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“Without Obscuring Deeper Truths:” Interpreting Slavery and Jefferson at Monticello

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Abstract

This thesis examines the paradigmatic shift in interpretation that occurred at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello during the 1980s and 1990s. For decades, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation presented the site as a marvel of architecture, décor, as well as exemplifying Jefferson's tranquil domestic life and intellectual talents. Beginning in the 1980s, the Foundation began to address slavery at the site. Chapter one introduces the introduction of slavery interpretation during this period. Early attempts to interpret slavery became intertwined with the Foundation's positive portrayal of Jefferson before becoming more varied and provocative in the 1990s. Chapter two examines the parallel evolution in Jefferson scholarship, where biographers attempted to both address slavery and preserve their hagiographic vision of Jefferson. Chapter 3 explores an unintended consequence of the slavery interpretation: the reemergence of Jefferson's political legacies as a thematic and tonal counterbalance to critical discussions about slavery. The inclusion of slavery in Monticello's interpretation created a space for critical thought and provocative questions about the symbolism of Jefferson and the site. However, the presentation of Jefferson's political legacies remained uncritical and congratulatory, showing the limits of Monticello's transformation.

Introduction

Controversies in public history come in all shapes and sizes. Monticello's was big. In 1997 Harvard Professor Annette Gordon-Reed published *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*. Upending the traditional denials about the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims, Gordon-Reed brought the relationship back into the public view. In the following year, University of Virginia Professor Eugene Foster published a DNA study of Jefferson and Hemings descendants, which supported Gordon-Reed's claims. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, a private, non-profit organization that owns and operates Monticello, released their own study of the matter in 2000, agreeing with the findings. The news made national headlines, and Jefferson-Hemings descendants made an appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The press, along with Jefferson's reputation, brought national importance to a small, often provincial history. The news was well timed: occurring in the middle of a fundamental yet inconsistent transition not only at Monticello, but also at many historic sites and museums.

Monticello was not the only newsworthy historic site at the close of the century. The Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum had captured the public's attention a few years earlier with its proposed exhibit on the *Enola Gay*, the bomber that dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In addition to telling the history of the event, the exhibit curators brought up moral questions about the attack and connected it to later concerns about nuclear proliferation.¹ Critics were enraged by what they saw as moralizing and revisionist history. The exhibit did get off the ground, but only after major revisions and

¹ A comprehensible account about the *Enola Gay* can be found in Mike Wallace's *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

concessions. The controversies at Monticello and the Smithsonian were both part of a gradual process in which museums and historic sites began to employ social history and introduce provocative interpretations.

The paradigmatic changes to interpretation corresponded with a rise of literature about museums and historic sites. In the smaller sphere of historic plantations, the interpretation of slavery became a flashpoint. Public historians Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small visited over a hundred plantation sites to compile and categorize the interpretation of slavery. Their conclusion was bleak, concluding that “one is extremely unlikely to learn anything of real substance about the institution of slavery, enslaved people’s lives, or the relationship between the enslavement of the majority of plantation residents and the master-enslaver’s wealth.”² The edited collection *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* also emphasized both the importance and reluctance for many sites to deal honestly with the subject.³ These books examined the struggle, but also noted that the struggle indicated a transitional period with much promise. These larger, thematic works often pointed to macro-problems for the difficulty to interpret slavery. Guests expected a sanitized and positive view of American history. Plantation sites often prioritized decorative arts and architecture in their interpretation. While these conclusions held much merit, they often overshadowed the smaller, institutional reasons why it was difficult for sites to transition. For both plantation sites and beyond, institutional histories became a key resource to understand interpretive shifts.

² Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 7.

³ Lois E Horton, “Avoiding History,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York: New Press, 2006),

It was during this period that public historians founded a new genre: institutional histories of museums and historic sites. Taking cues from historic preservation and social sciences in addition to history, the genre quickly became a diverse field. Richard Handler and Eric Gable's *The New History in an Old Museum* jumpstarted the genre, creating a snapshot of the site's attempt to incorporate social history into its interpretation.⁴ In what would become a recurrent theme, Handler and Gable stressed the friction between the desires of guests to enjoy a sanitized history and the historian's duty for inclusive interpretation. Other institutional histories took a longer view of their subjects; Seth Bruggeman's *Here, George Washington was Born*, for example, followed the site from the Early Republic to the end of the 20th century.⁵

Most books went beyond a simple retelling of institutional policy changes. Charlene Mires' *Independence Hall in American Memory* emphasized Independence Hall's changing relationship with the surrounding urban landscape.⁶ In *Denmark Vesey's Garden*, Ethan Kyle and Blain Roberts used race as a framework to understand the historic tours, sites, and museums of Charleston, South Carolina.⁷ One point common in these works was the focus on change, and the studies spent most of their time exploring paradigm shifts. Out of many books, familiar patterns emerge. Often, a particular figure or vision guided the formations of historic sites and museums: like Henry Ford's vision

⁴ Richard Handler, and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁵ Seth Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

⁶ Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia: Univ Of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁷ Ethan Kyle and Blain Roberts. *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy* (New York: The New Press, 2018).

of Americanization at Greenfield Village.⁸ These visions were often diluted as the founding generation was replaced by new, professional leadership. This leadership often encouraged a sanitized, pro-American interpretation that idealized a pre-industrial past through material culture and architecture. Finally, the emergence of social history forced museums to rethink their interpretation and incorporate more inclusive and truthful versions of the past. Taken together, these institutional histories tell the story of museums and historic sites in the United States.

This thesis cannot claim to be a complete or comprehensive institutional history of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. Instead, this work will focus on the interpretative history of the site, which by itself can provide a powerful case study for the field. In many ways Monticello's development mirrored wider shifts in public history. Like many other historic sites and museums, Monticello began its tenure as a public site in the service of a particular vision. A group of Democratic lawyers and politicians founded the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation and purchased Monticello in 1923. In its early years, the Foundation promoted Thomas Jefferson's political legacies and strove to uplift Jefferson's national reputation while simultaneously using Jefferson as a unifying figure for the Democratic Party. This distinctive interpretation had faded by the mid-twentieth century, giving way to a standard interpretive array of decorative arts, architecture, and domestic life. This interpretation was strengthened by institutional professionalization as well as the popular and positive portrayals of Jefferson in biographies. Since the 1980s, however, the site has consistently experimented in

⁸ Jesse Swigger, *"History Is Bunk": Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

interpreting slavery, becoming increasingly provocative over time. It is possible—and perhaps indispensable—to compare Monticello to other historic sites.

But for all the similarities, Monticello cannot be classified as a simple historic plantation. In addition to the scenery and plantation context, Monticello's connection to Thomas Jefferson has always been a key factor in guest interest and site interpretation. Monticello's goal to interpret slavery was complicated by Jefferson's political reputation and legacies. Both guides and guests have asked how the author of the Declaration of Independence could have enslaved people. At Monticello, Jefferson often became a crystallized symbol for the nostalgia of America's founding and of Southern living. Attempts to interpret slavery at Monticello always had to address the traditional, nostalgic views of Jefferson. As a result, interpreting slavery has been the largest paradigm shifts in Monticello's history.

Chapter one will detail inclusion of slavery interpretation at Monticello. Beginning in the 1980s, the Foundation to include mentions of 'slave life' and the 'plantation economy' into their tours, lesson plans, and exhibits. Early attempts to interpret slavery marked a change in content but a continuation of tone and perspective. The hagiographic tone that the guides used for Jefferson was maintained through the insistence of his benevolent plantation management. By the early 1990s, increased programming and institutional support created a distinct space for slavery interpretation on Mulberry Row and had allowed guides to ask provocative questions about race, slavery, and enslaved people. Unlike earlier interpretation, Monticello began telling the stories of enslaved people, focusing on their agency and community. They also challenged the positive view of Jefferson by describing his involvement in the institution,

his connection with Sally Hemings, and his conduct managing the Monticello plantation. By the end of the decade, the transition to provocative, slavery-focused interpretation had made a significant impact on the site, yet it remained incomplete. The Foundation often supported traditional views on topics with an existing historiography in Jefferson scholarship.

Although historiographies of slavery and Early America evolved drastically in the wake of the social history boom, the Foundation committed itself to working within the confines of Jefferson scholars and biographers. Jefferson exemplars like Merrill Peterson and Dumas Malone gave lectures to guides, and Jefferson biographies featured prominently in interpretation reading lists.⁹ This historical niche usually presented Jefferson in a positive light, and downplayed questions of slavery. In the 1990s, management utilized these authors' perspectives to steer new interpretation. A 1990 brief on Jefferson and race promoted John Chester Miller's *The Wolf by the Ears* as the most prescient source.¹⁰ When Plantation Community Tour guides began to challenge the traditional consensus on the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims, management asked guides to take, "the historical perspective. Be sure to be clear that this story has never been substantiated, and that most Jefferson scholars do not accept its validity."¹¹

Chapter two will analyze these Jefferson scholars, beginning with Fawn Brodie's iconoclastic *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. Brodie challenged both the traditional methodology by studying Jefferson psychologically, and giving credence to

⁹ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, 111, box 1, folder 2, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 49.

¹⁰ "Jefferson and Race Relations," 1978, 111, box 7, Folder 54, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

¹¹ Elizabeth Taylor, "To: Plantation Life Interpreters," September 7, 1994, 111, box 7, folder 54, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

his desires, passions, and the assumptions from his upbringing. She used her psycho-historical method to explore Jefferson's understanding of race, his relationship with slavery, and his relationship with Sally Hemings. Her biography forced a reaction from the rest of the field, with Miller, Malone, and Jefferson biographer Noble Cunningham all defending Jefferson from many of Brodie's charges. In *The Wolf by the Ears*, Miller presented a complicated picture of Jefferson's political and intellectual comprehension of slavery, but steadfastly defended the founder from charges of sexual impropriety. Malone excused Jefferson from blame or agency with slavery, and Cunningham combined the views of both Malone and Miller. By the 1990s a new generation of scholars had challenged the prevailing opinions, with Joseph Ellis' *American Sphinx* taking a more balanced and critical approach to Jefferson and slavery. When Annette Gordon-Reed published *An American Controversy*, her book entered a genre already in transition.

Chapter three will examine trace the interpretation of Jefferson's political legacy at Monticello. The Foundation began as an intensely partisan organization, with close ties to the Democratic Party and President Franklin Roosevelt. In this era, the Foundation's interpretative initiatives often took place offsite and emphasized Jefferson's work as a politician and political philosopher. Post-World War II, the site shifted its gaze to decorative arts and architecture. Shedding its earlier identity as a patriotic and political shrine, Monticello became a cultural icon for domesticity and pre-industrial life. The emergence of slavery interpretation also heralded a reemergence of political interpretation, as guides discussed the contradictions between Jefferson's political fight for freedom and his personal entanglements with slavery. As the counterbalance to slavery, Jefferson's political legacy became diluted and artificially simplified. Although

the Foundation has made admirable to truthfully tell the story of slavery and enslaved people at Monticello, the same effort has not been the case for Jefferson's political legacies.

Much historical attention has been placed on the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation's creation in the 1920s and their groundbreaking restoration methods in the 1930s and 1940s. Monticello was an invaluable case study in the developing field of historic preservation as well as an exquisite example of the relationship between politics and public history. But Monticello's paradigmatic shift in the 1980s and 1990s can also be a fine model of the rise of social history and provocative interpretation in public history. From the 1990s onward, public historians have created institutional histories as a method to explore the relationship between history, national identity, and truth telling. The story of Monticello's interpretation represents a step in that direction. The history of interpretation is, at its core, a story about stories. The story of Monticello is a story worth telling.

Chapter 1:

The Development of Slavery Interpretation at Monticello

Interpretive change is neither smooth, constant, or simple. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation embarked on a paradigmatic shift in its interpretation, transforming a hallowed site dedicated to the memory and reputation of Thomas Jefferson into a provocative experience about all who lived at Monticello. Since the 1950s, Monticello's interpretation focused on the house through guided tours centered around architecture, decorative arts, and the private life of Jefferson. Hostesses presented Jefferson hagiographically and as an essentially domestic and intellectual character, with little reference to his political career. This Jefferson-centric approach shrouded other historical figures at Monticello.

But changes were distinctly visible on the horizon. The tone, and often the content, remained the same during the 1980s even while the historic landscape changed dramatically. The house, the traditional interpretive focal point, was joined by other sites on the mountaintop. Monticello's Archeology Department secured their first federal grant for excavating Mulberry Row, the industrial center of the plantation. The Foundation also reconstructed the vegetable garden and hired staff both to work in the garden and to create related interpretation. The Foundation advertised these sites as interpretive features, giving out brochures containing "a map of the grounds with the points of interest noted."¹² Off the mountaintop, the Foundation built a new Visitor Center, including a permanent exhibit about the Monticello plantation.

¹² "Script: House Tour Early 1980s," Sample House Tours: Circa 1986-1987. 111: box 9, folder 75, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, Charlottesville, 7.

The expansion of the physical landscape mirrored the expansion of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. During the 1980s and early 1990s the Foundation created an Education Department, a Center for Historic Plants, and an International Center for Jefferson Studies. The Education Department in particular was an important leap in Monticello's interpretation. Acting on several logistical complaints from schools, the President and the Board founded the department to create programming for field trips.¹³ The Education Department quickly expanded to include their own staff of guides, internal trainings, as well as creating and selling classroom lesson plans to schools. Continuing a trend begun in the 1950s, the Foundation became more interested in scholarship and more intentional in its interpretation. The changes were led by a new President, Daniel Jordan, along with other key figures: Curator Susan Stein; Peter Hatch, Director of Gardens and Grounds; and Research Historian Lucia Stanton. These figures, along with many others, spearheaded a paradigmatic shift in Monticello's interpretation.

Changes in the physical and institutional landscape prompted an expansion of Jefferson interpretation. Emerging from the architecture and curatorial minutiae that had characterized earlier interpretation, the Foundation began to incorporate the plantation context into Jefferson's story. While this opened the door for the eventual interpretation of slavery, the Foundation at first used the plantation to support their vision of a hagiographic Jefferson. Much of the early plantation interpretation was characterized by a focus on Jefferson, with the work and lives of enslaved people shown as a reflection on Jefferson's character. Monticello focused on the economics and technology of the plantation, rarely naming enslaved people and often characterizing them as a single,

¹³ Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, April 13, 1985, box 12, folder 149, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives.

monolithic group. During this period the new interpretation perpetuated both the centrality and the hagiography of Thomas Jefferson.

Slavery interpretation at Monticello began to expand by the early 1990s. The Foundation set up readerboards on Mulberry Row in 1989 and began plantation tours and events in 1993. The Education Department created their first non-Jefferson lesson plan based on the life of an enslaved man, Isaac Granger Jefferson. Foundation management included African American history as a core theme in the House Tour. Institutionally, Monticello paved the way for greater slavery scholarship and interpretation through an oral history project, scholarly committees, and original research and publication. Both departments and individual guides changed the content to align with the new scholarship. By the end of the 1990s, Monticello told the stories of individual slaves, discussed the nature of slavery and race, and had shifted its tone on Jefferson.

These shifts in the 1990s corresponded with a change in Jefferson scholarship and historic site practice. Up through the 1980s, the Foundation relied on the research of pro-Jefferson scholars like Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson. By the 1990s, Monticello branched out by creating an Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation, which included community leaders, Foundation staff, and academic historians. New research and new advising helped Monticello expand interpretations of slavery, but they were more reluctant to alter their views on topics with established historiographies, such as Jefferson's connection with slavery or the Jefferson-Hemings paternity scandal. It was only after the publication in 1997 of Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* that Monticello began to cautiously revise its own interpretation. Gordon-Reed's scholarship was part of a larger academic shift that

critically examined Jefferson and his dependence on slavery. Throughout this period, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation stayed close to Jefferson scholarship. This symbiosis between the research and interpretive departments affected more than just the guest experience; it changed the Foundation's vision of Monticello as a historic site.

There were many interpretive changes at Monticello throughout this period, but none more complete than the inclusion of slavery and enslaved people. The stories of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation—and the stories of Monticello—were now wrapped together with the inclusion of fuller histories and complex interpretations. They cannot be understood without an analysis of the incorporation of slavery and its consequences.

Monticello's interpretive history is filled with years of tranquil seas punctuated with periodic storms of change. The creation of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in 1923 was directly tied to contemporary Democratic politics and Jefferson's political legacy. In *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*, Patricia West described how “the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation was founded by Jefferson enthusiasts Democratic almost to a man.”¹⁴ Democrats, all the way to Roosevelt, used Monticello as a “patriotic shrine” to unite the Democratic party through Jeffersonian ideals in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵ The original interpretation mirrored the institutional origins: a focus on Jefferson's political vision and accomplishments with a grandiose, patriotic tone.¹⁶

¹⁴ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*, (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 108.

¹⁵ West, *Domesticating History*, 109.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Taylor, *Interpreting the Great Man*, September 24, 1998, Interpretive Master Plan Committee - 1998, 111, box 1, folder 8, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

Over time, this initial political emphasis gave way to a more domestic version of Jefferson. Head Guide Elizabeth Taylor blamed “the site itself. Visitors were captivated by the house and its novel features and artifacts.” Historian Merrill Peterson commented much the same: “under the charms of Monticello, the political symbolism broke down. . . . Where was Jefferson’s equalitarianism, his love of the people, his ‘democratic simplicity’ at Monticello?”¹⁷ There was a clear distinction between Jefferson’s lofty and intricate home and his political vision. Faced with a complex man who both advocated for yeoman farming and designed one of the most complicated homes in the early Republic, the Foundation began to consolidate its interpretation under a few key themes: Jefferson as architect, as a devoted family man, and as a progressive scientist and innovator.

Taylor attributed this to a shift in the 1950s. According to a 1978 committee report, “the ‘guided tour’ method of showing the house was instituted about 1950 when Negro guides were replaced by hostesses.”¹⁸ One aspect of this change was an increased connection with academic history and an increased emphasis on historical accuracy. The report concluded that the switch to hostesses “meant an end to the numerous and exaggerated, but delightful ‘tales.’”¹⁹ At this time the Foundation also endowed a chair at the University of Virginia, held by renowned Jefferson scholars Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson, both of whom gave trainings for hostesses.²⁰ Hostess training included

¹⁷ Merrill Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 389.

¹⁸ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, 111, box 1, folder 2, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

¹⁹ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

²⁰ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 17.

reading *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson* and specializing in areas of interest such as “architecture, furnishings, domestic life of Jefferson, landscape architecture, and gardening.”²¹

This paradigm continued into the 1980s. The only House tour script from this period contained nothing about Jefferson’s politics, nothing about the Monticello plantation, nothing about slavery, and was almost entirely a real estate tour. The only mention of slaves was of their absence: “the moveable dumbwaiters [serving tables] were pulled up to the dining room table so that small groups could serve and remove dishes themselves without servants being present.”²² Historian Lois Horton concluded that “up to the mid-1980s guides only occasionally mentioned ‘servants’ in the tour of the mansion.”²³ The first step to incorporating slavery was the inclusion of the plantation context, which stretched the ways in which guides—the term hostess had been switched out by the 1980s—and exhibit designers could maintain Jefferson’s comfortable domestic interpretation.

One feature of this early interpretation was to maintain Jefferson as the central figure of the plantation as well as the house. By the 1980s the expansion of the historic landscape necessitated the need for a broader interpretation of the enslaved community who lived and worked at these sites. The Foundation did so by interpreting the enslaved community through the lens of Jefferson. Just as his figure towered over topics like family life and architecture, interpretation began to include Jefferson as the benevolent

²¹ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 18.

²² “Script: House Tour Early 1980s,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 8.

²³ Lois E Horton “Avoiding History,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York: New Press, 2006), 139.

plantation owner. An Education Department lesson plan explained that “Jefferson owned 120 slaves and considered them part of his family. He was responsible for giving them food, shelter, firewood, clothes, and medical care.”²⁴ The new Monticello Visitor Center maintained a similar tone in its purpose statement on slave life which was “to give the visitor an idea of the number and identity of Jefferson’s slaves, and of their leisure activities and the clothing, food, and furniture rations provided by Jefferson.”²⁵

Interpretation of Jefferson as a benevolent plantation owner depended on an aggregation of agency around the plantation, where the Foundation attributed work and accomplishments to Jefferson rather than to the free and enslaved workers. Horton described how “Jefferson was the actor in these accounts: he ‘designed and built’ the house, an elaborate clock, and many other inventions, and ‘experimented’ with particular crops.”²⁶ The plantation became another way for Jefferson to become the hero, the innovator, and the father figure. Jefferson “decided on a mathematically derived formula using a seven-year plan” for crop rotations on the quarter fields.²⁷ The Foundation also mentioned Jefferson as “extensively researching the new farming techniques of the day,” illustrating the man as a pragmatic and competent innovator.²⁸

In at least one document, this agency included a conversation about slavery itself. The 1985 Guides’ Training Manual recounted that “Mr. Jefferson was one of the first to set up a plan for freeing the slaves: first they would be taught a trade and then after a

²⁴ “Monticello-Plantation Economy,” 1987, 91, box 3, folder 27, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

²⁵ “Staff Report: On an Interpretive Program for the Monticello Visitors Center,” November 1984, 111, box 1, folder 3, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 7.

²⁶ Lois Horton, “Avoiding History,” 138.

²⁷ “Monticello-Plantation Economy,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

²⁸ “Monticello-Plantation Economy,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

certain date they were to be emancipated.”²⁹ In this telling, Jefferson went above and beyond the apparent duties of a plantation owner. The Foundation gave Jefferson agency as an innovator and even a proto-abolitionist. Monticello’s attribution of agency not only guaranteed a positive tone while interpreting the plantation, but also maintained Jefferson’s exceptionalism.

However, the history of Jefferson and his plantation mirror other plantations and plantation owners in less flattering ways. Through poor crop yields and exorbitant spending habits, plantation owners across the region hovered near financial ruin. Monticello was no exception, and the Foundation could not ignore the financial difficulties that Jefferson frequently faced. Though they emphasized agency when it put Jefferson in a positive light, they emphasized general trends while interpreting the negative aspects of the plantation economy. Jefferson’s debt was explained away as “inherent to the Southern plantation economic system” and that “it was very costly to run a large plantation.”³⁰ There is no mention of Jefferson’s spending habits other than the remark that “not only the planter’s immediate family, but his slave family as well, had to be clothed, fed, and housed.”³¹ Certainly Monticello’s commercial viability was dependent on larger economic trends, but Jefferson’s own unrestrained spending and lack of oversight doomed his family’s financial fortunes. A decades-long process of designing and redesigning Monticello and his constant purchases—including over 80 crates of paintings, furniture, and scientific equipment from his time as Minister to France—also contributed to his financial decline. Generalizing Monticello’s financial woes allowed the

²⁹ “Guide’s Manual,” 1985, 111, box 9, folder 79, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 18.

³⁰ “Monticello-Plantation Economy,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives 2.

³¹ “Monticello-Plantation Economy,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

Foundation to continue to promote Jefferson's exceptionalism Even Jefferson's economic troubles became a source of upstanding character as he struggled with "the moral contradictions of balancing the need for economic profit and the desire for mild treatment of his slave laborers."³²

The Foundation also used passive voice and euphemism to minimize conversations about slavery while talking about the Monticello plantation. In describing how to wind the plantation clock, one script stated that "the ladder was used in order to reach the clock."³³ A lesson plan on plantation life explained that "gardens and orchards were maintained" and "cattle, sheep, and hogs were raised."³⁴ Passive voice allowed the Foundation to explore the economics of the plantation without mentioning enslaved laborers. Several times the buildings themselves became actors, such as when "his weaving shop often had troubles."³⁵ This was often combined with the use of euphemism. An audio tour script used the term "workers" while a lesson plan on architecture used "servants."^{36,37} The Foundation had no set standard, with different scripts giving different terms. The Foundation used these techniques to divide specific points to interpret slavery while diminishing slavery when interpreting other topics. A draft for the new Visitor Center exhibit included a section on "Slave Life," but did not include any reference to slavery or enslaved people in its section on farming and agriculture. Instead, it focused on tools, crops, and Jefferson's agricultural innovations. Whereas in prior decades

³² "Monticello-Plantation Economy," Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 3.

³³ "Script: House Tour Early 1980s," Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

³⁴ "Monticello-Plantation Economy," Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4.

³⁵ "Monticello-Plantation Economy," Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4.

³⁶ Acoustiguide Script, 1988, 111, box 5, folder 34, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 19.

³⁷ Monticello Architecture Teacher Resources Packet, September 5, 1988, 91, box 3, folder 27, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 6.

Monticello had eliminated almost any references to slavery, by the 1980s Monticello included a carefully curated and confined interpretation of slavery.

The combination of economic interpretation and passive language allowed the Foundation to construct an indirect and indistinct vision of enslaved people as both monolithic and dependent on Jefferson. Tours and lesson plans mentioned few enslaved people by name. The *Plantation Economy* lesson plan only names one, “his favorite slave, Burwell, the butler.”³⁸ Six were named in the 1985 Guides Training manual: the five enslaved men Jefferson freed in his will as well as Isaac Granger Jefferson, whose memoir was quoted to show Jefferson’s kindness towards the enslaved community.³⁹ Just as the Foundation gave agency to Jefferson while interpreting him positively, enslaved people were also given individuality so that Jefferson could be shown in a positive light. Rather than names, the enslaved community was more often characterized by their duties, with one house script beginning with a picturesque description of the daily plantation workflow.⁴⁰ The Foundation’s link between slavery and the plantation economy often prioritized the usefulness of enslaved people to the plantation, and by extension to Jefferson. Interpreting slavery became an unwanted byproduct of interpreting the historic landscape, the plantation economy, and Jefferson’s role as plantation owner.

Early slavery interpretation did not include much about slavery. Throughout the Foundation, interpretation expanded to include the plantation economics and production. Though they did not have a lesson plan on slavery, the Education Department did create plans on the *Plantation Economy* and *The Colonial Kitchen*, both of which mentioned

³⁸ “Monticello-Plantation Economy,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4

³⁹ “Guide’s Manual,” 1985, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 18.

⁴⁰ “The New Tour: Outline for Guiding,” September 7, 1986, 111, box 9, folder 75, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

enslaved people only in connection with their duties or in their relationship with Jefferson. When describing the nailery, the *Plantation Economy* lesson explained: “the nails were produced by ten to sixteen year old boys, a part of the slave population which had not previously been productive.”⁴¹ In house tour scripts, guides mentioned enslaved people only when explaining the plantation context at the beginning or end of tours.

The interpretation of slavery was often marginal during the 1980s: combined with other subjects and presented in line with a hagiographic image of Jefferson. The Foundation did not address uncomfortable topics, such as accounts of physical abuse and whippings even when they were ordered and recorded by Jefferson. Instead, one exhibit draft included a reference to Jefferson’s “whipping prohibition.”⁴² Another difficult topic, sales and family separation, was mostly ignored or glossed over. Thomas Jefferson sold over 100 enslaved people during his lifetime, and 130 more were sold after his death. The Guide’s Training Manual reasoned “that Mr. Jefferson tried to sell them with the land they were working on.”⁴³ Monticello could not avoid difficult history entirely, but they could contextualize those topics inside an interpretation positive to Thomas Jefferson.

As interpretation expanded in the 1980s, Monticello became more than just a house. The content matched changes in the physical site. Jefferson’s domestic interpretation spread to include Jefferson the benevolent and progressive plantation owner, and with this change came the awkward subject of slavery. The first attempts at interpreting slavery were often aimed at closing the issue as fast as possible. The enslaved community was related back to Jefferson’s stewardship, difficult subjects were

⁴¹ “Monticello-Plantation Economy,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4

⁴² “The New Tour: Outline for Guiding,” September 7, 1986, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

⁴³ “Guide’s Manual,” 1985, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 18.

downplayed, and enslaved people were rarely individualized. These first attempts would evolve over the next few years as slavery interpretation became more institutionalized, more professional, and more prevalent at Monticello.

Just as slavery interpretation leading up and into the 1980s was a transitional period, the 1990s can be analyzed as another decade of transition and experimentation. The Foundation strengthened its ties with a changing academic community and increased its own output of original research. Departments organized specialized events and tours to discuss slavery. As the topic developed through research and increased interpretation, the content changed along with it. Guides told the stories of enslaved individuals, discussed the nature of slavery, and challenged earlier interpretations of Jefferson.

As Monticello sailed into the 1990s, the Foundation continued its institutional expansion with Dan Jordan, the Foundation's President, championing the new departments. One key theme to much of the growth was the interest in academic research. The Foundation had maintained connections with academic research since the 1950s, sponsoring a chair in the University of Virginia's history department, and inviting scholars to give trainings to interpretive staff. The 1994 founding of the International Center for Jefferson Studies (ICJS) provided a new connection between academia and the Foundation. Another initiative, the Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation (ACAAI), provided expert advice on slavery interpretation throughout the site. These groups strengthened the Foundation's commitment to interpreting slavery and were instrumental in changing the interpretative content.

ICJS supported several new academic initiatives. They sponsored multiple scholarly conferences that brought leading scholars to Monticello, including one on

slavery and another on new ways to interpret Thomas Jefferson. Previous archeological projects were catalogued and published. Newly created fellowships funded historians researching all aspects of Jefferson and Monticello, with a particular emphasis on Jefferson's political accomplishments and legacies. One of ICJS's most important contributions was its creation of publishing opportunities. Susan Stein, Monticello's head curator, authored ICJS's first book: *The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello*, a work about the material culture of the site. Highlighting the transitional nature of the period, the department reprinted classic works on Jefferson alongside the new research. As such, by 1999 a Jefferson aficionado could purchase the glossy-covered reprint of *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book* alongside Lucia Stanton's work, *Slavery at Monticello*. *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book*, published with context and commentary in 1953, consoled the reader that Jefferson's slaves were happy to serve.⁴⁴ Stanton's newer work complicated that picture.

Many of the interpretive changes at Monticello came out of new research. Before Stanton, studies into slavery at Monticello were limited and disjointed. Earlier scholars like Malone and Peterson rarely mentioned the topic. Even historians who spent more time on the subject analyzed it from Jefferson's perspective. Archeological discoveries at the site revealed some of the material culture of the enslaved community, but until the 1990s no one had used the findings to write about the enslaved community more broadly. Lucia Stanton's *Slavery at Monticello*, published in 1996, represented the first attempt at that project. This research became the basis for both the Foundation's principles for slavery interpretation as well as the individual stories guides used on tours.

⁴⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, with Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings*, ed. Edwin Morris Betts, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 4.

New research required new sources. Prior sources, such as Jefferson's letters and Farm Book, listed names and duties but did not comment on the culture or individuality of enslaved people. Founded in 1993, the Getting Word oral history project reached out to descendants of the enslaved community. Conducting dozens of interviews, Stanton and others began to peel back the curtain of the enslaved experience at Monticello. These interviews provided color and personality for enslaved individuals. They also provided perspectives on Monticello other than Jefferson's. Getting Word provided two key features for interpretation. First, guides had enough sources to interpret individual acts of agency and resistance at Monticello. Second, there was an increasing amount of research that contradicted earlier scholarship about Jefferson and slavery at Monticello.

Getting Word also opened conversations on community engagement and diversity hiring. In 1992, ACAAI began its inaugural meeting discussing "the need to hire more African-American staff members, especially interpreters."⁴⁵ The Foundation implemented several plans throughout the 1990s to diversify the staff. They hired Black interpreters to provide first-person interpretation and to demonstrate crafts during events. The Foundation also began an internship program with the University of Virginia where a diverse group of students gave Plantation Community Tours. Similarly, ACAAI also discussed engagement with the local African American community, which felt "little reason to visit Monticello because it is not about African-American history."⁴⁶ Despite their initiatives, neither problem was solved effectively. Five years later, ACAAI still

⁴⁵ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, December, 1992, 111, box 3, folder 17, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

⁴⁶ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, December, 1992, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

listed both among their top concerns, with Foundation President Dan Jordan welcoming “any suggestions on how to improve the situation.”⁴⁷

Made up of both high-level Foundation staff and outside experts, ACAAI became the major institutional catalyst for slavery interpretation. They suggested changes to tours, encouraged and benched initiatives, and were the first to seriously consider the historical—and financial—consequences of interpreting slavery. Perhaps the most important part of the committee was the gravitas it lent to the interpretive program. ACAAI tabled a proposed memorial to the enslaved community, arguing that interpretation presented a better tribute than an ahistorical addition to the landscape.⁴⁸ At other points they made suggestions to language, tour routes, and curation. ACAAI created a backbone for slavery interpretation during a transitional period. Through ACAAI, Monticello staff had access to experts and historians, and its continued existence signaled the Foundation’s interest in the interpretation of slavery as well as its insistence in the quality of that interpretation.

Institutional changes at Monticello allowed for new ideas, new themes, and new interpretation. New research initiatives gave guides access not only to more content, but to different interpretive paradigms. This institutional emphasis mirrored programmatic changes. The Foundation implemented specialized programs like Plantation Weekends and Plantation Community Tours to explore the enslaved experience at Monticello. They also released a new lesson plan based on Isaac Granger Jefferson, an enslaved man at

⁴⁷ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, June 27, 1997, 111, box 3, folder 21, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

⁴⁸ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, December 14, 1995, 111, box 3, folder 18, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

Monticello. Even the traditional House Tour included conversations on slavery.

Throughout these years the Foundation continued to experiment with new ideas and often its intentions outpaced its resources. Plantation Community Tours passed unfurnished spaces, and several projects were proposed and abandoned. This impulse towards change was always uneven, with old interpretation circulated with the new.

Beginning in 1993, Plantation Weekends provided a living history experience centered on Mulberry Row, the industrial hub of Monticello. The Foundation brought in several living history interpreters to demonstrate historic crafts and to provide first-person interpretation. These events marked significant changes to visitor programs at the site; Plantation Weekends were one of the first programs to not include the House. It was also one of the first to focus primarily on enslaved people rather than Jefferson and his white family. First-person interpretation of enslaved people was also a milestone compared to the near complete lack of individuality in prior interpretation. But these weekends also continued themes from the 1980s. The Foundation designed these events to be family friendly; as a result, they minimized heavier topics in favor of craft demonstrations.

Plantation Community Tours, also founded in 1993, became another mainstay in the 1990s. Beginning on Mulberry Row and winding through the dependencies on the South side of the House, these tours lasted 45 minutes to an hour and were given by veteran guides and trained student interns twice a day during the summer. The content was different on these tours than any other program. By 1995 ACAAI noted that the tours had “become more courageous in content—talking about Jefferson and race as well as

slavery.”⁴⁹ These tours mixed individual stories with discussions about racism, resistance, punishment, and methods of control. The tours also became more participatory than the House Tour, with guides asking provocative questions and attempting to put guests into the shoes of the historical actors. Plantation Community Tours became a frequent cause of guest complaints, with one guest commenting “I want the great man tour.”⁵⁰

The House Tour was also changing. By 1994 new guides were trained to give the House Tour based around several themes. The Foundation still included mainstays like “Jefferson at Home” and “Architecture and Decorative Arts,” but also included was “African-American Life.”⁵¹ Sample tours from the period showed a distinct increase in mentioning enslaved people. One tour mentioned the work of enslaved joiner John Hemmings and spoke about enslaved cook Edith Fossett in the dining room.⁵² Several Tours from the period also include conversations about “conflicting images of Jefferson as Enlightenment thinker and life-long slave holder.”⁵³ Guides mentioned these topics briefly, as they competed for space against Jefferson’s lifetime and the curatorial curiosities. There were also occasions where these topics were not mentioned at all. While explaining the goals of the house tour to a college class, Head Guide Elizabeth Taylor was challenged by a student, who said “They are not about what you say they are. . .they are about Jefferson’s cool stuff.”⁵⁴ It would take more than a changed manual or

⁴⁹ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, December 14, 1995, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

⁵⁰ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, December 14, 1995, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

⁵¹ Guide’s Manual, 1994, 111, box 9, folder 82, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 3.

⁵² Tour of Monticello, 1998, 111, box 9, folder 78, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4-7.

⁵³ Elizabeth Taylor, Exhibition Tour Outline, 1993, 111, Box 9, Folder 78, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Taylor, *Interpreting the Great Man*, September 24, 1998, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

an extra training session to decouple the House Tour from the hagiographic image it presented.

As a result, the new programs began to segregate Monticello's interpretation. All guests received a House Tour for their tickets; other specialty tours and events were add-on bonuses. Guests taking the House Tour still heard an interpretation based on an idealistic version of Jefferson, with slavery mentioned in small cameo appearances. Eichstedt and Small describe this segregation as making it "easy to escape any real contemplation of or education about slavery. However, it is impossible to escape being informed about the magnificent architecture, the respected owner of the plantation, or period pieces of furniture or china."⁵⁵ Similar to other forms of segregation, interpretation was separate but not equal. Even plantation-based interpretation diverged. Guests arriving for a Plantation Weekend found a version of Monticello based around the enslaved community and craftsmanship, but without conversations on racism, family separation, or physical abuse. Guides covered these topics on Plantation Community Tours, but only to guests who chose to attend.

Monticello did make significant steps not just institutionally, but programmatically. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation prioritized interpreting slavery through the creation of committees, the funding of research, the creation of programs, and the inclusion of tour themes. However, high-level decisions did not always translate to changes in the visitor experience. Guests could always choose to watch the newly created Garden Tour over the Plantation Community Tour. They could spend time looking through the Jefferson memorabilia displayed in the basement instead of the

⁵⁵ Jennifer Eichstedt, and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 171.

crafting stations on Plantation Weekends. But this does not mean that the changes were meaningless. Newly introduced programs provided opportunities to introduce new content and to reassess older narratives.

The largest shifts occurred not in the programming, but in the content itself. New themes joined older emphases on the plantation economy and craftsmanship. Guides named enslaved people and told individual stories that emphasized agency. They discussed race and racism, and Jefferson's views became more complicated and less saint-like. There were limits to these changes: the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims were treated gingerly and the Foundation often privileged white viewpoints during discussions of the topic. Likewise, a small but consistent number of guests resisted the new history.

The most limited form of new interpretation was the continued emphasis on craftsmanship and the plantation economy. Plantation Weekends gave new life to this interpretive style. When reviewing the program, ACAAI mentions the different stations purely by the demonstrated craft: nail making, cooking, and basket making among them.⁵⁶ The House Tour also emphasized craftsmanship by connecting enslaved people to objects and duties around the house: "John Hemings constructed this archway during his apprenticeship."⁵⁷ This focus on trades had several consequences. Even when guides named enslaved people, those figures became defined by their duties rather than their individuality, their humanity, or their enslavement. They were mentioned because they were useful to Jefferson. Often, they were not named at all. The Foundation brought in

⁵⁶ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, September 3, 1996, 111, box 3, folder 19, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 12.

⁵⁷ Tour of Monticello, 1998, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4.

outside interpreters to demonstrate crafts during Plantation Weekends. Although experts in their crafts, the outside interpreters did not know Monticello history, and as such could not comment on broader themes at Monticello. Talks on trades and craftsmanship were seen as the least controversial and the most family friendly. They were also the most limited in telling the broader realities of slavery.

Programmatic changes forced the interpretive staff to begin to explore the individual stories of enslaved people. A student lesson plan tasked high schoolers to learn more about Isaac Granger Jefferson, an enslaved man who left behind an oral history. Plantation Weekends included first-person interpreters. Plantation Community Tours spent the most time talking about enslaved individuals who lived at Monticello: a goal baked into the tour from the beginning. When stopping at the kitchen, guides were to “develop some of the kitchen/cook’s room personalities: James Hemings, Peter Hemings, Edy Fossett, Fanny.”⁵⁸ Many of these individual stories brought in larger themes. James Hemings committed suicide, prompting questions about racism and mental health. Edith Fossett and her children were sold after Jefferson’s death, a common cruelty at Monticello and other plantations. Individual stories became gateways into heavy topics, and helped audiences empathize with the human costs of slavery. By the 1990s, Plantation Community Tours gave guides and guests an opportunity to uncover and discuss the realities of slavery through the experiences of enslaved people.

Slavery itself—its nature, its scope, and its consequences—was a topic that Monticello only loosely covered. Plantation Weekends offered their own version of slavery through craft demonstrations and enthusiastic interpreters. House Tours avoided

⁵⁸ “The Plantation Community Tour Proposal for Content Covered, Stop By Stop,” February 1993, 111, box 7, folder 54, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4.

the subject almost entirely, preferring to mention enslaved people in passing or quickly inserting a line about the plantation setting. There are only two programs that attempted to provide an overall understanding of slavery: the *Finding Isaac Jefferson* lesson plan and the Plantation Community Tour. The lesson plan began with a general overview of the subject: the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, how slavery grew in Virginia, and the day-to-day realities of enslaved people. The tone was often blunt; the section on plantation management concluded “the threat of dominance and violent punishment prevailed within the nature of the system no matter how well an enslaved person might be treated.”⁵⁹ The Plantation Community Tour employed similar bluntness. Both these programs had the advantage of self-selecting audiences. Beyond those examples, the Foundation rarely invited guests to ponder the realities of slavery.

The Foundation was more open to mentioning Jefferson’s connection with slavery. House Tours brought out the paradox between Jefferson’s political accomplishments and his domestic involvement in slavery. Plantation Community Tours often delved deep into the subject, looking at Jefferson’s views on race as well as slavery. But the interpretation of Jefferson and slavery was often inconsistent. Throughout the 1990s the Guides Training Manual included a section titled “Jefferson’s Attempts to Curb Slavery” where the Foundation detailed Jefferson’s personal feelings and political moves towards the institution.⁶⁰ Although the document did not exonerate Jefferson entirely, it portrayed Jefferson as an exceptional plantation owner and conscientious public figure. At the same time, Plantation Community Tour guides asked guests “Why did he not do

⁵⁹ “Find Isaac Jefferson, A Monticello Slave,” 1994, 91, box 5, fold 70, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

⁶⁰ Guide’s Manual, 1994, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 26.

more politically—especially as President—to bring slavery to an end?”⁶¹ Conversations about Jefferson and slavery necessarily complicated the image of the founder, creating a fissure between interpretation and Monticello’s identity as a shrine to Jefferson. Guides carefully navigated this conversation. Upon being asked if Jefferson was a good slave owner, one guide punted “I don’t know.”⁶² Other guides relished the opportunity to “really get in there and mix it up.”⁶³ The Plantation Community Tour frequently differentiated from other interpretation. Though each guide wrote their own script, these tours consistently challenged traditional understandings of Jefferson. And more than any other topic, guests objected to the negative portrayal of Jefferson presented during discussions.

Topics like Jefferson and slavery were one way to provide a provocative interpretation at Monticello. Monticello had traditionally been a site of nostalgia. Carefully chosen topics combined with curated rooms provided a quaint tour designed to match the statuesque reputation of the founding father. This nostalgia presented the site not as a historic site, but as a monument and shrine to Thomas Jefferson. Even in the 1990s the Foundation mission statement was “to preserve and maintain Monticello. . . as a monument to the genius and patriotism of Thomas Jefferson.”⁶⁴ Slavery interpretation undercut the traditional view not just by offering provocative interpretation, but by designing it to be so. Management directed Plantation Community Tour guides to

⁶¹ The Plantation Community Tour Proposal for Content Covered, Stop By Stop,” February 1993, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 3.

⁶² Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, September 3, 1996, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 32.

⁶³ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, September 3, 1996, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 32-33.

⁶⁴ Guide’s Manual, 1994, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 3.

“always remember that our goal is to provoke thought on a significant yet complex aspect of our county’s history.”⁶⁵ Guides discussed race and racism and connected slavery to contemporary topics such as Affirmative Action.⁶⁶ Provocative interpretation was only extant during conversations about slavery. This approach gradually gained prominence throughout the Foundation, but it was the topic of slavery that planted the first seeds in establishing Monticello as a genuine historic site.

There were limits to this new interpretation, most notably during discussions of the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims. For generations, most mainstream scholars argued that Jefferson was not the father to Sally Hemings’ children.⁶⁷ As the source base changed through new oral histories and revised readings of older documents, guides used the material to provoke discussion. At one point management stepped in, cautioning guides to “review your treatment of the story that Jefferson fathered children with Sally Hemings. One interpreter, presumably in an effort to respect the oral tradition of descendants of Sally Hemings who claim Jefferson was their ancestor, referred to ‘two equally convincing sides’ of the issue.”⁶⁸ In this respect, Plantation Community guides outpaced both Foundation management and scholarly consensus. It would take another three years for Annette Gordon-Reed to publish *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An*

⁶⁵ The Plantation Community Tour Proposal for Content Covered, Stop By Stop,” February 1993, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 5.

⁶⁶ Advisory Committee on African-American History Minutes, September 3, 1996, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 31.

⁶⁷ Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson both opposed the claim, stating that fathering children with an enslaved woman was dramatically outside Jefferson’s character. This view was echoed in other texts, including John Chester Miller’s *Wolf By the Ears*, one of the first books about Jefferson and slavery. In her book, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, Fawn Brodie argued that Jefferson had fathered children.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Taylor, “To: Plantation Life Interpreters,” September 7, 1994, 111, box 7, folder 54, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives 1.

American Controversy. New sources and new interpretive inclinations allowed guides to ask new questions about Monticello: about enslaved agency and resistance and about the nature of the institution. The lack of historiography about slavery at Monticello allowed the Foundation chances to forge ahead with the tide of new social historians and museum professionals. Where there was an existing historiography, such as Jefferson's involvement with slavery or the paternity claims, the Foundation found it difficult to distance itself from the older literature.

Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy marked the largest historiographical change in the decade. After detailing the evidence, Gordon-Reed concluded that the Hemings family had strong arguments, but it was her historiographical conclusions that were the most pointed. She explained, "it is my belief that those who are considered Jefferson scholars have never made a serious and objective attempt to get at the truth of this matter."⁶⁹ A University of Virginia professor followed up the book with DNA testing, showing a connection between the Hemings and Jefferson lines. In 2000, the Foundation released their own report on the matter, concluding that Jefferson "most likely was the father of all six of Sally Hemings' children."⁷⁰ A controversy two centuries old was flipped on its head in a few short years. Despite the ensuing headlines and *Oprah Show* appearances, this controversy did not fundamentally shift interpretation at Monticello. Guides, both in the house and on Mulberry Row, interpreted the new conclusions. Departments sifted through their training manuals and lesson plans,

⁶⁹ Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: an American Controversy*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 224.

⁷⁰ "Report of the Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings," (Charlottesville, Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2000).

designating older versions to be rewritten. But that process was already occurring throughout the decade.

Interpreting slavery had transformed Monticello from a shrine to Jefferson to a historic site dedicated to interpreting more than just hagiography. Although leadership in the Foundation encouraged the interpretation of African American history, the paradigm shift that occurred was not wholly planned. Ways to incorporate the plantation into tours and exhibits forced new questions about the site, Thomas Jefferson, and the enslaved community. The Foundation sponsored new research and fostered more connections with the academic community. Both management and individual guides incorporated that research into their programs and tours. *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* was seeded into a fertile field, a transitional period where both interpretation and the mission of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation fundamentally shifted.

Chapter 2: Slavery in Jefferson Biographies

Historic houses have a habit for ignoring history. In the decades prior to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation's first attempts at interpreting slavery, the Foundation steadfastly ignored the changing currents of academic history. Instead, like many other historic houses, Monticello embraced decorative arts and architecture as primary subjects for interpretation. Despite repeated concerns from leadership, guided tours often focused more on the furniture and original Jeffersonian artifacts than on the man and historical context.⁷¹ A 1969 interpretive plan outlined the standard tour by listing objects to interpret in each room.⁷² But even as guides explained the connected parlor doors and the deconstructed grandfather clock in the entrance hall, Thomas Jefferson never fully disappeared from the narrative. Guides often connected physical objects with facts about Jefferson. In one tour, a guide used Jefferson's architect's table to represent his interest not only in architecture, but in education through the University of Virginia.⁷³ Beginning in the 1950s, The Foundation created reading lists and sponsored lectures to instruct guides about decorative arts, architecture, horticulture, as well as Thomas Jefferson. As a result, Monticello found for itself a niche historical eddy based around the growing professional field of material culture and the evergreen collection of Jefferson scholarship.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Taylor, *Interpreting the Great Man*, September 24, 1998, 111, Box 1, Folder 8, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

⁷² "Showing Monticello: Past and Future," 1969-1970, 111, box 1, folder 1, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

⁷³ "The New Tour: Outline for Guiding," September 7, 1986, 111, box 9, folder 75, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4

Specifically, the interpretation of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello coincided with and mirrored midcentury Jefferson biographies. Both Monticello's interpretation and Jefferson biographies minimized and ignored slavery, despite the social history revolution in the late 1960s and the emergence of slavery as a valid and energized field of study. Fawn Brodie's 1974 biography, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, broke the dam on Jefferson's involvement in slavery, his understanding of race, and the alleged relationship between himself and Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman at Monticello. It was one thing for a scholar to negatively portray Jefferson in a broader work in American history or in a book about other founders—Jefferson is rarely a sympathetic character in Hamilton biographies.⁷⁴ It was another to ask uncomfortable questions about racism and power, and about Jefferson and Hemings, in a Jefferson biography. Brodie's work was a direct attack on existing Jefferson scholarship. The years between 1974 and 1993 marked a period of reaction where Jefferson scholars were forced to reconcile their positive interpretations of Jefferson with questions about slavery, race, and sex.

This chapter focuses on five Jefferson biographies, beginning chronologically with Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974). Brodie's experimental book examined Jefferson's private life and psychology and questioned assumptions about the role of slavery in Jefferson's life. Dumas Malone's *The Sage of Monticello* (1981) and Noble Cunningham's *In Pursuit of Reason* (1988) both addressed yet minimized the issue of slavery by placing it the context of Jefferson's political career and intellectual beliefs. John Chester Miller's *Wolf by the Ears* (1977) represented a more direct response to

⁷⁴ Joanne Freeman, "Punching the Ticket: Hamilton Biographers and the Sins of Thomas Jefferson," in *Thomas Jefferson's Lives: Biographers and the Battle for History*, ed. Robert McDonald (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

Brodie. Devoting the entire book to Jefferson's views on slavery, Miller attempted to reconcile the renowned Jefferson portrayed by biographers with the rising criticism about Jefferson's lifelong role as an enslaver. A new generation of scholars reexamined Jefferson and slavery in the 1990s. Joseph Ellis' *American Sphinx* (1996) presented an evolving Jefferson who struggled with slavery on both political and personal levels. *American Sphinx* was also one of the first biographies to take the Hemings paternity allegations seriously.

From its earliest beginnings, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation grew alongside biographies. During its first decades, a decidedly Democratic Board of Directors embraced popular Jefferson biographer Claude Bowers' vision of Jefferson as a herald of both democracy and the Democratic Party.⁷⁵ Fiske and Marie Kimball, head of restoration and curation respectively, both contributed to Jefferson scholarship. Marie Kimball began a multi-volume biography of Jefferson towards the end of her life, finishing the first three books before her death. By the mid-twentieth century the Foundation had cemented their relationship with Jefferson scholars by partnering with the University of Virginia. By endowing a chair in UVA's history department, they enticed Jefferson scholars Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson to Charlottesville. Malone's six volume *Jefferson and His Time* won a Pulitzer Prize, while Peterson's work on Jefferson earned him a Bancroft. The two worked closely with the TJMF, leading trainings for staff while Malone served on the Board of Directors.

⁷⁵ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: the Political Origins of America's House Museums*, (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 108.

These biographers benefitted from new resources. Though there had been several attempts at collecting and publishing Jefferson's mountainous volume of papers, the quality and scope of the projects varied widely. Princeton's *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* series, headed by Julian Boyd, published its first volume in 1950. The project gave scholars an accurate and expansive collection of primary sources. Archeological and curatorial projects at Monticello also expanded knowledge of domestic and plantation life. Biographers also benefitted from a public interested in their past and a political atmosphere that privileged American heritage as a method to instill patriotism.⁷⁶ Francis Cogliano categorized both Peterson and Malone as members of the Consensus school of history, viewing Jefferson and his Declaration as originators of American values.⁷⁷ Put together, the mid-twentieth century was a period ripe for the expansion of Jefferson scholarship. Despite the new contours of the historical field, this generation of scholars largely expanded their work along traditional lines. Most Jefferson biographers focused on Jefferson's public life, with Kimball and Malone both segmenting their multi-volume works based on Jefferson's career. They also emphasized his intellectual gifts and described a warm personality. Overall, the popular image of mid-century Jefferson was that a likeable political philosopher thrust into extraordinary times.

Despite the positive tone—or, perhaps, because of it—biographers generally steered away from controversial topics, most notably slavery. The emergence of social history in the 1960s raised questions about Jefferson's personal and political

⁷⁶ Teresa Bergman, *Exhibiting Patriotism: Creating and Contesting Interpretations of American Historic Sites* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 16. See also John Gillis, *Commemorations: the Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994).

⁷⁷ Francis Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 6.

entanglement with the institution, as did the expanding bodies of work on slavery and the American Revolution. Both before and during that decade biographers avoided the topic, with neither Malone, Peterson, or Kimball dedicating more than a page or two on the subject. This tactic did not make the issue disappear, and UCLA Professor Fawn Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974) breathed new life into connections between Jefferson and Sally Hemings.⁷⁸ While Jefferson biographers could feasibly ignore the advancing historiography generally, Brodie's work directly challenged the prevailing currents in Jefferson biography. The challenge forced other biographers to respond not only to the Jefferson-Hemings claims, but also to broader questions about Jefferson's involvement in slavery.

Fawn Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* stands as one of the most iconoclastic Jefferson biographies ever written. The major Jefferson scholars of the day prioritized their biographies on Jefferson's public service as well as his intellectual life. Brodie flipped the script by examining Jefferson's private life and shaping her understanding of Jefferson on psychology rather than political philosophy. Her psychological perspective on slavery began in Jefferson's early life, where he "learned very early that whites ruled over blacks even as children."⁷⁹ For Brodie, Jefferson's understanding of race and slavery did not come from reading an Enlightenment text or a political newspaper, but from everyday interactions during his childhood. These

⁷⁸ Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997) provides an extensive historiography of the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims. In his 1857 Jefferson biography, Henry Randell denied the claims as a hoax created by Jefferson's political opponents. Since then, most Jefferson biographers have followed that tack by referring to the political scandal and by privileging accounts from Jefferson's white descendants.

⁷⁹ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), 49.

interactions grew into convictions. For example, Jefferson believed that Black expatriation must follow abolition. Brodie believed that “Jefferson as a small child somehow developed a feeling he was never able to wholly escape, that blacks and whites must be kept carefully separate.”⁸⁰ But if his youth oriented Jefferson in traditional viewpoints, it also allowed him to see the injustice in the system. This contradiction cyclically appeared during his lifetime. Jefferson’s defense of natural rights “first came to his lips publicly in the defense of a black man.”⁸¹ Yet even as he defended those rights for one man, he bought a Runaway ad in the local paper to keep another in bondage.⁸²

Taking Jefferson’s book *Notes on the State of Virginia* as a key source, Brodie painstakingly reviewed Jefferson’s position on race and emancipation. In *Notes*, Jefferson wrote “about Negroes as would a scientist.”⁸³ Brodie made explicit the connection between the Jefferson’s participation in Enlightenment ideas and the racial characterizations the movement propagated. But if Brodie tracked the origins of Jefferson’s beliefs, she also gave them less credit. She noted that “Jefferson shifted constantly in what he said and wrote about blacks, depending on his feelings at the moment.”⁸⁴ Unlike other biographers, Brodie represented Jefferson as distinctly human: inconsistent and evolving, confused and contradictory, influenced by both philosophy and upbringing. But perhaps the most important part of Brodie’s discussion on race was its very existence. Future biographers would attempt to contextualize Jefferson’s beliefs

⁸⁰ Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 50.

⁸¹ Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 93.

⁸² Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 93.

⁸³ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 58.

⁸⁴ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 423.

about slavery through analysis of his political plans or beneficent plantation management. Questions about Jefferson and race could not be set aside so easily.

Brodie's approach to Jefferson's plantation management was more in line with the prevailing arguments. She emphasized that "Jefferson forbade his overseers to use the whip on his own"⁸⁵ and "the Monticello slaves were not sold during Jefferson's lifetime."⁸⁶ These assertions, as later authors examined, are untrue or misleading and lead to the weakness of *An Intimate History*. A book based in psychology may use sources or make assumptions that most modern historians would find concerning. However, Brodie also made claims unjustified in the sources. Whippings at Monticello featured several times in Jefferson's correspondence. Once, Jefferson ordered that James Hubbard, an enslaved man who escaped and was subsequently caught, was to be "severely flogged in the presence of his old companions."⁸⁷ Jefferson directed the sale of Carrie, an enslaved child at Monticello, in another letter.⁸⁸ In another passage, she discussed Edward Coles' anti-slavery appeal to Jefferson, where she describes how "Edward himself had scores of slaves."⁸⁹ A recent Coles biography, *Crusade Against Slavery*, put the number around 20 at any given point.⁹⁰

More important to Brodie were the larger conclusions that could be drawn from Jefferson's correspondence. In 1814 Coles sent a letter to Jefferson, stating "My object is

⁸⁵ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. 35

⁸⁶ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 431.

⁸⁷ "Thomas Jefferson to Reuben Perry, 16 April 1812," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-04-02-0508>.

⁸⁸ "Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, 8 June 1803," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-40-02-0383>.

⁸⁹ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 432.

⁹⁰ Kurt Leichtle and Bruce Carveth, *Crusade Against Slavery: Edward Coles, Pioneer of Freedom*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 80.

to entreat and beseech you to exert your knowledge and influence, in devising, and getting into operation, some plan for the gradual emancipation of Slavery.”⁹¹ Jefferson responded generously, but declined to act for the cause of abolition. Brodie proposed a new interpretation of the Jefferson-Coles conversation: that Jefferson saw “in Coles' quixotic plan the kind of dramatic public gesture he might himself have made as a spur to antislavery activity.”⁹² In addition to asking Jefferson for help in the realm of public opinion, he had also asked for Jefferson’s advice on a daring plan. Coles was preparing to move himself and his enslaved workers to Illinois, granting freedom and plots of land for each family. Jefferson advised against the venture and recommended that Coles spend his time advocating against slavery in Virginia. Brodie argued that Jefferson’s failure to endorse the project stemmed from personal feelings. Edward Coles represented a choice that Jefferson chose not to take. By emphasizing choice, Brodie’s work contrasted with other biographies. Neither Malone or Cunningham ever asked whether Jefferson had a chance to remove himself from Monticello, Virginia, or the system of slavery in which they were rooted. If Jefferson had no choice, then[is this what you mean?] he had no guilt. Even if Brodie’s Jefferson was bound by psychology, he still had a broader range of possibilities. New waters, to which he chose not to travel.

Conversations on race and personal responsibility already made *An Intimate History* a radical departure from Jefferson biographies. But the book’s real controversy was Brodie’s stance on the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims. She took as her principal source the recollections of Madison Hemings, son of Thomas Jefferson and Sally

⁹¹ “Edward Coles to Thomas Jefferson, 31 July 1814,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0374>.

⁹² Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 432.

Hemings. She explained the source “has been in part repudiated by Jefferson biographers because Hemings claimed to be Jefferson's own son by Elizabeth's daughter Sally, and this claim they found insupportable.”⁹³ In examining the source, she found “few errors of fact” in Hemings’ recollections, and exposed the circular arguments of other Jefferson biographers against the Madison Hemings memoir.⁹⁴ According to biographers Madison Hemings’ memoir was not reputable because the paternity claims were untrue. Unlike other biographers, Brodie expanded her source base to include not only statements by Jefferson’s white family, but by an enslaved person as well. Her use of sources—regardless of the race and status—was admirable and representative of a changing historical landscape.

The Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims became reasonable conclusions when Brodie expanded her source base. Her conclusion, that ““it represents not scandalous debauchery with an innocent slave victim. . . but rather a serious passion that brought Jefferson and the slave woman much private happiness” was more representative of Brodie’s psychological perspective than a traditional, historical reading of the sources.⁹⁵ She turned to more suspect evidence to explain her romance theory. She noted that after Hemings, three-quarters white, arrived in France Jefferson used the term ‘mulatto’ eight times “in describing the countryside.”⁹⁶ She also pointed out absences in Jefferson’s extant correspondence, asking whether “someone at some time went through Jefferson's papers systematically eliminating every possible reference to Sally Hemings.”⁹⁷ These

⁹³ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 83.

⁹⁴ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 83.

⁹⁵ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 32.

⁹⁶ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 229.

⁹⁷ Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 234.

assertions provided future biographers points of attack to throw Brodie's entire book into disrepute.

Fawn Brodie would be vindicated a generation later when Annette Gordon-Reed published her study on Jefferson and Hemings in 1997. However, Gordon-Reed refused to make definitive conclusions about the nature of the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings. There are many ways to make children, and not all lead to, as Fawn Brodie phrased it, "much private happiness."⁹⁸ In 1974, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* broke the dam of the Jefferson biographical genre. Brodie asked questions about race and slavery that directly challenged the prevailing interpretations of the day. She also broadened the extent of acceptable sources and refused to adhere to the traditional assumption of truth from Jefferson's correspondence and the recollections of his white family. However, there were cases where she maintained the traditional telling. Brodie maintained the story of Jefferson's benevolent plantation management, and though she took the paternity claims seriously, she did not explore the life of Sally Hemings beyond the connection with Jefferson. Conclusions about mutual love can ring hollow when only the man's feelings and circumstances are considered. Regardless, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* represented a stunning break in Jefferson biography.

For the next two decades, other Jefferson scholars attempted to rebuild the dam that Brodie broke down. John Chester Miller's *The Wolf By the Ears* took the challenge head on by analyzing Jefferson's beliefs and actions in regards to slavery and race. It may be telling that the first book-length examination of Jefferson and slavery was written by a

⁹⁸ Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: an American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 225; Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, 32.

historian outside Jefferson scholarship. Miller was most well-known for his biography, *Alexander Hamilton: Portrait of a Paradox*. Unlike Jefferson scholars like Malone and Cunningham, Miller was not enamored with a mythic portrayal of Thomas Jefferson. However, he was also not an advocate of social history or the work of Fawn Brodie. Miller approached the new topic between Jefferson and slavery in a traditional manner; the story of Jefferson and slavery was, to Miller, a fundamentally intellectual and political question.

Most of the book revolved around Jefferson's words and political actions on the topic. Miller lauded Jefferson's early career, where his actions against slavery were most visible and, in Miller's understanding, the purest intentioned. Conversely, Miller coated the sections during Jefferson's retirement years in a cloud of disappointment. The author noted that Jefferson increasingly became "the spokesman of the planter-aristocrats, the very class which during the Revolutionary period he had sworn to liquidate by breaking up their large estates and slaveholdings."⁹⁹ Also presented was the connection between Jefferson's latter beliefs and the rise of the antebellum 'positive good' contentions raised famously by John Calhoun.¹⁰⁰ Miller's inclusion of Jefferson's retirement years was a novel shift in the field, as his retirement was to many an awkward and inconsequential time in Jefferson's life.

Few biographies spent time examining Jefferson's retirement years. Marie Kimball passed away before reaching Jefferson's retirement in her series, and Malone's work on the period was published after *The Wolf By the Ears*. Single-volume biographies

⁹⁹ John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 249.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 249.

spent their pages examining Jefferson's long public career. His retirement is also not an appealing ending to Jefferson's story. Jefferson increasingly struggled with debt and family tensions. Miller's account also revealed that Jefferson's intellectual mindset drifted towards a conservative, regional, and often paranoid worldview. The picture was far from inspiring and questioned the earlier political and intellectual vision that had made Jefferson exceptional. But, as Miller noted, Jefferson's retirement views still needed to be taken seriously. During this period Jefferson met with political figures like Webster and Van Buren and corresponded with many more. Though he did not play an overt role in politics, he still wrote about his opinions of current events and continued to theorize about political systems as well as slavery. After Miller, future biographies would be forced to contend with Jefferson's retirement.

Miller also consistently pointed out the lapse between Jefferson's written professions against slavery and the lack of action he committed to the cause. Here, Miller was ahead of his time. In *The Sage of Monticello*, Malone would go to great lengths to explain Jefferson's lack of action as a pragmatic necessity. Miller refused the same conclusion, and ended his book with the perspective of Harriet Martineau, who reflected on the difference between words and actions, writing that "it is not enough merely to proclaim this idea to a candid world. It must, she said, be acted upon."¹⁰¹ Jefferson's agency was a central topic in both Jefferson biographies and Monticello's slavery interpretation. Both guides and biographers diminished Jefferson's agency on uncomfortable topics or to excuse inaction. Miller, like Joseph Ellis a generation later,

¹⁰¹ Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 279.

rejected a denial of Jefferson's agency. Jefferson was as responsible for his inaction on slavery as he was responsible for his actions furthering the freedom of white Americans.

The complexity that Miller gave to Jefferson's character was not given to those he enslaved. Out of twenty-nine chapters, Miller dedicated only one to the people, workings and management at Jefferson's plantations. Much like other interpretations at the time, including those of both Malone and Brodie, the author placed weight on Jefferson's kindness and good treatment of enslaved people. Enslaved people, according to Miller, were "thankful that they were the property of a humane man."¹⁰² Notably, Miller never named any enslaved individuals in the chapter, nor did he use any primary sources from those enslaved by Jefferson, despite discussing them elsewhere in the book. Jefferson biographies were not opposed to giving the spotlight to figures other than Jefferson. George Washington, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton feature frequently and prominently within the genre. Maria Cosway was well described in *The Wolf by the Ears* despite the little relevance she had to Jefferson's views on slavery. In both this book and others, enslaved people were rarely given any notice, even when describing Jefferson's impact on their livelihood. The lack of agency and individuality given to enslaved people is a fundamental prerequisite to the attitude that biographers had towards the paternity claims between Jefferson and Hemings.

Though Miller had distanced himself from overtly positive conclusions commonly written about Jefferson, he steadfastly agreed with the prevailing opinion on the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims. Much of his argument was dedicated to disputing Madison Hemings' memoir as inconsistent with primary sources from Jefferson's white

¹⁰² Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 105.

family. He dismissed one portion of the Hemings story because “Jefferson’s daughters were not aware of their father’s alleged relations with Sally Hemings.”¹⁰³ In a disputed history, Miller assumed Jefferson’s white family told the truth. Conversely, Miller concluded that Madison Hemings’ goal was that “he hoped to achieve instant fame as the unacknowledged, natural son of Thomas Jefferson.”¹⁰⁴ Just as Miller assumed honesty from one side, he assumed deception and self-interest in the Black telling. One reviewer noted that *The Wolf by the Ears* contained several mistakes when reviewing Madison Hemings’ account, such as Madison Hemings’ town of residence in Ohio. The reviewer questioned “whether such offerings are indeed to be blamed on typography.”¹⁰⁵ By privileging the white, family sources and disparaging Black ones, Miller perpetuated racist undertones in the historical field. While Miller was willing to question Jefferson’s views and actions on slavery, he entered into this discussion with clear assumptions about the sources and, presumably, a conclusion in mind.

At the end of the chapter, Miller circled back to his concerns about the press. He questioned the value in both the original James Callender piece and the later reminiscence by Madison Hemings, published in a Republican newspaper during Reconstruction. He also attacked the partisan press in a future chapter about Jefferson’s alleged seduction of Elizabeth Walker, the wife of a close friend. The chapters on Sally Hemings and Elizabeth Walker, as well as another about Jefferson’s relationships with Maria Cosway and Angelica Church, revealed a desire to dispense with personal attacks on Jefferson’s character. Questions about Jefferson’s sex life and sexual desires were

¹⁰³ Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 168.

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears*, 174.

¹⁰⁵ Holman Hamilton, Review of *The Wolf by the Ears*, by John Chester Miller, *The American Historical Review*, volume 83, issue 3 (June 1978), 803.

uncomfortable topics for biographers. Focusing on Jefferson's ideas and politics had helped biographers ignore questions about the rest of Jefferson's body, as well as the bodies of those he enslaved. Though Miller was willing to give complexity to Jefferson's mind, he was not willing to ask questions about Jefferson's body. *The Wolf by the Ears* stood in between Brodie and the rest of the field. Miller steadfastly rejected many of Brodie's claims and restored the hierarchy of white, family sources. Yet he did not join in the hagiographical approach that many biographers continued to use in the 1980s.

Dumas Malone's *The Sage of Monticello* was the sixth and final volume in Malone's exhaustive *Jefferson and His Time* series. Throughout three decades—the first volume was published in 1948—Malone established a reputation as the preeminent Jefferson scholar of his generation. Times changed between 1948 and the completion of the series in 1981. Before *The Sage of Monticello*, Malone's largest treatment of slavery was an appendix in an earlier volume, *First Term*, that discussed and dismissed James Callender's allegations of children between the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims. By the 1980s, a shifting historical atmosphere compelled Malone to commit a chapter to Jefferson's position on slavery in his final volume. Like Miller, much of Malone's treatment of slavery revolved around Jefferson's political understanding of the issue. Emphasizing Jefferson's opposition to the institution, Malone stated that Jefferson was “one of the first Americans to propose a specific plan of emancipation.”¹⁰⁶ Arrayed against the standards of the day, Jefferson failed to make headway with his ideas, and his view towards slavery became marked by “an element of fatalism.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Dumas Malone, *The Sage of Monticello*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 317

¹⁰⁷ Dumas Malone, *The Sage of Monticello*, 321.

Malone paid special attention to Jefferson's exchange with fellow Virginian Edward Coles. Coles asked Jefferson to use his public prestige to argue for abolition. Malone pointed out that "Coles had made his personal request at a particularly unpropitious moment in Jefferson's personal history and in that of the republic."¹⁰⁸ The US was engaged in the War of 1812, and Monticello struggled with drought and debt. Malone's characterization of Monticello was telling. For example, he brought up how Jefferson labored "not how to free his slaves, but how to feed them."¹⁰⁹ He detailed how the number of enslaved people at Monticello was misleading, as many were children or elderly who could not work in the fields. Just like in Monticello's early attempts to interpret slavery, Malone's Jefferson became a benevolent patriarch tied down to the needs of the enslaved people, with the enslaved people finding themselves without agency.

In *The Sage of Monticello*, Malone described a Jefferson trapped between ideals and reality. A believer in emancipation, Jefferson was not able to act on his values because of the political climate and his unprofitable plantations. This interpretation came out from his sources; Malone prioritized Jefferson's own correspondence. Citing a Jefferson line from his response to Coles, Malone asserted that "until the end of his life he claimed that he would gladly bear the financial loss from emancipation if a practicable plan could be adopted."¹¹⁰ However, Jefferson rejected Coles' appeal to help create that plan. Nor did Jefferson change his lifestyle to become less dependent on slavery. Throughout his description of Jefferson's involvement with slavery, Malone continued to

¹⁰⁸ Dumas Malone, *The Sage of Monticello*, 322

¹⁰⁹ Dumas Malone, *The Sage of Monticello*, 327

¹¹⁰ Dumas Malone, *The Sage of Monticello*, 318

take his subject's writing at face value. In this way, Malone presented Jefferson the way Jefferson wanted to see himself: an enlightened planter trapped within an immoral system.

The Sage of Monticello contained little information about those enslaved inside that system. Malone mentioned John Hemmings—Monticello's enslaved joiner and younger brother to Sally Hemings—most often, usually in conjunction with construction at Monticello and Poplar Forest. Malone did proffer that the Hemings family “merit study” in an appendix while lamenting the small number of historical sources about them.¹¹¹ The line rings hollow considering Malone's treatment of Madison Hemings' oral history. Malone dismissed the source as false, a claim that Annette Gordon-Reed and R. B. Bernstein have both connected to a larger trend in Jefferson scholarship.¹¹² In a piece about Malone's legacy, Bernstein writes that Malone's assumption “that slaveholders tell the truth and slaves lie, make it easy to discount Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson and the oral traditions preserved by the Hemings family.”¹¹³ Though Monticello's oral history project would not begin until the following decade, there were both sources and scholarship about enslaved people at Monticello available for Malone. Malone's omission of enslaved people was not missed by scholars at the time.

Despite many positive receptions, some reviews of *The Sage of Monticello* began to question Malone's hagiographic tone for his subject. C. Vann Woodward and Gordon

¹¹¹ Dumas Malone, *The Sage of Monticello*, 513.

¹¹² Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: an American Controversy* argues that most Jefferson scholars rejected Madison Hemings' recollections out of hand because of the contradictions between it and accounts from Jefferson's family.

¹¹³ R. B. Bernstein, "The Perils of Definitiveness: Dumas Malone's Jefferson and His Time," in *Thomas Jefferson's Lives: Biographers and the Battle for History*, edited by Robert McDonald (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 234.

Wood both criticized Malone's lack of critical analysis, with Wood summarizing that the book "seemed to come from another time and place."¹¹⁴ Just released, *The Sage of Monticello* was already out of date with academic trends in Early Republic and slavery historiography. Malone's tone was consistent with John Chester Miller's *Wolf By the Ears* (1977) and Noble Cunningham's *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (1986). It was also aligned well with Monticello's interpretation, which would begin interpreting Jefferson's benevolent plantation ownership within a few years of *The Sage of Monticello*'s publication.

Noble Cunningham's *In Pursuit of Reason* continued Malone's treatment of Jefferson and slavery. Both Malone and Cunningham stressed Jefferson's rationality, though Cunningham traced that rationality towards Jefferson's belief in Enlightenment ideals. Cunningham wrote that Jefferson "accepted the Enlightenment view that all men are born free and that slavery was contrary to the law of nature."¹¹⁵ Jefferson viewed slavery as a public issue which needed a public solution. Cunningham combined Enlightenment ideals with the public perspective, reasoning that "once Kings or legislatures abolished slavery, slaves would regain their natural status as freemen."¹¹⁶ Like Malone, Cunningham listed the solutions that Jefferson proffered to end the institution. Unlike Malone, Cunningham did acknowledge that, though "Jefferson was ahead of his time on emancipation, he was much the product of his age on race."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, "The Hero of Independence", *New York Times Book Review* (5 July 1981); Gordon Wood, "The Disappointments of Jefferson" *New York Review of Books*, 28, no. 13 (August 13 1981)

¹¹⁵ Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 50.

¹¹⁶ Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 50.

¹¹⁷ Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 62.

Beyond this mention, race had little attention in *In Pursuit of Reason*, and Cunningham did not connect the Enlightenment with racial attitudes—a theme to which Brodie devoted serious attention. It was significant that Cunningham could not escape the subject entirely. Instead, he relied on a common refrain among Jefferson biographers: that Jefferson was a product of his time. This argument was another way to distance Jefferson from blame by removing agency. Though biographers regularly argued for Jefferson’s exceptionalism in other areas, his failures were generalized as societal problems and assumptions that Jefferson could not escape.

Cunningham fell directly into the traditional interpretation with the paternity claims. Using a letter of Abigail Adams, he insisted “There is no reason to assume that Jefferson thought of Sally in any other way than as the child Mrs. Adams saw.”¹¹⁸ He also attacked Brodie by name and stated categorically that “not only is there is no valid evidence to support this, but the weight of the evidence against it is preponderant.”¹¹⁹ In doing so, Cunningham rejected the testimonies of Madison Hemings and other enslaved workers, instead privileging Jefferson’s white descendants. Though he rejected Brodie’s theory on Sally Hemings, he did share a similarity. Both Brodie and Cunningham give Jefferson a choice on whether to participate in the institution of slavery. Cunningham wrote that “by transferring the ownership of these slaves to his daughter and her descendants. Jefferson was helping to perpetuate the system he deplored”¹²⁰ When he covered the Coles-Jefferson correspondence, he wrote “Jefferson would end his days without risking his way of life or alienating himself from the mass of his fellow

¹¹⁸ Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 115.

¹¹⁹ Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 115.

¹²⁰ Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 135.

Virginians by publicly planting an antislavery standard on his Albemarle mountaintop.”¹²¹ Unlike Malone, who pointed out the personal and political circumstances that would have made abolitionist activity non-practical, Cunningham agreed with Brodie and Miller. Jefferson never risked his own lifestyle by taking action against slavery. These admissions, however small, represent a bridge between generations. Malone’s advocacy could not work in all circumstances. Although Cunningham painted an overwhelmingly positive picture of Jefferson overall, he did concede the limitations of Jefferson’s relationship with slavery.

Jefferson scholarship drastically shifted in the years after Cunningham’s *In Pursuit of Reason*. The University of Virginia hired Peter Onuf to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Chair of history, where the new professor offered a more critical and complicated understanding of Jefferson to Charlottesville. A 1992 UVA conference on Jefferson became embroiled in controversy about Jefferson’s connections with slavery. Paul Finkleman, a Professor from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, boldly proclaimed that Jefferson’s anti-slavery efforts were overblown by sympathizers seeking to sanctify Jefferson’s involvement in the institution.¹²² Monticello’s head researcher, Lucia Stanton, founded the Getting Word oral history project and had begun publishing academic articles about enslaved people at Monticello. Joseph Ellis’ Jefferson biography, *American Sphinx*, encompassed the spirit of the age, portraying a complicated and contradictory founding father.

Joseph Ellis’ *American Sphinx* took agency to heart as it attempted to reconcile Jefferson’s changing beliefs and efforts. Ellis emphasized the evolution in Jefferson’s

¹²¹ Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 347.

¹²² Francis Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy*, 208-212.

public stance on slavery. As a young politician, Jefferson was outspoken in his rejection of the institution, but later in life, “once he grasped the full measure of his personal economic predicament, the larger question of emancipation appeared in a new a decidedly less favorable light.”¹²³ He also “had no workable answer to the unavoidable question: what happens once the slaves are freed?”¹²⁴ Though other biographers have marked Jefferson as feeling hopeless or fatalistic in the face of slavery—a point that Malone in particular highlighted—Ellis argued for a more deliberate change. Jefferson’s feelings of hopelessness may have been genuine, but they came from a desire to protect his lifestyle. Ellis took this line of thought into the domestic sphere, where he spent significant time examining Jefferson as a slaveowner.

Ellis created a complicated picture of Jefferson’s plantations. Ellis granted that “his residence meant fewer whippings, more dependable food and clothing distributions, and the assurance of a more fair-minded arbiter of work schedules”¹²⁵ and “he was extremely reluctant to sell slaves against their will.”¹²⁶ Though Ellis spent more time on the subject, he still channeled the traditional portrayal of Jefferson’s amelioration for enslaved people. And yet cracks appeared in the façade. Though Jefferson was reluctant to sell enslaved people, he still “disposed of 161 by sale or outright gifts.”¹²⁷ Ellis made sure to note that Jefferson’s lifestyle was perpetuated by the consistent sale of enslaved people. Ellis was also one of the first to argue that Jefferson attempted to showcase a lighter, kinder version of slavery towards his guests. Many of the duties on the

¹²³ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 175.

¹²⁴ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, 173.

¹²⁵ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, 176.

¹²⁶ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, 197.

¹²⁷ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, 171.

mountaintop were given to the lighter-skinned Hemings family, and those who worked with guests were often clothed better than the enslaved field workers.¹²⁸

The lens on the guest experience coincided with an exploration of the enslaved workers themselves. Ellis began with the statement: “Almost all the work, whether in the fields, in the nailery or at the construction site for Monticello was done by slaves.”¹²⁹ Although brief, Ellis made mention of the different duties and families of Monticello and named more enslaved people than just Sally Hemings. Ellis took the Hemings paternity claims seriously, and acknowledged Madison Hemings as a viable source. Ellis also used new information: Jefferson can be traced to Monticello nine months prior to each pregnancy. An addendum added several years after its initial publication included new DNA evidence that linked the Hemings and Jefferson families. Ellis concluded that the paternity claim “can never be proven absolutely, but is now proven beyond a reasonable doubt.”¹³⁰

Conclusions about the Jefferson-Hemings paternity claims constituted the most visceral dispute in Jefferson scholarship in the latter half of the 20th century. Part of the reason was the nature of the claims, which contrasted with the rational, political, and intellectual portrayal of Jefferson described by scholars. It is no mistake that a historian utilizing psychoanalysis and studying Jefferson’s personal life would come to a vastly different conclusion. Fawn Brodie’s work allowed for a new understanding of Jefferson as a figure motivated by desire as well as reason, and influenced by upbringing as well as philosophy. Though Miller, and to some extent Cunningham, were willing to complicate

¹²⁸ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, 179.

¹²⁹ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, 171.

¹³⁰ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, 367.

Jefferson's intellectual life, they refused to extend any critical scholarship to Jefferson's personal life.

Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* also asked questions about Jefferson's agency. A traditional defense of Jefferson, as well as other controversial historical figures, was that they were products of their time. This defense allowed biographers to celebrate the exceptionalism of their subjects in some areas—thereby granting the subject both credit and agency—while blaming faults on larger, societal issues. Malone underscored Jefferson's financial situation and the political realities that prevented Jefferson from speaking about slavery. But both Brodie and Miller argued that Jefferson had choices, and that his decisions, regardless of their pragmatism, did negatively impact hundreds of lives. Discussion of consequences entails the discussion of choice, and of agency.

But Brodie's sources were just as important as her conclusions. Her inclusion of Madison Hemings' oral history upended the traditional privileging of white sources. Since the 1800s, biographers assumed accounts by Jefferson's white descendants were true. Miller used these sources to dismiss Hemings. Likewise, Malone took Jefferson's correspondence at face value in his defense of Jefferson. Only in the 1990s did Jefferson scholars begin to use a broader array of sources to tell the story, not just of Jefferson, but of the entire community of Monticello. This community became more prevalent in Ellis' *American Sphinx*. Here, Jefferson's private role as a plantation owner became just as important as his political views. Ellis' book marks a remarkable departure from earlier biographies. His understanding of Jefferson is one symbolized by paradox and controversy, and he uses a broader source base to examine the contradictions. Through

agency and sources, Jefferson biographies began to join the larger currents of historiography.

Chapter 3: Interpreting Jefferson and Politics at Monticello

For over a hundred years, guests have traveled to the little mountain to learn about the famous figure who lived there. The Jefferson they encountered has not stayed the same. During its founding, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation embraced a political version of Jefferson, championed by President Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. After World War II, Jefferson's political career took a back seat as the historic site emphasized Monticello's domestic environment. The Foundation's interpretation of slavery shattered that tranquil portrayal, and the Foundation shifted its focus back to preserve Jefferson's positive image.

Though Monticello was never a stranger to visitors, its role as a public site began to solidify at the end of the 19th century. Jefferson Levy, successful real estate mogul and US Congressman, bought Monticello following the Civil War and poured money into its restoration. His efforts, as Levy family historian Marc Leepson argues, generated goodwill among both Charlottesville's citizens and Jefferson descendants.¹³¹ Much of Levy's restoration work consisted of structural and architectural repair, and he "succeeded in purchasing only a few Jeffersonian objects."¹³² Instead of restoring the rooms to Jefferson's era, Levy furnished the house according to his own taste: painting the parlor a yellow-green and filling the home with luxurious contemporary French furniture. Thomas Jefferson appeared in portraits, paired with Levy family paintings in the entrance hall. Levy also hung a framed Declaration of Independence above the

¹³¹ Marc Leepson, *Saving Monticello : the Levy Family's Epic Quest to Rescue the House That Jefferson Built*, (New York: Free Press, 2001), 133.

¹³² Marc Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 117.

mantlepiece.¹³³ Monticello existed as both a residence for the Levy family, and as a tourist destination.

Levy did make arrangements for the guest experience. He asked his sister to serve as the hostess for the site. He instituted the first ticketing system, allowing guests to explore the grounds, but not the house. Levy donated the revenue to Charlottesville charities.¹³⁴ The house itself was often restricted to invited guests. The Levy family hosted a varied array of invitees, from the Charlottesville chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution to President Theodore Roosevelt.¹³⁵ Though Jefferson Levy gained prestige from his ownership of Monticello, it was clear that guests relished the connection to Jefferson. From some, Monticello's existence as both a residence and a historic site belittled the historic importance of Jefferson. In 1897, William Jennings Bryan wrote to Levy, suggesting that he sell the property to the Federal Government to transform Monticello into an officially sanctioned shrine of Jefferson. Though Levy refused the proposal, it signaled the beginnings of controversy. Maud Littleton, wife of famous lawyer and Congressman Martin Wiley Littleton, was put off by Levy's presence when she visited Monticello during a trip to Charlottesville a decade later. She put it: "I did not get the feeling of being in the house Thomas Jefferson built and loved and made sacred."¹³⁶ Littleton began a movement to save the apparent shrine from its current use as a mere dwelling.

¹³³ Marc Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 118-120.

¹³⁴ Marc Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 126.

¹³⁵ Marc Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 125-131.

¹³⁶U.S House Committee on Rules, *Hearings on Public Ownership of Monticello*, "Statement of Mrs. Maud Littleton, New York, N.Y.," 62d Congress, 2nd session, on S. Con. Res. July 24, 1912 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912).

Much of the public debate revolved around questions of historic preservation: how well did Levy maintain the property, how could the US preserve the famous locations of its founders, and was it appropriate for those sites to also serve as private residences? But these discussions also included Levy's Jewish identity.¹³⁷ In one of her popular newspaper columns, Dorothea Dix illustrated scenes of desecration where "the hand of the vandal has torn down their birthplaces, or an alien sits at the fireside where they planned their immoral deeds, and their belongings have been scattered."¹³⁸ Dix traced the Levy ownership back to Thomas Jefferson. In her account, Jefferson, kind and hospitable, spent all his money to entertain guests and maintain Monticello. The expenses eventually forced his family to sell the home after his death. Uriah Levy, Jefferson Levy's uncle, then appeared on the scene to purchase the property, an act through which Dix characterized his cleverness and greed.¹³⁹ Dix relied on these anti-Jewish stereotypes to delegitimize Levy's ownership of Monticello. Argued during a period of rising anti-Semitism, opponents of Levy's ownership exploited his faith to ostracize him from his role as a custodian of American history. Dix, Littleton, and their allies subjected Monticello to a historical purity test and found the site to be lacking. They appealed to the Federal government to forcibly purchase the property to devote the site solely to Jefferson, and to remove those they found unworthy to represent American history.

Several citizen groups, including Littleton's Jefferson-Monticello Memorial Foundation, lobbied the government to employ eminent domain and purchase the

¹³⁷ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: the Political Origins of America's House Museums*, (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 100.

¹³⁸ Dorothea Dix, "Monticello – Shrine or Bachelor's Hall," *Good Housekeeping*, (no. 58), April 1914, 538-39.

¹³⁹ Dix, "Monticello – Shrine or Bachelor's Hall," 538-539.

property. A Congressman himself, Jefferson Levy fought those proposals on the Congress floor, successfully defending his right to own Monticello through several political storms. During the congressional debates party became more important than Levy's religion. Republicans argued against making Monticello a public, government-run site because of the explicit connections Democrats made between Jefferson's political views and their own platform. West points to a partisan divide over Jefferson's legacy: "from its inception, the Monticello campaign was bound up with a Democratic Party struggling to employ the image of Jefferson to hold together factions: northern and southern, urban and rural, nativist and immigrant."¹⁴⁰ These debates over Monticello occurred during a contentious consolidation under Woodrow Wilson. Levy's fellow New York Democrats had become particularly quarrelsome, with the young Franklin Roosevelt and his allies struggling against the influence of Tammany Hall. Although Wilson rejected many of Jefferson's policies, Wilson spoke positively of Jefferson's ideals of trusting the people and individual opportunity.¹⁴¹ When Wilson was elected President, he embraced the Jefferson legacy and planned "to have his reviewing stand before White House designed as a replica of the portico of Monticello."¹⁴² William Jennings Bryan, now Secretary of State, asked Levy to sell Monticello to the government to help unite the Democratic Party around their new acquisition.¹⁴³ Levy himself believed in the power of Jefferson's legacy to unite the Democrats. When the Jefferson Democratic Club of St. Louis visited Monticello, Levy argued that these pilgrimages

¹⁴⁰ West, *Domesticating History*, 103.

¹⁴¹ Merrill Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 344.

¹⁴² Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, 344.

¹⁴³ West, *Domesticating History*, 105.

would unite and inspire the Democratic party.”¹⁴⁴ However, Levy asserted that his ownership did nothing to diminish Monticello’s sanctity, Jefferson’s legacy, or public access to the site.

Ultimately, Republican concerns, combined with Levy’s standing in the Democratic party, doomed efforts to purchase the property. Levy continued his ownership of Monticello into the 1920s, when financial setbacks forced him to sell the site to a group of like-minded men: Democratic lawyers and politicians from New York. These men formed the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in 1923, and quickly began to raise money to fund the purchase and to preserve the estate. The first generation of Foundation leadership formalized Monticello’s interpretation by using the patriotic legacies of Jefferson championed by the Democratic party. During their first years, the Foundation often combined their interpretive mission with fundraising. In one campaign they partnered with the New York City school system to encourage students to raise money for the site. To stress Monticello’s importance, the Foundation asked students to recite a ‘Patriot’s Pledge of Faith’ as part of the program to honor the principles and signers of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁴⁵ This interpretation of Jefferson was abstract, defined by his political accomplishments and democratic ideology. The Foundation minimized mentions of Thomas Jefferson’s personality, private life, and the material culture at Monticello in their interpretive programs. From the 1920s to the 1940s, the Foundation presented the democratic Jefferson to the country. With the publication of Claude Bowers’ *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in*

¹⁴⁴ Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 131.

¹⁴⁵ “Monticello-Plantation Economy,” 1987, 91, box 3, folder 27, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

America, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation found itself leading a second wave of enthusiasm for the democratic Jefferson.

Jefferson mania had subsided after the failures of the late Wilson administration and the subsequent low tide of the Democratic party. The 1925 publication of *Jefferson and Hamilton* served as a new rejoinder for both Jefferson's place in the American pantheon and for the Democratic Party in contemporary politics. Known both for his written talents and oratorical skill, Bowers toured the country arguing that Jefferson's democratic vision had defeated Hamilton's plutocratic machinations.¹⁴⁶ For Bowers, this division between democracy and plutocracy was the fundamental debate that created the United States. This debate continued to be waged into the 20th century, and he left no doubt as to which side he supported. As Brian Steele summarized, "For Bowers, Jefferson's legacy would be carried and perpetuated—as it had always been, he thought—by the Democrats."¹⁴⁷ Bowers' arguments won over Franklin Roosevelt, who called for "the clear line of demarcation which differentiated the political thought of Jefferson on the one side, and of Hamilton on the other."¹⁴⁸ Roosevelt quickly became a supporter of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation.¹⁴⁹

Headed by former Wilson official Stuart Gibboney, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation embraced the political—and politicized—Jefferson. The

¹⁴⁶For Bowers' impact on Jefferson scholarship and historiography, see Merrill Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* and Brian Steele, "Consulting the Timeless Oracle: The Thomas Jeffersons of Claude Bowers and Albert Jay Nock." In *Thomas Jefferson's Lives: Biographers and the Battle for History*, ed. Robert McDonald. (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

¹⁴⁷ Steele, "Consulting the Timeless Oracle," 179.

¹⁴⁸ Franklin Roosevelt, "Democratic Revival is Party Hope" *St. Petersburg Times* (St. Petersburg, FL), March 9, 1925.

¹⁴⁹ West, *Domesticating History*, 114.

Foundation mobilized for the 1924 Democratic Presidential nomination, sponsoring 200 children to attend the event, learn about democracy, and fundraise for the site.¹⁵⁰ The convention chose John W. Davis, a TJMF charter member, as their Presidential nominee. Two years later, Gibboney invited New York Governor Al Smith to give a speech at Monticello. The press noted that a Monticello appearance could be seen as Smith's introduction to the South as a Presidential nominee. Smith withdrew his acceptance after witnessing protests and death threats from Klan members and nativists angered by his Catholic faith. West noted that "the Al Smith crisis prompted the TJMF's amplification of the religious freedom theme."¹⁵¹ A 1928 ceremony for Claude Bowers was more successful: the Foundation awarded Bowers a medal for having "destroyed the Jefferson of passion and prejudice, of myth and fable, and restored to the vision of his countrymen the myriad-minded statesman and philosopher who forgot the titular honors of the world."¹⁵² This relationship between Monticello and the Democratic Party only grew with the election of Roosevelt in 1932.

In the 1930s, the friendship between Gibboney and Roosevelt became the defining feature of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. Gibboney tracked down Jefferson quotes on the Supreme Court to legitimize Roosevelt's court packing proposal. Roosevelt spoke at Monticello during its 1936 Independence Day celebration. At the behest of Roosevelt, Gibboney joined a commission to establish a Jefferson Memorial in

¹⁵⁰ West, *Domesticating History*, 113.

¹⁵¹ West, *Domesticating History*, 114.

¹⁵² Claude Bowers, *My Life; the Memoirs of Claude Bowers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), 134.

Washington DC.¹⁵³ Throughout Roosevelt's presidency Monticello's Jefferson was the national Jefferson. As Peterson contended, "The New Deal lacked a consistent philosophy, but it possessed a sense of tradition, a faith in democratic ideals, a set of symbols and conventions."¹⁵⁴ The interpretation of Jefferson became the roots that supported and legitimized new government initiatives: new wine from old vines. This interpretation also presented Monticello as a patriotic symbol more than a historic site. The TJMF headquarters was in New York. Their major interpretive campaigns occurred outside the site, such as their partnership with the New York city schools. The TJMF Board of Directors spent little time directing matters of interpretation on site. The Board never made guidelines or suggestions for tours, and they rarely discussed interpretive staff. For them, the main goal for the Monticello site was its preservation as a patriotic shrine to serve as a spiritual center and source of legitimacy for external outreach.

Just as Monticello's public debut coincided with a rebirth in Jefferson's popularity and public utility, the TJMF was also formed during the professionalism of historic preservation. Carter Hudgins argues "in the 1920s, organizations formerly led by committed women surrendered leadership, philosophy, and policy to credentialed men."¹⁵⁵ In prior years, women's groups, such as the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, were founded to restore buildings they deemed to have patriotic or historic value. New

¹⁵³ For a detailed account of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation during this period, Patricia West, *Domesticating History*, and Frank Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson : Reputation and Legacy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁴ Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, 355.

¹⁵⁵ Carter Hudgins, "Mount Vernon and America's Historic House Museums: Old Roles and New Responsibilities in the Preservation of Place," in *Stewards of Memory: the Past, Present, and Future of Historic Preservation at George Washington's Mount Vernon*, ed. Carol Cadou, Luke J. Pecoraro, and Thomas A. Reinhart (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 199. See also Patricia West, *Domesticating History*; Charles Hosmer, *Presence of the Past; a History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (New York: Putnam, 1965).

museum projects like Henry Ford's Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg prompted the need for professional architects trained in early American architecture and historic preservation. President Roosevelt's New Deal also promoted preservation as the government hired architects to conduct the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Although Jefferson Levy had spent time and resources to preserve Monticello, he did so without the advantage of a professional restoration team. While the Foundation's Board of Directors utilized Jefferson's political legacy off-site, their major goal at Monticello was its preservation. Their choice for head of the restoration efforts, Fiske Kimball, was perhaps their most inspired decision during the Foundation's first decades. Kimball's restoration set the standard for the developing field, but he also brought a separate and divergent vision for Monticello. Rather than promoting the political roots of a founding father, Kimball sought to restore the domestic dwelling of Thomas Jefferson.

If Monticello deserves a footnote in the annals of public history, it is because of the relentless and groundbreaking professionalism of Fiske Kimball's restoration committee. A Harvard-trained architect, Kimball became the Director of Philadelphia Museum of Art, a University of Virginia Professor, and headed several well-known historic restoration projects. Already a leading figure in historic preservation, Kimball lent both his expertise and his scientific approach to preservation at Monticello. Kimball argued "the period room should be more than a romanticized, inspirational shrine; it should be based on sound, historical research to present accurate picture of the past as possible."¹⁵⁶ Along with his wife, Marie Kimball, who served as head curator, Fiske Kimball set to work obtaining Jeffersonian objects. The Foundation also began to

¹⁵⁶ West, *Domesticating History*, 123.

purchase surrounding land from the original Monticello plantation. During this period, up to the 1950s, the house was sparsely furnished. Levy's possessions had been moved out by his family, and the Kimballs only slowly obtained Jefferson artifacts.

While Fiske and Marie Kimball restored and expanded Monticello's material culture, less attention was put on standardizing interpretation at the site. While most historic homes at the time created domestic scenes and experiences, Monticello's lack of objects prevented the standardized experience.¹⁵⁷ Tour guides, mostly African American men, filled their tours by weaving "numerous and exaggerated, but delightful tales reaching well beyond Thomas Jefferson's recognized abilities and accomplishments."¹⁵⁸ Long heard Monticello myths, such as Jefferson's bed being hoisted up through the ceiling, can be traced to the tours in this time period.¹⁵⁹ The lack of interest in interpretation at Monticello by the Board of Directors suggests the TJMF's interest in larger scale events, often off-site, to raise Jefferson's national reputation. During the first decades of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, interpreting Jefferson was a way to boost his reputation on a national scale. Interpreting Jefferson became a way to entice Americans to visit Monticello rather than a method to educate guests who arrived. Monticello's first generation of leadership did not categorize Monticello as a historic house, but as a patriotic shrine. As the site experienced a massive increase in visitation post-World War II, Monticello began to conform to the standards of mid-century historic homes.

¹⁵⁷ Stuart D. Hobbs, "Exhibiting Antimodernism: History, Memory, and the Aestheticized Past in Mid-Twentieth-Century America" *The Public Historian* 23, no. 3 (2001): 39–61.

¹⁵⁸ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, 111, Box 1, Folder 2, TJF-Visitation, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

¹⁵⁹ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

Up until the post-war period, Monticello had never quite fit the historic house mold. Historic house institutions have always struggled to present both the aesthetic and historical qualities of their sites. Stuart Hobbs gives the example of Kenmore, the home of George Washington's sister, where visitors "almost certainly learned more about antiques and good taste than about history."¹⁶⁰ The emergence of historic preservation also contributed to the shift towards aesthetics, and historic house institutions turned towards architects and curators more than historians. In many ways, Hobbs argues, the mid-century historic house had more in common with an art museums than their history counterpart.¹⁶¹ By the 1950s, the Kimballs had obtained enough Jefferson artifacts and replicas to outfit the house in consistent period décor. The emerging Cold War had Americans history conscious and advances in transportation and income had them traveling. As historic homes across the country opened their doors to progressively more visitors each year, Monticello joined a larger, national phenomenon. New leadership led Monticello down the path of a historic house and a domestic Jefferson.

The Foundation experienced a generational shift in the 1950s. Its first President, Stuart Gibboney, passed away in 1944. Fiske Kimball followed in 1955. The pair worked well together, despite Gibboney's championing of Jefferson's democratic values and Kimball emphasis on Monticello's architecture and material culture. By 1950 Monticello had paid off its debts, acquired a sizable reliquary of Jefferson artifacts, and was benefitting from the post-war surge in tourism. As their fortunes rose, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation began to consolidate their interpretation of Jefferson. In 1951, the Foundation replaced their African American guides with a cohort of middle-

¹⁶⁰ Hobbs, "Exhibiting Antimodernism", 1.

¹⁶¹ Hobbs, "Exhibiting Antimodernism", 3.

class, white hostesses. The Foundation intended for the change to professionalize interpretation through an increased emphasis on historical accuracy. The new Head Hostess, Terry Tilman, compiled a “Hostess Book” for new staff to study and reference. By the 1960s, the Foundation had established a fully-fledged training system, funding scholars to give lectures and hostesses to visit other historic sites.¹⁶² The Foundation valued uniformity as well as accuracy, where “the ideal would be to have each speak about exactly the same things and in the same length of time.”¹⁶³ This projection of historical accuracy and uniformity would transform Monticello’s landscape.

Up to the 1940s, Monticello had been a comparatively integrated site. Black tour guides greeted guests and offered the primary interpretive experience for guests. The African American Coleman-Henderson family served as Monticello gatekeepers for both the Levy’s and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. Both the tours and facilities were integrated. As the Foundation crafted a new paradigm for the guest experience, their sense of professionalism created an almost entirely white space. The Black guides were fired or reassigned to non-interpretive roles to make room for the new hostesses. The Foundation removed the Coleman-Henderson family in 1951 to remodel the gatehouse into a modern ticket office. For decades, local African American families had held family reunions on Monticello’s West Lawn. The Foundation ended those in the 1950s as well.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 8.

¹⁶³ “Showing Monticello: Past and Future,” 1969-1970, 111, box 1, folder 1, TJF-Visitation, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

¹⁶⁴ Monticello’s Getting Word Oral History Project has met and interviewed members of the Coleman-Henderson family, and has also spearheaded Foundation efforts to reconnect with the local African American community.

This whitewashing was not exclusive to Monticello. Mount Vernon's employee hierarchy matched Monticello's with Black workers "still employed in the most subservient positions on the estate."¹⁶⁵ George Washington's Birthplace National monument, a historic site in Northeast Virginia, had also intentionally segregated their park. The park supervisor installed a separate picnic area, away from the historic buildings, for Black guests.¹⁶⁶ Charleston created a tour guide licensing program in the early 1950s. The certification process purposefully excluded both Black history and Black participants. In their study of race and memory in that city, Ethan Kytle and Blain Roberts conclude "to a remarkable degree, the consolidation of white memory after World War II rested on an expanded, more formalized tourism industry."¹⁶⁷

The government sponsored US Civil War Centennial Commission represented a peak of white memory in historic tourism. Like many public history professionals, the commissioners saw the Centennial as a chance to promote patriotism through shared heritage. Its inaugural event, coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter, was mired in controversy. Against the appeals of several state delegations, the commission hosted their event at a segregated venue, preventing Black members from participating. During the celebration white guests arrived in Confederate officer uniforms and Southern Belle dresses while the NAACP staged a protest outside. David Blight points to "the intensity of the resentment over the character and intent of the Centennial"

¹⁶⁵ Philip Schwarz, *Slavery at the Home of George Washington* (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2001), 162.

¹⁶⁶ Seth Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

¹⁶⁷ Ethan Kytle and Blain Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden : Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy* (New York: The New Press, 2018), 295.

as one of its most poignant legacies.¹⁶⁸ African American outrage corresponded with a rejuvenated connection of American patriotism, public history, and racist attitudes in Southern white audiences.¹⁶⁹ As the Centennial progressed, Southern events often included speeches about contemporary government overreach in desegregation.¹⁷⁰ During the 1950s and 1960s, public history in the US became linked to a formalized white memory that was often used to advocate against Civil Rights. Although Monticello did not explicitly endorse racism or racist political policies during the 1950s and 60s, it did cater to the racial comfort levels of its overwhelmingly white audience.

Race was not the only topic on the minds of white audiences during this period. Cultural changes such as suburbanization and increasing consumerism changed the way guests viewed historic homes. Antimodernism gripped museum professionals as they attempted to represent traditional American values through decorative arts. Hobbs describes how museum professionals believed that “Americans needed to be inspired and awakened within themselves. That inspiration could come from the example of fine artistry and graceful living that the pre-industrial age represented.”¹⁷¹ At many sites, directors turned towards curators, art historians, and architects who focused on material sources and public audiences. Historic homes were role models to understanding and reincorporating America’s “bucolic, graceful, happy past.”¹⁷² Interpretation mirrored the

¹⁶⁸ David W. Blight, *American Oracle* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 21.

¹⁶⁹ For the impact of public history and the Civil War Centennial on racism and Southern politics, see David W. Blight, *American Oracle*; Robert Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Adam Dombey, *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 2020).

¹⁷⁰ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*.

¹⁷¹ Hobbs, “Exhibiting Antimodernism,” 58.

¹⁷² Hobbs, “Exhibiting Antimodernism,” 60-61.

emphasis on material culture, and guides spoke about America's aesthetic past rather than its political and social history. Monticello, having accumulated both the material culture and an organizational interest in modernizing and standardizing the guest experience, embraced this vision in their new system of tours.

A political interpretation of Jefferson did not cohere with the new paradigm. As guests streamed to the site, Taylor explained that "Visitors were captivated by the house and its novel features and artifacts."¹⁷³ As both hostesses and guests embraced Monticello's unique material culture "the political symbolism broke down. . .Where was Jefferson's equalitarianism, his love of the people, his 'democratic simplicity' at Monticello?"¹⁷⁴ There was a clear distinction between Jefferson's lofty and intricate home and his political vision. Faced with a complex man who both advocated for yeoman farming and designed one of the most complicated homes in the early Republic, the Foundation began to consolidate its interpretation under a thematic cult of domesticity. The shift away from the political Jefferson also avoided any partisan entanglements. The engagement also matched the views of Jefferson scholars, such as Edwin Betts and Dumas Malone, who argued that Jefferson was not simply a politician, but a cultural hero.¹⁷⁵

Combining the popularity of Jefferson with trends in the public history field, the Foundation focused their new tours on Jefferson's private life. Through the new trainings

¹⁷³ Elizabeth Taylor, *Interpreting the Great Man*, September 24, 1998, Interpretive Master Plan Committee - 1998, 111, Box 1, Folder 8, TJF-Visitation, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

¹⁷⁴ *The Jeffersonian Image in the American Mind* (get book back and find page)

¹⁷⁵ R. B. Bernstein, "The Perils of Definitiveness: Dumas Malone's Jefferson and His Time."

In *Thomas Jefferson's Lives: Biographers and the Battle for History*, edited by McDonald Robert, 219-43 (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

and oversight, the Foundation crafted new interpretation based upon Jefferson's architecture, interest in science, and his family life. Writing about Monticello's interpretive history, Elizabeth Taylor argues "By this time there was a clear shift from the political/patriotic images to the image of Jefferson, man of culture. With his style, genius, and breadth, Jefferson became a symbol of the nation's civilized values."¹⁷⁶ Although conceived within the trends of the 1950s and 1960s, the domestic interpretation of Jefferson was maintained for decades. During the 1980s a Monticello school brochure listed 26 "subjects of interest" to Thomas Jefferson.¹⁷⁷ Included were architecture, archeology, education, and science. Politics did not make the cut. The Foundation created student lesson plans about Jefferson's travel, family, and interest in architecture. Though management encouraged hostesses to specialize in their knowledge, their options were limited to "architecture, furnishings, domestic life of Jefferson, landscape architecture, and gardening."¹⁷⁸

Jefferson's vision for Monticello facilitated the focus on Jefferson's domestic life and Monticello's decorative arts. Historic houses are often formulaic in décor and design. To a large extent, guests knew the style of the arrangements and made predictable conclusions about the world they were made to represent. Monticello was never a normal house, and its uncommon designs, gadgets, and décor demonstrated the desires of a man unmoored from popular trends. Walking into the house, guests would have seen a menagerie of scientific artifacts, innovative gadgets and cultural curiosities. Jefferson's fossil displays did not automatically connect with the standard imagined lives of the

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth Taylor, *Interpreting the Great Man*, 1.

¹⁷⁷ Eleanor Preston, "Memorandum (To: Teachers Interested in Visiting Monticello)," 1980, Box 4: Folder 37, TJF-Departments, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives.

¹⁷⁸ "Showing Monticello: Past and Future," Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 9.

preindustrial elite. Instead of using the house tour as a type of case study of early 19th-century living, guides used the décor to promote Jefferson's exceptionalism. In one script, the guide connected the displayed mastodon fossils with how Jefferson "is considered the country's first scientific archeologist."¹⁷⁹ The parlor doors showcased Jefferson's architectural innovations. The dining room table became a conduit to Jefferson's interest in gardening. The constant refrain of Jefferson's exceptionalism included not only Monticello's material culture, but also its history.

Other historic figures mentioned in Monticello's interpretation were often only included to demonstrate Jefferson's positive qualities. Jefferson's family were prime examples. A lesson plan on Jefferson's family life asserted that "Jefferson served as a role model for them [Jefferson's grandchildren] in almost every aspect of daily behaviors."¹⁸⁰ The lesson listed the talents and habits of Jefferson's grandchildren, always relating their origin back to Jefferson. For example, Ellen's interest in music came from Jefferson's tutelage. When mentioning the grandchildren's toys, the lesson was sure to include Jefferson as gift-giver. None of Jefferson's family were ever mentioned separately from Jefferson or had their accomplishments stand on their own. While the Foundation occasionally included enslaved workers into its interpretation, it was often to emphasize Jefferson's paternalism and benevolence. People not easily linked to Jefferson were not interpreted. While the Foundation worked with descendants to preserve Jefferson's grave, the Board of Directors "reported that the Foundation has no

¹⁷⁹ "Monticello Written House Tour," September 7, 1986, 111, box 9, folder 75, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

¹⁸⁰ Monticello Education Department, *Thomas Jefferson's Family Life Teacher Resource Packet Grades 3-6*, 1987, box 7, folder 76, Education Department Collection, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives 14.

responsibility to keep up the Levy cemetery.” Staff members were ordered “to fix up the crumbling wall [of the Levy cemetery] in order to keep it from being an eyesore.”¹⁸¹

Despite decades of effort to preserve the site, the Levy family’s legacy had become an unwelcome distraction from Monticello’s protagonist.

Put together, the interpretive experience at Monticello fundamentally changed in the 1950s. TJMF leadership gave more attention to on-site interpretation: giving guides access to training materials and relevant scholars, hiring a new cohort of guides and creating management and oversight positions. The Foundation also integrated their own interpretation with wider trends of public history. This had extremely negative consequences as the Monticello site became increasingly whitewashed. Monticello’s interpretation remained on Jefferson, though an increased availability and emphasis on material culture allowed for Jefferson’s private and intellectual life to become the dominant theme. Guests often heard more about Monticello’s parlor doors than the Declaration of Independence. Although leadership embraced these interpretive changes, they were also concerned about the lack of civic and political history.

As early as 1962, Foundation leadership recognized the lack of historical content in their tours as a potential problem.¹⁸² An interpretive committee brought up the problem again in 1978, writing “one important responsibility, is the matter of presenting Jefferson and his remarkable dwelling with its automatic doors, folding ladder, seven day clock, the dumb waiters, and other characteristic contrivances without obscuring deeper truths.”¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ “Board of Directors Meeting Minutes,” Feb. 2, 1955, box: 3, folder: 18. Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives.

¹⁸² Elizabeth Taylor, *Interpreting the Great Man*, 2

¹⁸³ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, 111, box 1, folder 2, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4.

The TJMF believed that increasing training and institutional infrastructure would enhance the historic content of the tour: giving interpreters access to books, scholars, and curatorial staff that could help broaden their tours. However, this institutional infrastructure just as often limited interpretation as expanded it. A 1978 list of training lectures included four on Jefferson and politics, and over ten on Monticello's décor.¹⁸⁴ Foundation management encouraged hostesses to specialize, but only in topics about Monticello's collections, architecture, landscape, or Jefferson's private life and interests.¹⁸⁵ Until the 1990s, no institution-wide effort attempted to bring Jefferson's political beliefs back into the tours. Instead, hostesses and guides made "little effort to emphasize Jefferson as the public figure; however, most of the salient facts are mentioned as the tour winds from room to room."¹⁸⁶

Thomas Jefferson's political career had become, at most, a minor, briefly acknowledged portion of Monticello's interpretation. It was not until the 1990s that Jefferson's political career began to be reinterpreted. Just as it had in the TJMF's founding generation, Jefferson's politics became important to enhance his reputation. An influx of social historians into the public history and museum fields drastically changed interpretation. At Monticello, the Foundation established slavery interpretation through Plantation Community Tours and Plantation Weekends, and dedicated student lesson plans. Slavery was also incorporated into the traditional house tour, though it often remained a secondary topic. Questions about Jefferson and slavery unbalanced the

¹⁸⁴ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 38.

¹⁸⁵ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 38.

¹⁸⁶ "Showing Monticello: Past and Future," Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

hagiographic nature of Monticello's interpretation. For the first time, guides asked guests to consider Jefferson's role as an enslaver and his attitudes on race. Changing interpretation generated mixed reactions, just as it had in the 1950s. Although most guests responded positively to the inclusion, many complained about "trashing Jefferson at his own house."¹⁸⁷ One asked "where can I find the great man tour?"¹⁸⁸

Jefferson interpretation changed alongside the emergent slavery interpretation. Though house tours maintained an emphasis on material culture and the domestic Jefferson, it was not Jefferson's private life that seemed in conflict with his enslaving. Guides did not ask how Jefferson could both study mastodon fossils and own slaves? They asked "how could the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence have kept slaves all his life?"¹⁸⁹ Slavery interpretation prompted an increase in Jefferson's political legacy. The two subjects were often joined together. The 1991 *Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* student lesson plan began: "Thomas Jefferson established, at the inception of our country, basic principles for all human beings and yet he owned slaves."¹⁹⁰ A 1992 lesson plan, *Thomas Jefferson—Patriot*, said that Jefferson "wanted to fight for public and private freedoms."¹⁹¹ Above all, the interpretations claimed, Jefferson believed in freedom. This emphasis laid the groundwork for a specific narrative: Jefferson as an abolitionist.¹⁹² "Thomas Jefferson and Slavery" emphasized Jefferson's political actions

¹⁸⁷ Elizabeth Taylor, *Interpreting the Great Man*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ Elizabeth Taylor, *Interpreting the Great Man*, 4.

¹⁸⁹ "To: Plantation Life Interpreters," 1994, 111, box 7, folder 54, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives.

¹⁹⁰ *Finding Isaac Jefferson: A Monticello Slave*, September 5, 1991, 91, box 5, folder 70, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 1.

¹⁹¹ Monticello Education Department, *1992 Lesson Plans*, November 30, 1992, 91, box 5, folder 60, , Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives.

¹⁹² Lois Horton, "Avoiding History" in *Public History and Slavery*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 145.

in ending the nation's participation in the international slave trade and supporting a Virginia manumission reform bill in the late 1760s.¹⁹³ Over half of *Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* was concerned with Jefferson's attacks on the institution of slavery. A 1991 brochure also mentioned Jefferson's effort to remove the country from the international slave trade as President, as well as how "in 1778 Jefferson drafted an act abolishing the importation of African slaves into Virginia."¹⁹⁴

Jefferson's political career became a double-sided coin. In one respect, comparing his political legacies and his attitude towards slavery mirrored academic trends in the field. Both attempted to fashion a more complex and human view of the founding father. However, politics was also used to retain a positive view of Jefferson. Other than Jefferson's public anti-slavery actions and commitment to personal freedoms, there was little mention of the Louisiana Purchase, the Louis and Clark expedition, or religious freedom on Monticello tours. The Foundation narrowly defined Jefferson's political legacy as a response to slavery, and whether the intent was to struggle with a complex, flawed figure or to defend an American hero, the use of political interpretation was the same. Politics was a buoy, keeping Jefferson's reputation from sinking beneath the surface. Just as the TJMF founders utilized a filtered version of Jefferson to bolster the political claims of the Democratic party, a more modern Foundation could take Jefferson's political belief in freedom as assurance that Monticello would always be a significant site in American history. One part of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation's mission statement illustrated this well:

¹⁹³ *Finding Isaac Jefferson: A Monticello Slave*, 7.

¹⁹⁴ *Monticello: A Guide for Student Tours*, 1991, 91, box 4, folder 39, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives.

“the special qualities of Mr. Jefferson himself as the supreme apostle of freedom and of American democracy, as a many-sided genius, as the American and the universal man, not as a demigod but a complex human being whose legacy transcends time and boundaries.”¹⁹⁵

The tone was much the same as the original understanding of Monticello as a patriotic shrine. Yet the content had substantially diverged; the tone was hagiographical but also allowed for complexity. But in many ways the statement no longer represented the site’s interpretation. Thomas Jefferson was no longer the only person interpreted at Monticello, and the newer interpretation went beyond complexity and into controversy. Perhaps the speed at which the Foundation changed left behind an unevenness where old interpretation merged with the new.

Concern for Jefferson’s interpretation has been evergreen. Jefferson’s prominence at Monticello became a flashpoint even before TJMF. The Levys preserved and restored the house, creating a combination of private residence and national shrine. After a disappointing visit, Maud Littleton created the Jefferson-Monticello Memorial Foundation to buy the site and make it a public shrine devoted solely to Jefferson. Though the Jefferson-Monticello Memorial Foundation was unsuccessful, the Levy family did sell the house to a new group: the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. From its conception in 1923, the new organization strove to put Jefferson as the interpretive force both at and beyond Monticello.

The Foundation embraced the political accomplishments of Thomas Jefferson during the first decades of its tenure. The Foundation had a political goal. Most of the founding members were Democrats, and they wished to use Jefferson’s legacy and

¹⁹⁵ *Instructor’s Resource Notebook*, 1997, 91, box 7, folder 81, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 2.

Monticello's image to unite a fractured Democratic party, and as a result Jefferson's interpretation obtained a distinctly democratic flavor. It is unclear how connected these high-level aspirations were with the daily public tours. Led by Black guides, tours consisted of "delightful tales" meant more for public enjoyment than historical accuracy.¹⁹⁶ A new generation of leadership radically changed Monticello's interpretation in the 1950s. TJMF's leadership embraced a newer, more intentional interpretive plan. They introduced a training regimen for interpretive staff led by Jefferson scholars and curators. This emphasis on historical accuracy and professionalism also created a segregated, white space in keeping with trends in public history. During the first half of the 20th century, Monticello served many functions. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation wished to simplify its functions into a tourist site, and a shrine for Thomas Jefferson.

During this period Monticello's version of Jefferson had shifted away from its early political roots. The new trainings stressed Jefferson's private life, as well as Monticello's setting. The interpretation was bolstered by the Foundation's commitment to preservation and restoration. The constant trickle of new Jefferson artifacts allowed hostesses and guides to give tours with an emphasis on decorative arts. Also included was Jefferson's architecture, his interest in science and technology, and his family life. Guests coming to Monticello from the 1950s onward would have heard little about the Declaration of Independence or Jefferson's presidency. Despite the lack of political discussion, there was no lack of positive recognition for Jefferson at Monticello. Until the 1990s, the Foundation maintained a hagiographical approach towards interpreting Jefferson. According to the interpreters, Jefferson became an exceptional father and a

¹⁹⁶ Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation, 1978, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 3.

new perfect grandparent. Positive traits and skills of his grandchildren were attributed to his influences. The Foundation also attributed the architecture and landscape to his genius. Combined, the Jefferson portrayed in the mid-20th century became an embodiment of a white, American heritage, a reflection not of the past but of a contemporary urge for nostalgia common among plantation sites.

This vision of Jefferson shifted only in the 1990s, when the Foundation began to interpret Monticello seriously as a site of production rather than a site of genteel consumption. Jefferson's domestic tranquility and exceptionalism were no longer driving questions at a site delving into its history of enslavement. Instead, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation returned to Jefferson's political career. Of particular emphasis was Jefferson's belief in freedom and his public stances against slavery. These seem designed specifically to counter the critical understanding of Jefferson as a slaveowner by portraying him as a believer in freedom and as a proto-abolitionist. Lost in the conversation was an honest assessment of Jefferson's political legacy. The interpretation of Jefferson has always remained a priority at Monticello. But just like the academic world, the interpretation changed dramatically with each generation. And through this interpretation, it becomes possible to see how the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation saw the role of Monticello in American society.

Epilogue

Monticello's Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation met with Plantation Community Tour guides during their 1996 annual meeting. The guides brought up concerns about the segregation between House Tours and Plantation Community Tours. Plantation Community Tours brought up difficult topics like racism and violence. House Tours, although they had begun discussing slavery, still maintained their overwhelming positive and comfortable tone. All guests got the cushy white history; they had to intentionally choose to attend the additional, outdoor tour to hear the other half of the story. Likewise, even the guides themselves had become separate. The Foundation had partnered with the University of Virginia to start a student internship program: students would learn about Jefferson, Monticello, and slavery, and then lead Plantation Community Tours over the summer. These student guides were a much more diverse group than the middle-class, overwhelmingly white workforce of house guides. The student guides' biggest concern was that Monticello had created "a plantation tour ghetto."¹⁹⁷ By the end of the 1990s, Monticello had experienced a seismic shift in slavery interpretation. However, like many institutions, the Foundation went through an uneven transition. The site had become, in the words of Eichstedt and Small, a place of "segregated knowledge."¹⁹⁸

Annette Gordon-Reed's historiographical masterclass, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997), forced the Foundation to confront their

¹⁹⁷ Advisory Committee on African-American History Transcript, September 3, 1996, 111, box 3, folder 19, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 38.

¹⁹⁸ Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 170.

interpretive past. The book reviewed the primary source documents from the Jeffersons, Hemings, and others and concluded that the Hemings' account provided the most logical interpretation of the facts. However, Gordon-Reed's real dispute was with the Jefferson scholars of prior generations. She concluded "it is my belief that those who call themselves Jefferson scholars have never made a serious and objective attempt to get at the truth of this matter."¹⁹⁹ Her attack on Jefferson scholarship provoked massive public attention and a scientific DNA study, which backed up her claims. The Foundation conducted their own review, coming to the same conclusion as Gordon-Reed in 2000. Interpretively, the Foundation consolidated their interpretation. Monticello's Education Department revised their old lesson plans, still in use from the late 1980s.²⁰⁰ House guides devoted longer sections of their tours to slavery. *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* forced Monticello to incorporate slavery into their interpretation, not just to include it.

But Gordon-Reed's book was an accelerant, not a catalyst. The first attempts to interpret slave life in the 1980s was intimately connected to the Foundation's view of Jefferson and Monticello. The introduction of Plantation Weekends and Plantation Community Tours had given that knowledge a chance to thrive, decentralized from the Jefferson-centered House Tours and exhibits. These initiatives gave Monticello a testing ground for provocative interpretation, and became a vital piece of institutional memory for later incorporation. And Monticello was not alone. The field of Jefferson scholarship was already trending in Annette Gordon-Reed's direction. The generation of Miller,

¹⁹⁹ Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: an American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 224.

²⁰⁰ "Education Department DNA Report Implementation Needs," 1987, 91, box 3, folder 31, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives.

Malone, and Cunningham had an superseded by a new group of scholars, led by Gordon-Reed and Peter Onuf. *An American Controversy* marked the end of a chapter of public history at Monticello. Interpreting slavery had become a core piece of Monticello's mission.

Jefferson's political legacies also gained ground following the publication of *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*. Reworking their interpretive plan in 1998, the Foundation included "Jefferson's public career and its legacy" as one of three themes, along with the plantation context and the house.²⁰¹ The new theme proposed by committee and approved by the board did little to change interpretation on the ground. A 2001 script's only mention of politics was a single line about Jefferson's hope that Lewis and Clark would find the Northwest Passage.²⁰² A 2003 script only mentioned politics in relation to his evolving views on slavery and political abolition.²⁰³ Between the old interpretation on décor and the new initiatives to discuss slavery on the plantation, Jefferson's political legacy became the odd man out in the interpretive triumvirate.

Yet, this was not always the case. During the founding of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, it was not Jefferson's home that attracted interest, but his political usefulness. Monticello was a shrine. Guests could visit the site, but just as important was the symbolic significance of being tied to an idyllic American political philosophy. The Foundation's first interpretive efforts manifested not in carefully curated tours, but in fundraising ventures in New York schools and Democratic conventions. The generational

²⁰¹ "Building a Home and a Nation: Monticello's Interpretive Plan for the 21st Century," December 1998, 111, box 1, folder 8, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4.

²⁰² "Basic House Tour," February 2001, 111, box 9, folder 78, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives, 4.

²⁰³ "Monticello Written House Tour", 111, box 9, folder 78, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Archives 6.

change that marked the end of those projects also shifted the meaning of Monticello. Once a patriotic shrine, Monticello became a home. Jefferson's politics were not needed in an essentially domestic paradigm, and the interpretation of decorative arts, architecture, and Jefferson's private life took center stage. The 1990s introduced a new framework: Monticello as a plantation. Here, Jefferson's political legacy served as a counterweight to the heavy, negative discussion of slavery.

Interpreting slavery on historic plantations remains just as vital today as it was 30 years ago. Recent events have shown that the United States still needs to confront the difficult subjects of its past. However, Monticello is not just a plantation, and slavery is not Thomas Jefferson's only legacy. Just as questions on race and equality resonate today, so do issues of religious freedom, human rights, government, science, and intergenerational justice. By teaching us the debates of the past, perhaps historic sites can advance conversations in the present. Doing so would require a new paradigm at Monticello. Whether this will occur, or whether it *should* occur, is up for debate. But interpretation always changes, and the history of tomorrow will certainly be different from the history of today.

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