PARADISE LOST: THE STORY OF CHAUMIERE DES PRAIRIES

BY MARY CRONAN OPPEL*

Nine miles southwest of Lexington in Jessamine County on the mouth of Jessamine Creek lies the site of Chaumiere des Prairies.[1] Settled in the late 18th century by a prominent Tidewater Virginia planter, Chaumiere was reportedly the first lordly estate in Kentucky. Its builder, "Colonel" David Meade, left his native Virginia at the age of fifty-two and moved to the undeveloped lands of Kentucky where he proceeded to build a mansion and cultivate a garden that were to receive acclaim not only in this country but in Europe as well.

Meade was born in 1744, the eldest son of David and Susannah Everard Meade. The first of the Meade family to arrive in America was Andrew, David's grandfather. Andrew Meade left Ireland in the late 17th century and came to America where he settled on the mouth of the Nansemond River in Virginia. There he acquired extensive land holdings and a large number of slaves. At Andrew's death the Nansemond River estate was left to David Meade's father who in turn willed it to his eldest son David. Meade's mother, Susannah Everard, was the daughter of Richard Everard, an English baronet who served as the proprietary governor of North Carolina. Having no brothers, Susannah Everard inherited from her father a considerable fortune consisting of several large English country estates, their mansions, furnishings, jewels, and objects of art. At the age of seven, Meade was sent to be educated in England as was the custom of wealthy Virginia planters. After attending Harrow for ten years under the Reverend Dr. Thackeray, he returned to Virginia in 1761 and traveled in the Northeast with the sons of other prominent Virginia families. In 1768 Meade retired from his travels and married Sarah Waters of Williamsburg, Virginia.[2]

Although David Meade was in his prime of life during the Revolutionary War there is no mention of his active involvement in military affairs. It may be that poor health or a weak constitution

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1 The source of the name Chaumiere des Prairies, which means "Cottage in the Meadow," is unknown. It could have been named from a popular novel of the time, *La Chaumiere indienne*, by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. The author was the first French writer to treat landscape as the background of life. L. Cazamian, *A History of French Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 280.

2 David Meade, "Meade Family History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 13, I (1904), pp. 37-45.

in his childhood, to which there are several allusions, was responsible. Nonetheless, Meade is said to have been a devoted patriot and tremendous financial contributor to the cause of independence; in later life he was respectfully known as "Colonel" Meade. Meade did make one brief entry into public life during the revolutionary period when in 1769 he was elected First Burgess from Nansemond County to the Virginia Assembly. Meade was reportedly more distraught at the thought of public speaking than by the physical illness that besieged him at the time. As it turned out, his career as a public representative was short lived. The Virginia Assembly was abruptly dissolved several months after its opening by Lord Botetourt, the governor of Virginia. Botetourt, as royal representative was incensed at the freedom with which the Burgesses discussed the differences between England and the Colonies. To Meade's great relief Botetourt's action allowed him to return home and retire from public office.[3]

Just before the War began, Meade sold his ancestral home on the Nansemond River to his brother Andrew and bought Maycox, a six hundred acre plantation on the James River across from Westover, home of Colonel William Byrd. The formal grounds of Maycox, the setting for the entertaining for which David Meade was so adept and well known, comprised twelve acres on the bank of the James River. The area was landscaped by natural woods and fruit trees together with artificial hollows and rises covered with well manicured grass. Meade resided at Maycox and practiced the fine arts of landscape architecture and hospitality for twenty-two years.[4] In 1795 Meade commissioned his eldest son David to travel to Kentucky to select a piece of land for settlement. The same year Meade purchased three hundred and thirty acres in Jessamine County nine miles southwest of Lexington from Andrew McCalla who had originally settled on the land. A year later Colonel Meade left his estate on the James River and moved to the wilds of Kentucky with his wife, nine children, and servants.

Leaving Virginia on June 17, 1796, the family traveled over the Allegheny Mountains to Red Stone Fort on the Monogahela River. On this portion of the journey, the family and retinue of servants traveled between twelve and twenty miles a day, experiencing several broken wagon wheels along the way. Meade noted with some surprise the populated landscape they passed. Expecting to

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3 Meade, "Meade Family History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 13, II (1904), pp. 73-102.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

hear the cries and growls of savages and wild animals, they heard instead the calls of plowmen, waggoners, and mowers as the family slowly made their way through the mountains. At Fort Red Stone, the Meades boarded flatboats and continued to Pittsburgh. At Pittsburgh the family remained on the flatboats and began the trip down the Ohio River. The Meades landed in Kentucky at Limestone (now Maysville) three months after departing from Virginia. From there they continued to Lexington and eventually to their place of settlement by wagon. Twenty-one horses and fifty wagons were required to move the household possessions.[5]

It is curious that a man of Meade's age and social standing should have left the comforts and society of Tidewater Virginia for the Kentucky wilderness. Although he never mentioned his motive, there are several clues which suggest an explanation for Meade's move. In his family history, Meade recorded that Maycox consisted of six hundred acres of very poor land with only a few good acres along the river.[6] In light of the poor quality of land at Maycox, the glowing reports of the beauty and fertility of the western lands could have inspired Meade to search for better land in Kentucky. In several letters written from Kentucky, Meade indicated that his financial standing was severely damaged during the Revolutionary War and that he never recovered his losses.

> I have been too much accustomed since the American Revolution to disappointments and losses to be much elated by the occurrence of any circumstance upon which a hope of better fortune may be grounded . . . For about twenty years I have been in a state of indigence. . .[7]

Meade may have sold his estate in an attempt to recover his dwindling income.

Regardless of his motive, it must have been difficult for the family to leave their native Virginia to come to the Kentucky frontier. At the journey's end, Meade recorded his sadness at the thought of never seeing his Virginia friends again. Realizing that his family shared his sense of loss, Meade intentionally remained in Lexington several months after the family's arrival in Kentucky.

> The sojournment in Lexington was inevitable but had it not been so, it had always been my intention to fix our females for a few weeks in as large a society as possible to divert their thoughts as much as I could from the objects which they had left behind in Virginia and the

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5 Meade to Prentis, August 1796, Webb-Prentis Collection (#4136), University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Virginia. Judge Joseph Prentis of Williamsburg, Virginia, was Sarah Waters Meade's first cousin.

6 Meade, "Meade Family History," p. 89.

7 Meade to Prentis, 19 September 1803, Webb-Prentis Collection.

> expedient answered very well — our daughter Sally was indeed very unhappy for the first few days and to such a degree as to apprehend that her brain would be turned. The vapor soon exhaled and after a ball or two — many tea parties and much flirtation — her ladiship [*sic.*] soon became as zealous a Lexingtonian as any in it. I must do the Mother and other daughters the justice to say that they never uttered a complaint — on the contrary they always appeared cheerful and contented.[8]

While the Meades were residing in Lexington, a temporary log house was being constructed at Chaumiere. After the family moved in, the Colonel described the residence in an early letter:

> Our present quarters is a log house 28 by 16 feet with a chimney in the middle having two fireplaces to each room below which are very small you may conclude — our dining room is 16 by 12 feet and our chamber is two feet narrower. The two wretched apartments above are loft chambers we have for the junior part of the family — the girls occupy the left or rather the most private room for that has a door put to it since we have been here — the other is David's [Meade's eldest son] chamber which serves for all the boys and two workmen to sleep in.[9]

The first few years of Meade's settlement were spent in intensive building activity. Shortly after his arrival at Chaumiere, Meade began construction on a second and larger temporary residence of log with the idea that it could eventually serve as the kitchen and wash house.[10] Meade described it also:

> It consists of different log houses so intimately connected as to form one mansion of five rooms, an entry ten feet wide and twenty long to our dining room door — and a long narrow cross passage — the apartments consist of a dining room — full twenty feet square — two smart uniform chambers about thirteen by fifteen in the clear — and two chambers which are lean-to or sheds ten by sixteen.[11]

A year later Meade continued to record his progress and his pleasure in the development of his residence:

> We have just finished two additional bedrooms which are of frame work — wainscotted chair board high and cornices with hearths of wrought stone from a quarry at our best spring which affords good stone and the best water in the neighborhood. Sally [Meade's eldest daughter] now occupies one of the new rooms and I will be bold to say is as well lodged as any of our friends or acquaintenance in Virginia when the little improvements I am making to the interior parts of a log building are finished. I think we shall have an elegant kind of Chaumiere for I will not dignify my collection of rooms with a name of higher class amongst buildings.[12]

Evidently by 1800 Meade had expanded what he originally had

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8 Meade to Prentis, 12 December 1796, Webb-Prentis Collection.
9 *Ibid.*
10 Meade to Prentis, 14 August 1796, Webb-Prentis Collection.
11 Meade to Prentis, 29 July 1797, Webb-Prentis Collection.
12 Meade to Prentis, 7 September 1798, Webb-Prentis Collection.

considered a temporary residence into a permanent mansion. In a November 12, 1800, letter to Judge Prentis, Meade enclosed a description of the existing rooms of Chaumiere as well as a detailed floor plan showing proposed additions. The source of the design of the house is unknown, although it is presumed to have been executed by Meade himself. The floor plan was unique among contemporary residences in the Commonwealth. In 1796 Meade wrote that Chaumiere's arrangement of one-story log rooms "is adverse to the prevailing stile [*sic.*] of log houses in these parts and my fancy is approved but by few."[13] He also noted that neighboring landowners were beginning to build houses of stone or brick in place of their original log dwellings.

Although the arrangement and functions of the rooms were unusual for the period and region, the layout reflected a variation of the Georgian plan found in England and Tidewater Virginia. The front apartments, which were accessible only from a long cross hall, perpendicular to the central hall, were designated as bedchambers rather than as parlors for entertaining. According to the 1800 floor plan, the only room provided for receiving guests was the large square dining room at the end of the central hall. With the addition of a stone kitchen (44 feet by 22 feet) in 1806, Chaumiere was complete as Meade had drawn it in 1800. Meade made particular provisions for a kitchen composed of a minimum of combustible material to reduce the danger of fire.[14]

Although Meade made no further reference in his letters to improving his residence after 1806, it is known that he constructed the surviving octagonal brick parlor prior to 1825. According to tradition, the room was added in anticipation of a visit by General LaFayette, although it is unknown whether LaFayette actually stopped at Chaumiere on his tour through Kentucky in May 1825. Reportedly the only brick portion of Chaumiere, the parlor is entered through a small vestibule with small dressing rooms or closets on each side. The octagon is spacious and well proportioned with a high ceiling. All woodwork is black walnut. Although the exact relationship of the parlor to the original portion of the house is unknown, it is believed to have been located to the right of the dining room.

During the first years of his residence in Kentucky, Meade was not exclusively occupied with the construction of Chaumiere. He

13 Meade to Prentis, 12 December 1796, Webb-Prentis Collection.
14 Meade to Prentis, 5 October 1806, Webb-Prentis Collection.

devoted an equal amount of time to horticulture and landscape gardening. In a letter dated July 29, 1797, Meade asked Judge Prentis to send him the following seeds for his garden: cauliflower, green savory, madivia cabbage, sugar loaf, stock July flower, hyacinth, pioney, white and yellow jessamine, honeysuckle, and rose.[15] Although Meade did not actually describe his garden in his letters to Judge Prentis, there are numerous personal accounts which elaborate on the beauties of Chaumiere. Dr. Horace Holley, president of Transylvania University from 1818 to 1827, was a frequent guest of the Meades. The following description of Chaumiere was written after one of his visits.

> His house consists of a cluster of buildings in front of which spreads a beautiful sloping lawn, smooth as velvet. From this walks diverge in various directions forming vistas terminated by picturesque objects. Seats, verdant banks, alcoves, and a chinese temple are all interspersed at convenient distances. The lake over which presides a Grecian temple, that you may imagine to be the home of the Water Nymphs, has in it a small island which communicates with the shore by a white bridge of one arch. The whole park is surrounded by a low, rustic stone fence almost hidden by roses and a honey-suckle, now in full flower. You enter from the road through a drive, which winds through a noble park; to a minor gate, the capitals to whose pillars are formed of roots of trees, carved by nature. There the rich scene of verdure and flower capped hedges burst upon you. There is no establishment like this in our country.[16]

Meade's garden was apparently influenced by the English garden, or park, introduced in that country in the mid-18th century by "Capability" Brown. The three principles on which Brown's work was based were perspective, light, and shade. Brown executed these tenets simply: in contours of green turf, mirrors of still water, or a few species of tree used singly or in clumps.[17]

In his later letters it became apparent that Meade took great pride in the Chaumiere grounds and regarded them as the supreme achievement of his life.

> I may with confidence assume that my gardens containing forty acres including ten acres of native wood are more extensive than any other in the United States . . . I had some muscular force at command none but a slave holder without pecuniary resources could have affected what I have done. My grounds are altogether the production of my own fancy . . . A Lady told me that she had heard of my Seat of Chaumiere

15 Meade to Prentis, 29 July 1797, Webb-Prentis Collection.

16 Mary Virginia Terhune, *More Colonial Homesteads and Their Stories* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1899), p. 79.

17 Lancelot Brown (1716-1783) an English landscape gardener and architect, received his unusual nickname "Capability" because he was fond of saying he could "see capabilities in estates." During his career, he designed gardens or parks for over one hundred and forty estates throughout England. Derek Clifford, *A History of Garden Design* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), pp. 158-59.

> in Ireland. I do indeed prefer it to any other I ever saw in my life. You will excuse the vanity of an old man in thinking favorably of a work which may be said to be of his own creation but I owe my success in commanding the commendation of all who have visited my garden much more to the fertile subject which I have had to operate upon than to any extraordinary skill which I possess in the art.[18]

Meade evidently shared his interest in landscape architecture and gardening with the French botanist Constantine Rafinesque who resided in Kentucky from 1819 to 1826. In his book, *A Life of Travels* (Philadelphia, 1836), Rafinesque mentions visiting Meade at his county seat where he was a frequent visitor (pp. 62, 70). When the idea of a botanical garden in Lexington was conceived by the state legislature in 1824, Rafinesque hired a gardener from David Meade for the work.[19]

It is apparent from the many accounts of the visitors at Chaumiere that the Meades were eagerly accepted into frontier society and became the focal point of Bluegrass social activities. A testimony to Chaumiere's fame was its appearance on the first map of Kentucky authorized by the General Assembly and published in 1818.[20] Dr. Holley colorfully described Colonel and Mrs. Meade upon his return from one of their frequent parties.

> He and his wife dress in the costume of the olden time; he wears the square coat and great cuffs, the long court vest, knee breeches, and white silk stockings at all times: the buttons of his coat and vest are of silver with the Meade crest on them. Mrs. Meade had the long waist, the stays, the ruffles at the elbow and the cap of the last century. She is very mild and lady-like, and though between sixty and seventy, plays upon her piano-forte, the first one brought to Kentucky, with the facility and cheerfulness of a young girl.[21]

Coinciding with the lavish entertaining was the need for many servants. The Jessamine County tax records from the period indicated that Meade owned an average of forty slaves from 1796 to 1825.[22] Susan C. Williams, the Colonel's granddaughter, gave an account of the house and garden servants.

> Seven men were kept at work on the grounds, mowing the grass, trimming and tending the trees, shrubberies, and gardens; not a leaf or a twig was ever allowed to remain on the velvet turf.
> There were cooks, dining room servants, coachmen, footmen, valets, and housemaids. The butler and men of the establishment wore a livery

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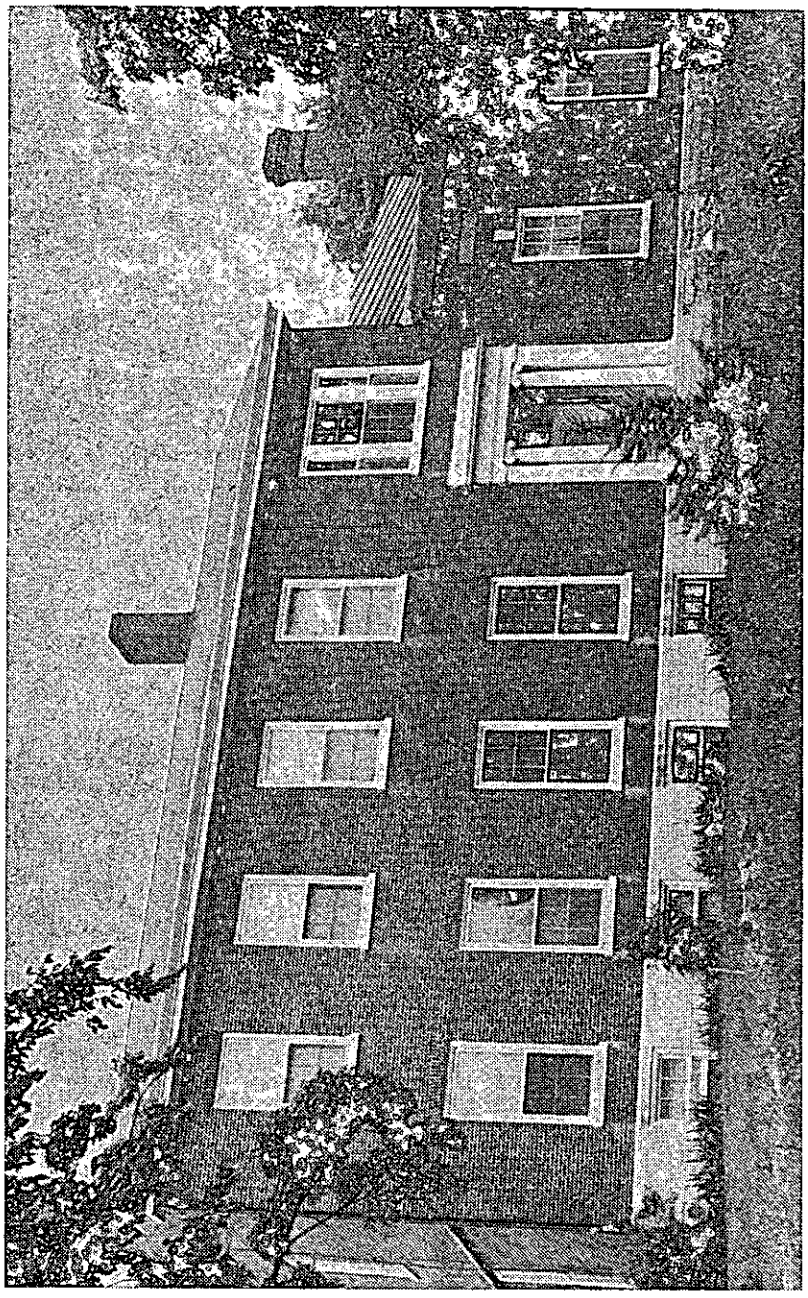
18 Meade to Prentis, 7 November 1825, Webb-Prentis Collection.
19 Meade to Rafinesque, 14 March 1825, Rafinesque Papers, Lexington Public Library, Lexington, Kentucky.
20 Map of Kentucky (Philadelphia: Luke Munsell, 1818), at the Old State Capitol, Frankfort, Kentucky.
21 Clara Goode, "Chaumiere des Prairies," *Journal of American History* XVI (1922), 327.
22 Jessamine County Tax Book, 1799, 1830, and 1832.



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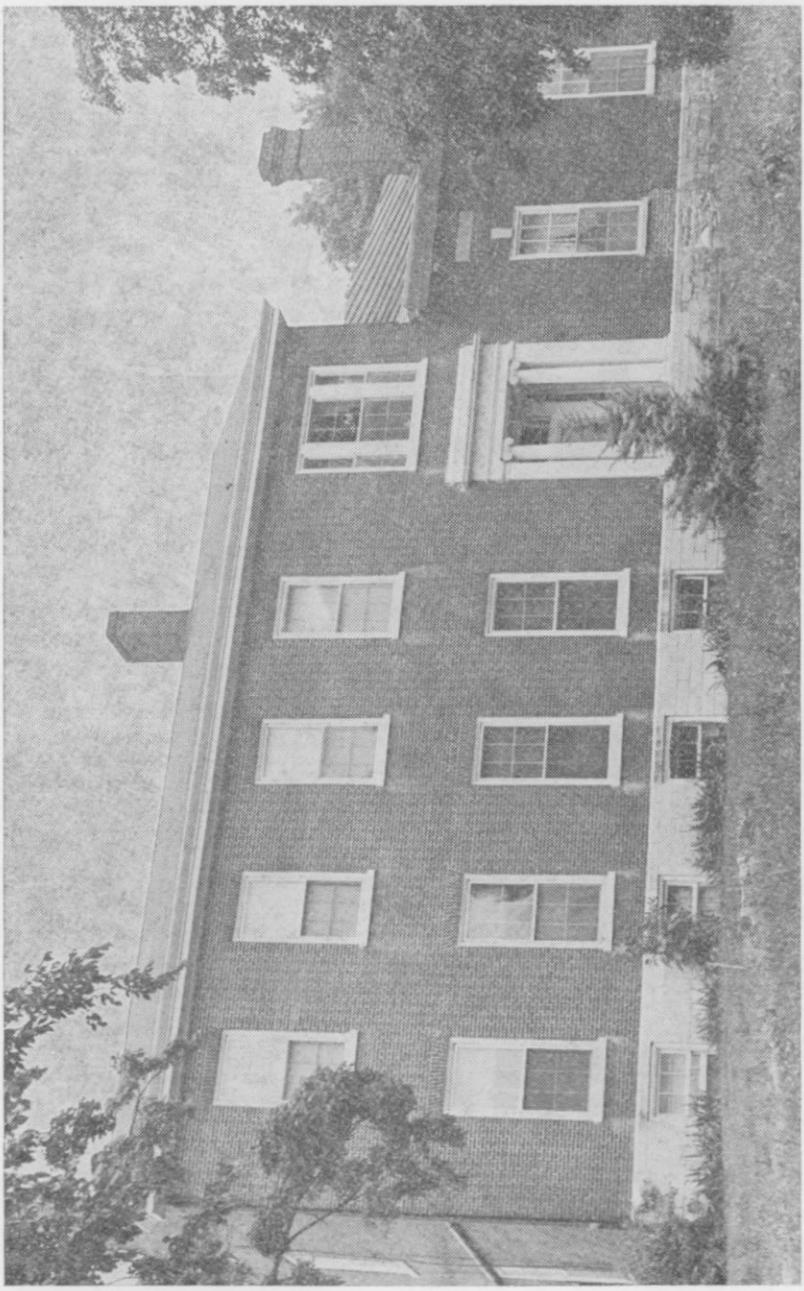

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Chaumiere des Prairies

> of drab cloth with silver buttons and low-cut shoes. The care of the silver and cut glass was no little charge. The magnificent solid silver plate, which was brought from England, and the costly china and cut glass were on such a lavish scale, that one hundred guests could be easily served at one time.[23]

In light of the grand opulence described by visitors, it is not surprising that Chaumiere was well known in this country and in Europe as well. Among the Meades' distinguished guests were James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, General Charles Scott, and Zachary Taylor. Henry Clay was also a frequent visitor.[24] Perhaps the most notorious were Aaron Burr, a school friend of Meade's son David, and Harman Blennerhassett. Meade mentioned in a letter that his son David, having been appointed Deputy Marshall, arrested Blennerhassett, and was responsible for escorting him to Richmond, Virginia to appear at the conspiracy trial of Aaron Burr. Meade stated that the escort and Blennerhassett were to stop at Chaumiere on the way to Richmond.[25]

David and Sarah Meade had nine children, five sons and four daughters. The eldest, David, who appeared to lack ambition and purpose, died unmarried before his thirtieth birthday. Andrew, a quiet studious young man, died while attending college at William and Mary in Williamsburg. Sallie, the eldest daughter, married Judge Charles W. Byrd, son of William Byrd of Westover, and resided in Chillicothe, Ohio. Richard Everard, described by his father as being intelligent and industrious, married and lived in Oldham County. He served repeatedly in the state legislature. William, who was evidently dim-witted, died a bachelor. Hugh Kidder, described as being industrious and fond of manual labor, married Judith Shelton. Susan married General Nathaniel Massie and lived in Chillicothe. Ann married Samuel Woodson of Nicholasville in Jessamine County. Betsy married William Creighton, first secretary of the state of Ohio.[26]

At the time of Meade's death in 1830 he was survived by three sons, three daughters, and at least thirty grandchildren. In his will he directed that his son Richard was to receive all of the livestock and plantation utensils. A number of small bequests were made to other members of the family. The land was to be divided equally among the children. Unfortunately, Meade specifically requested that no appraisement be made of his real or personal prop-

23 Terhune, *More Colonial Homesteads*, p. 88.
24 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
25 Meade to Prentis, 20 July 1807, Webb-Prentis Collection.
26 Meade, "Meade Family History," p. 37. Meade to Prentis, May 1807, Webb-Prentis Collection.

erty, so there is no inventory of his possessions at the time of his death.[27]

In 1832 Meade's heirs decided to sell Chaumiere. It is unknown whether the children lacked the funds to continue its operation or if they had already established their own plantations and could not live at Chaumiere. The estate was purchased at public auction by William Robards, a "plain practical farmer."[28] This surprised and distressed the citizens of Jessamine County, who had taken pride in the place. They were incensed and shortly after the new owner had been announced, there was a placard in large letters over the grounds with the words "Paradise Lost." In less than a week the beautiful gardens were filled with horses, cattle, and hogs. The forests were felled, lodges torn down, parks destroyed, and lakes drained. Main portions of the house were also demolished.[29] Today, the only remaining visage of Chaumiere des Prairies, as David Meade created it, is the octagonal brick parlor. The handsome Greek Revival house which is attached to the parlor was built by a subsequent owner in 1840. All evidence of the once magnificent gardens has vanished and been reclaimed by nature.

27 Jessamine County Will Book D, p. 152.
28 Bennett Young, *A History of Jessamine County, Kentucky* (Louisville: Courier Journal Job Printing Company, 1898), p. 216.
29 Terhune, *More Colonial Homesteads*, p. 95.