

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

GEORGE READ II HOUSE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: George Read II House

Other Name/Site Number: Read House and Gardens

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 42 The Strand

Not for publication:

City/Town: New Castle

Vicinity:

State: Delaware County: New Castle Code: 003

Zip Code: 19720

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: ___

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: ___

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

Noncontributing

___ buildings

1 sites

___ structures

___ objects

1 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ___ Entered in the National Register
___ Determined eligible for the National Register
___ Determined not eligible for the National Register
___ Removed from the National Register
___ Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: DOMESTIC **Sub:** single dwelling

Current: RECREATION AND CULTURE **Sub:** museum

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:

Georgian

Federal: Adams or Adamesque

MATERIALS:

Foundation:

Walls: load-bearing brick

Roof: clay tile

Other: wood

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Site and Immediate Landscape

The property is located in the center of the New Castle Historic District, designated a National Historic Landmark in 1967. The core of the district is distinguished predominantly for its two and three story brick residential and commercial buildings constructed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, reflecting the town's importance during that period. The northwest boundary of the Read house lot is delineated by a brick wall added in the early twentieth century. This wall extends along Second Street that, along with Market Street, marks the southeast boundary of the New Castle Common.

The George Read II House is situated on the northwest (project west) side of one of the principal roads, known as The Strand. This side of The Strand is lined by brick townhouses, but the George Read II House dominates the street because of its considerable breadth, height, and placement on a double lot, which is approximately 180' wide by 312' deep. A brick wall with gate extends southward from the house along the street front, which encloses the mid-nineteenth century gardens on that side of the house. Installed in 1847 by William Couper, second owner of the house, the gardens were constructed upon the sites of two houses destroyed by an 1824 fire and extend the full depth of the block to the west; the house immediately to the south had belonged to George Read I.

An 1804 survey of New Castle by Benjamin Henry Latrobe illustrates that the original setting for Read's stylish house was somewhat more densely urban than at present, with houses then located immediately to the north and south no longer being extant. Read built his mansion on two parcels of land which his father had recently purchased adjacent to his own house, leaving only a four to five foot alley between the two homes. Although George Read I's house was only one-half to two-thirds the height of his son's house, its proximity determined the fenestration on the south wall of the main block of George Read II's home. The expanse of unbroken brick on the portion of the house's south wall nearest the street would have originally been masked by Read I's dwelling. The lot across The Strand from the house was originally the location of Read's wharf and is included in the nomination. The site is presently unoccupied, and it is planted in grass, which allows the unobstructed view of the Delaware River from the house that would have existed during the Read family's occupancy.¹

Main Block: Exterior

The house consists of three attached, telescoping blocks. The main block is two-and-one-half stories high and measures 49'-2" across its front and 48'-0" deep. The second block, described in historical records as the "back building," contains three-and-one-half stories over a cellar with stories not as tall as in the main block; its footprint measures 21' wide by 32' deep. The third block is two stories with a footprint measuring 16' wide by 26' deep. The main block has a truncated side gable roof topped with a widow's walk. The two subsidiary blocks have rear-facing gable roofs.

The house is constructed of load-bearing brick masonry walls on a stone foundation; the façade is laid up in Flemish bond, and the remaining walls are in common bond. Floor and roof framing is timber. Paired brick chimneys connected by tall masonry bridges rise from the north and south ends of the roof on the main block. Two more chimneys pierce the north slopes of both service blocks.

The five-bay facade is defined by strict symmetry and an overall concern for geometric proportion. The entry and Palladian window above constitute the major architectural features. The raised front entry is reached by a

¹ Because of changes in the shoreline, the lot is now deeper, and the river farther from the house, than when the house was built.

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wide flight of marble steps. These steps were added by the house's last residents in the twentieth-century, but correspondence from George Read II indicates that he considered replacing his original seven granite steps and entry platform with marble in 1813.² Wrought-iron railings with curlicues and lozenges with inset rosettes are mounted on either side of the steps. The ironwork on the railings is a copy of that used for the second story balcony, which is original.³

The main entry contains a raised, six-panel, wood door recessed in paneled side jambs. Full-height sidelights consist of narrow, two-over-two, double-hung windows. The outer limits of the surround feature fluted modified Doric pilasters and entablature. The doorway is surmounted by a sunburst fanlight with wood tracery set within a wood Roman arch having a punch-and-gouge carved fascia featuring a central ornamental keystone.⁴ The fanlight has paneled intrados. Recent restoration work on the door surround and fanlight revealed intricate punch-and-gouge decoration that had been obscured by layers of paint. The main entry is flanked by two six-over-six, double-hung windows with marble sills and splayed marble lintels having central ornamental keystones; these windows have very slender muntins.

A Palladian window with ornamental wrought-iron balcony is centered above the first story entry. This window features narrow, two-over-three, double-hung windows flanked by Doric pilasters and featuring deep cornices located to either side of the central sash. The central window unit is a standard nine-over-nine, double-hung window surmounted by a decorative compass head with wedge-shape lights and bordered by roping and topped by an ornamental keystone. As on the first floor, two pairs of six-over-six double-hung sash windows are positioned to either side of the Palladian window in the center bay.

Four windows open onto the cellar at ground level at the front of the house. These have marble sills and simple, splayed lintels lacking the keystones of the upper stories. Iron bars provide security for the openings.

The façade is crowned by a wood cornice featuring a bead-and-reel motif in the frieze and modillion blocks beneath the soffit. Two pedimented gabled dormers rise from the front roof slope. These dormers feature fluted Doric pilasters, a beaded archivolt, and an ornamental keystone. The windows consist of a compass-head upper sash with six rectangular lights over a six-light, lower sash. The roof terminates in a low-slope deck covered with a roofing membrane, with a twentieth-century replacement balustrade featuring turned balusters positioned between five posts topped by wooden urns. The balustrade design is similar to that depicted on the rendering of the house in Benjamin Latrobe's 1804 survey of New Castle. The sloped roof is sheathed in clay tiles, which replaced a cedar shingle roof in the late 1930s for fire safety.

The first story of the south gable end of the house is pierced by three irregularly placed, six-over-six, double-hung, sash windows; all were carefully placed behind the area that George Read I's house obscured when George Read II's house was constructed. Each first story window has operable paneled wood shutters. The

² William Read to George Read II, 28 Mar. 1813, in Richard R. Stryker, Jr. and Darol Jane Flahart, "Manuscript Study for the Restoration of the George Read II House, 1797-1804," The Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington, Delaware, May 1978, 85. This report was the result of an extensive project intended to document the construction of the George Read II House as completely as possible. Delaware Historical Society staff searched the historical societies of Delaware and Pennsylvania for letters, invoices, and drawings that were ultimately assembled in this report.

³ The new steps and railing were designed in 1934 by Edward William Martin FAIA, a Wilmington architect of Scottish birth who documented several New Castle buildings for the Historic American Buildings Survey in the 1930s. Specifications for New Steps and Railings at Front Entrance, Residence of Philip D. Laird, Esq., New Castle, DE, February 13, 1934 by E. William Martin A.I.A., Read House Archives, Delaware Historical Society, Wilmington.

⁴ "Punch and gouge" refers to the two tools used to make these decorative elements; the gouge is a chisel with a curving blade that makes a small half-moon cut in the wood, and the punch produces the second element, a shallow circular pit.

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second story is pierced by two six-over-six, double-hung windows, vertically aligned with the two western first story windows. Paired smaller six-over-six, double-hung windows are placed in the gable end of the attic story. An exterior staircase to the cellar was installed to accommodate visitors during the late-twentieth-century restoration and is concealed by a low brick wall.

The north end of the house adjoins a cobblestone drive and has asymmetrical fenestration composed of double-hung sash windows. The primary feature of the wall is the Palladian window that opens onto the first landing of the principal stairway. It is located off center in the wall about midway between the first and second stories. Although slightly smaller than the Palladian window on the front façade and lacking the deep cornices and ornamentation, this window has a similar configuration.

Because of the telescoping service ell, only three bays of the main block's west elevation are exposed. On the first story, one contains an exterior door topped by a fanlight that opens onto the central passage. The other two feature tall openings, each holding a six-over-six, double hung window positioned above a glazed jib door. The combination windows flood the interior with light. Three second story openings, each with a six-over-six, double-hung window are aligned above the first-floor openings. The wall is crowned by a simplified version of the façade cornice. A pair of gable dormers rises from the attic story, each having a six-over-six, double-hung window topped by a compass head and flanked by fluted pilasters.

The two service wings feature a variety of six-over-six, twelve-over-twelve, eight-over-twelve, and eight-over-eight double-hung windows, with a small two-over-one window on the north side and a four-pane window in the gable end of the west block. The south bay on the west elevation of the center service block features a six-paneled door recessed in a doorway with paneled jambs. On the east bay of the south elevation of the west service block, a large opening beneath a brick arch has been infilled with brick; a five panel door is set within the brick infill.

Main Block: First Floor

The first-floor plan of the main block is a modified double-pile plan with a center hall opening onto two rooms on the south side and a front-facing room and a stair, corridor, and a service area that once was the housekeeper's office on the north. The ceilings on this floor are 13'-1".

The hall is notable for its elaborate decoration, including baseboard, chair rails, arches, door surrounds, molded plaster cornices and decorative plaster ceilings. The molded baseboard features a ball molding while the chair rail features a mahogany cap and punch-and-gouge ornamentation imitative of festoons and trilyphs. The three main hall doorways are marked by trabeated wood casings with fluted pilasters and full cornices with punch-and-gouge motifs. The doorways have pilaster capitals featuring rope molding. The upper section of the surround architrave features a band with rope work, surmounted by a punched wave decoration and flanking punched, pumpkinseed paterae. The cornice is marked by a frieze with punch-and-gouge work forming a series of vertical chains. The surmounting portion of the cornice is marked by tiny dentils, while the fascia is ornamented by sets of five gouged striations, interspersed by punch work circles with a central larger hole. The mahogany doors feature raised wood stiles and rails and each has a silver-plated brass door knob and escutcheon plate.

The center hallway is divided into three sections. The center section is set off from the front and rear sections and the stairhall by a series of three elaborately molded, cased, and columned wood arches. Each arch features an archivolt elaborated by punch-and-gouge ornament, paneled jambs and intrados, fluted pilasters, and an ornamental keystone. The most ornate ceiling decoration appears in the center hall section; in addition to the

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cornice that appears in all three sections, here a center medallion holding a hanging lantern is surrounded by a circle of sixteen stars⁵, scattered garlands and an undulating grape vine. The hallway is anchored by exterior doors set in arched surrounds at either end.

Two major spaces are located on either side of the main first floor hall. On the south side are the front and back parlors connected by a doorway: paired six-panel doors are set within an arched surround with paneled reveal, surmounted by a fanlight composed of concentric arches of delicate wood tracery and a central gilt sunburst motif. The frieze above the doors is marked by punch-and-gouge decoration while the archivolt features punches imitative of swags.

The focal point of the front parlor (southeast room) is the fireplace, centered on its south wall. This fireplace features a marble face and a wood mantel with doubled fluted pilasters and rope molding. Robert Wellford (1775-1844) produced the applied composition-ornament central tablet of a classical scene of Mars in a horse-drawn chariot. The inner flanking panels feature applied composition swags while the outer panels contain applied composition ornaments of classical figures. All of the composition ornament except for the restored chariot wheels is original Wellford decoration from the initial house construction. The mantle cornice features elaborate punch-and-gouge ornamentation, including vertical chains, faux triglyphs, and punches in abstract, blossom patterns. The bed molding is covered by an elaboration of the dentil molding in which the dentil is reduced in size and given a concave surface while the interstices are filled by small pierced circles. The architrave features a ribbon molding of drill holes.⁶ The ceiling features a molded plaster cornice, with areas of geometric design that are more restrained than the ornamentation of the center hall section.

The back parlor (southwest room) features glazed jib doors under the windows in its west wall which provide access to the rear gardens. The windows are placed within molded wood surrounds and set in deep paneled wood reveals and are equipped with three ranks of operable, hinged, wood-paneled shutters. The shutters on these windows were the only original shutters retained through the twentieth century. Based upon these examples, interior shutters were restored to windows elsewhere in non-service spaces of the house on the first and second floors.

As in the front parlor, the back parlor fireplace is centered on the south wall. The punch-and-gouge decoration repeats the patterns used on the front parlor mantel, which reinforces the links between the pair of rooms. In this room, the Wellford composition ornament features a central panel of Diana calling her hounds and a pair of figures on pedestals for the outer panels, all of which are original. In the twentieth century, the Lairds installed a bookcase along the north wall of the room using the chair rail as a cornice. The book case was removed during restoration and chair rail restored to its proper location. The decorative plaster ceiling is similar to that in the front parlor.

In the northeast corner of the main block is a room originally used as Read's law office and converted to a dining room by the Lairds in the early twentieth century. Unlike the parlors across the hall, Read's office featured little decorative detail. The door surrounds and chair rails are not ornamented with punch-and-gouge nor are the chair rails and mantel capped with mahogany. The Laird dining room retains its 1920s appearance with wallpaper murals presenting fanciful depictions of the history of New Castle. Among the subjects shown on the murals are William Penn's arrival in the New World at New Castle, the George Read I House, the Old New Castle Courthouse, and an early New Castle residence. The Lairds constructed a jib door in the west wall

⁵ The sixteen stars may refer to the sixteen states then forming the United States.

⁶ Sterling M. Boyd, "The Adam Style in America: 1770-1820," dissertation Princeton University, 1966, published in original format: New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985, 264.

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to provide more direct access from the butler's pantry; this door has been retained. The room also features a wood mantel and fluted pilasters, limited punch-and-gouge decoration, and a full cornice. Composition ornament figures of Milton and Shakespeare have been restored in kind on the outer mantel panels. The fireplace face is marble.

The northwest corner of the main block, west of the Laird dining room's west wall, contains the main stairway, the servant hall, and the housekeeper's office. Modern, carpeted stairs, installed during the Delaware Historical Society's restoration, descend under the main stairway into the basement visitor's center in the location of an original Read-period stairway to the cellar. In the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, the Couper family removed this flight of Read cellar stairs and installed a lavatory under the main stairway. At this time they also installed a small window in the exterior wall under the Palladian window to ventilate the lavatory. In the twentieth century, the Lairds removed the Couper lavatory and installed a butler's runway under the main staircase between the servant entrance to their dining room and their butler's pantry, a combination of the Read housekeeper's office and pantry. The lavatory window was removed and the opening bricked in at the same time the Delaware Historical Society replaced the butler's runway with a stairway.⁷

The most significant first-floor alteration was the reconfiguration of the housekeeper's office during the Lairds' tenure, including removal of the chimney breast to accommodate a butler's runway and a counter in the pantry on the north wall. Along the south wall of the room, the Lairds installed a utility closet, using the original housekeeper's office doorway as an entrance, and a powder room, cutting an access doorway into the servants' hall wall to the right of the utility closet entrance. Lowered ceilings were installed in the utility closet, powder room, and butler's pantry to accommodate plumbing and electricity. During the Delaware Historical Society restoration, steel reinforcement was added to the main staircase and the chimney breast above. All original elements in the housekeeper's office, including fireplace and mantel, small closet beside the fireplace, and covered original ceiling were restored by the society in the 1980s, and woodwork removed during the Laird tenure was replaced in-kind during the restoration. The west hall ceiling was replaced in kind at that time, as a twentieth-century bathroom installed by the Lairds directly above in the back second floor hall had caused deterioration in both the original flooring beneath it and in the first floor ceiling.

Floors on the first, second, and third floors, except for the first floor of the rear block, are of pine. In the twentieth century, the Lairds stained the floors of the hallways, parlors, and bed chambers. Except in the dining room on the first floor and the northeast bed chamber on the second, both of which are interpreted to the Laird period of ownership, the floor stain was removed during the 1980s restoration. Six bathrooms installed by the Lairds and various service spaces were fitted with linoleum or tile floors. Only two of the bathrooms, in un-restored sections of the second and third floors, retain their Laird period floor overlays.

Main Block: Second Floor

Overall, the ornamentation in the primarily private second-story spaces is less elaborate and exuberant than in the public first-story spaces, except for the second floor southwest room which appears to have been intended as a public space; this reflects a common decorative hierarchy in substantial houses of the period.

The second-floor hallway also extends the depth of the main block. Woodwork in the center passage on the second floor is a subdued version of the elaborate ornamentation on the first floor. Here, door surrounds and

⁷ These observations are based upon exterior and interior photograph documentation from the period 1900-1940 and architectural drawings from 1920 contained in the Read House Archives. Further observations regarding architectural changes have also been based upon photographs and architectural drawings, as well as Delaware Historical Society staff memos and a post-restoration photograph supplement and notes.

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chair rails are simpler than those on the first floor, though still embellished with punch-and-gouge work. A cased arch marks the location of the stair, while the doorways are set within trabeated surrounds. Originally, the two east rooms at the front of the house were bedrooms, and the southwest room, the most elaborately-decorated room in the house, was intended as a drawing room for entertaining. The fourth space in the northwest corner contains the stair, a secondary hall, and an interpreted bathing room.

During the Read occupancy, the room in the northeast corner was Mrs. Read's, and one in the southeast corner was Mr. Read's. The western end of the hallway terminates in a six-over-six, double-hung window set within a molded cross-topped surround. In the early twentieth century, the Lairds enclosed this end of the hall, forming a dressing room and bathroom; the rooms were accessed through doorways cut into the wall from the chamber to the southwest, originally planned as a drawing room, which the Lairds used as a sitting room. Portions of the chair rail in the new rooms and in the chamber to the southwest were removed to accommodate these additions. During the 1980s restoration, the space was restored to its original function as part of the passage. Missing pieces of the chair rail were replaced in kind.

The elaborate Adamesque detail in the southwest chamber denotes a planned public function, in the then-fashionable style of the *piano nobile*. The ceiling features the most elaborate plasterwork of any in the house, portions of which were replaced in kind during the 1980s restoration. The most detailed second-story mantle is also placed in the southwest chamber. It is comparable to those in the first-story rooms and includes punch-and-gouge motifs, including festoons, faux triglyphs, and punch circles. The tablet, restored in the 1980s, is ornamented by composition ornament depicting a "large country dance and tree." This room also exhibits the most elaborate plaster cornice, with applied garlands in the frieze, surmounted by two rows of anthemion; the lower row of smaller anthemion is in the location of a bed mold, and the upper row forms the crown mold. In the center of the ceiling is an oval medallion formed of leaves, surrounded by an oval garland; the garland oval terminates at each end with a small circular garland. Beyond the garland is a rectangular band containing flower sprigs with quarter circle insets at the corners.

The northeast bed chamber also displays delicate punch-and-gouge carving, although not as elaborately articulated as in the southwest room. A composition tablet, the "Goddess of Liberty," has been restored in kind at the center, and flanking figures were similarly replaced, but left unpainted. Two shallow closets, original to the Read construction, are located on the north wall to the east of the fireplace.

The mantel in the southeast bed chamber was removed during the late nineteenth or early twentieth century and has not been restored; in the twentieth century, the fireplace opening was covered. Four original shallow closet spaces are located on the south wall of the bed chamber, two to either side of the former fireplace. Woodwork in several other second-story rooms is limited to simple baseboards, chair rails, and molded door surrounds.

Changes to the second floor during the 1980s included the restoration of the bathing room above the housekeeper's office.

Main Block: Third Floor

The third floor rooms currently consist of a west room divided into a storage closet and mechanical space, northeast room with fireplace along the north wall, southeast room with fireplace along the south wall, and landing/passageway space that provides access to all three rooms. During the Read period, it is thought the southeast room was used as the boys' room while the smaller northeast room was used as the eldest son's room and the southwest room was the girls' room. The northwest space contains the main dogleg stair and the

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straight-run stairway to the roof. The third-floor rooms of the main block feature sloped ceilings and lack decorative elaboration.

These spaces were renovated to use as staff offices during the 1980s restoration. Fireplace and mantle are in place in the northeast chamber, but lack detail and feature a simple plaster face. In the southeast chamber, the mantel was relocated during restoration and used in the housekeeper's office, where that mantel had been removed by the Lairds.

Along both the east and west walls of the third floor, except at the dormers, the Lairds installed knee walls with small doors to serve as storage closets. The Read daughters' room was also divided in half by the Lairds. In the north portion of the room, they installed a twentieth century bathroom. They also installed a cedar-lined closet and narrower closet opposite it in the southeast corner of the room, with an opening to the northeast chamber. The Delaware Historical Society installed a modern HVAC system for the restored portion of the house during the 1980s restoration. Units servicing the second and third floors are currently located in the Lairds' former bathroom space. In the south half of the Read daughters' room, the Lairds removed the mantel along the south wall (reusing it in the extant cellar taproom) and covered the fireplace opening. The Delaware Historical Society currently uses this room as a storage space. The spaces include rectangular projections with window seats for the dormers and a simple chair rail. The walls and sloping ceiling are unornamented plaster. The open, roof stairway has wood panels, bracketed stringers, turned balusters, and a turned newel.

Cellar

The cellar of the main block was originally divided into four major spaces with a central passage, an arrangement echoing the spatial divisions of the main block's upper stories. The cellar also extends beneath the original kitchen in the center block. The spaces were relatively open and connected by means of arched openings, some of which are evident today. The northeast space included a coal bin with a (now enclosed) coal chute in the north wall, which dates to the Read tenancy. Originally, a quarter-turn stairway descended from the first floor at a point beneath the primary stairway in the northwest quadrant; this area also contained a well. Stairs have been replaced in this location along the north wall by the Delaware Historical Society.

The cellar of the house has undergone a greater degree of alteration than the remainder of the house because of the need to accommodate HVAC systems, installation of the twentieth-century Laird tap rooms, and conversion to visitor facilities. A modern, wood and glass door, installed during restoration on the south gable end, provides entry from the exterior. The entrance hall has been carved out of an originally larger space, and two bathrooms have been enclosed. The ceiling has also been lowered with acoustic tiles in a metal grid to hide HVAC ductwork. To the east of the entrance hall, a classroom for the education program was constructed in 2014, with a small snack area installed under the stairs; the mechanical room was retained during restoration. The mechanical room contains the heating system's boiler, as well as HVAC pumps and the main control panel for the system. To the north of these spaces, the Historical Society created meeting room space that currently also accommodates educational programming and small exhibits and adjacent to the meeting room on the west is the museum's gift shop.

Cellar spaces retain original brick and stone arches; alterations include the installation of modern systems. In the early twentieth century, the Lairds converted the cellar into a series of taprooms, designed by Wilmington architect Laussat Richter Rogers (1866-1957) in the manner of a German Rathskeller. Brick floors, ornamental exposed beams, and stained glass were installed. The stained glass was provided by D'Ascenzo Studio of Philadelphia. One of these rooms has been retained in the portion of the cellar under the center back building. The brick floors were replaced in kind during restoration. A moisture barrier was added to the floor and walls

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were furred out and vented because of a moisture problem. The HVAC conduits were enclosed in false ceiling beams and one enclosed steel beam was added to support the kitchen fireplace above. The entry to the room is an arched, wooden door with an upper, stained-glass panel, vertical boards, and strap hinges.

Back Buildings

The two back buildings are laid-up in a seven-course American bond with regular arrangements of window and door openings on the rear and garden walls. On the alley side, there is a large expanse of blank wall that is the location of the kitchen fireplace and flues. The openings are progressively smaller with each story in the middle block and on the alley wall of the rear block; the windows in the rear block facing the garden are uniform in size. Except for a small window in the rear gable, the windows are all double-hung with smaller lights and thicker muntins than in the main block. Of the seventy-three windows in the house, it is believed that no more than eight are replacements. The rear block, or “pump house,” contains a door facing south, set within a large, bricked up opening with an elliptical head. The arch may have been bricked in during Read’s lifetime (d. 1836).⁸

The first floor of the middle block is divided into three major spaces: a secondary stairway in the southeast corner, the pantry in the northeast corner, and the kitchen occupying the remainder of the first story. The kitchen features a corner pantry, a projecting bake oven, and a nineteenth-century boiler with some of the piping for a steam table. Account books indicate that Read ordered a steam kitchen, fitted with a boiler, for the space. The west wall of the kitchen has two wide, six-panel, painted doors. The left door has a wrought-iron latch and may have been installed after original construction. The right door provided access to the pump and wash houses and the open area behind the large arch. Once the arch was bricked-up the left door on the kitchen’s west wall may have been installed to provide direct access to the exterior of the house. The kitchen also contains call bells for the servants, believed to have been used during the Read tenure. A series of ten bells was employed. Each bell was of a slightly different size and had a slightly different pitch. These bells were connected to the major rooms in the front of the house. Call bell levers or evidence of their placement exist in the two parlors, office, and northeast bed chamber.

The pump room, or rear block, is divided into two first-story spaces. The east space was designated as pump and wood house while the west space was used as the wash house. These spaces were renovated during the Delaware Historical Society’s tenure to convert them to living quarters. The pump room contains a washing machine and dryer, and utility sink. A small lavatory that had adjoined the space was enlarged in 2014 by the removal of a Laird-era partition to accommodate a barrier-free restroom.

The two spaces farthest back on the upper floors of the back buildings were primarily low-status or service spaces during the Read occupancy and contained little decoration. They exhibit changes made during the Laird occupancy and the creation of a caretaker’s apartment after the Delaware Historical Society acquired the building.

The room above the first floor historic kitchen contains a larger fireplace and a mantel with some punch and gouge work; it is thought this may have been a family gathering space or a nursery. This space also is believed to have been where the Read family stayed when they occupied the house in 1803, before the interiors in the main block were completed in 1804.

⁸ Alvin H. Holm, Jr., and Robert M. Levy, “Historic Structures Report: The George Read II House, New Castle, Delaware for the Historical Society of Delaware,” Media, PA, 1978, 22.

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Recent research has revealed that originally there was a tightly-winding stair from this second floor room to the space directly above, located to the west of the fireplace in the current location of a closet. In addition, a winder stair existed from the first floor wash house to the second floor, with “hop offs” into two separate rooms probably occupied by servants. This stair was replaced by a more standard staircase, probably in the twentieth century. A third winder stair, which postdates the two mentioned above and which is extant, continues from the second floor past the third floor.

Gardens (Noncontributing to 1797-1804 period of significance)

The Read House gardens extend over approximately one-and-one-half acres to the south and the west of the house. Installed in 1847 by the second owner of the house, the gardens were constructed on the sites of two houses destroyed by the 1824 fire. The Read House gardens consist of three garden “rooms,” each with its own theme. The most formal of these rooms, the parterre garden, borders The Strand, and provides an impressive, welcoming gesture to the public. Together, these garden areas feature a wealth of specimen plants set in beds, grass lawns edged by brick walks, decorative wooden structures, and perimeter walls and fences.

The parterre garden incorporates the site of the former George Read I House. Each of the three grass turf beds within the front parterre garden features a distinct planting concept. Two symmetrically placed, wooden lattice gazebos with benches at the center bed were restored by the Delaware Historical Society based on photographs taken during the 1880s and 1901 during the Couper occupancy. The center bed, which is oval in shape, includes a grass-turf panel with a central planting of boxwood (*Buxus sp.*) arranged in the shape of a large flower basket set within a concrete border. Known as the Boxwood Basket, this feature was also restored by the Delaware Historical Society based on photographs taken by *House & Garden* in 1901.

The central bed is connected along the long north-south axis of the garden to two smaller circular beds by brick walks installed by the Lairds in the 1920s. Both of these beds have plants as their central focal points: a hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) shrub set in grass turf marks the center of the circular bed closest to the neighboring property to the south and a crape myrtle tree (*Lagerstroemia indica*) set in grass turf serves as a focal point to the circular bed closest to the house. Surrounding, symmetrically-arranged beds feature an array of perennials and bulbs and are bordered by boxwood curbs.

The central specimen park features a wide variety of ornamental trees and shrubs placed in such a way as to be visible from various angles or in the round from the meandering paths that encircle them. Many of the plantings appear to have been selected for their form, texture, or seasonal display of fruits or flowers. In almost all cases, the plants are used individually rather than in masses or groups. This garden is more park-like and less formal than the parterre garden. The plantings are usually not arranged in geometric patterns, and the paths are not edged with boxwood hedges.

Two feet higher than the rest of the property in elevation, the rear kitchen garden occupies the full width of the property over most of its rear lot. A portion of the property behind the house is fenced off; this area houses a shed installed in 2006 on an older outbuilding foundation. A wooden privacy fence screens these working features from the pleasure grounds of the garden.

Three paths, two of which include short flights of brick steps, lead into the kitchen garden from the specimen park. The paths are constructed of bricks laid in a basket-weave pattern. They all lead in a straight line toward the rear of the lot and are crossed by a central crosswalk and a terminal walk near the back of the lot. The middle walk intersects the crosswalk at a large circular planting bed featuring a ceramic urn in its center. A walk that edges the privacy fence extends beyond the terminal crosswalk to a gate in the perimeter brick wall.

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Another larger gate is present in the wall at the other end of the garden, but there is no path that leads to this gate.

The kitchen garden is characterized by the geometry of its orthogonal paths, some of which are edged by low boxwood hedges or tree plantings and turf-grass panels. Some of the trees placed within these beds are shade trees, while others are pear trees, planted in geometric patterns.

Legacy and Integrity

A comparison of Latrobe's Front Street elevation and the present façade confirm that relatively few changes have been made to the Read House exterior over its more than two centuries of existence. A predominance of the distinctive Federal architectural features that set the house apart from its surroundings in Latrobe's 1804 elevation were retained by the successive owners of the house: William Couper and family (1846-1919) and Philip and Lydia Laird (1920-1975).

After George Read II's death in 1836, his heirs rented the house during the following ten years, most notably to John Clayton, who later served as Secretary of State under Zachary Taylor. In 1846, they sold the house to William Couper (1806-1874), who had grown up next door in George Read I's former house. Couper had retired to New Castle after amassing a fortune in the import-export trade. A bachelor, he lived in the Read House with his bachelor brother, widowed mother, and his sisters and their children. After Couper's death in 1874, family members remained in the house until his last surviving niece, Hettie Smith, died in 1919. William Couper and his heirs changed very little architecturally during their ownership. Photographs taken of the Read House parlors and front hall by a Read family descendant in the 1880s depict few alterations to the primary Read House interiors. Wallpaper covered the walls at the time, but the signature woodwork and mantels continued to serve as focal points. In the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century, Hettie Smith removed the stairway to the basement beneath the main staircase and replaced it with a bathroom, using an added window to ventilate the space. These changes were documented in 1920 by the Wilmington architectural firm Brown & Whiteside prior to renovations by the third Read House owners Philip and Lydia Laird.

In 1920, the Lairds purchased the Read House from a Couper descendant living in Princeton, New Jersey. They moved from their Wilmington residence closer to their duPont relatives and became involved in the early-twentieth-century preservation of New Castle. The couple had no children and fashioned their house and grounds as gracious spaces for entertaining. Between 1920 and 1940, the Read House and garden appeared in approximately ten architectural books and fifteen magazines. Philip Laird died while on vacation in 1947 and Lydia Laird owned the Read House until her death in 1975. In 1965, she signed a legal agreement with the Historical Society to transfer the house and grounds to its stewardship upon her death.

Although the Lairds altered their house's interior to accommodate a twentieth-century lifestyle, they made relatively few changes that impacted the character-defining Federal features and Adamesque detailing of the dwelling. In the primary block of the house, they installed a second doorway in the northeast room on the first floor that connected to a runway under the main staircase into their butler's pantry. Their pantry extended into the former Read housekeeper's office, which was also sectioned into a bathroom and storage closet. The chimney breast was removed in the housekeepers office to accommodate the Laird pantry. In the first floor parlors the Lairds added a bookcase on the north wall of the rear parlor.

On the second floor primary block the Lairds divided the room above the housekeeper's office into a bathroom and linen closet. The outer hearth and mantel were removed and the fireplace bricked up and plastered over. The Lairds partitioned the back of the main second floor hall to create a dressing room and a bathroom. A door

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for each room was cut into the north wall of the southwest chamber. In the southeast chamber the outer hearth and mantel were removed and the fireplace bricked up and plastered. Except for the latter, the changes made by the Lairds were well documented in 1920 by Brown & Whiteside, aiding the Delaware Historical Society's restoration of the spaces in the 1980s.

Both the Delaware Historical Society and Lydia Laird felt that the most compelling interpretation of the house focused upon the house's original construction and ownership under George Read II. The integrity of the building, extensive construction records, including over 130 letters and forty invoices, and excellent documentation of the relatively few alterations made restoration the best option. The Historical Society currently interprets the relevance of the significant architectural features of the house to each of the three families who resided there, and has preserved three Laird rooms as part of this interpretation plan.

After the Delaware Historical Society acquired the house in 1975, it launched a million-dollar restoration program. The plan included replacing, in kind, missing original features and reconfiguring altered service spaces using the house's extensive construction records, a recently-completed historic structures report, photographic archives from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and modern restoration techniques. During the restoration, the detail of distinctive and extensive punch-and-gouge carving, representative of the house's Federal period architecture and location in the Philadelphia region, was restored by carefully removing over twenty layers of paint from its surface. Additionally, elements of Robert Wellford mantel ornamentation were restored in-kind based upon examination of the mantels without their paint and with x-ray technology as well as an original bill of sale.

Archaeology

The George Read House and Gardens contains archeological resources dating back to as early as the mid-seventeenth century. Between 1995 and 2013, Lu Ann De Cunzo of the University of Delaware directed a program of documentary, landscape, architectural, material culture, and archaeological research on the Read House and Gardens. Fieldwork was accomplished in five 6-week summer research seasons, a semester-long introductory field school, and additional volunteer efforts. On the main house lot, a total of thirty-two 5'x5' test units were excavated. Twenty-three units were excavated generally along a north-south transect beginning near the southwest end of the property so as to generate a stratigraphic cross-section of the entire length of the 300' long lot. Additional units were excavated in portions of the parterre garden in the southern end of the property and the rear yard at the northern end of the property was likewise sampled.

A total of 875 distinct soil layers and features were documented using the Harris Matrix system. Approximately 70,000 artifacts including items of ceramic and glass, architectural materials, faunal and floral material, and miscellaneous items related to personal adornment, smoking, furnishing and grooming were collected and analyzed throughout the investigation. Samples for macrobotanical, pollen, phytolith, parasite, and soil chemistry analysis were also collected. Features from all eras of the property's occupation ranging from early European colonization to present were encountered, including architectural elements associated with razed structures, privies, wells, garden-related features, and disposal pits. Features and fill soils reflecting major alterations to the landscape were identified. In general, the areas on the south end of the property contain the most extensive and intact remains, perhaps owing to various filling and dumping episodes.

In 2009 a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey was conducted by John Milner Associates on the parcel across the alley to the north of the George Read II House, an area not included within the current boundaries of this nomination. The GPR survey identified numerous anomalies consistent with archeological features, including

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one buried structure, and at least one obvious and two possible buried shaft features. The buried structure coincides with the location of a small building shown on the 1885 Sanborn map and is in the vicinity of three small buildings depicted on the 1805 Latrobe map.

In 2011 a GPR survey was undertaken by John Milner Associates on the Waterfront Lot, located directly across The Strand from the George Read House. The GPR data reveals at least two potential historical shorelines and multiple filling episodes landward of the potential shorelines. Also identifiable on GPR imagery are potential archeological features including shaft features and a possible stone or brick walkway or bulkhead wall. Additional anomalies located seaward of the potential historical shorelines are likely later historical features including pipelines or other utility lines that cross-cut and intrude upon the earlier shoreline features, various piles of material related to historical filling events, and a possible septic field or drainage feature. The GPR data also revealed a linear feature consistent with the mapped location of the 1885 wharf.

In 2011-2012, University of Delaware teams excavated 25 shovel test pits, 10 on the Waterfront Lot, and 15 on the lot across the alley to the north of the George Read House. Several of the water lot tests were placed to ground truth anomalies identified by the GPR survey. The southernmost water lot, across from the house and the lot George Read I and his family rented, yielded evidence of a documented 1768-1769 retaining (or dry) wall, distinguished by a dense concentration of brick and mortar, rubble and/or decayed parapet or paving over the retaining wall. More than 4.5' of landfill covers natural shoreline deposits landward of the retaining wall. Analysis of the STPs on the north lot is incomplete. Intact historical contexts, including a buried seventeenth-century land surface, were encountered in the tests.

A final report documenting the archeological resources of the George Read House and Gardens is forthcoming (De Cunzo et al., n.d.). This NHL nomination documentation may be updated if and when an analysis of the excavations conducted at the site is complete and the integrity and research potential of the archeological resources present is found to merit designation for national significance under Criterion 6.

Integrity

The George Read II House retains a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Its location and setting on The Strand, a street of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century residential and commercial structures, retain its original context, including the unoccupied lot opposite on the east side of the street that allows preservation of the original view of the Delaware River from the house. The sites of two eighteenth-century houses to the south of the George Read I House, which were lost to fire in 1824, were incorporated into the Read II House setting as gardens in the nineteenth century. The design of the façade is unchanged, except for the construction in the early twentieth century of marble entrance steps, replacing the original granite ones. The balustrade on the roof is a restoration, but is based on a drawing of the original. Alterations to the other three exterior elevations have been minimal, and consist mainly of changes relating to evolving technology in the service wing, such as the infill of what were originally open drains from the kitchen and laundry to the exterior. The interior likewise retains an exceptionally high level of design integrity, with all the major rooms on the first and second floors being either unaltered or with ornament restored based on physical evidence and original construction documentation; minor spaces, such as the housekeeper's room, were altered by subsequent owners, but have now been restored to their original configurations. Restoration of materials has been minimal and includes individual pieces of composition ornament and ornamental plaster which were lost through attrition; woodwork, including punch-and-gouge work, survives intact. The integrity of the workmanship, particularly of the intricate and masterful punch-and-gouge carpentry, is the highlight of the interior design; previously obscured by many layers of paint, the superfluous paint has been removed to display the woodwork as originally crafted. The elegant simplicity of

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the house eloquently expresses the Federal-style aesthetic as manifested in the home of a wealthy and sophisticated lawyer who pursued the latest and highest style in the construction of his home and office, and results in a high level of integrity of feeling and association.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: _ Locally: _

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A _ B _ C X D _ _

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A _ B _ C _ D _ E _ F _ G

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Theme(s): III. Expressing Cultural Values
5. Architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1797-1804

Significant Dates: N/A

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Peter Crowding [Crowding]

Historic Context: XVI. Architecture
C. Federal (1780-1820)

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**Summary Statement of Significance**

The 1797- 1804 George Read II House is nationally significant as an outstanding early example of Federal style architecture, reflecting the influence of the established Philadelphia merchant class, of which its owner was an important representative. Although located in a National Historic Landmark historic district, the house meets NHL Criterion 4 as a property exceptionally valuable for an understanding of the evolution of American architecture during the early years of the republic. The Read House is also significant by being a design inspired by the long-demolished but seminal 1787 Bingham House of Philadelphia, perhaps the most influential neoclassical Federal style mansion in America. Although some traits of the fashionable English Adam style began to appear in a few American examples in the 1770s, the Adam style and its translation into the American Federal style took place in the period of economic growth after the Revolution from 1780 to 1810. Architectural historian W. Barksdale Maynard called the Read House, completed in 1804, a “masterpiece of the Federal style.”⁹ Another architectural historian, Mark Reinberger, finds “that in every way, the ...[Read House]...ranked with the elite of Federal period houses in America.”¹⁰

The evaluations of these and other scholars recognize the signature features of the Federal style seen in the Read House. The Federal style’s monumentality is emphasized by the house’s cubic form with a flat, taut unbroken façade elevated on a raised basement. Foremost among the Federal features of the house is the large recessed front entry door flanked by tall narrow sidelights all surmounted by a large semi-circular fanlight. Also typical of the Federal style, above the fanlight there is a large round-headed Palladian window fronted by a curvilinear wrought-iron balcony. In addition, Federal-style design motifs of thinness, attenuation, delicacy and lightness are seen in features such as the tall, narrow, symmetrically placed double-sashed windows with six-over-six glass panes separated by extremely thin muntins. Most significantly, the Read House displays the principal hallmark of the Federal style in its display of a light and delicate decoration with its large number of Adamesque composition fireplace mantels by Robert Wellford and extensive use of punch and gouge moldings, both characteristic of the Philadelphia region.¹¹ Introduced on the exterior in the surrounds of the entryway, and the Palladian window above, the distinctive punch and gouge moldings continue throughout the house culminating in the mantelpieces of the three best parlors.

George Read II: The Demanding Owner-Builder

As a young member of the mid-Atlantic elite, (George senior, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and member of the Constitutional Convention), George Read II undoubtedly wanted to make a forward-thinking architectural statement that conveyed his gentility and status in addition to forming his own identity in the New Republic. It was the passion, perfectionism and persistence of George Read II that are largely responsible for the outstanding Federal character of the Read House. “He wanted to build a sensational house that would display his wealth and standing in the community in terms of luxury and grace.”¹² For inspiration and ideas, he looked north to Philadelphia, the new nation’s largest city and capital, and the national leader of architectural fashion. In the summer of 1797, Read II planned his new house with his father George Read I, and his brother-

⁹ W. Barksdale Maynard, *Buildings of Delaware*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008) p. z.

¹⁰ Mark Reinberger, *Utility and Beauty: Robert Wellford and Composition Ornament in America*, 102

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104-105. As noted in Description section, “Punch and gouge” refers to the two tools used to make these decorative elements; the gouge is a chisel with a curving blade that makes a small half-moon cut in the wood, and the punch produces the second element, a shallow circular pit.

¹² Alvin H. Holm and Robert M. Levy, “Historic Structures Report: The George Read II House.”

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in-law Matthew Pearce, a Philadelphia merchant. To be sure the new house would be in the latest fashion, Pearce also sought architectural advice from knowledgeable colleagues from Philadelphia.

Among over 130 surviving letters and forty invoices related to the design and construction of the Read House are four conjectural floor plans passed between Matthew Pearce and George Read I. None of the surviving floor plans is an exact match for the house as constructed, but they suggest that its overall form was decided on without the assistance of an architect and before a builder was hired for the project. Pearce's Philadelphia environs afforded greater exposure to new ideas about space arrangement and to professional architects and builders. The two suggested floor plans he produced exhibit new ideas used or discussed in the city. Although Read I died in 1798, shortly after the foundation for his son's house was laid, Read's brothers John and William Read and Matthew Pearce continued to exert influence during the planning and construction phases. Correspondence among the relatives in New Castle and Philadelphia record the exchange of ideas about such things as procuring appropriate door hardware and selecting a proper design for window heads. Constant communication with family in Philadelphia provided an opportunity to incorporate elements of neoclassical architectural trends then becoming modish in Philadelphia and elsewhere along the Atlantic seaboard.

It was Matthew Pearce's significant recommendation to Read I that probably did the most to increase the influence of Philadelphia's past and emerging architectural trends on the house. On August 10, 1797, Pearce wrote to Read I, stating: "I have met a Man that I think would undertake this Building for George and probably he cannot get one more worthy of the trust from what I hear of him- he would select the Materials and probably in the Course of the Winter prepare a considerable part ready to be put up." The man, Philadelphia carpenter Peter Crowding, played an integral role in the construction of Read's house. He acted as Read's agent in procuring supplies and negotiating orders. Like Read's family in Philadelphia, he offered frequent advice about the design and also influenced decisions about the types of materials employed in the construction.

Not much is known about Peter Crowding's career in Philadelphia. He is listed in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century city directories as a house carpenter, but he was not a member of the prestigious and exclusive Carpenters Company. No extant buildings in Philadelphia have been directly attributed to him; however, in New Castle, in addition to the Read House, five private and public buildings attributed to him between 1798 and 1801 survive. These include the New Castle Academy and the Immanuel Episcopal Church Parish House, which both exhibit distinctive wood carving and features closely resembling the neoclassical design motifs Crowding used at the Read House. In the fall of 1802, Read fired Crowding for an unknown reason and the latter's activity in New Castle seems to have ended.

In particular, Crowding championed a frugal approach in the implementation of the latest styles. Beyond his connections to suppliers and insights about architectural trends, letters from Crowding to Read also attest to his design acumen. In 1801, he wrote to Read: "I am Drawing the Draft of the wash house arch (Today) and all the Building on a small scall [*sic*] but have not got it finished but will bring it Down with me..."¹³ On Read I's request, Crowding even prepared a garden plan, although Read ultimately rejected the scheme.

The foundation of the house was laid in the fall of 1797, and after a delay, construction resumed in earnest in 1801. The family occupied the rear wing of the house in 1803, and the interior of the main block was completed in 1804.

¹³ Peter Crowding to George Read, March 25, 1801, Richard S. Rodney Collection, Delaware Historical Society.

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The Emergence of the Federal Style: 1780-1810

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Federal style, an American adaptation of an architectural style created by British architect Robert Adam (1728 – 1792), was the pinnacle of architectural style and taste in America. Drawing on neoclassical design principles and first called “Roman Revival,” the Federal style was a simpler, lighter and more delicate refinement of the earlier Georgian style, which itself evolved from a Renaissance architectural tradition introduced into England in the early seventeenth century. Like the Adam style, the Federal style focused on the interior, employing its attenuated proportions and decorative conventions, “yet, the American idiom was simpler than the British, more severe, more chaste.”¹⁴

The Federal style had five elements: the first was the system of ornament, the second was the simplification of the underlying structure, the third was the increased flexibility of the floor plan and variety of room shapes, and the fourth was movement. “The idea of movement...is found in varying room shapes, axial plans producing volumetric progressions, radial and concentric lines in geometric ceilings, and in the curving forms of wall decorations.”¹⁵ The fifth element of the Federal style, which derives from both Adam style and Roman practice, was to contrast a more austere and grander exterior to interior richness.¹⁶

Whereas the preceding Georgian style had evolved slowly, becoming more elaborate over the eighteenth century, the Adam style was introduced quite suddenly in the 1780s beginning with the construction of several of what might be called “imported” English neoclassical, Adamesque houses in Philadelphia. These differed radically from earlier Georgian houses and served as models of the new Adam style, which evolved into the Federal style through a process of simplification. They were “imported” in the sense that they were designed by English architects such as John Plaw or by their gentlemen-architect owners after architectural tours of England and especially London. These included two country houses Solitude (1780) and the Woodlands (1789) and two urban mansions, the Bingham House (1787) and the Physick House (1788).

Although some traits of the fashionable English Adam style began to appear in a few American examples in the 1770s, the Adam style and its translation into the American Federal style took place in a mansion boom after the Revolution from 1780 to 1810. This period of significant house construction, which peaked at the turn of the eighteenth-century, brought with it the emergence of the American Federal architectural style. The boom was driven by the resurgence of the American economy after the Revolution, sparked by growing international trade and the resumption of strong economic and cultural ties to England and especially to London as the center of architectural fashion. Among American cities, Philadelphia developed the closest ties to England. These new Federal-style mansions were built to reflect the success and status of prosperous leading merchants who wanted both to emulate their English counterparts while declaring their cultural independence through a distinctive architectural style that placed an American stamp on the prevailing fashionable Adam style. Another factor contributing to the Federal-style mansions boom was the emergence of the first professional American architects in the 1790s such as Charles Bulfinch, John McComb, Jr., Benjamin Latrobe and Gabriel Manigault. The first pattern books featuring Adamesque design became more available in this country in the 1790s.

The mansion boom was a response to the explosive population growth of American cities from 1790 to 1830. In this period Philadelphia, the nation’s largest city, nearly tripled in size from 42,520 to 161,410 persons – a

¹⁴ William H. Pierson, *American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neoclassical Styles* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1970), 112

¹⁵ Boyd, “The Adam Style,” 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

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383 percent increase. New York expanded even more rapidly going from the second largest city at 33,131 in 1790 to become the largest at nearly 200,000 people by 1830 – a rate of almost 600 percent! Boston, the third largest city in 1790 grew from 18,000 to 61,000 while Baltimore, the fourth largest city in 1790, by 1830 had displaced Boston as the third largest, expanding from 13,000 in 1790 to 80,600 by 1830, growing at the same exponential rate as New York.

This greater population forced higher building densities because the eighteenth and early nineteenth century city was a “walking” city. Most structures were constructed within a thirty minute walk from the city center, and buildings were vertically maximized within this space, although walk-ups did not exceed four or five stories until the invention of the elevator in the 1860s. Urban land became more expensive requiring the higher density housing that Stillman observed in his Federal style housing typology (discussed below).¹⁷ It also made the large detached house more expensive to build and more rare. In addition, because of health concerns in central cities, such as yellow fever in Philadelphia, the wealthy often preferred to build in healthier suburban locations. For example, houses such as the Manigault House in Charleston and the Grange in New York were built in then suburban locations, such as Harlem in the latter case.

The Read House and its Contemporaries

The American Federal style came together in the 1790s and in the first decade of the nineteenth century, with a virtual explosion of construction of high style mansions from 1795 to 1806. Historic contexts look at how styles evolve over time but in this instance an agreement on a new Federal-style architectural vocabulary seems to have occurred by the mid-1790s in the design of what would become eleven National Historic Landmarks being built virtually at the same time but reflecting the range of diversity of Federal property types and character defining features. The Read House was built in the midst of this flurry of construction. In Boston, these included Bulfinch’s **First, Second and Third Harrison Gray Otis Houses** (1796, 1800 and 1806) and the 1806 **Gardner-Pingree House** in Salem by Samuel McIntire; in Portland, Maine, the 1800 **McLellan-Sweat Mansion** established the prototypical New England Federal-style mansion. New York’s contribution was the 1802 **Hamilton Grange** by John Macomb; Philadelphia added the 1800-1801 **Lemon Hill; Homewood** was built in Baltimore in 1801-1803. Further south in Washington, D.C. the **Octagon** was constructed in 1800 and Charleston contributed two iconic Federal-style mansions in the 1801 **Blacklock House** and 1803 **Manigault House** by Gabriel Manigault.

Although the urban mansion, in the form of a large, elaborate detached house was the leader in introducing this new architectural style, it was only one type of urban housing built in the Federal period. Perhaps more fundamental than a new architectural style, in the 1780s Philadelphia and other cities began to see new types of housing being built to serve their rapid urban growth. According to Damie Stillman, five types of urban houses were built in the Federal period, of which three were new.¹⁸ Two older types that continued to be built from the Colonial period were the free-standing, often five-bay, house built by wealthier individuals and the smaller, narrower, but detached, three-bay houses used for infill in the urban fabric. The three new housing types designed to shelter a rapidly growing urban population included a double or semi-detached house (or duplex in today’s terms); rows of three or four, attached three-bay houses; and finally, longer rows of multiple smaller two-and three-bay, attached houses. These were, “innovations of the postrevolutionary period”, although “the last type is especially indicative of the transformation that characterized the urban image in the young

¹⁷ Damie Stillman, “City Living, Federal Style,” *Everyday Life in the Early Republic*, C. E. Hutchins, ed. (Winterthur, DE: Winterthur Museum, 1993), 138-139.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

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republic.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the detached large expensive, pretentious mansion houses of the elite reflecting their new wealth still set the standard of the new Federal architectural style.

On the interior, while the Federal style largely continued the center-hall four-corner room plan, this gave way after 1800 to more flexibility of the floor plan and variety of room shapes. This change included an increase in Adam-inspired elliptical, round-ended rooms with projecting bows beyond the wall line in an exedra. The new elliptical rooms were especially elegant and intended for entertainment and display as best rooms. In addition, moving the stairs into a side hall or creating an “imperial staircase” with one straight flight splitting into a double return enhanced the central hall.²⁰ Following European precedent of *piano nobile*, there was also the tendency to place some more important rooms on the second floor, as with the principal drawing room in the Read House.²¹

Another Federal urban mansion form, inspired by French models, was a plan with a circular salon projecting from a cubic form. Although originally designed to be at the center of the rear garden front, as at the Swan House of Dorchester, MA, projecting circular fronts were also used to create impressive urban mansions such as William Thornton's 1798-1800 Octagon in Washington, DC and the 1804 Manigault House in Charleston, SC – both National Historic Landmarks.

This consensus that forged the new Federal style in the 1780s came from several sources. The first was the promulgation and emulation of particular new Adam style houses and a second was the publication of pattern books featuring the Adam style. The most influential building in forging this consensus was perhaps the long demolished 1787 William Bingham House in Philadelphia, mentioned earlier. The Bingham House, designed by English architect John Plaw, established what would become the model for the detached urban mansion. Surrounded by a garden on a large urban lot, the Bingham house consisted of a luxurious, monumental three-story, central block topped with a shallow hipped roof and flanked by one-story wings below marble balustrades. The flat red brick five-bay façade was enriched with wall plaques, thin stringcourses and curvilinear wrought-iron balconies. The fenestration featured three rows of symmetrically arranged double-sash windows with tall, narrow six-over-six windows on the second story above shorter six-over-six ground story windows and below small three-over-three square windows on the third story. The attenuated second floor windows reflected the high-ceilinged public rooms. The façade was organized around a wide central axis consisting of “a massive front entrance framed by a rusticated stone arch, topped by a Palladian balcony window on the second floor” and a lunette on the third story.²² The rear garden façade featured two polygonal ends typical of English neoclassical designs.

In contrast to its austere, attenuated exterior, the Bingham House’s “true glory lay in its interior design.”²³ A soaring central hall with the first mosaic marble floor in America led to a wide self-supporting grand marble staircase ascending to the principal rooms on the second floor. On the first floor “the study, the library, and the banqueting room opened to the right...with the ballroom and several parlors on the left, one of them leading into an extensive conservatory.”²⁴ The second floor contained “a drawing room lined with mirror-covered folding doors to increase the sparkle of chandeliers, a dining room, a card room, and bedchambers.”²⁵

¹⁹ Ibid., 139.

²⁰ Ibid., 140

²¹ Kimball, 160

²² Keels, *Forgotten Philadelphia*, 54.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Albert's, *The Golden Voyage*, 162.

²⁵ Albert's, *Golden Voyage*.

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The Bingham House emerged as a model for Federal mansions along the eastern seaboard as it became well known as the latest in Adam style architectural fashion and was visited by many. The Boston architect Charles Bulfinch visited in 1790 and described it as “in a stile, which would be esteemed splendid in even the most luxurious parts of Europe.”²⁶ Bulfinch made a drawing of the exterior of the house, which he used seven years later as the basis for his First Harrison Gray Otis House, which has been recognized as perhaps the seminal Federal-style urban mansion. The Bingham House was also visited that year by Joseph Manigault, a wealthy Charlestonian who wrote his architect brother that “Mr. Bingham’s house is more handsomely furnished than I had supposed . . . I think it proves him a man of taste.”²⁷ In 1803, his brother would build the Manigault house, a large urban mansion with a projecting circular front, which reflected the exterior simplicity and detailing of the Bingham house. As there are strong similarities in proportion and exterior finish, the Bingham House may have also influenced the 1801 Homewood in Baltimore, as its owner and builder, Charles Carroll, Jr., spent much time visiting his sister who lived down the street from the Bingham House in Philadelphia.²⁸

The most widely used source for new architectural styles were pattern books. In the 1770s, pattern books began to shift their emphasis from Palladian/Georgian designs to plans reflecting new more fashionable Adam designs. The most influential of these were those of Englishman William Pain (ca. 1730 – ca. 1790) who published *The Practical Builder, or Workman’s General Assistant* in 1774, followed in 1788 by the *Practical House Carpenter, or Youth’s Instructor*.²⁹ Because Pain’s guides were specifically adapted to the needs of the joiner, they had a great influence on the actual design of houses and their features. Pain’s modifications of Adam’s designs were so influential in America that “it [is] necessary to distinguish between the style as originated by Robert Adam, and as interpreted by . . . William Pain.”³⁰

Areas in which Pain modified Adam design and techniques were in moldings and the promotion of new forms of decoration, including punch and gouge work, mantelpieces, and frontispieces and the form of the fanlight door. Compared to Adam’s ornament, Pain’s is repetitive; a favorite device for accomplishing this was “the use of repeated gouged flutes to enliven flat, vertical surfaces that would have been left plain in Georgian design.”³¹ He also elaborated fret-dental and plain dental moldings (in mantelpieces, for example) by filling the open spaces with small circles with pierced centers creating coloristic effects reflecting the spirit of Adam design.³² In combination, these delicate busy details augmented with punch and gouge carving motifs “provide a dazzling visual effect unknown in earlier work.”³³

Punch and gouge, which possibly found its highest expression in the George Read II House, became a popular form of decorative molding in the Federal style as a substitute for plaster or composition, and evolved into at least four regional styles, of which the Delaware River, Connecticut River, and Hudson River were three, followed by a Rhode Island style.

Pain illustrated a lighter, refined version of the Adam mantelpiece, which as modified by American joiners would become a character-defining feature of Federal interiors. Georgian chimneypieces consisted of heavy

²⁶ Stillman, 143.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Catherine Rogers Arthur and Cindy Kelly, *Homewood House*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 16.

²⁹ Both books were reprinted in Boston in 1796.

³⁰ Boyd, “The Adam Style,” 67.

³¹ James L. Garvin, *A Building History of Northern New England*, Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2001, 106.

³² Boyd, “The Adam Style,” 72.

³³ Gavin, *Northern New England*, 106.

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eared architraves surrounding the firebox with an elaborate overmantel above. Later Adamesque chimneypieces, with no overmantel and deemphasized architrave, consisted of flanking supports such as pilasters supporting a frieze with end blocks below a mantelshelf. The frieze band was divided into panels with cast decoration.

Pain also introduced a new type of frontispiece or front door, with a fanlight in an open pediment above the door. This would become perhaps the most singular defining feature of the Federal style. Although fanlights appeared in Late Georgian front doors, they were placed between the top of the door and the (usually) heavy pediment above. Pain created an “open pediment” by removing the central area of the pediment and middle section of the entablature leaving only the orders immediately above the columns flanking the door and the raking cornice of the pediment. In this open pediment, he placed a semicircular fanlight filled with tracery.

If the Bingham House introduced Adamesque neoclassical design to America, it was the First Harrison Gray Otis House (NHL) designed by Charles Bulfinch and completed in 1796 that established the template for the Federal high-style mansions. Closely following the elevation and floor plan he drew in Philadelphia of the Bingham House some six years earlier,³⁴ in the First Harrison Gray Otis House, Bulfinch built a monumental, three-story, five-bay “crisp brick box, punctuated with stone band courses and lintels” topped by a very shallow hip-on-hip roof.³⁵ More severe than the Bingham house, “he eliminated nearly all exterior ornament, relying on delicate tracery on the central door, as well as studied proportions of window shapes and wall treatments for visual delight.” In this, he moved more toward the Adamesque ideal of the flat façade emphasizing the contrast of solids and voids as design elements.

Adamesque and Federal delicacy, lightness, and elegance were brought to this composition by the attenuation of its architectural features and the thinness of their elements, which the flat blank wall served to emphasize. Like the Physick House, the façade is horizontally divided by thin stone belt courses below a narrow brick corbelled cornice into three bands with a narrow third story. A sense of attenuation is emphasized by an elaborate three-story entryway, almost a replica of the Bingham House. It consists of large entry door flanked by vertical sidelights below a wide elliptical fanlight, which would become a signature of the Federal style. Like the Bingham house, the second and third floors feature a large Palladian window below an elliptical lunette on the third floor belt course.

The plan of the First Harrison Gray Otis House follows the Georgian precedent of two rooms on either side of a center hall with a kitchen ell. Though simpler and less elaborate than the Bingham House, one historian believes this older type of plan probably reflects the overall organization of that Philadelphia house.³⁶ The hall bisects the house with a rear entry and a double straight staircase to the second floor with a second service stair hall in the rear. The best rooms, dining room and parlor, are at the front of the first floor, with an office behind the parlor. Following the Bingham plan, Bulfinch placed the drawing room in the southwest corner of the second floor, as was done in the Read House. The second floor, like the Bingham house, also had higher ceilings, although not evidenced by larger window size on the façade.

The product of several people, the quality and character of the interior decoration lacked the coherence of the exterior that would come to characterize the Federal style and of the interior decoration of the Read House. The

³⁴ Harold Kirker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1969, 119.

³⁵ Keith Morgan and Peter Vanderwarker, *Buildings of Massachusetts: Metropolitan Boston* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 96.

³⁶ Kirker, *Charles Bulfinch*, 119.

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exception, according to Pierson, is the mantel in the dining room. A well-executed Federal mantel, “the delicate green background against which white carved and molded figures stand out in delicate relief is a characteristic touch...the use of cool neutral tones as a foil for the lacelike white or gilded ornament is typical of Adam’s interiors.”³⁷

The First Harrison Gray Otis house, based on William Bingham’s Philadelphia mansion as was George Read II’s house, became a model for the upcoming Federal mansion boom and was institutionalized as an example of the urban mansion in new pattern books.³⁸ Elements of the architectural vocabulary were incorporated in different combinations to create a diversity of Federal-style houses. From 1797 to 1803, the period from the design to the completion of the Read II House, nine NHL Federal style urban mansions of various types were completed. Three represent the Federalized version of the five-bay, brick rectangular block – the McLellan-Sweat Mansion in Portland ME (1800), the Read II House of New Castle, Delaware (1797 – 1803), and the Blacklock House in Charleston, SC. All three feature an unbroken flat façade with decorative central bay including impressive Federal style fan-lit entry, below a large Palladian window on the second floor, which is round-headed on the McLellan-Sweat and Read Houses, and flat-headed on the Blacklock House. With a circular portico at entry and a flat roof with a balustrade at the eaves, the three-story McLellan-Sweat House represents the classical New England Federal style detached urban mansion while the Read House represents the more austere Philadelphia style. The Blacklock House has the most elaborate exterior of the three with a projecting pediment and windows flanking the entryway set in blind arches. All three have center hall plans with flanking rectangular rooms. In the Federal fashion, the stairs in the Read House are in a side hall, those in the Blacklock House are at the end of hall and the McLellan-Sweat House features a spectacular imperial staircase with the first run freestanding in the center of the hall.

More sophisticated in the Federal style were Lemon Hill in Philadelphia (1800-1801) and Hamilton Grange (1802) in New York designed by McComb. Both are three-bay buildings, which increases the wall to window ratio with the walls of Lemon Hill stuccoed while those of the Grange are boards laid end-to-end to create a flat surface. Both buildings also have single-story open porches at each end, and have low hipped roofs fronted, in the case of the Grange, by a balustrade at the eaves. In terms of their facades, both are on raised basements with the Lemon Hill entry approached by double stair and that of the Grange by a single run of stairs. With widely spaced windows, the most striking feature of the Lemon Hill façade is the expanse of light stucco wall that also focuses attention on a large double door with sidelights topped by a large elaborate fanlight below an impressive Palladian window. Smaller in area and fronted by a rectangular portico, the façade of the Grange features a simpler, single entry door with sidelights below a triple window over the portico.

Innovatively representing the latest Federal feature, both houses contain hexagonal or elliptical drawing rooms. In Lemon Hill, three oval rooms are spectacularly stacked one above the other on the river side of the house to allow a view of the Schuylkill River, with double hung windows allowing access to the exterior at the piazza level, as do the jib windows in the rear parlor of the Read House. The ground floor oval served as a dining room while those above were parlors.³⁹ At Hamilton Grange, two large elliptical octagonal rooms are laid out end to end in the middle of the first floor with their polygonal ends extending into the porches at both ends of the house. According to Roger Moss, “[s]uch high style neoclassical rooms were rare in America of 1800.” In addition to the elliptical dining room and parlor at the nearby Woodlands, “[t]hose in James Hoban’s White

³⁷ Pierson, *American Buildings*, 261.

³⁸ Roth, 114.

³⁹ Roger Moss, *Historic Houses of Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 90.

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House in Washington, D.C. and Charles Bulfinch's Joseph Barrell House in (1792-93) are usually cited as earlier examples."⁴⁰

With many seeking to escape the health risks and crowded conditions of the city, the five-part Palladian country house also proved attractive in the mansion boom. An outstanding example, often cited as a premier example of the Federal style is Homewood in suburban Baltimore. "Homewood is the result of the taste and ideas of Charles Carroll Jr. and the skilled work of Robert and William Edwards."⁴¹ In this, the relationship between patron and builder was much like that between Carroll's contemporary George Read II and his builder Peter Crowding in the construction of the Read House, in which Read made critical decisions regarding the design and construction with Crowding translating them into the actual building.

"The design for Homewood incorporated a classical five-part plan based on the theories of Andrea Palladio, the sixteenth century Italian builder. . . .At Homewood, the Adamesque affinity for symmetrical building units determined the choice of a five-part plan, with hyphens flanking the main block and connecting two wings of dependencies."⁴² The main block is fronted by a white projecting pedimented four-column portico. Both the main block and dependencies are one story with shallow hipped roofs. As with the Read II House, the façades are flat uniformly colored brick walls laid in Flemish bond. Topped by marble keystone lintels, the four windows in the main block and four in the flanking dependencies are six-over-six double sash in tall narrow frames recessed behind the wall line.

The floor plan of Homewood is organized around a lateral central passageway extending through the main block through the hyphens and connecting to the dependencies. The main block is divided into evenly sized rooms with three flanking either side of the central passage. A wide two-part central hall extends from a front reception hall to a rear back hall with stairs, which also functions to provide cross ventilation. Like the Read House side parlors, the front and rear central halls at Homewood are connected by double door under a large fanlight.

However, the two most elaborate, innovative and sophisticated of the Federal urban mansions were the 1800 Octagon in Washington, DC and the 1803 Manigault House in Charleston. Both were monumental versions of the house type with the projecting circular salon in the front. The Octagon is an example where the type was used on a corner urban lot. Here, however, we will concentrate on the Manigault House. Some time after returning from his visit to the Bingham Houses in 1790, Joseph Manigault commissioned his architect brother to "design a house in the manner of a neoclassical suburban villa." Monumental in scale, it stands three stories above a high basement with its most distinctive feature being a large semicircular bay projecting from the front north side of the house. The main entry is comprised of a large single door with sidelights topped by a semi-circular fanlight below a stylized Palladian window on the second floor with another three part window above that. The façade is five bays wide with all windows and doors recessed behind the wall line. Extremely flat, the façade is constructed with a local reddish brown brick, which lends the building a rather drab appearance. It also boasts a semicircular double-tiered piazza on the west and three-level rectangular piazza on the south facing the garden.

On the interior, the most impressive space is a two-story entrance hall in the front projection with a curved stairway leading to the second floor. Extensive neoclassical composition work decorates the various mantels

⁴⁰ Moss, 90.

⁴¹ Arthur and Kelly, 23.

⁴² Ibid., 24.

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and doorways of the principal rooms. There is another curvilinear bay in a major drawing room on the southeast corner.⁴³ Overall, with the possible exception of the Octagon, the Manigault House is the most elaborate of the Federal-style urban mansions.

Called “the last great house which Bulfinch designed,” the 1806 Third Harrison Gray Otis House represents the maturing of the Federal style. Here, the English Adamesque is transformed into the Federal style as the American influence further shaves off exterior ornament to abstract the underlying geometry as the essence of the new style. For this seminal Federal house, Pierson argues that “the refined adjustments of shape and interval, and the elegant rhythmic sequences...[make]...the ultimate experience of the house...primarily an experience of proportions.. The shape and location of the windows are the design.”⁴⁴ Yet, against the newly, geometrically abstract flat façade, the principal interior feature is the quintessential Adamesque-like large oval ballroom on the higher-ceilinged, second floor of principal rooms – thus the exterior straight lines contrast interior curves.

A monumental four-story, five-bay, detached urban mansion, the Third Harrison Gray Otis House is only slightly wider than it is high in actual measurement. According to Pierson, “in this superb building all ornamental pretense is stripped away, and the brick wall...is here permitted to speak for itself.” Yet, it gives an overall impression of verticality and attenuation which is accomplished with several visual devices. First, above a low first floor of rusticated white granite which acts as a podium, the red brick façade then rises as an unbroken, flat wall plane with sharply cut corners framed by a balustrade fronting a flat roof. Within this, the wall as a single unbroken expanse is reinforced by the removal of horizontal elements such as belt courses and minimizing the size of horizontal lintels and sills on windows. Thus, the façade wall becomes a single uniform red brick expanse in which windows are the only architectural and design element. This contrasts starkly to the highly compartmentalized Georgian façade framed by pilasters, divided by belt courses, frequently with its central axis emphasized by a projecting pavilion.

The 1804 Pingree (or John Gardner) House designed and built by Salem carpenter and carver Samuel McIntire is widely recognized as a masterpiece of Federal design. Pierson calls it “remarkable for its combination of austerity and grace.” Roth describes its “cubic severity” as “austere to the point of starkness [which] gains its...distinction through the arrangements of proportioned parts and the position of windows and stringcourses.” In his design, McIntire distilled the Palladian, Renaissance-inspired, five-bay, residential block to its proportional and rectilinear essence creating a “precise, simple and elegant...design.”⁴⁵ Beneath a flat roof fronted with a light eaves balustrade, the flat red brick façade is a grid of thin horizontal belt courses dividing three stories of symmetrically placed windows set back from the face of the wall. The ornamental focal point of this undecorated wall is a light semicircular portico fronting an entryway of a popular Venetian door with an elliptical fanlight and flanked by sidelights. The extremely thin, attenuated columns of the portico stand in sharp contrast to the brick wall.

Reflecting Adamesque design principles, the stark exterior of the house contrasts sharply with an elaborate interior carved by McIntire which in “its crisp linearity” is judged to be a superb example of Federal interiors. Concentrated on architectural elements of mantel pieces and door surrounds in the Federal manner of a classical temple with columns or pilasters to each side supporting an entablature, Pierson described the mantel

⁴³ Description of Manigault House adapted from Jonathan Poston, *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture*, (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 612.

⁴⁴ Pierson, 264.

⁴⁵ Leland M. Roth, *A Concise History of American Architecture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 58-59.

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as “a coherent whole, a symmetrical system of horizontal rectangles – clean, sharp, and exact...which grades from the exquisite thinness of the side panels to the greater sculptural richness of the...basket of fruit in the central panel.

Pierson summarized the house as “[b]eginning with the overriding rectangle of the facade, it develops in a continuing subdivision of delicately related parts which...descend in a rhythmic diminuendo to the smallest bead in the thinnest molding of the fireplace mantel.” Behind the rectangular façade, the house with rectangular central-hall floor plan extends well back into a deep narrow lot featuring formal gardens.

Federal Style Character-Defining Features of the Read II House

By the late 1790s, when the Read House was designed, the Federal-style house displayed several key components: the simplification of the underlying structure with flattened surfaces and emphasis on the wall; attenuated proportions;⁴⁶ light, curvilinear ornament based on Roman decorative and geometric motifs; and the introduction of curves and ellipses into the strict Palladian rectilinear layout. Adam planned his houses on the basis of a concept that could not be seen from a single vantage point. He distinguished between interior and exterior forms. Following Roman practice, Adam thought a more austere exterior design should contrast to interior richness.⁴⁷ This interior/exterior contrast is one of the most significant Federal-style attributes of the Read House. The simple exterior contrasted to the decorated interior can be seen by comparing photos of the elevation of the house to the central hall.

The Read House is an exemplar of the Federal style. According to Professor Damie Stillman, perhaps the leading academic authority on the Federal style: “The primary significance of the George Read II House is that it is a major manifestation of the Federal style of architecture, a style influenced by the Adamesque brand of neoclassicism developed in England in the last third of the 18th century by Robert Adam. It is especially seen in the attenuated proportions and in the delicate neoclassical decoration, particularly in the interior. Philadelphia saw an especial efflorescence of this style, and the Read House reflects that flowering.”⁴⁸

In fact, the Read House is a Philadelphia version of the Federal style; one historian commented that the house “could not be more Philadelphia than if it had been built there, loaded on a barge and floated down the Delaware River to New Castle”⁴⁹ One of the earliest fully neoclassical houses to be constructed in America, according to Stillman, the William Bingham house, located in Philadelphia, may have been an important design source for the Read House. The most striking similarity between the Bingham House and the Read House was the organization of the façade’s central axis. Both houses were designed around a wide central axis, the Bingham House consisting of a “front entrance formed by a rusticated stone arch topped by a Palladian balcony window on the second floor” and a lunette on the third floor.⁵⁰ The Read House displays a two-story version of this, with its large entryway topped by a fanlight, below a large Palladian window with a balcony.

The Exterior

On the exterior, the Read house displays several significant character-defining features of the Federal style while a hierarchy of interrelated Federal features marks its interior. Conforming to the Adam/Federal design

⁴⁶ Stephan W. Semes, *Architecture of the Classical World*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 64.

⁴⁷ Sterling M. Boyd, “The Adam Style in America: 1770-1820.” Dissertation Princeton University, 1966. Published in original format: New York: Garland, 1985, 26.

⁴⁸ Written communication from Professor Stillman, January 21, 2016.

⁴⁹ Charles T. Lyle, “The George Read II House: Notes on its History and Restoration,” 1.

⁵⁰ Thomas H. Keels, *Forgotten Philadelphia: Lost Architecture of the Quaker City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 54.

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principle, the Read House presents a plain, monumental taut exterior contrasting to an elaborately decorated interior. The Read house “is huge, simple, and grandly proportioned and . . . George Read II has built a house of almost abstract simplicity.”⁵¹ This plain symmetrical façade serves as a background for decoration concentrated on features in the central bay.

In terms of the neoclassical flat wall aesthetic, the façade of the Read House has been flattened to an almost two-dimensional abstract pattern of solids and voids of symmetrical openings on a flat brick wall. Its flatness has been created by removing all projecting elements, including a water table and belt courses, to create an unbroken wall surface from ground to cornice. In addition, recessing architectural elements such as windows and entryway in sharply-cut openings and making features like lintels flush with the wall emphasize the planar quality of the wall. Beyond this, actual physical flatness is increased by the use of light-red, high-quality smooth uniformly-colored Philadelphia bricks laid in thin mortar joints in Flemish bond. All of this along with plain sharply-angled building corners without quoins reinforces the Federal emphasis on line and hierarchy.

Overall, then, the façade of the Read House presents a “bold, clear, rigorously geometrical, subtly contrived composition,” according to architectural historians Alvin H. Holm and Robert M. Levy.⁵² They attribute its geometric precision to having been planned on the basis of a nine-by-nine grid. “The square and the double square form the insistent proportional system for the façade and to a lesser extent the entire house,” a rigor of layout that must be rare.⁵³ The attenuated Federal style double square with an aspect ratio of 2:1 is the proportional building block of the Read House.

The Adam/Federal style emphasizes the central bay or axis of the façade as the main point of decoration. The Read House does so dramatically with three Federal style features within the central axis. They are an elaborate Palladian window fronted by a delicate wrought iron balcony with curved features on the second story above an outstanding example of a Federal-style entry consisting of a large fanlight above a four-and-a-half-foot wide door flanked by vertical rectangular sidelights and fluted pilasters. Adam had transformed the facade entry point to this more elegant motif based on the popular Palladian window. It was first called a “Venetian” door. The characteristics of the entryway of the Read house are rare because “the door and glazing are set back to the interior wall plane while the side jamb pilasters project to the plane of the exterior wall . . . [which] serves to exaggerate the depth of the doorway recess, emphasizing the central void around which the façade is arranged.”⁵⁴ The floor-to-ceiling Palladian window above, as wide as the hallway, illuminates the second floor hall creating what is called a Palladian hall.

The attenuation of the Read House as manifested in thinness, lightness and delicacy is seen throughout the façade, as in the very delicate thin muntins in the windows. The tall, narrow, recessed, stacked undecorated windows are dominant elements in the façade. The attenuation of the façade of the Read House is accentuated by spacing these tall, narrow windows more closely vertically than horizontally as Charles Bullfinch would later in the design of the Third Harrison Gray Otis House in Boston.⁵⁵ Moreover, recessing the very narrow window frames two inches behind the face of the wall highlights the light grid of the thin muntins, lending the façade a light, open appearance. Holm and Levy note that the equal height of the first and second story windows

⁵¹ Alvin H. Holm, Jr. AIA and Robert M. Levy, *Historic Structures Report: The George Read II House, New Castle Delaware for the Historical Society of Delaware*, Media, Pennsylvania, September 7, 1978.

⁵² Holm and Levy, 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁵ Pierson, 262.

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emphasizes the abstract non-hierarchical and so non-Georgian quality of the façade.”⁵⁶ Making the marble keystone arches flat and flush with the wall continues the flattening.

The truncated gable roof of the Read House has been cited as a holdover Georgian feature, though another argument can be made based on the function of the roof. But first, aside from the roof form, is the point that it is finished and decorated in a Federal manner. The cornice is decorated in the Federal style and the roof is topped by Federal-style balustrades and Roman urns. A Georgian aspect is that the balustrade is on the ridge of the roof rather than at the eaves in the Federal manner. This, however, raises the question of the function of the truncated gable roof, which may well have been to provide a captain’s walk for this shoreline house. Such walks were common features in coastal houses. Stillman points out that in New England the Federal style was, as in the example of the Joseph Coolidge House in Boston by Bulfinch, “affixed to . . . four-square New England seacoast house with a hipped roof and captain’s walk.”⁵⁷ The functional importance of the roof walk is reflected in the unexpectedly elaborate stairway that served it.

The Interior

The grand monumental spaces promised from the outside of the Read House by its large Palladian windows and the great central entryway with its sidelights and broad fanlight are fully realized on the interior. In the best Adam/Federal-style fashion, the interior presents a decorative exuberance in contrast to the quiet, monumental, and dignified exterior.

Overall, the signature feature of the Adam and Federal styles was their system of ornamentation and unified approach to interior design; Adam “coordinated not only wall decoration, but also floor curtain treatments, hardware, furniture, paint colors, upholstery fabrics and furniture.”⁵⁸ Architectural historian William Pierson asserts that the “Adam style above everything else [was] a delicate and imaginative mode of interior decoration and it is here that Adam’s very special and ardent form of Neoclassicism is to be found.”⁵⁹

Adam’s approach to interior design had four characteristics. The first was the light delicate ornamentation itself. Following his emphasis on contrast, Adam’s decoration was concentrated on architectural features such as mantelpieces and door surrounds, while Georgian wood paneling on walls was replaced with plain plaster or wallpaper. The second characteristic was how the newly designed interiors of houses were modified to better accommodate and display the interior decoration through simplification of the underlying structure. The third characteristic is how Adam modified the floor plan both to be more functional and flexible. The fourth characteristic was movement, demonstrated both by the movement within the exuberant ornamentation, and by the sense of movement through the house and the progression of hierarchical decorated spaces and vistas.

In interpreting the interior of the Read House, it is best to start with the floor plan. A high-ceilinged large central hall greets the visitor with decorated Federal-style Roman arches at midpoint marking the locations of primary rooms and the stairs to the best parlor on the second floor. The central hall has been enlarged in Federal fashion by moving the stairs into a side hall occupying one of the four quadrants of the plan. High ceilings and large windows on the first and second floors continue the exterior monumentality.

⁵⁶ Holm and Levy, 10.

⁵⁷ Stillman, “City Living, Federal Style,” 139.

⁵⁸ Krill, 77.

⁵⁹ Pierson, 216.

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The center-hall four-room-square floor plan has been interpreted as a Georgian holdover, but it is not specifically Georgian as it was a common ongoing characteristic of Renaissance-neoclassical-inspired classical houses from their introduction until the late eighteenth century. Damie Stillman observes that the center-hall, four-corner plan was conventional and common to most New England Federal-style houses.⁶⁰ And during the late period only a small percentage of Federal houses adopted foyers in lieu of central halls, making it as much a Federal feature as a Georgian one.

Overall, the Read II House exhibits what might be called an elaborate “nested” hierarchy of rooms and spaces. The basis for a hierarchy of rooms is part of the multi-floor plan. The second floor, the piano nobile, contained the most elaborate public rooms and private family areas with higher second floor ceilings and with the most elaborate parlor in its southwest corner. The other two “best rooms” are the first floor front parlor and first floor rear parlor, which opens onto the rear yard. The purpose of different levels of decoration in rooms was to signal their status to guide the guests throughout the house to the most important rooms. Within each room, there is a hierarchy of Federal decorative features consisting of arches, mantels, doorways, window casings and chair rails,⁶¹ with the mantelpiece being the most important architectural feature and the elaborateness of its decoration signaling the rank of the room.

Within this hierarchy, the Read House exhibits the Adam/Federal interior decorative scheme of using plain plaster walls as foils for decoration and of concentrating that decoration on the architectural elements. The Federal-style punch and gouge ornamentation⁶² sparingly introduced on the exterior is continued on the interior, most lavishly on the arches and interior door surrounds and then more modestly on the chair railings and baseboards. This ornamentation, the most significant feature of the interior, combines the decorative system of punch and gouge moldings with integrated Wellford composition panels on the primary fireplace mantels. The Read House contains both the most extensive punch and gouge moldings in the country, as well as the largest collection of Wellford composition ornament panels. Reinberger comments that the Read House may have been “at the center of the punch and gouge universe” coinciding with the pinnacle of the form of ornamentation, since it was only introduced in the late 1790s and reached its peak by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century. According to Mark Reinberger, the “Read House was exceptional for having a profusion of punch and gouge work on the second floor as well as the first.”⁶³ Composition ornament, adopted and popularized by Adam in the 1770s, was cast in molds from a simple mixture of materials and used as a substitute for more expensive woodcarving.

The elaborate Federal-style mantelpieces with composition ornament integrated in punch and gouge moldings are the decorative apex of the interior of the house. Adam designed neoclassical fireplace surrounds and door and window surrounds based on a classical aedicule or framing structure. Neoclassical mantelpieces were featured in William Pain’s 1789 pattern book, where “they became a popular feature of best rooms almost immediately,”⁶⁴ as well as the model for the Philadelphia Federal-style mantelpiece. Architectural historian Sterling Boyd describes the mantelpieces at the Read House as “covered with small-scale gouge work . . . [that] . . . in its profusion and intricacy, produces a lace-like effect that offsets the bulk of the chimneypiece or doorway design.”⁶⁵ These neoclassical mantelpieces consisted of flat pilasters flanking the opening of the firebox and supporting an entablature across the top with a wide frieze band topped by a wide

⁶⁰ Stillman, “City Living, Federal Style,” 139.

⁶¹ Mudrick and Smith, *Federal Style Patterns: 1789 to 1820*, (New York: Wiley, 2005), 159.

⁶² Punch and gouge has also been called “Carpenter Adam.”

⁶³ Reinberger, 105.

⁶⁴ James L. Garvin, *Building History of Northern New England* (Hanover and London, 2001), 163.

⁶⁵ Boyd, 263.

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thin mantelshelf. The frieze band was divided into three panels or tablets to accommodate composition ornament. In the Read house, allowing for more ornament, the center tablets are larger and break forward.⁶⁶

The hierarchy of punch and gouge decoration in each parlor extends from the elaborate mantelpieces, to less elaborate door surrounds, to relatively simple chair rails.⁶⁷ A wide plain frieze band tops the door surrounds with punch and gouge concentrated in the cornice. Chair rails have punch and gouge swags, as do the arch surrounds in the hall.⁶⁸

Although the Read House contains no elliptical rooms with curved walls, the extensive use of Roman arches is striking, both on the exterior fanlight and Palladian windows and in the five large arches on the interior which comprise major architectural decorative features. The curvilinear wrought iron balcony on the façade presents another curved accent that adds contrast to an otherwise severe form.

Conclusion

Thus in the formative period in the development of the Federal style there seem to have been two divergent trends. On the one hand, as Damie Stillman has observed consistent with growing urbanization, there was the trend to a simpler, smaller and more standardized urban house in the Federal style. Yet at the same time, among the wealthy elite, there was a great deal of innovation and experimentation with architectural vocabulary to create unique houses within that vocabulary. Designed in what was an important river port (and the first state capitol) with strong cultural and economic links to Philadelphia, the Read House reflects the latest stylistic trends in a rapidly changing nationwide architecture environment.

The George Read II House has been owned by the Delaware Historical Society since 1975, and today is opened to the public as a house museum. It holds a place of prominence in Delaware as the most outstanding example of Federal-style architecture in the state, both for the quality of design and ornamentation, and the integrity of historic fabric. These are the attributes that qualify it to take its place with other preeminent Federal-style mansions as a National Historic Landmark.

⁶⁶ Reinberger, 104.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5 and 105.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 105.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ___ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
___ Previously Listed in the National Register.
___ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
[X] Designated a National Historic Landmark. Contributing resource in the New Castle National Historic Landmark District, 1967
[X] Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: HABS No. DE-81
___ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record:

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- ___ State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State Agency
___ Federal Agency
___ Local Government
___ University
[X] Other (Specify Repository): Delaware Historical Society

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: approximately 2.5

Table with 3 columns: UTM References, Zone, Easting, Northing. Values: 18, 451809, 4389904

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundary of the property encompasses the entirety of New Castle County, Delaware, tax parcels #2101540037 and #2101500180, excepting the narrow T-shaped lot on the southwest side of The Strand extending from that road along Packett Alley to the Delaware River. The boundaries of the nominated property are shown on the attached site plan.

Boundary Justification: The boundary has been drawn to correspond with the current legal lot lines for the two principal historic parcels associated with the George Read II House. The two parcels are the lot on the north side of The Strand that contains the brick mansion house, and the large lot directly opposite the house on the

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south side of The Strand extending to the Delaware River. This latter parcel contains no buildings but is integral to the historic setting of the house during its construction and early history.

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Photo 1: George Read II House façade and partial south elevation, 2015.
(Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 2: Entrance, 2015. (Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 3: Partial west and south elevations looking east, 2015. (Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 4: View of gardens looking south from Read House, 2015.
(Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 5: Entry hall looking west toward rear door, 2015. (Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 6: Center of first floor hall, with entry to stair hall, looking northwest, 2015.
(Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 7: Front (southeast) parlor looking through to rear (southwest) parlor, 2015.
(Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 8: Detail of punch-and-gouge woodworking on mantel of front (southeast) parlor, 2015.
(Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 9: Mantel in second floor (southwest) parlor, 2015. (Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 10: Second floor hall looking east toward Delaware River, 2015.
(Photograph by David Ames)

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Photo 11: Southeast bedchamber, 2015. (Photograph by David Ames)

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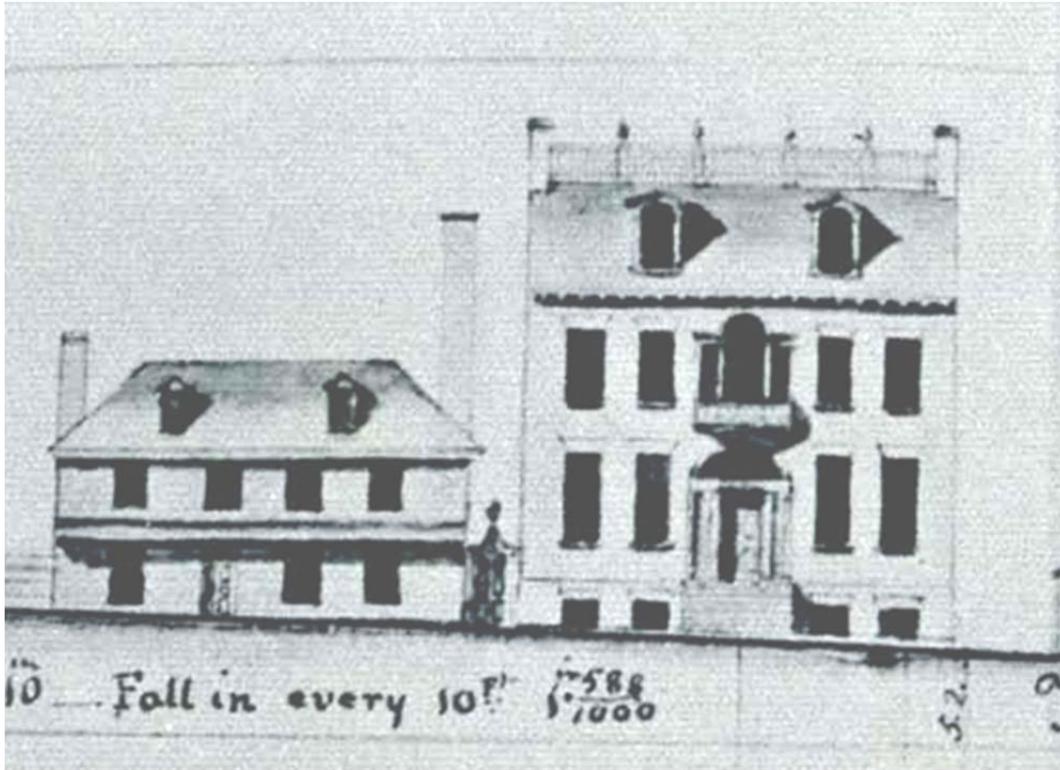


Fig. 1: Benjamin Latrobe's drawing of George Read I House (left) and George Read II House, 1804. (Courtesy of Delaware Public Archives)

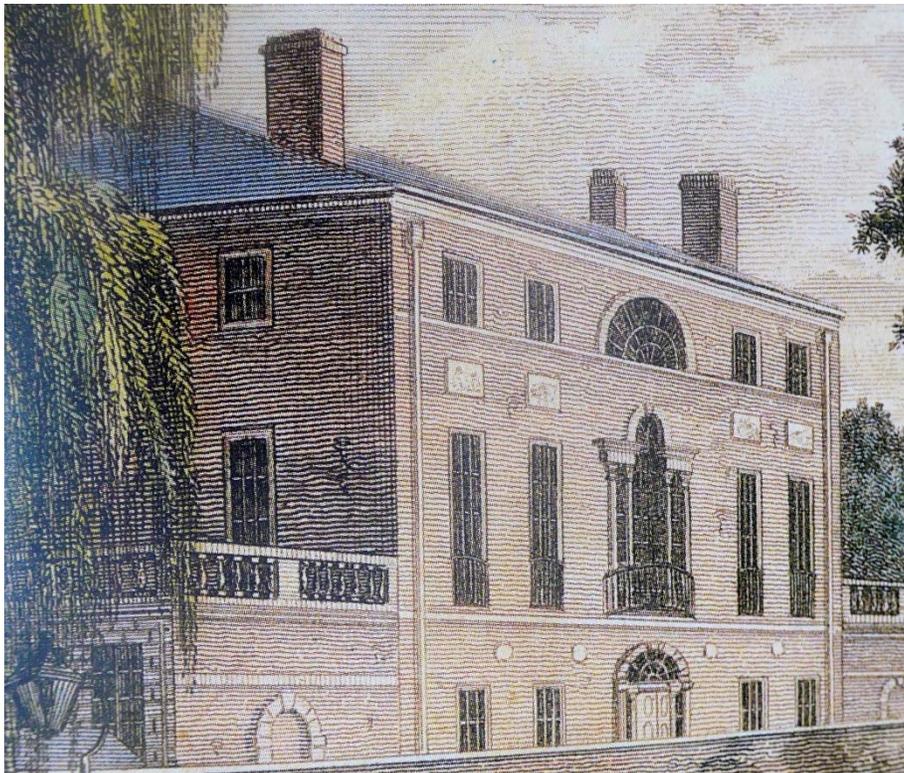


Fig. 2: William Bingham House, Philadelphia, 1800. (William Birch, *The City of Philadelphia, in the State of Pennsylvania North America; as it appeared in the Year 1800.*)

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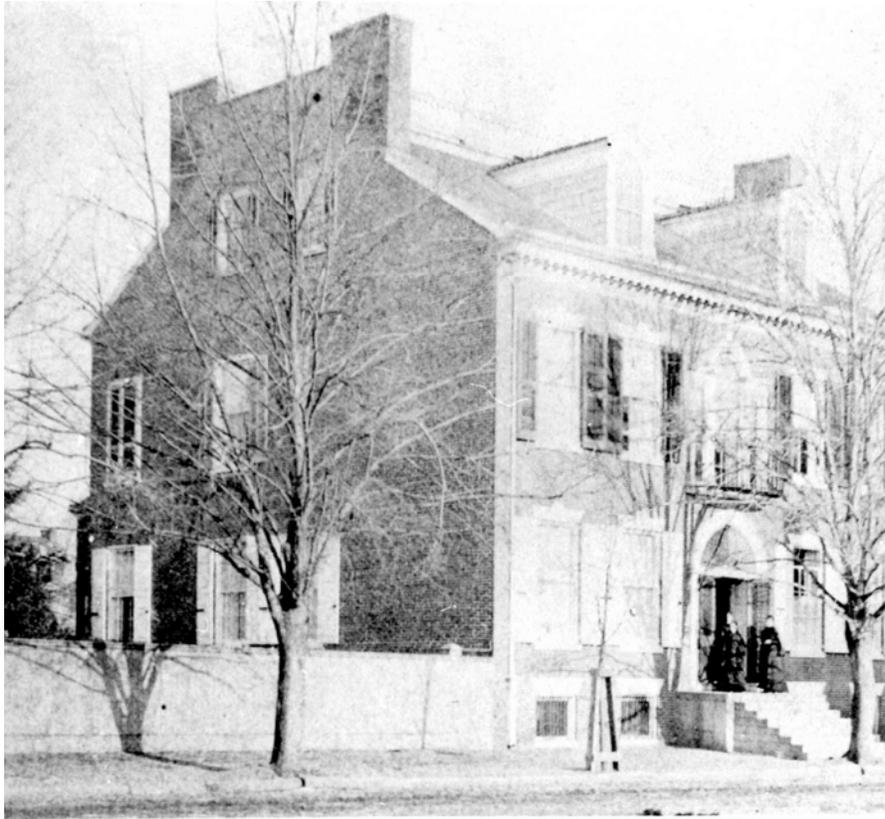


Fig. 3: Façade and south elevation, 1890-1895. Note original entrance steps without railings. (Courtesy of Delaware Historical Society Archives)



Fig. 4: Façade, 1920. (Courtesy of Delaware Historical Society Archives)

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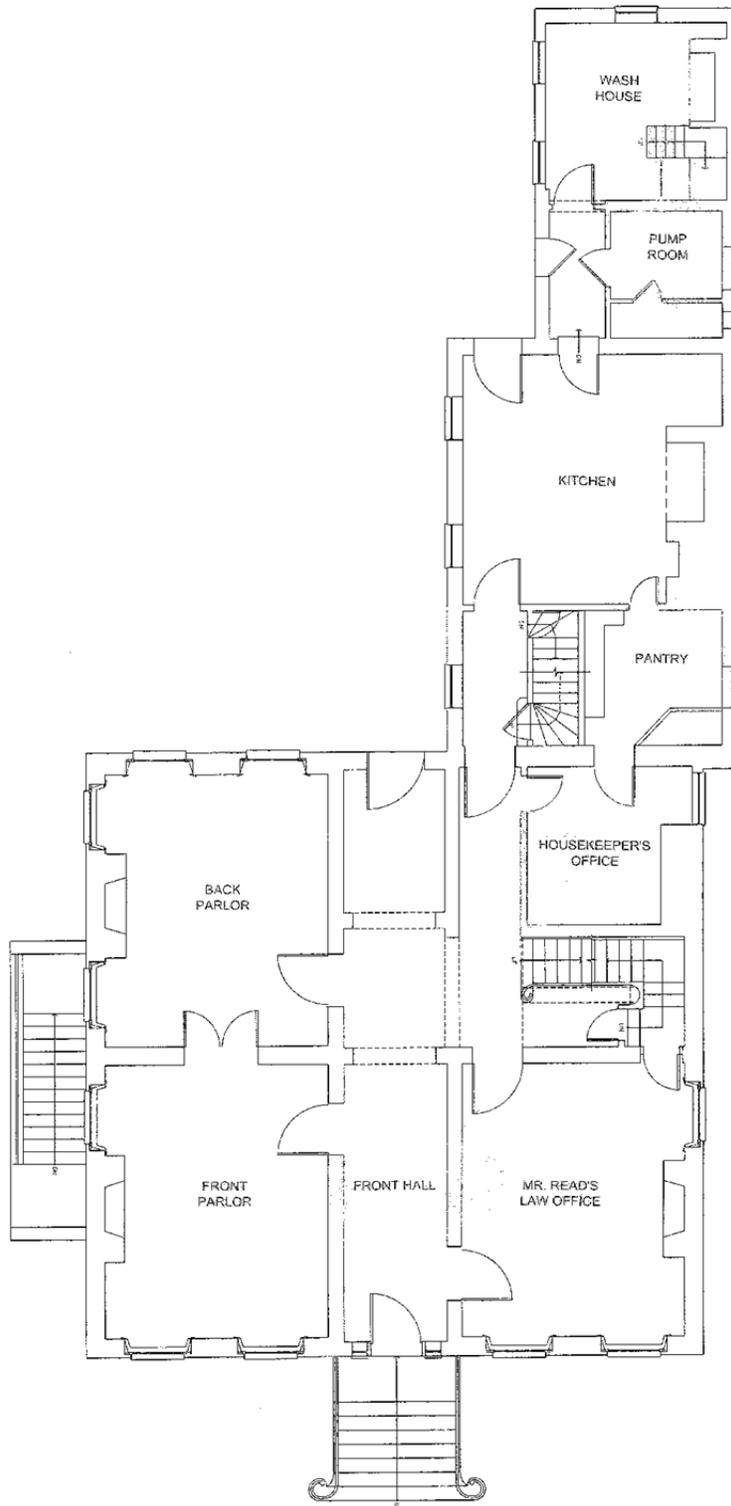


Fig. 5: First-floor plan with original room designations, ca. 2009. (Drawing by Bernardon Haber Holloway Architects PC and Frens & Frens LLC Restoration Architect)

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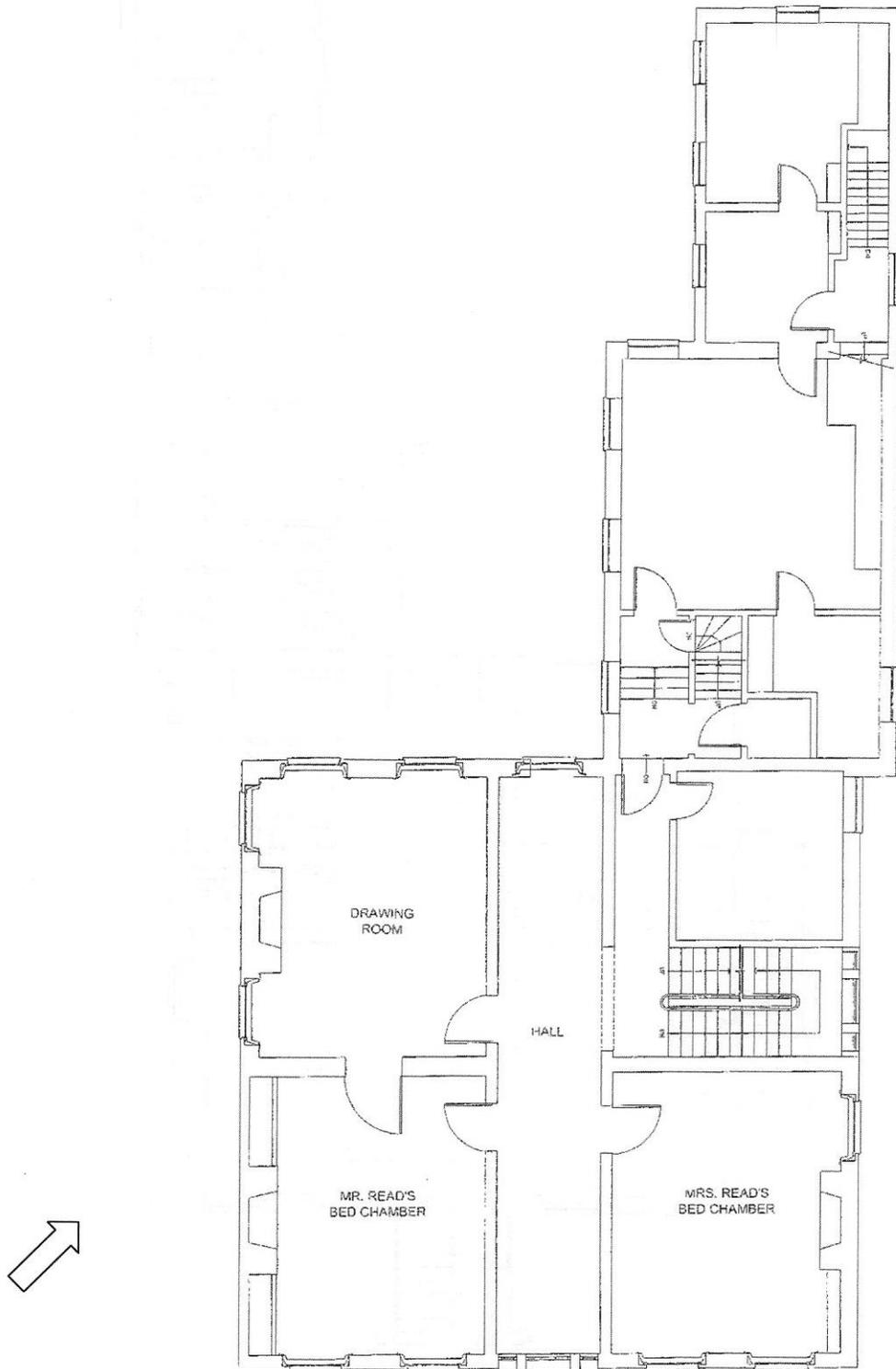


Fig. 6: Second-floor plan with original room designations, ca. 2009. (Drawing by Bernardon Haber Holloway Architects PC and Frens & Frens LLC Restoration Architect)

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Fig. 7: Looking from stairway through front hall to rear parlor, 1930. Photograph by Frances B. Johnston. (Courtesy of Delaware Historical Society Archives)

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Fig. 8: Fireplace, rear parlor, 1884-1885. (Courtesy of Delaware Historical Society Archives)

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Fig. 9: Detail of two hallway arches, before 1920. (Courtesy of Delaware Historical Society Archives)

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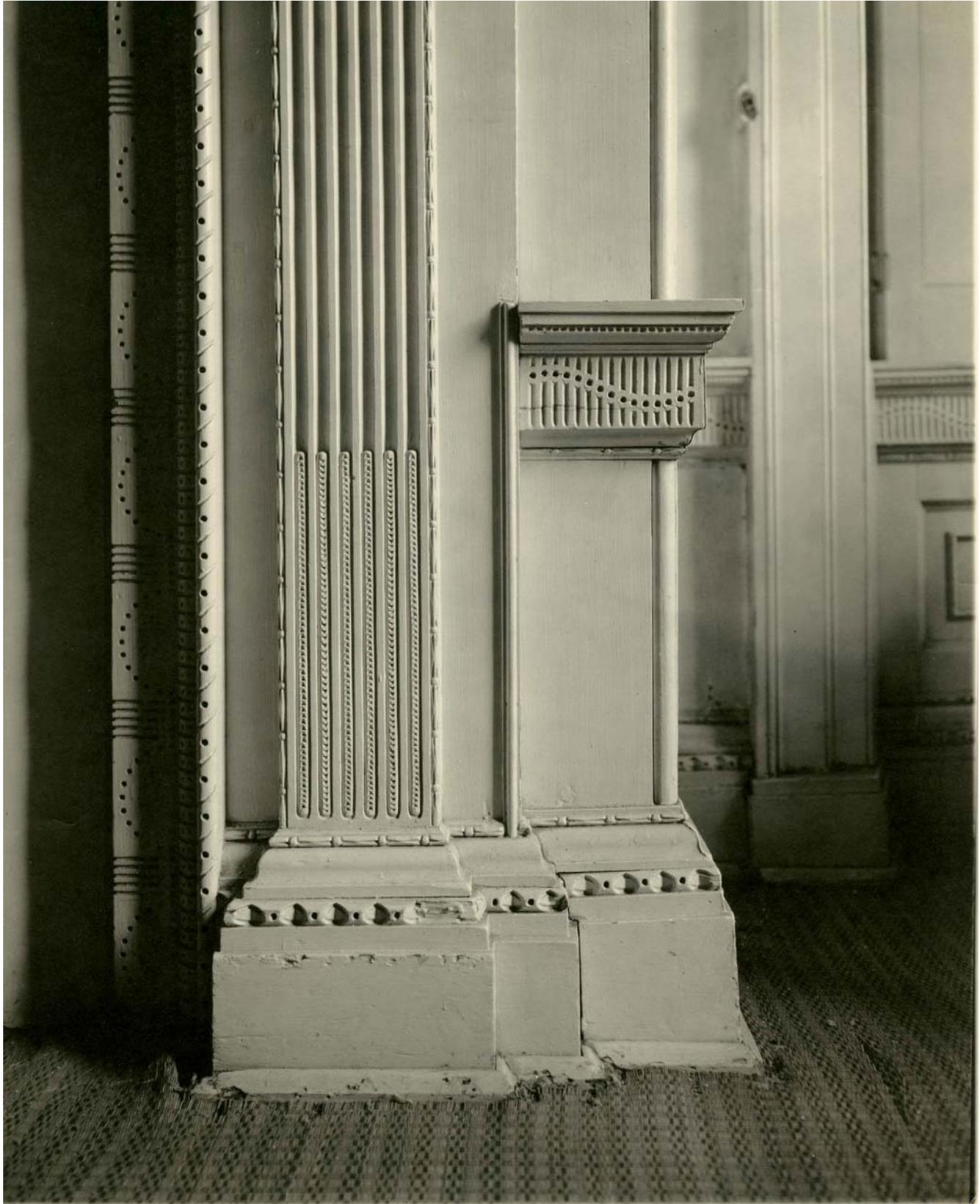


Fig. 10: Detail of woodwork in second-floor sitting room, before 1920.
(Courtesy of Delaware Historical Society archives)

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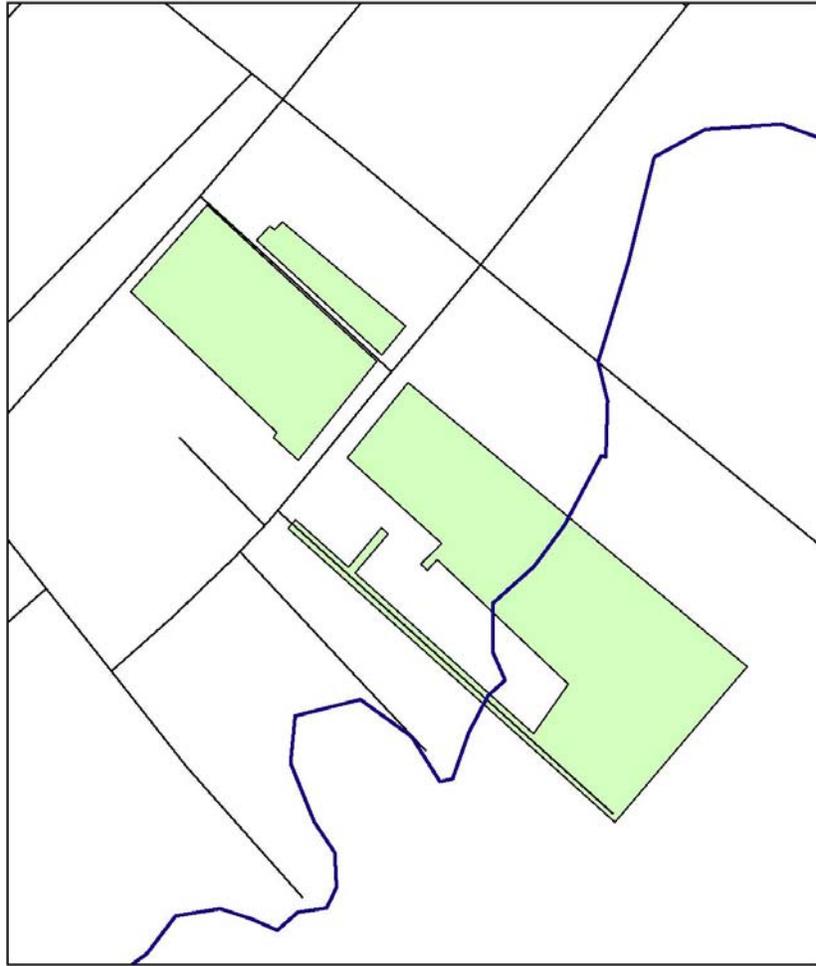


Fig. 11: Original boundaries of George Read II property (in green), with overlay of present shoreline.

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Figure 12: Read House site plan showing proposed designated boundary on aerial photograph.
Source: Bing Maps, Latitude and Longitude 39 degrees, 39'34.98" N, 75 degrees 33'41.68" W, Datum WGS84.