

# Welcome to Wilton Plantation House

Wilton Plantation House  
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### One Architectural Historian's Take on Wilton:

*“Wilton, built in 1763 by William Churchill, is a story-and-a-half, T-shaped brick house, five bays long on the front, with a four-bay ell of equal length on the rear. Built of brick laid in Flemish bond above the beveled water table and in English bond below it, the corners, window jambs, chimney corners, and gauged jack arches of the house are constructed of rubbed brick. Nine-over-nine sash, recently replaced, light the first-floor windows, and 6/6 sash are used in the gabled dormers. The front portion of the house is covered with a gambrel roof and the rear with a hip-on-hip roof. Box cornices embellish the eaves. Interior end chimneys crown the main block, while a single square interior chimney of massive proportions serves the ell.”*

*From the 1978 document nominating Wilton for placement on the National Register of Historic Places.*

## Overview

Wilton is an 18<sup>th</sup> century plantation house that was the seat of the Churchill family from the early 1760's through the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the center of an estimated 6,000 acres of their landholdings in lower Middlesex County. The product of inherited wealth, Wilton was built like many other 18<sup>th</sup> century Virginia plantation houses, by the sons and grandsons of the ambitious merchants, planters, and officeholders who rose to prominence in the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This small, elite group, drawn from perhaps two or three dozen families, wielded great political influence in Virginia, largely for their own economic advantage, and they continually cemented their political, economic and social positions through marriage amongst themselves. The Churchills, for example, wed promiscuously with the richest of these families, the dynasty of Robert "King" Carter. Indeed, Carter money may well have built Wilton.

Just as the Churchill family, wealthy and prominent in its day, has left few traces of note in the historical record beyond matters of largely local interest, Wilton, more modest in scale than many of its peers, has rarely appeared at all, let alone prominently, in the many coffee-table compendiums of Virginia's grand houses. Even its name must play second fiddle in Virginia to the grander Wilton House built in 1753 for William Randolph and now sited in Richmond. Still, the present day Tidewater Wilton has its bragging rights. If not among the grandest 18<sup>th</sup> century Virginia plantation houses, it is a study in elegance and simplicity. And while the minimal adornments to the structure's exterior may reflect the relatively modest -- and perhaps also declining -- wealth of its builder, they also advance the credentials of the house as quintessentially Georgian, that is to say: simple, elegant and understated.

Moreover, what Wilton may have lacked in stature, it has made up over the years in perseverance. Not only does the house have the very same elegant profile it did 250 years ago, but its interior is still made up of the same materials and wears many of the same finishes that were applied in the 1760's. Few of Wilton's peers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century can make a similar claim. Many of these plantation homes, for example, underwent a remodeling in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to reflect the Greek revival fashion of the day. Economic decline, both before and after the Civil War, took a heavy, sometimes fatal, toll on others. Still others were ravaged by Union troops. Of those houses that survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many were frequently reworked -- wings added, roofs raised or lowered, interiors re-jigged, re-modelled, re-freshened and re-invented -- often in the fever of the 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial revival movement. This is not to disparage in any way these other grand homes. But Wilton stands out as a survivor. Two hundred and fifty years after its completion, it is essentially unchanged -- in its external footprint, in its interior layout, and in its materials, from the masonry that defines the brick exterior to its heart pine floors. Even some of the paint on the woodwork likely dates to the 1760's and is the first and only coat of paint that woodwork has ever seen.

Since it was purchased from Preservation Virginia in 2011, Wilton has undergone extensive modernization and preservation work. Chuck Rackley, an experienced hand from neighboring Essex County who has worked on dozens of historical homes, carefully shepherded Wilton and a bevy of local tradesmen and artisans through this process over a period of three years. Modernization has meant installing heating, cooling, plumbing and electrical systems as well as a modern kitchen and bathrooms in a house which -- even until very recently -- had none, or very few, of these features. Preservation has meant installing those systems ever so gently all the while doing what was required to retain and preserve

the existing materials in their original state; only where this was not feasible were compatible materials -- sometime new, sometimes old -- used to replace them. Consistent with this approach, and unlike at other historical homes, which often seek to re-create the look of a specific earlier period in time, the effort at Wilton has been to show the house and its original materials as they have aged over the years -- from the wear marks on old floors to the patina of two-hundred-year-old paint.

Similarly, the house has been furnished in a manner that is sympathetic to the period in which it was built, but there has not been any effort to duplicate the furnishings that might have been here in say, 1775, or to create a museum-like atmosphere. That said, with minor exceptions, the furniture is from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, all purchased in the last two years through Brian Penniston, a highly knowledgeable dealer in nearby Tappahannock. As was the case in a typical Tidewater plantation house of the day, the 18<sup>th</sup> century pieces are a mix of American and English antiques. The 19<sup>th</sup> century pieces are almost exclusively American. Although “Turkiye rugs” were not unheard of in grand 18<sup>th</sup> American homes, they were on the rare side and not always on the floor. Thus, while there is historical precedent for displaying them here, their current proliferation throughout the house is a reflection of the taste (some would say obsession) of the current owner. The paintings are from the owner’s collection. They are a mix of American and European works, mostly from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

We hope you enjoy your visit.

## **Interior Changes and Room by Room Guide**

With difficulty, modern systems – electricity, heating, plumbing – can be threaded into an old house almost sight unseen and without dramatic disturbance to the historic fabric. This is not the case with modern bathrooms, which require substantial interior floor space. Not surprisingly, therefore, the major change to the interior floor plan during the recent preservation work was the sacrifice of interior space to bathrooms. Of most note, the upstairs center hallway in the front wing of the house now accommodates two new bathrooms, serving the two adjacent bedchambers. A third bathroom was installed *en suite* to the bedchamber in the rear wing, but without changing the profile of that room. In the room just below, a modern kitchen has been installed, but this, too, did not disturb the room’s profile. Finally, the powder room off the dining room replaces an earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century bathroom in this space which was, in all likelihood, originally a closet. But for these few instances and one change to the center hallway from early in the 1800’s, the interior floor plan remains unchanged from 1763.

What follows is a brief description of the interior of the house, room by room, with reference to notable features and furnishings.

Center Hall. For the time being, the hallway is being kept simple and uncluttered: a stark demonstration of the basic finishes in the house: white plaster walls, early painted woodwork, and heart-pine floors. The paint here was probably applied at the same time as the “new” paint in the adjacent Red Room, or about 1825. The floorboards in this central passage are in particularly good condition.

Paneled Room. This room, immediately to the left on entering the center hall through the front door, would have been the showpiece room in the house, containing the best furniture for the highest level entertaining or receiving the most important guests. After the paint preservation work was completed,

however, it was thought best to furnish this room simply. Accordingly, the only furnishings here are a walnut Queen Anne table, American ca. 1760, and four period English Queen Anne chairs. They have been placed in the center of the room, the better to appreciate what is its most important feature: the old blue-painted pine paneling. That paneling is all original, with the exception of minor Dutchman repairs. The paint that you see is the second coat, probably applied sometime in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first coat was a cream color. The insides of the two closet doors on either side of the fireplace were grain painted, probably at a somewhat later date, during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The window sash, replaced in the 1970's throughout the house, has been freshly painted a sympathetic blue-gray to complement the old paint on the paneling. The interior shutters are original as are most of the shutters throughout the house. The modern painting over the mantle is ca. 1955 by Belle Cramer (American, 1883 – 1978).

The Red Room. This room, directly across the center hall from the Paneled Room, might have originally served as the master bedchamber. It is now a sitting room. The beautiful red paint you see here is the fifth coat, probably applied around 1825. Furnishings include an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Sheraton sofa, two ca. 1790 lolling chairs, a ca. 1800 Pembroke table, a small, English, 1760 Queen Anne drop leaf table and two late 18<sup>th</sup> century American side chairs. The imposing corner cabinet is ca. 1800-1820 and may be from the Hagerstown, Maryland area. It contains a fine collection of English cream ware, ca. 1800, possibly by Elijah Mayer. The secretary-bookcase, from Virginia, ca. 1780, is in exceptionally fine condition and bears on its underside markings that may relate to the “WHW” cabinet maker, William Seay. The accompanying armchair is ca. 1770 from a maker in the Rappahannock River area. The painting over the mantle is by French artist Gustave Colin (1828 - 1910), ca. 1890. Over the Sheraton sofa hangs a moonrise scene that could be Virginia but is probably New York, by American painter Birge Harrison (1854 - 1929), likely executed in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A painting by his older brother, Alexander Harrison (1853 – 1930), hangs on the west wall.

Stair Hall. The highlight here, of course, is the stairway, all original down to the last walnut baluster. For comparison purposes and because it was in relatively good shape, the plaster on the south wall above the chair rail was not disturbed during the preservation work. The handsome, small mahogany chest of drawers is from Philadelphia, ca. 1770. The Chippendale mirror, of notable size, ca. 1770, is English and/or American. The modern painting on the south wall is by Provincetown MA painter Remo Farrugio (1904 – 1981). The paintings, as you mount the stairs, are by Swedish painter Axel Sjoberg (1866 – 1950), Alexander Harrison, and George W. Picknell (American, 1864-1943).

Dining Room. This, the front room in the rear wing, now serves as the dining room, though it is anyone's guess how this room was used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although this room has no chair rail, the window seats, shutters, and trim on the two windows suggest a formal room. Quite likely, it was a multi-purpose room, used for dining, entertaining, and other family activities. The redecoration that went on in the house in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century apparently came to an abrupt stop midway through painting the trim on the west facing window in this room; it is only partly painted in the color that matches the “new” paint in the center and stairway halls. That leaves the rest of the room in an earlier coat of dark brown paint, which dominates the room and therefore was the color choice for the extensive faux painting – in this case, fresh painting that replicates the look of the old paint surfaces -- that was required here. The doors to the powder room and the kitchen, for example, are newly made, and replace doors installed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The base molding is also new and has been faux painted. The plaster was finished with two coats of lime wash. The floor here and in the kitchen is new to the house, but from antique, reclaimed

heart pine flooring. The mantle is not early. Most of the furniture is American, from the Federal period, including the wide-board mahogany Heppelwhite dining table. The small sideboard, a “brandy board,” is from Baltimore, ca. 1800; the chairs, possibly New York; the D-shaped Walnut side table, Virginia, ca. 1790; and the clock, Pennsylvania (works) and possibly Virginia (cabinet) ca. 1790. The mahogany Queen Anne card table is English, ca. 1760. The dining service is French *porcelain de Paris*, from the early to mid-19th century. There are two paintings in this room by Alexander Harrison, the small one to the left as you enter the room and the larger moonlight scene over the mantle. Over the D-shaped side table hangs an 1869 upstate New York scene by Hudson River School painter James Renwick Brevoort (American, 1832 - 1918). The large painting over the sideboard is by French artist Auguste Bonheur (1824 - 1884), brother to the more famous Rosa Bonheur, dated 1865. A small preparatory sketch for the larger work hangs immediately to its left.

Kitchen. This room, by far the plainest on the first floor, was certainly a service area of some sort, and perhaps at one time even the main kitchen. It is the one room in the house whose windows have neither a wooden window seat nor decorative wood trim. Antique pieces here include the cherry setback cupboard, ca. 1820 from the Shenandoah Valley, and the 1780 hutch table and six comb-back Windsor chairs, probably from Pennsylvania.

Southeast Bedchamber. This is the smallest of the three bedrooms, accessed from the narrow hallway immediately to left at the top of the stairs. New closets were added on each side of the hearth, based on evidence that closets had previously been installed here in an early period. (The closet to the left holds the washer and dryer.) The door with the old paint was the original entry door to this room from the center hall. It now serves as part of the wall between this room and the newly created bathroom. (Do not try to open, please!) The ca. 1820 mahogany dressing table, the ca. 1800 shield back chair, and the ca. 1820 bed are from the North Shore of Massachusetts, possibly Salem. The bed is likely from the shop or school of Salem’s noted furniture maker and carver, Samuel McIntyre.

Southwest Bedchamber. The entrance to this bedchamber, the larger of the two in the front part of the house, was originally from the center hall, which is now, as previously noted, occupied by two bathrooms. The new entrance to this room, now entered directly from the stairway hall, was created by breaking through a hall closet; the original hall closet door has been retained. As in the adjacent bedroom, there is clear evidence of early closets on each side of the hearth, but the decision was made not to rebuild them in this room. Instead, the ca. 1830-1840 red-painted Virginia armoire to the left of the hearth serves as a clothes closet. To the right, the mahogany slant-front desk is Philadelphia, ca. 1770. The slender-legged Queen Anne cherry high chest is from the Delaware Valley, ca. 1770. The California King bed has been configured around 19<sup>th</sup> century black walnut bed posts. The modern table and floor lighting here, and in much of the rest of the house, is ca. 2013, from *Restoration Hardware*.

Rear Bedroom Suite. The mantle in this bedroom is old, perhaps 19<sup>th</sup> century, but not original to the house. The bed posts are from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of birch, configured to fit a modern queen-size bed. The painting over the 1790 bow front chest of drawers is dated 1872 by Alfred Cornelius Howland (American, 1838 - 1909). The painting over the mantle is by Guillaume Seraphim van Strydonck (Belgian, 1861 - 1937) and was painted in 1896 in India, not far from the Bay of Bengal. In the adjoining bathroom, the red painted linen press is mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, from the Shenandoah Valley. The

mahogany Queen Anne drop leaf table with the unusual carved “hoof” feet is ca. 1760 and possibly Irish. The yellow-painted metal contraption in the fireplace is a 19<sup>th</sup> century Tidewater-region bilge pump.

The Basement. There is a full basement under the front part of the house, accessed via bulkhead doors on the east side. A part of the basement was sacrificed to a newly built utility room housing electrical panels, a gas furnace, heat exchangers for the geothermal system, a hot water heater and a water storage tank. For 250 years, the floor here was made of dirt, and was often muddy, or worse, in wet weather. After installing a perimeter drain and a sump pump, a new brick floor was laid in soft mortar. Despite the recent modern intrusions and “improvements,” it is still possible to see much of this remarkable space in its original condition.

The Ground and the Dependencies. Wilton now sits on a 25-acre lot, a far cry from the 6,000 acres that once surrounded it but enough for the old house to stand graciously in its rural setting. The large boxwoods around the front of the house are English and were planted by the Ballantyne family in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The circular driveway in front of the house is new, as is the long driveway to the house, which was sited largely to take maximum advantage of the odd-shaped lot Wilton now occupies. The cabin to the east of the house was likely a combination slave and kitchen/laundry quarter. It is original to the property but was built later than the house, probably in 1840’s or 1850’s. The outbuilding to the west of the house is a 19<sup>th</sup> century log cabin, with 20<sup>th</sup> century enhancements. It is not original to the property but was moved here in the 1970’s from within the county.

## **More on Preservation**

With the exception of the work related to the installation of modern heating, plumbing and electrical systems, it is perhaps best to characterize much of the what has gone on at Wilton over the past three years as preservation, rather than restoration work. The reason is simple; there was a lot here to preserve and very little to restore. What follows is a brief description of the major categories of such work.

Masonry. Wilton’s masonry exterior has remained largely intact. Repairs were made to the brickwork on an estimated 15 percent of the surface area, from modest replacement of damaged bricks and mortar to “hogging out” and laying in new brick where several major cracks had developed on the east, west and northeast walls of the front portion of the house. Inside the house, substantial repairs were made to the fireboxes, most notably in the kitchen.

Roofing. Wilton has a new roof, of cedar shingles with a “fish-scale” or rounded edge. This replaces a roof of straight-edge cedar shingles that no doubt replaced a similar roof before it. The fish-scale shingle was chosen because it is a little more elegant than the straight edge and because there was (and still is) an early fish-scale shingle, made of cypress, nailed (with early nails) to the side of a closet in the Paneled Room, providing reasonable, though not conclusive, evidence that the original roof was made of shingles of this shape.

Floors. When the preservation work began, the flooring in the house was entirely original, except in what are now the dining room and the kitchen. The flooring in these two rooms was replaced in the early 20th century with narrow-plank pine flooring which, a hundred years later, had severely

deteriorated. This was removed, and heart-pine flooring reclaimed from a late 18th century Tidewater home was beat into shape -- old nails, varnish, paint and grime removed, then planed on the underside to lie flat -- and installed in its place. The rest of the flooring throughout the house is all original heart pine. In their time, these floors were not finished with a varnish or stain, and even though fashion has since changed dramatically, they successfully managed to evade such treatment over the years. To remove accumulated dirt and grime, they were lightly cleaned with a cleaning agent and water.

Plaster. The plaster in the house was problematic. Much of it had deteriorated due to dampness and water damage and had to be removed along with some of the supporting lathe. Where the old lathe was retained, new plaster was applied using historically appropriate materials and techniques. Elsewhere, and on all the ceilings, blue board (a drywall treated to accept plaster) was used and a skim coat of plaster was applied. For comparison purposes, one small area, the south wall in the stairway hall above the chair rail, was kept as found in 2011. Lime wash was applied to the plaster walls in the dining room and, to minimize glare, on some of the ceilings. As plaster and lime wash were freshly applied at Wilton periodically over its lifetime, the overall result of this treatment has been to give the interior walls the look that likely obtained throughout much of Wilton's history.

Paint. Microscopic analysis of the painted surfaces was performed by Susan Buck, a leading expert in the field. Her work confirmed what many had long thought to be the case: that the paint surfaces at Wilton were remarkably early. The Paneled Room revealed two coats of paint. The first was a cream color, and the second, the one you see today, a Williamsburg blue. The educated guess is that the second coat was applied around 1790. The woodwork in the Red Room, the two hallways and a small part of the dining room has four or five coats of paint the last of which, it is estimated, was applied around 1825. Upstairs, the analysis revealed only a single coat of paint, applied most likely in the 18th century and probably in the 1760's. (Susan Buck's report can be seen at <http://wiltonhousevirginia.org/the-preservation-project/>.)

Treatment of Paint Surfaces. The rarity of such old paint surfaces demanded special attention, which came in the form of Chris Mills, a conservator recommended by Susan Buck. The initial strategy was to test the surfaces, stabilize them, clean them and then in-paint in areas where there were paint losses. The next question was how to harmonize the old paint surfaces with the new woodwork, which included all the windows and exterior doors, replaced in the 1970's, recent Dutchman repairs, and new doors and trim. It was decided that all the window sash would be newly painted in a color that was sympathetic to the old paint surfaces in each room. Elsewhere, the new wood was faux painted to match the old paint surface. Chris Mills' talented assistant, Nicole Seguin, was responsible for most of the faux painting. How much faux painting was required? In the Paneled Room and the Red Room across the hall, only about five percent of the wood surfaces have been faux painted. In the dining room and in the stairway hall, it's closer to 50 percent. Upstairs, two of the three bedrooms required only very modest amounts of faux painting. In the third bedroom, the Southeast bedchamber, however, the amount of new woodwork -- replaced trim and five new doors -- overwhelmed the old and it seemed to make more sense not to faux paint this newer wood but to give it a fresh looking coat of paint in a sympathetic color. Finally, the paint on the wood work in the rear-most room of the second floor was almost entirely faded (you can see traces of the original grey paint in the window seats, which were left untouched), and the decision was made to faux paint all the trim in the original color. Chris Mills' extensive report can be seen at <http://wiltonhousevirginia.org/the-preservation-project/>

## **History: How Old Is Wilton, Anyway?**

While the exact age of Wilton has long been a matter of debate, the year 1763 is the focal point of discussion. Etched into a brick niche on the back wall of the rear of the house (facing the wall, it is on the left side about two thirds of the way up) is the inscription “E WC 1763.” The “WC” refers to William Churchill, the first born male of the third generation of Churchills to make their mark in Middlesex County. (The “E” likely refers to Elizabeth Carter Churchill, his wife.) The date “1763” refers, all seem to agree, to the year this last wall on the family residence was completed. There, however, the agreement ends. Some knowledgeable observers contend this inscription merely marks the completion of the rear wing of Wilton, which, they assert, was added to the front wing of the house after Bushy Park, the longstanding seat of the Churchill family several miles to the northeast, burned to the ground in 1760. In this view, the front wing of the house was built much earlier, perhaps as early as the first quarter of the 1700’s. Evidence of this, they say, can be found in the brickwork at the two ends, east and west, of the front part of the house, which suggests that this part of the house may have initially had a gable roof. That gable roof, the theory goes, was converted to the present gambrel roof at the time the rear wing of the house was added in the early 1760’s. Look at the brickwork there today and you can clearly see the evidence supporting this argument.

Those with a contrary view take a look at the house as a whole, and ask, does this look like a house built in two stages a generation or more apart? They point to the uniformity of appearance and harmony of design of the entire structure, and find it hard to conceptualize the rear wing as an afterthought or addition. Take a look, for example, at the house from about 50 to 75 feet to the back of the rear wing. The symmetry of the three chimneys and the two “wings” of the front of the house, the consistent roofline, and the compatible brick work all speak, according to this contingent, of design and construction that was of a piece, done in one fell swoop.

As a result of the recent preservation work, there are now new facts to consider. Removal of the plaster on some of the second story walls allowed close observation of the wood framing on the second floor. More than one architectural historian found little in this wood framing to bolster the “two-stage” construction theory. The exposed wood framing also allowed access to enough wood surfaces throughout the house to do a thorough study of the age of the wood through the science of dendrochronology, the dating of wood by analysis of tree rings and their comparison to a companion database. Just such an analysis, which drew on 12 wood samples from basement joists and beams to second-story framing in both wings, concluded that the timber used in the construction of Wilton was made entirely from trees felled between 1760 and 1763. (The dendrochronology report can be viewed in its entirety at <http://wiltonhousevirginia.org/the-preservation-project/>)

Even in the face of this important new evidence, the issue of Wilton’s age and the order and timing of its construction is not necessarily closed, nor should it be. During the recent work on the house work, for example, what looked to be part of an earlier brick foundation wall was discovered along the base of the fireplace in what is now the dining room. Is this evidence, perhaps, of an earlier building or residence? On this as well as other matters, the door remains open to tell the full story of Wilton as more facts come to light about the house, its occupants, and their histories.

## **Wilton and the Churchills**

Putting Wilton as a structure in context one might call it important, but not grand. That characterization might also describe the family that built it. The Churchills were an influential, socially prominent family of Virginia planters, merchants and officeholders. On the basis of their wealth, office holdings, political influence and marital relations, they might be ranked in the top 25 or so families in Virginia in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Wilton, as a structure, is likely an accurate reflection of that position.

The real mover and shaker in the family was not the William Churchill who built Wilton in the 1760's, but his eponymous grandfather. Although William Churchill the First died in 1710 and never lived at the Wilton House we know today, it was he who generated the wealth and patrimony that made the construction of Wilton House possible some 50 years after his death.

William Churchill came to Virginia in the 1670's as an agent for English merchants. He would later become a merchant in his own right, a lawyer, a landowner and a planter as well as a prolific public office holder (and the profitable collector of the "rents" which often came with these public positions). William's son Armistead, born in 1705, followed in his father's footsteps in terms of holding local public office. For a time at least, he may have also increased the family patrimony through the extensive marital relations of the Churchills with other prominent Virginia families, most notably the Carters, and through his landholdings and other income generating activities. (Armistead was the Naval Officer for the Rappahannock District for nearly 30 years, an office that, despite its military title, was basically a rent collecting post.) But Armistead did not cut the same high voltage profile as the elder William Churchill, he may not have engaged in any of the latter's merchant and trading activities, and his fortunes appear to have flagged later in life.

Armistead Churchill died in 1763, curiously, the very year Wilton was completed by his son William. Like his grandfather William and his father Armistead, William Churchill the Second was much involved in local county office, but this third-generation Churchill, it appears at first blush anyway, was content to live the good life of the landed gentry, a planter who managed – and we know not how well or poorly — what he had inherited. Recent research by local historian and writer Larry Chowning reveals William Churchill to have been a genuine American patriot, unlike many others of the old guard Middlesex County gentry. No doubt more facts about the Churchill family await discovery.

## **Five More Ways of Looking at Wilton**

Though not written about extensively, or in great depth, Wilton has not been entirely ignored by writers and historians of old homes, though some of the fleeting commentary reminds one of the story of the three blind men who described the very same elephant in widely differing ways. An early 20th century description of Wilton, for example, describes the house as being "massive" in its structure, an adjective that seems to have stuck over the years. But while one's perspective can explain a lot, Wilton hardly seems massive. The footprints of each of its two wings measure 20' by 50'. That makes for about 3,750 square feet of living space in all, after adjusting for the width of the masonry walls and the slope of the gambrel roof. In other words, Wilton is about the size of your average modern day McMansion, certainly not massive, whether the standard is 1760, 1950 or 2014.

Yet another, more recent commentator took an opposite tack, seeing in Wilton a “middling” plantation house. This dismissive comment might not have been too far off the mark if the reference were solely to Wilton’s size; it is plain to see that Wilton is not the size of, say, Carter’s Grove, or Westover or a dozen other grander Virginia plantation houses of the period. But size apart, “middling” seems an inappropriate characterization of this gracious home.

The disparate nature of these two characterizations might have something to do with the fact that Wilton is a plantation house (ah, so it must be massive) with a gambrel roof (ah, so it must be a middling one). The gambrel roof is, indeed, a distinctive feature of Wilton. Though by no means unprecedented in Virginia at the time, such a roof was more common in the Middle Atlantic colonies to the north, and today, a gambrel roof is typically associated with a “Dutch” colonial (think tidy, small and efficient). This “Dutch” element, thus, makes for an unusual pairing with an 18th century Virginia plantation house, one of whose principal purposes was social ostentation. Matters are not helped by the architectural historians, with their practice of describing a house with a gambrel roof as having only one-and-half stories, rather than two, because the second story is so often tightly tucked under the roof.

The one-and-a-half stories convention notwithstanding, you can see for yourself that Wilton does, in fact, have two full stories, though the ceilings are only seven feet high in the second story, versus a stately ten feet on the main floor. This low ceiling height was thought to be inappropriate for Virginia, according to yet another historian of old Virginia houses, who must have been focusing on Virginia’s hot summers. But as anyone living in Virginia today can attest, Virginia winters can be cold, and at such times a low bedroom ceiling has its distinct advantages. As for the summertime, every room in the house, upstairs and down, has cooling cross-ventilation. In addition, on the first floor, the ten foot ceilings and masonry walls serve to mitigate the effects of the summer heat. Moreover, sit at the junction of the stairway hall and the center hall, open all three exterior doors leading to them, and, even on the hottest day of the summer, you will feel a cooling breeze that beats modern air-conditioning for soothing comfort. In sum, Wilton seems well built for the climate it sits in.

As the foregoing ruminations suggest, the definitive history of Wilton is perhaps yet to be told. In the meantime, we might propose the following as a good layman’s working description (and counterpoint to the professional one on the cover page):

*“Wilton is a two-story plantation house, with its second story tucked tightly under a gambrel roof. Well built in 1763 to accommodate the Virginia climate, it is neither massive in size, nor middling in quality. With its gambrel roof, it is, at once, an unusual example of an 18th century Virginia plantation house and a simple and elegant expression of the Georgian style. Wilton is significantly more important today than it was in 1763 because, quite remarkably, it has survived into the 21st century largely intact – unfazed by war, pestilence, and economic decline and unsullied by changing tastes, decorative revivals and other manifestations of human folly.”*

*Stephen M. Foster  
May 4, 2014*