

Henry Clay's House

Early in 1805 Clay contracted with local builder John Fisher for the construction of a mansion at Ashland. When the two-story Federal style house was complete, Clay and his family settled there for the remainder of his life. While the house was of a relatively simple Federal design, it was more spacious and substantial than most Kentucky homes of the period. Architectural historians Patrick Snadon and Michael Fazio state that as “a spreading, multi-part country house,” Ashland was “unusual for time and place.” Most Kentucky homes of that time were plain, dark, and dirty; a house like Clay’s stood in striking contrast: refined, smooth, gracious, and comparatively fashionable. The Ashland mansion, like many large-scale American homes of the time, was designed to accommodate a large family and graciously receive numerous guests.

This original structure, the central block, was home to Henry, Lucretia, and six of their children for about seven years until Clay began expanding the house to include a library, additional bedchambers, and a domestic service area. The addition of two wings presumably allowed for guest rooms and space for four more children to come. Clay began construction c. 1811-14 of the two single-story, “L”-shaped wings that projected to the front. The wings were designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764-1820), the British-born American architect best known for his work with Thomas Jefferson and his design of the United States Capitol. The timing of Clay’s additions to Ashland, Snadon and Fazio state, “would have corresponded both with Clay’s increased status on the national political scene and with his and Latrobe’s collaboration at the Capitol.” Clay may have met Latrobe as early as 1806-07 during his first Senate term, but their acquaintance was first documented in 1811 when Clay (then Speaker of the House) worked directly with Latrobe to “refit the House of Representatives chamber and improve its acoustics,” and the Latrobes and Clays subsequently became close friends.

In *The Domestic Architecture of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, Fazio and Snadon theorize: “It has long been known that Latrobe designed the wings around 1813-1814, but a thorough review of the documentation suggests that he may have designed the central block also.” The north “Chambers and Nursery” wing, as Fazio and Snadon explain, was built first (late summer into autumn 1813), while the south “Kitchen wing,” was built either before Clay’s trip to Ghent, Belgium or afterward (early 1814 or late 1815).