

Thomas Lee of STRATFORD HALL

Long before Matholic burned Thomas Lee had started building his own home.

As a land agent for the Northern Neck proprietary he was well acquainted with its desirable lands, but the portion which he selected for his own belonged to the Pope family, and had been patented by Colonel Nathaniel Pope about 1650, before the proprietary came into being.

"I want to buy the Clifts," said Thomas Lee. This land was situated in Westmoreland County and bordered on the Potomac. Here the banks rose sharply above the River. We can imagine Thomas Lee standing at the edge of those bold cliffs, looking across the River while he dreamed of the manor house which he would some day build.

One day in 1716 a representative of the Pope family closed the deal by ceremoniously presenting Thomas Lee with a handful of earth and a twig—an ancient symbolic confirmation of the transference of the 1,450 acres of land called "the Clifts Plantation."

Thomas Lee built his home nearly a mile inland from the "clifts," where it would not be so open to an enemy attack from the River. Pirates were still roving the surrounding waters.

It took a long time to build the kind of house that Thomas Lee had in mind—a house with walls of brick two feet thick, that would stand for centuries. The thousands of bricks required for this undertaking had to be made there on the place.

Thomas Lee made a trip to England at the beginning of his project, some traditions say, and while he was there he doubtless visited the estate at Strat-by-the-Ford, once owned by his grandfather, Richard Lee, the immigrant. There could scarcely be any other reason why he would name his own home, Stratford.

Thomas Lee planned his house, it is said, after viewing the manor houses of England, and the result was that Stratford turned out to be a sort of medieval fortress. It was shaped like the letter H with pointed roofs. The crossbar of the H was the Great Hall, about thirty feet square.

On the roof of each wing arose a cluster of four great chimneys, which were joined together by arches of masonry. These clustered chimneys gave the appearance of two belfries, or towers. The space inside each group of chimneys was made into a summer-house. A member of the Lee family later described them thus:[Pg 125]

"Eight chimneys formed the summer-house pillars, From which were

seen Potomac's sea-like billows...."

In medieval times the use of the summer-house was functional, and so were these at Stratford—the activities of the plantation and on the Potomac could be seen from them.

At first glance Stratford appeared to be a one-story building, but its main floor was raised to the level of a second story. Thomas Lee had an idea of his own about architecture which was remarkably modern, that was to bring the beauty of nature inside. He did this by having long flights of steps leading directly from the lawn to the front and rear entrances of the Great Hall. Doorways and windows framed the fields, forest and lawn.

The manor occupied the center of a large square marked at the corners by four dependencies. A ha-ha wall ran across the front of the square, the purpose of which was to keep the cattle away from the house without obscuring the view.

Stratford Hall was built between 1725-30.

Source: The Stronghold A Story of Historic Northern Neck of Virginia and Its People by Miriam Haynie