

# Moral Treatment

## *Thomas R. Blackburn and Western State Hospital*

Bryan Clark Green

That Thomas Blackburn became an architect builder is quite extraordinary. After receiving a position with Jefferson's work crew at the University of Virginia's Academical Village, he proved himself to the other self-taught builders like James Dinsmore and John Neilson. Coming to the attention of Thomas Jefferson, Blackburn developed a relationship that led to Jefferson loaning his copy of Leoni's edition of Palladio's *Four Books*. By poring over and meticulously copying from this extraordinarily rare reference, Blackburn taught himself the foundations of architecture.<sup>1</sup>

While his first works were Albemarle houses built in partnership with William B. Phillips, another UVA workman, the focus of this

essay is Blackburn's work at the Western Lunatic Asylum at Staunton, which led to other commissions in that city.

After working at UVA and completing several Albemarle houses in partnership with Phillips, Blackburn faced a decision: would he continue his fruitful business designing and building houses in Albemarle County or would he set out on his own?

Blackburn's attraction to Staunton was obvious. It was "one of the most flourishing interior towns of VA," the hub of a thriving agricultural and mercantile economy.<sup>2</sup> Staunton was well established, legally recognized in 1761 with its first court meeting earlier in 1745. By 1830, the census revealed approximately 2000 city inhabitants



General view of the original building, handsomely remodeled as the Blackburn Inn. The central portion of the building had been built before Blackburn's arrival.



with almost 20,000 in the surrounding county of Augusta—a potential market for an ambitious architect and carpenter. With both its economy and population rapidly expanding, Staunton needed many new buildings: residential, civic, commercial, and institutional.

Blackburn may have arrived as early as 1834, answering an advertisement like one in the April 4 *Staunton Spectator* calling for carpenters to work on the Western Lunatic Asylum.

While Jefferson's major works, such as the Virginia State Capitol and UVA, reflect an ideal that buildings can exert a powerful positive influence upon the lives of those who use them, Western Lunatic Asylum can be seen as an attempt by Blackburn to expand this belief

to heal the lives of society's most vulnerable members, those deprived of reason. At Western State, Blackburn made the most significant and enduring contribution of his long architectural career.

American colonists had assumed the cause of madness, like that of other diseases, rested with God's will: the patient, being deprived of reason, willfully if mistakenly chose a life of insanity. The objective of treatment was to convince the patient to reconsider his or her behavior and return to a life of rationality. The insane were essentially removed from society, restrained so as not to injure themselves or others, and left alone until they realized the error of their ways.

Beginning in the 1790s, the idea developed that insanity might not be a spiritual affliction but a physical illness that could respond to treatment. This notion, which had also developed in Europe, set into motion the "moral management" phase of the asylum movement, in which the insane were released from physical restraints and treated with respect.

In America, the architectural aspect to this movement reflected the Palladian form of British hospitals set within carefully designed landscapes. The focus became a soothing, ordered environment that created an ideal place to which the insane could be removed from the tumultuous, disordered society, one of the causes of their insanity. By placing patients in an orderly environment with attentive care, the patient would respond rationally, eventually emerging from the darkness of insanity into the calm, morning light of reason. The word "asylum" was applied in its truest sense: a place apart, a refuge.<sup>3</sup>

In 1838, Dr. Francis T. Stribling, physician and later director at Western Lunatic Asylum, wrote "it is now abundantly demonstrable that with the appropriate medical and moral treatment, insanity yields...with more readiness than ordinary diseases."<sup>4</sup>

As early as 1834, Blackburn began a long and fruitful partnership with Dr. Stribling, designing several buildings at Western Lunatic Asylum. Their collegiality continued until 1858 when he ceased to build. Blackburn's very last dated drawing was, in fact, for the Asylum.

In consultation with Dr. Stribling, Blackburn consciously used architecture and landscape to attempt to mend the broken lives of those within its carefully constructed walls. Extensive terraced gardens graced with pavilions crowned a landscape that was considered an integral part of the treatment. Patients were encouraged to tend gardens, walk their paths, and experience the outdoors to help heal their minds.



Spiral stair to cupola, Western State Hospital





Cupola, Western State Hospital

In addition, the three original ward buildings were designed with roof walks so that one might view the landscape from on high. For example, the dramatic spiral stair to the cupola and roof walk of the original building demonstrate that the roof walk was an important part of the design for patient access and experience.

Several surviving drawings also attest to Blackburn's interest in designing and ornamenting the grounds to complement the buildings. He created many landscape features, including utilitarian structures, a greenhouse, and ornamental features such as two garden pavilions, porticos, summer houses, and colonnades.

Building interiors were also designed to create a peaceful, domestic, and non-institutional feeling. The wards for the less manageable patients were the only rooms with bars; yet even there, the exterior bars on the windows were carefully matched to the mullions screening the bars from the patients' view. The resulting effect of great beauty, elegance, and dignity was believed to be an essential component of the healing process.

The "Additional Building," the first new structure built under Stribling's leadership and Blackburn's design and completed in

1838, provided comfortable accommodations for wealthy patients willing and able to pay for a higher standard of care. This income provided Stribling means to additionally improve the Asylum.

Blackburn originally proposed a seven-bay, four-story, double-pile brick structure articulated by a projecting pedimented central bay and covered by a hipped roof surmounted by a monitor and Chinese lattice rail.

The next building erected at the Asylum was a dining room, located behind the main building and built in 1841 for \$792.90.<sup>5</sup> This utilitarian structure had a chapel added as a second story a decade later, which is anything but ordinary. Blackburn's chapel is among the most interesting spaces at the Asylum. Easily identified by its Gothic windows, a broad elliptical vault spans the chapel's interior.

In order to furnish and decorate the chapel, a fund was established through the creation and sale of needlework by female patients: "The frescoing and graining of the chapel, the pulpit, seats, stained glass, window shades, &c., above mentioned, were paid for from this fund and cost about \$900."<sup>6</sup>





Main stair, second floor  
Western State Hospital



Detail of secondary stair, first floor  
Western State Hospital



"Additional Building"  
Now referred to as the North Building, Western State Hospital



Dining Room and Chapel  
Western State Hospital

While Blackburn's most prominent architectural work in the Staunton area was at the Asylum, his designs were by no means confined to that complex. In due time, virtually all of the major institutional and civic buildings in Staunton were either designed or built by Blackburn. These include the new courthouse (demolished in 1900 for the present courthouse); residences, such as those for Adam Link, an expansion of the Stuart House, and a Lutheran church. Sadly, with only a few exceptions, most of Blackburn's non-institutional works in Staunton do not survive. Blackburn also helped redesign Staunton's second largest institutional building, the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind.

Blackburn's notions of architecture did not remain embedded in the 1820s. His interest in architectural changes is demonstrated by

his visits to buildings to use as models, an interest in the engineering aspects of his buildings (especially water and heating systems), and experimenting with construction innovations. Much like Jefferson, Blackburn preferred to design his buildings with a Palladian exterior while freely experimenting with the building systems that serviced them.

Like others who worked for Jefferson, Blackburn absorbed the lessons that resulted in a rich blend of traditional Virginia architecture and Jefferson's preferred classicism, an architecture that proved not only elegant and permanent but also practical, buildable, and habitable. The result was "Piedmont Palladianism," an architecture that became enduringly intertwined in Virginia's rich heritage.





Lobby, first floor, Western State Hospital  
The primary stair on the first floor, removed during an earlier use, was restored in the recent renovation as a hotel.

Blackburn spent the remaining 37 years of his life in Staunton. While he never again designed another building in Albemarle County, his education under Jefferson's tutelage and the design proportions derived from Palladio continued to inform his work. Tellingly, at some point soon after Jefferson's death in 1826, Blackburn began to sign his first name like Jefferson, adopting Jefferson's familiar "Th" as part of his signature. ■

Bryan Clark Green is the author of *In Jefferson's Shadow: The Architecture of Thomas R. Blackburn* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006) from which this article has been adapted. He lives in Richmond and is director of historic preservation for Commonwealth Architects. All photographs are by the author.

- 1 For more information, see Bryan Clark Green, *In Jefferson's Shadow: The Architecture of Thomas R. Blackburn* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006). The Center for Palladian Studies in America generously supported publication of that book..
- 2 William Darby and Theodore Dwight, Jr., *A New Gazetteer of the United States of America* (Hartford: Edward Hopkins, 1830), 527.
- 3 This view had developed more or less simultaneously in France, Italy, and Britain. See Samuel Tuke's *Description of the Retreat* (1813).
- 4 Western Lunatic Asylum, Report to the General Assembly, July 1838. Western State Hospital Records, Library of Virginia.
- 5 "Report," *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia*. (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1841), p. 3. "The whole expenditure will then have been one hundred thousand dollars, and two hundred and forty patients will have been furnished with an asylum in every respect suited to their unhappy condition." (Emphasis in original.)
- 6 "Superintendent's Report," *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia*. (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1851) n.p.



Shrewdly combining the most current architectural discourse with unabashed self-promotion, Colen Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus* (1715–1727) simultaneously presented Palladian classicism as the height of architectural achievement with Campbell as its chief practitioner. Through a form of elite consumerism easily masked as taste and erudition, architectural publications such as Campbell's rendered the country house replaceable through commission and replication.

It is impossible to claim with any certainty that Wentworth Woodhouse was selected as if from a catalog by either Malton, who owned each volume of *Vitruvius Britannicus*, or his architect, Flitcroft, who subscribed to volume three. What is clear, however, is that in the middle of construction Malton engaged new architects and craftsmen working in the most fashionable Palladian language, and either he or they replicated the much admired Wanstead as the central block of a massive new house, totally reorienting Wentworth Woodhouse to face the vast parklands awaiting Malton's investment and improvement.

This was the new public face of Wentworth Woodhouse. The extravagant rooms it contained, including the double-height Marble Saloon based on the cubic rooms of Palladio, became a

hub of political activity in Yorkshire. Both baroque and Palladian, the design history of Wentworth Woodhouse remains shrouded in mystery, and the reasons for the changes may simply be unrecoverable. However, the contrasting styles of Wentworth Woodhouse certainly reflect not only the rising tide of Palladianism in England but echo the shifting motivations of its construction, from the personal to the political. The result was a house with two faces. ■

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- 1 James J. Cartwright, *The Wentworth Papers, 1705-1739* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1883), 79.
- 2 Richard Hewlings, "The Classical Leviathan: Wentworth Woodhouse, South Yorkshire, The Home of Mr. and Mrs. Newbold, Part 1," *Country Life*, vol. 204, no. 7 (17 February 2010): 46-53, 52.
- 3 Ruth Harman and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Yorkshire West Riding: Sheffield and the South, The Buildings of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 728.
- 4 Quoted in M.J. Charlesworth, "The Wentworths: Family and Political Rivalry in the English Landscape Garden," *Garden History* 14/2 (1986): 120-137, 127.

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# Architect & Author Bryan Clark Green



Bryan Clark Green is the newest member of the Board of Directors of CPSA. Bryan, who is an architectural historian and Director of Historic Preservation for Commonwealth Architects in Richmond, was the luncheon speaker at the Blackburn Inn during CPSA's Staunton tour last November.

The author of *In Jefferson's Shadow: The Architecture of Thomas R. Blackburn*, among other books and articles, Bryan graduated from the University of Notre Dame in history and received his master's and PhD degrees in architectural history at the University of Virginia.

He is an adjunct faculty member of the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at the Virginia Commonwealth University and has given many lectures on preservation issues and historic structures. Bryan serves on the Citizens Advisory Council on Furnishing and Interpreting the Governor's Mansion and has served on several Richmond City boards and commissions, including the Commission of Architectural Review.

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