Data on Moses M. Robertson and the Robertson Farm
(Childhood Home of Benjamin Moses and Judith Ann Robertson)
From *Chesterfield County: Early Architecture and Historic Sites*[1], pp 178-180

While [William] Hatcher's household was considerably more prosperous than that of the average Chesterfield farmer, it was far less so than that of Moses Robertson, who lived three miles south on one of the county's largest plantations. Robertson, who was also a Baptist preacher, expanded his holdings from 236 acres in 1840 to 1141 in the mid-1850s. In 1857 he enlarged the original early-nineteenth century one-story hall-and-rear-chamber house by adding a two story side-passage section with basement; slightly earlier he had erected a one-room-plan wing on the opposite end of the house. By 1860 the house had 2144 adjusted square feet of living space, and together with its outbuildings was assessed at $2500 - five times that of the Hatcher farm. Moses Robertson's inventory, taken shortly after his death in 1858, shows that he owned 24 slaves, valued at $12,100. Livestock, valued at a total of $2080, consisted of six horses, six mules, one yoke of oxen, 33 head of cattle, 53 sheep, and 159 swine. Household and kitchen furniture, assessed at $500, included such luxury goods as window shades, sofas and a piano. Robertson's total estate, including land ($5966), buildings ($2500), slaves ($12,100), cash ($5,000) and other personal property ($1,913**)** amounted to $27,479. In contrast, Hatcher, who lived in a house about half the size of Robertson's, owned property worth about $2,600.

. . . An interesting phenomenon, illustrated by the comparison between the Hatcher and Robertson farms, is the fact that the total sizes of the farmhouses described in this section do not vary as much as the other indicators of their owners' wealth, such as land, slaves, cash and personal property. Moreover, the building assessments themselves show a greater variation than the size of the houses - a fact that probably reflects the relatively large number of outbuildings and farm buildings (including slaves' quarters) on the larger farms.

Erecting large and impressive dwellings, then, was evidently not a way in which most prosperous ante-bellum Chesterfield farmers disposed of their capital. As we saw in the previous chapter, a very wealthy and socially prominent man like William Tazewell of Richmond View continued to live in a one and a half-story two-room-plan farmhouse until his death in 1840. An examination of Chesterfield's standing early dwellings shows that only a very small number of county planters built houses that would have been considered large by Virginians like General John Hartwell Cocke of Bremo in Fluvanna County, or lawyer John Wickham, builder of the Wickham-Valentine House in Richmond. Although ten to twenty relatively high-style ante bellum houses have been recorded in Chesterfield, most of these were not significantly larger than expanded vernacular dwellings like the Robertson house, and only three or four approached the size and sophistication of such colonial Virginia mansions as Brandon in neighboring Prince George County, or such mid-nineteenth century plantation houses as Varina in neighboring Henrico County.

The majority of Chesterfield's large planters evidently preferred - or were content with - farmhouses built in the local or "vernacular" idiom. These dwellings were neither dramatically larger nor fancier than those of their middle-class neighbors. The wealth of Chesterfield farmers like Moses Robertson, Armistead Hill of Fruit Hill or Richard Thweatt of Mantua shows that they could easily have afforded larger and more stylish houses: instead, they invested their money in slaves, land, or stocks and bonds.

Why did farmers like Robertson and Thweatt choose to live in the dwellings they did rather than in grand houses like Bellvue or Bolling Hall? Inertia and conservatism - fundamental factors in any situation involving human choice - would undoubtedly be part of the answer. Then too, for a variety of reasons, Chesterfield farmers may have been reticent about flaunting their wealth in the form of elaborate dwellings. Simple frugality would certainly have been another factor, particularly in an age when providing one's daughters with good dowries and one's sons with independent farmsteads was a prerequisite for their social acceptance and economic survival. Probably the most satisfactory

---

[1] *Chesterfield County: Early Architecture and Historic Sites* by Jeffrey M. O'Dell. Published by the County of Chesterfield, 1983.

explanation, however, is that most wealthy Chesterfield farmers felt no need to build large and expensive houses. The dwellings they lived in served them well enough: they were comfortable, well built, and sufficiently large by local standards. It would probably be more appropriate to ask why a few local farmers did elect to build showy houses like Ampthill or Magnolia Grange, when houses like Keesee or the Robertson house would have served their practical needs as well. As Mark Girouard has demonstrated in his recent book Life in the English Country House, one reason was probably social and political ambition. It was mainly men who were pushing for greater social status - men who wished to enter the public arena, or the world outside their local communities - who felt impelled to build dwellings that out shown those of their neighbors. In the following chapter, devoted to Chesterfield's eighteenth and nineteenth century high-style houses, we will examine this phenomenon in more detail.

From pp 236-237:

Robertson Farm

The Robertson house is situated at the crest of a low hill west of Salem Church Road in eastern Chesterfield.[2] Once the focal point of a 1,400-acre farm, the house is presently surrounded by a medium-density housing development; the dwelling was slated for demolition until the present owners decided to purchase and renovate it in 1977.

Hidden in the center of the present rambling frame structure is the original hall-and-rear-chamber plan house. Built ca. 1800-25, this one-story frame structure was heated by corner fireplaces feeding into a 10-foot wide Flemish bond chimney. In the early twentieth century, the roof on this section was raised to two stories to conform with later additions at both ends. The only early detailing remaining in the original house are two similar Federal mantels with vertically-reeded surround, tablet and end blocks.

[2] Note from Rob Creekmore: This is the house acquired by Moses M Robertson where Benjamin Moses Robertson and his older sister Judith Ann were born and grew up. Many of the events during the Civil War recounted in Judith Ann's letter occurred here. To get to the house, take Chippenham Parkway to Iron Bridge Road (Route 10) going south toward Chesterfield Courthouse. Just before Highway 288, turn left on Kingsland Rd (Route 611 – Beulah Road (641) also intersects there). Turn right on Salem Church Road (642). Turn right on Huntingcreek Drive. The house is about a half mile on the left. The cemetery is across the street that intersects Huntingcreek next to the house behind a wall.

In 1856, the addition of a two-story side-passage structure at the west end of the original dwelling tripled the size of the house. In contrast to the original section, the side passage addition has remained virtually unaltered. Interior detailing includes plain Greek mantels, two-flush-panel and four-recessed-panel doors and oversize six-over-six sash. While a pedestal chairrail and symmetrical trim are employed on the main floor, architrave trim and a doublebeaded chairrail are used on the upper floor. A simple openstring stair ascends from the main to the second floor, and a semi-enclosed stair leads to the basement which contains a small brick storage pantry with the unusual feature of an interior vertical-grate window.

Another addition - a one-story, one-room-plan unit - was added to the opposite (east) end of the original house some time in the 1850s. This section was also later raised to a full two stories, causing the present house to exhibit relatively uniform facades that belie its complex architectural history.

In the 1830s Moses M. Robertson acquired the tract on which the original dwelling stood, and over the course of' the next twenty years added to his holdings until he was one of the largest landowners in the county. In 1855, the value of buildings on the property rose dramatically from $400 to $2,500; probably at this time Robertson built the side-passage section of the house. Three years later, in 1858, Robertson died, leaving 24 slaves and a personal estate of $27,420 ($12,100 representing the value of slaves).

The property passed to his widow Judith Ann Nunnally Robertson, who lived there through the remainder of the nineteenth century. Although his daughter, Judith Ann (1845-1924), did not inherit any of the real estate, she spent most of her life on the property. In 1918, at age 74, she wrote an informal autobiography in the form of an open letter to her grandchildren, most of which is devoted to her early years on the Robertson Farm. This manuscript provides a graphic first-hand description of local events during the Civil War. Judith's father died when she was thirteen years old, and shortly afterwards her mother sent her to a female boarding school at Fork Union, Virginia. With the outbreak of the War Between the States in 1861, her brothers joined the Chesterfield Court House Infantry, and her mother, who was in poor health at the time, recalled her from school. A few months later, Judith's nineteen year old brother Joseph died of typhoid fever while on duty at Jamestown Island, and in 1862 her half-brother John Nunnally was killed at the Battle of Seven Pines. . . In May 1864, heavy fighting took place in the vicinity of Centralia and Drewry’s Bluff, and Union Troops staged frequent raids on surrounding farms. During the height of the fray, the widow Robertson packed off her three young children to a house outside the area of conflict. . . . A year after the war, Judith married Eldridge Meredith Foster, who ran a packet boat on the James River & Kanawha Canal. After living several years in Amelia County, the couple returned to the Robertson farm in Chesterfield to care for Judith's mother, and Foster, though a complete novice, tried his hand at farming. While farming appeared at first to be - in Judith's words - "a great financial mistake," it eventually provided a stable income, and the Fosters continued to live on the family homestead until around 1900.

In 1904, title to the property passed from Judith Robertson's estate to her son Frank P. Robertson, who sold it that same year to Benjamin F. Darby. In 1912 George Krupar of Chicago bought the farm and moved there with his family. Krupar was one of the first men in the county to work the land with modern machinery, and he was the only farmer in the area to use Percheron horses. While living in Chesterfield he helped set up a group of Bohemian emigrants as peanut farmers in neighboring Dinwiddie County, and in 1914 he laid out the town of Hopewell for the Dupont Company. During the Krupar tenure, the farm was the scene of large picnics featuring traditional Bohemian music and dancing. Krupar sold the farm and returned to Chicago during World War I. The property passed through the hands of several owners before being acquired by L. H. Jackson, who raised turkeys there until the 1970s. In 1976 a realty company purchased the farm and divided it into housing lots. The present owners, who bought the house in 1977, shortly before it was to be demolished, have carefully renovated it.