

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE



Illustration 2. Front view of The George Read (II) House, New Castle, Delaware.

In 1971 the George Read (II) house looks much as it did soon after its completion in the first years of the nineteenth century. (Illustration 2). In 1804, Benjamin Henry Latrobe depicted it in his survey of the town of New Castle. (Illustration 3). At that time it was set between two houses of a smaller scale and of an earlier date, one of which, a brick house with a pent eave, had been owned by George Read (I). Both

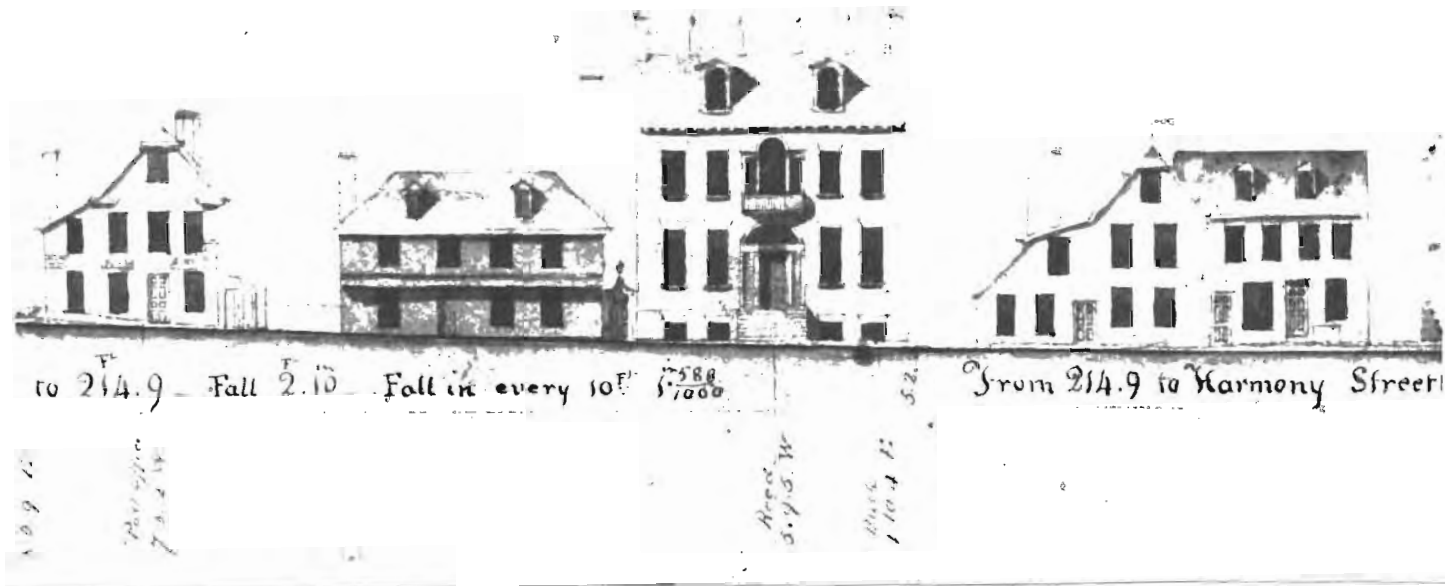


Illustration 3. Section of Front Street, 1804, Detail of Survey of New Castle, Delaware by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Delaware State Archives, Dover, Delaware.

of the earlier houses were later destroyed. In Latrobe's survey, the house looked, as it does today, across a green meadow towards the Delaware River, and is a rectangular, five-bayed, brick structure, topped by a balustraded "widow's walk" with double square chimneys at the gable ends. Set on a raised cellar built of fieldstone, the main body of the house is of brick laid in Flemish bond.

Designed in the manner of a Philadelphia town house, presenting a squarish appearance to the front, but having an extension at the rear, unseen from the street, the Read House was built on a relatively narrow lot of forty-eight feet. It is reasonable to assume that Read, having spent considerable time in Philadelphia, would want to build a house much like those fashionable in the large city up the River. There is, moreover, ample documentation of other Delawareans modeling their residences after those seen in that place.¹

The exterior of the house exhibits sophisticated details. The molded marble window frames and keystones of the first two floors, with slightly plainer ones reserved for the cellar, supply an elegance rarely found in New Castle houses. (Illustration 4). The central section of the facade is ornamented by a large arched doorway surmounted by a Palladian window, large enough to reach from floor to ceiling in the second-floor hallway. (Illustration 5). The surfaces of the woodwork if this window and doorway are softened with gouge carving on the arches, although the jambs and lintels are severely simple pilasters and entablature of a modified Doric Order. (Illustration 6). The facade of the house is further lightened by the use of a delicate iron balcony, in front of the central window. (Illustration 7). This railing, long thought to be a later addition, can be seen in Latrobe's drawing of 1804, and is documented



Illustration 4. Photograph of front window, The George Read (II) House.



Illustration 5. Photograph of entrance, The George Read (II) House.



Illustration 6. Photograph of doorway detail, The George Read (II) House.

in letters written during the construction. The marble entrance steps, which blend well with the rest of the house, are a twentieth century addition.

On the interior, following the arrangement common to many Philadelphia houses, the George Read (II) House is composed around a central hall, which leads, through a series of arches, to the large garden door. Gouge work carving decorates the arches, as well as the deep entablatures which top the entrances to the two parlors



Illustration 7. Photograph of Palladian window and iron railing, second floor front, The George Read (II) House.

and office. (Illustration 8). The central area of the hall has a plasterwork ceiling, decorated with a central medallion surrounded by widely spaced five-pointed stars. A plain molding at the edge separates a simple border of rosettes from a trailing vine of leaves and berries. The plasterer filled empty spaces between the vine and the stars with sprays of leaves and acorns. (Illustration 9).

The rooms on the first floor consist of a large, plainly decorated room to the right of the front door, and two large rooms to the left, with elaborate architectural woodwork and mantelpieces. The room to the

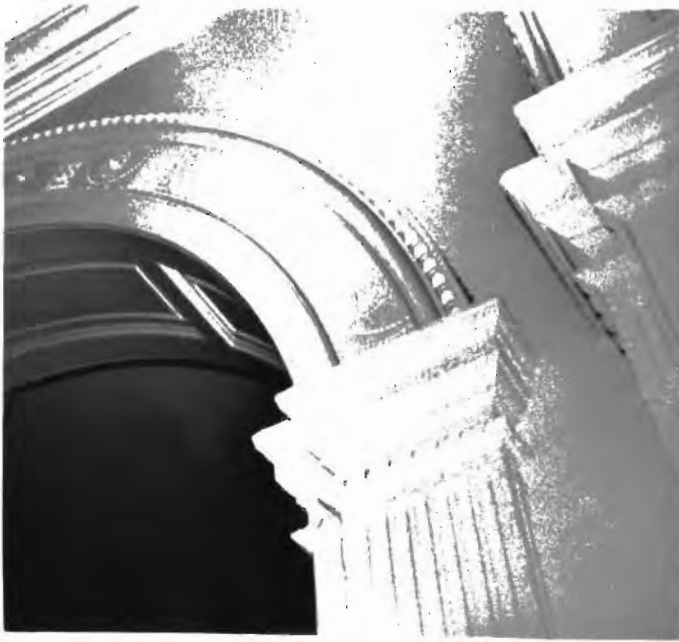


Illustration 8. Photograph of interior archway carving, first floor, The George Read (II) House.



Illustration 9. Photograph of ceiling detail, first floor hallway, The George Read (II) House.

right is today used as a dining room; its walls decorated with modern murals of New Castle scenes. When the house was built, however, this room apparently was intended for use as George Read's law office; it was designated as such on the plans (See Chapter III), and its restrained woodwork, quite unlike that in other principal rooms of the house, supports this theory.

The two parlors on the left side of the hallway, entered from that passage, are connected by a pair of wide mahogany doors, over which rises an interior fanlight, spreading from a small sunburst at the center. (Illustration 10). Papered walls, originally painted white, surround deep plaster cornices of fruit design, a gouge-carved archway, doorway entablatures of the same work, and elaborate applied plasterwork and gouge-carved mantels.² (Illustrations 24-28). The ceilings of the room are also decorated with plasterwork. Heavy beading forms a border around the room's perimeter. (Illustration 11). French windows (an innovation of the period) open onto the terrace. (Illustration 12).

Other rooms on the first floor include a small room behind the office, then used as a pantry. To the rear of the house, connected with it and on the same floor level, are the kitchen and laundry or washhouse. Over the kitchen are rooms which were originally the servants' quarters, reached by an enclosed stair, between the kitchen wing and the main part of the house.

The main staircase of the house leads from the center hall, where it is set behind the office, and cannot be seen from the entrance door. It has turned wooden banisters and a molded mahogany handrail, which ends in a scroll at the bottom. The stairs rise in a straight line, but turn to the right at the landing, where a large



Illustration 10. Photograph of interior archway, first floor, The George Read (II) House.



Illustration 11. Photograph of ceiling detail, first floor, back parlor, The George Read (II) House.



Illustration 12. Photograph of French window, first floor, back parlor, The George Read (II) House.

Palladian window lights not only the stairs, but the halls below and above.

The main part of the second floor contains three bedrooms. Like the parlors below, the two rooms on the south side of the house are connected with a mahogany door. Mahogany doors are, in fact, a feature throughout the house. The woodwork on the second floor, while less elaborate than on the first floor, has sophisticated

detail in the trim around the floor length Palladian window at the east end of the hallway. (Illustration 13). The doorways have less carving than those on the first floor, and the crosssetted corner of the frames, while decorated with classical motifs (Illustration 14), are influenced by woodwork in eighteenth century houses.

Two of the bedrooms have mantels carved with gouge work, which today bear no trace of their original ornament of plaster figures. The third bedroom's mantel was removed in the early twentieth century. An elaborate plaster ceiling of floral design gives an elegant appearance to the back bedroom, and indicates that the room may have been originally planned as a second floor sitting room.

Relatively unusual features of the bedrooms are the large full length closets, built into the fireplace walls. These were apparently original.⁴ Another



Illustration 13. Detail of Palladian window woodwork, Second floor Hallway, The George Read (II) House.



Illustration 14. Detail of doorway, second floor hallway, The George Read (II) House.



Illustration 15. Detail of paneling on stair landing between second and third floors, The George Read (II) House.

peculiarity are the brass slip locks on two of the bedroom doors, which, when fastened, can be opened by a string carried along the ceiling, to a position beside the bed.

Over the kitchen, but several steps lower than the second floor, is a small room with fielded paneling and an unfinished floor.⁵ Behind this room, but not connected with the front of the house were the servants' rooms.

From the second floor, the main staircase continues to a finished third floor. At the landing of the stairs is a tall section of fielded paneling, decorated with a bead, and topped by a strip of running scrollwork. (Illustration 15). The three small rooms under the eaves have simple woodwork, and open onto a large landing at the top of the stairs. A short flight of ladder-like steps reach to a trap door, which opens onto the flat deck at the top of the house, framed on the east and west sides with an urn-supported balustrade, and on the north and south, by double chimneys.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER II

¹John A.H. Sweeney, Grandeur on the Appoquini-
mink (Newark, Del., 1959), p. 39.

²Account Book 1814-1818, George Read (II), Entries
for September 8, 1814, RSR, HSD.

³Efforts to locate this mantel on Manhattan Island
have not been successful.

⁴The inventory of George Read (II), taken on Octo-
ber 15, 1836, gives no listing of wardrobes or other
pieces of furniture useful for the storage of clothing.
See Appendix E.