PINK STUCCO IN THE LAND OF RED BRICKS

The Creation of Casa Maria, A Mediterranean Enigma in Albemarle County

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the creation of Casa Maria, a sprawling Mediterranean style house constructed from 1919 to 1921, located in Greenwood, Virginia. Casa Maria is unique: it is the only Mediterranean Revival house in Albemarle County, and its architectural design is credited to renowned landscape architect Charles Gillette, who never designed another building in a career of 2,500 commissions. This perplexing architectural attribution and noteworthy stylistic departure from the regional norm have remained unquestioned. In turn, this project asks: What were the motivations or inspirations behind Casa Maria? And who was really involved? Instead of leaving these questions unanswered in the face of missing architectural sources, which apparently were lost in a fire decades ago, this thesis orients to biography and social conditions as primary lenses to understand Casa Maria and its creation. By constructing a biography of Mary Thomas Williams, the house's unstudied original client, her extensive global travels, experience as an unmarried, independent woman, close friendship to Charles Gillette, and a pivotal moment of domestic upheaval emerge as essential, overlooked influences on the estate's commission and conception. A comparison of Casa Maria to the Mediterranean style works of William Lawrence Bottomley, renowned collaborator of Gillette, strongly suggests his involvement or influence, and makes the case for including Casa Maria within Bottomley's portfolio, not solely Gillette's. In conclusion, this thesis not only adds an overlooked project into the well-studied body of work of one of Virginia's most lauded architects, but also illuminates how a series of largely forgotten, nuanced social conditions intersected in the creation of a unique Mediterranean vision.

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memories that will last a lifetime. And lastly, thank you in memoriam to Mary Thomas Williams. Her boldness in breaking from the architectural status quo, which this project sheds clearer light on, created a place of transcendent, fantastical beauty - and helped ensure the career of Charles Gillette in Virginia. As this thesis shows, without Mary Williams' visionary patronage, a man who would become one of the most revered design professionals to ever work in our proud state might not have found his footing. To all of these and others, thank you.

INTRODUCTION: Casa Maria's Unanswered Questions

Greenwood, Virginia is a scenic rural community in the shadow of Afton Mountain, a 20 minute drive west of Charlottesville, defined by its verdant rolling hills and rich cultural history. Nancy Langhorne, Viscountess Astor, the first woman to sit in British Parliament, her niece Nancy Lancaster, owner of influential decorating firm Colefax & Fowler, and artist Charles Dana Gibson, who immortalized his wife Irene Gibson neé Langhorne as "The Gibson Girl", all called Greenwood home during its early 20th century heyday as a country retreat. During this era, the region's wealthy flocked to Greenwood and built an array of pleasure estates epitomizing the American Country House Movement. The creation in 2011 of the 16,200 acre Greenwood-Afton Rural Historic District underscores the historical significance and present integrity of the area. Historians working on this project noted that "perhaps nowhere else in the Southern United States was [the American Country House Movement] more evident than in Greenwood. Whether remodeling an existing house or constructing a lavish new estate, Greenwood blossomed as a playground for the rich, wealthy families, who initially came from Richmond, to escape the urban heat."[1] Included among the contributing assets of the Rural Historic District are a series of such country houses, as well as a handful of historic parishes and an assortment of small 'villages', including the historically Black enclaves of Newtown and Free Town. Amidst this local array of landmarked structures and well documented social histories, sitting in a county overflowing with sites of architectural interest, one stands apart: Casa Maria, a sprawling

[1] National Register of Historic Places, "Greenwood-Afton Rural Historic District", 2011. Historians working on this project defined the American Country House Movement as follows: "Inspired partly by the Country House Movement in England, the American Country House Movement produced grand estates that showcased architectural masterpieces as well as serving as a setting for social events and rural sports.The movement spanned from the 1880s through circa 1930 and was driven by the desire of a new class of wealthy Americans to establish grand rural retreats."

Mediterranean style house constructed from 1919-1921, and completed with an addition in 1928. Casa Maria is something of an enigma, glimpsed by passersby in flashes of pink stucco, tiled roof, and urn-capped parapets through thick forests of bamboo, and concealed behind a long mortarless stone wall, the only one of its kind in the area. Lang Gibson, a lifelong Greenwood resident and descendant of the famed Gibson Girl, called the stone wall "the most visible work of art in Greenwood"[2] - no small claim considering the surroundings, including a 1920's barn complex by Delano and Aldrich, a palatial hilltop manor modeled after the White House, and Georgian revival church with an arcaded cloister financed by Lady Astor, all located within a few thousand feet. Despite its beauty and craft, the wall itself is scarcely mentioned in any texts documenting the area's history. It is an apt metaphor, as it encases Casa Maria in many unanswered questions, which this thesis seeks to engage. Before diving further into those questions, it is necessary to describe the site. While access to the interior spaces was not possible for this project, the following is a short description of the house and its environs.

Casa Maria is an estate with a large main house, two cottages, and extensive gardens. Casa Maria's main house consists of two perpendicular rectangular blocks, which form a series of different outdoor spaces in the house's immediate vicinity. It is not oriented along a symmetrical axis nor does it attempt to dramatize the entrance or arrival experience; upon arriving in the parking circle, one sees a rear ¾ angle of the house, where the perpendicular blocks intersect. From this view the fenestration includes a series of arched windows, projected bays, a balcony, and double hung sash windows in multiple sizes. The primary facade faces west, away from the point of arrival, oriented toward the scenic view of the mountain range in the

[2] Lang Gibson, *For the Love of Greenwood,* Privately published by Lang Gibson, Richmond, VA. 2009

distance. A short path and an arcaded walkway leads to the main entrance and a large terrace (Figure 1). The primary rooms including living room, entrance hall, and dining room are all aligned along the mountain-facing terrace. The six-over-six and eight-over-eight paned sash windows with louvered shutters represent a Georgian / Colonial Revival element, blending with more overtly Mediterranean-inspired elements like the arcade and tiled roof. A higher pitched section of the roof is tiled; the rest is concealed behind a simple parapet. A projecting string course on the upper story and eyebrow windows covered with louvered grates aligned with the window bays are two of the more unique details, and provide some visual texture to what is otherwise a simplistic, rustic facade. The current owner added additional ornamentation like decorative rain spouts, stone urns atop the parapet wall, and enclosed one of the rear corners of the house to form a walled garden. A 1928 addition of a two story music room with bedrooms above further extends the primary, mountain-facing facade; this addition is constructed of brick, but painted the same soft pink and dark blue scheme as the stucco original portion of the house. The addition features a series of doors / walkthrough full height windows with louvered shutters, and a doorway with a decorative fanlight above, a somewhat more Georgian or Federal style detail. Different garden areas extend outward from around the main house. An open lawn in front of the main facade frames the mountain view with two large magnolia trees. Beyond these magnolias, boxwood hedges define a central allee, a pony paddock to the left, and what remains of an orchard to the right. More formal garden spaces extend from the northwest corner of the house, including a large garden ‘room’ surrounded with stone walls. In addition to the main house are two cottages which show similar architectural stylings. The larger of the two cottages is two stories; the smaller is a single living floor with a garage space below accessed through its own driveway entrance. A greenhouse and potting shed sit along the rear drive which connects

the main house to the two cottages. Colored photographs from shortly after the house's completion show balustraded terraces in the landscape, and also show the original color scheme of the house, soft pink with pale green trim (Figure 4).

WHO DESIGNED CASA MARIA?

Before the creation of the Greenwood-Afton Rural Historic District, Casa Maria itself was nominated for and accepted to the National Register of Historic Places in 1990. Historian Geoffrey Henry completed the nomination process. His statement of significance remains the most substantial description of the house and its story to date. It provides a thorough design assessment of the house, the landscape, and its contributing and non-contributing structures; however, key aspects of Casa Maria's origin remain largely unsubstantiated. The nomination materials identify a key point of departure for this project, one that has long been a source of curiosity amongst Virginia's architecture aficionados: the claim that Charles Freeman Gillette (1886-1969), as Henry described him, "one of the premier landscape architects practicing in Virginia in the first half of the twentieth century" designed not only the gardens of Casa Maria, but the house as well.[3] Gillette was not an architect. It has repeatedly been noted that if true, this would be Gillette's only documented building design in a prolific and influential landscape and garden career of over 2,500 commissions.[4] Per Geoffrey Henry's research over 30 years ago, the claim is rooted in oral tradition, passed down from the original owners to the current owner of the house, and was recalled in conversation with surviving neighbors. Casa Maria's literary

[3] Henry, National Register of Historic Places, "Casa Maria"

[4] George Longest, *Genius in the Garden: Charles F. Gillette and Landscape Architecture in Virginia*, Virginia State Library and Archives, Richmond VA, 1992 provides an appendix of projects of Gillette's firm.

footprint is small, but the claim of Gillette's design credit is repeated in every magazine article, book, or newspaper source located for this project.[5] The claim is repeated, but never fully interrogated or evaluated. It persists because a fire at Gillette's office supposedly destroyed the original plans and the correspondence related to the construction of Casa Maria, which appears to have dissuaded any historians from further questioning the notion. It remains perplexing, particularly because Charles Gillette is famed in Virginia for his many collaborations with William Lawrence Bottomley, a New Yorker who became Virginia's society architect of choice in the 1920s and 1930s. Bottomley was brought on to complete an addition to Casa Maria in 1928, but the earlier overall house design circa 1919-1921 is attributed to Gillette. The two professionals are so synonymous in Virginia that many mentions of Casa Maria posit that they 'switched roles' for the house - assuming that if Gillette was involved, Bottomley must have been as well.[6] Bottomley and Gillette's legacy of collaboration surrounds Casa Maria on all sides. Bottomley and Gillette worked together just down the road at Blue Ridge Farm beginning in 1923[7], and the sister of Casa Maria's original owner engaged Bottomley to build a new house for her in 1930. Why would Casa Maria's owner commissioned Gillette, and not Bottomley, or any other more qualified architect? This line of thinking begins to open many questions, which scholarship on both professionals has not yet sought to answer. No studies of Bottomley's portfolio have included Casa Maria, and studies of Gillette's work have held Casa Maria at a

[5] Within the Casa Maria Archive Folder at the Albemarle Historical Society, see: Albemarle Magazine, *Albemarle at Home: Casa Maria*, Oct 1992. *Casa Maria*, Albemarle Observer, 22 April 1982. *Casa Maria*, Charlottesville Daily Progress, 22 April 1982. Also see Lay, K. Edward. *The Architecture of Jefferson Country: Charlottesville and Albemarle County, Virginia*. Albemarle County Historical Society, Charlottesville, VA, 2000, and Longest, *Genius in the Garden.*

[6] Gillette's biographer suggested that "At Casa Maria, in Greenwood near Charlottesville, Bottomley and Gillette may have found themselves in different roles, with tradition holding that Gillette served as the main architect… this may have been the only house Gillette ever designed." Longest, *Genius in the Garden,* 68-69.

[7] National Register of Historic Places, "Blue Ridge Farm", 1990

distance.[8] In order to investigate this unusual anomaly in their respective *oeuvres*, my own project confronts the lack of direct architectural sources which has dissuaded historians in the past, and orients instead toward the interpersonal relationships surrounding Casa Maria's creation. However, the question of *who* is only just the beginning.

WHY BUILD CASA MARIA?

This unusual 'orphan status' of Casa Maria, how it sits on the fringes of the bodies of work of two of 20th century Virginia's most respected design professionals, is enough to draw the eye of the curious historian; but the question of attribution is not the lone mystery. Casa Maria is the only example of large-scale Mediterranean style domestic architecture in Greenwood and in the rest of Albemarle County.[9] This is a noteworthy distinction in a landscape arguably defined by its vast quantity of pleasure estates and country houses. Therefore, the story of Casa Maria is not only a question of *who*, but a question of *why*? Why a sprawling bit of stucco fantasy in a land steeped in the architectural legacy of Thomas Jefferson? Albemarle County is a place where red bricks, white columns, and the varying intersections of farmhouse vernacular, Georgianism and Colonial Revivalism largely defined elite domestic architecture before, during, and since Casa Maria's construction. Virginia's very strong architectural traditions underscore the significance of a Mediterranean 'deviation'. As one Gillette scholar stated, "*The stabilizing influence of this indigenous design tradition rendered it less likely that*

[8] Longest, *Genius in the Garden* devotes one image and a short caption to the site. Frazer, *The Architecture of William Lawrence Bottomley* and O'Neal, William B. and Weeks, Christopher, *The Work of William Lawrence Bottomley in Richmond* do not contain any feature or image of Casa Maria.

[9] Lay, *The Architecture of Jefferson Country* ; Henry, National Register of Historic Places, "Casa Maria"

affluent Virginians would turn to the chateaux of the Loire Valley or the villas of Florence for their residential prototypes."[10] Even within the small footprint of Greenwood, Casa Maria is surrounded on all sides by evidence of this "stabilizing influence", with red brick houses like Whilton, Rose Hill, Blue Ridge Farm, Mirador, Wavertree Hall, The Cedars all located within a few miles.[11] Casa Maria is unquestionably different - but what actually is it? Casa Maria itself has been referred to as "Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival", "Spanish-Mediterranean", and "Spanish-style".[12] The historians who prepared the nomination for the Greenwood-Afton Rural Historic District also placed Casa Maria in a broader category they called "Eclectic Revival", a label that included both Swannanoa, a lavish, Carrara marble-clad mountaintop mock-Medici palace as well as Royal Orchard, a heavy, castle-esque fortress concocted out of local stone, both fashioned as summer retreats for powerful Richmond families, located on the mountain ridge that overlooks Greenwood. Ed Lay's *The Architecture of Jefferson Country* also groups Casa Maria into the concept of eclecticism. While parallels between these 'eclectic' creations can certainly be drawn, my own project seeks to uncover influences specific to Casa Maria and its Mediterranean inspiration, beyond seeing it as merely an "eclectic" deviation from a Georgian or Colonial Revival norm. What were the motivations or possible sources behind this specific architectural expression? Early 20th century rural Virginia was culturally, socially, physically, climatically, *not* a Florida or California resort town, the sorts of places where American architectural Mediterraneanism found prominent footing in the early 20th century, often through

[10] Rachel M. Lilly and Reuben M. Rainey. "The Country Place Era in Virginia: The Residential Site Planning of Charles F. Gillette," *Landscape Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, Temporary Publisher, 1992, 99–115.

[11] National Register of Historic Places, "Greenwood-Afton Rural Historic District". All houses are included as contributing assets of the Historic District

[12] Lay, *The Architecture of Jefferson Country* ; Henry, National Register of Historic Places, "Casa Maria"

the enterprising machinations of developers and marketers.[13] With an allure of escapism, Mediterranean architecture emerged in the first few decades of the 1900's as a valuable image-making tool in locations ripe for their own 'historical identity', like Southern California and Florida. The uniquely American amalgam of cues from around the Mediterranean region became a style in its own right, one quickly adopted in these locations as a burgeoning regional expression; in turn, much of the historiography on Mediterranean architecture in America centers on these locations.[14] Casa Maria, in the foothills of Virginia's Piedmont region, far from Spanish colonial histories or balmy coastal climates, presents an opportunity to question the transposition of Mediterranean architecture. With its stucco facade, tiled roof, arcaded walkway, and asymmetrical plan oriented around a series of outdoor spaces, Casa Maria bears many hallmarks of Mediterranean influence; but as the following chapters show, interpreting Casa Maria's style hinges not just on the building itself, but the lives of the people who contributed to it.

LENSES, METHODS, AND SOURCES

To begin to answer these questions – *why* build Casa Maria, and *who* contributed to it – this study centers the house's nearly forgotten original patron, Mary Thomas Williams (Figure 2). Mary is mentioned in existing source material; it is known that she was the original client, but so far her life experience remains unstudied. She is one of three women essential to

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[13] McDonough, Michael. "Selling Sarasota: Architecture and Propaganda in a 1920s Boom Town." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 23 (1998): 11–31.

[14] Lauren Weiss Bricker's *The Mediterranean House in America*, published in 2008, claimed to be "the first national survey of this popular style". Bricker, an associate professor of architecture at California State Polytechnic University, assembled a collection of 25 houses for the study - only one of the 25, the William H. Rand Jr. House in Rye, NY, was outside of California, Florida, or Texas. Bricker, Lauren Weiss. *The Mediterranean House in America*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2008.

understanding the house, the other two being her sister, Susanne Massie, who in 1919 gave Mary a parcel of her own property upon which to build Casa Maria; and Ella Williams Smith, Susanne's daughter and Mary's niece, who inherited Casa Maria after her aunt Mary's death at the age of 52 in 1920, roughly two years into the endeavor. Ella and her husband Gordon had completed Casa Maria by 1921, and called it home until its sale in 1972. It was they who brought on William Lawrence Bottomley to design an addition to the house in 1928. Despite the mystery surrounding its early days, Casa Maria is well-recorded as Ella Smith's home; many of an older generation fondly recall her massive Sunday luncheons. Ella herself left an indelible mark on the community. The city of Charlottesville's Civic League named Ella Smith their 'Outstanding Citizen' for 1960. She was chairman of the local chapter of the American Red Cross during the 1930's and again during the Second World War. She conceived of and worked extensively to realize the Greenwood Community Center in the 1950's, a unique recreational and social facility which became her enthusiastic passion later in life. She served as president of both the Albemarle Garden Club as well as The Garden Club of Virginia, as did her mother before her.[15] While the many decades of social history that extended around Casa Maria as the residence of the Smith family are dynamic and fascinating, it is the *genesis* of Casa Maria as an expression and as an idea to which this project looks closer. Casa Maria was Ella Smith's *home* - but it was her aunt Mary's *creation*, which is the untold story this project attempts to excavate. Therefore, particularly in the face of so many missing architectural sources, I anchor the question of *why* - what might have motivated or contributed to such a rebuttal of the region's architectural status quo? - on a deeper understanding of Mary Williams. Looking closer at her life reveals many experiences that impacted her noteworthy departure from Virginia's aforementioned architectural

[15] *Memorandum on Mrs. Ella Williams (James Gordon) Smith as the community's outstanding citizen for 1960*, 1960, Casa Maria Archive Folder, Albemarle County Historical Society, Charlottesville, VA

"stabilizing influence", thus far neglected in existing histories of the house; from her education, to her global travels, to her lifelong status as an unmarried woman, culminating in a very specific episode of domestic upheaval which spurred Casa Maria's construction.

This focus on women's identity and experience owes a particular debt to Alice T. Friedman's *Women and the Making of the Modern House*, published in 1998. Friedman's project asked, "Why were independent women clients such powerful catalysts for innovation in domestic projects?"[16] While Casa Maria architecturally falls outside of Friedman's focus on early Modernism, and how individual women clients' "redefinition of domesticity…propelled these projects into uncharted realms of originality"[17], her assemblage of case studies and the dynamics they reveal proved pivotal to my own understanding of Casa Maria not just as a building, but a reflection of the life of its patron. In the words of Friedman, "By choosing to build for themselves… they made a radical statement about the value of their lives as independent women."[18] This project reveals that Mary William's own life has been the ignored source key to unlocking, or at least exploring, the many truths behind such a special house. Previous historians' focus on the *lack* of architectural sources left the site narratively mute, with barely a story to tell; centering Casa Maria's patron - her life, her relationships, her experiences - reveals a fascinating series of social conditions which influenced its creation. Interestingly, the focus on social conditions proves fruitful not only for answering the question of *why?*, but also the question of *who?* It was recorded that Charles Gillette "designed the house as a favor for the

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[16] Friedman, Alice T. *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998. 15

[17] Ibid. 16

[18] Ibid. 17

Williams sisters, both of whom were close personal friends of his."[19] Were they indeed close friends? How did they meet? What could this "favor" have been? Chapter 2 shows that this suggested friendship is not only pivotal to understanding Gillette's unusual role as architect, but has likely been misinterpreted as it has been passed down through oral history.

Sources pertaining to the life of Mary Williams are limited. As a daughter of a prominent Richmond, Virginia family of tobacco merchants, newspaper archives provide useful details which serve as a counterpoint to a resource at the center of this project: Mary's niece Ella Smith's own autobiography, *Tears and Laughter in Virginia and Elsewhere*, published in 1972. The book is a collection of reminiscences that follows Ella's youth in Richmond, Virginia, at the dawn of the 20th century, growing up in a wealthy family who socialized and traveled extensively, as well as her many decades as a prominent resident of Greenwood. The book was a key source for this project to identify significant milestones deserving of further inquiry, and is invaluable for the details it provides about her aunt Mary, whose biography would otherwise be nearly impossible to reconstruct. Perplexingly Ella dedicated few words to Casa Maria; despite it being her home for half a century, *Tears and Laughter* says very little about the details of the house, its construction, or the experience of living there. However, a few sentences illuminate pivotal points of view specific to the house and why it was initiated, thus far overlooked in all other existing documents pertaining to the house. Chapter 1 surfaces these episodes and brings them to life with additional biographical context. In addition to the aforementioned newspaper archives, family descendants provided sources like personal letters and photograph albums, including early images of Casa Maria from the 1920's. Letters and photographs were also

[19] National Register of Historic Places, "Casa Maria"

discovered in the archives of Agecroft Hall in Richmond, the home-turned-museum belonging to Mary's brother, T.C. Williams Jr. These previously neglected sources allow memory, identity, and biography to emerge as essential lenses through which to interpret Casa Maria. As this project shifts from tracing the patron's own life to questioning *who* might have been involved in bringing Casa Maria to fruition, biography continues to be an important resource to compensate for missing architectural plans and drawings and construction-related correspondence. However, this doesn't mean the building itself is not also a valuable source. In the concluding sections, formal analysis (examining the design of the house and comparing it to similar works by William Lawrence Bottomley) allows me to explore and advocate for the possibility of his involvement or influence. In summation, this project has had no chance to interpret floorplans, to question the use of space, or engage with the construction of Casa Maria or its landscape. However, instead of turning away from the site as an unsolvable mystery, I instead focus entirely on the social experiences which molded, inspired, and influenced its inception.

As we look into its history, Casa Maria just recently celebrated its centenary. In Virginia, a state proud of its rich and lengthy history, a hundred years is hardly 'old'. In England, Scotland, or Germany, where many of the region's colonial settlers hailed from, a one hundred year old house is barely settled in. But while time is a constant, it is also relative - and a century has been long enough to obscure and oversimplify the narrative of Casa Maria. In such a span, so much can be lost or misplaced, surmised, assumed, told and retold, again and again. The plans and correspondence related to Casa Maria's construction burned in a fire. Its original patron died before seeing Casa Maria finished, and left the house to its well-known first owner of nearly half a century. The person who apparently designed Casa Maria would go on to become famous in

the state - and famously *not* an architect. How do you question the creation of a unique house, when the owner who defines its social history was not its client, when the apparent architect never designed another building, and when the sources directly documenting its conception and construction no longer exist? Casa Maria is a challenge to many of the ways we commonly understand the history of a house. Above all, this project resolutely seeks to show that a *history of architecture* doesn't begin the year construction begins. By looking farther back, we see how a work of architecture, particularly one so personal, can be understood as much through biography and social experience as bricks and mortar. Therefore, the story of Casa Maria doesn't begin in 1918, like it has been told before. It begins in 1867, with the birth of Mary Thomas Williams.

CHAPTER 1: MARY THOMAS WILLIAMS: FORGOTTEN PATRON

Mary Williams was born in Richmond, Virginia on March 22, 1867, to Thomas C. Williams, a successful tobacco merchant, and his wife Ella Peatross Williams.[20] Mary spent her youth, and nearly all of her life, on West Franklin Street, the epicenter of Richmond's Gilded Age upper class. Franklin Street represented the westward expansion of postbellum Richmond. This pattern of westward growth would continue over the next century, particularly for Richmond's elite, with the development of Monument Avenue, an extension of Franklin Street. Mary's own brother, T.C. Williams Jr., would come to play an outsize role in this process, creating the affluent subdivision Windsor Farms in the 1920's. But during the Williams siblings' youth, Franklin Street was unquestionably the city's most prestigious address.[21] Richmond's

[20] U.S. Census Bureau, 1880 Federal Census

[21] Winthrop, *Commonwealth Club Historic District*, The National Register of Historic Places, 1983.

captains of industry lined this thoroughfare with showpiece townhouses, which today serve as a walkable timeline of the evolving upper class tastes for architectural display, from Richardsonian Romanesque to Beaux-Arts and Colonial Revival. By the turn of the century, Franklin was a residential rolodex of Richmond's power players, including the Scott family of bankers, and Lewis Ginter, tobacconist and philanthropist. The Williams family maintained a comfortable position in this milieu of company presidents, manufacturers, lawyers, and stock brokers, the likes of which were propelling and profiting from Richmond's emergence out of the ashes of Reconstruction.[22] Mary's father Thomas, the son of a highly regarded builder named Jesse Williams, became one of the era's most successful tobacco merchants. T.C. Williams, as he and his namesake trademark were known, steadily rose from his job as an office clerk, forming multiple tobacco partnerships during the 1850's that went on to propel the family's finances to great heights. The business relocated to Danville during the war years, as the Confederate Army acquisitioned most of Richmond's factories. Following the war, the family returned to Richmond and Williams continued the expansion of his enterprises, which included popular tobacco brands like Golden Eagle, Nosegay, Welcome Nugget, and Juno.[23] By 1903, T.C. Williams' son (and Mary's older brother) T.C. Williams Jr., was overseeing what had become one of the largest exporters of chewing tobacco in the world, shipping out 5 million pounds annually.[24] That year, the family's export business was sold to major competitor British American Tobacco, and in 1904, the domestic side of the business merged with the American Tobacco Co.[25] The wealth

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[22] Ward, Harry M. *Richmond: An Illustrated History.* United States: Windsor Publications, Inc. 1985, 148-187.

[23] Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America* (New York, 1949), 130.

[24] *Big Tobacco Deal*, The New York Times, Page 3, May 8, 1903.

[25] Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America*

created by this enterprise enabled a series of noteworthy architectural projects commissioned by the Williams siblings, including T.C. Jr.'s Agecroft Hall and the aforementioned neighborhood of Windsor Farms, his sister Susanne Williams' Rose Hill and Mary's own Casa Maria, in Greenwood, Virginia. These highly personal residences in an array of styles, from Tudor to Georgian to Mediterranean, are an interesting architectural window into the various ambitions and cultural experiences of Virginia's elite in the dawn of the 20th century. But well before this generation of siblings was to make such memorable marks on the Virginia landscape, in 1880, the family still lived together, at home on West Franklin, including parents Thomas C. Williams and his wife Ella Peatross, their children, and five Black domestic servants.[26]

Mary was born nearly exactly two years after the evacuation and burning of Richmond, into the upper echelon of a city of paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions. The Civil War left Richmond in ruins; or rather, its own army and leaders did, lighting fire to the vast supply of munitions and equipment left behind as they retreated in the face of Union advancement. Post-Reconstruction era Richmond was a place where memory and modernity dramatically intersected. It was the site of a vast multitude of social experiences, all of them mediated by the city's conflicting identity; its past that many clung to as the 'Capital of the Confederacy'; its present as a canvas for opportunistic investment and reform; and its unfolding future, buoyed by indications of progress like one of the nation's first electric streetcar services, yet still mired in centuries of deeply embedded racism and provincialism. Although primary sources remain limited regarding her own life, there are multiple lenses through which to consider Mary Thomas Williams' experience in this context and how it shaped her. Mary was a daughter of Richmond's

[26] U.S. Census Bureau, 1880 Federal Census

white elite, growing up in the aftermath of the Civil War. Some recent scholarship has encouraged a more nuanced understanding of upper class women of the post-war 'New South', and questioned the stereotype of their conservatism, most often characterized as looking backward and with memorializing the Confederate past than with looking forward. Jane Turner Censer, professor emerita of history at George Mason University and 2017-2018 president of the Southern Historical Society, published in 2003 *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895*. This project proposed a generational framework of 3 groups to understand how women of different ages experienced and adapted to the Civil War's upheaval. Mary Thomas Williams (b. 1867) belongs to Censer's third and youngest group, and at the very tail end of it - women born from 1850 to 1869. This younger generation "sought to redefine women's sphere and influence after the war", less burdened by "adult memories" of the War's trauma or the social structures before it.[27] While no sources suggest any element of burgeoning progressivism in Mary Thomas Williams, like some of the examples of socially minded female writers or education activists cited by Censer, this framework nevertheless encourages us to see Mary not only in the broad picture of her privileged position and Southern identity, but also in the nuances of her own lived experience. Censer emphasized factors like managing domestic affairs, education, and increasing sharing of property and inheritance as spheres in which postbellum elite women contributed to shifting ideas of womanhood.[28] These mirror the formative parts of Mary's individual life journey that emerge upon closer inspection. The following sections explore Mary's educational experience and the ideas and people it exposed

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[27] Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895,* LSU Press, 2003, pg. 6

[28] "even privileged white women had to increase their knowledge of domestic affairs… many elite women came to define their achievements in terms of the homes over which they presided"... "Unmarried women, even those highly unlikely to ever marry, increasingly shared in the family lands and other property" Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895,* 6.

her to; her travels as a member of an increasingly mobile American upper class; her depth of devotion to her family and home life; and the significance of her inheritance and property holdings. Mary's inherited wealth didn't just make her architectural endeavor possible, but supported another important part of her story: her status as an unmarried woman up until her death. These hitherto unacknowledged biographical threads become key dimensions not only to understand Mary as a woman of her time, but to understand the conception of Casa Maria.

MARY'S EDUCATION

One of the developments impacting women of the postbellum period was the increasing emphasis on education.[29] This was a time when entrenched elite educational traditions picked up where they left off after the war, but also ran concurrent with emerging progressive ideas. The fact that Nina Anderson Pape, education reformer who introduced the Kindergarten movement to Savannah and co-founded the Girl Scouts with her cousin Juliette Gordon Low, was a contemporary of Mary Thomas Williams at the Edgeworth School for Young Ladies, a traditional boarding school or "finishing school" for young women in Baltimore, brings this dynamic into focus.[30] Mary attended Edgeworth in the 1880's.[31] Sending daughters Northward to

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[29] Censer noted "...even as some mothers emphasized the graceful ornamental arts and accomplishments that would make their daughters admired members of society, they also wished to give young women some means of self-support. Formal education would make it possible for women to earn wages and ensure, if necessary, an independent existence. This indicates an important change of attitude from the antebellum period…". Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895,* 17

[30] Paul M. Pressly, *Educating the Daughters of Savannah's Elite: The Pape School, the Girl Scouts, and the Progressive Movement,* The Georgia Historical Quarterly, Vol. 80, No. 2 (SUMMER 1996), pp. 246-275

[31] Ella Williams Smith, *Tears and Laughter in Virginia and Elsewhere*, Verona, Virginia: McClure Printing Company, Inc. 1972. A newspaper social announcement also notes Mary's "return from school in Baltimore": Richmond Times Dispatch, Page 8, June 20, 1886.

boarding school was common practice for Southern upper class families, its ubiquity so ingrained that it hindered the success of early attempts to establish more localized options and college preparatory programs in Southern cities.[32] These established educational traditions are often seen as deeply ingrained modes of conservatism for Southern elites[33]; this might be true when thinking at a structural level, however, one would be amiss to consider this sort of educational experience merely part of an expected or repetitive routine for the individual. For cloistered women of this era, time spent away from home and family during formative years was undoubtedly a significant moment, engaging with an expanded peer group from new cities and new regions, encountering their ideas, behaviors, and perspectives - as well as new sources of authority and influence. By questioning more deeply the nuances of Mary Thomas Williams' specific educational experience, instead of viewing it as simply consistent with the genre of the upper class finishing school routine, we might gain more understanding of what ideas helped shape her outlook as a young woman.

Edgeworth is frequently referred to as "Madame Lefebvre's School" or "Madame Lefebvre's French Finishing School", after its longtime principal Madame H P Lefebvre, who took the reins of the academy in 1872.[34] However, the school's story begins in 1862, when Edgeworth was founded by Agnes Kummer, a woman who remarkably began life as an orphan in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania,[35] and ended up as the proprietress of her own school in Baltimore's

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[32] Pressly, *Educating the Daughters of Savannah's Elite,* 248

[33] Ibid. 249-250. Described Pape's education, including time at Madame Lefebvre's, as "thoroughly conventional" and "a century-old pattern"

[34] *Death of an Estimable Lady*, Baltimore Sun, Page 1, Nov. 18 1872

[35] Ibid.

elegant Mount Vernon neighborhood. Edgeworth became a highly regarded institution for many generations of East coast elite women, even boasting the attendance of the daughter of the governor of Maryland.[36] Edgeworth was founded on a French-focused curriculum, a type of school described by historian Paul Pressly as "well-established institutions where native teachers patrolled the rooms to ensure only French was spoken while imposing a rigid social etiquette liberally borrowed from the ancien régime".[37] Today's reader might be inclined to see nothing but constrictive conservatism and reinforced social rigidity in this curriculum, particularly when contrasted with the ensuing, more academically rigorous developments in women's education - but Edgeworth appears to have engaged meaningfully with French culture, well beyond the pretense of simply instilling an aristocratic demeanor. Literature, drawing, and travel abroad were key parts of the curriculum.[38] Anges Kummer, Edgeworth's founder, was no provincial elitist; as stated, she was born an orphan, not into a position of privilege. Before founding Edgeworth, an upper class family employed Kummer as a governess. In this role she traveled extensively around Europe, and clearly cultivated a desire to share Continental culture, as she established the French-rooted Edgeworth shortly thereafter. Agnes Kummer's own travel diaries from her days as a governess reflect her belief in the expansive power of travel and cultural exposure. She mused after a day spent at London's Crystal Palace, "It is quite possible, after a careful study of the Crystal Palace, to be as familiar with foreign works of art as if the student had possessed the advantages of travel. How delightful it would be to have something of this kind in America". Kummer's writings even show how she expanded her own perspective and

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[36] *Ex-Governor Brown's Trolley Party*, Baltimore Sun, Page 10, May 13, 1896.

[37] Pressly, *Educating the Daughters of Savannah's Elite*

[38] Newspaper advertisements for the school boast instruction in English and French literature and drawing; see Baltimore Sun, Page 5, September 28, 1991 ; Baltimore Sun, Page 5, October 3, 1894 ; Baltimore Sun, Page 4, September 23, 1909.

provoked prejudices; after touring the Crystal Palace's Hall of the Abencerrajes, and seeing the "perfectly enchanting...effect when the sun shines through the stained glass window at the top" she reflected, "I had not supposed the Moors capable of building anything so magnificent".[39] Agnes Kummer established a sister campus to Edgeworth in Paris, noted as the only one of its kind at the time, where she spent many years, only returning when her health required it. Kummer's escort on the trip home in 1872 shortly before her death was her friend the renowned neoclassical sculptor William Rinehart[40], who chose to live most of his life in Rome as an unmarried man.[41] That the founder of Mary Thomas Williams' school experienced a transition from orphan to entrepreneur, traveled extensively, and boasted close friendships with renowned, worldly artists suggests Edgeworth's foundational leadership perspective perhaps wasn't solely centered on status quo and rigid etiquette or mired in provincial pretentiousness. Succeeding headmistress Madame Lefebvre continued the legacy of school founder Agnes Kummer, and took boarding students on trips to France every summer.[42] While it is not clear whether Mary Williams traveled with her headmistress on one of these school trips, it is certain that the presence of the French language, instruction grounded in the art and culture of France, and authority figures that sought meaningful cross-cultural exposure were all key elements of her educational experience. In turn, this emerges as a formative experience for Mary Thomas Williams in her early years that likely built an affinity for, or at least awareness of, a point of

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[39] Kummer, Agnes. *S. Agnes Kummer Diary*, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary. Williamsburg, VA.

[40] *Death of an Estimable Lady*, Baltimore Sun, Page 1, Nov. 18 1872.

[41] William Rusk, PhD, *William Henry Rinehart, Sculptor,* Norman Munder Publisher, Baltimore, Maryland, 1938.

[42] Edgeworth School, The Baltimore Sun, Page 8, June 9, 1892. Notes that after commencement exercises *"Madame Lefebvre, accompanied by several of her pupils, will set sail for Europe aboard the steamer City of New York for summer travels"*

connection to the Mediterranean region. French culture specifically would continue to play a sizable role in Mary's life through her friendships and her own travel abroad - particularly in one relationship that was cultivated through the social network of Edgeworth / Madame Lefebvre's School.

Ella Smith notes that while in Baltimore, her aunt Mary "formed a lifelong friendship with Helen Cameron" of Petersburg, whose nickname "Sister Helen" emphasizes her kindredness to the Williams family.[43] Interestingly, Smith does not acknowledge what appears to be the substantial age difference between her aunt Mary and family friend Helen - Mary was 25 when Helen was born in 1892.[44] Presumably Mary must have met the younger Helen in the context of an engagement as an alumni of the school; or, as Helen's father George Cameron was also a prominent player in the tobacco industry in nearby Petersburg, perhaps he and Mary's father T.C. Williams sought to have their daughters make an acquaintance as pupils of the same academy. Regardless of the nature of their introduction, Mary, who remained childless and unmarried for her whole life, must have formed a sister-like relationship with Helen, as did Mary's niece Ella. "Sister Helen" spent holidays with the Williamses every year, staying with Mary and her mother for the month of January, and Ella and her mother Susanne for the month of February. The Williams family continued to visit Helen long after Mary Williams' death in 1920.[45] Sister Helen is important to Mary's biography because she represents another significant connection point to France and French culture in Mary's life; Helen was a Francophile from a

[43] Smith, *Tears and Laughter,* 10-11

[44] Findagrave.com

[45] Smith, *Tears and Laughter,* 10-11

family of Francophiles. Sister Helen's aunt Lizzie Cameron lived in Paris[46], and Helen herself ended up following suit, living in France for many years. Steamship records show Helen Cameron's lifelong back and forth between American ports and Le Havre.[47] Mary's niece Ella Smith's memoirs are full of references to adventures with Sister Helen in France, from interloping with an imposter Duke, to boldly driving the group around Paris in her own car. One trip in 1905 was particularly memorable. The family stayed at the Hotel Castiglione, and Mary contracted shingles. Ella and Sister Helen sourced a doctor who visited Mary twice daily for several weeks. The doctor evidently became somewhat close to the family - Ella and Sister Helen were invited to a reception at his mother's house during Mary's convalescence. Interestingly, Ella remembers, "I did not hear anything about his being in love with Mamie, but he certainly gave her a rush".[48] Throughout Ella's reminiscences, this is the only mention of romantic advances made toward Mary - noteworthy for a woman remembered as timid, religious, and "too staid and conventional to ride a bicycle".[49] Ella suggested that Mary calmed down once her "fears were allayed". This aversion to romantic attraction is something that will be further assessed in this chapter.

TRAVEL ABROAD

[46] Smith, *Tears and Laughter,* 47

[47] Ancestry.com. *New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Year: *1953*; Arrival: *New York, New York, USA*; Microfilm Serial: *T715, 1897-1957*; Line: *21*; Page Number: *12*

[48] "Giving a rush" was a popular term of the era meaning to make advances

[49] Smith, *Tears and Laughter,* 19

While the long friendship with Sister Helen and the travel and cultural exchange that occurred around it were prominent, it was by no means the only impetus for exploration in Mary Williams' life. Mary's travels were truly extensive, and far greater than the standard repertoire of the burgeoning tourist class. She circumnavigated the world by the time she was 21. In June of 1888, Mary, her father Thomas C. Williams, her mother Susanne Peatross Williams, and brother Dolph embarked on a worldwide trip that headed west from Virginia, and returned from the East four months later. The itinerary included stops in the American West, Australia, across the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka, then on through the Suez stopping in Egypt, through the Mediterranean to Italy, where the family stayed in Naples, Rome, Florence, and Lake Como; upward to Switzerland through Lugano, on to Paris, and home by way of London. A substantial volume of diaries, letters, and telegrams survive from the family's trip, today preserved in the archives of Mary's brother's Richmond home Agecroft Hall.[50] Not only was correspondence preserved - Mary's souvenir albums from this huge global trip also survived the 140 years since. These albums do not contain personal photographs, but rather souvenir photography presumably purchased as keepsakes in the locations visited; accordingly, they depict not family members or people but scenic views, sites of interest, monuments, and buildings (Figure 3). They form a catalogue of scenes Mary herself deemed noteworthy or sought to remember - and for the intention of this project, give us an invaluable opportunity to consider Mary's eye for architecture, and particularly her exposure to a variety of Mediterranean style buildings. Figure 1 shows pages from Mary's albums. Included are iconic Italian scenes like the Doge's Palace and The Palazzo Ferro Fini (at that time the Grand Hotel) in Venice, picturesque views of the bay of Naples, as well as Villa d'Este at Lake Como, villas around Lake Lugano and the scenic surrounding mountains. Even more interesting are some of the less expected

[50] See Bibliography "Agecroft Hall Archives"

Mediterranean-connected scenes Mary chose to include, like the funicular station near Mount Vesuvius, the quay at Port Said in Egypt, and 'Mount Lavinia' in Sri Lanka, a classical style seaside villa built in 1806 by Thomas Maitland, the English governor of what was then the island of Ceylon, and named after his mistress.[51] In any contemporary traveler's collection, these would reflect a noteworthy global odyssey. As we specifically question the genesis of Casa Maria, this array is even more significant - it proves that Mary Williams had a varied and extensive experience with many varieties of Mediterranean architecture, from rustic to palatial, vernacular to classical, from Venice to North Africa. The Northern Italian lakeside houses, and Mediterranean seaside villas in particular emerge as significant possible inspiration points for Casa Maria's design years later. These albums also make clear that she not only observed and experienced the region's architecture and aesthetics firsthand, but that she made formative and significant memories in these landscapes. As Mary wrote in a letter dated September 9,1888, at the end of her trip, "We are nearly at an end of our ocean voyage, which I must say to my great regret, for I could go on this way for months - am so completely fascinated with the pleasures and everything pertaining to ocean life".[52] Travel made a positive impact on Mary - and the breadth of her travels meant she could put these varieties of global experiences into a much wider context for herself, like few of her generation could. Well before the rise of film and the dawn of mass media, to have explored the ruins of Pompeii only a few weeks after meeting indigenous peoples in Sri Lanka; to have strolled the halls of the Uffizi Gallery a few months after walking along the waste-clogged streets of a sewerless, freshly developed Melbourne; to have seen the expansive plains of Kansas by rail, the warm, serene waters of the Indian Ocean,

[51] Williams, Mary. *Travel Albums, 1888 Family Trip.* AH1994.1141.5. Agecroft Hall Archives, Richmond, VA.

[52] *Letter from Mary to TCW Jr.* AH1997.558.31.a-c. 9 September 1888, Agecroft Hall Archives, Richmond, VA.

and the locks of the Suez Canal all before taking in the classical buildings ringing the moonlit bay of Naples and overlooking the ruins of the Roman Forum, suggests that Mary, even in this single trip out of the many in her life, would have developed a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the beauty of the Mediterranean region than most.[53] Her connection to it was undoubtedly more personal. Clearly travel, whether abroad or domestically, was a constant throughout Mary's lifetime, as noted in *Tears and Laughter*, and surely inspired the style of Casa Maria; but Mary's life at home reveals the dynamics that directly initiated its creation.

DOMESTIC LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Mary's travels were the exclamation points that punctuated an otherwise typical domestic existence as a daughter of Richmond's high society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mary was religious.[54] She frequently hosted teas and luncheons.[55] She involved herself in charitable causes. However, she departed from the expected routine in a noteworthy way by remaining unmarried her entire life. Current sources do not prove whether Mary intentionally avoided marriage, or simply ended up that way. Born just after the Civil War, Mary's singlehood cannot be attributed to the well-documented *marriage squeeze* caused by the war's huge loss of young men, which impacted marriage patterns for years afterward. Historians have noted that the fear of not finding a desirable marriage partner was a dominant topic for both men and women of

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[53] *Diary of TCW Sr. on 1888 Family Trip*. 19 August 1888. AH1997.558.28. Agecroft Hall Archives, Richmond, VA.

[54] Smith, *Tears and Laughter;* frequently describes Mary's frequent prayer and church attendance

[55] Ella Smith notes that Mary "loved to entertain frequently, although she worked herself to the point of exhaustion". Smith*, Tears and Laughter,* 40.

that time;[56] but the prevalent worries of lifelong lonesomeness were unfounded. The shift in marital trends is observed to have concluded and returned to normal by 1880, when Mary was 13.[57] The longer lasting cultural shifts and attitudinal changes towards womanhood wrought by the War bear more significance on Mary's own situation. Historian Lee Chambers-Schiller's study of single women in America noted that the Civil War's ruination of the population of marriageable men prompted southern women to embrace the notion that remaining single and useful represented a higher calling than marriage for marriage's sake.[58] Additionally, recent scholarship has suggested that unmarried southern women were different from those in the North; similar to married women, they kept their identity close to their family as opposed to seeking professional development or economic freedom.[59] Jane Turner Censer's project mentioned earlier looked more broadly at the emotional dynamics of the Victorian family, noting that "In some cases, the closeness of the Victorian family impeded marriage. Some daughters became devoted to their parents, especially their mothers, and did not want to make other attachments. The intense emotional engagement in such families made it difficult for young women to break free, even in families in which daughters eventually married."[60]

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[56] Hacker, J. D., Hilde, L., & Jones, J. H.. The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns. *The Journal of Southern History*, (2010) *76*(1), 39–70. Notes that "Bell Irvin Wiley's early social histories of Confederate and Union soldiers document the obsession of unmarried men with the possibility of losing a fiancée or not finding a wife after the war."

[57] "The vast majority (approximately 92 percent) of southern white women who came of marriage age during the war married at some point in their lives. Indeed, the marriage squeeze on southern women apparent in the 1870 census is no longer evident in the 1880 census." Hacker, Hilde, & Jones, *The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns.*

[58] Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, a Better Husband: Single Women in America, The Generations of 1780-1840*. New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1984

[59] Carter, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South, 1800-1865.*

[60] Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895,* 34

These theories - that the war's shift in gender dynamics inspired some Southern women to double down on family usefulness as core to their identity in lieu of marriage, and that Victorian family emotional bonds were extremely strong - coalesce in Mary Thomas Williams' own life. Her singlehood, whether intentional or not, does not appear to have propelled her to seek purpose *outside* the family unit, but rather to entrench her identity deeply within her immediate household. Mary spent all the decades of her life up until the construction of Casa Maria living at the family home at 824 West Franklin Street; by the 1890's it seems she began to assume the role of hostess. Mary's older sister Susanne had started her own family, and given birth to her daughter Ella in 1888. T.C. Sr., the family patriarch, died in 1889. Ella remembered that Mary "loved to give formal and elaborate parties, though she would work over them to the point of exhaustion" and that she "adored her family".[61] She grieved immensely when her mother passed in 1901 - to the point where Mary, according to her niece Ella Smith, was too "hysterical" to spend Christmas at home alone after their mother's death, so the family instead went to New York, where Mary "seemed to be proud of her grief and made no efforts to control it".[62] Mary's sense of self was strongly intertwined with her familial relationships.

Mary's strong emotions relating to family emerged most significantly when it came to marriage. Mary seems to have had a challenging attitude toward marriage, particularly when it involved her own brothers. Ella Smith notes that when Mary's brother Dolph wed in 1890, everyone in the family attended but "Mamie, for some reason, would not go to the wedding".[63] Perhaps there was a disagreement or personal issue between the two siblings; however, this

[61] Smith, *Tears and Laughter*. 23; 41

[62] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.* 41

[63] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.* 14

wasn't the only example of a strong reaction to a brother's matrimony - the next changed the course of her own life. Mary's older brother T.C. Jr., or "Tom", seemed to have been the apple of her eye. Ella Smith notes that when Tom planned summer road trips for the family, "Mary saw to it that his plans were meticulously carried out" and specifically remembers her frequently saying "Your uncle wants it that way" if anyone questioned his intentions.[64] Tom also remained unmarried into his 50's; the two siblings continued to live together along with servants and staff on West Franklin Street, as they had for their entire lives. Mary's devotion to and dependence on her brother Tom are one of the most pivotal pieces of Mary's biography, because Tom's courtship of his future wife, begun in 1918, sparked the creation of Casa Maria. Ella Smith notes that "[Mamie] practically idolized Tom, and depended on him for guidance in even the simplest matters. Consequently, when rumors persisted that he was courting Elizbaeth Booker, Mamie made two moves toward declaring her independence. The first was asking for a private bank account for the first time in her life, and writing her own checks. The second was to start building Casa Maria."[65]

This marked arguably the most significant milestone in Mary's life. She spent decades at the center of her family unit; doting on her brother, caring for her aging mother, hosting frequent gatherings and parties, rotating within the highest echelons of Richmond society with a confident place in her family's household. It was likely a shock that her older brother who she so depended on, well into his 50's, decided to marry for the first time. Tom's new wife was not just a new spouse, but would assume her role as head of his household. This meant that Mary, at age 50

[64] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.* 44

[65] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.* 84

herself, was forced to reconsider not only her home, but her standing, her relationships, her purpose; the foundations of her life. She would have to strike out anew, outside of her close family unit, for the first time ever. The highly personal nature of Casa Maria is therefore fully revealed. Casa Maria was initiated not on a whim, not merely for pleasure, not as a seasonal escape nor as a place to focus on hobbies like gardening, hunting, or riding, like nearly every other contemporary estate and country house in the Greenwood area.[66] Casa Maria was an expression of independence for an unmarried woman whose passionate, decades-entrenched identity as the head of her family household became uprooted.

It was 1918 when Tom began his courtship of Ms. Booker; Casa Maria was initiated that same year.[67] As Tom's courtship progressed, Mary took her independence even further - she apparently rewrote her own will with no legal counsel, which had significant ramifications as Mary was of ample means, and was also a strong gesture of autonomy, as Tom had been her main source of financial guidance. At this point she was more than capable of realizing any architectural dream she put her mind to. As previously mentioned, her brother was Chairman of the T.C. Williams Tobacco Company in the years after their father's death. The company was sold in 1903, to the tune of $2,000,000, or hundreds of millions of dollars in today's figures.[68] It is unclear how exactly that sale impacted each specific sibling; but in addition to the windfall from her father's tobacco interests, Mary owned valuable land holdings inherited from her mother's side, in the form of "Windsor", the family farm. In earlier years, the family would

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[66] The historians working on the Greenwood-Afton Rural Historic District defined the area's estates as "a setting for social events and rural sports". National Register of Historic Places, "Greenwood-Afton Rural Historic District"

[67] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.* 86

[68] *Big Tobacco Deal*, The New York Times, May 8, 1903, Page 3

receive produce and fresh flowers sent in from the farm to the house on Franklin Street.[69] Windsor was located in what was then a rural area immediately west of Richmond; luckily for the Williamses, by the early 1900's, Richmond's higher-end suburban expansion extended in exactly this direction, making the land extremely lucrative for development. Mary sold her portion of family land in 1913; the $195,000 sale of 97 acres stretching from Cary Street Road to Patterson Avenue was recorded as "one of the largest transactions made in real estate in this city in a long time".[70] This area in the close western proximity of town would go on to become the most desirable residential section of the entire Richmond region. Her brother Tom later decided to develop his section of the land, on the other side of Cary Street Road fronting the James River, into a new neighborhood called Windsor Farms. Mary clearly had the means; but how would the motive take shape?

Mary's dependence on family maintained; her sister Susanne was the reason for the selection of Greenwood as the site of Mary's new residence. Susanne had placed roots in Greenwood in 1903, constructing a large Colonial Revival farmhouse called Rose Hill as a summer getaway from the heat of Richmond.[71] Mary visited Susanne here frequently; family photos show the two siblings enjoying their time together in the countryside. She appears to have offered her sister a small 10 acre tract of land in the former apple orchard upon which to build her own home.[72] 1919 is a significant year in the history of Casa Maria, as the beginnings of the house, its planning, and the correspondence relating to its ideation presumably all took place

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[69] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.*

[70] *Many Lots Sold in Northern Suburbs*, Richmond Times Dispatch, October 31, 1915, Page 56

[71] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.* 27-28

[72] Deed Book 174, Page 243. (Albemarle County Land Records, Charlottesville, Virginia.)

during this time, none of which appear to survive. After a year, in the summer of 1920, Ella Smith recalls that Mary "enjoyed watching the building of Casa Maria" while visiting Susanne at Rose Hill. During this visit, Mary received word that a close friend was gravely ill. She rushed back to Richmond to see her. Mary had a stroke, and died within a few weeks, at age 53.[73]

Mary left behind the unfinished Casa Maria - and a substantial estate valued at over $1,750,000. Her brothers Tom and Dolph served as executors. The Richmond Times Dispatch reported that they and Susanne received "the bulk" of the estate, and Ella, the only child out of all the Williams siblings, received a trust fund of $300,000.[74] Ella remembered that "Casa Maria passed to Mother, who then offered it to us".[75] It isn't entirely clear what state the project was in, but according to her memoir, Ella and her husband completed Casa Maria and moved in by fall of 1921. They brought on William Lawrence Bottomley to expand the house in 1928; he added a music room with an additional few bedrooms atop, which extended along the primary mountain vista facade. So begins the Smith family's many years at Casa Maria, and thus ends Mary William's own story.

As an intention and as an idea Casa Maria now comes into clearer focus. It was the site in which Mary Thomas Williams' layered aspects of 'independence' converged; her financial independence, her marital independence, and forced domestic independence. These biographical threads *are* the fabric of Casa Maria, the very name of which underscores its unique personal

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[73] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.* 87

[74] *Wills filed to probate dispose of $2,000,000,* Richmond Times Dispatch, September 23, 1920, Page 14

[75] Smith, *Tears and Laughter.* 87

nature. It wasn't named for the view, or for the land, or for the kind of trees that lined the drive. It wasn't named for an old family house or ancestral village. It was named for herself, for *Mary*.[76] For a project so wrapped up in one's own identity, the creation of which was necessitated through such personal upheaval, it seems appropriate that Mary would fashion the house as a strong self-reflective statement; that she would draw on her own experiences in commissioning a home that was not about raising a family or continuing a legacy, but defining her own self sufficiency. Mary's significant memories - her education, her friendships, her world travels that she loved so much - must have inspired this Mediterranean vision. Even if we can't be sure it was "her" idea (the style could have been suggested to her), her willingness to make (and to pay for) such a specific architectural statement must have been propelled by these personal experiences. With this, Casa Maria is not merely a curious or arbitrary outlier to the Georgianism that Virginia's patrician, patriarchal families sought to erect during the Colonial Revival period, to architecturally attach themselves to their state's long and proud legacy, like neighboring estates Whilton, Blue Ridge Farm, or even her sister's own Rose Hill when reconstructed in 1930.[77] Casa Maria is something else entirely. It is an architectural memoir of a woman's independence, one who poignantly did not live to see it finished, but whose name remains today for all to see, on the mysterious stone wall surrounding her estate.

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[76] It is not explicitly stated that Mary named "Casa Maria" herself, and it is possible that the family named it in tribute to her after her death. However, the fact that Ella Smith, who throughout her memoirs does not seem significantly emotionally attached to her aunt Mary, makes no note of the family naming the property in her honor, frequently refers to Casa Maria as *Casa Maria* when discussing it during Mary's planning phases, suggests that it was known as Casa Maria during Mary's lifetime.

[77] Nearly all of the neighboring estates like Whilton, the rebuilt Rose Hill, Mirador, and Blue Ridge Farm are all in Virginia's traditional red brick Georgian style

This concludes a significant intention of this project - to gain a deeper understanding of *why* Casa Maria was built, and what could have motivated its significant stylistic departure from the aforementioned "stabilizing influence" of Virginia's strong regional domestic architectural traditions. The following chapter will assess the other noteworthy historical claim about Casa Maria - that it was designed by landscape architect Charles Freeman Gillette.

CHAPTER 2: GILLETTE, BOTTOMLEY, AND THE DESIGN OF CASA MARIA

As stated, existing scholarship identifies landscape architect Charles Gillette as the designer of not only the grounds, but the house itself. The claim is attributed to oral history, as "the architectural drawings for Casa Maria were lost in a fire at Gillette's office and no other correspondence, drawings, or building records can be found to substantiate the claim for Gillette as architect-designer."[78] This claim is questionable for a variety of reasons. As noted, Gillette appears to have never designed another building in a long, prolific career of over 2,500 projects. Existing scholarship of Gillette's work does not appear comfortable with fully supporting the notion. And above all, Gillette, while famed in his own right, was renowned primarily as a collaborator with prominent architects of his day, most notably the Beaux-Arts trained William Lawrence Bottomley, a New Yorker who became Virginia's society architect of choice in the interwar years. Bottomley and Gillette collaborated on dozens of projects throughout the 1920's and 1930's. Bottomley was brought on in 1928 to expand Casa Maria. Before this addition, they worked together in Greenwood, at Blue Ridge Farm, roughly one mile away from Casa Maria;

[78] Henry, National Register of Historic Places, "Casa Maria"

Gillette began work there in 1920, and Bottomley joined the project in 1923.[79] Bottomley would return to Greenwood again to rebuild Mary's sister Susanne's Rose Hill in 1930, shortly after the original house burned. Both of their portfolios are well studied, their work immensely admired, and most of it survives to this day. Their legacy is by no means forgotten; it is very much alive and current. Yet Casa Maria stands as a strange outlier. Where to begin unpacking this entanglement, particularly in the face of so many missing sources? The National Register form states:

> "It is said that Gillette designed the house at Casa Maria as a favor to the Williams sisters, both of whom were close personal friends of his. Their personal and professional paths crossed frequently during this period and it is natural that Gillette should become closely involved in the overall planning of Casa Maria. Surely they knew of his work at Blue Ridge Farm, immediately adjacent to Rose Hill, begun in 1920, where Gillette and Bottomley created a masterful interpretation of the Georgian Revival style."[80]

This passage provides a jumping off point, as it posits a theory as to *why* Gillette would have taken on a project outside of his metier: it was a "favor" to the Williams sisters. Did he indeed have a closeness with Mary Williams? What could the favor have been? These questions are important, as previous historians clearly misplaced the chronology. Casa Maria was initiated two years *earlier* than Blue Ridge Farm, noted in the passage above as a possible source for Gillette's introduction to the Williamses. Mary was dead by the time Gillette began his work there. So when could they have met, and what was the nature of their acquaintanceship? As the following sections seek to show, Mary was indeed close with Gillette, but their meeting was earlier than supposed previously, and as evidence shows, more significant than the usual

[79] National Register of Historic Places, "Blue Ridge Farm"

[80] National Register of Historic Places, "Casa Maria"

client-professional engagement. The depth of their relationship emerges as one of the most pivotal pieces of the attribution question.

CHARLES GILLETTE AND MARY WILLIAMS

Gillette, born in Wisconsin in 1886, was not a member of Mary Williams' society; however, his natural intellectual gifts, his talent, and his personal polish enabled his ascent into a rarefied milieu. A significant project early in his career brought him to Richmond, Virginia, a move that would prove pivotal to his trajectory and introduce him to Mary. Gillette's professional life began in 1909, in the Boston office of Warren Manning, a former apprentice of Fredrick Law Olmsted. Manning was "a luminary"[81] who ran a bustling office full of aspiring landscape novices. Gillette appears to have stood out amongst his peers. Within his first year at the firm, Manning tasked Gillette with supervising landscape renovations at Chelmsford, an estate in Connecticut owned by the Booker family. This first big engagement cements a few themes to Gillette's career that help us to consider his relationship with Mary Williams and Casa Maria. He developed a close and long lasting social relationship with his first client; the Bookers invited Gillette to share their box seats at Carnegie Hall over 25 years after the project had concluded.[82] In the words of Gillette's biographer, he became "content to be part of a household that displayed a style and sophistication removed from any he had known in Chippewa Falls."[83] He worked in tandem with, and observed the processes of, highly skilled architects; at Chelmsford, McKim Mead & White were renovating the house while Gillette oversaw the

[81] Longest, *Genius in the Garden.* 8

[82] Ibid. 8-13

[83] Ibid. 12

landscape on behalf of Manning.[84] Gillette's first project of his career combined a marked degree of autonomy, valuable experience collaborating with elite architectural professionals, and equally valuable experience socializing with a patrician family. Gillette succeeded, not only professionally but socially - the Bookers insisted on paying for the young Gillette to travel abroad to continue his studies and hone his talents.[85] In a short span of time, Gillette showed the ability to forge deep and meaningful personal relationships with his clients.

Gillette's next big project management opportunity brought him to Richmond, to oversee a variety of Manning's initiatives, most notably the development of the new Richmond College, which would later become the University of Richmond. Gillette would again be working in close proximity with a legendary name in architecture: Cram Goodhue & Ferguson. Ralph Adams Cram created a Gothic architectural vision for the new college, for which Gillette helped craft a picturesque, parklike setting. This project brought Gillette to Richmond; but more importantly, it brought him into contact with William Lawrence Bottomley, who by 1915 was working across the street on his first house commission in Virginia.[86] This was of course pivotal for Gillette, as his professional union with Bottomley would prove immensely fruitful in the years to come. However, Gillette didn't just meet Bottomley through his work at Richmond College - it is highly likely he also met Mary Williams through this project. The Williams family significantly endowed Richmond College years before. T.C. Williams, Mary's father, bequeathed a large sum of money to support the new law school, later renamed in his honor as the T.C. Williams School

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

[86] "The Bottomley House", Richmond Times Dispatch, March 9, 1996, Pg. E1-E2

of Law.[87] One scholarship fund for the College was in Mary's own honor, "The Mary Williams Student Aid Fund". A letter from the desk of C.H. Ryland (then the College's head librarian) in November of 1888 notes that "several most worthy young men have been selected as beneficiaries" of Mary's namesake fund.[88] This letter was written to the family near the end of their round-the-world trip. Another letter dated 1915 from College president Frederic W. Boatwright to Mary's brother Dolph, exactly at the time Gillette was engaged at the new campus, shows that the College was very actively seeking additional involvement and patronage from the Williams siblings, eagerly pursuing their continued relationship with the school years after their father's passing.[89] While no sources directly confirm this, it is likely that Mary Williams met Gillette through this project - but the point of their introduction is of less import than the depth of the relationship they developed, which has been suggested, but thus far unsubstantiated. As discussed, accepting the theory of Gillette as architect rests on the premise that Gillette designed the house as a favor for his close personal friends, the Williams sisters. The venue of their possible introduction seems likely - but how close could they have gotten in the few years

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[87] University of Richmond, "University of Richmond Bulletin: Catalogue of the T.C. Williams School of Law for 1934-1935" (1934). Law School Catalogues. Book 19. "In 1890 the family of the late Mr. T. C. Williams, who had been a devoted and useful trustee, donated $25,000 as the nucleus of an endowment for the Law School. In recognition of this gift, the name of the School was changed to the T. C. WILLIAMS SCHOOL OF LAW. At various times the School has received further generous gifts from members of the family of Mr. Williams. The largest of these gifts came through a bequest from Mr. T. C. Williams, Jr., who like his father, was long a trustee of Richmond College, and for twenty years was the efficient chairman of the Executive Committee of the Board. As a result of these several benefactions the endowment of the T. C. Williams School of Law now amounts to $281,700.00."

[88] Letter from C.H. Ryland to Thomas C. Williams, November, 1888, Archives of Agecroft Hall, Richmond, Virginia

[89] Boatwright encouraged Dolph to "come out and see the college and see for yourself whether you think it offers worthy opportunity for some part of the public service you wish your philanthropy to serve". Boatwright, Frederic. *Letter from College President Boatwright to Mr. A.D. Williams concerning donations to Richmond College.* 24 April 1915. Valentine Family Archives, Richmond, VA.

between Gillette's engagement at Richmond College in 1912, and Mary's commissioning of Casa Maria in 1918? Mary's life didn't leave behind the evidence - but her death did.

In Mary Williams' 1920 obituary, one of eight pallbearers was Charles F. Gillette.[90] In the disbursement of Mary's will, inheriting more than her brother and sister in law, more than her cousins, more than her god-children, was Charles Gillette, whom she left the sum of $5,000.[91] This brings back into focus Ella Smith's claim that Mary re-wrote her will without her older brother's counsel in 1918, as an apparent form of solidifying her independence (and surely some aspect of rebellion), as his impending nuptials and the upheaval they represented in her life progressed further. Significantly, this same year an upheaval occurred in Gillette's life as well: the bank sent he and his wife's recently-built dream house to auction.[92] Gillette and his wife Ellen broke ground on Crestmere, their new house in Richmond, two years prior in 1916, just after he left Manning's firm; Gillette was "eager not only to establish a business in Richmond but to build a house of his own."[93] The house at Rothesay Circle was located just further up on the riverfront from Windsor, the Williams family farm. Mary must have known or learned of this troubling fact (not only was Gillette clearly a friend by this point, the auction of Crestmere was published in the paper). Her generosity to a friend in need seems validated by her relative leniency towards other family members who she deemed had more than enough. (The $2,500 she left to her siblings in law was specifically instructed to be spent "on something to remember her

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[90] *Bury Miss Williams at 9:30 O'Clock This Morning*, Richmond Times Dispatch, August 22, 1920, Page 6

[91] *Wills filed to probate dispose of $2,000,000,* Richmond Times Dispatch, September 23, 1920, Page 14

[92] *AUCTION SALES*, Richmond Times Dispatch, September 29, 1918, Page 48

[93] Longest, *Genius in the Garden,* 46.

by".) Gillette, however, *was* in need; buoyed with confidence at his recent successes, had struck out on his own, and overextended himself. He needed new projects.

Thus, in summation: it seems highly likely that Mary met Gillette at some point during his work for Richmond College. As a surviving head of household of the College's largest benefactor, she would have been keenly aware of the development of the new campus. Gillette had already proven, even in his first project, his ability to cultivate very close personal relations with clients; the first project of his career resulted in an all expenses paid European Grand Tour. By 1918, patron and professional had established their friendship, and that year, two significant personal experiences collided: Mary's own upheaval which required the construction of a new house, and Gillette's dire financial situation as an aspiring professional new to Richmond and in need of work. Thus, it seems extremely likely that the "favor" remembered by descendants and recorded by oral history was not in Gillette *taking on* the project as a favor, but in Mary extending the contract to Gillette *as a favor*, despite his unproven architectural abilities. Interestingly, the years of 1918-1920 are absent in Gillette's biography. The story of the "crushing blow" of the 1918 sale of Crestmere immediately transitions to "Charles Gillette's business slowly grew and prospered despite this setback. Starting in the 1920's, he developed a solid client base…"[94] As the records of Casa Maria appear to have been lost, this explains the missing gap; but not just any gap, one of utmost importance. It was the project that gave Gillette a lifeline *and* required him to work far outside of his own skill set, making Casa Maria's lack of study by his own biographers all the more glaring.

[94] Longest, *Genius in the Garden*, 46.

With the social conditions that spurred the project in greater visibility, the question remains…even if his friend Mary extended the project to him as a favor, could Gillette have taken on the whole project, and designed the house himself? Was he capable? It has been shown that Gillette's major projects up until this point included supervision duties, and close collaboration with the likes of McKim Mead & White and Ralph Adams Cram, whose processes managing a building site he would have witnessed first hand…though it must be said, designing a house and managing a construction project are two very different things. Looking closely at the architecture of Casa Maria suggests that Gillette, in some form or another, sourced inspiration or guidance from William Lawrence Bottomley, who as we have shown, made his acquaintance a few years beforehand.

CHAPTER 3: BOTTOMLEY'S INFLUENCE ON CASA MARIA'S DESIGN

William Lawrence Bottomley exemplified an erudite and worldly breed of American architect working in the period between the world wars. Contemporaries of Bottomley in this period included names like William Delano, Mott Schmidt, Charles Platt, Harrie Lindeberg, David Adler, and Philip Shutze, who all specialized in creating elegant yet inventive houses for the American gentry of the 'teens, twenties and thirties, whether in town, in the countryside, or blending the virtues of both in the ever-growing supply of manicured new suburbs. These architects were the prototypical Renaissance men. They were students of the legendary ateliers of the Ecole de Beaux Arts and winners of the Rome Prize. They were fluent in a rich array of architectural styles, cultivated by trips abroad in the tradition of the Grand Tour. They were

expert draftsmen - but their creativity was by no means limited to the drafting table. Often they could draw, paint, and write in equally beautiful measure, and before the era of specialization, they were savvy generalists: adept architectural designers, decorators, site planners, and gardeners. All of the above is true of William Lawrence Bottomley (1883-1951). He graduated from Columbia with a bachelors in architecture in 1906, won the McKim Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome in 1907, and spent the summer of 1908 traveling throughout Italy. He was not only an architect of refined houses, but of apartment buildings, clubs, urban housing schemes; he advised closely on decoration, wrote extensively on matters of style and taste; he designed restaurant interiors, and even jewelry for his beloved wife Harriet, herself an erudite contributor to many detailed aspects of his projects.[95] Bottomley specialized in, more than any other type, houses for families with ample means. However, a monolithic idea of "*the rich*" fails to give an understanding of the specific milieu that his work appealed to, of which the Williams siblings were emblematic. The American upper crust of the twenties and thirties that formed Bottomley's client base were not the robber barons of the previous generation. As Calder Loth stated in his foreword to Susan Frazer's The Architecture of William Lawrence Bottomley, his clients "didn't have names with the lofty status of Rockefeller, Whitney, or Widener"[96], but represented an increasingly well-traveled and discerning American gentry with an appetite for refined, thoroughly modern, easily managed houses. They represented economic shifts as well as shifts in taste. The new income tax of 1913, passed just as Bottomley began his professional career, brought the richest of the rich somewhat closer down to earth, and America's continual economic expansion brought more and more entrepreneurs and white collar professionals up into

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[95] Susan H. Frazer, *The Architecture of William Lawrence Bottomley.* Acanthus Press, New York, New York, 2007.

[96] Frazer, *The Architecture of William Lawrence Bottomley,* 4

the fold of an expanding, more modern class of well-to-do. Not only the scale, but the style of Bottomley houses reflected this; stylistic projections of prestige were evolving. “Gentility, rather than ostentation, was a guiding principle.”[97] The Gilded Age domestic architecture that closed out the previous century, wrought to full splendor by the likes of Richard Morris Hunt and Horace Trumbauer, was opulent above all else. These often heavy-handed importations of European styles were wrapped around plans and programs engineered to support a rotating social lifestyle kept afloat by a vast retinue of staff. In a way, these were the last gasps of a very long historical timeline of palatial living rooted in an old world feudal social system that, ironically enough, burned its final moments of glaring brightness as American democracy made its global ascent. While some of Bottomley’s aforementioned interwar contemporaries still worked in this dwindling grand manner, like David Adler’s Crane Estate, Bottomley’s work - not massive but manageable, elegant instead of showy, gracious but by no means grandiose - represented not a dying aristocratic way of life for an extremely privileged few, but the circumstances and tastes of the emerging upper middle class. Richmond, Virginia was an ideal market for this sort of client, and proved significant to his growth and success. His entry to Virginia came by way of a former schoolmate and her husband, Col. Jennings Wise. Bottomley completed a house for them on River Road, part of Richmond’s expanding affluent West End, in 1915. This house was across the street, literally, from where Gillette was wrapping up work on the Richmond College project. It is noted that this junction is where and how they first became acquainted.[98]

[97] Ibid

[98] “The Bottomley House”, Richmond Times Dispatch, March 9, 1996, Pg. E1-E2

Bottomley's arrival to Richmond in 1915 proved fortuitous. The city boasted a strong housing demand, proliferation of affluent new suburbs ready to build in, and an Anglophilic patrician class eager to display its connectedness to Virginia history through architecture.[99] Bottomley was the man for the moment: his ability to thread together comfortable modern living and synthesize fresh interpretations of Virginia's Georgian architectural tradition set a new aspirational standard which resulted in over 40 commissions in the state.[100] His success in Virginia and series of commissions in the varyingly described Tidewater Georgian or Banker's Georgian language influenced Bottomley's legacy and historical identity; he is popularly defined as a Colonial Revival or Neo-Georgian architect. This legacy seems to have influenced the perception of his possible involvement in Casa Maria. Geoffrey Henry's National Register form for Casa Maria says that "The use of the Mediterranean style suggests that a typical country house architect was not used – Gillette often incorporated Mediterranean themes into his designs" and says about Bottomley's 1928 addition, "Essentially Georgian in style, the addition is distinctly different from the rest of the house" and refers to the Mediterranean interior of the addition as "an unusual stylistic departure for Bottomley".[101] This 'exclusively Georgian' read on Bottomley neglects a sizable portion of his work. In actuality Bottomley was a virtuoso of styles plural, including, most notably for this project, the Mediterranean. A substantial body of Mediterranean designs, from Richmond to Florida to Maine to Pennsylvania[102], and published

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[99] O'Neal, William B. and Weeks, Christopher, *The Work of William Lawrence Bottomley in Richmond*. Charlottesville, Virginia. University Press. 1985.

[100] Bottomley's Windsor Farms houses including Nordley, Canterbury, Milburne, and 4207 Sulgrave Road, all reflect a synthesis between Virginia's Georgian plantation architectural heritage and the demands of modern suburban living. O'Neal, William B. and Weeks, Christopher, *The Work of William Lawrence Bottomley in Richmond*. Charlottesville, Virginia. University Press. 1985.

[101] Henry, National Register of Historic Places, "Casa Maria"

[102] Some of Bottomley's work in this vein includes the Parrish House (1922) in Richmond, the Morris L. Cook (1928) and Fred J. Miller (1925) houses along the Delaware River in Center Bridge, Pennsylvania, the Effie Kerr Branch house (1924) in Castine, Maine, the Van Riper residence (1926) in Palm Beach, the

writing, from his 1924 book *Spanish Details* to many articles in contemporary periodicals, speaks to this, but has been curiously left out of existing analyses of Casa Maria.[103] Bottomley was not only adept, but passionate about the Mediterranean style, something this project seeks to shine a light on.

Bottomley clearly had both a passion and a proficiency for the Mediterranean style, both of which have not been acknowledged in existing study of Casa Maria. Why wouldn't Bottomley have joined the project? Perhaps Gillette in his state of need was awarded the job for both landscape *and* architecture, per the generosity of his patron. Regardless, even if he was asked, Bottomley appears to have been unable to take on the project. In 1918, the same year Casa Maria was initiated, Bottomley began work on a residence for the Davis family of Portland, Maine, a family he was uniquely close to, closer than any of his other client relationships. Bottomley was friends with the son of the Davises, Walter Goodwin Davis Jr., with whom he frequently spent Christmas holidays. Bottomley even designed a mausoleum for the family after Mr. Davis' death in 1918, the only example of the sort he ever created. After this death, Mrs. Davis decided to commission a house for her son and herself. This project was not only far away from Virginia, in Maine, and not only in service to very close personal friends, it involved international travel – Mrs. Davis sent Bottomley to London to study precedents in Regents Park.[104] Construction of the Davis house ran exactly concurrent with Casa Maria, from 1919-1920. The personally significant

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Stuart Court Apartments (1924) in Richmond, some of which the next section brings into closer formal analysis.

[103] Bottomley, W. Lawrence. *Spanish Details*. New York, New York: William Helburn Inc. 1924 ; Bottomley, W. Lawrence. "*Small Italian and Spanish Houses as a basis of Design*" Architectural Forum, March 1926, Vol. 44, 185, 187, 190.

[104] Frazer, *The Architecture of William Lawrence Bottomley*, 37

Davis house was not the only thing on Bottomley's professional plate that could have prevented him from being involved at Casa Maria. 1919 also marked the beginning of the Turtle Bay Gardens project, the redevelopment of an entire city block comprising twenty 3-story townhouses in East Midtown Manhattan, which Bottomley worked on in tandem with Edward Clarence Dean.[105] Notably, Turtle Bay Gardens was Bottomley's first major Mediterranean commission, happening at exactly the same time as Casa Maria. These two projects help us place Bottomley in time, showing that he was preoccupied with far flung, intense undertakings that might have prevented him from coming on board Mary Williams' undertaking in Greenwood. But much more significantly, as a Mediterranean style project happening concurrently, Turtle Bay prompts one to consider Casa Maria's design as a source. Are there consistencies between Bottomley's Mediterranean work, and the design of Casa Maria? Turtle Bay begins to reveal a series of noteworthy similarities. Contemporary reviews note that "rosy pink salmon was the predominant color used" on the garden facades at Turtle Bay, "interspersed with soft cerulean blue…or mossy gray green".[106] Hand-colored photographs of Casa Maria taken soon after its completion in the 1920's (crucially, before Bottomley's 1928 addition) show the same color pattern of salmon pink and gray green (Figure 4). In 1922, shortly after both Turtle Bay and Casa Maria were completed, Bottomley designed a Mediterranean style house for Richmond's Parrish family on Monument Avenue. This house was also painted in the same colors - soft pink with gray green and blue trim.[107] This prevalence of this specific color scheme is telling, but by no means the only formal similarity which would suggest Bottomley's influence on Casa Maria's

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[105] Frazer, *The Architecture of William Lawrence Bottomley*, 48

[106] Colton, Arthur W. (1920) *Turtle Bay Gardens, New York City.* Architectural Record, Volume 48, Issue No. 6, December 1920: 467-494.

[107] Marsh, Janet H (1926) An Italian Villa in Urban Setting. New York: Arts & Decoration Volume 24, 1925-1926, Nov-Apr: 38-40.

design. Closer inspection of Bottomley's portfolio reveals a series of shared design elements, seen in projects before, during, and after the completion of Casa Maria. These strongly suggest Bottomley's hand in the original design for Casa Maria, not only the 1928 addition.

Bottomley's design for the Ernest P. Davies residence in Roslyn, New York, completed in 1915, boasts more elaborate detailing and a symmetrical plan, but the combination of stucco facade and Georgian style six-over-six sash windows with louvered shutters create a similar stylistic expression as Casa Maria (Figure 5). The overall proportions and fenestration are markedly similar. The Davies house's decorative openings in the parapet wall aligned with the window bays read similarly to Casa Maria's small recessed ventilation panels in the attic story. Bottomley employed a similar detail in the Georgian-style Williams House on Sulgrave Road in Richmond, with recessed stucco panels aligned with the window bays. The Davies house's blending of Colonial Revival and Greek Revival cues creates a similar effect to Casa Maria's mingling of Georgian and Mediterranean traits.

Bottomley designed a Maine retreat for Richmond socialite Effie Kerr Branch in 1924. The house in Castine was known as the 'Pink Palace'.[108] Beyond just the shared original color, the Effie Branch house bears even more consistencies with Casa Maria. The asymmetrical composition of a core block with a series of projecting bays, the variations of the roofline with both pitched sections in tile, and flat sections behind a parapet wall, the series of arched windows of similar design, all read consistently with features at Casa Maria. Particularly telling are the string course on the upper story, and once again the small recessed eyebrow windows / panels in

[108] Emerson, Brad. "*Sunrise Boulevard: Castine's Pink Palace*", Portland Monthly Magazine, July/August 2012, 62-67. 2012

the attic story aligned with the window bays. The small outbuildings are similar in scale and in design to those at Casa Maria. (Figures 6, 7, 8). Overall, the rustic, sprawling Branch house feels very similar in strategy to Casa Maria, in comparison to Bottomley's Mediterranean designs in urban settings, which received a higher style treatment and more refined detailing. Nevertheless, even these projects share design consistencies with Casa Maria, like the previously noted color scheme of Richmond's Parrish House.

The design similarities throughout Bottomley's hitherto ignored Mediterranean-influenced body of work strongly suggest he had some influence on the design of the original house. The fact that Casa Maria was painted in the exact same, very specific color scheme as Turtle Bay Gardens would be enough to imply at a minimum some element of dialogue and communication between Gillette and Bottomley; the fact that Casa Maria began in 1919, and was completed *before* many of these later Mediterranean houses by Bottomey, means that - if Gillette *were* the sole architect working on his own, Bottomley would have been taking heavy inspiration from Gillette in his own later works, which seems highly unlikely. While it is hard to quantify exactly what form Bottomley's possible involvement, direction, influence, or contribution might have taken, the circumstances do suggest it. Gillette's experience in project management, and exposure to elite architectural firms' own project management sites and routines, means that he likely could have overseen the project; but his lack of architectural design experience would be hard to overcome without assistance. Upon closer look at these projects, it seems likely that he obtained that assistance from William Lawrence Bottomley.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of this project posed a prompt: *How do you question the creation of a unique house, when the owner who defines its social history was not its client, when the apparent architect never designed another building, and when the sources directly documenting its conception and construction no longer exist?* In the early stages of this project, that prompt felt like an insurmountable challenge. With no access to the interiors, no floor plans, no invoices, no letters discussing its ideation or its construction, and barely any commentary from the family who called it home for its first five decades, Casa Maria seemed destined to remain an enigma for much longer; shrouded in unusual claims, a Mediterranean mystery beautiful as it is baffling. But a simple perspective shift opened up a whole different way of seeing, reading, and interpreting. It required less fixation on the structure itself, and more empathy for the lives of those who impacted it. Before this, the oft-repeated story of Casa Maria was quite simple. *It was the long-time home of community luminary Ella Smith. It was built in the early 1920's. It is the only Mediterranean style house in the area. It is claimed to have been designed by Charles Gillette, his only ever work of architecture.* As covered in the previous chapters, this thesis proposes some important new additions to the story of Casa Maria.

Through the lenses of formal analysis and neglected social dynamics, a possible theory of Casa Maria's design emerges. The trajectories of Mary Williams as patron, Gillette as landscape architect, and Bottomley as architect, all converged in the years during Gillette's work on the Westhampton College campus project. Mary Williams was a surviving child of the college's biggest benefactor, and the college was actively seeking the Williams siblings' involvement

during this time. Bottomley was working on his first house commission in Virginia across the street, and would have made Gillette's acquaintance during this time by 1915 or 1916. Gillette received the Casa Maria project as a commission from his friend Mary in 1918, as a favor owing to his desperate need for new jobs as a recent transplant to Virginia. Gillette had experience witnessing the management of architectural projects; he managed landscape work in tandem with some of the nation's best architectural talent, including McKim Mead & White and Ralph Adams Cram; but Gillette was not himself an architectural designer. While we cannot prove whether or not Bottomley could have been sought as a possible architect, it seems clear that regardless, he would have been unable to accept the project owing to major commitments elsewhere. It seems likely that in some way or another, Gillette sourced some design guidance, inspiration, or assistance from Bottomley, who was working on Turtle Bay Gardens, his own first large scale Mediterranean-influenced commission at the same time. Therefore the simplistic question of *who?,* while not necessarily concretely proven, has nevertheless been complicated. This means that Casa Maria is possibly the very first example of design dialogue - if not outright partnership - between two legendary collaborators, who would go on in the following decades to create a vast body of influential work together. Perhaps more poignant than the design itself, is the question of *why*? It has been observed how Casa Maria is unique. Upon further study of Mary Williams, it now becomes clear why. Casa Maria's design is a manifestation of an independent woman's life experience, her travels and her memories, her friendships, and her generosity to those in need. It represents an unacknowledged, but pivotal act of patronage in the 20th century history of landscape in Virginia; without this project, Charles Gillette, in dire financial straits, might have relocated elsewhere. With these many interpersonal experiences resurfaced, one may

hope that Casa Maria may become less of an enigma, and more of an acknowledged site of importance.

Some questions still remain unanswered. Archives and materials pertaining to William Lawrence Bottomley, like those held at Columbia University, which were unable to be accessed in the timeframe of this project, might continue to illuminate new possibilities. The supposed fire at Gillette's office that destroyed most of the architectural sources relating to Casa Maria remains another point worth investigating further. It might be possible that this project was intentionally obscured; it represented a point of financial need for Charles Gillette, and for Bottomley, perhaps a project that didn't fully satisfy his own exacting standards. Regardless, with the theory posited here, Casa Maria's significance appears clarified. It represents a compelling, missing chapter for legendary landscape architect Charles Gillette; a possible portfolio addition for a lauded residential architect William Lawrence Bottomley; and a meaningful statement of individuality for Mary Thomas Williams, a forgotten patron, one now properly at the center of the story of the house that bears her name.

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- Commonwealth Club Historic District (1983)
- Blue Ridge Farm (1990)
- Casa Maria (1990)
- Greenwood Afton Rural Historic District (2014)

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Casa Maria, Greenwood, VA. West facing / mountain view elevation. Jennifer Hallock, 2008, National Register of Historic Places.

Figure 2. Mary Thomas Williams, around 1900, Valentine Family Archives, Richmond, VA.

Figure 3. Mary T. Williams' Travel Albums, 1888 Trip. Agecroft Hall Archives, Richmond, VA.

Figure 4. Casa Maria, Greenwood, VA. Photos depicting the main house before the 1928 addition, showing the original pink and green color scheme. Valentine Family Archives, Richmond, VA.

Figure 5. William Lawrence Bottomley, Ernest P. Davies House, Roslyn, NY. 1915. Roslyn Landmarks Society.

Figure 6.

Above: William Lawrence Bottomley, Cottage at the Effie Kerr Branch House, 1924, Castine, ME. Zillow.com, 2021.

Below: Cottage at Casa Maria, Greenwood Virginia, 1919-1921, (author's photo).

Figure 7. Above: William Lawrence Bottomley, Effie Kerr Branch House, 1924, Castine, ME, Zillow.com, 2021.

Below: Casa Maria, Main House Kitchen Entrance, 1919-1921, Greenwood, VA. (Author's photo).

Figure 8.

Left: Casa Maria, Greenwood, VA, 1919-1921, arched windows along rear, entrance-facing block. (Author's photo). **Right**: William Lawrence Bottomley, Morris Llewellyn Cooke House, 1928, Center Bridge, PA. Knickerbocker-Style.blogspot.com, 2012. **Bottom**: William Lawrence Bottomley, Effie Kerr Branch House, 1924, Castine, ME. Beverly Stinson, 2021.

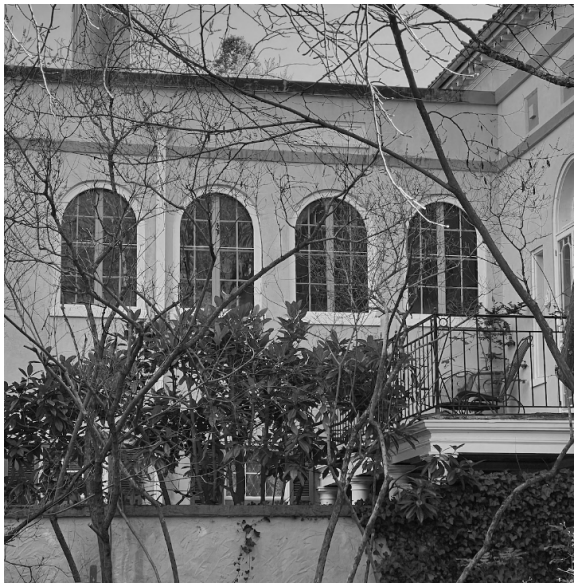

Figure 9. Casa Maria, Greenwood, VA, 1919-1921. Main house before 1928 addition. Valentine Family Archives, Richmond, VA.

Figure 10. Casa Maria, Greenwood, VA, 1919-1921. Main house before 1928 addition. Valentine Family Archives, Richmond, VA.

Figure 11. Casa Maria, Greenwood, VA, 1919-1921. Main house after 1928 addition. Valentine Family Archives, Richmond, VA.

Figure 12. Casa Maria, Greenwood, VA, 1919-1921 with 1928 addition, and the rebuilt Rose Hill, William Lawrence Bottomley, 1930, home of Mary T. Williams' sister Susanne Massie, Valentine Family Archives, Richmond, VA.