

**Locust Grove:
Bringing the Past into the Present**

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In Charlottesville, nestled just off of the 250 Bypass as it heads towards the Rivanna River is the neighborhood of Locust Grove. As one walks through it, they can see beautiful homes, both old and new; meticulously kept lawns, whether they be small or expansive; and enough lush greenery that you wouldn't be remised to briefly mistake it for a botanical garden. As you walk through the neighborhood, along the picturesque Locust Avenue, you may very well be so taken in by the lovely scenery around you that you'd miss the ancient house, hidden behind a wall of thick foliage, where Locust Grove intersects Hazel Street. Interestingly enough, this lot, so easily overlooked, contains within it arguably the most historically important buildings in the neighborhood – the mansion, kitchen, and smokehouse of the mid-19th century Locust Grove Plantation. It is by taking a deep dive into the history of this Plantation that I aim to achieve two goals: to contextualize it throughout time, and to use it as a physical analogy of both the history and pervasiveness of systemic racism in and around Charlottesville.

On September 19th, 1837, a man by the name of George Sinclair purchased a 534-acre property from one Dr. Thomas W. Meriwether.¹² This property, originally part of a larger one known simply as “The Farm” which had been granted to Nicholas Meriwether in 1735, was called Locust Grove.³

After finalizing his purchase, Mr. Sinclair set about constructing three structures on his newly acquired land: a mansion, kitchen, and smokehouse.⁴ By 1840, the kitchen and smokehouse were done, and the Sinclair family began to occupy the site, living in a 1 ½ story home built as a temporary solution until the completion of the larger mansion.⁵ The main house would be completed in 1844, with the prolonged construction times owing to the time-consuming

¹ 104-0005 Locust Grove. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2021, from <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/104-0005/>

² Lay, K. Edward. (1967). *Papers of K. Edward Lay*.

³ 104-0005 Locust Grove. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2021, from <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/104-0005/>

⁴ Lay, K. Edward. (1967). *Papers of K. Edward Lay*.

⁵ *ibid*

process of on-site brick production.⁶ The buildings were completed in the Georgian style, one popularized in the eighteenth century but enduring well into the nineteenth, and characterized by symmetrical composition in both building mass and window and door placement and by its use of formal, classical features, an artefact of the Italian Renaissance period buildings which it drew heavily from.⁷ UVA Architecture Professor K. Edward Lay describes the main house at Locust Grove as being “five bays wide and built in common bond. A formal portico at the front entrance serves as a centerpiece for the house as well as protection for visitors from the elements. Four square columns which are panelled support the portico. All of the windows are double hung (6 over 6) except for the false windows at the north and south ends of the house. These blind windows are present in order to maintain a continuity or symmetry for the mansion. The cornices are very simple along with the rest of the exterior of the building. Continuing this lack of ornamentation, is this absence of moulding on the architraves over the doors and windows.”⁸



Fig 1. The Locust Grove Mansion, as seen on Page 12 in Box 57 of the Papers of K. Edward Lay, Professor of Architecture at the University of Virginia

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ PHMC Georgian style 1700 - 1800. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2021, from <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/architecture/styles/georgian.html>

⁸ Lay, K. Edward. (1967). *Papers of K. Edward Lay*.



Fig 2. The Locust Grove Mansion, as seen on Page 19 in Box 57 of the Papers of K. Edward Lay, Professor of Architecture at the University of Virginia

Lay's observations categorically evoke the Georgian style, but one observation which he makes is certainly of note – that of the simplicity in its detailing.⁹ Lay makes further note of this, describing how “the Greek revival mantels, the simple cornices, and absence of mouldings and dentil work indicate a trend from Georgian influences to a... Greek revival style,”¹⁰ a shift that became ever more prevalent from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was one especially relevant to the house at Locust Grove – expense.¹¹ While the typical Georgian home was characterized by an intense attention to detail, Locust Grove largely lacked it, opting instead for a composition which evokes Georgian forms but in detail favors the more simplistic styles which were beginning to become prevalent in the nineteenth century. What this demonstrates, and which Lay also recognizes, is that the Locust Grove mansion's form is dictated by three key factors: that George Sinclair was not enormously wealthy, that as a result function dictated form more than it might have otherwise, and that architecture contemporary to that period was following a general trend towards a simpler Greek revival style.¹² The mansion at Locust Grove was, ultimately, a farm house – there was no need

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

for it to be built with even as much detail as it was, and with the proportions that Mr. Sinclair was working with, the combination of on-site brick making and Mr. Sinclair's limited access to both money and workers, the building's final form was heavily influenced as a result.¹³



Fig 3. The Kenmore Plantation House, a Georgian-style plantation house built in the 1770s as part of the 1,300 acre Kenmore Plantation in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Image from user Cowpie21 on Wikimedia.org



Fig 4. The Nelson House in Yorktown, Virginia. Constructed in about 1730 by an influential colonial merchant, the grandfather of Declaration of Independence signer Thomas Nelson, Jr, this Georgian-style home exemplifies the level of detail found in classical examples. Image from NPS Photo

¹³ ibid

As George Sinclair's relative wealth is of significant importance to the form of the plantation buildings, it also is significant to determine the relative scale of the operations taking place at the Locust Grove plantation to help contextualize it. Luckily, some of the farm books from the Sinclair plantation survive, allowing us to begin to answer this question. By looking at entries from between July and December of 1853, what begins to become apparent is that the major local industries which the plantation seems to have been involved in were those of lumber, animal husbandry, and agribusiness, heavily skewed towards the lattermost item.¹⁴ The plantation book makes reference to some brickmaking, a bit more tree-cutting and timber-hauling, and that in late 1853 there were between 20 to 30 pigs being kept at the farm, but the vast majority of entries refer to the production and care of wheat, rye, oats, and corn, with further mentions of turnips and potatoes that would seem to imply that these last two were a part of the farm's crop yields, but far from being a main focus.¹⁵

As far as labor goes, Locust Grove was run as most other plantations in pre-Civil-War Virginia: by use of enslaved laborers. The plantation book alludes to two laborers by the names of Rollo and Israel, and the name Jim Coles comes up frequently, though this last name is likely not that of an enslaved laborer due to them being given a last name in the text.¹⁶ Additional references are made to laborers such as "Mrs. G. Craven's Boy," slaves who were "rented" by the Sinclair family for a short period of time.¹⁷ Perhaps the most useful bit of information as it pertains to this question is a brief entry about shoes. On Monday, October 24th, 1853, the manager who was keeping this book recorded the following: "Gave shoes to the following servants – Burton 1. Sam 2. Levi 3. Armistead 4. Daniel 5. George 6. Thom 7. Arch 8. Ryland

¹⁴ Sinclair, G. (1851-53). *Journal of George Sinclair*.

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

10. Also to Nancy 1. Louisa 2. Tetus 3. Sally. Harriet. Sarrah...¹⁸ Provided that the three names listed previously (Rollo, Israel, and Jim Coles) were indeed all enslaved laborers, combining them with the list of those given shoes would make it seem that there were around 20 enslaved laborers working in or around the plantation during the 1853 calendar year. Between this number and what is known about the crops grown at the Locust Grove plantation, what can be concluded is that the operational scale of the Sinclair farm was on the higher end of average, which corroborates the story which the architecture of the mansion proposes. According to a PBS article entitled the “Conditions of antebellum slavery,” ¾ of white southerners were not slaveowners, and the primary occupation of these non-slaveowners was that of a “yeoman farmer.”¹⁹ Out of the ¼ of white southerners that did own slaves, 88% of them owned twenty or fewer – a demographic which directly corresponds to what can be seen at the Locust Grove Plantation.²⁰ A separate quarters existed for these enslaved laborers, but it was later dismantled and the bricks were reused for a guest house.²¹

Not even a decade after the events outlined in the plantation book, the south seceded from the nation and Virginia became a battleground. Charlottesville, perhaps unsurprisingly, fell into the territory of the seceded states and for most of the war served as a stockpile location for Confederate Supplies and as a node along the Virginia Central Railroad, a key supply line from the Shenandoah Valley to Confederate army camps.²² Union forces came into the area twice – first during a failed raid in February of 1864 led by George A. Custer (who would later gain notoriety for his involvement and death during the Great Sioux War of 1876), and later from

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ PBS. (n.d.). Antebellum slavery. Retrieved April 28, 2021, from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2956.html#:~:text=Most%20of%20these%20plantations%20had,largest%20plantations%20have%20several%20hundred.>

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Landmark Survey [PDF]. (n.d.).

[Http://weblink.charlottesville.org/public/0/edoc/651445/818%20Locust%20Avenue_Historic%20Survey.pdf](http://weblink.charlottesville.org/public/0/edoc/651445/818%20Locust%20Avenue_Historic%20Survey.pdf): City of Charlottesville.

²² Battle of RIO HILL. (2020, March 28). Retrieved April 28, 2021, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Rio_Hill

March 3rd to March 7th, 1865, when Custer and General Philip Sheridan occupy the town.²³ This second instance is especially pertinent to the history of the Locust Grove Plantation. In Box 57 of Professor Lay's papers, there is a page included which appears to be taken from a newspaper, and out of only two historical events which the author decided to be pertinent to the plantation's history, one reads as follows: "During the Civil War Gen. Philip Sheridan raided the area and a Union regiment occupied Locust Grove, carrying off horses, servants and other valuables. Mrs. Sinclair at the time reputedly was nursing a seriously wounded Confederate Soldier and successfully concealed his presence."²⁴

Some time after the end of the Civil War, George Sinclair died.²⁵ Following his death, the 534-acre property was given up in order to pay a number of debts, and in 1876 the Locust Grove Investment Company purchased the property with the intent of subdividing it into numerous smaller lots, which they did. John M. White bought the lot containing the mansion in

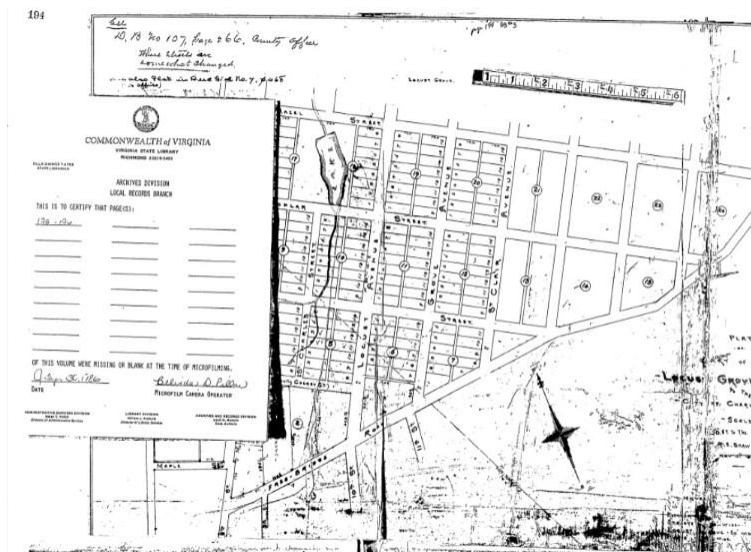


Fig 5. Locust Grove Investment Co. 1891 Map. Image originally from the blog of Jordy Yager

²³ ibid

²⁴ Lay, K. Edward. (1967). *Papers of K. Edward Lay*.

²⁵ ibid

1899, and owned it until his death seventeen years later, after which the property was passed to John Coles for intermediate ownership.²⁶ It was soon purchased by Judge Lemuel Smith, a Judge of the Supreme Court of Virginia.²⁷ Upon his death, he bequeathed the property to his family.²⁸ In 1956, Downing Smith, Judge Lemuel's son, became executor and owner of the Locust Grove Farm.²⁹ As recently as 1978, Mr. Smith and his wife Margaret were still the owners of the property, though more recent updates to the ownership of the plot are likely necessary.³⁰

The plantation structures at the Locust Grove site today sit quietly and, it would seem, unobtrusively behind their boxwood screen. An almost two-hundred year piece of history, hiding in the shadows of one of Charlottesville's most up-and-coming neighborhoods. On one hand, it serves as an outstanding look into the history of both America and American architecture, a sort of time capsule sitting mostly undisturbed by the ever-changing world around it. On the other hand, however, the Locust Grove plantation is a blight on the face of progress and a reminder and physical manifestation of the systemic racism ingrained into American society and culture, a piece of a dark history that America has spent years trying to hide behind its own boxwood screen.

Despite being almost invisible at a glance, Locust Grove Plantation remains a part of Charlottesville's topography of power and hierarchical inequity. Nineteenth-century Charlottesville provided many examples of how topography can be used to promote a landscape of racism and inequity. One well-known and glaring example is Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village, a planning feat that many describe as ideal and genius. To promote this

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ Landmark Survey [PDF]. (n.d.).

[Http://weblink.charlottesville.org/public/0/edoc/651445/818%20Locust%20Avenue_Historic%20Survey.pdf](http://weblink.charlottesville.org/public/0/edoc/651445/818%20Locust%20Avenue_Historic%20Survey.pdf): City of Charlottesville.

idealistic view of academia, however, means that Jefferson had to come to terms with the fact that many of the functions necessary for normal operation (such as cooking, cleaning, etc.) were going to be performed by slaves, something which clearly wasn't a part of his "perfect" university. So he created two systems to reconcile this fact. The first was that of framing, and of view. He bolstered what he found ideal by effectively getting rid of what he didn't. This is especially apparent when walking around the lawn. While the promenade intended for students and faculty only indicates two stories worth of structure with the rotunda at the end, walking down by the pavilion gardens (which, at that point, were purely for functional use, unlike today) reveals a third story – the story that Jefferson didn't see a place for in his perfect world. The other intention that the architecture of the Academical Village demonstrates is that of height delineating seniority. While the students lived their lives on the "ground" floor, Professors could, after intermingling with the students, retreat to their residences in the level above the student ones, leaving no uncertainty as to who held the higher echelon. Meanwhile, enslaved laborers toiled thanklessly below both staff and students – viewed architecturally as they were societally: the lowest class, a tool rather than a person.

Both of these concepts demonstrated at the Academical Village can be seen in present-day Locust Grove. As one wanders through the neighborhood, one street stands out from all the others: Locust Avenue. Everything there is bigger, wider, better – the sidewalks, the streets, the yards, the houses – it's almost as if it were intentionally designed to be the most walkable path in the neighborhood. Much like Jefferson's Academical Village, the Locust Grove neighborhood clearly has an intended promenade as well, and it takes pedestrians right past the old plantation, hiding more ordinary or everyday homes and experiences away by failing to make them anywhere near as walkable. Just as the Academical Village has a topographical class system, so to does Locust Grove – both Locust Avenue and the former plantation buildings sit on a topographical ridge. If the same conclusion is to be drawn, where height is equivalent to

power, then it can Also be surmised that the plantation buildings, though relatively hidden from

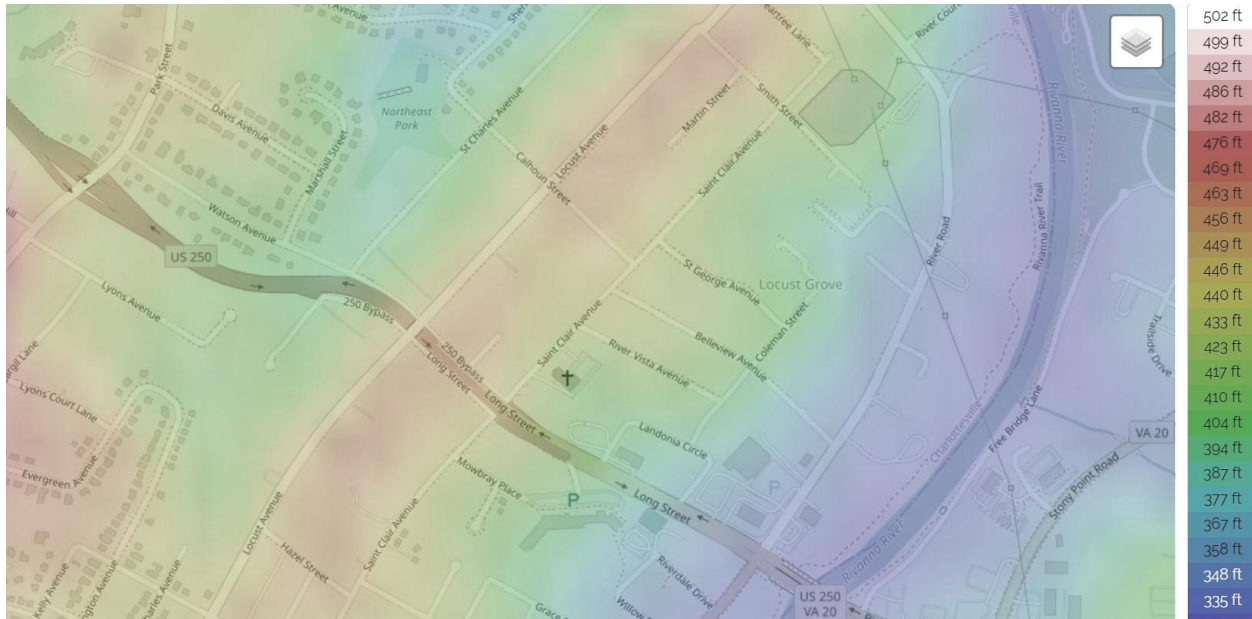


Fig 6. Topographical Map of the Locust Grove neighborhood, displaying the presence of a topographical ridge upon which Locust Avenue and the Locust Grove Plantation both sit. Image courtesy of topographic-map.com

view, still benefit from this precedential power structure. The endurance of the buildings at Locust Grove plantation is admirable to be sure, and the historical significance of these buildings is truly relevant, but the unfortunate fact is that as long as these types of histories endure, so will the systemic powers which they evoke. The simple fact that these buildings relate to a plantation causes a massive schism between groups of people, people who want to see history reconciled in various ways. The endurance of these plantation buildings is, in a sense, a symbol of the endurance of the so-called “southern way of life,” or rather sympathies towards a cause that should have ended when the war did, over a century and a half ago. They’re buildings that remain a monument to America’s history of systemic racism and injustice, systems that have, just like this building, withstood the test of time. Just like Locust Grove Plantation, these systems have been continuously chipped at, little by little, but they still exist.

The lot which Locust Grove Plantation sits on is 0.44 acres, 0.088% of the original size.³¹ Yet there it still stands. There it still perseveres.

The simple and regrettable truth of the architecture of injustice is that no matter how much society changes, it's still a history that exists. Society will always have to acknowledge it, to deal with it, to try to understand it. While the histories of injustice and inequity will always be a part of the collective, human story, they don't need to be the precedent for it. Locust Grove Plantation tells a story of a time when people were viewed as tools, as goods to be exchanged, of times when injustice was acceptable. If you ever find yourself walking along Locust Avenue, don't ignore the corner lot with the boxwood trees by Hazel Street. Walk past it, knowing of its presence, of its history. Walk past it knowing what it might stand for. Walk past it knowing as long as it's "lurking" behind those boxwoods, not merely existing behind it, it holds power. Use it as a way to caution yourself, to make sure that your actions take the human story further from that point, and not closer to it.

- ³¹ - Lay, K. Edward. (1967). Papers of K. Edward Lay.

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