**Approximate Boundary of Spence Monroe’s Property**

The plantation where President James Monroe was born in 1758 consisted of 250 acres extending northwestward from Monroe Creek and lying on both sides of the tributary Freeneck Gut. Through a 1764 purchase, the property grew to 350 acres by the time James Monroe was six years old. Unfortunately, no document prior to 1774 includes a plat, useful boundary description, or even precise acreage. On the other hand, the location and extent of the property in 1758 and 1764 generally can be inferred from various sources.

In 1737 Spence Monroe, James Monroe’s father, inherited an unspecified amount of land through the will of his grandfather William Monroe (Deeds and Wills 8, pt. 2:471-473). In 1764 Spence Monroe added to his holdings by purchasing a 100-acre tract from his neighbor Francis Gray (Deeds and Wills 14:298-301). By the time James Monroe and his brother Spence each inherited one-half of the property in 1774, the total acreage stood at 350 acres. James Monroe’s portion lay on the south side of the dividing line, described as follows:

...beginning at the mouth of Freeneck Gut, extending up the meanders of the said Gut to the present Hogpen, from thence a course until it intersects Monroe’s line... (Deeds and Wills 16:128).

Freeneck Gut runs about 200 feet northeast of the archaeological remains of the Monroe dwelling, flowing eastward into Monroe Creek.

The 250-acre size of the family’s plantation when James Monroe was born is inferred by later transactions. Six years after Monroe had left Westmoreland to attend the College of William and Mary and then serve in the Revolutionary War, he described the old homeplace in a newspaper advertisement:

*For SALE, the fifth of January next... About 500 acres of land in Westmoreland county on Monroe’s creek, within a mile and a half of Potowmack river. It is perfectly level and rich; has standing on it, a quantity of valuable oak timber, adjoins the creek, large marshes which with part of the adjoining land, may be turned into a good meadow. There are also on the tract, a dwelling house with a passage and several rooms below and above, with a kitchen, barn, stables, and other necessary out-houses... (Virginia Gazette, Richmond: Purdie and Dixon, No. 94, 23 Dec 1780).*

In fact, when Monroe finally sold his property to Gawen Corbin in 1783, the deed recorded its size at 550 acres. This more precise estimate probably can be attributed to a survey made before the final sale, although unfortunately no plat was filed with the deed. The only other conveyance of land involving James Monroe in Westmoreland County’s well-preserved court records is a purchase of 200 acres from Nathaniel Gray in February 1781 (DB 16:154-155). Subtracting these 200 acres from the 550-acre sale to Corbin, James Monroe must have acquired a total of 350 acres through inheritance from his family. Apparently, this 350 acres included not only his “moeity,” or half, of his father’s estate, but also his brother Spence’s portion as well. No deed records the sale of Spence Monroe Jr.’s property and by 1782 when the first land tax records
appear he is absent from the rolls. National Park Service historian Charles Porter (1937) suggests he may have died intestate, leaving his portion of the property to his brother James Monroe.

In all likelihood, then, James Monroe inherited 175 acres in his own right from his father in 1774. Sometime between 1774 and 1782, he also acquired the other 175 acres that his brother Spence had inherited. It is likely that all of the land James Monroe inherited from his father lay within the original tract his father had received in 1737. Since the 100 acres Spence Monroe Sr. purchased from Francis Gray in 1764 lay to the north of Freeneck Gut, it became part of the inheritance of Spence Jr. (Porter 1937). The remaining 75 acres constituting the younger Spence’s portion of the 1774 estate would have been from the 1737 estate. Therefore, all 175 acres of James Monroe’s inheritance (south of Freeneck Gut) most likely were part of the holdings owned by his father in 1758.

Based on these assumptions, when James Monroe was born, the elder Spence Monroe’s property probably consisted of about 175 acres on the south bank of Freeneck Gut and 75 acres on the north. Spence Monroe’s will, the 1780 advertisement, and subsequent court records indicate that the eastern boundary was the bank of Monroe’s Creek. Although the will only vaguely describes the western boundary as “Monroe’s line,” the property may have extended to Route 632, which was the main road between Oak Grove and the Irish Neck (Colonial Beach) prior to the twentieth century. This older road runs on a parallel course about 150 ft. west of Route 205 in the vicinity of the Monroe dwelling site (compare 1892 and 1933 versions of Wakefield-Montross 15-minute topographic quadrangle maps). Assuming the western boundary was along the road, a rough outline of James Monroe’s inherited 175 acres was estimated with the help of a mapping program (TopoUSA) that calculates acreage as shapes are drawn over a base map. If the property extended farther west, the southern boundary would need to be pulled north (Figure 1). A similar, rough boundary was drawn for the inheritance of Spence Monroe, Jr. to the north of Freeneck Gut. While highly conjectural at this point, having these rough boundaries plotted on a modern map is a useful first step toward future historic preservation efforts.

Potential for further boundary information exists among the papers of Henry “Light Horse Harry” Lee and a discussion of his real estate transactions at the Virginia Historical Society. In 1799, Lee purchased the 550 acres Monroe had sold to Corbin. More precise boundaries also might be determined by tracing plats or metes and bounds for adjacent properties that indicate an identifiable property line for one of the Monroe holdings discussed here. These possibilities will be explored further during the course of research for this project.
Figure 1. Approximate extent of Monroe birthplace farm in 1774.