

CARTER'S GROVE

James City County

1755, altered 1928-1931

Among the ascendant tobacco planters of the Virginia colony, none was richer or more powerful than Robert “King” Carter, owner of 300,000 acres and over a thousand slaves when he died in 1732. Among these holdings was a tract called Martin’s Hundred plantation. In the will drawn shortly before his death, Carter left the tract to his daughter, Elizabeth Carter Burwell and her son Carter Burwell, stipulating that “in all times to come it be called . . . Carter’s Grove.”

Soon after coming of age, Carter Burwell made his residence here and began construction of the mansion complex—a project that took about fifteen years to complete. Work began in 1740 with construction of the kitchen dependency, followed by the laundry in 1748. The main house was underway by 1750 and was completed by 1755. Burwell’s magnificent dwelling was the product of a flourishing consumer society, made possible by Virginia’s expanding wealth and growing access to credit. Looming over a collec-

Early twentieth-century view of Carter’s Grove. Between 1928 and 1931 Molly and Archibald McCrae remodeled the house with the help of architect Duncan Lee. Photograph from the Lancaster Collection, Valentine Museum.



tion of subordinate structures, it aptly portrayed Burwell's exalted place in colonial society.

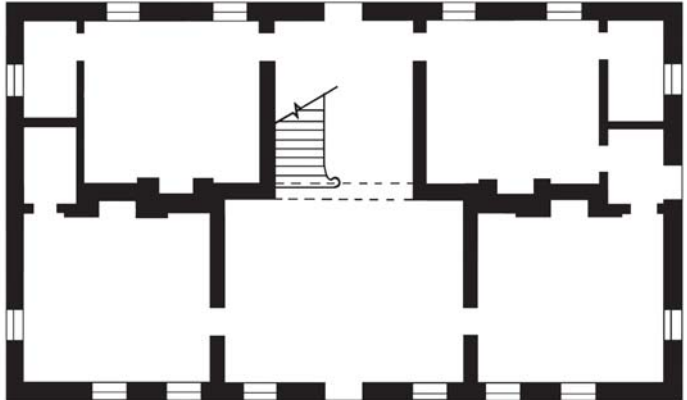
As a revelation of the builder's personal qualities, Carter's Grove was equally revealing. British historian Mark Girouard declares that the English country house was a "power house—the house of a ruling class . . . people did not take up residence in such a house unless they either had power, or were making a bid to possess it." Each of these structures, he regards as an "an accurate index to ambitions . . . of their owners." Measured by Girouard's yardstick, Carter Burwell appears to have been a supremely ambitious man—his dwelling was a remarkable structure for its time and place, surpassing all but a handful of its contemporaries in size, elaboration and classical rigor.

There is, perhaps, no better aid to understanding what this structure represented in 1755 than the juxtaposed worlds of Wolstenholme Towne, with its meandering lines of postholes huddled on the river's edge, and Carter Burwell's great mansion, standing assertively atop its man-made terraces, dominating everything around it. Nowhere do we find a clearer picture of the builder's self-concept and attitude toward the land and a starker contrast of Virginia at the beginning of settlement and at the end of the colonial era some 125 years later.

In 1928 Archibald and Molly McCrae purchased the property and commissioned architect Duncan Lee to transform the house into a grander seat that would resemble Westover further up the river. Lee raised the slope of the roof, added dormers, and continued the staircase to the new third story suite of bedrooms. In addition, he expanded the depth of the flanking offices and added connecting enclosures to them. Colonial Williamsburg was given the property at Molly's death. In the 1980s the Foundation decided to interpret the twentieth-century grandeur created by the McCraes.

Ivor Noël Hume's excavations in the 1970s and early 1980s revealed not only the long-lost Wolstenholme Towne from the 1610s, but discovered the archaeological remains of an eighteenth-century quarter on the escarpment above the fields on the river's edge. The quarter site with its log and frame dwellings, outbuildings, gardens, and fences was reconstructed in the late 1980s according to evidence gathered from the site and extensive investigation of standing quarters throughout the region by the Architectural Research Department. The quarter is now one of the principal sites for the interpretation of black life in eighteenth-century Virginia. In 1989 the Carter's

Grove Slave Quarters received the Abbott Lowell Cummings Award from the Vernacular Architecture Forum. MRW and CRL



Above: First floor plan of Carter's Grove. Drawing by Mark R. Wenger. Below: Reconstructed slave house and garden at Carter's Grove. Photograph by Willie Graham, 2001.

