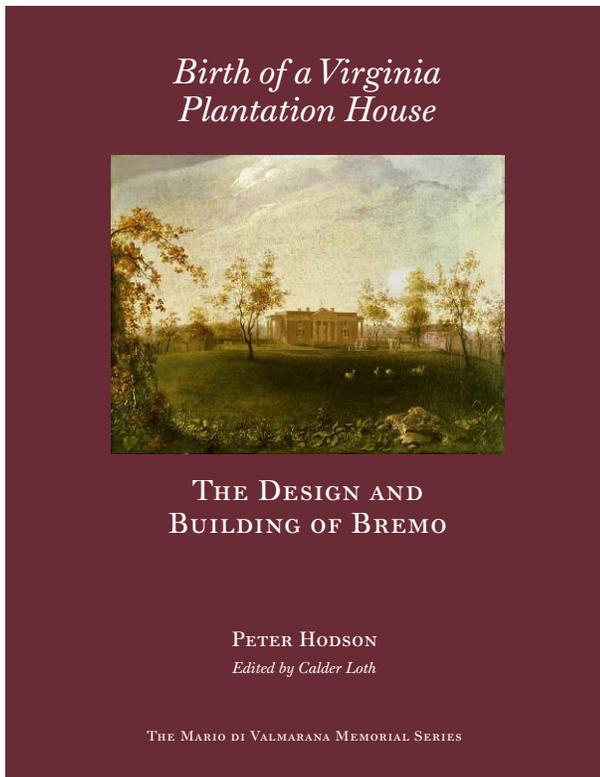


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Birth of a Virginia Plantation House: The Design and Building of BreMO examines the origins of one of America’s most beautiful and influential plantation houses, but it also captures a unique moment in the evolution of American culture when the new nation began to advance its own increasingly independent ideas about architecture and design.

Peter Hodson untangles and corrects the record as to those responsible for creating the 1815–1820 plantation house on the banks of the James River in Virginia. Then he constructs a poignant narrative, drawn from General Cocke’s diary, correspondence, invoices and other documents, to show the complexity of such a construction project and the real-life impact it had on the patron, his family and the craftsmen involved. Finally, Calder Loth, editor of the volume, adds his own essay unlocking the patternbook origins of many of BreMO’s interior motifs. In the process, he shows the central role played by one of America’s pioneering architectural patternbooks.

Birth of a Virginia Plantation House, printed in a limited edition of just 500 copies, is an essential reference for scholars and a fascinating addition to the library of any lover of American architecture, history or culture. (*More details overleaf*)



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Figure 3. Front facade, with view after wing of the right. (Reverend)

main floor of the house substantially as built, but with walls of disproportionate thickness, and Kinchall stated that the drawing "might possibly have been the one which gave rise to the legend of an original drawing by Andrew Briscoe handed down to the possession of the University of Virginia."¹⁰ Since the publication of Peter Kinchall's article the position of architectural scholars has been that the Briscoe provenance is untenable with the dating of Breemo as evidence, although the attribution of the house to the remains a strong popular tradition—fading, not entirely regression for instance in the State Highway Historical Marker near the entrance to the house. In the final pages of this work, made possible through the generosity of the Cooke descendants in allowing full access to the Cook Papers and the Breemo Drawings, we clarify the question of Briscoe's authorship by providing a chronological account of the construction and make available for scholarly examination the original collection of original documents relating to the design and building of the distinguished manor of American architecture.

The present of this book was in 1997 University of Virginia master's thesis, *The Design and Building of Breemo: An Epic*. Through the generosity of the Cooke family at the time, Joseph F. Kinchall, Jr., the thesis was primarily printed in facsimile the following year for general scholarly use. Regrettably, all but one of the printed copies were made in a warehouse shortly after printing.

A recognition of the value of understanding and recognizing one of the nation's premier Palladian-style houses in the Center for Palladian Studies in America has sponsored this republication of the thesis, as it is revised and updated form, and with new, high-quality photographs. In addition, there is the inclusion of a new essay by Colin Lavin, examining and identifying the published sources for many of Briscoe's architectural details. The text, original documents and drawings, coupled with Lavin's new scholarship, provides a unique insight into the emergence, in the early years of the new republic, of a distinctly American domestic architecture.

¹⁰ Kinchall, op. cit., "The Building of Breemo," p. 3.

The Design of Breemo

When in 1815 Gen. John Hathorn Cooke decided definitively to build a new manor at his first plantation, Upper Breemo, he was aware that his talents as an amateur architect would be required to take of designing the large and important structure which he contemplated without assistance. He then began seeking advice from friends who were also amateur architects, writing for suggested designs to his neighbors, John Patterson of Warren, and his old schoolmate, St. George Tucker of Williamsburg. Patterson responded first in July 1815 with a design for a large, two-story building with basement (Fig. 1) which clearly reflects Andrew's influence on Patterson's house-building. The formal correspondence is being printed, when Patterson drew three alternatives for the shaped roof of this room, but stated in accompanying letter [a-1] that he "should prefer the octagonal" are typical of Andrew's influence, and the design has a greater similarity to the early houses including Breemo as built—concentrated under Andrew's eye or influence in the region during this period.

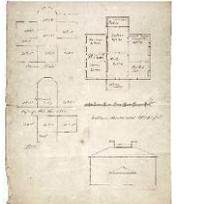


Figure 4. John Patterson, proposed design, July 1815



Figure 6. Breemo west gable. The west gable wing housed the ballroom and ballroom entrance, the west gable wing housed the ballroom and ballroom entrance.

On June 3 [a-15] Gen. Cooke had received letters from Ellis and Allen to Lagrange for the month, which they reported had been 28 [a-15] The respective, measurements and plans were at work during the remainder of the month building the base—showing the roof, finishing the cutting of the capitals for the portico columns and designing the roof. June 6 Gen. Cooke sent "Memorandum regarding the foundation of the New Building at U. R. . . ." [a-17] and on July 1 [a-18] that Messrs and the carpenters were awaiting the arrival of plank to build the roof and the brickwork when Drimmer's estimate had required. Work began in earnest on August 18 when Gen. Cooke sent " . . . and the hands opening the foundation for the Western Office of the new building, which Mr. Whitson is to commence the block work of the first week of September. . . ." [a-18] The month also saw him writing with Ellis and Allen to him an important memorandum from Cooney to Richmond, and on September 10 Whitson began laying out the foundation of the new manor on the reverse of a note from Whitson of September 2, 1817. [a-18] Relating the laying of the floor of the foundation, and on September 10 Whitson began laying out the foundation of the new manor on the reverse of a note from Whitson of September 2, 1817. [a-18] On the same day, Allen, the black stone-carver hired from Cooney, began preparing door and window sills for the other wings. Ellis was also responsible for the base of the Thomas columns for the new office wing, but Cooney undertook setting the capitals under Whitson's direction. [a-18]

"Which he was in Charlottesville for the laying of the cornerstone of the new Great College. . . ." [a-18] "Which he was in Charlottesville for the laying of the cornerstone of the new Great College. . . ." [a-18] "Which he was in Charlottesville for the laying of the cornerstone of the new Great College. . . ." [a-18]

On the 10th of November, however, that Gen. Cooke (in Charlottesville) again for the meeting of the Agricultural Society "from Mr. Nelson [a-1] in his way to give directions for the construction of a new plan for a new plan for your design for my principal building. . . ." [a-21] Nelson made only a brief visit "going down the river" [a-21] in the early part of November, and was on the night December 10, when Whitson had finished the round columns of the west wing and commenced the arches of the east wing, that "Mr.



Figure 7. The Breemo ball. The room has recently undergone renovation. (Reverend)

Nelson arrived and gave me a detailed plan of my buildings" [a-18] The next day Gen. Cooke "agreed with Mr. Nelson finally upon the plan of my proposed building, it is commenced the [Dated 18] October. . . ." [a-18] On the 15th that he is with him building the digging out of the foundation of the main block, and on the 18th Nelson "finished the ground plan of my buildings. . . ." [a-18]

Measured a great deal of preparatory activity and correspondence had been engaged. On November 6 [a-18] Ellis and Allen reported that the order for the marble and the standing bill had been received by C. L. Nelson, the representative to Lagrange. The order had been handed over "to a workman for the new office wing," and the marble could be expected to reach Richmond early in the spring. The prospect for completion and date the latter obtained ultimately from the Buckingham quarter were investigated, and an estimate of plans, doors, gears, options, ornaments and purchase—obtained the previous winter from Price of Richmond—was placed on the east wing of the ball at Upper Breemo. On November 10 and as Gen. Cooke planned two doors "Highgate Oak" from his brother-in-law, James Patrick, in "the S. W. Corner of my new manor at Upper Breemo" printing the room as bearing the best apple for sale.

On December 18 Ellis wrote to recommend James Curtis, a mason, to replace Allen, who had to return to Cooney. He also recommended a planter, M. Bladen. The contract for the completion

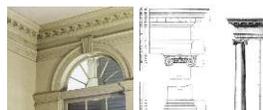


Figure 10. Window pane decorative muntins and transoms.

Following the tradition of classical design for windows, Nelson applied a variety of details to the room facades. There is for the ballroom, the room with the highest ceiling. The window panes of the ballroom comprise several panels. Ellis refers that details, the version of the pane used for the ballroom. (Fig. 10) Palladio's house, as shown in Book 3 of the Four Books, has rarely decorated muntins, including egg-and-dart, wavy, and leaf-and-rod. The basic problem, however, are essentially the same as in the window panes elsewhere. A similar version of the muntins, but without the decorated muntins, is illustrated in the Langley's The Builder's Journal, where it is labeled "The Rank Palladian Double-talloon." As with the detail elsewhere, the Langley shows the muntins with a paneled frame. Not to be left out, Bladen illustrates the same muntins with a paneled frame. (Fig. 10) To be sure, which seems to Nelson following "What he has done, Bladen's final variations is identical to the window pane elsewhere, or again, we can conclude that Bladen was the primary source here. The connection to Owen Bladen's book the more apparent is evidenced in the treatment of the arched window leading to the light. The architrave frame of such windows, the

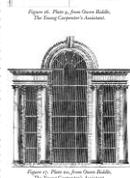


Figure 11. Plan of Owen Bladen, The Young Carpenter's Assistant.



Figure 12. Owen Bladen, The Young Carpenter's Assistant.

architrave, as well as the way in which the arch is set on the cornice closely follow Bladen's illustration of what he termed "a Venetian window in the Rank Order," illustrated in Plan and The Young Carpenter's Assistant. (Fig. 12) The window transoms in the main manor are similar but not identical to Bladen's plan.

We see a departure from reliance on Bladen's plans in the doorframes in the main-floor ballroom panes. The doorframes are not treated with classical architectural details but instead are the classical architectural style with corner blocks, although here the corner blocks appear the straight architectural style on the panes from the central into the arch. (Fig. 13) Each of the corner blocks is decorated with a panel consisting of concentric nested circles. The panes in a decorative detail behind the shallow pane for holding several light used in construction of muntins. Palladio and other Renaissance architects treated that use as decorative detail, as in the illustration, the Pattern Chart, as illustrated in the Lower edition of Four Books, a noteworthy example. (Fig. 13)

The frame type is termed "symmetrical architecture style" because instead of having an arched panes, as a standard architect, the frame here are treated with symmetrical moldings. The fashion for using ornamental moldings with square corner blocks originated in the late eighteenth-century England with the Regency style and the Greek influence. Some of the earliest architecture was treated with the ornamental facing on column heads, but the treatment came in many variations. Such was become popular with hill-builders because it was much easier to frame an opening than that with ornamental carvings, which are difficult to make. While it cannot be documented, it is likely that this new style of frame was introduced into this country by the noted British architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who emigrated to America in 1794 and is credited with introducing the Greek style or Greek Revival to the United States. He is, 1798-99 presentation showing in the state hall of the French House in Norfolk, which shows ornamental moldings and corner blocks decorated with panes, and may be the earliest proposal of an idea that is shown here.

The question then arises as to whether the Nelson got the idea of using this type of opening frame in Breemo. It is illustrated in none of the pantheons cited here and in none that we are aware of that would have been available to him at the time. However, since Nelson was then young and trained in Belfast,

BIRTH OF A VIRGINIA PLANTATION HOUSE
contains a wealth of illustrations: over a dozen reproductions of the original sketches and correspondences produced during the early stages of the design, plus numerous photographs showing both exterior and interior aspects of the house. Construction details have been meticulously researched and are shown in both source drawings and as-built photographs. The book contains 70 illustrations in all, plus transcriptions from original documents.

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