



# Race & Remembrance at *Thomas Jefferson's Monticello*

by Michael Aubrecht

Thomas Jefferson is remembered as perhaps the most exceptional Founding Father. His contributions to the birth of the United States are second to none, and his words have inspired generations of Americans to value their liberty. At the same time, the author of the Declaration of Independence is criticized as the most hypocritical affiliate of the revolutionary generation. The largest point of contention in this Virginia planter's legacy is his lifelong practice of slave owning and how it benefited him socially, politically, and personally.

## *History and Hypocrisy*

Jefferson experienced the so-called “peculiar institution” directly, as Monticello's slave population was one of the largest in Virginia. His community of human property resided just over the hill from the main house on what was referred to as “Mulberry Row.” Jefferson would often walk along the path tracing this community that included family dwellings, wood and ironwork shops, a smokehouse, a dairy, a wash house, and a stable. Five log cabins were also built near the site for additional household servants who did not fit in the basement-level dependency wings of the estate.

Monticello slaves maintained an arduous schedule. Most of them worked from dawn to dusk, six days per week. Only on Sundays and holidays could they pursue their own affairs. These included prayer meetings and worship. Unlike many masters, Jefferson actually paid

his slaves a monetary share for extra vegetables, chickens, and fish for the main house—as well as for special tasks performed outside their normal working hours. He also encouraged some of his enslaved artisans by offering them a percentage of profit from the sales of goods produced in their shops. An extremely diversified man himself, Jefferson was most likely impressed by the skills cultivated by his slaves. In this respect, his treatment of them imitates a mutual respect for hard working individuals who cared about contributing to Monticello's well-being. Jefferson's good friend, James Madison, also appreciated the vocations exhibited on Mulberry Row and purchased all of the nails used to enlarge his neighboring estate of Montpelier from Jefferson's nail foundry.

Like many powerful Southerners, Jefferson also benefited greatly from slavery in the political spectrum. Many experts have argued that Jefferson's election as the third President of the United States was due solely to the South's augmented representation in the Electoral College—three-fifths of a state's slave population could be counted for purposes of representation. At the time, detractors of his election referred to Jefferson as “the negro president” and criticized the clause in the Constitution that they believed enabled him to achieve victory. The Three-Fifths Compromise had been agreed upon to balance the voting power between the northern and southern states, but it resulted in a more aggressive importation of Africans that ultimately secured more power for the slave states.

The conflict that existed between Jefferson the slaveholder and Jefferson the proponent of liberty is still being debated and examined to this very day. According to the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, which preserves and presents the legacy of its namesake, Jefferson's words and deeds are contradictory on the issue of slavery. Although he wrote that “all men are created equal” and worked to limit the stranglehold of slavery on the new country, he personally found no political or economic remedies for the problem and







**Monticello and its reflection**  
*Photograph courtesy of Matt Kozlowski*

trusted that future generations would find a solution. “But as it is,” Jefferson wrote, “we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.” In fact, throughout his career, Jefferson repeatedly voiced displeasure with the institution of slavery. He referred to it as an “abominable crime,” a “moral depravity,” a “hideous blot,” and a “fatal stain that deformed what nature had bestowed on us of her fairest gifts.” He was successful in outlawing international slave trade in Virginia, but continued to keep slaves on all his farms there. This



**Thomas Jefferson**  
*Charles Willson Peale*

blatant contradiction illustrates the complexity that was Thomas Jefferson. One conclusion is that he believed that a practical solution to this moral dilemma could not be found in his lifetime.

Without a doubt, the most controversial issue in regards to Thomas Jefferson and slavery is his relationship with Sally Hemings. Several books have been published that specifically deal with the subject, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning book entitled *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* by Annette Gordon-Reed, and the counter-argument entitled *In Defense of Thomas Jefferson: The Sally Hemings*







*Sex Scandal* by William G. Hyland Jr.

Hemings, a house slave, was the half-sister of Jefferson's deceased wife, Martha. Rumors that Jefferson had fathered multiple children with Sally Hemings actually entered the public arena during his first term as president. It continued to hang over Jefferson's memory for many years. In 1998, Dr. Eugene Foster and a team of geneticists revealed that they had "established that an individual carrying the male Jefferson Y chromosome fathered Eston Hemings (born 1808), the last-known child born to Sally Hemings. There were approximately 25 adult male Jeffersons who carried this chromosome living in Virginia at that time, and a few of them are known to have visited Monticello." The study's authors, however, said, "the simplest and most probable conclusion was that Thomas Jefferson had fathered Eston Hemings.

The Thomas Jefferson Foundation's official statement on the matter declares:

*"Although the relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings has been for many years, and will surely continue to be, a subject of intense interest to historians and the public, the evidence is not definitive, and the complete story may never be known. The Foundation encourages its visitors and patrons, based on what evidence does exist, to make up their own minds as to the true nature of the relationship."*

This adds an entirely new layer to the complexity of Thomas Jefferson's views, not only on slavery, but also on race in general.

To this day, the Hemings Affair remains a hotly contested topic among Jefferson experts and enthusiasts alike. It is inevitably a mark on the life of a man who ultimately helped to establish a nation built on the foundation of freedom.

### ***Memories of Monticello***

The largest monument to the memory of Thomas Jefferson can be found at his beloved plantation. There



**Isaac Jefferson**

stands one of the most celebrated and recognizable houses in all of America. It is the only private residence to be featured on U.S. currency, and is heralded as a masterpiece of both form and function. Each year, millions of visitors traverse the rolling hills of Virginia to walk in the footsteps of a man who accomplished more in his lifetime than most. Upon arriving at Jefferson's estate, many feel a sense of awe at the magnificent architecture, beautiful gardens, and the breath-taking view of the valley that surrounds Monticello Mountain. Inside the main house, visitors

remain in astonishment of Jefferson's boundless creativity, ingenuity, and practicality. Every room and item appears to have a distinct purpose. A visit to the nearby museum reinforces the notion that few men were as intelligent or as creative as Jefferson, and that few households in the Commonwealth were as productive as Monticello.

One of the most welcome and recognizable additions to the site can be found in its vastly improved interpretation of slavery and the inclusion of more African American perspectives. As the subject of slavery is certainly an uncomfortable one, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation should be applauded for its renewed commitment to expanding the stories of those who experienced slavery firsthand. Five major elements of the Monticello experience now recall the institution. These include the newly expanded visitor center and gallery, the house tour, Mulberry Row, the visitor's guidebook, and the slave cemetery.

### ***Visitor Center***

This year marked the grand opening of the Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center and Smith Education Center at Monticello. There are two main galleries at this location (along with a theater, café, gift shop, and research library). Both exhibit halls feature displays dealing with slavery and the labor force at Monticello. In the upstairs gallery there is a biography card about Isaac Jefferson, who had served as a blacksmith, tinsmith, and nailer. Isaac's memoirs were recorded by an interviewer and remain among the most insightful narratives about the day-to-day lives





of Monticello's inhabitants. Isaac held a sincere affection for his owner and was reported as saying, "Old Master was very kind to servants."

Next to Isaac's display are matching biographies of John Hemings—a tremendously skilled woodworker who crafted much of the interior woodwork of Jefferson's house at Poplar Forest—and Sally Hemings. In addition to these biography cards, artifacts made by the enslaved artisans are on display. The craftsmanship that these slaves demonstrated is even more impressive when considering the technology (or lack thereof) they had at their disposal. In many instances, slave labor equaled skilled labor.

In the downstairs gallery, a large display titled "Those Who Built Monticello" presents the tradesmen, free and enslaved, as well as the tools they used to construct Jefferson's magnificent estate. According to the plaque:

*"Jefferson required highly-skilled workmen to realize his vision for Monticello. In Philadelphia in 1798 he engaged James Dinsmore, an Irish house joiner, to take charge of the ongoing construction in his absences. Dinsmore worked closely with enslaved joiner John Hemings to create much of Monticello's fine woodwork. The team of joiners also included James Oldham (1801-04) and John Neilson (1805-09), and another enslaved man, Lewis..."*

The plaque continues:

*"John Hemings, the son of Elizabeth (Betty) Hemings, apprenticed under Dinsmore and hired joiners. He became an accomplished craftsman, succeeded Dinsmore as head joiner in 1809, and trained other slaves in his trade, including his nephews Madison and Eston Hemings. A Monticello overseer recalled that Hemings 'could make anything that was wanted in woodwork.' He made fine furniture, a landau carriage, and much of the interior woodwork at Poplar Forest. Jefferson freed Hemings in his will and gave him all the tools of his shop. Continuing to work for the Jefferson family, Hemings lived for several more years at Monticello with his wife, Priscilla."*

### ***Main House and Dependencies***

Nothing major has changed noticeably at the top of the hill, although the guided tours are now more open to discussing the institution of slavery and how it was a crucial element in the construction, maintenance, and operation of Monticello. Some guides are known to immediately make a point of presenting Jefferson as a typical Virginia plantation owner who had established his lifestyle on the benefits of slave labor. Others quote Jefferson and say that he abhorred slavery and believed that he looked at his slaves with a paternalistic view—that they were children who required his supervision—then counter this by explaining how Jefferson greatly benefited from slavery.

Underneath the house remain several displays in the center alcove presenting the servants' quarters, artifacts, and slave lifestyle. The kitchen areas in particular present how Jefferson had his slave cooks trained by French chefs in the traditional dish preparations of the time. Adjacent quarters present the life of a slave named Joseph Fossett. The plaque reads:



**Monticello was voted one of the "Top 10 Iconic American Homes" by HGTV's FrontDoor.com, and one of "8 Places Every American Should See" by Budget Travel.**

*Photograph by Michael Aubrecht*





**Jefferson's slaves cultivated over 330 different vegetable varieties  
in Monticello's 1000-foot-long garden terrace.**

*Photograph courtesy of Michael Aubrecht*

*“Joseph Fossett (1780–1858) was the grandson of Elizabeth (Betty Hemings) and the son of Mary Hemings Bell, who became free in the 1790s while her son remained a slave at Monticello. According to overseer Edmund Backon, Fossett, a blacksmith, was ‘a very fine workman; could do anything it was necessary to do with steel or iron.’ Joseph and Edith Fossett had ten children, from James, born in the President’s House in 1805, to Jesse, born in 1830. Although Joseph Fossett was freed in Jefferson’s will, his wife and children were sold at the Monticello estate auction in 1827. He continued to work as a blacksmith and, with the help of his mother and other free family members, was able to purchase the freedom of Edith and some of their children. They moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, in the 1840s. In 1850 their son Peter, who left a number of recollections*

*of his life, became free and joined his family in Cincinnati, where he was a prominent caterer and Baptist minister.”*

***Mulberry Row***

Perhaps the most direct display of slave life at Monticello is along Mulberry Row. In addition to traditional placards, brick ruins mark the areas of significance. Named for the mulberry trees planted along it, Mulberry Row was the center of plantation activity at Monticello from the 1770s to Jefferson’s death in 1826. The Mulberry Row cabins were occupied mainly by household servants who did the cooking, washing, house cleaning, sewing, and child tending. According to Monticello’s website, “Not all slaves lived on Mulberry Row. A small number who were household servants lived in rooms in the basement-level dependency wings of Monticello, and others







lived in cabins located elsewhere at Monticello and outlying farms.” It is estimated that in 1796, there were over 110 African Americans living on the 5,000-acre plantation, and nearly half of them were children.

Stops along the way include slave dwellings, a workman’s house, a storehouse, a blacksmith shop, a nailery, and a joinery. Some visitors may not be aware that all building materials including Monticello’s bricks and nails were made on-site, and they will most certainly be surprised to learn that white workers also lived along this section of the estate. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation states:

*“A blacksmith shop was built on this site about 1793. Here Jefferson’s slaves Little George, Moses, and Joe Fossett shod horses, repaired the metal parts of plows and hoes, replaced gun parts, and made the iron portions of the carriages that Jefferson designed. Neighboring farmers brought work to the shop as well, and the slave blacksmiths were given a percentage of the profits of their labor. In 1794, Jefferson added a nail-making operation to the shop, in an effort to provide an additional source of income. Nail rod was shipped to Monticello by water from Philadelphia and was hammered into nails by as many as fourteen young male slaves, aged ten to sixteen.”*

The crumbled foundation of a typical Mulberry Row slave cabin remains. According to the plaque, the structures were approximately 20x12 feet, constructed of logs on stone foundations, with wood chimneys and earth floors. These buildings overlooked the main produce gardens. Today there is a special Plantation Tour available that covers the slave community and its daily contribution in more detail.

### Visitor’s Guidebook

Monticello, like most of the nation’s historical sites, provides a quality guidebook with each ticket purchase. This includes both an adult and a child’s version. In the past, some patrons have criticized the child’s pamphlet for containing “cheerful” illustrations depicting happy slaves cooking in the kitchen and playing with the Jefferson children around the fish pond. No doubt

slave-master relationships like this existed, but these representations can be viewed as illustrating complacency. Both sides of this argument are understandable, as little children are perhaps too young to understand or comprehend the issues of slavery, yet these candy-coated drawings gloss over the issue altogether.

The adult guidebook that is currently distributed features two large spreads dealing with slave labor. The first is titled “Mulberry Row” and includes an illustrated map of the grounds and photographs of artifacts. Once again, Isaac Jefferson makes an appearance (clearly the most exhibited slave on the premises). A section on the storehouse states:

*“In 1796 Jefferson recorded that the log building here was used for storing iron and nail rod for the blacksmith shop and nailery. It also served over time for tinsmithing and nail manufacture and as a dwelling. A slave named Isaac Jefferson, trained as a tinsmith in Philadelphia, briefly operated the tin shop.”*

The second spread is titled “The Plantation” and deals specifically with slavery:

*“Most of Jefferson’s slaves came to him by inheritance—20 from his father and 135 from his father-in-law. In 1782, he was the largest slaveholder in Albemarle County. For most of his life he*



**The Visitor’s Guidebook at Monticello details the contributions of slaves who lived and worked along Mulberry Row.**

*Photograph courtesy of Michael Aubrecht*





*was the owner of 200 slaves, two-thirds of them at Monticello and one-third at Poplar Forest, his plantation in Bedford County.”*

A photograph of Jefferson’s record of slaves complements the copy, and a sidebar deals directly with the subjects of enslaved families:

*“A number of extended families lived in bondage at Monticello for three or more generations, facilitating Jefferson’s operations as farm laborers, artisans, tradesmen and domestic workers. Among them were the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Elizabeth Hemings, David and Isabel Hern, Edward and Jane Gillette, and James and Cate Hubbard. Nights, Sundays, and holidays provided the only opportunities to socialize and nurture their connections that united them as a community. Like their fellows across the South, Monticello slaves resisted slavery’s dehumanizing effects by filling this time with expressions of a rich culture: gardening, needlework, music, religious practice. They were part of a cultural and spiritual life that flourished independent of their masters.”*

### Slave Cemetery

One additional area that deserves attention is the small African American graveyard located on the grounds of the estate. According to the sign, this cemetery is the final resting place of over 40 slaves who lived at Monticello from 1770–1827. It adds that although the names of Jefferson’s slaves were known, it has not been possible to identify any of those buried here.

### A Lasting Impression

Due to these new expansive interpretations, visitors to the new Monticello are more likely to come away with a more complex perspective of the man, as well as new conclusions. Many will acknowledge that the Thomas Jefferson we recognize today was a man who may very well have held a sincere paternalistic fondness for his slaves, but at the same time, he held his slaves in the chains of bondage. And despite the fact that many of his servants received specialized training and developed trades that resulted in

the creation of great things, they were simultaneously denied the basic principle of freedom. This is where the contradiction of the Patriot who penned the most famous call for liberty lies. Thomas Jefferson was an extraordinary man whose contributions to the United States cannot be denied, but he was also a man who adhered to the racist views of the period. This is an undeniable truth.

Thankfully, the folks at Monticello are not shying away from this aspect of Jefferson’s life, and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation has made great strides to include an African American presence in its presentation. This effort not only fills the void of a far-too-neglected history, but it also makes Thomas Jefferson human. Visitors today will more likely leave Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello with a broader understanding of this remarkable, yet flawed, Founding Father.



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