County, and William enjoyed friendships with members of the planter-aristocracy such as Thomas Jefferson and George Gilmer.\(^{28}\) For the Wirts, owning a house with clear plantation affiliations magnified the fact that they were not members of this rank of Virginia society and obscured their position in the new elite.

The third problem Elizabeth found in the plan of her old house relates closely with the second; the plantation context assigned the Palladian-inspired plan as a rural form, out of place in the urban landscape of early nineteenth-century Richmond. In the 1760s, the approximate time of the construction of the house, Richmond existed as a small town encompassing one fifth of a square mile stretching east from Shockoe Creek (fig. 7).\(^{29}\) At that time the house was located outside the city, but in 1769 it lost its country situation when the half mile area around it was annexed.\(^{30}\) In 1780 the Virginia state capitol moved to Richmond, and the town center shifted west from the earliest settled areas to the Public Square, located only four blocks from the house. By 1817 the city had expanded to cover

\(^{28}\)William H. Cabell was elected governor of Virginia in 1805. William corresponded with Jefferson, married Gilmer's daughter Mildred, and lived at his father-in-law's plantation Pen Park until Mildred's death in 1799.

\(^{29}\)Mary Wingfield Scott, *Houses of Old Richmond* (Richmond, VA: The Valentine Museum, 1941), 29.

almost two and one half square miles and the population grown to over 14,000, and by 1820 Richmond ranked tenth among United States cities in size. In 1816 the Wirt's Palladian-inspired house, standing within this rapidly growing, highly urbanized city, must have seemed out of place.

The renunciation of purely English architectural influences and eighteenth-century rural plantation associations accounts for Elizabeth's dissatisfaction with her house. But one important question lingers—why did Elizabeth, certainly aware of the shift in architectural taste away from English styles as well as the urban character of Richmond, accept this house in 1809 when she and William bought it, then reject it in 1816? The arrival of professionally trained architects in Richmond might account for her change of opinion.

Three nationally recognized architects visited Richmond and designed buildings in that city during the early nineteenth century—Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Alexander Parris, and Robert Mills. English-born and trained

31 Smart, 19.

Benjamin Henry Latrobe made his mark on the public and private architecture of Richmond at the end of the eighteenth century. In addition to designing the Virginia State Penitentiary, located on the edge of the city near the James River, he also submitted plans for a new theater, as well as numerous designs for domestic structures, some of which were built, but none of which still stand.

One of Latrobe's homes, originally erected for Colonel John Harvie in 1798, was bought by Elizabeth's father Robert Gamble around 1800, and Elizabeth lived there with her parents until her marriage to William in September, 1802 (fig. 8). It embodied the new federal style in America, with its interplay of geometric forms such as circles, ovals, squares, and rectangles. The house sat upon a hill on the south side of B (today Byrd) Street between Third and Fourth streets, a location Latrobe described as a "delightful situation and...charming prospect."\(^{33}\) Compared with the smaller eighteenth-century houses nearby, it proved to be a powerful statement of Robert Gamble's success as a city merchant and demonstration of his family's commitment to fashionability.

Architectural Historians, 41 (October 1982), 202-11; Brownell, and Pierson.

Latrobe's original design for the house consisted of the familiar Palladian main block-hyphen-wing plan popular with Virginia planters before the Revolution and present in the Wirt's house. However, Latrobe's house was never built according to this design. According to Samuel Mordecai, a chronicler of early nineteenth-century Richmond, Colonel Harvie (the original owner) and Latrobe disagreed about the execution of the design and parted, leaving the house unfinished. The hyphens and wings were omitted, leaving the compact, two-story main block as the complete structure. Harvie's opposition most likely stemmed from the decrease in popularity of this plan in the years after the American Revolution, particularly in urban areas.

Two professionally trained American architects worked in Richmond a decade after Latrobe. Alexander Parris, a New England architect who had worked briefly for Charles Bulfinch, sojourned in Richmond around 1810. Strong evidence supports attributing the 1811-12 John Wickham House to his hand (fig. 9). John Wickham, an attorney and colleague of William Wirt, had this home built at the corner of K (today Clay) and Eleventh streets next to his old house, which he sold to Elizabeth's brother, Robert Gamble, Jr. The Wickham House represents one of the few remaining

34Edward C. Carter, 383.
35Zimmer and Scott, 208-08.
36For further information on the construction of the Wickham house see Zimmer and Scott.
early nineteenth-century houses in Richmond. In addition to the this house, Parris planned and superintended the building of the home of another prominent Richmonder, John Bell.

Robert Mills, another professional architect working in Richmond during the 1810s, trained with Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Thomas Jefferson. At the same time that Parris was designing the Wickham house, Mills was at work two blocks away on the Monumental Church, a structure which commemorated the tragic deaths of seventy-two people when the Richmond Theater burned on that spot in 1811. Mills also submitted a design for the City Hall in 1814, and by 1816 he was supervising its construction.

The presence of these professionally trained architects in Richmond affected the city's architectural development. Each had designed in many cities along the eastern seaboard, and they brought outside architectural ideas into Richmond and combined them with existing ones. This activity, when spread among several urban areas, helped to create a more homogeneous architecture than had existed

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37 The house, operated by The Valentine Museum, has been recently restored to the period of the Wickham's occupation and is open to the public.

38 Zimmer and Scott, 203. For an illustration of the Bell House see Scott, Houses of Old Richmond, 55.


40 Scott, Old Richmond Neighborhoods, 104.
in the eighteenth century. Within urban areas, these architects were patronized by prominent, wealthy citizens and state governments, simultaneously promoting their work and expanding their influence. As a result, Richmonders became increasingly interested in commissioning or possessing professionally designed, new-style homes.

The Wirt's purchase of the house in 1809 preceded the most intense period of work by Parris and Mills in Richmond. It was not until the height of professional architectural activity in the 1810s that Elizabeth began to question the fashionability of her house. And as the family's peers--John Wickham, John Bell, and the Monumental Church Congregation (to which the Wirt's belonged)--patronized the new architects, Elizabeth grew dissatisfied with her house. The house was unmistakable to Richmonders as an English-inspired design from before the Revolution and bore no relationship to the professionally-designed buildings that were appearing as the homes of the new elite.

Recognizing the inability of her home to accurately communicate her family's status within the new elite, Elizabeth looked for a more suitable house. When she wrote her letter to William demanding a new house, she had already chosen one, located only three blocks away on the corner of E (today Main) and Fifth streets (figs. 10, 11). Within the month the Wirts had concluded its purchase, and at the beginning of February they moved in. Having been completed in 1809, this house was much newer than their former one,
which probably dated to the 1760s or 1770s. Mutual Assurance Policies described the new house as a two-story brick structure, with a shingled roof and a kitchen wing (fig. 12). The main block measured 56 feet along the front and extended back (without kitchen wing) approximately 40 feet.\textsuperscript{41} 

In terms of style, the new E Street house embodied the federal style. According to architectural historian William H. Pierson, federal architects in America—men such as Latrobe, Parris, and Mills—sought a mode of building symbolic of the new Republic in two ways. First, they rejected purely English styles, looking to contemporary France and classical antiquity for additional inspiration.\textsuperscript{42} While classical architecture had influenced Continental and English building for centuries, the federal (or neoclassical) style attempted to generate a more literal translation by working directly from classical sources instead of relying upon previous interpretations. Second, American builders and patrons developed a national style by practicing cultural independence in the conscious, free choice and blending of classical elements such as geometric forms, Roman arches, and temple models.\textsuperscript{43} 

\textsuperscript{41}Mutual Assurance Society Policies #810, 1817; #4754, 1822. 


\textsuperscript{43}Pierson, 297.
Thomas Jefferson, though not a professionally trained architect like Latrobe, Parris, and Mills, had perhaps the most profound impact on American neoclassical architecture. Jefferson's Virginia State Capitol, begun in 1795 shortly after the capital moved to Richmond, represents the first American building to completely reject the English architectural tradition. Based on the Maison Carree in Nimes and designed in collaboration with Neoclassicist and French Academy member C. L. A. Clerisseau from 1795 to 1798, it imported both Roman and French architectural influences to Virginia. These new influences, combined with the older English ones, proved to be significant elements in the architecture of the new America, giving Americans an architectural expression free from exclusively English models.

The neoclassical character of the Wirt's new house can best be expressed through a comparison with another of Jefferson's designs, the later Monticello, the result of the redesigning and enlarging of the original 1772 house (fig. 13). The later Monticello and the Wirt's house, with their polygonal bays, octagonal rooms, and arched porticos, represented expressions of American cultural independence embodied in buildings (fig. 14). In terms of floor plan,

"Pierson, 297.

the Wirt's new house bears a striking resemblance with the north wing of Monticello as completed in 1809 (fig. 15). Each plan contains a central passage, flanked on the right by a single large room with a polygonal front wall and on the left by two rooms—one octagonal and one square.

The Wirts shared ties with the Jefferson family. William corresponded with Thomas on legal matters and journeyed to Charlottesville, but no evidence exists suggesting he or Elizabeth visited Monticello. Even if the Wirts did not possess first-hand knowledge of this house, they felt Jefferson's architectural influence in Richmond through the Virginia State Capitol.

Although the new house unquestionably falls under the classification of federal, many aspects of this design recall Englishman Robert Morris's work once again. Plate 25 of Select Architecture depicts a country seat, 200 feet long, that terminates in polygonal bays at each end (fig. 16). A shallow portico with three arched openings, similar to the treatment of the Wirt's new house, demarcates the entrance. The single story elevation and horizontal line differentiate Morris's plan from federal manifestations which tend to be two stories with a vertical thrust. These simple variations on the design, however, diminished the plan's English influence and helped define it as a federal design.

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46 Robert Morris, Select Architecture, plate 25.
In addition to its federal style, the Wirt's new house resembled professionally commissioned architecture. No evidence links the new house to Latrobe, Parris, or Mills, or, for that matter, any other specific builder or architect. However, in terms of style it relates to the work of these professionals. The two polygonal bays on the front of the new house are reminiscent of elements used in two homes designed by Latrobe for Richmonders. The first, an unexecuted plan for an unidentified patron, possibly Latrobe himself, dates from 1797. It consisted of a curved projecting wall in the drawing room and a single polygonal bay that outlined an octagonal study. The second plan was built in a modified form in 1808-09 for Benjamin James Harris. Closer in shape to the Wirt's new house than the 1797 unidentified design, the Harris house contained two polygonal front bays, with the area between these bays containing a small entrance rather than the full portico found on the Wirt's house.

The Wirt's new house represents a form of federal architecture that enjoyed popularity in Virginia, and many houses in Richmond utilized this plan. Alexander McRae, John Robinson, and David Bullock owned houses dating from the first two decades of the nineteenth century that


48 Scott, Old Richmond Neighborhoods, 120-22; Brownell, 237. For an illustration see Brownell, 237.
contained polygonal bays (fig. 17). Outside Richmond this plan also experienced popularity. Violet Bank near Petersburg and Point-of-Honor in Lynchburg, as well as portions of the later Monticello, contained similar polygonal bays.

Point-of-Honor, built by Dr. George Cabell, first cousin to Elizabeth's brother-in-law William H. Cabell, bears a striking resemblance to the Wirt's home (fig. 18). Elizabeth spent extended visits with her sister Agnes and Agnes's husband William Cabell at their Virginia plantation Montevideo, but there is no evidence that Elizabeth visited the homes of other Cabells. However, the building of such an impressive, new-style home by a family member must have been a topic of conversation within Cabell circles. Perhaps not coincidentally, Point-of-Honor was completed by 1815, shortly before Elizabeth decided she wanted a new

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49 Scott, *Houses of Old Richmond*, 55. The Wirt house is the only one still standing.


51 Lateral kinship networks were strong in eighteenth-century planter society; relationships with aunts and uncles, and therefore cousins, were important facets of family life. It is not unreasonable to hypothesize that knowledge of the building of Point-of-Honor was widespread among Cabell family members due to the close relationships among extended family members. Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), Chapter 5, esp. 186-87.
house in January, 1816.\textsuperscript{52} It could have been this association with a family that she respected (her youngest son, the "little master" that she refers to in her letter, was named William Cabell after her brother-in-law), combined with the resemblance to the north wing of Monticello and the federal style that made reference to the professional architects of the day, that drew Elizabeth to the new Richmond house.

In addition to affiliations with the architectural expression of post-Revolutionary America, the association of the new E Street house with urban architecture further attracted Elizabeth. Unlike her old house which contained clear plantation analogues, the new house was appropriate in both a rural and an urban context; George Cabell built Point-of-Honor as the seat for his 900 acre plantation, while the other similarly-planned Richmond houses appeared in well-settled areas of the city. Also, this particular form, while popular in Virginia, appeared as far north as Vermont and as far south as Georgia, qualifying it a national rather than regional style.\textsuperscript{53} In vertical line and

\textsuperscript{52}The precise date of construction is unknown, however, in 1815 Cabell was taxed $7,500 for a house. Chambers, 519, note 65.

\textsuperscript{53}Examples outside of Virginia include the Nicholas Ware House, Augusta, Georgia; the Langdon-Cole House, Castleton, Vermont; and Constable Hall, Constableville, New York. For illustrations see Frederick D. Nichols, The Architecture of Georgia (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1976), 158–59; and Dorothy and Richard Pratt, A Guide to Early American Homes, North (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 72, 145.
federal style it resembled other urban townhomes of the nation, and although regionalism did not disappear in the early nineteenth century, these houses represent an emerging national style.54

The combination of the federal style and urban context of Elizabeth's new house communicated an association between the Wirts and the new Republic not only in terms of architecture, but in world view as well. Through these characteristics in the house, Elizabeth declared that her family embraced the post-Revolutionary War nationalistic principles which reevaluated the hierarchical social structure of the colonial era and argued for increased democratization and egalitarianism.55 By expressing these beliefs, she upheld her family's elevated rank in Richmond society, a position which could not be justified in the eighteenth-century plantation context embodied in their old house.

Elizabeth recognized that the neighborhoods possessed the ability to communicate as powerfully as the styles of the houses themselves. For her the location of the new house proved to be equally as important as the house itself in communicating her family's rank and social alliances. Richard Bushman demonstrates that genteel people attempted to extend the standard of living they enacted

54Pierson, 287; Fiske Kimball, 145-46.
55Wood, Section i.
within their houses out into the larger urban landscape. They erected assembly rooms, visited fashionable taverns, and promenaded in parks. If they could not physically create genteel areas in the city, they mentally zoned polite and vulgar regions.\footnote{Bushman, 140.} Similarly, Elizabeth looked for an area which possessed the qualities she associated with the standard of polite living her family followed and contained similarly-ranked citizens.

Located on the corner of G and Sixth streets, the old house was situated only three blocks from the new one on E and Fifth, but despite their proximity, the neighborhoods differed enormously (fig. 19). Elizabeth considered three characteristics in these areas as she attempted to communicate her family's status and social connections—lot sizes and composition, distance from commercial activity, and occupants.

Lot sizes represent the first aspect of the neighborhood that Elizabeth utilized to communicate her perception of her family's social position. In the early nineteenth century, as in the eighteenth, property ownership remained one marker of status.\footnote{Wood, 32.} Due to this enduring connection between large plantations and high rank, the possession of land carried close associations with gentility.
in the South, and within Richmond the size and location of the property ranked landowners.

The late eighteenth-century survey of Richmond divided the land into two-acre blocks divided into four half-acre lots (fig. 1). Generally, owners built one principal structure, such as a house or a shop, on their property during the eighteenth century. However, the city's growing population made new demands on housing. Between 1793 and 1817 the city's area increased by 61 percent, while its occupancy rose 350 percent. Commercial districts experienced the greatest pressures from the increasing population, and these areas infilled with shops and houses to meet the new demands.

Especially hard hit due to its proximity to both the first market place and the Capitol, the neighborhood surrounding the Public Square increased dramatically during the early nineteenth century. The area possessed the advantage of being accessible by land and water; merchandise arrived via the Country Road, known within the city as H Street, as well as the James River and canal basin. Craftsmen's homes and shops lined the intersections of E, F, and Thirteenth streets, while flour mills and tobacco

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58 This information is based on building patterns found in Mutual Assurance Society Policies.

59 For raw data see Scott, Houses of Old Richmond, 29-30.
warehouses covered the riverfront.\textsuperscript{60} The move of the Virginia capitol from Williamsburg to Richmond in 1780 likewise increased the population and spurred building activity.

The properties in the G Street area of the Wirt's old house encountered the changes brought about by the rise in Richmond's population. Few lots remained their original half-acre size. Increasingly, they were divided into smaller units as series of double houses, row houses, and shop-dwellings filled the streetfronts (fig. 20). The lot upon which the Wirt's house stood covered the original half acre, and William briefly owned a portion of the lot adjacent to the northeast. Dr. McClurg's estate across Sixth Street encompassed two half-acre lots, with a portion of one lot containing shops.\textsuperscript{61} The property adjacent to the Wirt's on the northwest covered a half acre, but the owner, William Price, had built a double house on it before 1808. Although Price lived in one side during 1808, tenants occupied both sides by 1815.\textsuperscript{62} Similarly, structures for

\textsuperscript{60}Aline Zeno, "The Furniture Craftsmen of Richmond, Virginia, 1780-1820" (M.A. Thesis, University of Delaware, 1987), 67.

\textsuperscript{61}John Maddox, The Richmond Directory, Register and Almanac, for the Year 1819 (Richmond, VA: John Maddox, 1819).

\textsuperscript{62}Mutual Assurance Society Policies #1861, 1815; #1864, 1815.
multi-family housing began to crowd the lot across G Street to the southwest.⁶³

The proximity of the Wirt's old house to H Street, the thoroughfare that led from the Country Road to the Public Square, accounts for the increased housing demands and lot infill in the neighborhood. H Street developed into a commercial area as a result of both the nature of the traffic using it and the overflow from the densely settled first market place located near the Public Square. By the early nineteenth century the street front had filled with rows of shop-dwellings. Mutual Assurance Policies depict closely-packed structures, of either brick or wood, measuring from 16 to 28 feet by 24 to 50 feet (fig. 20). The first Richmond directory, published in 1819, lists eighty-two businesses along H Street from First to Tenth streets. Grocers comprised the preponderance of these businesses (31), while attorneys, merchants, tailors, shoemakers, coachmakers, cabinetmakers, physicians, druggists, apothecaries, boarding houses, and taverns comprised the difference.⁶⁴ Samuel Mordecai, reminiscing on his childhood in Richmond during this period, described the trading activities on H street, here referred to by its later name, Broad Street:

⁶³ Mutual Assurance Society Policies #2607, 1818; #1204, 1818.
⁶⁴ Maddox.
The trade from the Blue Ridge was carried on by means of large four or six-horse wagons; and, as they entered the city at the head of Broad street, small dealers established themselves there to meet the trade...the wagons came laden with flour, butter, hemp, wax, tallow, flaxseed, feathers, deer and bear skins, furs, ginseng, snake-root, &c.; and I once saw a bunch of dried rattlesnakes.  

Elizabeth complained to William about the commercial dynamics of their neighborhood: "You have talked of getting 20,000$ for this lot—with all of what I think its disadvantages, its contiguity to that nasty range of French shops, & their appurtanences." The buildings to which she referred, located next to the Wirt property on the northeast, included the two store-dwellings owned by Frenchman Lewis Wercq and his wife Victoria, the home of Mrs. Vanet, and their numerous outbuildings.

In contrast the new E Street area provided a quieter, completely residential setting where most properties comprised, at minimum, the original half-acre allotments (fig. 21). The new house was situated at a

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65Mordecai, 51.

66Elizabeth to William, January 13, 1816.

67Mutual Assurance Society Policy #326, 1813.

68This information is based on Mutual Assurance Society Policies. Regarding the neighborhood during the early nineteenth century, Wyndham Bolling Blanton states, "It was entirely residential. Business houses did not begin to encroach upon it until some years later." Wyndham Bolling Blanton, The Making of a Downtown Church: The History of the Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia, 1845-1945 (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1945), 57. For an additional description of the neighborhood see Mordecai.
greater distance from commercial activity than the old one, being one block farther west from the old market and two blocks farther south from the new one that opened near H Street in 1817. The nearest commercial building recorded on an insurance policy was located several blocks away on the corner of F and Fourth streets. The absence of business endowed E Street with the feel of a genteel, residential neighborhood, and although all Richmonders had access to the area, nothing drew them in the numbers that the business focus of H Street did. Rather, local traffic marked the movement through the area.

The large lot sizes in the new E Street neighborhood likewise contributed to its polite qualities. The Wirt's home stood upon on a half acre lot, and they bought a small portion of the adjacent lot for building a new stable. Joseph Marx, from whom the Wirts bought the house, had wanted to retain a part of the property along Fifth Street to build a small house for his mother and offered to compensate for the loss by adding a piece of land along the western edge of the property. Elizabeth prevented this from happening by leading Marx to believe that William would not buy the property. She wrote to William, "[I] said I was sure it would be impossible to persuade you to purchase if they took off a part of the handsomest part of the lot". 69

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69 Elizabeth to William, January 11, 1816.
The residences along E and Fifth streets likewise stood upon tracts of land larger than those of the Wirt's former neighborhood (fig. 21). James Brown Sr.'s lot, next to the Wirt's on Fifth Street, encompassed a half acre, as did William Dickinson's on the corner F and Fourth streets.70 Located across Fifth Street, James Gibbon's property covered two of the standard half acres that marked the original survey of Richmond. Several residents owned even larger holdings; the properties of Thomas Taylor and Joseph Gallego, located across E Street from the Wirts, each encompassed four half-acre lots and covered the entire two-acre city blocks on which they stood.71 These urban estates resembled rural plantations more than they did city lots. The Gallego estate, for example, contained a large two story brick house, a garden, and a trail of outbuildings (including ice, slaves', smoke, and green houses, as well as an office, a necessary, and a stable) (fig. 22). The Wirt's new property possessed a similar configuration but on a smaller, more condensed scale (fig. 12). These layouts contrasted sharply with the typical arrangement in the old H Street area where generally two or three houses and a small number of outbuildings stood on each lot (fig. 20).

70 Mutual Assurance Society Policies #1130, 1812; #2344, 1817; #201, 1808; and #2510, 1818.

71 Mutual Assurance Society Policies #1916, 1813; #1500, 1820.
In addition to the E Street area, Elizabeth considered houses in another neighborhood, "Court End," an area commencing north of H and east of Eighth streets (fig. 1). There were two properties available, her brother Robert's house on Tenth and K streets (John Wickham's old house), which she quickly dismissed: "can see nothing in this house to make it desirable," and William Brockenbrough's house, farther up K on Eleventh Street (figs. 23, 24).\(^7^2\)

The primary occupation of the male occupants of Court End was attorney; in the area from Eighth to Twelfth streets and along I and K streets there lived seven attorneys. Four merchants, two military officers, and one physician comprised the known occupations of the remaining residents. William was an attorney and a participant in the trial of Aaron Burr along with Alexander McRae, John Wickham, and Benjamin Botts, all of Court End.\(^7^3\) As well as being their occupational associate, William was also their social peer; he was a member of the Buchanan Springs Quoit Club with residents John Marshall, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, and John Wickham.

Although Elizabeth acknowledged William's occupational and social relationships to the Court End

\(^7^2\)Elizabeth to William, January 11, 1816.

\(^7^3\)Benjamin Botts and his wife died in the Richmond Theater fire of 1811, but his property continued to be owned and occupied by his heirs through the 1810s.
residents, other considerations led her to reject the neighborhood. One was the connections by marriage among the residents; two families dominated the neighborhood and account for more than half of the thirteen known occupants (fig. 25). Five families were tied to the Ambler family by marriage, and an additional two to the Wickham family. The Wirts were related only to Robert Gamble, Elizabeth's brother. His was one of the houses she considered buying, and if he left the area, she would have had no familial connections in the neighborhood.

Elizabeth's own mercantile connections through her father led her to favor instead the new house on Fifth Street, an area dominated by merchants. James Brown, Sr., was formerly an agent for the London merchants Donald & Burton and became one of the founders of Richmond's Brown & Burton firm.74 His son, James Brown, Jr., partnered with Thomas Taylor, another Fifth Street neighbor, to form the mercantile firm "Taylor and Brown." Joseph Gallego was the successful flour miller who owned the Gallego Mills.75 James Gibbon had been a merchant in Petersburg and was the collector for the port of Richmond.76 Both Gibbon and Elizabeth's father had fought at the battle of Stony Point

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74 The Valentine Museum, Richmond Portraits in an Exhibition of Makers of Richmond, 1737-1860 (Richmond, VA: The Valentine Museum, 1949), 23.
75 The Valentine Museum, XV, 71.
76 The Valentine Museum, 78.
during the Revolution, making it is possible that the two men knew each other from as early as 1779. Elizabeth's family's mercantile dealings most likely acquainted her with the merchant families in the new neighborhood and created social alliances with them.

Elizabeth was acquainted with the women of these merchant families in the Fifth Street neighborhood. She indicated to William that she preferred this locality over Court End because of these connections, "there is...more of a neighbourly friendly disposition among most of the female deportment."77 She knew James Gibbon's daughters and while considering buying the new house invited one of them over to tell her about it. She wrote William, "By the bye, I sent for one of the Miss Gibbon's to come over to see to day--knowing that they were well acquainted, from their intimacy with Mr. Hancock, with every part of the aforesaid house--Mani was good enough to come over altho it began to snow again about that time she described to me all and every part of the its arrangements."78 Elizabeth's use of Mani Gibbon's first name suggests a close relationship between the women, and that Mani agreed to come to see her despite the inclement weather further supports this. Elizabeth

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77Elizabeth to William, January 12, 1816.

78Mr. Hancock was the original owner of the house who sold it to Marx, who in turn sold it to the Wirts. Elizabeth to William, January 13, 1816.
associated with other women in the area as well, attending the wedding of Lucy Singleton to Thomas Taylor.

Elizabeth's interest in living in a neighborhood populated by women of similar rank and occupational connections is analogous to Suzanne Lebsock's conclusions about female community in Petersburg, Virginia, during this period. Lebsock found that among upper-class women, kinship, neighborhood, and common experience determined networks of relationships, especially in benevolent organizations.

The comfortable accommodation of her household proved as important to Elizabeth as the ability of the style and location to communicate the status and social connections of her family. For her, comfortable accommodation meant the proper interaction of the household members within the domestic spaces. In the household she demarcated three groups—her children, the slaves, and her husband—representing the familial, service, and professional activities which existed alongside one another in the house. As domestic manager, she saw herself as the link between each group, but she also saw these groups as distinct entities and attempted to assign each to its own

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space. In separating activities, she also pushed many of the work functions, primarily that of the slaves and William, out of the house, creating a private, exclusively domestic environment for her nuclear family.

In Elizabeth's correspondence with William, the comfort of her children emerges as her most pressing concern for the internal arrangements of the house. In fact, the benefits the new house holds for the children mark her most arguments for its purchase: "I think you ought to give more weight to the consideration of...your children's welfare." These considerations include providing them areas which allow them to engage in their activities as children without interfering with others in the house. In Elizabeth's opinion the arrangements of the old house denied the children their own spaces. In 1812 the Wirts remodelled the house, attempting to make room for the children's activities. Elizabeth appears to have initiated the project since William asked for her advice and authorization in the work and requested that a family friend write to her.


81 Elizabeth to William, January 7, 1816.
concerning the progress. The changes in the house she mandated provided the children with specific spaces for sleeping, eating, and playing. One modification created a nursery above the first floor bedchamber with a staircase that allowed immediate access between the two rooms. This location, separate from the formal spaces of the house and accessible only through the bedchamber, corresponds with the placement of children's rooms during this period in "unprepossessing" rooms. Presumably, most of Elizabeth's children, who numbered at least four by 1812, slept in Elizabeth's bedchamber, either in cribs, on impermanent pallets on the floor, or with William and Elizabeth in the main bed.

Elizabeth's desire to assign her children their own spaces stemmed from polite views on childrearing at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Karin Calvert maintains that by this time child raising had changed from an idea of restriction to one of freedom. Parents understood the importance of childhood as a time for development, and they allowed their children the physical

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82 Elizabeth to William, December 6 and 14, 1812; William to Elizabeth, December 10, 1812; Francis Walker Gilmer to Elizabeth, December 31, 1812.


84 This is based on sleeping arrangements described in other Wirt letters.
and psychological freedom to grow. However, mayhem could ensue by liberating children in spaces not specifically designed for them. Elizabeth expressed exasperation with her children's antics. She complained of their behavior: "the children sometimes stepping into the dishes—or at least raising a hubbub for their dinners, keeping a dozen of maids to watch them & keep them out of mischief—and at last no place to give them their meals but in my chamber." Providing the children with their own spaces offered one means of allowing them to act as children yet still control them. Elizabeth believed that if her children had their own dining area the "hubbub" would be curtailed: "I would then cut off each child's dinner & set it before them--And they should eat so snugly, and so nicely—theres no telling."

When the Wirts bought the new house their brood of children had reached eight, and if Elizabeth had been concerned with the pressures generated by her small family in 1812, she felt it doubly so by 1816. In no uncertain terms she communicated her concerns to William: "With my family of eight young children I must have a more commodious dwelling." She also pointed out that her need for a bigger dwelling, although ultimately temporary, was immediate:

85 Calvert, 56.
86 Elizabeth to William, December 6, 1812.
87 Elizabeth to William, December 6, 1812.
88 Elizabeth to William, January 7, 1816.
"What should I care to looking forward to having a fine large house at a future day—when if I should live to see it my children will be all grown and able to take care of themselves—and will probably leave me to wander about its naked walls as my Mother is doing now in hers." 89

In Elizabeth's opinion, the new house provided "plenty of accommodation for our family just now, & at a future date" and offered superior accommodations, "at present it is certainly arranged to promote our immediate comfort 10 times more than we ever enjoyed here."90 The upper floor, which consisted of a stair hall and three chambers, offered ample room for the family (fig. 11). The largest room became William and Elizabeth's bedchamber, and it contained enough space for some of the younger children to sleep with their parents. One of the other two rooms served as a nursery, and the second probably used, as Elizabeth suggested, for "grown daughters or sons at a future date."91 Additionally, the house could be altered as the children entered adolescence: "I have never had a thought but that we should have to add to it by & bye—to enable us to have a separate room for Laura—and our daughters as they became too old for the nursery."92

89 Elizabeth to William, January 7, 1816.
90 Elizabeth to William, January 11, 1816.
91 Elizabeth to William, January 13, 1816.
92 Elizabeth to William, January 13, 1816.
Elizabeth also regarded the cellar as an area for the children "to eat & play in, or any thing of that sort that I choose."\(^{93}\)

The slaves constituted the second group within the household that Elizabeth sought to separate from the main house. By 1816 she owned at least eight slaves: Isaac, James, at least one other unnamed man, Marinda, Celia and Rachael (both pregnant), and Rachael's two children. In the old house all slaves live in one cellar room. Elizabeth expressed three concerns with this arrangement—the lack of flexibility in the accommodations, the unhealthy physical environment of the cellar, and the unsupervised location of the room.

Elizabeth's description of the slaves' accommodations indicates that only one room was available for them. In the course of everyday events she expressed little discontent with this arrangement, but the lack of flexibility became an issue when Celia's baby arrived. The single-room arrangement forced her to give birth before the male slaves who also lived in that space. Moving her to another area was not an option that Elizabeth entertained. With no other spaces designated for slave living, relocating Celia would have required moving her into one of the outbuildings (either the dairy or stable) or bringing her into the family's spaces. Elizabeth did not consider

\(^{93}\)Elizabeth to William, January 13, 1816.
outbuildings as suitable for slave habitations, but bringing Celia into the main part of the house would have required the family to surrender space which Elizabeth already viewed as insufficient. While most of the men could leave the room during the delivery, Isaac, who had a broken leg, could not be moved. Elizabeth complained bitterly to William that "such things ought not to be," and that he had an obligation to provide for the comfort of his slaves. To complicate matters further, Elizabeth was in the process of purchasing more slaves at the time of Celia's confinement, an undertaking which only amplified her opinion that the old space was inadequate.

The unhealthy environment of the cellar, which Elizabeth described as cold and damp, marks the second problem she encountered with the slaves' accommodations. She feared for the health of her slaves in these conditions, especially Celia's since she had to spend her post-partum recovery there. But Elizabeth's fear was not grounded in altruism—it resulted instead from her belief that illness would rob her of the domestic help which she desperately needed. She told William that Celia "must lay bye...at the risk of her life--which to me--since I see the impossibility of getting good servants--is no small consideration."  

94 Elizabeth to William, January 7, 1816.
95 Elizabeth to William, January 7, 1816.
The location of the slaves' room in the cellar represents the third problem Elizabeth found in the arrangement. She confided to William, "they do not well night or day when removed as they are, out of sight & hearing."^6 Several factors influenced her concerns. One arose from a general fear of unsupervised slave activities. Urban slaves, in several ways, had greater freedom of movement than their plantation counterparts, and the overall state of slavery in Richmond during this time has been described as lax and somewhat disordered.\footnote{Sheldon, 28.} Blacks comprised a large portion of Richmond's population; in 1820 forty-seven percent of the population was black, and of this percentage about six percent were free black.\footnote{Sheldon, 28.} The majority of slaves were house servants, entrusted with duties such as shopping and errand running which allowed them to be on the streets without suspicion. Having limited freedom away from the house, they were able to establish networks in the larger slave community. They met at friends' rooms, wharves, grog shops, corners, and in Richmond especially,

\footnote{Elizabeth to William, January 11, 1816.}

\footnote{For more information on the movements of slaves and the reactions of whites see Marianne Burhoff Sheldon, "Black-White Relations in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1820," \textit{The Journal of Southern History}, 45 (February 1979), 27-44.}
the small ten foot alleys which cut behind the lots and joined the main streets.  

The organization of rebellions such as Gabriel's Insurrection in 1800 marks one fear many whites held as a consequence of slave networks. A slave of Thomas Prosser, Jr., Gabriel had recruited other slaves from Richmond and surrounding countryside to invade the city one August night. The plan called for setting fire to the eastern end of the city, then, while whites and blacks engaged in fighting, capture the Capitol building and armory. With blacks in control of the city, the immediate release of all slaves would be demanded. However, torrential rain, which flooded the creeks and rivers and hindered transportation, thwarted Gabriel, and word of the plan soon reached the governor. According to the testimony of those arrested, the information was relayed during gatherings of blacks (both free and slave) such as after church meetings and at barbecues. The final outcome of the insurrection was Gabriel's arrest and execution by hanging. Other smaller insurrections flared up throughout Virginia in the years after, Richmond being the center of one from 1808 to 1809 and again in 1813. Elizabeth's concerns, however, stemmed

100Tyler-McGraw, 74-76.
from an incident closer to home which confirmed her fears about the activities of her slaves when unsupervised. Two days before she learned about the sale of the Marx house, her cook Isaac was brought home with a broken leg. She wrote of the incident to William:

About 5 o'clock our man Isaac was brought home with his leg broke—having been caught in our neighbor Valentines kitchen by a man by the name of Phil—who had a wife there. He beat the wife & broke Isaac's leg with an iron pan handle—Isaac made out to get through the window—& there he lay in his shirt from 1 o'clock until 5—when somebody found him & brought him home.  

For Elizabeth, a more effective arrangement placed the slaves' quarters out of the house and into an outbuilding within sight of the house—a pattern of building common to plantations. Elizabeth believed that the new house followed this set-up, however, she later learned that it did not: "The servant rooms I am disappointed in— I had thought that they were in the outer buildings—there are some over the Ice house and the rest under the house." This information did not diminish her favorable opinion of the house, but it forced her to think about modifying the arrangements. She informed William: "I wish still to have the them (the servants) farther off—and have already planned the converting of the present stables which is

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102Elizabeth to William, December 26, 1815.
103Elizabeth to William, January 13, 1816.
rather too near the house—into servants rooms, & building another stable at an agreeable distance."

Little descriptive information remains about the new slave accommodations that Elizabeth planned. It is evident that she completed her plans by April, 1817, when the first insurance policy was underwritten (fig. 12). The old stable was divided into a slave room and smoke house and a new stable built on the edge of the lot. Policies describe the slave room as one story, of brick construction, with a wooden roof. No dimensions are given, however, slave quarters in the urban South were generally 10 by 15 feet, sometimes two stories. Of course size would depend upon several factors such as the number of servants and the wealth and altruism of the owner. Adequate for sleeping, most slave spaces were too small for everyday living, forcing the slaves out into the yard and into view of the house.

Elizabeth's modifications to the overall domestic arrangement—consolidating the various slave spaces into a single one near the house and moving the stable and animals

104 Elizabeth to William, January 13, 1816.
105 Mutual Assurance Society Policy #810, 1817.
106 The stable was built on a small piece of land to the north west that William bought in 1816.
107 Wade, 113.
108 One structure from a Mutual Assurance Society Policy specified as a slave room measured 36 by 16 feet and was two stories high. In 1817 it was valued at $1700, a high sum.
to a more distant location—suggest she saw her slaves as a service category distinct, yet not inseparable, from the other service functions in the yard. This explains why Elizabeth never considered moving Celia to an outbuilding during her confinement at the old house; she viewed Celia's function as different from that of the dairy or stable. However, slaves in Richmond often lived in buildings with other primary functions—in kitchens, stables, or over ice houses.\textsuperscript{109}

The domestic order that Elizabeth attempted to realize appealed to her for a variety of reasons. Not only did this arrangement put the slaves within view from the house, it also put the slaves in view of the house, constantly reminding them of their bondage.\textsuperscript{110} Other dynamics of the urban lot arrangement contributed to this reminder. Often lots were encircled by a high brick wall, making them into enclosed compounds.\textsuperscript{111} There was no indication on insurance policies that the new house had a wall, but several houses of comparable value contained them.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{109}This information is based on slaves' rooms recorded in Mutual Assurance Society Policies.

\textsuperscript{110}Wade, 111.

\textsuperscript{111}Wade, 61.

\textsuperscript{112}Mutual Assurance Society Policies #396, 1818; #1916, 1816.
William's professional activities, his need to meet and entertain clients within the house, represented the third function that Elizabeth attempted to separate from the activities of the family within the house. As early as 1812, when the remodelling occurred in the old house, Elizabeth felt William's work conflicted with other household activities. In her rearrangements she could not find room for him: "My mind was much busied last night, in planning additional conveniences to our house. The only draw back—was—how I was to dispose of you. I wanted to turn you out neck & heels, Books and all, out of your present office."\textsuperscript{113} She wanted to convert his office into a dining room for the children and offered him the antechamber in return: "would you not go to the \textit{antechamber} for this winter...how much more genteel you would look in a nicely kept room, with a carpet on it, the walls \textit{papered}, the \textit{pictures of great men} surrounding you."\textsuperscript{114} In her desire to move William and provide a space for her children, Elizabeth either ignored or overlooked the problems generated by this arrangement. William pointed out to her that this plan created disruption within the house: "how will it do for my office to be a thoroughfare for servants--& how will it do for my dirty clients & your visiting ladies to be jostling each other--and how will it do for your ladies who

\textsuperscript{113}Elizabeth to William, December 6, 1812.

\textsuperscript{114}Elizabeth to William, December 6, 1812.
wish to go to your chamber to be passing through an office full of the dirt of clients shoes, rubbish paper, tobacco spit, &c &c."\(^\text{115}\)

Moving William's professional activities out of the house, similar to the manner in which she moved the slaves into the yard, offered Elizabeth the best solution to her accommodation problems. During the 1812 remodelling of the old house she promised him, "In the spring I will give you leave to build an office in the corner of the yard--A thing you have long set your heart upon--and which I am now anxious to indulge you in. And for which indulgence I hope you will be suitable grateful."\(^\text{116}\) Despite Elizabeth's generosity, there is no indication that William built an outside office at the old house.\(^\text{117}\)

The new house, however, contained an office in the yard, located near the other outbuildings and connected to the icehouse (fig. 12). Elizabeth informed William of its existence as she described the arrangements of the yard: "The garden is filled they all tell me with the choicest fruit trees the neatest kitchen, and room for the servants in the town--an office ready to your hand, a green house,

\(^{115}\)William to Elizabeth, December 10, 1812.

\(^{116}\)Elizabeth to William, December 6, 1812.

\(^{117}\)No office appears in the Mutual Assurance Policy of 1815, only a dwelling house, dairy, and stable-carriage house.
and every thing neat & complete so far as it goes." By mentioning the office within the list of service buildings, she clearly associated William's professional activities with the other work functions of the household which needed to be removed from the main house. The office entrance, probably located on E Street, also separated it from those other functions by allowing clients immediate access into it instead of through the yard. Thus, although the office was considered another work space in the yard, it was also differentiated from those other functions.

Although Elizabeth wanted William's work removed from the house, she understood that the office remained an important element in their household since the family depended upon the income generated by William's law practice. Therefore, in promoting the new house Elizabeth kept his work in mind and pointed out to him the advantages of its location: "this house Does not remove you farther from the capitol--or at least not farther from Business, being immediately on the main street." 

In order to separate the members of her household, Elizabeth needed a floor plan which not only provided enough room for their separation, but also enabled them to move about the house without intruding upon each other. The plan of the old house, unknown but possibly arranged similar to

118 Elizabeth to William, January 11, 1816.
119 Elizabeth to William, January 7, 1816.
Battersea, could not direct the interior traffic effectively (fig. 6). This was due to the absence of a central passage which connected all rooms to one point, enabling direct access into spaces while limiting entry into others. In order to reach the wings, household members had to pass through the covered ways which were used as rooms. Elizabeth complained about the lack of a central passageway and told William that she ought to have a house "in which the chambers at least were drawn together by immediate communication." 

The central passage plan of the new house, unlike the innovative shape, represented a variation on an eighteenth-century interior arrangement commonly referred to as the Georgian plan. The four-room-per-floor organization of the new house (as opposed to the standard five room Georgian plan), consisting of a passage or public space, dining room, chamber, and central passage on the first floor, developed as a vernacular plan in Virginia (fig. 26). That the plan of the new house reflects traditional notions of architecture while the style embraced

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120 This supposition is based upon the similarities of the two houses in terms of style, size, and the room descriptions given in earlier Wirt letters.

121 Elizabeth to William, January 7, 1816.

a newer one suggests Elizabeth's reluctance to completely abandon conventional architectural modes for unfamiliar ones, especially with respect to spatial interaction.

The new house contained a central passage on each floor which connected all rooms and facilitated the interior circulation Elizabeth sought. These passages aided the separation of groups and functions within the house by limiting access to rooms, acting as instruments of control and demarcating social boundaries within the house. For example, slaves could enter the house from the rear yard through the door at the end of the first floor passage opposite the main entrance and from this space enter only those rooms required at the time without disturbing others. Only one room was inaccessible from the central passage, a rear room in the cellar which could only be reached through a front one (fig. 11). The two adjacent rooms on the second floor could be accessed directly without using the central hall by means of a doorway in the closet (fig. 11). This provided an even greater separation within the house, allowing movement to remain unseen by the rest of the household.

Elizabeth Wirt's act of selecting a new house in Richmond, Virginia, in 1816 reflects a complex decision-
making process. Through her letters to her husband William she articulated many of her motivations, and through the house she rejected and the one she accepted she revealed many of her subconscious ones. Clearly, she was cognizant of the multiple dimensions of houses and considered the exterior style and location as well as the interior spacial arrangement as she reassessed her family's housing.

In evaluating the exterior characteristics of the house she lived in, the new house her family bought, and a third house in Court End that was for sale, Elizabeth demonstrated a concern with communicating her family's status and social connections. Utilizing the public aspect of architecture, she selected a federal style house that represented her family's rising rank in the post-Revolutionary social system, a position they would not have enjoyed in the hierarchical eighteenth-century society.

In the interior arrangements of the old and new houses, Elizabeth attempted to secure a domicile that enabled her to compartmentalize and separate the familial, service, and professional activities of her household. Her choice of a traditional eighteenth-century Virginia floorplan in the new house manifests a more conservative attitude than in her choice of style. Her selection also suggests an unwillingness to abandon familiar spacial arrangements, the aspect of architecture more heavily interacted with by the family than the exterior.
Elizabeth Wirt's decision to buy a new house provides us with an understanding of the role women played in determining their family's housing. Style and location have often been identified as men's concerns, but Elizabeth shows that women had the same considerations. On the other hand, her attention to spatial arrangements and the interaction of household members represent the development of the domestic sphere and women's interests in home and family. Ultimately, Elizabeth demonstrates the power of women to make architectural choices.
Figure 1  "A Plan of the City of Richmond," Richard Young, c. 1810. A. denotes the location of the Wirt's old house and B. the new one.
Figure 2  Insurance Policy of the Wirt's Old House. Richmond, Virginia, before 1796. Policy #1721, 1815. Mutual Assurance Society Declarations and Revaluations, Accession 30177. Courtesy, Business Records Collection, Archives Division, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, 23219.

A. A wooden Dwelling house.
B. A wooden Dairy.
C. A Brick Stable.
Figure 3 Plate 3, Robert Morris, Select Architecture, 1755. Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.
Figure 4  Floorplan of the Early Monticello. Charlottesville, Virginia, before 1772. Computer-assisted design by Patrick Haley.
Figure 5 Battersea. Near Petersburg, Virginia, c. 1765. Historic American Buildings Survey.
Figure 6  Floorplan of Battersea. Near Petersburg, Virginia, c. 1765. Computer-assisted design by Patrick Haley.
Figure 7 Territorial Growth of Richmond. Growth information added to Young's Plan of Richmond. Young's Plan Courtesy Map Collection, Archives, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, 23219.

A. A brick Dwelling house.
B. A brick Kitchen.
C. A brick Dairy.
D. A brick Office.
E. A brick Stable.
Figure 9 The Wickham House. Richmond, Virginia, completed 1812. Photo by author.
Figure 10  The Wirt's New House. Richmond, Virginia, completed 1809. Photo by author.
Figure 11  Floorplans of the Wirt's New House. Computer-assisted design by Patrick Haley.
Figure 12 Insurance Policy of the Wirt's New House. Policy 
#810, 1817. Mutual Assurance Society Declarations and 
Revaluations, Accession 30177. Courtesy, Business Records 
Collection, Archives Division, The Library of Virginia, 
Richmond, Virginia, 23219.

A. A well finished Dwelling house.
B. A Brick Kitchen.
C. An Office.
D. An Ice house.
E. A Summer hse.
F. Servants Room/A brick smoke.
G. Brick necessary.
H. A Stable & Carriage house.
Figure 13  Floorplan of the Later Monticello. Charlottesville, Virginia, completed 1809. Computer-assisted design by Patrick Haley.
Figure 14 Comparison Photos of the Wirt's New House (above) and the North Wing of the Later Monticello (below). Photos by author.
Figure 15 Comparison of the Floorplans of the Wirt's new house (above) and the Later Monticello (below). Computer-assisted designs by Patrick Haley.
Figure 16 Plate 25, Robert Morris, Select Architecture, 1755. Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

A. A Brick wing.
B. An Office.
C. Brick Stable.
Figure 18  Point-of-Honor.  Lynchburg, Virginia, c. 1815.  
Courtesy, Damie Stillman.
Figure 19 Plan of the Neighborhoods Surrounding the Wirt's Old and New Houses. A. denotes the Wirt's old house and B. the new one. The number and placement of buildings on the lots are based on Mutual Assurance Society Declarations and Valuations, 1796 to 1822. The lots marked with crosses represent properties where no insurance information was found. Insurance policy research by author, computer-assisted design by Patrick Haley and author.
Figure 20 Plan of the Old G Street Neighborhood. The number and placement of buildings on the lots are based on Mutual Assurance Society Declarations and Valuations, 1796 to 1822. The lots marked with crosses represent properties where no insurance information was found. Insurance policy research by author, computer-assisted design by Patrick Haley and author.
Figure 21  Plan of the New E Street Neighborhood. The number and placement of buildings on the lots are based on Mutual Assurance Society Declarations and Valuations, 1796 to 1822. The lots marked by crosses represent properties where no insurance information was found. Insurance policy research by author, computer-assisted design by Patrick Haley and author.

A. A Dwelling house.
B. Servants Room.
C. Office.
D. A Green house.
E. A wooden Smoke house.
F. An Ice house.
G. A Stable & Carriage hse.
H. A brick Necessary.

A Dwelling house
A Kitchen
Coal & wood House

A. A Dwelling house.
B. Kitchen, Laundry & Carriage hse.
C. A Coal hse.
D. A wooden Smoke hse.
E. A Stable.
F. An Ice hse.
G. A Servants Dwelling house.
Figure 25 Familial Connections in Court End. Computer-assisted design by author.
Figure 26 Central Passage Floorplan (above) and Floorplan of the Wirt's New House (below). Computer-assisted design of central passage floorplan by author, computer-assisted design of the floorplan of the Wirt's new house by Patrick Haley.
Appendix A

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION
ELIZABETH WASHINGTON GAMBLE AND WILLIAM WIRT

Elizabeth was born around 1785, probably in Virginia, to Colonel Robert Gamble and Catharine Grattan. Elizabeth's father, of Irish descent, was born in Augusta County, Virginia, in 1754. He served in the Revolutionary War, achieving the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and afterward he entered the mercantile business with his brother-in-law in Staunton, Virginia. The business proved to be successful, and Robert was known to be "wealthy, or, at least, in the enjoyment of a competency which enabled him to practice a liberal hospitality."1 Elizabeth's mother was born in Ireland in 1753 and immigrated with her parents to Virginia in 1761. John Grattan, Elizabeth's grandfather, served as a churchwarden of Augusta Parish and a justice of the peace for Rockingham County. He was a merchant and owner of a flour mill. Elizabeth was preceded by three others siblings—her brothers, John and Robert, and her sister, Agnes, who married former Virginia governor William

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H. Cabell. In 1790 the Gamble family moved from Staunton to Richmond and in 1799 purchased a stately mansion designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Elizabeth's father died in 1810, and her mother followed in 1831.

William was born November 8, 1772 in Bladensburg, Maryland (near present-day Washington, D. C.), to Jacob and Henrietta Wirt, German immigrants. He was the youngest of six children, having two older brothers and three sisters. His father died in 1774, leaving the family one half lot of ground in Bladensburg containing a "billiard room" and partially completed house, a brick store in the same city, and a lot on which stood a tavern, counting house, smith shop, outbuildings, and stable. William's mother died around 1780, leaving William in the care of one of his sisters and her husband. He spent his childhood years going from school to school in the area, until, at the age of fifteen, he moved into the house of his schoolmate Ninian Edwards to act as his tutor. Having no means of financial support at adulthood, William turned to a career in law and befriended other Virginians of the bar, notably Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Dabney Carr. In 1797 he

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3 Kennedy, 16-17. Kennedy estimates the value of the property left in Jacob's will as between three to four thousand dollars, and split among six children, the inheritance proved to be "but small provision."
married Mildred Gilmer, but she died two years later. William moved on to Richmond, was appointed clerk of the House of Delegates, and continued to practice law.

On September 7, 1802 Elizabeth and William married, and over the course of the next sixteen years they had twelve children, ten of which survived to adulthood. During the first several years of their marriage they lived in Williamsburg and Norfolk but returned to Richmond in 1806. For the next twelve years the couple resided in Richmond, with Elizabeth managing the growing household of children, slaves, and visitors, and William pursuing a private law practice (which included the prosecution of Aaron Burr on behalf of the state of Virginia) and literary career (The Letters of the British Spy, The Rainbow, The Old Bachelor, and Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry). In 1818, after William's appointment as Attorney General of the United States, the family moved to Washington, D. C. William spent twelve years in this office, until Andrew Jackson had him replaced in 1830.

In the late 1820s Wirt moved again, this time to Baltimore. Here Elizabeth pursued her own literary career, publishing a gift book filled with poetry and prints titled Flora's Dictionary in 1829. William again tried his hand at politics, running unsuccessfully for President of the

"For a discussion of Elizabeth's volume and biographical information, see Sarah P. Stetson, "Mrs. Wirt and the Language of Flowers," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 57 (October 1949), 368-89."
United States on the Anti-Masonic ticket in 1832. He died due to complications of an illness on February 18, 1834. Elizabeth died in 1857 at her son-in-law's Annapolis home.

Appendix C of Frank P. Cauble, *William Wirt and his Friends* (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1933), contains a transcription of a letter by William and Elizabeth's daughter Catharine to an aunt recounting the days before and after William's death.
Appendix B

WILLIAM WIRT'S TAX ASSESSMENT
RICHMOND PERSONAL PROPERTY BOOK, 1815

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<tr>
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<td>Number of Slaves over 12 years</td>
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<td>Number of Chests of Drawers with or without Desk in whole or in part Mahogany</td>
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<td>Number of Wardrobes or Clothes Presses in whole or in part Mahogany</td>
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110
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<th>Item Description</th>
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<td>Tea and Card Tables of Mahogany</td>
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<td>Bedsteads of Mahogany</td>
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