

WASHINGTON'S HEADQUARTERS: ITS HISTORY AND RESTORATION

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Pending a more complete statement on the history and furnishings of Washington's Headquarters, to be included in the new Guide Manual, now in preparation, it has been deemed advisable to give the guide staff a brief but helpful summary on this subject.

From the best evidence now available, the Ford Mansion appears to have been built by Col. Jacob Ford, probably in collaboration with his son, Col. Jacob Ford, Jr., between 1772 and 1774. The Fords were a well-to-do family, whose interests lay principally in iron works and land. During the Revolutionary War, they also were subsidized by the State of New Jersey for the maintenance of a powder mill on the Whippany River, not far east of the house. This mill supplied much ammunition for the American Continental Army.

Architecturally, the Ford Mansion is of the English High Renaissance style developed in the seventeenth century by Inigo Jones, which became the familiar type for the eighteenth century mansions of America. This style is characterized by a symmetrical facade, strong horizontal lines produced by a heavy, rich cornice (and in this case also by the belt course at the second floor line), and by a hipped roof. The characteristic formality was best obtained with stone or brick, but wood was often used because it was cheaper, and was believed to be dryer. The Ford Mansion is built of brick with a wooden exterior finish and interior plastered walls.

As in all good architecture, the attention is focused by a dominating feature -- in this case the fine doorway and window above. These are both derived from the Palladian motive of an arched central opening flanked by two minor, square-headed openings. The doorway is properly the more elaborate and is decorated with engaged Ionic colonettes and enriched cornices, and by a fanlight of interlacing design. The plan of the house, with its prominent

In 1777, when the Continental Army encamped for the winter near Madison, in the Loantaka Valley, the light infantry regiment of Colonel Richard Olney occupied the house as barracks for a period of almost two weeks (January 6-18). Just how the rooms were used at this time is not known. It was during that winter that Fort Mifflin was built, that Washington made his headquarters at the Arnold Tavern on Morristown Green, and that Colonel Jacob Ford and his son, Colonel Jacob, Jr., both died.

Three years later, when the Continental Army again had its winter encampment near Morristown, this time about three miles southwest of the village, in Jockey Hollow, Washington was invited to use the house as his headquarters by Mrs. Theodosia Ford, the widow of Colonel Jacob Ford, Jr. He gladly accepted. A certificate signed by one of his aide-de-camps on July 26, 1780, tells us that "the Commander in Chief took up his quarters at Mrs. Fords at Morris Town the first day of December 1779, that he left them the 23^d of June 1780, and that he occupied two rooms below; all the upper floor, Kitchen, Cellar, and Stable. The stable was built and the two rooms above Stairs finished at the public expense, and a well, which was entirely useless and filled up before, put in thorough repair by walling &c." Washington himself, in a letter to Quartermaster-General Nathanael Greene dated January 22, 1780, wrote as follows: "I have been at my prest. quarters since the 1st. day of Decr. and have not a Kitchen to Cook a Dinner in, altho' the Logs have been put together some considerable time by my own Guard; nor is there a place at this moment in which a servant can lodge with the smallest degree of comfort. Eighteen belonging to my family and all Mrs. Fords are crowded together in her Kitchen and scarce one of them able to speak for the colds they have caught." By "eighteen belonging to my family", the Commander-in-Chief referred, of course, to his official family, including his aide-de-camps, of whom Alexander Hamilton and Tench Tilghman were the most important. It included, also, Mrs. Washington, who was with him at Morristown for some considerable time.

This is the only positive contemporary evidence we have as to how the house was used during the winter of 1779-80, but the historian Benson J. Lossing, in his Field Book of the American Revolution, published in 1852, records some additional information which he acquired from Judge Gabriel H. Ford, the son of Colonel Jacob Ford, Jr., in 1848. His statement is as follows: "The general and his suite occupied the whole of the larger building, except two rooms on the eastern side of the main passage, which were reserved for Mrs. Ford and her family. The lower front room, on the left of the door, was his dining-room, and the apartment over it was his sleeping-room while Mrs. Washington was at headquarters. He had two log additions made to the house, one for a kitchen, on the east end, and the other, on the west end, was used as the offices of Washington, Hamilton, and Tilghman." In connection

with this statement, it is well to point out Washington's own reference, in his letter of 1780 to Greene (see above), to a log kitchen, and also that archeological investigation revealed evidence that a small structure of some kind had once abutted the east wall of the present restored kitchen wing. In the Headquarters itself, it appeared from structural examination of the framing that the original window in the west wall of the northwest, first floor room (Washington's Office) was at one time replaced by a door, and the door still later replaced by a window. It is possible that the door may have been inserted in place of the original window to give Washington and his staff easy access (remember that the winter of 1779-80 was a severe one) to the log office building referred to by Lossing, if such a structure indeed existing.

And now as to the restoration of Washington's Headquarters, completed by the National Park Service in 1939. In general, it may be said that all structural features dating from the Colonial period, except where rot or decay made their replacement with new material positively essential, have been retained. Features which dated from after 1779-80, the date of Washington's occupancy and hence the period of greatest historical significance for the mansion, were removed and the original features restored, so far as research made possible, or replaced by features of appropriate Colonial design, as indicated by known examples of other Colonial architecture in northern New Jersey. A very few concessions to modern needs have been made to accommodate heating, plumbing, and electric and telephone systems.

The windows of 1938 in the Ford Mansion were of the Victorian period (late nineteenth century), except for some original sash in the upper portion of the wing, which had 8"x10" panes, a typical Colonial size. New sash, of appropriate Colonial design, with 8"x10" panes, were therefore placed throughout the building, wherever necessary, as part of the restoration. The glass used was obtained from other old Colonial buildings which had been dismantled. Restoration of the original lacework fanlight in the central window above the main doorway was included in this work. The basement windows of 1938 had modern sash. These, with their frames, were removed, and wood grilles and frames, such as formerly existed at the Washington Tavern in Hasking Ridge, New Jersey, were installed. Wood grilles were typical basement window protection from New England to Florida during the Colonial period.

The first and second floor window blinds of 1938 were only about forty or fifty years old. The characteristic Colonial window covering in northern New Jersey for houses of the Headquarters type was panelled shutters over the lower windows and fixed, louvered blinds over the upper. This scheme was therefore followed in restoring the Ford Mansion. The design details were taken from the

Old Chateau in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and from the Lidgerwood House in Morristown.

In the wing, several changes were made in the fenestration. The window on the east side of the hall in 1938 was originally a doorway, as revealed by a cut in the boarding outside and by examination of the framework. The original Colonial door had been moved one bay east, taking the place of a window in the same location. These two features were therefore transposed in the restoration. On the rear or north side, it was found that the two central windows and frames of 1938 (one on each floor) were entirely modern, and that the original framework allowed for no windows here. These windows were therefore removed and the openings closed in the restoration. The door at the east end of the rear wing elevation was indicated to be an alteration by the framing and was replaced by a window, which seems to have been the original construction at that location.

While the east chimney is original, it was altered by the Washington Association of New Jersey many years ago to allow the installation of a heating range for the custodian, who then used the kitchen as living quarters. The original Dutch oven was removed in this process. When investigating the house as it stood in 1938, the architect found that seams showed in the chimney stonework, lining with the edge of the foundation, and that these seams came together in a semi-circle at a line where evidently the dome of the oven originally abutted the chimney. The masonry within these seams was removed and found to have been laid with modern mortar; and the cavity when cleaned out showed the exact form of the domical vault, while the foundation uncovered outside showed its projection. In line with this evidence, the oven was restored, the general precedent being the oven in an old Colonial house at Brookside, New Jersey. The caps on all three chimneys of the building as it stood in 1938 had obviously been built up with modern brick and mortar; but as they were good below the heavy topping out were retained, with one or two new topping courses along the lines of good Colonial design for this section of the country. As one chimney was of modern brick, all three were painted white.

The wood steps of 1938, being modern, were also removed. Unfortunately, no evidence existed as to the original form or material of these steps, but in related mansions in this vicinity, such as the Dey House at Freekness and the Old Chateau at Elizabeth, local sandstone was used. The wood steps were therefore replaced with brown sandstone steps of Colonial design.

The front dormers of 1938 were built on top of the roof construction; and the thin muntins of the sash, the large glass size,

and the character of their trim pointed to about 1830 as the date when they were built. Records of the Washington Association showed that the large rear dormers of 1938 were added in 1903-04. All dormers were therefore removed in the restoration, and a new roof of hand-split red cedar shingles applied in line with good Colonial design for this type of house.

In the interior of the mansion as it stood in 1938, it was discovered that alterations of the two northwest rooms and the wing had been made about 1830. Neither of the two northwest rooms had any trim older than this, except perhaps the mantel in the upper room, which was retained. The mantel in the lower room in 1938, said to have come from Washington's room at the Arnold Tavern, his headquarters in the winter of 1777, was actually early nineteenth century in period, and was therefore discarded. The chief alteration to this lower room during the nineteenth century had been the cutting back of the chimney breast, involving destruction of the original fireplace. As part of the restoration, therefore, this chimney and fireplace were rebuilt to fit the original floor framing, the design of both fireplace and mantel being identical with that in the room directly across the hall (the lower northeast room of the main building).

There was no evidence whatever as to the original trim in the two northwest rooms of 1938. This was therefore restored to match that in the rooms on the east side of the main building. It also was necessary to carry heating ducts from the first to the second floor west rooms. These ducts are concealed in the cupboards built against the south wall of the northwest first floor room. Cupboards in this position are familiar features of Colonial houses in New Jersey, such as the Washington's Headquarters at Somerville, the Winfield Scott House (now destroyed but architecturally recorded before its destruction) at Elizabeth, and the Dey House at Freakness.

The plaster of 1938 was removed from walls and ceilings in all rooms of the building except the northeast first and second floor rooms of the main section, where it was repaired. The modern plaster throughout the rest of the house was in bad condition and was removed for study purposes, except in the lower hall of the main building, where, being in good condition, it was retained. The finish of the new plaster simulates Colonial precedent.

Almost all original hardware throughout the building was replaced by new many years ago. However, marks on the doors indicated the size and location of old hinges and locks. These marks were used in designing the new hardware, which is all hand-forged and stamped with the date, 1939. All new wood and stonework in the building is

also stamped, 1939. In the wing, where new hardware was needed, and where no evidence remained for it, the designs were inspired by early New Jersey examples.

Fortunately, all original fireplaces remained in the building as it stood in 1938, except the one in the first floor northwest room, as referred to above. Most of them had been replastered, however, with cement. This cement plaster was removed; and lime and sand plaster, such as was found in the back of the fireplace in the first floor northeast room of the main building, was substituted. Modern paint on the stone facings of the downstairs fireplaces was removed. In the building as it stood in 1938, the original stone hearths had been replaced by cement construction. These cement hearths were accordingly removed as part of the restoration, and new stone hearths installed to match those which still remained in the house.

Modern flooring in the kitchen and in the second floor portion of the wing was removed as part of the restoration, and replaced with old floor boards taken from the attic. The floors in the main house, being old, were retained, only a very few minor repairs being necessary. Modern paint was scraped from all the floors, and a natural, waxed finish, typically Colonial, applied.

During the course of restoration work, the wing presented the greatest problem. All plaster was removed to allow a complete examination of the framing. It was found that a set of mortise holes in the kitchen ceiling timbers occurred ten feet south of the north wall, and nine and one-half inches further south in the service hall to the west. This was good evidence that the partitions were not planned to be as at present, but due to the great age of the existing two-inch oak plank partitions, it did not seem proper to remove them, especially as the change might well have taken place in Washington's day. The ceiling beams of the kitchen were left exposed, as they undoubtedly were in the Colonial period. Minor repairs were necessary in the fireplace lintel, which had been burned through in three places. The mantel boards which covered this original lintel in 1938, and which were modern, were appropriately removed.

Restoration of the second floor of the wing involved replacing partitions which had been removed by the Washington Association many years ago to form a meeting room for that organization. Structural evidence showed that a partition had originally existed east of the stair, against the exposed posts, and that another ran east and west over the mortise holes in the kitchen ceiling beams. This evidence was followed in the restoration. The rest room and service facility closet of 1938 were retained, but were subdivided to conceal the plumbing fixtures.

The original form of the main stair at Washington's Headquarters has been a perplexing problem since the National Park Service acquired the house in 1933. Particularly, aside from being dangerous, it seemed out of character with the general structure, and its design was in striking contrast to that of stairs in other New Jersey Colonial houses of the same elaboration, such as the Old Chateau at Elizabeth. Its steep incline was especially unusual. Moreover, the stair itself, having only a non-descript handrail, and being poorly put together, did not provide adequate evidence for fixing the date of its construction.

The framing of the house was therefore carefully examined with these considerations in mind. This indicated that there had originally been no door from the main hall on the second floor directly leading to the northwest second floor room, and that the passage existing in this location in 1938 had been cut through, probably involving a change in the stairway, at a later time. The arrangement of floor timbers in the northwest second floor room also indicated that the house had been framed originally for a larger stair. Since extensive changes seem to have been made in the building about 1830, it is likely that the passage was cut through about that time. This tied in with structural evidence that the second floor northwest room had originally been reached by a doorway from the southwest room, which General and Mrs. Washington are said to have occupied. The changes of about 1830, resulting in separating these two rooms and making both accessible from the hall only, were doubtless dictated by the then increasing emphasis on privacy.

The present restored stair was designed to fit the original framing. Unfortunately, no evidence came to light, either from physical or documentary sources, as to its exact form. However, the design has been kept as simple as possible, conformable to the requirements of space and local Colonial precedent for the balusters and trim.

This statement is based upon the documentary study of Washington's Headquarters prepared by the writer, the architectural report prepared by Associate Architect Thomas T. Waterman, who was in charge of planning the restoration, and upon other research done by the writer. For further details, photographs, and plans relating to the restoration, inquiring visitors should be advised to consult with Superintendent Kahler. The reports in question may be freely consulted by visitors upon request.

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