

Belle Isle, Palladio, and Carter's Grove: A formidable connection

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Palladio's Influence on American Architecture

Sixteenth century Italian architect Andrea Palladio had a significant influence on Colonial American architecture. This influence can be traced back to the rebirth of classic Roman architectural design in the Italian Renaissance and the works and publications of Palladio and others. An early proponent of Palladio in England, was Inigo Jones, whose Palladian style buildings and designs spawned a late 18th century Palladian Revival in England. This English Palladian Revival had a strong impact upon Colonial American architecture of the Georgian Period of 1714-1830 exerted by means of numerous published works of designs.

Palladio's classic, *I Quattro Libri, The Four Books on Architecture*, and other books by Palladian followers such as James Gibbs, Robert Morris, Colin Campbell, Batty Langley, and William Salmon presented a visual and practical sense of classicism in design. From these pattern books, the designs of the handsomely engraved plates were implemented in the colonies with enough skill to instill in American buildings a new sophisticated formality. Palladio's ideas translated well to the rural nature of young America. He took the large 16th century Italian farm with its many scattered buildings and unified the composition for a small villa. Palladio raised his one important floor or *piano nobile* on a high basement that became the main living space of the family, with high ceilings for coolness in the hot summers and mezzanine rooms tucked into upper spaces. The two-story building was flanked with dependencies, to house farm services, laid out on either side of the main block to frame it symmetrically, often in a *five-part plan* (Fig. 1). The central block, wings, and dependencies were connected by means of arcades, colonnades, or passages creating a *forecourt* (Fig. 2) and a single complex of spaces. This unification of spaces worked well especially in the south with the hot summers and with the necessity of housing services and laborers in outbuildings close to the main dwelling.

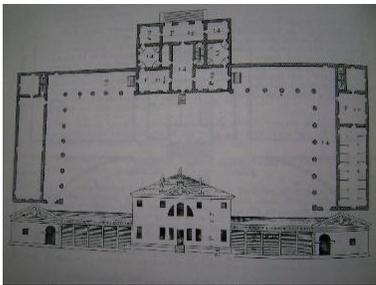


Fig. 1. Villa Foscari from *I Quattro Libri*



Fig. 2. Forecourt, Main Block, and Connected Dependencies

The Palladian Influence on Belle Isle and Carter's Grove

Belle Isle and its predecessor Carter's Grove are two examples of American Georgian period architecture influenced directly by the English Palladian Revival pattern books of Robert Morris, William Salmon, and James Gibbs.

Carter's Grove (Fig. 3), built in the Mid-Georgian period, was completed in 1755 with a style based upon plates from James Gibbs's *Book of Architecture* and William Salmon's *Palladio Londinensis*. The precedent set by Carter Burwell, builder of Carter's Grove, influenced Belle Isle builder Thomas Bertrand Griffin. Conceivably, Thomas Bertrand Griffin, who married Judith Burwell the daughter of Carter Burwell, would have spent time courting his wife at Carter's Grove and hence come under the influence of the Carter and Burwell families and their Palladian style mansions. Belle Isle (Fig. 4), the Griffin mansion house, was constructed in the Late-Georgian period and reflected a style based upon Robert Morris's plate 33 in *Select Architecture 1754*, a publication likely found in the library at Carter's Grove.



Fig. 3. Carter's Grove, Original Façade and Dependencies



Fig. 4. Belle Isle with Forecourt

Where did the long line of classicism and Palladian building traditions originate in the Carter and Burwell families?

Carter Burwell was a member of two families with lengthy traditions of mansion building using established classicism from England in its various forms. In the mid-1730's, the uncle of Carter Burwell, Lewis Burwell III built Kingsmill (Fig. 6.), a Burwell plantation house (no longer extant except for dependencies). Kingsmill is described as an exact arrangement of the Governor's Palace (Fig. 5.) in Williamsburg with dependencies projecting from the plane of the front wall of the mansion, closing the forecourt at either side in a Palladian villa format.

From the Carter side, the grandfather of Carter Burwell, Robert (King) Carter built his mansion Corotoman, circa 1701, as a two-story brick on an elevated basement, with projecting corner pavilions and rich classical ornamentation. King Carter's use of classicism in his building program likely influenced the construction of his children's mansion houses such as Cleve (Fig. 7.) built by his third son Charles. Built in the early 1750's, by Charles Carter, Cleve was a two-story brick center block with hipped roof and a stone water course. The façade and interior plan were designed in a style popularized by Palladian enthusiast, James Gibbs with an almost identical plan to that of Carter's Grove.

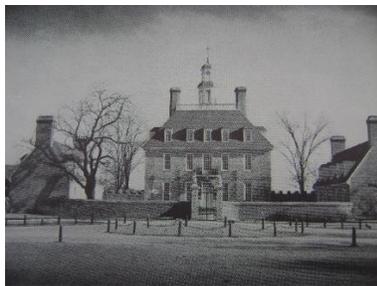


Fig. 5. Governor's Palace



Fig. 6. Kingsmill



Fig. 7. Cleve

From Corotoman and Kingsmill to Carter's Grove

Following both the Burwell and the Carter family building schemes, Carter Burwell, father of Judith Burwell Griffin, nephew of both Charles Carter and Lewis Burwell III, built Carter's Grove in 1749-1755. Carter's Grove (Fig. 3.), had a hipped roof, two story brick center block with water and string course. Elaborate paneled interiors were installed using as a guide book, William Salmon's *Londinensis*, purchased by Carter Burwell in 1751. In addition, Burwell built two dependencies one attached with passage and one incomplete, in essence, emulating the five-part plan of Gibbs's Palladian designs.

Belle Isle and the influence of Carter's Grove and Palladio

Belle Isle, a Late-Georgian period mansion, begun in 1767 by Thomas Bertrand Griffin exhibits a five-part plan with forecourt in the Palladian Revival style (Fig. 4.). The availability of pattern books by Palladian Revivalists in America and the physical presence of Judith Burwell Griffin's family home, Carter's Grove, would do more than suggest that Thomas Bertrand Griffin found the Palladian format the best model for his new house, Belle Isle. Based upon the wealth of his father and his wife's dower, a

grand building was planned. Griffin's design for his house and dependences was based on a plate from Palladian follower, Robert Morris's *Select Book on Architecture*, showing the 5-part plan of a central block, wings, and dependencies connected by hyphens or colonnades forming a forecourt(Fig.8.).

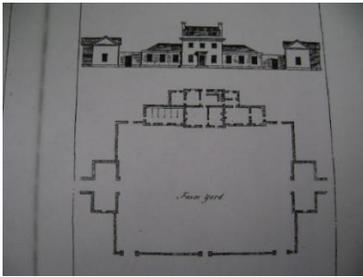


Fig. 8. Robert Morris Plate

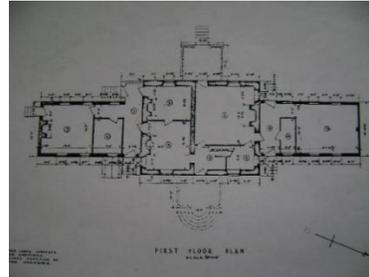


Fig. 9. Belle Isle Floor Plan

Belle Isle's central block has the look of a typical Late-Georgian period double pile, four square structure, with four over four rooms. The house features a hipped roof, modillion cornice, beveled water table, narrow belt course, and segmental brick window and door arches. These were all elements found on the original façade of Carter's Grove. Belle Isle interiors were elaborate with all paneled rooms and fancy staircase just as in those of Carter's Grove (Fig.9.). Two single pile, detached flankers (dependencies) of brick with clipped gabled roofs were also completed before Griffin's death in 1778 and formed a forecourt in the Palladian model. The exterior has visible signs of racking on the sides of the main block where Griffin had planned to add wings, which in addition to the dependencies, would complete the Morris design.

In 1786, Rawleigh William Downman acquired Belle Isle and by 1801-2 had initiated construction of the wings originally planned by Thomas Bertrand Griffin. The new wings reflected, with few changes, both Carter's Grove and Robert Morris's plan. In the Morris plan the wings had clipped gable or hipped roofs as well as a central block with no exterior porticos. The Downman addition of the wings with straight gables and the addition of Tuscan porticos to both fronts, presented an articulation and architectural style associated with turn of 19th century rather than late-Georgian 1765-1776. The later additions did serve to visually complete Belle Isle's forecourt, lacking only the connections of the dependencies to the wings of the main house. Ultimately, Belle Isle successfully emulated the model of the Palladian small villa, so beloved by the Carter, Burwell and Griffin families.

Conclusion

The legacy of Carter, Burwell and Griffin families is exemplified by their extensive building programs and their shared enthusiasm for classic design. From the Governor's Palace, Kingsmill, Cleve, Carter's Grove, to Belle Isle, a formidable connection can be made from Palladio, to English classicism including its Palladian Revival style, to fine Virginia Architecture in the 18th century.

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