

VLR-6/19/91 NR-HP-8/23/91

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name VINE FOREST

other names/site number Forest Oaks, Forest Tavern, DHR File No. 81-207

2. Location

street & number US Rt 11, 2 mi. W of Natural Bridge N/A not for publication

city, town Natural Bridge vicinity

state Virginia code VA county Rockbridge code 163 zip code 24578

3. Classification

Ownership or Property

- private public-locat public-State public-federal

Category of Property

- building(s) district site structure object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, and Total.

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official: [Signature] Date: 3/11/91 Director, Virginia Department of Historic Resources

in my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official Date State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet. determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet. determined not eligible for the National Register. removed from the National Register. other, (explain):

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: Single dwelling  
Secondary structure  
COMMERCE/TRADE: Department store

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: Single dwelling  
Secondary structure

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

EARLY REPUBLIC: Federal  
LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS:  
Colonial Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE  
walls BRICK  
WOOD: weatherboard  
roof ASPHALT  
other \_\_\_\_\_

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

Forest Oaks, which began according to family tradition around 1806 as a side-hall-plan brick Federal-style house, is now, as a result of several alterations, a very large house with an interesting variety of stylistic influences in its detailing, massing, and plan. The house, with its three attendant early-twentieth-century guest houses and two non-contributing barns, stands on a rise of land approximately two miles west of Natural Bridge.

ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS

Forest Oaks, as it was built around 1806<sup>1</sup>, was a two-story, side-hall-plan house in a local interpretation of the Federal style. The house was constructed of brick made on the site. The plan of the house, consisting of one room and hall downstairs and two rooms upstairs, is derivative of the I house type which was a prevalent building form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the Valley of Virginia. Such a substantial house was still relatively rare in the first decade of the nineteenth century in Rockbridge County. Most houses of the period were small, usually one-story, structures built of logs, timber framing, or, occasionally, stone.

The original section of Forest Oaks was four bays wide (three on the rear) with doors located in the second and fourth bays. The northernmost<sup>2</sup> door opened into one large room used by Matthew Houston as a store. The southernmost door opened into the hall, which contained a set of stairs (configuration unknown) leading to the two-room second floor. Two chimneys were located on the north

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance

1806-1918  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates

1806  
1812  
1916

Cultural Affiliation

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder

Walton, Curtis  
\_\_\_\_\_

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Forest Oaks, a large two-and-a-half-story Flemish-bond brick gable-roofed dwelling, is an interesting local landmark for Rockbridge County. It is significant in architecture both for the substantial nature of its original Federal-style section, dating from around 1806, as well as for the subsequent alterations, including an enlargement around 1812 and substantial Colonial Revival additions and alterations in 1916, which together have made the house and property an unusual--and very grand-- architectural essay. The house and property have also been associated with several locally significant families, most notably the Houston family.

The period of significance extends to 1918 to encompass the period during which the Waltons completed their program of alterations to the property.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The land on which Forest Oaks stands was originally deeded to Benjamin Borden as part of the enormous Borden Grant from Lieutenant Governor Sir William Gooch in 1736. The property was purchased by Matthew Houston, a member of one of the Scotch-Irish families from Pennsylvania that settled in the Valley of Virginia. Matthew Houston was born in Rockbridge County in 1762; after his marriage to Patsy Cloyd, Houston ran a sawmill, gristmill, and drygoods store. He purchased a farm one and one-half miles away in 1804, from the Cloyd family. On this property, near the small village of Springfield, Houston built his house, called Vine Forest. Already on the property was the High Bridge Presbyterian Church, an early Rockbridge County church where Matthew Houston's brother, the Reverend Samuel Houston, preached for forty years and where Matthew Houston was an elder for forty-five years.

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

221 Governor Street, Richmond, VA 23219

**10. Geographical Data**

Acres of property 8 acres

UTM References

A	17	625460	4165050
	Zone	Easting	Northing

B	17	625580	4164880
	Zone	Easting	Northing

C	17	625340	4164860
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D	17	625330	4165000
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See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

The boundary of the nominated property is delineated by the polygon whose vertices are marked by the following UTM reference points: A: 17/625460/4165050, B: 17/625580/4164880, C: 17/625340/4164860, and D: 17/625330/4165000.

See continuation sheet

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary includes the main dwelling and contributing outbuildings that have been historically associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Dianne Pierce, Consultant

organization \_\_\_\_\_

date \_\_\_\_\_

street & number 10056 Hobbyhill Road

telephone (804) 272-5502

city or town Richmond

state Virginia

zip code 23235

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side of the house; in a photograph dating from around 1915, exterior end chimneys rise up to the second floor, at which point they are corbeled into the wall. The diamond-shaped window between the chimneys in the photograph may have been added later. Two original mantels survive in the large first-floor room; these display simple but nicely-detailed Federal-style carved moldings.

Historical sources written about the house agree that around 1812, Matthew Houston added substantially to his house. Physical evidence for this date is scanty, since most of it was obscured by subsequent alterations. However, in the basement the original exterior wall is evident, with a narrow opening cut through its eighteen-plus-inch width. Further, the very lack of regularity in the plan and front and rear facades may indicate two separate building campaigns.<sup>3</sup> The two-bay addition consisted of two first-floor rooms and two second-floor rooms, giving the house a double-pile center-hall plan. The house as completed around 1812 was constructed of rose-colored bricks in Flemish bond, with random glazed headers and a fairly sophisticated molded brick cornice. The windows were six-over-six sash with plastered jack arches and keystones over the first-floor windows. A one-story, three-bay porch spanned the front. What type of porch, if any, existed previously is difficult to ascertain; some alterations to the brickwork can be detected where porch posts may have been removed, but it is impossible to tell from which period these alterations date.

Most local sources assert that it was during the 1812 renovations that the house gained one of its most remarkable features: the two-story center hall with a full arched ceiling. Local legend further states that Houston was inspired by the nearby Natural Bridge in building this feature.<sup>4</sup> In order not to disturb the grandeur of the hall, two separate staircases were installed, each leading to second-floor rooms flanking the central hallway, thus denying access between the two sides of the house on the second floor. One mantel, in the southeast corner room on the second floor, dates from this addition.

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The second owner of the house, William Arnold, presumably found the stair arrangement to be inconvenient, for he removed the two separate stairs and added one in the hallway. Arnold, who did not use the house as a store, also divided the main first-floor space into two rooms. Although the dimensions of the plan were still not perfectly symmetrical, now with a four-over-four plan, the house was more nearly in the style of the period.

The house received few substantive alterations after the early 1840s during the long ownership of the Arnold family. The simple Gothic-Revival-style mantel in the second-floor north room dates from this period. When the house was sold in 1916, the major remodeling under architect Curtis Walton, of Cleveland, Ohio, was begun. On the southern end of the house, Walton added a two-story, four-bay (three on the rear) wing, using bricks salvaged from interior walls and a pre-existing brick kitchen building. Although these bricks provided a close match in color to the original house, they were not intended as exterior brick; the difference in surface texture is readily apparent. (This may even be cause for concern in the near future, as these bricks are already showing signs of accelerated deterioration.)

Because there were not enough matching bricks to build the desired number of rooms, Walton also added a two-story frame wing on each end of the house, set back a few feet from the plane of the front and rear facades. He further added brick stepped parapet gable ends and dormers in the roof, creating a full third story that was used as servants' quarters. The earlier porch was removed and a one-story, octagonal, one-bay porch was added with semicircular niches flanking the door. The porch has octagonal columns and is surmounted by a heavy modillioned cornice with an overhanging denticulated eave. Leading up to the porch are brick steps with stepped stone walls. (The foundation of the previous porch still exists and extends to either side of the newer porch.)

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On the east (rear) side of the house, Walton added a three-bay, two-story veranda with paneled square columns, a flat beamed ceiling, and the same modillioned cornice as the front porch. Along the eaves of the entire front and back, over the brick cornice, Walton continued the denticulated portion of the porch cornices, creating a heavy overhang.

In the 1916 brick section of the house, the northernmost bay of the front on both floors has a six-over-six sash window flanked by sidelights, to match the window over the front and rear doors. On the rear of this section, there is a large wooden bay window with cornice and pilasters matching those of the porches that extend across the two southernmost bays on the first floor; the northernmost bay has a six-over-six sash window with sidelights on the second floor, and double doors with six lights each on the first floor. All other windows in this 1916 wing are six-over-six sash which match the pre-existing windows. Front and rear dormers are paired four-light casement sash.

The frame wings are clapboard-sheathed, ornamented with the same cornice and eaves as elsewhere, with paneled pilasters on the corners and between the first-floor windows. Windows are eight-over-eight sash, except for those on the first floor of the northern wing. This side was used as an aviary and had floor-length twelve-light windows topped by semicircular fanlights. The aviary probably had a stone or slate floor; this is indicated by the slight rise in floor level from the living room to the study, which is now housed in this wing, and which has a relatively new wood floor. The Waltons kept not only birds (as many as fifteen or twenty at a time), but also had a variety of plants in this room. Here they also kept some of the statuary they brought back with them from their extensive travels in Italy.

Walton added heavy moldings over all the exterior openings in the brick section. These eared moldings have an exaggerated Greek-key motif and feature recessed panels. The moldings are not uniform

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across the front and rear facades, however, since Walton had to deal with the variety in sizes, heights, and configurations of the existing openings.

The ground slopes to the south; therefore, on that end of the house not only is the stone foundation visible under both the brick and frame wings, but it features eight-over-eight sash windows and both front and rear entrances.

Walton made no fewer changes on the interior. Perhaps the most striking changes were made in the hall's configuration and ornamentation. The existing stair was removed and the room immediately to the west of the stairhall was given over to a new triple-run stair with two landings and hallway leading to the new brick section. To the detriment of its grandeur, Walton ceiled over the arch of the hall, adding a full two-story paneled arch between the front and rear sections, perhaps to suggest the existence of the vault above. The living room was made into one large room again. In the hallway and living room spaces, Walton added an astonishing array of paneled wainscoting, heavy cornices, paneled interior window shutters, and a massive new front door, along with pilasters in the living room. The overall effect, as Walton and his adopted English mother intended, is reminiscent of English Georgian country houses.

Elsewhere in the sections added by Walton, the flavor is more American Colonial Revival (although still with an English flavor); an example is the paneling and mantel in the large room on the back of the house, now used as a family room. The mantel and paneling in the small room to the south of the hall on the first floor probably date from this remodeling, as does the mantel in the upstairs room to the east of the hall. The dining room in the south wing has been much altered but retains its deeply paneled ceiling, which has an Arts and Crafts flavor.

In the upper stairhall is a similar tour-de-force of paneled walnut wainscot, pilastered door moldings, and turned and carved stair balusters. To provide a bridge from one side of the hall at the

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second-floor level to the other, Walton added balconies at the front and rear. A large arched opening looks over the main hall from the upper floor of the stairhall.

The woodwork in the other rooms of the second floor is much simpler. In most cases, the moldings are wide and flat, with mitered corners and a thin applied outer strip. Doors are either seven recessed panels, or simply two vertical panels. Most of the flooring on this level, as on the first floor, appears to have been replaced during the 1916 remodeling.

The woodwork on the third floor is much the same as the second floor. An interesting feature on the third floor is the sink units, including mirrors, shelves, and lights, which were installed for the servants who occupied that floor.

During the Waltons' tenancy, three guest houses were added to the grounds, all in a modified Classical Revival mode, with a very definite Greek Revival flavor. The largest of these guest houses is located to the east of the main house. Its exterior shares with the other two guest houses pedimented overhanging eaves, paneled pilasters, and shuttered double-hung windows in a variety of sizes and types. In recent years, this house has had a large screened porch addition as well as the enclosure of a side porch off the kitchen. On the interior there is early twentieth-century woodwork, not the least of which is the stair with its square balusters and paneled newels. In the stairhall, the ceiling is ornamented with strips of wood in an Arts and Crafts manner. The dining room contains a built-in oak sideboard with glass doors fitted with wooden tracery. The other wide and flat woodwork in the house is typical of the early twentieth century. Doors feature, for the most part, two vertical panels. The two smaller guest houses lack the sophistication of the larger, but retain their simple woodwork in the style of the larger. A magnificent two-story Stick-Style frame barn with a pedimented gable stood to the northwest of the house until the 1950s when it was demolished for the building of Interstate 81.

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The changes to the house subsequent to 1916 have been relatively modest; most have occurred under the ownership of the Garys. A modern kitchen has been added on the front of the 1916 brick section; formerly the kitchen was in the basement, as evidenced by the enormous stove still existing in the southernmost room of the basement. The Garys paneled the former aviary space, covering most of the windows, but leaving them intact on the exterior. They also paneled the dining room and the easternmost room of the original section on the second floor. Sometime prior to 1933, as indicated by a photograph of that date, the first-floor windows of the south wing were altered to a smaller, more vertical, fixed sash. (The original opening configuration for these windows can still be clearly seen on the exterior, however.) The 1933 photo also shows a vine-covered pergola extending across the front basement level and wooden shutters on most of the front windows. All of these have subsequently been removed. The Garys built two modern barn structures on the property in the late 1970s; these are located very unobtrusively, and are non-contributing buildings. All of the buildings on the property are in excellent condition. Despite the building of Interstate 81 nearby, the property remains very pastoral and unspoiled, including the spectacular views to the south and east.

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ENDNOTES

1. Leslie Lyle Campbell, The Houston Family in Virginia (Lexington, VA: 1956), p. 8. The sources for this text are largely family notes and traditions.
2. For the sake of simplicity in the text, the house is assumed to face west, with its long axis running north-south, although this is not exactly true to the actual compass directions.
3. There is no obvious evidence in the brickwork of either front or rear facades indicating that this wing was an addition. It is possible, however, that the lack of a line of demarcation in the brick is simply due to a skilled mason.
4. Two sources consulted, the Roanoke Times article, and the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission Survey Form, based their information upon interviews with Martha Walton (the Times article may have also interviewed Anna Hodges of the Arnold family). It seems therefore a likely assumption that the hall has a pre-1916 date, since it was apparently in the house already when the Waltons bought it.

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According to family tradition, Houston built his house around 1806,<sup>1</sup> from bricks made on the site. In addition to farming this land, Houston opened a store in the large first-floor room of his house, using the rooms upstairs as living quarters. Although the typical country store of the period was a "very plain affair and was destitute of showcases... (with) only the most common goods and necessities... on exhibit,"<sup>2</sup> nevertheless the merchants of the time were usually prosperous and Matthew Houston was no exception. By about 1812, Houston was able to add substantially to his house, as indicated by both local tradition and architectural evidence. The original side-hall-plan house received two upstairs and two downstairs rooms to the south of the existing hall, giving the house a more nearly symmetrical four-over-four plan. Local tradition also attributes the two-story hall, with its arched ceiling, to the renovation campaign.

After his wife's death, Houston sold the Vine Forest property of three hundred acres in 1841 to a resident of Campbell County, William Penick Arnold, for \$7,500.00. At the same time he donated the two acres of land upon which High Bridge Church stood to the church. Arnold removed the dual stairs in Vine Forest's hall, installed one central stair, and made the large first-floor room into two rooms. When he died in 1871, the property passed to his son, a graduate of the University of Virginia and member of the House of Delegates, Dr. Jacob Wyatt Arnold. Upon Arnold's death in 1887, the property passed to his widow, Sarah Wilson Arnold; her granddaughter Anna Hodges, who had spent part of her girlhood in the house, was still living as of 1975.

In 1916 Mrs. Arnold sold the property to Miss Lilly Walton, an Englishwoman and resident of Cleveland, Ohio. Walton was a friend of the Peckin family and it may have been on a visit to their home, the nearby Greylodge, that she saw Vine Forest. She brought with her her adopted son Curtis Walton, an architect trained at Case Western Reserve. The Waltons had spent a great deal of time in Europe, especially Italy; some of the items they brought back with them, such as the tapestries in the large hall, are still in the

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house. Curtis Walton married Martha Paxton, a local woman, in 1922. In the meantime, he had begun a series of renovations and additions to the house and property which brought it to its present appearance. He added a large brick wing to the south, as well as two-story frame wings on both the north and the south ends. The roof was raised to incorporate a full third story, a two-story portico on the east side was added, and the old front porch was replaced by an elaborate one-bay octagonal porch. The interior of the pre-existing section received an eclectic array of new door and window trim, wainscoting, and a massive stair.

The Waltons ran the property as an inn from 1929 until 1931, when they sold it to John Clothier, who also ran an inn here. Clothier's and his predecessors' success as innkeepers was due to the large number of tourist attractions in the area, ranging from the Natural Bridge to the many resorts built around healing and hot springs. Even during the lean years of the Depression, Rockbridge County consistently saw a large influx of summer visitors from Richmond, Tidewater, and indeed up and down the East Coast. Clothier's success was also no doubt due in part to the fact that he had previously managed the Natural Bridge Hotel.

After Clothier sold the house (by then called Forest Tavern) in 1939, a quick succession of owners followed. The longest occupancy was by John Whittington, who despite a large family, occasionally had rooms available to rent to tourists. The present owners purchased the property in 1974, following several owners' unsuccessful attempts to restore or even maintain it. Changes to the house and property between the ownership of the Waltons and the Garys have been very few. The Garys have invested a sizable amount of time and money in preserving and updating Forest Oaks, as it is now called. Martha Paxton Walton was still in residence in one of the cottages on the property when the Garys purchased it. Before her recent death, she was a valuable source of information about the house.

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### ENDNOTES

1. Leslie Lyle Campbell, The Houston Family in Virginia (Lexington, VA: 1956), p.8. The date of construction of the house is well documented. Helpful for other dates was "Forest Tavern Remembers", an article in the July 6, 1975 edition of the Roanoke Times, since it was based upon deed research and personal interviews with individuals who had lived in the house.
2. Morton F. Oren, A History of Rockbridge County (Staunton, VA: 1920), p. 108.

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## MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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- Department of Historic Resources, File number 81-207.
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- Lyle, Royster, Jr. and Pamela Hemenway Simpson. The Architecture of Historic Lexington. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1977.
- Morton, Oren F. A History of Rockbridge County. Staunton, VA, 1920.
- Tompkins, E. P. and J. Lee Davis. The Natural Bridge and Its Historical Surroundings.
- White, Clare. "Forest Tavern Remembers". Roanoke Times, July 6, 1975.

