

VLR Listed: 6/20/1989
NRHP Listed: 6/13/1990United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Registration Form1933
MAY 3 1990

5/3/90

NATIONAL
REGISTER

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 Virginia House

other names/site number

2. Location

street & number 4301 Sulgrave Road

N/A ☐ not for publication

city, town Richmond

N/A ☐ vicinity

state Virginia

code VA

county (city) Richmond

code 760

zip code 23221

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

☒ private☐ public-local☐ public-State☐ public-Federal

Category of Property

☒ building(s)☐ district☐ site☐ structure☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

0

0

2

Noncontributing

0 buildings

0 sites

0 structures

0 objects

0 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

Date

Director, VA Department of Historic Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

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:)Patrick Andrews
Signature of the Keeper6/13/90
Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Domestic: single dwelling

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Recreation and culture: museum

Social: clubhouse

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Tudor: Jacobean

Flemish

Neoclassical

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Stone / English sandstone

walls Stone / English sandstone/
limestone / portland stone

roof Stone / slate and concrete tile

other Metal / copper / iron / cast
iron / lead

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Summary Description

The Virginia House is an expansive, asymmetrical, two-story stone and stucco dwelling situated on a nine-acre lot at 4301 Sulgrave Road in the city of Richmond. The house is located in the Windsor Farms subdivision of west Richmond on the crest of a hill that slopes steeply southward to the James River. The Virginia House is a historical composite that embodies several centuries of predominately English architectural heritage, spanning twelfth-century Anglo-Norman to fifteenth-century Tudor to seventeenth-century Flemish to 1940's Classical Revival. The structure is distinguished by its steep Flemish gables, its aged sandstone bearing walls, and its medieval leaded glass window construction. The principle interior rooms are embellished with dark oak panneling, coffered and plastered ceilings, and massive precast fireplaces. The elaborate landscape garden plan that cascades behind the house down towards the James River was designed by noted landscape architect Charles F. Gillette. Conceived by Gillette as a Tudor-style garden, the landscaping scheme compliments the romantic, early Anglican character of the composite manor house.

Architectural Analysis

The Virginia House is an imposing, asymmetrical, two-story stone dwelling with massive sandstone walls, small medieval windows, and a richly embellished oak interior. The external appearance is primarily characterized by two high Flemish gables that date to the 1620 remodeling of the Thomas Hawkins Priory in Warwickshire, England.

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The adjacent cross-gable roofs and crennelated balustrade over the carriage entrance provide a horizontal cross-axis on either side of the Flemish-gabled central bays. In plan the house is organized into a long rectangular scheme with two rear ells projecting into the garden terrace. One of the ells contains the two-story, cathedral-ceilinged library, the other a drawing room and the master bedroom wing. Polygonal bays and oriel windows project from both the primary (north) elevation and the garden (south) elevation. These elements break the linear organization of the design into a modulating rhythm of straight wall planes, polygonal window bays, recessed niches, and porch projections. The massive load-bearing perimeter walls are constructed of recycled sandstone set in an irregular ashlar pattern. The Flemish gables and window sills were fabricated from a more durable English limestone. Likewise, the window casings and mullions were reassembled segments of beveled limestone salvaged from the Warwick Priory. Over a window on the west side of the primary (north) elevation is a coat of arms commemorating the visit of Queen Elizabeth I to the Priory in 1572. The panel has suffered severe deterioration over its four-century lifespan from the effects of exposure to harsh weathering and freeze-thaw cycles, particularly so in its recent history.

The leaded-glass, quarrel-paned casement windows used throughout the house feature authentic crown glass dating from the sixteenth to the nineteenth-century history of the priory. Some of the glass may in fact date further back than the sixteenth century, although there is no conclusive evidence to support this contention.

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The main entrance hall is a spacious, double-height room that is paneled with oak planking resawn from salvaged timbers from the Warwick Priory. The ornate, mannerist "L" staircase is a reconstruction of the original sixteenth-century staircase of the priory repurchased from an antique shop on the outskirts of London. The acanthus leaf newel cap and overscaled newel posts are well-crafted attractive stair details worthy of special note. The floor in the entrance hall is a peculiar 1920 flooring material known as zenitherm, a composite made up of terra-cotta, asphalt, and wood shavings. The tile is arranged in an irregular rectangular pattern. The zenitherm tile is a durable material that shows little wear after more than a half century of use.

The withdrawing room located immediately beyond the entrance hall is finished also with oak paneling, but from another English manor house in Warwickshire. The plaster ceiling features a Tudor rose motif executed by Italian artisans in 1925-26. A fifteenth century stained glass oval window is highlighted in the south wall surrounded by leaded glass from the Warwick Priory. The floor of the withdrawing room is random-width, wide-plank oak, a deviation from the zenitherm flooring found elsewhere on the first floor. The adjacent east drawing room feature a cylindrical Florentine soapstone fireplace. Heraldic symbols are set in relief on the plaster ceiling. The rear hall is finished with coffered oak paneling rising six feet above floor level. Modified Corinthian columns are freestanding in the hall and create an unusual ornamental gateway. Stained glass doors open from the end of the hall onto the rear porch arcade. Above the high paneling a series of six-inch-by-nine-inch oil portraits of Renaissance figures add color

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and accent to this unusually elegant rear hall.

Sometime after the Virginia House was occupied in 1928 the dining room was paneled with oak salvaged from Redbourne Manor in Hertfordshire, England. The same Tudor rose ceiling motif seen in the withdrawing room is repeated here. The floor is constructed with aged, resawn pegged oak, random-width boards. An imposing portland stone fireplace positioned midway in the room may be another salvaged artifact, however its origin is not known.

The gallery room, located in the northwest corner of the house, is the least ornate of the public spaces. Its plain plaster ceiling, vertical oak paneling, and zenitherm floor provides a restrained backdrop for the exhibition of artwork and historic artifacts from the Virginia Historical Society collection. The Sulgrave room in the southeast sector of the house is faithful reproduction of the Washington family's ancestral home, Sulgrave Manor. The open beam ceiling reveals massive oak timbers, chamfered on their exposed edges. The walls are treated in mottled plaster, a texture unique to this space. On the east wall of the room an interior window and door were originally exterior elements in their historic context at Sulgrave Manor. A salvaged oak summer beam from the Warwick Priory serves as the fireplace mantel for this room.

The second floor library is a great ceremonial space with a high cathedral ceiling and an extremely long conference table used for board meetings by the Virginia Historical Society. Another massive oak beam from the Priory serves as the fireplace mantel. It is carved with an Old English inscription that reads:

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"O ye fyre and heate bless ye the Lord." A secret hidden passage behind a trick door in the library paneling leads to Alexander Weddell's private study. This whimsical feature suggests that the Weddells enjoyed the historical romance of their mediievally inspired house in the way they used the rooms and entertained their startled guests.

Virginia Weddell's bedroom, bath, and study, and the extensive servants' quarters at the east end of the second floor completes the inventory of upstairs rooms. A private apartment for the gardener is located over the three-bay garage wing on the east extension of the house.

In summary, the first floor is comprised of large-scale, elaborately finished and ornamented ceremonial spaces intended for large social gatherings and later for the functions and exhibits of the Virginia Historical Society. The second floor was restricted for use as the private living spaces of the Weddells and their staff. The exception to this space program is the large, second floor library, which now serves as boardroom and research facility for the Virginia Historical Society. It is significant to note that this room also served as the personal library of Alexander Weddell, who kept it close to his inner sanctum by way of a secret passage.

8. Statement of Significance

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

☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally

MAY 0 1 1990

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

Landscape Architecture

Period of Significance

1925-1939

Significant Dates

1925

Cultural Affiliation

Significant Person

Alexander W. Weddell, Ambassador

Architect/Builder

Henry Grant Morse, Architect

William Lawrence Bottomley, Arch.

Charles F. Gillette, Landscape Arch.

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

Statement of Significance

The Virginia House is a noteworthy representative of a peculiar residential building type prevalent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century period of American architecture: a reconstructed composite of European manor houses that have been disassembled, cased, shipped, and creatively reassembled in their new American setting. Reconstructed during the period 1925 to 1928 to become the private residence of Ambassador Alexander W. Weddell and his wife, Virginia, the landmark is more complex than the literal reconstruction of a single English house, as commonly believed. Rather it is a composite of three structures, the creative fusing of its New York architect, Henry Grant Morse. Morse combined building components and design elements from three English houses with his own infill features to bring the composition together. The primary components of the design--the central bays that incorporate the two Flemish gables--were salvaged from the demolition of the Thomas Hawkins Priory in Warwickshire, England. The eastern bay is a reconstruction of the gate tower of Wormleighton Manor, ancestral home of the Spencers. The western bay is based on the entrance facade of Sulgrave Manor, the English seat of the Washington family.

☒ See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

- Anonymous "Virginia House" Virginia Cavalcade Winter 1955
Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia
- Burrell, Scott "The Gardens of Virginia House" An Occasional Bulletin,
June 1986, Virginia Historical Society
- Weddell, Alexander W. A Description of Virginia House in Henrico
County Virginia Historical Society, 1947
- Weddell, Alexander W. and Virginia Weddell Papers, Archives Virginia
Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia
- Longest, George C., "Genius in the Garden; A Biography of Charles F. Gillette"
Unpublished manuscript in the possession of the
Virginia Historical Society.

☐ See continuation sheet

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 # _____

Primary location of additional data:

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

Specify repository:

Department of Historic Resources
221 Governor Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property 8.77 acres

UTM References

A 18 278860 4158990
Zone Easting Northing

C

B
Zone Easting Northing

D

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description The original boundary of Virginia House property is described as lot 9, Block 41, Windsor Farms, in the plan of Windsor Farms made by Alan J. Saville, Inc., dated September 15, 1926, and recorded in the Clerk's Office of the Circuit Court of the County of Henrico, Virginia in plat book 14-A, pages 1 to 9. The adjacent 7.77 acre lot purchased in 1936 to accommodate the expansive landscape plan is described in plat book 263-C, page 144, and was recorded on April 14, 1936. The attached survey map describes the survey coordinates for the two land parcels.

☐ See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The property boundary is justified by the combined plat dimensions of the two contiguous parcels bought by the Weddells in 1925 and 1936 to provide a site for the house and, a decade later, for the expansive landscape plan extending south towards the James River.

☐ See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Douglas Harnsberger, Architectural Historian

organization Interplan Architecture date June 1, 1989

street & number 108 N. First St. telephone 804-648-4366

city or town Richmond state VA zip code 23219

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The classical loggia was added to the west elevation in 1946. It was designed by the renowned Colonial Revival architect William Lawrence Bottomley. Though connected functionally to the second floor library, the loggia is an independent appendage, a significant later addition that serves as an elegant classical counterpoint to the otherwise romantic asymmetry. The garden plan, developed between 1927 and 1939 by landscape architect Charles F. Gillette, is an important adjunct to the structure's architectural significance. The informal series of Tudor-style gardens that Gillette prescribed for the steeply sloping southern hillside enhance the house's dramatic qualities and extend the aged Anglican allusion well into the twentieth-century Virginia landscape.

Historical Background

The Virginia House was the product of Alexander and Virginia Weddell's determination to rescue the Warwick Priory, an English landmark centuries old, from imminent demolition in 1925. From this basic objective grew a more complex project that incorporated design elements from three English manor houses into a unique historical composite.

The auction of the Warwick Priory occurred on September 23, 1925, and was described in the catalogue as a "Highly Important Unreserved Demolition Sale" offering such items as "rare old oak doors, large quantity of floor boards, the whole of the joists and other timbers, and enormous quantities of excellent brick, sandstone, old Oak and other Beams and Timbers, Girders, and c." The catalogue advertising the sale of the priory and

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and enumerating the many lots of building parts survives in the Weddell Papers at the Virginia Historical Society. The Weddells successfully offered a lump sum bid of 3,500 pounds for the entire remaining structure, which precluded the scheduled itemized auction. Before the priory disassembly began in October 1925, the Weddells hired a local English draftsman to produce measured drawings of the structure in situ. Apparently these drawings have not survived. There is no trace of them in the notes and papers examined in the Weddell collection.

The sale of the Warwick Priory to an American couple intent on reconstructing the English landmark in Virginia created a loud controversy in the English press. The erroneous perception that the Weddells were "pulling down" an ancient landmark for the perverse purpose of re-erecting it in America caused such a public outcry that a member of the House of Commons proposed that the sale be invalidated in order to prevent this "act of vandalism". The motion was not approved by the Parliamentary body, however. The facts surrounding the sale of demolition eventually were brought to light and a letter of apology from another House member, Mr. F.G. Rye was sent on April 13, 1926, to Alexander Weddell, addressed to his American Consulate General Office in Mexico City. In contrast to the public criticism, Mr. Rye offered his personal appreciation: "Had you not stepped in and bought the materials of the partially demolished structure, they would have been lost for all time, whereas now they will be utilised in the erection of a new building."

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It is an important aspect of the Virginia House story to recognize that the English perception of the priory sale to the Weddells was considered either an act of vandalism and theft or, alternately, an heroic act of rescue. The philosophical issue of the appropriateness of transplanting an English historic structure to American soil initially generated heated debate. Today the Virginia House has established its own historic identity within the twentieth century American architectural epoch. Admiration for the Weddell's determination and curious penchant for collecting European building parts and art forms is the principal sentiment now associated with the telling of the Virginia House story.

The erection of Virginia House was undertaken by the General Contracting firm of Allen J. Saville, Inc., ("Constructors"). Ground was broken on November 6, 1925, and the house was officially turned over to the Weddells on January 1, 1929. The total cost of construction was \$236,968.83, with an additional \$15,000 spent on the purchase of the lot. A remarkable set of twenty-one large-format photographs were taken by Saville to show the sequence of construction from ground breaking to finished landscaping. A clay massing model of the house was executed presumably by Morse, the architect, and is shown in one of the progress photos. Not long after the construction was complete in 1928 Virginia Weddell requested that a two-story addition be added to expand the master bedroom suite and create a second-floor sunroom. This addition was constructed in January 1932 by the contracting firm of Claiborne and Taylor, following a succinct masonry specification provided by Henry Morse: "The addition is to be built entirely of Briar Hill sandstone, carefully selected to match the present building."

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One-half-inch-scale blueprints of this 1932 addition survive in the Weddell Papers file.

A second, more significant addition was added in 1945 in the form of a reconstructed ancient Spanish loggia. Earlier in 1941 Mrs. Weddell purchased the antique stone columns from the Spanish Duke of Infantado, and hired architect William Lawrence Bottomley to provide a design integrating these columns into a loggia on the southwest elevation of the house. Bottomley adapted existing Virginia House details from the parapets, finials, and pierced railings and posts from the north library bay windows into the loggia design. The loggia ceiling was adapted from a sixteenth-century house on the grounds at Knowle, England. New cast stone column bases were fabricated by Economy Cast Stone in Richmond. Commenting on the effect of his Classical addition upon a largely Tudor House, Bottomley wrote: "If I have any fault to find with the design it is that it is a little too set, a little too symmetrical, a little lacking in the indescribable quality of Picturesqueness and Romance that is so much a part of the house itself." Bottomley suggested that an octagonal stairway be added on the outside corner in an effort to add asymmetry and design interest to the loggia. The idea was not received favorably by the Weddells, however, and the stair was not built. The cost of the loggia construction totaled \$10,764, with a ten percent commission paid to Bottomley for his drawings and construction supervision.

By the mid-1930s some repairs to the roof and exterior walls were required, according to the surviving invoices. An invoice

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dated May 29, 1935, provided for the shipment of "Cotswold Stone Roofing Slate" shipped from England. This roof slate is considerably thicker and heavier than Virginia Buckingham slate, as well as somewhat lighter in color. The slates are laid in graduated courses that diminish in size as they rise to the roof peak, a perspective device to emphasize the height of the steep roof. The Cotswold slate has held up well over the half-century of its service to Virginia House and has required only minor patching and repairs to maintain the roof's watertightness.

In contrast to the durability of the English slate, the Warwick sandstone has not fared nearly so well. As early as 1936 the spalling of the sandstone was causing sufficient concern to warrant hiring a masonry consultant to look at the matter. A letter from the Lumino Masonry Company dated November 12, 1936, noted that: "the sandstone is showing disintegration due to the continual soaking of rain and consequent freezing action in late fall and winter weather." Today there is clear evidence that the severe erosion to the sandstone jeopardizes the integrity of the exterior walls. The harsher Virginia climate may be the primary factor causing the accelerated spalling, although the type of mortar and the orientation of the stones in the wall may also be at fault. English stone conservation experts with the Association for Preservation Technology have been contacted recently to seek technical advice to address this serious threat to the long-term preservation of Virginia House.

The extensive garden plans developed by Richmond landscape architect Charles F. Gillette in 1927 evolved over a twelve-year period with three major design phases. The first phase provided for an informal Tudor-style garden on the original one-acre site that the Weddells purchased for the house site. This original scheme utilized the

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steeply sloping southern hillside by creating interconnecting ponds, flagstone walkways, and terraced garden beds. In 1932 a second scheme reworked the original concept by overlaying a cross-axis into the plan and expanding the planting beds for perennials such as tulips and iris. The third phase of Gillette's work began in 1939, the same year that the Weddells purchased a large adjacent piece of land that extended their property far down the southern hillside towards the James River. With the extensive planting of grass and asymmetrically positioned evergreens Gillette achieved a romantic mirroring of the rambling architecture of Virginia House. The original blueprints and notes from Gillette's studio are preserved in a collection of his work at the Fiske Kimball Fine Arts Library at the University of Virginia. Great care is taken by the staff of the Virginia Historical Society to manage the elegant landscape left by Gillette. The Garden Week tours held in the spring attract thousands of visitors motivated perhaps as much by the uniqueness of Virginia House as by the beauty of the picturesque landscape that supports its setting.

Charles F. Gillette is considered to be one of the three major landscape architects to practice in the South in the first four decades of the twentieth century. The other two were Alden Hopkins, resident landscape architect for Colonial Williamsburg, and New Yorker Morley Williams, whose major historical interpretation was Mount Vernon.¹ Among Gillette's notable Virginia commissions were the Nelson House in Yorktown and the Milborne and Redesdale Residences in Richmond. Gillette collaborated closely with Lawrence Bottomly, the renowned Georgian Revival architect, in many of his Virginia commissions. As in the case of the Virginia House and its landscape, both architect and landscape architect achieved their reputations by exercising "liberal interpretations" of the Georgian tradition. In collaborated effort, they brought a reinterpretation of the Colonial Virginia building tradition to twentieth century Virginia.

1. Longest, George C., "Genius in the Garden; A Biography of Charles F. Gillette"

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National Park Service**

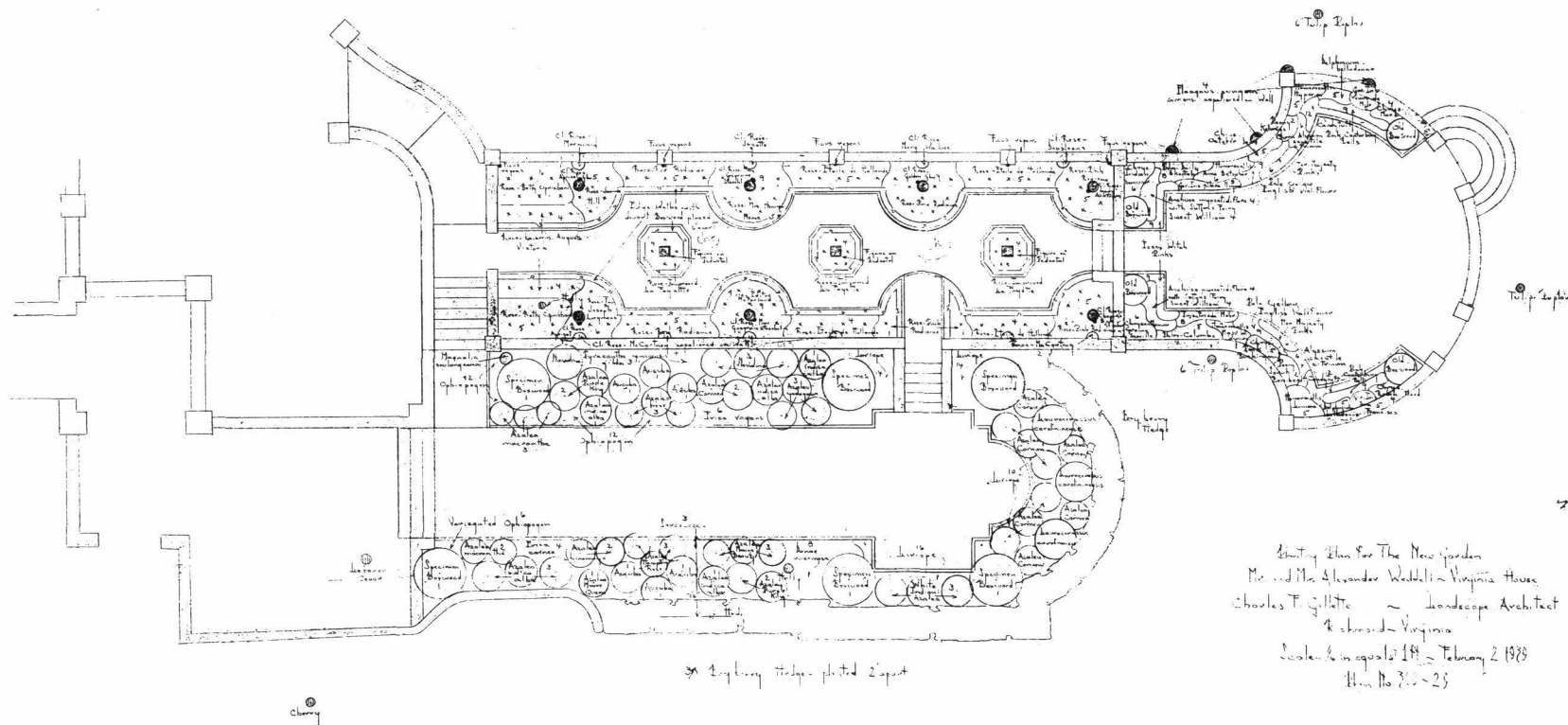
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The Virginia House has been owned and managed by the Virginia Historical Society since 1948. The Weddells bequeathed the house to the Society shortly after its construction, but retained lifetime tenancy. A tragic train accident in 1948 took the lives of both Weddells and prompted the permanent transfer of the house and property to the Society.

The Virginia Historical Society was founded in 1834 for the purpose of archiving Virginia history related papers, art, and artifacts. Mr. Weddell joined the Society in 1901 and became an avid contributor in the 1920's. In 1924 he bequeathed his large collection of rare books to the Virginia Historical Society, with the intention of dedicating the Sulgrave Room as library for the collection. This plan was not followed, however, due to code restrictions. The book collection was placed instead on the second floor in the library/conference room. Today the house and grounds are open for guided tours and special functions sponsored by the Society.



Henry Elton for The New Garden
Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Weidlin Virginia House
Charles F. Gillette ~ Landscape Architect
Richmond Virginia
Scale 1/4" equals 1' ~ February 2 1928
H. B. 300-25

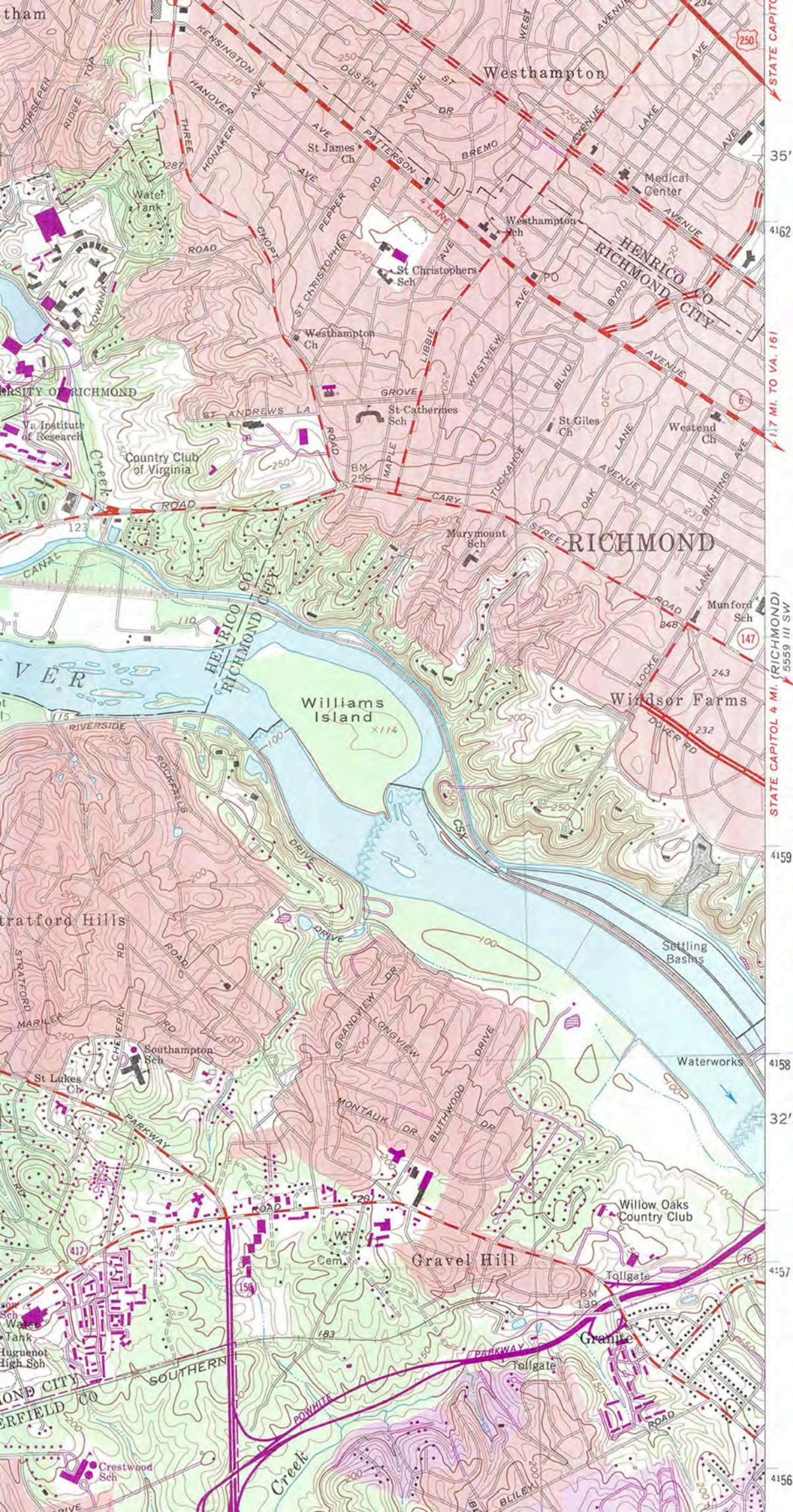
Virginia House
Richmond, Va.

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D. Harnsberger

Univ. of Va. Co
Campbell Hall Library

1939 Gillette Garden Plan
Phase II



VIRGINIA HOUSE
Richmond, VA

UTM References:
18/278860/4158990
Bon Air, VA

OCT 3, 1989

32'30"