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HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT
NORTH SERVANTS' QUARTERS
CUSTIS-LEE MANSION, VA.
(PART I)

NATIONAL CAPITAL PARKS

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SIGNATURE SHEET

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(Part I)

Recommended: Cornelius W. Heine — 8-2-60
Chief of the Division of Public Use and Interpretation — Date

Adv. Chief of the Division of Design and Construction — 8-19-60
Date

Acting Superintendent — 8-22-60
Date

Chief of Design and Construction, NPS — 11/1/60
Date

Approved: Adv. Director — 11/16/60
Date

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

NORTH SERVANTS' QUARTERS,

CUSTIS-LEE MANSION, VA.

(PART I)

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL CAPITAL PARKS

1960

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ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

a. Name and Number of Building:

The North Servants' Quarters is located approximately 40 feet west of the north wing of the Custis-Lee Mansion with its long axis running east and west. It faces the South Servants' Quarters to form a rear court to the Mansion.

b. Proposed Use of Structure and Justification:

It is planned to repair and recondition the North Servants' Quarters in a manner somewhat similar to the work already completed in the South Servants' Quarters. In keeping with the wishes of the Congress to restore the structures as they were just prior to the Civil War, these quarters should be reconverted to the one story structure which they were at that time. This is the way the building was remodeled in 1854 and in which it remained during the remainder of the occupancy of the Lee and Custis families. In this work, the present basement rooms which were reexcavated and restored in 1932 and the outside stairways to these rooms will be removed. The furnishings for the kitchen and two rooms for servants' quarters when reconditioned will be sufficient for these rooms.

c. Provision for Operating the Building:

The North Servants' Quarters as formerly will be operated as a unit with the Custis-Lee Mansion. Consequently, no additional staff members will be needed.

d. Preliminary Estimate of Cost for Rehabilitating the Structure and Grounds:

A total of $39,444 is available for this work, which will also include certain repairs to the Mansion itself. For this reason it is difficult to estimate the portion to be allotted to the North Building. This may perhaps be $25,000.

HISTORICAL DATA

General History of Site:

George Washington Parke Custis, grandson of Martha Washington, was adopted by General Washington and taken to live at Mount Vernon upon the death of his father in 1781. In 1802, following the deaths of the Washingtons', young Custis moved to the tract of 1100 acres which had been purchased by his father in 1778. The estate, which Custis later named Arlington, consisted mostly of woodland and virgin oak forests with a few cleared fields near the river. He moved into a cottage built by former owners and began the cultivation of his fields.

The unsuitability of his quarters soon prompted him to begin the construction of his family seat. For this the architect George Hadfield designed for him a classic scheme consisting of a simplified overscaled Greek Doric portico fronting the central block which was balanced by extended wings. Though clay for brick and choice timber were at hand on his estate, Custis lacked the money necessary to build the house all at once. Consequently he built the wings first, completing the north wing in 1803 and the south wing the following year. He then married and partitioned the north wing into living quarters. With a kitchen and laundry in the basement and the use of the south wing for entertaining, Custis and his bride had the essentials of living at "Arlington House." At this point his work of construction evidently stopped for the time being.

Despite economic hard times, Custis determined in 1817 to build the main section of the Mansion. Although the dignified structure aroused much comment, surprisingly little survives outside of a few bills for labor and building materials to tell of this important phase of its history. By 1818 the structure was largely completed.

This house became the home of Robert E. Lee when he married the only daughter of Custis in 1831. As Custis grew older he appears to have increasingly relied on the assistance of his son-in-law in the management of his business affairs and the up keep of his buildings. It fell to Lee to try to extricate Custis from the difficulties besetting him on his outlying estates beside directing extensive renovations at Arlington. At the death of Custis in 1857 the sole responsibility for improvements and development of his holdings devolved upon Lee. These duties he faithfully discharged until the upheaval of civil strife placed in his hands a far greater burden.

History of North Servants' Quarters:

Nothing is known of the early history of the outbuildings except that which can be deduced from the structures themselves. Both servants' quarters, from early Brady photographs, show a general resemblance to the Mansion in their architectural style and construction being built of plaster covered brick and decorated with recessed semicircular arches. That they had stone foundations like those of the service wing of the Mansion would indicate that they were probably built at the same time (prior to 1824).

Originally, there were two basement rooms in the North Quarters; one that was used by the coachman, Daniel Dobson, the other served as a summer kitchen. These were separated by an unfinished room with an earth floor. The three rooms above were occupied by Eleanor Harris, housekeeper; Aunt Judy, family nurse;[1] Ephraim Derecks, gardener; and George Clark, cook.[2]

For some reason, possibly due to dampness, the basement rooms were later partially filled in and abandoned. The earliest known sketch of the building, made by a member of the Lee family, about 1854, shows the basement rooms filled in.[3] The kitchen at this time may have been moved to the ground level, for R. E. Lee twice refers to this building as the kitchen in his application for fire insurance in 1859.[4]

When the Lee family moved out of the Mansion, in May 1861, the servants continued to occupy the quarters while Union troops occupied the estate.[5] In 1873 the Mansion served as Cemetery Headquarters and the west room of the north quarters housed a watchman or laborers and the east room was used as a carpenter shop.[6] From about 1880 to 1885, until the preparation for restoration by the War Department in 1925, the entire ground floor of the building was occupied by the head gardener, J. H. Marcy, and his family.[7]

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1 Mathew Brady, Photographs, 1861-1864.

2 Luther Leisenring, "The Restoration of Arlington House" an unpublished manuscript.

3 Pencil sketch, (Photograph 1 of this report).

4 Robert E. Lee, Application for Insurance, Hartford Fire Insurance Company, Oct. 17, 1859.

5 Markie Williams to Mrs. Lee, July 13, 1861 DeButts-Ely MSS

6 D. H. Rhodes, Historic Memories of Arlington National Cemetery, March 1930

7 Ibid.

Pictographic evidence from c. 1854 until the War Department restoration shows that the building was one story with three rooms, each with its separate entrance, the floor level was near the ground level with perhaps one step.[8] There was no indication of outside entrance to original basement rooms; access may have been by way of trap doors from the rooms above which were of equal dimensions to the rooms below.[9]

Mr. L. M. Leisenring, architect for the Quartermaster Corps. of the War Dept., began restoration of the quarters in 1929. The description of his findings follows:

"The interior of this building had been completely changed - a new floor put in at grade, large fireplaces and chimneys torn down; but we found the old holes in the walls where the round oak beams of the original floors had rested and the outlines of the old chimneys against the walls, and where partitions had or had not been by the whitewash that was or was not there. In the walls were solid oak lintels over openings long closed with masonry, and under the temporary floor we found parts of the original basement floors and hearths of brick and stone.[10]

In 1931 Mr. Leisenring reported to the Quartermaster General concerning the work done on the North Quarters:

"Practically everything except the walls inside this building was removed (1929), the kitchen and basement rooms were restored, new floors were constructed at the original elevation and we now (1931) have five rooms following the original arrangement. Information on the original condition of this building was also obtained from a former slave (James Parks)." [11]

The term "original" used by Mr. Leisenring, refers to initial construction, prior to 1824. Changes made between 1824 and 1854 were not considered by him.

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8 Mathew Brady, Photograph 2

9 David Spencer & William Marcy, "Physical Alterations or Replacements to Mansion during Restoration" c. 1940.

10 Leisenring, "The Restoration of Arlington House".

11 Ibid.

Several cart loads of debris were hauled out of the old kitchen and a fireplace was reconstructed with old hardware brought from a house in Baltimore. Windows were cut out in the basement rooms, probably in the old positions. Windows on the upper level apparently were unchanged. The paintings on the original panels over the three ground-level doorways had deteriorated beyond recognition long before the restoration. The two end doorways were filled in so that access was gained to all rooms at ground level through the center door. Exterior doorways were cut for the two basement rooms and stone stairs for access were installed.[12]

Summary of Evidence for basic Restoration:

Public Resolution No. 74, 68th Congress, approved March 4, 1925, provides for the restoration of the Mansion "as nearly as may be practical . . . to the condition in which it existed immediately prior to the Civil War," In adherence to this policy The Director, National Park Service, advised the Superintendent, National Capital Parks, that the basement rooms of the North Quarters should not be restored.

Immediately prior to the Civil War, the basement rooms were partially filled in, and their doors and windows were closed with masonry. Three doors on the south opened to the rooms one step above grade as shown in Photographs 1, 2, 3 & 4. Brady photographs show pebble dash finish on exterior walls above stone foundation, and the absence of clinging vines. The relative position of doors to the panels above them is seen in Photographs 2 & 4, and the door design is seen in Photograph 2.

The window seen through the west doorway in Photograph 4 would indicate that the windows on the north side were unchanged.

East and west walls according to Photographs 1, 2, 3 appear also to be unchanged.

There were two chimneys as shown in Photographs 1, 2, 3 and the roof was shingled.

The interior rooms were approximately the same dimensions as now existing. On the basis of Lee's designation of this building as the kitchen it would seem that the kitchen may have been in the east room where the existing chimney could be used and which would put it in close proximity to the mansion. Further research as to the occupants of the other two rooms should be done in connection with preparation for the furnishing plan.

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12 David Spencer & William Marcy, Op. cit.

Intensive architectural reconnaissance of the interior should be carried out to determine changes made by War Dept.

Historical Research Problem:

Scarcity of documentary evidence

Although documentation is adequate for basic restoration detailed information is lacking due to the character and purpose for which it was built. As a relatively unimportant dependency of the Mansion it received little note when the Custis and Lee families, guests and travelers referred to Arlington. As was stated, construction records for the Mansion have not been found, and there is little chance that such data exists for the quarters. The occupants of the quarters, slaves of little education, had few acquaintances away from the area and little need for correspondence.

For reasons given above the construction and structural changes in the period, 1803-1861, are largely unrecorded. Little material has been recorded for the period 1861-1925, preceding the initial restoration and no detailed documentation of work done was made during that restoration 1925-1930.

Historical Documentary Evidence Assembled:

Historical evidence assembled is summarized with footnotes under the Historical Data section of this report. Additional sources are listed in the bibliography of Dr. Murray H. Nelligan's book "Old Arlington." That list constitutes only half of the works cited in the footnotes of the book. Since the completion of the book in 1954 research in various fields relating to the Memorial has continued, and this report is based on the analysis of both accumulations. At this point certain sources might be re-checked but it seems advisable to check leads as they arise rather than entering upon a time consuming search into sources that promise little or no reward.

One promising field of inquiry that remains in connection with the occupants of the North Quarters is a check of county records, tombstone inscriptions and personal interviews with descendants of the former slaves. This should be done in conjunction with the collection of data for the furnishing plan.

Statement of Significance:

Although the North Quarters was of little significance in the historic period when all life revolved about the Mansion there is increasing interest in the lives and homes of those who lived in a manner less grand. From the restoration of these quarters visitors will receive a broader knowledge of the complete life on the ante-bellum estate, and see a cross section of society that is important to the understanding of those times.

ARCHITECTURAL DATA

The north outbuilding at the Custis-Lee Mansion is about 20' x 47' in size and is a mixed masonry structure with lower floor and attic. The building includes five rooms referred to as Quarters No. 1, No. 2, etc. There are four brick fireplaces, one on each gable end of both floors, including a large kitchen fireplace. The walls are approximately 20" thick at the lower floor and vary from 8" to 14" at the attic floor. The interior walls are whitewashed plaster. The brick floors in Quarters No. 1 and in the summer kitchen are finished with boiled linseed oil. The storage space under Quarters No. 3 is accessible only through a trap door in the floor, and the floor of this storage space is earth. Exterior stone steps lead to Quarters No. 1 and the summer kitchen. The center vestibule and Quarters Nos. 2, 3 and 4 are accessible by exterior stone and wooden steps. A space under the center vestibule is inaccessible. The attic floor is random-width wood flooring. The roof consists of wood rafters, collar ties, ridge board, and sheathing covered with a slate roof. The first floor consists of wood flooring on handhewn log joists. There are copper gutters, downspouts, and ridge roll and snow guards on the roof. The building is provided with concealed electrical outlets in all rooms except the vestibule and storage space. The single sash windows swing in and are hinged at the top with six lights in the attic space and nine lights in the ground floor. Heat is provided by fireplaces only.

ARCHEOLOGICAL DATA

No archeological study is planned for the North Servants' Quarters.

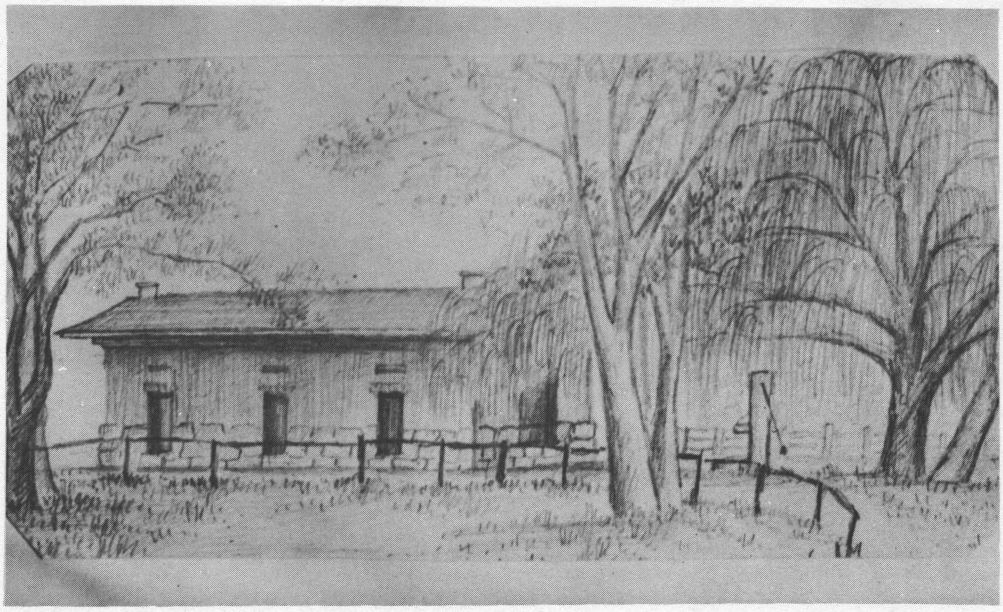
LANDSCAPE DATA

Since the North Servants' Quarters is a part of the area of the Custis-Lee Mansion no special landscape treatment is proposed.

FURNISHING AND EXHIBITION DATA

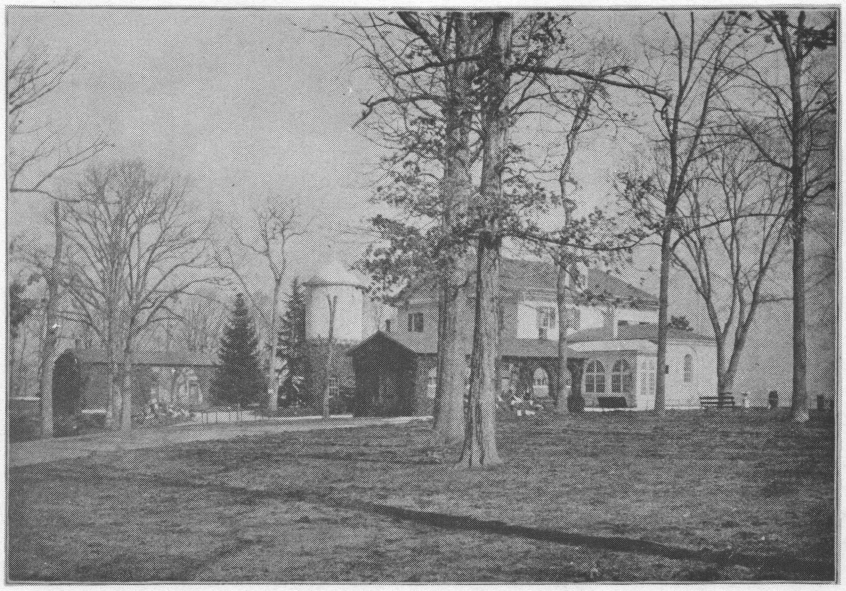
It is planned to reinstall the old furnishings in the North Servants' Quarters on completion of the renovation of the building. At a later date, a Furnishing Plan is planned for the Custis-Lee Mansion which would include the North Servants' Quarters.

APPENDIX - MAPS AND PHOTOGRAPHS



Photograph No. 1. Pencil sketch of North Servants' Quarters made by a member of the Lee Family about 1854. (From Scrap Book in the Ely-Butts Collection, "Nordley", Upperville, Va.

Photograph No. 2. West side of Arlington House with North Servants' Quarters on left. From Brady Collection, National Archives.

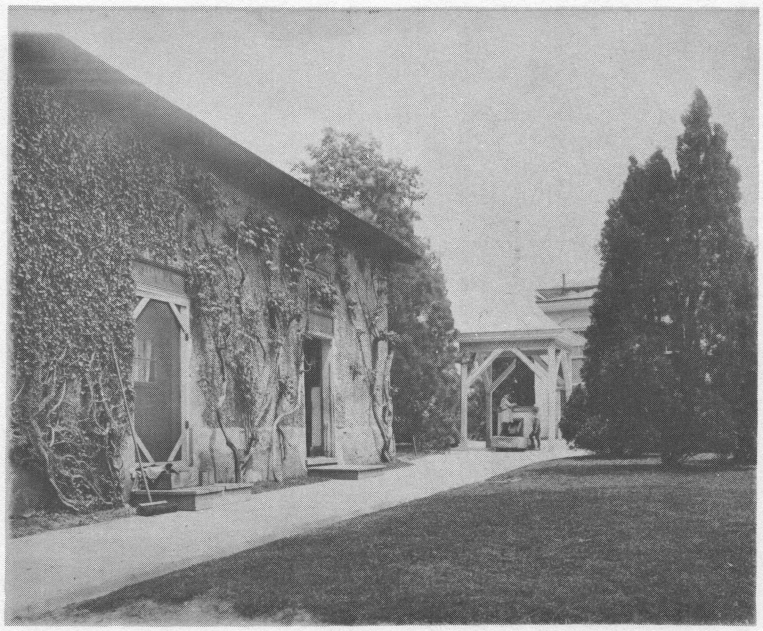


REAR OF MANSION

Showing the servants cottages enclosing the kitchen yard where the old well still serves the house, while the circular tank adds to the convenience of the water supply, and contributes a picturesque feature to the view.

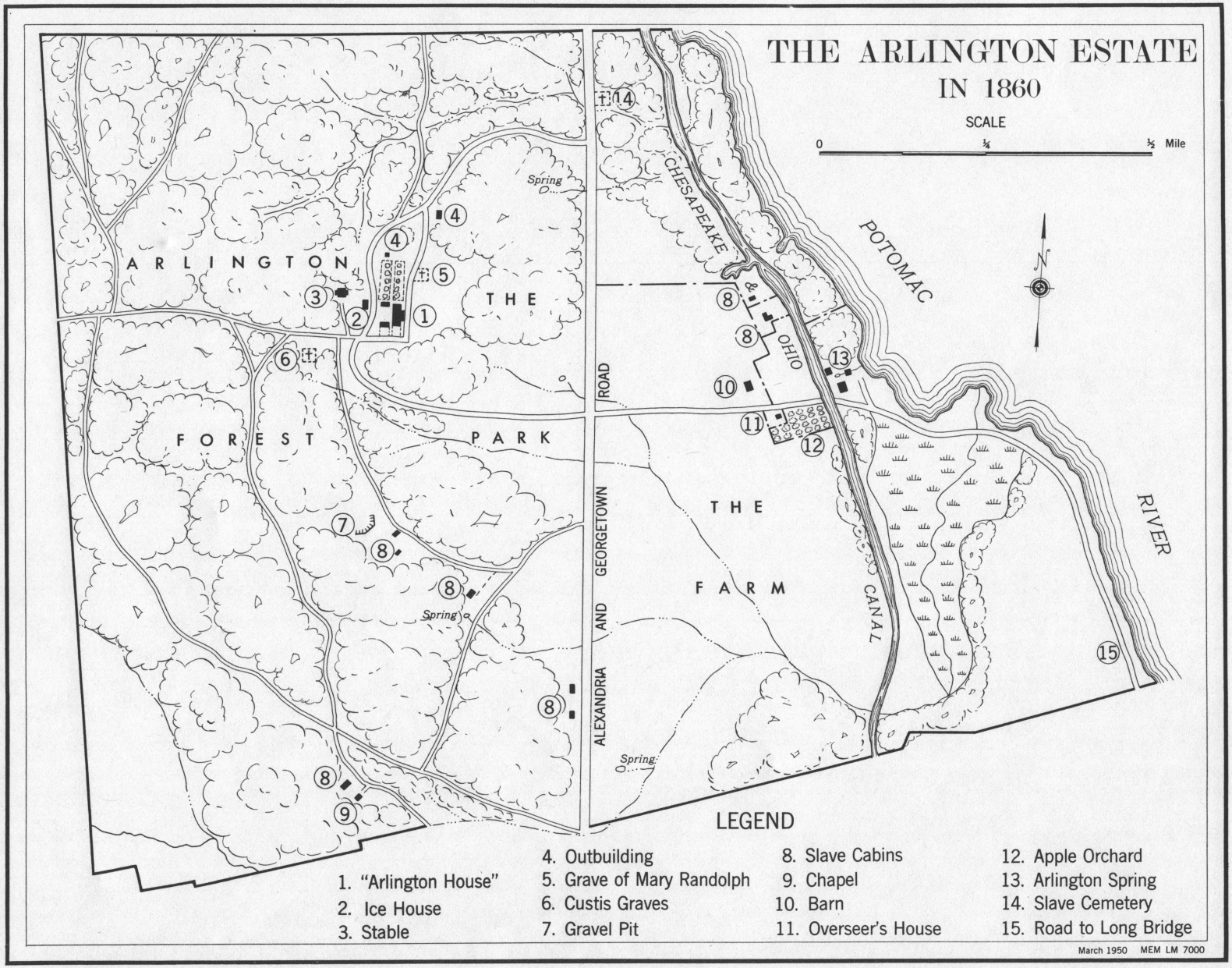
Photograph No. 3. Rear of Arlington House, 1897, showing North and South Servants' Quarters. From Wm. Bengough, U. S. National Military Cemetery, Arlington (1897).

Photograph No. 4. North Servants' Quarters, 1900. Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston.



Photograph No. 5. North Servants' Quarters, 1900.
Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston.

Photograph No. 6. Photograph of North Servants' Quarters
c. 1933.


THE ARLINGTON ESTATE
IN 1860
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ARLINGTON
FOREST
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PARK
Spring
CHESAPEAKE
&
OHIO
CANAL
POTOMAC
RIVER
ROAD
GEORGETOWN
AND
ALEXANDRIA
THE
FARM
LEGEND
1. "Arlington House"
2. Ice House
3. Stable
4. Outbuilding
5. Grave of Mary Randolph
6. Custis Graves
7. Gravel Pit
8. Slave Cabins
9. Chapel
10. Barn
11. Overseer's House
12. Apple Orchard
13. Arlington Spring
14. Slave Cemetery
15. Road to Long Bridge
March 1950 MEM LM 7000

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