



# Set in stone

An heirloom wall defines  
a grand exterior

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIRGINIA HAMRICK





The more dramatic the house, the more challenging it is to create an appropriate landscape surrounding it. When Jim and Cynthia Stultz built their Western Albemarle house in 2000, architects Daggett & Grigg drew them a plan for an imposing Palladian-style home, including an ambitious hardscape that featured a high semicircular stone wall along the rear terrace.

The right stonemason to make this plan a reality, the Stultzes thought, would be Shelton Sprouse, whose credentials, in local terms, could not be bested. Sprouse is the builder of the stone wall that surrounds the vegetable garden at Mon-

ticello—and he's worked at Poplar Forest and Ash Lawn-Highland too, receiving an award from the American Institute of Architects for these presidential projects. He's been a stonemason since the early 1970s, and spent the better part of a year working at the Stultzes'.

"I didn't have any idea of the magnitude of the job," says Jim Stultz. Sprouse sourced the stone himself from a local creek valley, and along with partner John Apperson, painstakingly selected each stone as the wall slowly rose.

"It's intuitive," says Sprouse, also a musician, of his approach to stonework. "It's like playing

drums in a samba band; if you don't have that samba beat..."

The Stultzes' terrace emerges from a covered section just off the back door and opens onto a western view, feeling both expansive and, because of a stand of tall trees nearby, sheltered. A linear stretch gives way to a rounded peninsula that holds planting beds as well as seating.

It's this area that's defined by the semicircular wall. From a set of easy steps down from the terrace, one is drawn along a path that follows the outside of the curve, and as the ground slopes

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away the wall becomes taller and taller, until—at the bottom of a second set of steps—it looms high overhead. Large, roundish stones punctuate its surface, otherwise composed mostly of narrow, angular pieces.

The scale and precision of the work more than match the house itself. The Stultzes were happy enough with Sprouse's craftsmanship to bring him back for more. He built a hot tub surround just off the house, and contributed to what his clients call "the temple": a circular, open structure with classical columns, inspired, says Stultz, by something Jefferson drew. The third president called this feature a "folly."

"Montpelier has one," says Stultz. "Jefferson's never got built. I thought I'd give it my shot."



Stonemason Shelton Sprouse counts the stone wall around Monticello's vegetable garden among the most recognizable projects of his 40-plus-year career.

Situated downhill from the house, along the treeline, the temple is part of a larger landscape scheme that includes two pools and several sets of steps, bisected by water running through a channel. Sprouse constructed walls to enclose the steps and—in an echo of the larger project up the hill—define the upper, circular pool.

Sprouse says that while he did consult with his clients about their preferences, he works from basic principles that have stood him well through four decades of practicing his craft. "My instinct has always been the horizontal lay," he says. "I like the feeling of foundational stuff; I don't like seeing stones up on end."

## THE BREAKDOWN

1,000 square feet

Primary materials or finishes: Hand-gathered stones from a creek in White Hall

