

DARST, JORDAN, STONO AND LEXINGTON

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MANY OF THE BUILDINGS standing today in Lexington were built nearly two hundred years ago, after the Great Fire of 1796 destroyed most of the town. Some of the buildings erected after the fire were built in the classical style, and were probably constructed by Benjamin Darst Sr.

Darst was a potter who became a brickmaker and, as did many builders of his day, he occasionally had to supply the designs for the buildings he was commissioned to construct. His son, Samuel, and Samuel's partner, John Jordan, continued this building tradition in Lexington into the early nineteenth century. Together these three men introduced to Lexington the latest styles in architecture, even though they were not trained architects.

In fact, there were no professional architects in Lexington in Darst and Jordan's time. In other parts of the

country there were a few people, such as Benjamin H. Latrobe, who were trained expressly in architecture as a profession, and there were also builder-architects like Asher Benjamin and Samuel Biddle who wrote books on architectural ideas and designs. These carpenter guides and pattern books were useful to people such as Darst and Jordan, providing guidelines for building, even though they were not trained in architecture.

Architecture was considered part of an educated man's well-roundedness. Men who read such books sometimes designed their own homes or those of their friends. Probably the most famous example of this type

This article is excerpted from an honors thesis that Mrs. Adams researched and wrote under the direction of Professor Pamela Simpson at Washington and Lee University in 1995. Mrs. Adams, who was vice president of her graduating class, is now a teacher in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, near Birmingham.

of gentleman-amateur architect is Thomas Jefferson. Lexington also had its own local version of the gentleman-amateur architect in Samuel McDowell Reid, a local lawyer, landowner and clerk of the court. Darst and Jordan, however, were builders, so they fit into the category known as the architect-builder.

SAMUEL DARST

HOW DID DARST AND JORDAN get involved in this kind of work? It started with Samuel's father, Benjamin Darst Sr., who arrived in Lexington at some point in 1784 or 1785. His father had immigrated from Switzerland to Philadelphia in 1743 and had brought his family down to the Valley of Virginia by the middle of the 1750s. Benjamin Sr. learned the pottery business as a boy, and in 1780 headed into eastern Virginia to use his talents to earn his fortune. He met his wife in a town outside Richmond and decided to settle not far from there, near the village of Manakin, on the James River. After a few years, he decided to leave his settled planter's life and try his future in the frontier hamlet of Lexington.¹

Benjamin Darst set up his pottery factory soon after his arrival in Lexington. Writing 150 years later, the family historian H. Jackson Darst thought that Benjamin Darst's was the first pottery business in Rockbridge County.² Benjamin Darst was successful, and just when he was thinking of expanding his enterprises, the Great Fire gave him strong reason to begin making bricks for the rebuilding of the town.

The Darsts were also involved in business ventures other than brickmaking and building. Not only were they active in land-trading and road-building; Benjamin Darst "joined in numerous pleas having to do with public improvements in western Virginia, such as roads, canals, navigation of the James River, and railroads."³

Benjamin Darst's son, Samuel, joined him in the brickmaking business when he was fourteen, in 1802. It is his work from the years 1815 until 1824, however, that is most important to this study: the years of his construction business partnership with John Jordan.

Jackson Darst suggests that the two must have worked well together: The two men, he wrote, "fused in a unique fashion the talent of the master architect-builder with the imaginative entrepreneur."⁴ Jordan handled the business side of the deals and Darst oversaw the building; Jordan was the "agent for the firm and handled contract negotiations, bids, and other 'customer relations,'" while "Darst was the 'active partner' and managed the operations."⁵ According to Jackson Darst, it was Samuel Darst who hired and fired the workers and paid them, kept the financial records for the firm, bought supplies, and managed the construction operations and the brickmaking. Jackson Darst may have minimized Jordan's role, however, in his efforts to rectify what he saw as earlier scholars' failure to give Samuel Darst his due. There is no doubt that John Jordan was also intimately involved in the building industry and knew construction work firsthand.

JOHN JORDAN

BUT HOW DID THE TWO come together? John Jordan may have been enticed to come to Lexington by Samuel Darst's father, Benjamin.⁶ The Darst family historian suggests that Jordan may have worked an apprenticeship as a bricklayer with Benjamin Darst. It is probably significant that Jordan's first major construction job in Lexington, the Ann Smith Academy, was built in conjunction with Benjamin Darst's son-in-law, John Chandler. Chandler did the woodwork, and Jordan the brickwork.⁷

In addition to building, Jordan conducted several other businesses from his residence at Jordan's Point. Jackson Darst notes that Jordan was called an "industrialist" and a "capitalist"⁸ and that he was involved in "iron-smelting, grist mills, blacksmith shops, canal construction, cotton and wool processing, contracting and architecture."⁹ Just one of Jordan's many iron works, the Lucy Selina furnace,^{*} produced more than 50,000 tons

* Located in Alleghany County, near the border with Rockbridge, built in 1827 by Jordan and his partner John Irvine. It was named for their wives. After Jordan and Irvine sold it in 1831, the Lucy Selina operated until just after the Civil War

John Jordan in an undated photograph. Unfortunately, there are no known pictures of Samuel Darst.



of pig-iron, which was vital to the Confederate Army for the manufacture of munitions.¹⁰

The difficulties in moving supplies and products made Jordan keenly aware of the need for good roads. Jordan was instrumental in developing transportation in western Virginia. Despite difficult working conditions, Jordan successfully built the first major link between Lexington and the west,¹¹ a highway, known as Jordans' Trail, across North Mountain in Rockbridge, west of Lexington.¹²

Jordan became a well-respected man in the community. On Jordan's death in 1854, his friend the Reverend William S. White, the celebrated minister of the Lexington Presbyterian Church, spoke highly of him:

[Jordan] took a deep and generous interest in all that concerned the comfort and well-being of the whole community. This is fully evidenced by the houses we occupy, the roads on which we travel, the bridges which span over streams, and the Schools and Churches which throw their hallowed light around us.¹³

Another Lexington man, William T. Shields, remembered Jordan as a "man of integrity, noted for his charity and his wonderfully useful life."¹⁴

Both Darst and Jordan were important contributors to their community, both individually and as a partnership. They were two of the ten shareholders who, in February 1814, formed the Central School Association for elementary education for boys.¹⁵ Local historian Royster Lyle Jr. noted in a letter to H. Jackson Darst that in the early 1820s "two of the most prominent houses were John Jordan's [Stono] and Benjamin Darst's [The Pines, on Lee Avenue]." Lyle also wrote that he agreed with Jackson Darst that the Pines and Stono were in the

"Jefferson mode." He claimed that the years surrounding 1824, "when the Darsts and Jordan were so active, brought the spread of this classical style (W&L, etc.) undoubtedly because of these two houses by these two prominent builders."¹⁶ In a paper presented to the Rockbridge Historical Society, Mrs. Henry Agnew called Jordan's house, Stono, at Jordan's Point "one of the first Classical Revival buildings west of the Blue Ridge."¹⁷ As a firm, both men brought innovative ideas to the growing town of Lexington.

THE BUILDINGS

THE FIRM OF Darst and Jordan existed from 1815 until 1824. At least twelve buildings constructed then in Lexington and Rockbridge can be attributed to them. The partnership was the only one of its kind known to exist in Lexington at the time, so it seems likely that houses built for people with connections with Darst or Jordan or their families would have been built by them.

John Jordan's own residence, Stono,¹⁸ was built in 1818, and was presumably designed by Jordan himself. The distinguished Virginia architectural historian Calder Loth has said that Stono reveals Jordan's willingness to experiment in his designs, as it was one of the



The Pines on Lee Avenue, built for Benjamin Darst in 1818.



Stono today. Library of Congress photograph by Carol Highsmith.

first buildings west of the Blue Ridge Mountains to be in a temple form with a two-story portico.¹⁹ Stono follows a three-part Palladian scheme, with a “colossal Roman Doric portico” which the Report for the U.S. Interior Department’s Register of National Historic Places cites as reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson’s style.²⁰ The original portion of the house has a two-story central section and two one-story side wings. The front portico has a modillioned pediment, and the portico columns are “thin and closely spaced.”²¹ The front door and the porch door

above both have semicircular fanlights, and the interior entry-way doors have fanlights as well.

The brickwork at Stono is particularly fine, as one would expect. Not only is the house laid in Flemish bond, but there are also numerous examples of specialized brick such as the cyma recta curved bricks* for the cornices. Another artful touch is in the interior or woodwork, including the mantle pieces, which have elliptical sunbursts, and the carved newel post in the shape of a dog’s head.

Stono has elongated proportions that recall the Federal style, but new is the degree of Classicism they brought to it. The temple front with side wings, the double-story portico, dentils lining the pediment and the Roman bath window — all are Classical features. Stono’s elongated proportions are not typically Classical forms, but its round columns are of the Classical Tuscan order.

“Little Stono,” about three miles outside the town of Lexington, believed to have been built in 1816, is also

* Concave moldings becoming convex. One might say S-shaped, and in three dimensions.



Stono’s dog’s head newel post.



Little Stono: built by Jordan & Darst? Or by Jordan? Or by someone else?



Neriah Baptist Church, in the South River community between Lexington and Buena Vista.

of the temple form with a two-story portico, and looks remarkably like Stono. Based on these similarities, it is also attributed to Darst and Jordan.²²

The Neriah Baptist Church Meeting House was also built in 1816. Jordan’s wife, Lucy, was one of the first six people to sign the confession of faith with the Baptists in Lexington, and it is probable that Jordan built the house of worship for them. Jordan himself was not affiliated with the Baptists at first, as they were new in the area. But after the Meeting House was built and the Baptists became recognized, Jordan became a member and strong supporter.²³

In 1817, Jordan built the Lexington Arsenal Building, which later became the barracks of Virginia Military



Built as a residence in 1822, this building on South Main Street was the Rockbridge library building, 1961–86. Miley photograph.

LITTLE STONO: ANOTHER VIEW

Washington and Lee student Parker Dunn, who graduated in 1991 and was another student of Professor Simpson’s, wrote a paper arguing that John Jordan was not the architect of Little Stono — that it was a myth advanced in the 1950s by W&L historian Marshall Fishwick.

Dunn asserts that Fishwick leapt to his erroneous conclusion because Jordan was a builder and because of strong design similarities between Little Stono, on the one hand, and Stono and the Centre Building (now Washington Hall) at Washington College, on the other hand, which Jordan certainly helped build. (H. Jackson Darst, the family historian, had also discredited Fishwick’s research and conclusions in his 1972 history of the Darst family.)

Dunn’s “best guess” is that Little Stono was built in 1820

by John Chandler, who was certainly no stranger to Darst (they were brothers-in-law) or Jordan (they were business associates); all three of them worked on the Centre Building. But, Dunn says, the evidence is strong from tax records and from architectural clues that it was Chandler who built Little Stono after Jordan built Stono in 1818, not before, and that Chandler emulated his associate’s design. Chandler called the house Poplar Hills, Dunn writes, and the name Little Stono was not applied until the early 1900s.

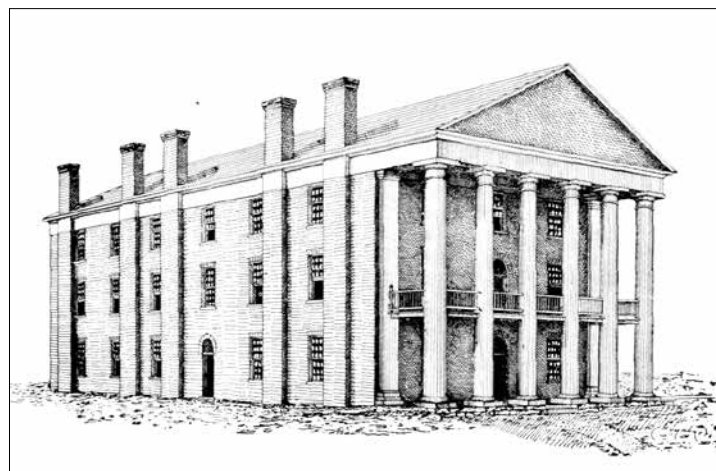
In a letter to Dunn (April 11, 1991), Royster Lyle — Professor Simpson’s co-author of the definitive *Architecture of Historic Lexington* (1977) — wrote: “I think you’ve pretty well established to my satisfaction that John Chandler built or had built Little Stono in 1820.”



Stylistically, the Charles P. Dorman House, left, more familiarly known as the Rectory, and the next-door Reid-White House, right, have more in common with each other than either has with the Pines or Beaumont, their Lee Avenue neighbors to the south.

Institute.²⁴ He wrote a letter in January 1818 that noted the great care he had taken in molding the bricks, saying that there were more hand-made bricks than would usually be the case.²⁵

The Pines was built about 1818 by Benjamin Darst, Samuel's father.²⁶ The Central School Association schoolhouse, built in 1819, is attributed to Darst and Jordan; it is no longer standing. The Dold Building, at the corner of Washington and Main Streets, was built by the firm of Darst and Jordan in 1820; Samuel Darst was the brother-in-law of John Irvine, for whom it was built. In 1821, the firm undertook the building of a residence for Henry Ruffner on West Preston Street. What became the main section of the Botetourt-Rockbridge Regional Library



The Centre Building at Washington College, left, and Thomas Jefferson's conception for the Virginia State Capitol, right, share striking similarities in design details — not surprisingly, since Jordan had worked with Jefferson.

was built by Darst and Jordan as a residence on Main Street in Lexington in 1822.

In 1824, the firm erected two buildings, and probably a third. They are known to have constructed Beaumont as Samuel Darst's residence, as well as the Centre Building at Washington College, now Washington Hall at Washington and Lee University.

They may also have worked on the C. P. Dorman residence on Lee Avenue, directly north of The Pines and Beaumont; it became the Episcopal rectory and is now a private residence. Much-debated is the question of whether Darst and Jordan actually designed the rectory. The matter arises because of the rectory's similarity to the Reid-White house, next to it on the north. When



Above: Beaumont on Lee Avenue, once called the Barclay House, built in 1824 for Samuel Darst's own family. Right: the Willson-Walker House on North Main Street, 1818, became a centerpiece of Lexington's African American business community before evolving into an inn and restaurant.

Pamela Simpson and Royster Lyle discovered Samuel McDowell Reid's drawings for his own home, they speculated that Reid may have drawn up the plans for the rectory as well. The Dormans and Reids were neighbors, and both houses are more closely Federal in style than are Darst and Jordan's Classical buildings. But the Darsts, too, were neighbors of the Dormans, and even if Reid did supply the plan, it seems likely that Dorman would have hired Darst and Jordan to do the construction work. There is a brick in the northeast wall of the rectory with the initials "BD" inscribed in it. Speculation has it that the initials are for Benjamin Darst, the brick-maker (Samuel's father).²⁷

Simpson and Lyle base their speculation about Reid on his obvious interest in architecture, as well as the detailed specifications he wrote for his carpenter, Edward Sewell. Reid's interests involved his service on the building committees for Washington College, the Presbyterian Church and the Lexington Jail. Lyle and Simpson also found a Reid-White drawing that survived in Samuel McDowell Reid's papers and is signed by him on the back. Interestingly, nowhere in the Reid papers is there any mention of Darst and Jordan. Did they supply the bricks? Probably. Did they supply the design? Evidence



suggests that Reid did that himself. And the rectory and Reid's home are more Federal in character than Darst and Jordan's Classicism. All of which reminds us of the unstructured nature of the building industry in Lexington in the early nineteenth century and the uncertainty of historical speculation. But there is no doubt that Darst and Jordan built the Centre Building at Washington College — their firm's biggest project. The front portico of the original plan for the building is similar to that of Jefferson's Virginia State Capitol building. The columns of the Centre Building are also of the same variance from the "correct" Tuscan column — as are the columns of Jordan's own Stono. Calder Loth wrote that William H. Ruffner, president of Washington College (1837–48), called the Centre Building "a handsome, well propor-

tioned structure; a Maison Quarrée, like the State Capitol, but without a high basement.”²⁸

What is today still called the Willson-Walker House is thought to have been built in 1820 by Darst and Jordan. Captain William Willson was treasurer of Washington College at the time the Centre Building was constructed, and thus would have known Darst and Jordan and their architecture. The temple front, the Tuscan columns, and the sophisticated brickwork all suggest that the house may have been built by Darst and Jordan.

BUILDINGS ATTRIBUTED TO DARST & JORDAN

- 1816 Little Stono [*but see page 5*]
Neriah Baptist Church Meeting House
- 1817 The Lexington Arsenal, now part of Virginia Military Institute
- 1818 Jordan’s own residence at Jordan’s Point, Stono, now owned by VMI and called the Turman House
Residence for Benjamin Darst Sr., now known as The Pines
Central School Association schoolhouse, no longer standing
The Dold Building, now commercial [Pumpkinseeds gift shop in 2020]
The Willson-Walker House, formerly a grocery and residence, more recently a restaurant
- 1821 Residence for Dr. Henry Ruffner, also called the Preston House, became a Washington and Lee fraternity house; now privately owned
- 1822 Residence on South Main Street; headquarters of the Rockbridge Regional Library system, 1961–86, now commercial
- 1824 Residence for Samuel Darst on Lee Avenue, now called Beaumont, formerly the Barclay House, next to The Pines
Residence for Colonel Samuel McDowell Reid, now the Reid-White-Philbin House
Residence for General C. P. Dorman, later the rectory for R. E. Lee [now Grace] Episcopal Church
Centre Building of Washington College, now Washington Hall of Washington and Lee University

The Lee Avenue houses were also of the Classical form, which Darst and Jordan were popularizing in the area. Lyle and Simpson wrote that Beaumont, Darst’s own home, is the “most Classical of the Lee Avenue group.”²⁹ The porch is of the Roman order with a pediment over barrel vaulting and two-story columns.

Although their work reflected the older Federal style in interior decoration and in details like the fanlights above doorways, Darst and Jordan brought a new architectural style to Lexington.

WHO WAS WHO

- Chandler, John** (1872–1852) — husband of Benjamin Darst’s daughter Polly (thus Benjamin’s son-in-law and Samuel’s brother-in-law); worked with John Jordan on Ann Smith Academy in 1808.
- Darst, Benjamin Sr.** (1760–1835) — Patriarch. Built The Pines on Lee Avenue, 1819.
- Darst, H. Jordan** (1924–2019) — professor at the University of Virginia; his history of ten generations of Darst family history was published in 1972.
- Darst, Samuel** (1788–1864) — son of Benjamin Sr., from whom he learned brickmaking and building. Partner of John Jordan, 1815–24. Built Beaumont on Lee Avenue, 1824, next door to The Pines.
- Dorman, Charles P.** (1794–1849) — commissioned a house next to Beaumont for himself and his family, 1821–24, probably built by Darst and Jordan. The house became the Episcopal Rectory in 1854 but is now in private hands.
- Jordan, John** (1777–1854) — Lexington builder; partner of Samuel Darst, 1815–24. He built Stono for himself and his family.
- Reid, Samuel McDowell** (1790–1869) — powerful Rockbridge clerk of court and land developer. His house (c. 1821–24) was the northernmost of the four houses on Lee Avenue associated with Darst and Jordan.

ENDNOTES

- H. Jackson Darst: *The Darsts of Virginia: A Chronicle of Ten Generations in the Old Dominion* (1972), pg. 25.
- Ibid.*, pg.26.
- Ibid.*, pg.39.
- Ibid.*, pg.68.
- Ibid.*, pg.63.
- H. Jackson Darst: “Benjamin Darst, Sr.. Architect-Builder of Lexington,” volume 8 of Rockbridge Historical Society *Proceedings*.
- Ibid.*
- H. Jackson Darst: *The Darsts of Virginia*, pg. 62.
- “John Jordan,” *RHS Proceedings*, volume 4, pg. 12.
- Marshall Fishwick: “John Jordan: Man of Iron,” *The Iron Worker*, Fall 1957.
- Fishwick, pg. 8.
- Catharine Gilliam, Rockbridge Historical Society *Proceedings*. volume 9, pg. 112.
- Sherwood, *The Valley Star*, Lexington, August 3, 1854.
- Fishwick, pg. 8.
- H. Jackson Darst: *The Darsts of Virginia*.
- Letter in the files of Royster Lyle and Pamela Simpson in the W&L Special Collections in the Leyburn Library.
- Withrow Scrapbooks, volume 13. The Withrow Scrapbooks were put together by sisters Lucy and Margaret Withrow. The articles are not all dated.
- Mrs. Henry Agnew: “The Jordan Family,” *RHS Proceedings*. volume 4, pgs. 12–13.
- The house was not known as Stono in Jordan’s day, but rather as Jordan’s Point. It was later residents Mr. and Mrs. John Lyle Campbell III (Emily Platt Howell), who named the house Stono. They vacationed near Charleston, South Carolina, along the Stono River, and wanted to bring their fond memories back home with them, and so they named the house Stono. This information is from the granddaughter of Emily Platt Howell Campbell, Emily Lancaster, from a conversation she had with Louise Dooley in 1988, and is documented in Louise Dooley’s files at Virginia Military Institute concerning the Turman House, as Stono is now formally known.
- Calder Loth, “The Ante Bellum Architecture of Washington and Lee University,” University of Virginia thesis, (1967), pg. 19.
- Inventory/Nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places, from Louise Dooley’s files at VMI concerning the Turman House.
- Ibid.*
- Loth, pg. 19.
- Rev. Mr. John S. Moore: “John Jordan, Baptist Layman,” *RHS Proceedings*, vol. 6, pgs. 63–71.
- William Couper: *One Hundred Years at VMI* (Richmond: Garrett & Massie, 1939), pg. 8.
- Ibid.*,
- The Rockbridge County News, March 30, 1922. The date when The Pines was built is uncertain, Royster Lyle’s records showed it to be 1819, but Jackson Darst corrects him and states it as 1815, while the County News article asserts that it was built in 1819.
- Royster Lyle Jr. and Pamela Hemenway Simpson, *The Architecture of Historic Lexington*, pg. 84.
- Loth, pg. 26.
- Lyle and Simpson, pg. 83.

