

Monroe Hill Law Office
McCormick Road
Charlottesville
Virginia

HABS No. VA-1027

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MONROE HILL LAW OFFICE

HABS No. VA-1027

Location: McCormick Road
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia
UTM: 17.71874.421239

Present Owner: University of Virginia

Present Occupant: Dr. George R. Minor

Present Use: Residential

Statement of Significance: Built by James Monroe about 1790, the Monroe Hill Law Office was the first portion of a building complex which later became part of the University of Virginia campus. The small structure is faced with brick laid in Flemish bond with beaded weatherboards in the gables. Monroe, who lived there only a short time before moving to Ashlawn in 1799, is said to have used the building as a law office.

PART I. HISTORIC BACKGROUND

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Between 1790 and 1800.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Monroe Hill Law Office was built on farmland originally owned by George Nicholas. James Monroe purchased the land from Nicholas in 1790, and by 1800, as indicated by the insurance records from that year, Monroe had built three small brick buildings, a kitchen and two dwelling houses. Monroe moved to Ashlawn in 1799, and seven years later his attorney sold the Monroe Hill property to George Divers who in turn sold the lot to John Nicholas in 1810. Four years later the property was divided and sold to John Perry; it was probably Perry who built the main house. In 1820 Arthur Brockenbrough, proctor of the recently established University of Virginia, purchased the lot which is still owned by the University. In 1848, due to the increasing number of students, two arcaded dormitories were added, one connecting the law office to the main house and the other located on the southwest side of the property.
4. The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the Monroe Hill Law Office is located. No deed was located for the sale of the property by George Nicholas to James Monroe. Nicholas,

who owned property in different parts of Albermarle County, apparently sold his property without making any conveyances for it. It was not until nearly twenty years after his death, that James Morrison, his executor, gave title to the heirs of the vendees.¹

The deed books are located in the Albermarle County Clerk of Circuit Court Room.

- 1806 Deed July 5, 1806 recorded in Book 15 page 527
James Lewis, attorney for James Monroe
to
Kemp Catlett
- 1806 Deed July 5, 1806 recorded in Book 15 page 528
Kemp Catlett
to
George Divers
(six hundred and seventy acres)
- 1810 Deed October 1, 1810 recorded in Book 17 page 325
George Divers
to
John Nicholas
(six hundred and seventy acres)
- 1814 Deed February 28, 1814 recorded in Book 19 page 17
John Nicholas
to
John Perry
(one half of the parcel of land, three hundred and forty six acres)
- 1815 Deed February 24, 1815 recorded in Book 19 page 250
John Nicholas
to
John Perry
(the remainder of the property)
- 1820 Deed January 25, 1820 recorded in Book 22 page 170
John Perry
to
Arthur Brockenbrough, Proctor of the University of Virginia
(forty eight and three fourths acres)
- 1825 Deed May 9, 1825 recorded in Book 25 page 251
John Perry
to
Arthur Brockenbrough, Proctor of the University of Virginia
(one hundred and thirty two acres)

Note

¹Edgar Moors, Albemarle County in Virginia (Virginia: Jarman's Inc., 1932), p. 280.

5. Alterations and additions: The law office has undergone several changes in addition to the construction of the main house and the two dormitory rows. The exact date of these alterations is unknown. Finished ceiling beams below the main floor and above the present-day crawl space indicate the possibility of an earlier basement. Three basement windows, two on the south facade and one on the north facade, have been sealed with brick laid in five course American bond. Also on the north side is a larger opening which was probably the bulkhead entrance leading to the basement. This too, has been sealed with brick laid in American bond.

A window opening on the south facade in the east bay has been closed up with brick laid in American bond.

A small brick patio has been added to the rear or north facade. The east wall became the end wall of the dormitory row connecting the office with the main house. One small opening was cut through the east wall at a later date to link the building to the dormitory.

Some of the woodwork has been replaced including the window moldings in the north rooms. All of the door moldings except the doorway connecting the two south rooms have been altered.

The fireplace in the northeast room has been closed.

The upstairs has had a bathroom and small closets added. The stair and the closet below the stair have also been changed from their original state.

B. Historic Context:

James Monroe, the third president of the United States, lived in the building for a short time before moving to Ashlawn. Active for a long time in the Virginia government, Monroe succeeded James Madison as President in 1816. He was closely connected with the activities of the new university; he laid the cornerstone for Pavilion VII in 1817 and served on the Board of Visitors from 1826 to 1831.

At one time, Jefferson had hoped to convert Monroe Hill into an observatory, however the plan was abandoned and the house was turned over to the proctor of the University.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The two-and-a-half story building is the oldest part of a building complex which includes a main house and two arcaded dormitories. It is linked to the main house by one of the dormitory rows. The rectangular building measures 27 by 20 feet and has two bays.

2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Exterior Description:

1. Foundation: Stone.

2. Wall construction: The building is faced with brick laid in Flemish bond with beaded weatherboards in the gable. The building is painted white.

3. Structural system: The exterior walls are brick while the interior has wooden framing.

4. Chimneys: There are two exterior end chimneys.

5. Openings:

a. Doors: A dutch door is located on the east facade. It is entered by way of the arcade in front of the dormitory.

b. Windows: Wooden, double-hung windows on the north and south facades have a nine-over-nine light sash. A flat brick arch is over each window. The south window has louvered shutters. In each gable two casement windows with a transom flank the chimneys. Batten type shutters are found on the west end.

6. Roof shape: Metal sheathing covers the gable roof. There is a plain boxed cornice.

7. Dormers: The two gabled dormers have triangular pediments. They are double hung with a six-over-six light sash.

C. Interior Description:

1. Floor plan: The entrance, located in the east facade off of the dormitory arcade, opens into a small stair hall. To the right of the stair hall is a small room which is currently used for a dining room. A third room is located in the west end of the building. The floor above is divided into two rooms, a bathroom and bedroom.

2. Stairways: The main stair is an open-well, closed-string stair of a single flight.

3. Flooring: All of the rooms have hardwood flooring. The hall floor is presently covered with linoleum.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster.

5. Doorways and doors: Paneled wooden doors have a simple architrave trim. The doorways and doors are painted white.

6. Lighting: There are modern ceiling lights throughout the building.
7. Heating: Each room has a fireplace except the stair hall and the upstairs rooms. The dining room fireplace has a plain architrave and mantel shelf. The west room has a more elaborate fireplace framed by an architrave, plain frieze and dentiled cornice.

D. Site:

General setting and orientation: The law office is located on a small hill facing south. It is the end building of a dormitory row which connects to the main building. The walks around the main house are brick; the law office is approached by a flagstone walk.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

Bruce, Phillip A. History of the University of Virginia. New York, 1920.

Moore, John Hammond. Albemarle, Jefferson's County 1727-1976. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976.

O'Neal, William B. Pictorial History of the University of Virginia. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968.

Rawlings, Mary. Ante-bellum Albemarle. Charlottesville: Peoples National Bank of Charlottesville, 1935.

Woods, Edgar. Albemarle County in Virginia. Virginia: Jarman's Inc., 1932.

B. Supplemental Information:

The fold-out on the following page is a reproduction of the 1800 insurance record for the Monroe Hill property. It reads:

The underwritten James Monroe residing at Richmond in the county of Henrico do hereby declare for Assurance in the Mutual Assurance Society against Fire on Buildings of the State of Virginia, ... the 26th December, 1795, agreeable to the federal acts of the General Assembly of this state, to wit: My Buildings on my plantation called _____ occupied by my overseer (crossed out) myself situated between the plantation of Isham Lewis and that of Doctor Wm(?) in the county of Albemarle....

The Dwelling house marked A at 750 Dollars
The ditto marked B at 750 Dollars
The Kitchen marked C at 750 Dollars

Prepared by: Elizabeth Byrd Oliver
Student Architect
University of Virginia
Spring 1981

Edited by: Anne F. Bisceglia

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was sponsored by the University of Virginia/School of Architecture under the direction of K. Edward Lay, Professor of Architecture. The project was completed during Spring semester, 1981 by student architect Elizabeth Byrd Oliver. This material was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. It was not prepared under HABS supervision, nor edited by members of the HABS staff.