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Oxmoor: The Bullitt House in Jefferson County, Kentucky

*Samuel W. Thomas*

For 200 years, the 1,000-acre Oxmoor tract, now bounded by the Watterson Expressway and divided by Interstate Highway 64 near Louisville, has been owned by the Bullitt family. At the core of this commercial and farm property is the homestead—a rambling residence surrounded by outbuildings. It is rare that a property and its buildings remain for two centuries, let alone in one family. It is even more remarkable that much of Oxmoor's history is recorded and extant in family papers.

Alexander Scott Bullitt (1761/2-1816) was the first Bullitt to set foot on the hillsides along Beargrass Creek, near the pioneer fortification known as A'Sturgus Station. His son, William Christian Bullitt (1793-1877), inherited the property, and his grandson, Thomas Walker Bullitt (1838-1910), wrote out his recollections of "Life on a Farm in Kentucky Before the War" in 1906. These were edited by his great-grandson William Marshall Bullitt (1873-1957) and published as *My Life at Oxmoor* in 1911 in a private printing of 100 copies. His great-great-grandson, Thomas Walker Bullitt, intends to reprint *My Life at Oxmoor*; he anticipates including additional annotation and sections on his father's tenure as well as his own and also his plans for the preservation and development of the property. That research is aided by a collection of Bullitt family papers at Oxmoor and on microfilm at The Filson Club. Within this collection are documents which speak directly to the main residence and its construction. No other house in Kentucky is as well documented. Here is a glimpse of Oxmoor's history.

When Alexander Scott Bullitt made his initial purchase of 1,200 acres adjoining A'Sturgus Station in 1787, according to the deed, it was already "commonly called and known by the name of Oxmoor." In literary history, Oxmoor is the "fine, large, whinny, undrained, unimproved common, belonging to the Shandy-estate," described by Laurence Sterne in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767). Above the spring, he built a log
house which perhaps was saddlebag in form, as Thomas W. Bullitt relates, "the 'rocks' forming the chimney now constitute the small 'mound' covered with grass." Shortly, Alexander Scott Bullitt undertook a more elaborate dwelling. Receipts for purchase of building materials indicate it was under construction for about two years.  

The Bullitts moved into the four-room, clapboard house some yards from their log house about the spring of 1791. The rooms had corner fireplaces which were joined to form a single chimney stack at either end. Corner fireplaces were rare in western Virginia, but end chimneys were not. Architectural historian Clay Lancaster compares the Oxmoor floor plan to the Barraud house in Williamsburg. The latter house contains its chimneys within the clapboard sides and has five dormers across the front. Oxmoor had no dormers, which was the prevailing practice in the far west. When the Barraud house was restored in 1942, a late front porch was removed and a smaller portico was rebuilt to conform to the old foundations. The front entrance at Oxmoor may have been simply protected by a projecting hood, as was over the back door.

Alexander Scott Bullitt married twice. His only children, born to his first wife Priscilla Christian, were Annie Christian Bullitt (1786-1828), Cuthbert Bullitt (1788-1854), Helen Bullitt (ca. 1789-1871), and William Christian Bullitt (1793-1877), who
inherited the Oxmoor property. He married Mildred Ann Fry (1798-1879) in 1819. She was the daughter of Joshua Fry and
Peachy Walker Fry of Danville; her sister Lucy had married John Speed, and they had built Farmington off the Bardstown Road near Louisville in 1810-1811. The William C. Bullitts had eight children, and a larger house was needed. A major brick addition was made to the clapboard house in 1829. A passageway would connect the new and the old. The old part would be relegated to bedrooms; the new part would be an entrance hall flanked by a parlor and dining room. The new part, in brick, would be the front. It would have a recessed portico entrance similar to both Farmington and to Ridgeway—an even more outstanding example of Federal architecture—on property which cornered on the Shelbyville Pike a few miles closer to Louisville than Oxmoor. There was good reasoning for the similarities. The mistress of Ridgeway was Helen Bullitt Massie, wife of Colonel Henry Massie (1768-1830), and sister of William C. Bullitt. The contracts for the repair of the old clapboard house and construction of the addition are in the Bullitt family papers and are among only a very few extant for a Kentucky house.

Repairs of Dwelling House of W. C. Bullitt
Weather boarding to be renewed all around the house four feet high from the Sill, and all other decayed or injured planks removed and renewed in the ballance of the weather boarding.......................... $6-75
Frame compleat for one window and outside casing for another.................................................. 3-00
Sills for thirteen windows.......................... 6-50
Sash new & compleat for thirteen windows and putting in glass.......................... 23-40
Three outside pannel Doors and frames for same........ 18-00
Three doors to be repaired & 3 corner boards for outside of house.......................... 2-75
Stopping up one window.......................... 00-50
Venetian Shutters for one window.......................... 4-00
Pannel doors to Cupboard.......................... 2-00
$66-90
May 1829, John Chinnowith has undertaken to do in a neat and workmanlike manner the above described work for the prices annexed making in all the sum of Sixty Six Dollars ninety Cents—to commence on Monday next being May 25th and continue until it is completed.

John Chenoweth
Wm. C. Bullitt

A Description of a House to be Built for Wm. C. Bullitt viz
63 feet long by 22 feet wide
2 Rooms each 20 by 22 feet in the clear
1 passage or Saloon, between the Rooms 16 by 15 feet in the clear.
Celler under both Rooms & passage 7 feet from the payment [pavement] to the cealling.
one Porticoe of which 4 feet to recess under the Rough [roof] of the House & 15 feet Wide the balance to extend 6 feet from & in front of the House & to be 17 feet 3 Inches Wide, on the Plan of the Porticoe of H. Massie.
3 Celler Doors 3 feet 6 inches by 7 feet, to be hung & Locks put on, frames compleat, batton Doors to the Same
4 Cellers Winders, Cedar frames, With Locust grates to be split out of the Timber by the Carpenter, Sash & glass lights 6 to each Winder 8 by 10 inches, or 10 by 12 inches as Bullitt may direct, all to be compleatly made and put up.
Framing Floors, & Joysts above & below, also Rafters the Joysts to be 18 inches appert from Center to Center neatly dressed to soot the flow below & Lathing above the Rafters, to be Joined at the Top in the old fashioned Way with Teanent [tenon] & pin.
Sheeting & Shinglening, the Shingles to Shew 5 inches to the Weather. Barge Boards to be plain & neat to the Gable Ends & also Porticoe.
4 Door Frames & 4 Doors 7 feet 2 inches by 3 feet 4 inches, the Doors to be Six pannel with moldings on both Sides,
hanging the Same & putting on any kind of Lock perferred by Sd. Bullitt.

4 Winder Frames, making & putting in Sash & glass with 12 Lights in each Winder the glass to be 12 by 18 Inches all Compleat Box frames with pulles in the upper & lower Sash, Venetian Shutters to the 4 Winders of the best sort with a middle Rail making & hanging, putting on bolts, Screws &c, &c all compleat.

Laying ash Floors for the whole House Tong & groved With Secreat Nailed &c

Casing all the Doors & Windows with Double Archatrave

Base & Surbase around both Rooms & Saloon equal to H. Massies frount Rooms, to the right as you goe into his House

Two Mantel Peaces one around each fire place to be made of Cherry Stuff Similar to Mr. Massie’s Lodging Room except the pillers which is to be Substituted by Pilasters or plain Slabs

Two Clossetts in one of the Rooms, one on each Side of the fire place with Shelves, framing for as necessary with pannel Doors to each of the same, size & kind with the Doors before mentioned, hanging the same putting on Locks mortice or other kind with casing similar to the other Door casing all compleat.

Frount Door to be folding Doors 2 1/2 feet wide each by 7 1/2 feet high, with a Row of sash & glass over the Top of the Door, of a size to be perferred by the sd. Bullitt, the Door to be six pannel in each Door, fram plain with a Bead in frount & Double Archatrave in the inside, hanging & putting on Locks & Bolts &c all Compleat

Six Posts for Porticoe between 10 or 12 feet long, to be Dressed from log & made Eight square from the handrailing, putting the same on the Sills, Bannisters to be of white pine, also the Railing around the Porticoe, putting up & fraining Joysts Rafters, sheating & shingling, Roof of Porticoe & Valles, Cealing the Pediment of Porticoe, Tong & groved with a Pediment cornice.

A Cornice in the frount of the House including the Porticoe
equal to the front of H. Massie's House & the Cornice in the Rear to be equal to that on the Dwelling House of sd. Bullitt's.

We, Northam & Sackett have agreed to do the above described work in the manner described & in a workmanlike way for the sum of Three Hundred & thirty five Dollars in specie, to be paid when the work is completed, to commence some time next week & continue until the work is completed. An unreasonable delay on their part will authorise the said Bullitt to employ another workman. No extra charge to be made for any work unless by the written request of said Bullitt. Executed this 7th July 1829, the work alluded to in this contract is described in pages 1, 2 & 3 hereof.

witness
H. Massie
Ejiaphroditus Titus Northam
Nathan Sackett

Wm. C. Bullitt

Bullitt having turned the posts of porch & Sacket made a new window shutter casing &c. all compleat, & there being one more door expressed in the contract than Sackett thought there was, Bullitt for the additional work is to pay him six dollars Augt. 1829,

Wm. C. Bullitt
Nathan Sackett

Rec'd. on the within agreement two hundreds and seven dollars Eighty six cents.

Nathan Sackett

Rec'd. on this 13th day of April 1830 Eighty one Dollars sixty four Cents the balance due for all Carpenters work done for him by Sackett and myself up to this date.

Northam & Sackett

Benjamin T. Rue agrees to paint the Dwelling house of W. C. Bullitt in the following manner. The whole of the outside of the house except the window sash & shutters to have one coat of white, the sash to have two coats of white, the shutters to have three coats of Green. The two front rooms to have two coats of Green, one room two coats of
yellow, one room two coats of Blue, the ballance of the house two coats of Lead colour. The whole wood work in the house of every kind including the Bannisters to the Stairs & the outside Doors are to have two coats of Paint. The colours of the rooms may be altered by Bullitt if he chooses. Bullitt is to furnish the necessary paints & oil & Rue to do the painting in the best workmanlike manner & for which he is to receive the Sum of Thirty four Dollars in specie when the work is compleated. Rue is to assist in selecting the materials. He is to commence the painting the day after tomorrow & to continue until it is completed.

Benjamin T. Rue
Wm. C. Bullitt

July 17th 1829, Rec'd in part of the above painting ten Dollars.

Benjamin T. Rue

Oxmoor was closed by the Bullitt family in 1863 and they did not return until 1906, when William Marshall Bullitt purchased other family interests, began to reassemble the land holding in his own hands, and to make the house habitable. It may be that work undertaken between 1906 and 1909 was done under the direction of architect George Herbert Gray (1874-1945) who marked on a floor plan probably made for and printed in My Life at Oxmoor (1911) that the house was measured in 1906 and the plan drawn in 1911. A graduate of Johns Hopkins University (1895) and the École des Beaux-Arts (1905), Gray was a superb delineator in the Colonial and Federal Revival styles. When writing architectural historian Rexford Newcomb in 1927, William Marshall Bullitt provided a concise list of the changes he had made after reopening Oxmoor in 1909. "I added one wing [the west wing was to house a kitchen and servants' quarters] in 1916, put a second story over the front part of the house last year [1926], and am now building another wing, principally to contain my library. F. Burrall Hoffman, Jr. of New York, is my architect, and has endeavored to keep everything in exact keeping with the old house." Bullitt subsequently replied to Professor Newcomb about the photographs reproduced in My Life at Oxmoor. "They were made when I first undertook, in a crude way, to reopen the old house, after it had been closed for fifty years. Since then I have
undone on the inside pretty much all that I did at that time, so as to restore the inside to the condition that it was before I commenced to make in 1909 the somewhat crude improvements.” This statement is mystifying if George Herbert Gray had been the architect. For some unknown reason, Newcomb did not mention Oxmoor in his landmark book, *Architecture in Old Kentucky* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953).

The library is without equal in Kentucky. It is on a scale that even the architect for Vizcaya, the Deering villa near Miami, admired. Burrall Hoffman’s widow, Virginia Kimball Hoffman of Washington, still remembered Oxmoor in 1987. The library is without equal in Kentucky. It is on a scale that even the architect for Vizcaya, the Deering villa near Miami, admired. Burrall Hoffman’s widow, Virginia Kimball Hoffman of Washington, still remembered Oxmoor in 1987.9

My husband made that lovely library. Somebody in the family introduced them and they got on and became great friends. They were great friends when we were married in 1927. We went down there and that was when I saw that beautiful room. I have never forgotten it. Wonderful! I remember going there for two weekends—one being the

*East view of the Oxmoor residence. (From My Life at Oxmoor, 1909)*
Kentucky Derby. I had never tasted a mint julep and I sang the whole way home. It was really a good time. And, of course, I fell in love with the beautiful room.

Burrall had an office in New York. He had studied at the Beaux-Arts and also at Harvard, and bought two old houses and put them together. In one he took out the ceiling and made the room very high and he painted it green. So when they did Oxmoor, he suggested that since they liked the room, they paint it the same color. I hope it is the same color.

Although it is a grand piece of architecture, the 60' by 28' library is and was functional. William Marshall Bullitt, a forceful lawyer and Solicitor General of the United States in the William Howard Taft administration, had a vast array of books to house, and that he did. The heart of his collection was mathematics, which he had majored in at Princeton, graduating in 1894. That part of his collection was given by his widow to the University of Louisville in 1958. It contains 370 rare books and documents.
including works by Archimedes, Gauss, Newton, and Einstein.  

The rest of the massive collection, some 9,500 volumes, will stay with the house, which will be preserved with comfortable acreage when Thomas W. Bullitt and his wife, the former Kay Stammers of British tennis fame, depart. To many today, the name Oxmoor conjures up the commonwealth's largest shopping mall, a massive retail complex on the Shelbyville Road east of Louisville. Plans for further development of the farm tracts are being worked out carefully and methodically, but the historic compound behind the shopping center will be preserved in such a way that posterity may see here a continuum of two centuries.

NOTES

1 A'Sturgus Station is now part of the Oxmoor tract. Alexander Scott Bullitt may have been there as early as 1784 and certainly by 1785. William Christian and his wife Annie Henry Christian came to A'Sturgus Station in 1785 and built three log cabins. William Christian (1743-1786) was killed by Indians and was buried in front of one of the log cabins in what became the Bullitt family graveyard. It exists as well as the saddlebag cabin which remains as a residence. After Col. Christian died, his widow called the settlement Fort William.


3 Deed Book 1, p. 310; Deed Book 2, p. 277. My Life at Oxmoor, 5-6. In 1796 Bullitt contracted with Benjamin Eareckson to build a frame kitchen (30' x 16') and a dairy (14' x 14') with a round top. Only a brick version of the kitchen survives.

4 Clay Lancaster, Ante-Bellum Houses of Kentucky, pending publication.


(1779-1854) and Marshall Key (1788-1860). Ridgeway was subsequently sold to the Bauer family and in 1922 was purchased by the Aubrey Cossars. Then, according to Rexford Newcomb (Architecture in Old Kentucky), the house was “immaculately restored by Arthur Loomis.” According to HABS files, “Nevin, Morgan & Kolbrook, Architects, finished a studio in the attic space and replaced an older cupola with a monitor skylight.” Newcomb may have been mistaken and all the work was done under the direction of Frederic L. Morgan. Judge and Mrs. Churchill Humphrey purchased Ridgeway in 1931, and in 1978 it was sold to Ben and Carole Birkhead who are in the process of carefully restoring it.

7Deed Book 644, p. 321, dated 16 June 1906. Fourteen tracts were assembled by William Marshall Bullitt between 1906 and 1939.

8William Marshall Bullitt to Rexford Newcomb, 10 August 1927 and 25 August 1927. Copies in the author’s files. Bullitt sent Newcomb My Life at Oxmoor saying: “I expect to get out a new edition of it some day, showing the place as it now looks. I have done nothing to change the old part of the house.” He also invited Newcomb to spend the night “in this old house.”

9Francis Burrall Hoffman (1882-1980), a native of New Orleans, graduated from Harvard University in 1903 and École des Beaux-Arts in 1907. He designed theaters, apartments, churches, and residences, including an addition to Gracie Mansion in New York. The telephone interview with Mrs. Hoffman was made 21 November 1987. The library was featured in House Beautiful, March 1982, pp. 74-75.
