

Historic Structures Report  
Parts I and II

001087

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Exterior Repainting of the  
Custis-Lee Mansion

June 1965

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APPROVAL SHEET  
HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT  
PARTS I and II  
EXTERIOR REPAINTING OF THE  
CUSTIS-LEE MANSION

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HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

PARTS I and II

EXTERIOR REPAINTING OF THE  
CUSTIS-LEE MANSION

Prepared by the Staff  
National Capital Region  
and  
National Capital Office  
of Design and Construction

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## ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

a. Name and number of structure:

The Custis-Lee Mansion, Reservation Number 697, is located in the Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia.

b. Proposed use of structure:

The structure will continue in use as a historic house museum, interpreting the lives of the famous Custis and Lee families. In restoring the exterior paint of the structure to its appearance in 1861, we shall be effecting Public Resolution 74 of the 68th Congress, which provided for the restoration of the mansion" . . . to the condition in which it existed immediately prior to the Civil War . . . ."

c. Provisions for operating the structure:

The Custis-Lee Mansion will continue to be administered by the National Capital Region. The proposed construction activity will not alter the operation of the structure.

d. Estimate of cost of proposed construction activity:

This work is to be accomplished with Maintenance funds as follows:

|                                                                            |             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Work already completed - sandblasting, restuccoing, labor, and materials - | \$12,206.68 |
| Estimate for painting of exterior (+ 25% overhead)                         | 14,620.78   |
| Estimate for marbleization and stone coloration                            | 8,400.00    |

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Total estimated cost for exterior repainting \$35,227.46

## HISTORICAL DATA

### Documentary Evidence:

No conclusive documentary evidence exists on the exterior appearance of the Custis-Lee Mansion in 1861. Vague written references add little to the indisputable evidence given by contemporary photographs. But the written record does make what existed more intelligible.

George Hadfield, a talented English architect with first-hand experience in the classical ruins of Italy, designed the Custis-Lee Mansion shortly after 1800. This building is one of the earliest and most notable examples of Greek Revival architecture in America.<sup>1</sup>

The dominant Doric portico, built in the few years after 1817, drew on the primitive Greek Doric temple, such as the one at Paestum, Italy.<sup>2</sup> The walls of the completed structure were stuccoed, both for appearance sake and to protect the soft brick, and were scored and painted to resemble stone.<sup>3</sup> (See Plate I) The brick wall on the west side of the main block was left exposed, and is shown in a Brady photograph of 1864.

The last authentic changes in the exterior painting of the house must have been made before the Lee family left for the last time in May 1861. A soldier who passed the mansion in 1861 recorded that it was white, but an off-white color with marbleization would appear white from any distance.<sup>4</sup> (See Plate II) The house and grounds were soon occupied by General Irvin McDowell's Corps of the Union Army. By order of General Winfield Scott, the house and its contents were to be protected from damage.

At first, McDowell even camped outside the house, rather than occupy it with his staff. The building served for a time as the headquarters for the defenses of Washington, west of the Potomac. After December 1862, when its use as a headquarters was discontinued, officers, some with families, continued to live there. The Federal Government bought the house and grounds, put up at auction for non-payment of the taxes levied on rebels, on January 11, 1864. In May, with the establishment of the cemetery there, soldiers were moved out of the house so that it could be used by civilian cemetery employees.<sup>5</sup>

The monthly reports of the Arlington National Cemetery show changes in the original appearance of the building after the Civil War. The columns were replastered, the exterior "Kalsomined," and in 1864, a yellow wash coat of paint was applied to the patched exterior of the mansion.<sup>6</sup>

These conditions prevailed until the War Department began the restoration of the structure in 1928, under the authority of the act of March 4, 1925. Officers of the Quartermaster Corps collected information and began the work. A former Arlington servant, "Uncle Jim" Parks, told them that the building may have been painted with "a sort of whitewash" with yellow trim, but his recollection was questioned.<sup>7</sup> Still, the War Department did not change the cream and white colors of the mansion. These colors have remained until recently, when the surface was sandblasted. (See Plates III, IV, and VI.)

The Neoclassic movement which produced the Custis-Lee Mansion began in this country in the 1780's and 90's. New archeological discoveries in the second half of the 18th century, such as found in the publication by Thomas Major in 1768 of Ruines de Paestum, destroyed the long reliance on the classical interpretations of Palladio and Vitruvius. In place of the faith in the universal truth of the principles of classical architecture, Winckelmann argued in favor of imitating past styles for their own sake. This led people to attach romantic associations to Greek and Roman architectural styles, and to strive to imitate specific classical prototypes.<sup>8</sup>

Primarily, under the influence of Robert Adam, English homes had begun to show refined classical decorative details. In small houses, exterior stucco became popular. Within, plaster walls were frequently papered, painted, or marbled.<sup>9</sup> Painted marbleization was not unknown in the United States, especially in New England. The 1816 diary of William Bentley of Salem recorded that he "visited the Woodbridge house, said to be 140 years old . . . The ground [ ] of the interior wall [ ] is variegated white & black shaded."<sup>10</sup>

This stylistic background is not in itself sufficient to make intelligible the exterior painting of the Custis-Lee Mansion. The missing element seems to be in the personality of its builder and owner, George Washington Parke Custis. We know of his considerable amateur interest and skill in painting, which resulted in the spirited hunting scene fresco in the west end of the central hall, and in painted panels on the fronts of the "middle house," and the north and south servants' quarters. It seems entirely logical that Mr. Custis, interested in painted decorations and inspired by the romantic associations he attached to classical styles, would go further than his contemporaries in simulating the authentic material as well as the architectural form of the Greek Doric temple. It seems unlikely that the painted marbleization could have been the idea of the architect Hadfield, since it appears that the stuccoed columns were not at first marbled.

### Photographic Evidence:

Photographs taken by Mathew Brady between 1861 and 1864 constitute our most reliable evidence as to the appearance of the Custis-Lee Mansion in 1861. Definite evidence appears in three photographs taken June 28 and 29, 1864. All eight columns and both pilasters are scored twice horizontally to simulate blocks of stone. Each column and pilaster is streaked differently in each simulated drum. (See Plates I & II). The capitals of the columns and pilasters are also marbled, but their general hue is darker than the columns. The wooden entablature and cornice of the portico is also of this darker color streaked to look like stone. This treatment of the cornice ends shortly after the cornice joins the main portion of the building. There is no trace in the photographs, shown in earlier drawings of the mansion, of rusticated stucco in the pediment of the portico.

Custis' painted panels on the east front of the mansion, under the portico, are still clear in the 1864 photographs. It also appears that the rusticated stucco of the entire east front, wings included, was streaked with a contrasting color to simulate freestone. Similar sandstone and limestone was commonly used in imposing buildings such as the White House and the Capitol. If Custis intended to imitate them, then the background hue of the east walls were probably a slightly tan shade of off-white, with darker brownish-gray streaks. The 1864 photographs also hint at this treatment being used on the stuccoed sides of the center portion of the mansion, perhaps on the sides of the north and south wings, but probably not on the conservatory portion of the south wing.

Although the black and white photographs give no good indication of the color of the paint used, it would appear that the columns carried strong streaks of gray and brown against the off-white base. The capitals and the entablature, on the other hand, may well have been a tan background with darker brown and grayish streaks.

### Physical Evidence:

There is no physical trace of the marbling of even the columns of the Custis-Lee Mansion. It is possible that the house was scraped since 1861 before being repainted by the War Department. We know that the first color used on the central section was French ochre, followed by a series of yellows and off-whites.<sup>11</sup> Paint samples taken in October 1964, from the columns of the portico, and examined by a laboratory of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, revealed only shades of cream and tan, but with no idea as to their age.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. S. Fiske Kimball, "George Hadfield," Dictionary of American Biography. Vol. 8, 77.)
2. Murray Nelligan, Old Arlington: The Story of the Lee Mansion National Memorial. (N.P.S., 1953), pp. 70 ff.
3. Ibid. p. 75. Nelligan believes that the front of the house and the wings, if not the sides and back, were streaked to resemble marble.
4. Cited by Agnes Mullins in Memo, Jett to Bartel, Sept. 29, 1964.
5. Ibid. pp. 472-92.
6. Ibid. p. 499, n. 12.
7. Memo Nov. 16, 1929, Lt. Col. Charles G. Mortimer to Gen. L.H. Bash, Chief, Construction Service; Quartermaster Corps Records, National Archives. p. 3.
8. Hugh Morrison. Early American Architecture: From the First Colonial Settlements to the National Period. (New York: 1952), pp. 567-572.
9. Thomas E. Tallmadge, The Story of England's Architecture. (New York: 1934), p. 214.
10. Cited by Fiske Kimball, Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic. (New York: 1927), p. 136.
11. Agnes Mullins in Memorandum, Jett to Bartel, September 29, 1964.

## ARCHITECTURAL DATA

The Custis-Lee Mansion is a large structure along classic lines with a two-story block fronted by a Doric portico, flanked on both sides by hip-roofed, one-floor wings. The plastered exterior of this structure is scored to look like dimension stonework and has been continuously repainted, sometimes with artificial marble graining, (See Plates I, II). The rectangular double hung windows in the central block are equipped with solid panel shutters, while the arch headed windows of the wings are not.

The mansion is built of brick, which has been smoothly plastered except for the pebble dash base. The pediment and cornice are wood with some small sheet metal areas. Composition tiles cover the roof.

Attention should also be given to the fact that the chimney and the West central face of the mansion were exposed brick during the period of 1861-64, the period of restoration. The present plaster surfaces in these areas are incorrect historically. (See Plates, IV, V, & VI).

Prior to the fall of 1964, the exterior of the Custis-Lee Mansion had many thicknesses of blistering, cracking and peeling paint. The only satisfactory method for applying fresh paint was determined to include removal of the old paint. Samples of the old paint were taken by the National Capital Office, Design and Construction, of the National Park Service to the Federal Bureau of Investigation Laboratory for analysis and to establish a permanent record of what was removed. The F.B.I. Laboratory Report No. PC-82537 H.B., dated October 5, 1964, resulted. The physical evidence thus gathered, when weathering chemical and pigment changes are considered, allows that the off-white base color suggested by old photographs and documentation is reasonable.

Research was suggested before marbleization started. Sources on marbleization were located, of which Guertler Studios, Inc., of New York, who have done some White House work, responded on October 13, 1964, to NCDC giving recommendations with respect to exact techniques and experienced artisans. Moore Research Laboratories, M.J. Macdonald Associates, Inc., and Apex Decorating Company gave technical advice also.

As paint was removed in sample areas, the plaster beneath proved to be a patchwork of original stucco and later cement patches, a fact that was obvious due to spottiness and textural irregularities seen through the paint. (Plate VIII) What was not known, however, was the condition of the bottom coat of stucco. This was found to be deteriorated or "rotted" to such an extent that it would crumble when exposed. (Plate VII) Such conditions would not give sufficient bond

to any but the most temporary patch. All areas on the East, South and North sides of the structure were found to be in the same dangerous condition. Dangerous in the fact that the conditions would aggravate the already serious water leakage problems as well as constitute a real hazard to visitors from the falling plaster.

It was the opinion of masonry experts from the National Capital Region, Operation and Maintenance section that the insufficient bonding properties of the old finish would require the use of flat, unribbed, expanded metal lath and new plaster, scored identically to the old.

The finish plaster on the central Western front of the mansion, which is of questionable authenticity, was found to be in good condition, requiring only painting to be kept in excellent condition.

During September and October of 1964, the entire exterior surface of the Custis-Lee Mansion was lightly sandblasted to remove blistering paint and loose cement. The surface exposed by the sandblasting was in such poor condition and such a conglomeration of patches that the work of lathing and plastering was undertaken.

Expanded wire ribless metal lath was anchored to the surface except for the west central front and the columns of the east portico. The lath was deep anchored with nails into the masonry. (Plate IX).

On top of the lath a rough and a finish coat of waterproof cement was installed. A surface identical to the original was completed, thus giving a waterproof surface which covered the remains of the original, without obliterating it. The surface was then set to "cure" until spring, 1965. The exterior was scheduled to be painted an off-white with waterproof paint manufactured by Re-Nu-It of New York.

It is recommended that the exterior of the entire building be painted off-white with a gray-brown tint and that the columns be marbled with a darker shade of gray-brown. The portico cornice, except for the pediment, should be painted with a medium range gray-brown similar to that color used to give a stone texture to the columns. The cornice should then be given a stone texture with a darker gray-brown.

The North, East, and South sides of the mansion should be given a slight gray-brown stone texturing to further the cut-stone look of the structure. This can be done with mild textured streaks on the off-white surface, running from joint to joint.

Complete restoration of the Custis-Lee Mansion to its condition in the 1860's would involve removal of the stucco on the West front and chimneys of the main house. Removal of such stucco may result in serious brick ruptures and spalls as well as serious water penetration

through the walls. This project would be so sizable that we feel it should be considered quite separate from the painting.

In summary, we feel that all stucco should be painted off-white. A medium gray-brown color should be used to marbleize the columns and to simulate cut stone on the South, East, and North sides of the wings and main house. The same medium gray-brown ought to be used for window frames, steps, shutters, benches, doors and cornice trim. A darker gray-brown should be used for stone texturing the cornice above the portico and the capitals.



PLATE I

Arlington House from southeast. Photograph by Mathew Brady, June 28, 1864. National Archives.



PLATE II

Arlington House from south. Photograph by Mathew Brady, June 29, 1864. National Archives.



PLATE III

Custis-Lee Mansion, east front, March 1962. Note peeling paint on south wing. NPS photograph.



PLATE IV

Custis-Lee Mansion from south, August 1964. Exterior appearance before current project. NPS photograph.



PLATE V

Custis-Lee Mansion, west front, 1959. Existing conditions before current project. NPS photograph.



PLATE VI

Custis-Lee Mansion from south - October 23, 1964. After sandblasting exterior. NPS photograph.



PLATE VII

Custis-Lee Mansion, northwest corner, October 23, 1964. Note deteriorated stucco. NPS photograph.



PLATE VIII

Gustis-Lee Mansion, south wing and portion of portico. Note patches and deteriorated stucco. NPS photograph.



PLATE IX

Custis-Lee Mansion, October 23, 1964. Installation of metal lath preparatory to restuccoing. NPS photo.