The Hermitage Plantation: A Landscape of Social Distance

In Federalist New Castle

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Like many extant buildings in and around New Castle, Delaware, the "Hermitage" plantation house, named by Nicholas Van Dyke in 1806, stands as an icon to the social landscape of Federalist Delaware. A study of the Hermitage reveals a built environment in which the use of local and extralocal architectural solutions and ¬ expressed the occupants' desire to order and separate public and private spaces. Although no room-by-room probate inventory was discovered for the Hermitage, its evolution during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from a one-room-plan of two and a half stories to a more elaborate multiple-winged-plan of three and a half stories illustrates that during this period there was an increasing emphasis on spatial hierarchies. The use of particular decorative ornamentation and architectural finish as well as spatial organization conveys the intention of Nicholas Van Dyke to control social interaction and separate himself and his family from those whom they believed to be of inferior social status.

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The land on which the Hermitage stands was first patented in 1667 to Captain John Carr.[1] After this patent the ownership of the 150 acre parcel fragmented into a number of holdings, changing hands several times by the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1748 Doctor John Finney purchased a 72 acre

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[1] See copy of the 1667 patent to John Carr made for David Finney February 10, 1799 from the original in Finney's possession in appendix. Dupont Family Papers, Accession 298 Series H Box 8, Hagley Library.

"plantation or Tract of land Scituate & Being on the North West of the said town of New Castle..."[2] Presumably, this purchase included the two-and-a-half story one-room-plan brick structure which formed the original block of the Hermitage and was most likely, according to its construction, built in the early eighteenth century. The structure's primary wall was oriented to the south toward the public road from New Castle to Christiana Bridge, now State Route 9. The primary wall is constructed of flemish-bond brickwork, while the secondary wall exhibits seven course common-bond brickwork (Fig. 1 & 2). The basement walls of the original section are made of rubble and English-bond brickwork. The rubble construction encompasses about one-half of the structure's foundation in support of the chimney pile.

The first story of the original block of the Hermitage was entered directly from the outside through a doorway on the south facade. Its chimney pile is constructed against the west gable end (Fig. 2). While no evidence now exists, it is possible that a small corner stairway leading up to the second-story chamber was located to the right of the hearth. In the upper chamber a narrow stairway winds up to a finished attic space, suggesting that this area was a possible location for the original first-story stair.

The structural development of the Hermitage coincides with southern New Castle County's first building period (1700-1820.)[3] Sometime during the latter half of the eighteenth century a four-

[2]Deed dated 2 September 1748, (Dupont Family Papers), Hagley Library.

[3] Bernard L. Herman, Architecture and Rural Life in Central Delaware, 1700-1900. (Knoxville: 1987).

bay two-story kitchen addition of common-bond brickwork was made to the original structure (Fig. 3). Seams in the exterior brickwork indicate the later addition of this space to the original block (Fig. 4).

No evidence exists to indicate whether a separate kitchen was ever located on the premises. Indeed, the addition of the kitchen wing suggests that no such separate domestic space was extant. It can be surmised, then, that the creation of this new area allowed for the removal of cooking and other work-related functions from the hall. This functional differentiation was the first major change in the Hermitage's spatial organization. Rather than the scene of busy domestic interaction, the hall assumed new functions as a common sitting room, bedchamber, or dining room.[4]

The decorative elaboration of the Hermitage's hall indicates how this room fit into the new spatial hierarchy created by separating domestic functions from main living areas. Like most other southern New Castle County farmhouses, the hearth wall in the Hermitage hall was the most expressive of a new decorative sensibility. While the original raised paneling was stripped away during subsequent remodeling, examples still exist in the upper chamber and inside the hall's chimney closets which were added later. Originally, the chimney wall projected into the room approximately fifteen inches. Still existing on this wall is a mantle complete with a heavy ceiling cornice (Fig. 5). It

[4] Herman, p. 19.

resembles those seen at Fairview near Odessa, Delaware.[5] The date of Fairview (after 1769) indicates that the elaboration of the Hermitage hall coincided with the addition of the kitchen wing. When the walls on the sides of the hearth were moved forward to create chimney closets, most probably during an extensive remodeling in the early nineteenth century, the mid-eighteenth-century panels were left intact on the sides of the hearth wall. The panels and decorative details such as trim on the hearth wall in the upper chamber were left in place as was vertical boarding, illustrating how the interior of the first floor hall may have looked (Fig. 6).

It is possible that this first reorganization of space occurred when John Finney's son David inherited the plantation of 133 acres south of the canal in 1771. During John Finney's ownership, the Hermitage was a tenant farm.[6] Perhaps David Finney, a major landowner after inheriting his father's extensive holdings, saw the opportunity to acquire and create a country estate. This could have been a reflection of David Finney's desire to set himself apart from others in the New Castle community. The changes occurring at the Hermitage by the end of the eighteenth century illustrate a combination of new decorative concerns and the traditional architectural forms of direct entry from the outside. As Bernard Herman has asserted, "the resulting

[5] Herman, p. 55. The mantles in Fairview's parlor and hall are strikingly similar although a bit simpler.

[6] John Finney will, dated September 6, 1770. Finney died in 1771. From copy of will dated April 18, 1774, Accession 298 Series H box 8.

landscape was one in which architectural detail conveyed values of domestic interaction and social distance that were understood by many, accessible to some, and communicated by a few using combinations of formal, constructional, and aesthetic options."[7]

On May 31, 1802, David Finney sold the plantation to his son David Thompson Finney for $8,000.[8] By 1806 David T. Finney had paid only $2,000 of the mortgage. In this year David Thompson's father died, stipulating that the mortgage would be discharged if David sold the plantation and divided the proceeds between his other two siblings.[9]9 On April 1, 1806, the Hermitage plantation consisting of 141 acres was sold to Nicholas Van Dyke a prominent New Castle lawyer and politician "for $6,000 lawful silver money of Delaware.[10] Shortly after acquiring the plantation Van Dyke embarked on an "experiment" of country living, naming the property the Hermitage. Van Dyke joined this purchase with property he already owned adjacent to the plantation, creating a parcel of approximately 150 acres complete with brick "messuage."

It was during Nicholas Van Dyke's tenure as owner of the Hermitage that the structure essentially attained its modern form (Fig. 8). Van Dyke first added a two-story 18 feet square dining room and chamber adjacent to the kitchen addition and cut a new

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[7] Herman, p. 53-4

[8] Deed, Book Z Vol. 2, p. 69, recorded May 27, 1803.

[9] Codicil to will of David Finney, Esq., dated February 21, 1805, proved February 26, 1805 Reel #34 Microfilm, #3087, University of Delaware.

[10] Deed recorded September 22, 1809, Book H, Vol. 3 p. 73, New Castle County Deeds.

stairway to the upper chambers (Fig. 9). A letter from Nicholas to his wife Mary from Washington dated June 21, 1809 makes brief mention that "it will be necessary to make repeated inquiries of Colesbury, as to the Completion of his work lest he keeps us waiting for the Room all the Summer." [11] This reference to Colesbury, probably a head carpenter, and "the Room" suggests the possibility that Van Dyke was referring to the new addition.

During the period around 1810, Van Dyke's correspondence reveals his aspirations to lead a country life of leisure. As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, the theme of Van Dyke's boredom with endless political discussions and the yearning to flee the backwater that was Washington is quite pronounced. In a June 14, 1809 letter to Mary Van Dyke, Nicholas writes

> each [illeg.] experiment in the field of politics convinces me more strongly that my happiness is centered in a family, which is too dear not to be the subject of my constant recollections & anxious solicitations. You will believe me when I assure you that I sigh for the shade of the Hermitage and the sweet in the course of domestic life.[12]

In another passage to his wife from 1810 Van Dyke refers to his aspirations of providing a leisure life for his wife away from uninteresting New Castle

> I Trust you have by this time become so much habituated to leisurely life as not to suffer the arrangements & business of the farm to give you any effort beyond what may add to your Happiness--Such you know has been my repeated Order & is still my most earnest injunction--for I repeat that I never

[11] Longwood manuscripts, Box 13 Group 4.

[12] Longwood manuscripts, Box 13 Group 4.

> should have tried the experiment of a Country Life, but under a full persuasion that your happiness if not greatly increased would not be diminished by the Change.[13]

It can be gleaned from this letter that Nicholas Van Dyke had made a conscious decision to "Change" his life style. Van Dyke's involvement with the Hermitage was more than merely adding a country estate to his land holdings. His decision to reside permanently at the Hermitage suggests an attempt to separate himself and his family from town life and live the life of a country gentleman.

The application of doorway surrounds throughout the house identical to the new addition's window surrounds reflects a concerted effort by Van Dyke to order the architectural finish at the time of the new addition. The elaboration of these thresholds thus created new social and domestic spaces bridgeable only by the chosen few. In the Hermitage, as Bernard Herman has suggested for other structures in rural Delaware, "visual reference points project the social values experienced through architectural movement.[14]

In 1818, Van Dyke added the final and largest addition to the Hermitage (Fig. 10). This three-story two-bay (each floor) section of the Hermitage consists of an 18 by 23 feet parlor on the first floor and chambers on the second and third floors. The third floor is capped with two dormer windows. This addition is essentially an urban side passage one-room-plan like many seen in

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[13] Longwood manuscripts.
[14] Herman, p. 43

the town of New Castle. The passage is small, unheated and does not have a stair. The exterior is constructed of seven course brickwork. The window above the front doorway is false in an attempt to balance the facade. The front entryway is arched with a gothic fanlight window and is rather sparsely decorated with lightly emphasized pilasters and paneling (Fig. 11).

Up to the point of the last addition, the increasing usage of decorative elements gradually emphasized the delineation of spaces into distinct social spheres. With the completion of the final phase of the Hermitage's physical evolution the ranking of social spaces through architectural details had matured. Examining the hierarchy of finish in the completed Hermitage reveals the intention of Nicholas Van Dyke to order the social landscape around him into private and public spaces.

An initial glance at the exterior of the Hermitage seems to present a peculiarly out of balance facade, something that might not be expected of Georgian-style buildings. For example, the dormer windows on the large block are over too far to the right of the roof (Fig. 12). Another instance is the upper chamber window and first story doorway of the original block (Fig. 13) or the asymmetrical spacing of the windows on the kitchen addition (Fig. 14). But a closer examination reveals that balance is achieved in discrete formal units. From inside the third-story chamber the windows appear quite centered and provide the room with a symmetrical treatment. The placement of the window and doorway in the original block is necessary to allow access from

the side passage into the tall. As for the kitchen, the chimney pile required that the windows be set over in this manner. From inside, as with the dormer windows, symmetry is achieved.[15] All of this points to the subordination of the exterior facade to the interior spaces. Much more important to eighteenth-and nineteenth-century occupants was the ordering of interior spaces.

The first threshold in the ordering of space at the Hermitage is the front entryway. The decorative detail on this doorway is much less elaborate than that found on many houses in New Castle. Nonetheless, compared with other entries at the Hermitage this one is much more ceremonial. This threshold distinguished the space beyond the entry from the landscape outside and as Robert St. George asserts for elaborated doorways in the Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts, "created (a) symbolic barrier between [the occupants] and their neighbors."[16]

What is important to understand about the Hermitage is the symbolic process of movement rather than the interpretation of symbols.[17] As one gained entry into the passage, for example, he or she was directed according to his or her relationship to the occupants. If one was of a lower status than the owner, his or her route would be straight ahead through the plain door into the common room or hall. If, on the other hand, one's status was

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[15] Herman, p. 29.

[16] Robert Blair St. George, "Artifacts of Regional Consciousness in the Connecticut River Valley, 1700-1780," in Material Life in America 1600-1860, Robert Blair St. George, ed. Boston: 1988.

[17] Dell Upton argues this in "Form and Use, Style and Mode, Reading the Artifact" in Living in a Material World, Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture, Gerald L. Roers, ed.

equal to or greater than the owner's, his or her entrance would-be through the concave mahogany door which accessed the parlor or best room. These secondary thresholds were clearly marked in a language understood depending upon one's position in relation to the owner, indicating a conception of distinct and separate advances.

If one gained entry into the Hermitage, he or she encountered a hierarchy of finish between the parlor, dining room, common room, upstairs chambers, kitchen, and, finally, the attic. One finds in the parlor a large room with large windows on the south and east walls (Fig. 15). Elaborate architraves surround the doorways, windows and chimney cupboards and consist of bulls-eye motifs with deep vertical fluting. In the wide door jambs there is vertical ribbing, complementing the fluting found on the architraves. Eleven-inch baseboards grace the entire room as does a light ceiling molding. The parlor also has a simple chair rail extending around the room. The centerpiece of the parlor's architectural finish is a black marble mantle, reportedly from King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.[18] Its design is simple and elegantly carved with double column pilasters extending from the mantle cornice to the floor. The mantle cornice in supported with double marble brackets and protrudes from the hearth wall twelve and one half inches. The hearth wall

[18] Lena Deemer, the owner of the Hermitage since 1949, had some unverified written information stating the origin of the marble for the parlor mantle. I was unable to discover any such documentation.

protrudes twenty-seven and one half inches into the room. On each side of the hearth wall are display cupboards with tall doors of approximately seven feet. Two doors balance the room on each side of the mantle, one being the concave mahogany door leading in from the unheated passage, the other leading into the hall. The concave wall and door are interesting aspects of the parlor and accentuate its use as the best room at the Hermitage.

The dining room adjacent to the parlor is the next highly finished room. One enters the dining room through a large double doorway six feet nine inches wide with eight feet nine-inch doors. Patch pieces in the flooring indicate the doorway was widened from a three feet five-inch opening. This room, like the parlor, possesses evenly spaced windows, one on the north wall and two on the east wall (Fig. 15). The room contains an Adamesque or "Welford" style mantle. It is constructed of wood chair rail which, except for the hearth wall, surrounds the entire dining room. The hearth wall protrudes into the room twenty-two inches, a bit less than in the parlor. The seven-inch baseboards exhibit beading and like the ceiling cornice are heavier than those found in the parlor, indicating the movement toward simplicity in design as the Federal period progressed.

The next room on our journey through spatial hierarchy is upstairs to the parlor chamber. Between the first story and the upper chambers the stair hall exists as a barrier between private and public space. Like the parlor below, each surround in the chamber is finished with bulls-eye motifs and vertical fluting.

The windows again are balanced and exhibit fold-in interior shutters. The mantle is wooden with a series of cornices, but lacking in any other distinguishing ornamentation (Fig. 17). A "little room over the entry" could have been used as a closet.[19]19 This storage space'has a medium-sized window that faces west. The door to the little room and the door leading out to the stair hall balance the chimney wall. The parlor chamber also has a ceiling cornice matching the one downstairs in the parlor.

Following the same pattern as downstairs, the dining room chamber exhibits the next highly finished space. The mantle in this space is much more spare than the one in the parlor chamber. The doorway from the stair hall is oddly placed due to the convergence of the dining room addition and the kitchen. As can be seen from Fig. 9, the west slope of the dining room addition roof merges into the kitchen roof in order to make room for the stair that was cut when the dining room addition was made. In like manner this particular advance continues up a straight stair located against the west gable end of the parlor addition to a third-floor chamber. This room contains a mantle exhibiting the sparest decorative detail of all and the two dormer windows.

This advance through one hierarchy of space at the Hermitage illustrates how architectural finish controls the flow from one space to another. Altogether, three such separate advances can be outlined (Fig. 18). While differentiation in wealth increased and land grew scarce as the nineteenth century

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[19] Bernard L. Herman, *Architecture and Rural Life in Central Delaware, 1700-1900*, p. 32.

progressed, wealthy individuals like Nicholas Van Dyke increasingly sought to separate themselves from their social inferiors. These individuals possessed certain options of architectural solutions which they appropriated depending upon their needs.

Without understanding Van Dyke's needs for particular architectural solutions, it seems odd that he would appropriate an urban-style side passage plan for his country retreat. While Van Dyke was one of the wealthy elite in New Castle society, his resources were limited. In the 1810s his son Kensey was at Princeton College and Van Dyke himself was serving in both state and federal government.

There is evidence that he was restless and bored with New Castle. Indeed, this was one of his reasons for attempting to experiment with a country life at the Hermitage. But by 1816, even the Hermitage could not relieve him of his restlessness. Appearing in the Delaware Gazette, on February 1, 1816 was an ad announcing that he was contemplating a move away from Delaware (Fig 19). Van Dyke's lack of commitment to the community at this point in his life suggests an unwillingness to invest heavily in a major renovation of the Hermitage. Yet, if he was to maintain the social distance that supported his position in New Castle society, he needed to enlarge the space at the Hermitage somewhat. The modest plan of a side passage urban form familiar to him and local builders offered a satisfactory compromise. In August of 1820, another ad appeared in the Delaware Gazette

offering either his town house or the Hermitage farm for rent. Whereas Van Dyke once had sighed for the shade of the Hermitage, by 1820 the farm did not seem to matter much to him. This was the year his son Nicholas, Jr. died and one can only guess how this tragedy affected him at that moment.

While Nicholas Van Dyke's motives for wanting to first sell and then rent the Hermitage can only be guessed, it is known that he took a great personal interest in designing and supervising the carpentry done to his houses. Among his personal correspondence was found a letter to Doctor Colesbury, the carpenter who may have overseen the building of the Hermitage's dining room addition. In this letter from Washington dated 14 February 1825, the year before his death, Van Dyke discussed particular directions and methods of construction. Firstly, he is concerned with hanging Venetian Doors at the Kensey Johns Van Dyke House which had been built around 1820.

> The Venetian Doors are to cover the whole exterior including the side lights according to the plan [illeg.] but if I was present I should measure to ascertain whether there is sufficient space for so wide a door to open with out interfering with the window shutter--for .that must not be, as has happened thro' the Carpenters mistake in setting the parlour Windows next to Pearl Street. In fact, as this Item is a matter of some importance to the appearance of the front & the eye alone can decide what will comport best with. [illeg.], I should prefer having an opportunity to look at the door and decide about it on the Spot.

This letter also mentions work done to the "Summer House", the name for the Hermitage at this time.

> As to the Summer House, I think the contract speaks of putting up Shelves 8 it was intended to come out the Window Spaces when properly boarded outside so as to be securefrom rot [?]) into open apartments for books. This will require care to secure the joint ofthe boards at the top of the window-& also will require well seasoned boards with well fitted plough and groove, to guard against the screeching storms to which we are subject...the gate at the Hermitage farm was if I recollect, to be a "handsome one" & was left to his own good Taste, in which I have [illeg.][20]

From these two passages it is certain that Van Dyke not only knew about construction, but also took an active interest in directing the process so as to prevent mistakes. It is likely that Nicholas Van Dyke acted as his own architect, a common practice among individuals of Van Dyke's social and educational position.[21]

[20] Letter from Nicholas Van Dyke to Dr. H. Colesbury, Longwood manuscripts, Box 13 Group 4. See copy in appendix.

[21] Bernard L. Herman, "Kensey Johns and His Carpenters," in *After Ratification, Material Life in Delaware, 1789-1820*, ed. Garrison, Herman, and Ward. Newark: Museum Studies Program, University of Delaware, 1988.

The Hermitage plantation illustrates some of the ways architecture was used by people of the past to make statements about themselves and those around them. In a conscious attempt to control social relationships through the use of spatial hierarchies, we obtain a glimpse of how wealthy men like Nicholas Van Dyke looked upon and reacted to the landscapes that surrounded them. In consciously ordering their spatial environment, some eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Delawareans were able to dominate those whom they believed were socially inferior. The changes that occurred during the Hermitage's evolution from a one-room-plan brick house to a Federal-style brick mansion coincided with the steady development in America of economically and socially differentiated classes based not on privilege but distance and wealth.

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