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Barboursville

Iterations of the “Rotunda House”

Henry Hull

When James Barbour (1775–1842) set out to build his home in his native Orange County, Virginia, he consulted the same person upon whom he had built his political career, Thomas Jefferson. One of only a few houses for which Jefferson was largely responsible for the design, Barboursville is at the epicenter of neoclassical architectural discourse in the early republic. At least 14 years in the making, Barbour’s residence underwent a series of design changes involving the leading architectural figures in the United States, including Thomas Jefferson as well as Robert Mills and Benjamin Henry Latrobe. A remarkable assemblage of 19th-century depictions of Barboursville chronicles Jefferson’s commitment and influence in reforming domestic architecture in the United States.

From a young age, James Barbour devoted his life to a career in public service. As an aspiring lawyer, powerful orator, and promising politician, Barbour espoused republican values championed by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison through the political positions he held, which included Governor of Virginia, United States Senator, and United States Minister to England. Although the Barbour family had regional prominence in Piedmont Virginia, Barbour’s ambitious

personality made a tremendous impact not only on his political career, but also on his agrarian pursuits and architectural aspirations.¹ Barboursville would come to embody these passions in the specific language of Jeffersonian Palladianism.



Detail. Artist unknown.
View of Barboursville, ca. 1830,
watercolor on paper

Photo of the original painting
courtesy of Jane Nelson

In 1808, Barbour started his architectural endeavor with a pair of two-story structures arranged in an arc flanking the western hillside of his future residence. Barbour, then in his mid-30s, served as Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates. He and his family likely occupied these buildings in 1810, when the next critical development of Barbour’s project occurred.

As part of Barboursville’s architectural development, he commissioned Cephas Thompson to paint his portrait. Thompson, a contemporary of Barbour, was an itinerant portrait artist from Massachusetts, who traveled throughout the early republic painting prominent persons such as John Marshall. Thompson’s portrait included the earliest-known architectural rendering affiliated with Barbour. Thus, it suggests that the portrait

references antecedent architectural drawings developed between 1803 and 1810.

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Villa Forni Cerato

Palladio's Re-Design of an Old House

R. Francesca Grandi

During his lifetime of creating beautiful buildings for wealthy and important inhabitants and all the citizens and religious worshippers of the Italian Veneto district, Andrea Palladio also designed a small villa for a patron who was wealthy but not noble.

Responding to the request of his well-to-do timber merchant, Girolamo Forni, who officially supplied the material for many of Palladio's building sites, such as the Olympic Theatre and Palazzo Chiericati, the architect produced Villa Forni Cerato. This 16th-century villa is in Montebelluna Precalcino in the province of Vicenza in northern Italy.

Villa Forni Cerato, a *villino*, sustained 400 years of private use and survived 50 years of abandonment. The recent rescuer of the building—the Villa Forni Cerato Foundation—is working to save the structure from further deterioration and perform a careful restoration of its entire fabric. The Foundation's effort is important to protect a significant cultural resource recognized by UNESCO, as well as for the interesting architectural and artistic discoveries being made at the property, which have resulted from its state of abandonment and the absence of human use for decades.



Villa Forni Cerato chimneypiece
Photo by R. Francesca Grandi



Villa Forni Cerato entrance doorway
Photo by R. Francesca Grandi



Villa Forni Cerato elevation

Photo by R. Francesca Grandi

Although the original owner of the villa, Girolamo Forni, was not an aristocrat, he was a friend of artists such as Vittoria, a collector of antiquities, a painter himself, and a member of the Accademia Olimpica, which dates from the 16th century and still exists.

Nevertheless, the dry minimalist architectural character of Villa Forni Cerato places it in harmony with the bourgeois status of the owner. The building also represents an excellent example of Palladio's alteration of a pre-existing building, transformed through a really quite modest means into a significant monumental work of architecture.

The abstract language of Villa Forni Cerato has raised doubts among experts concerning Palladio's authorship, as has the extremely simple plan of the building, which is devoid of the usual dimensional correspondences between rooms and which includes certain proportional disharmonies among its parts.

In reality, the villa is the result of the restructuring of a pre-existing "old house," but, in fact, the opinions, should be revised to acknowledge Palladio's intelligence in transforming situational constraints into expressive opportunities. Evidence of this is the crisp design of the *serliana*, where the columns are reconceived as clipped, stereometric pilasters because of the loggia's limited width, which was probably derived either from the dimensions of the pre-existing salon or the frieze reduced to a single fascia below the main cornice.

The architect Francesco Muttoni was the first to mention Palladio as the designer of Villa Forni Cerato in 1740, and he provided drawings as well. He was followed by Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi in 1778. Thanks to their surveys, it is possible to compare the current state of the villa to the possible original plan and discover what has changed and what still exists. In such a comparison, the question arises as to whether to preserve or transform the villa in

restoration. Floors, bas-reliefs, and decorations have disappeared. Should they be reinvented or rediscovered? For example, the original staircase was different from the current one, which dated back only to the 18th century. Should the present staircase be preserved or the original one reconstructed? This is just one of the many unanswered questions in this captivating case.

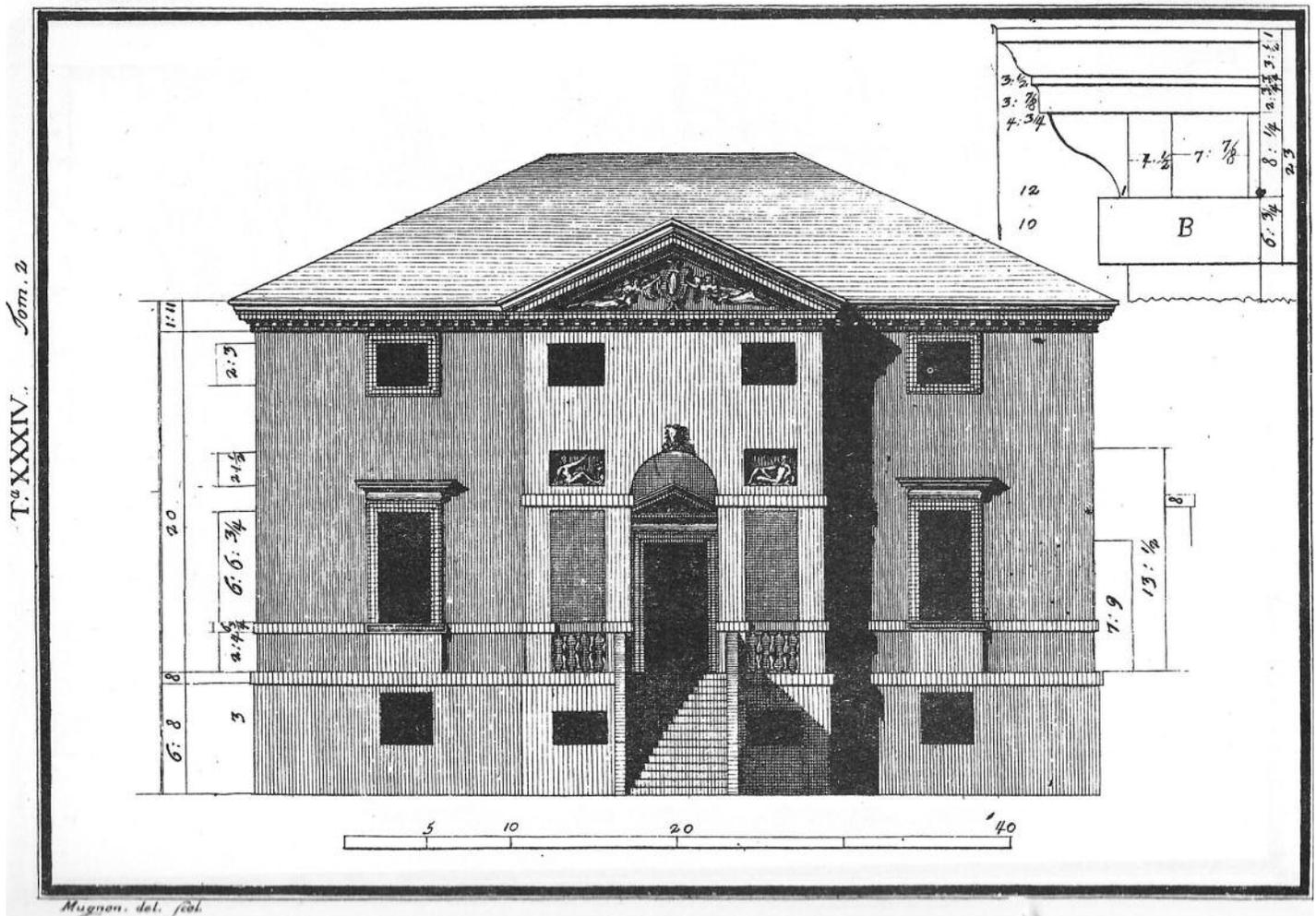
“Captivating” is a very appropriate choice of words here. Villa Forni Cerato survived after many years of neglect and dereliction, putting the villa off the radar, but it is now ready to be closely studied, understood, and described to the world for the first time.

Thus, the aim of the Villa Forni Cerato Foundation is to achieve a restoration that will be slow, exemplary, participatory, and lasting. The so-called *Villino*, Palladio’s smallest villa, is at a very decisive moment. Following work on a complete photogrammetric and topographical survey, a laser scan, and the creation of

dendrochronological records, the Foundation is ready to begin Villa Forni Cerato’s rebirth process.

The Villa Forni Cerato Foundation, established at the end of 2018, aims to enhance the cultural and landscape heritage of the villa. The Foundation will carry out a painstaking restoration of this architectural and artistic treasure, and it guarantees that the villa will never be abandoned again. Research continues on Villa Forni Cerato, and it will probably never end. A goal of the Foundation is to welcome scholars, students, and experts to the villa and to discuss all the solutions pursued by Andrea Palladio through its detailed study and in-depth analysis. ■

R. Francesca Grandi is the property manager of Villa Forni Cerato Foundation. This article was written in collaboration with Ms. Carol Kelly. For more information about the property visits www.villafornicerato.it/en/homepage-3/



Villia Forni Cerato elevation
 Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi, *Le Fabbriche E I Designi di Andrea Palladio*, Tomo Secondo, Ta. XXXIV