

Monticello



The invention of an American place

I remember a Monticello of my childhood, though I have never been there. fields of lush green; the Rotunda, a fresh whiteness; and a mood of bucolic serenity, a feel of quietness and slow time. I don't know where this impression came from. I had seen pictures of Monticello in books and on television, and I knew Jefferson—or rather, he was an emblem of my boyhood. But this is not enough to account for my Monticello: a place without history, almost without a past, and peopleless. The last, in particular, never seemed strange to me, though it does now. Not once did I imagine the house and the fields as anything but empty. Perhaps people would have spoiled the view and brought with them noise, bustle—the world—which was just what my Monticello locked out. Even today, this sense of the place lingers in me. It has survived its clash with real history of the place as I've come to know it. It is one of those vague and powerful notions that survive any contact with reality. And so as I read about the place and see the many different forms it has taken, those other Monticellos compete and meld with mine.

Most Westerners take for granted the value of historical sites, the notion they should be preserved as “heritage.” And yet we forget the idea is a recent one; its wide acceptance blinds us to its newness, its strangeness. True—even the ancient world had its travelers in search of relics, its pilgrims to the tombs of great men. But our sense of the past, which insists on protecting the things of a lost world precisely because *it no longer exists*, is a different thing altogether.

Not until the end of the nineteenth century did people begin to think that Monticello, as a historical place, should be preserved in something like its “original state.” After Jefferson's death, it was sold in 1832 to James T. Barclay for seven thousand dollars. In sight of the Rotunda and its classical columns, in the fields where the author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States had taken his walks, this man planned to grow silkworms. The scheme failed. In 1836, Uriah P. Levy, an admirer of

Jefferson and the first Jewish commodore in the U.S. Navy, bought the house and its two hundred and eighteen acres for \$2,700.



An Old Engraving of Monticello, post card published by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation for the benefit of Monticello (Brooklyn, N.Y., date unknown). Courtesy of the Post Card Collections at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

It is easy to forget that the people who bought and sold Jefferson's home in the 1830s were his contemporaries. The man—and the place—had not yet been hallowed by history, by distance in the past. There were people alive who had seen Jefferson in the flesh, who had shaken his hand, who knew his faults. The sage of Monticello had not yet become a god.

Nevertheless, even in these early years there were visitors to Monticello who came because Jefferson had lived there. In 1832, Philadelphia lawyer and architect John H. B. Latrobe wrote of the "utter ruin and desolation" of the house and grounds but also of the "lingering" presence of Jefferson: something he felt would lure visitors to the place as long as "the history of America...[has] an influence on the conduct of its people."

Latrobe's association of person with place makes his view of Monticello well ahead of its times. This is perhaps not surprising given who he was. In addition to having a personal connection to Jefferson—his father, the Philadelphia architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, worked for the Jefferson administration and assisted the former president with the design of the University of Virginia—Latrobe was also a gifted landscape painter and architect.

In 1862, thirty years after Latrobe's visit, the will of Uriah P. Levy did leave Monticello to the nation but not as a monument to an important man in American history. Instead, the place was to become a school for the orphan children of naval warrant officers. (It is possible Jefferson would have approved. But then, he was vain and maybe would have preferred the pristine shrine of today.) The plan never went ahead because the Confederate government sold Monticello in 1864 as "alien property."

Alien property was a strange thing to call the home of one of Virginia's favorite sons, even if the Richmond government, ever desperate for money, was keen to raise cash by disposing of the properties of Northerners like Levy. After Union victory, the government—again ignoring the wishes expressed in Uriah P. Levy's will—restored the property to the Levy family, and it once more became a private home. The Monticello of the twentieth century, a place fit only for a memorial and museum, was not yet a reality in the American imagination. Instead, visitors to the place before the 1880s were more inspired by the view from the mountain, by the natural beauty of the scene. Reverend Stephen Higginson Tyng, writing in 1840, talked about the "glory" of Blue Ridge as seen from the house, a vision that spurred him to offer "homage to the great being" who could create such a sight.

Tyng was not even an admirer of Jefferson. He disapproved of his "atheism"—the reference to "the great being" was actually a dig—and was pleased to report not only that "[Jefferson's] influence has passed away" but that his name was spoken with "little respect, and much aversion...in this very neighbourhood in which he lived and died."

Tyng's sense of Monticello, particularly the notion that its natural beauty offered proof of the deity's presence, reflects the influence of Romantic conceptions of landscape. But over time, it would be another set of Romantic ideas—those about place and history and the relation between them—that would form the background to the "invention" of the modern Monticello. (Interestingly, my own image of the place, formed as a child in inner-city Sydney in the 1990s, is closer to that of Tyng and other early observers than to the later, more "historical" Monticello.)

From the 1880s, perceptions of Monticello change dramatically. While visitors continue to admire the natural beauty of the estate, it is Jefferson's presence that really excites them. The members of the Jefferson Club of St. Louis, on a visit in 1902, were "impressed by the sublimity of the scene...the disappearing mists of the morning, across valleys of rolling farm land to other mountains." But beneath this sentiment lay "*an even deeper feeling* of standing on the ground forever rendered sacred by the life and deeds, the death and dust of one who had been the greatest benefactor of mankind...[a] man who died there only to live forever in a Nation's life..."

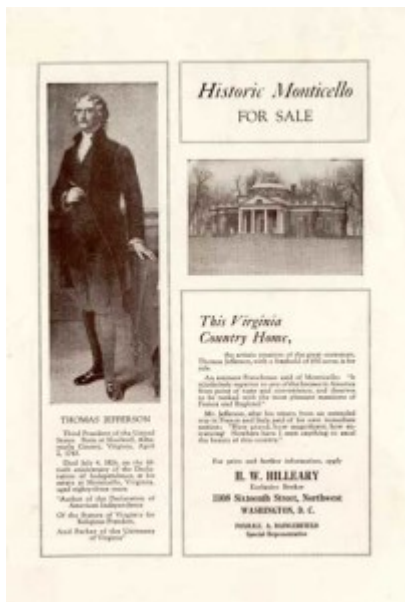
Certainly, the members of the Jefferson Club were far from typical. Some, perhaps most, Americans had no doubt never heard of Monticello, and of those who had, few would likely have used the grand word "sacred" to describe it. Nevertheless, the club's choice of words is interesting: where previous visitors to Monticello talked mostly about the landscape, now it is the memory of Jefferson's "life and deeds" and his place in the "Nation's life" that are important. American nationalism was slowly building a new Monticello.

In 1853, fifty years earlier, Benson Lossing had still seen in the place "only the empty offerings of laudable curiosity." Lossing was writing for *Harper's*

New Monthly Magazine, a popular periodical with a large readership; his view may not have been unusual. What is harder to believe for a contemporary is what Lossing did for a living: the man was a historian.

Clearly, times had changed by the turn of the century. Other motives, besides an interest in history, lay behind the St. Louis pilgrimage. The club was a Democratic group; its politics were Progressive and opposed to the administration of Republican president William McKinley. In 1897, just five years before the club's visit, William Jennings Bryan, the great Populist and Democratic presidential candidate, had been the first public figure since the Civil War to call for Monticello to be publicly owned (this had, of course, been the wish of Uriah P. Levy from the beginning). Ironically, this call gave rise to a movement to wrest control of Monticello from Uriah P. Levy's descendants. In the same year as the St. Louis club's pilgrimage, former Democratic congressman A. J. Cummings wrote an article about the Levys' ownership entitled "A National Humiliation."

It is not surprising that Democrats, now beholden to an at times openly anti-Semitic populist movement, would object to the Levys' ownership of what was becoming a national shrine. When it was Jewish bankers who allegedly crucified America's agrarian heartland on Bryan's "cross of gold," how could the former home of America's greatest agrarian champion remain in Jewish hands? Similar sentiments swirled around the question of Monticello's ownership until the Levys sold the property in 1923.



"Historic Monticello FOR SALE," pamphlet advertising sale by "H. W. Hilleary, Exclusive Broker, 1108 Sixteenth Street, Northwest, Washington, D.C." (date unknown). Courtesy of the U.S. Views Collections at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In 1912, the wife of a former Democratic congressman, Maud Littleton, testified

before Congress about the need for Monticello to be publicly owned. Having been invited by the Levys to inspect the estate, Littleton returned the favor by lamenting that at Monticello, she “did not get the feeling of being in the house Thomas Jefferson loved and built and made sacred...Jefferson seemed detached from Monticello...It seemed to me that the people of the United States should own Monticello...that it should be furnished as much like Mr. Jefferson had it as possible.”

Not once in her testimony did Littleton mention the landscape—the view from the mountaintop, which had so taken nearly all the visitors who came before her. For Littleton, all the value of Monticello is in its historical associations; the place will not be whole until the Levys are turned out and the house is rebuilt to look just as it did in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

This is a long way from Benson Lossing, writing over fifty years before and seeing only “curiosity” in Monticello itself. And yet Lossing was a professional historian, while Littleton was not. Nevertheless, hers was the more sensitive—if not necessarily the deeper—sense of history. In the period between 1853 and 1912, a historical profession, inspired by German ideas of craft and scholarship, had grown up in American universities. At the same time, there emerged a more *popular* interest in the past. Maud Littleton’s Monticello—a place very like the austere, World Heritage-listed monument of today—belongs firmly to this time in American history.

Despite all the fuss, Monticello never did become publicly owned. Littleton’s campaign only drew from Congress a joint resolution declaring Monticello “the Mecca of all lovers of liberty” and noting a petition, signed by “thousands of patriotic American citizens,” which complained about the Levys barring the public from the house.

The meaning of this failure is far from clear. Mount Vernon, Washington’s home, had been a house museum since before the Civil War (albeit under the ownership not of the public but of the fantastically named Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union). Did this mean Jefferson and Monticello did not have as important a place in the American imagination? Maybe—but there could have been other reasons why Congress failed to vote the money. Mount Vernon had been bought in 1858; by the 1900s, buying up a large estate in Virginia was far more difficult and costly. But perhaps most important, Jennings Bryan and Littleton—and, by association, Jefferson and Monticello—were closely linked with the Democrats; in the years of the campaign to buy Monticello, Congress was controlled by the Republicans.

When the Levys finally gave in and sold the place, it was not to the federal government but to a private group called the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. According to a supporter, the foundation was “an organization of patriotic citizens who...[have] worked to see Monticello a national shrine. Its purpose is to...restore it to the condition in which Jefferson knew it.”

May Sarton was not the sort of person usually associated with American nationalism. She was a lyric and confessional poet and a lesbian. Her most famous work was a novel about McCarthyism. And yet, in 1948, she wrote this about Monticello:

*This legendary house, this dear enchanted tomb,
Once so supremely lived in, and for life designed,
Will none of moldy death nor give it room,
Charged with the presence of a living mind.*

All the joys of invention and craft and wit,
Are freely granted here, all given rein,
But taut within the classic form and ruled by it,
Elegant, various, magnificent—and plain.

The time must come when, from the people's heart,
Government grows to meet the stature of a man,
And freedom finds its form, that great unruly art,
And the state is a house designed by Jefferson.



Thomas Jefferson, lithograph from the original portrait by Gilbert Stuart (1805). No. 3, Famous American Series, lithographed by Forbes Lithographic Manufacturing Company (Boston, 1928). Courtesy of the American Portrait Prints Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

There are a number of motifs here. First, Sarton appeals to something like the sense of place experienced by the members of the St. Louis Jefferson Club. They too saw eternity at Monticello: for them, it was “forever rendered sacred” by Jefferson’s life; for Sarton, it will have “none of moldy death.” Like the bucolic, Romantic Monticello, this Monticello owes a great deal to the traditions of Western—and especially English—literature. Shakespeare and

Shelly, in the same scheme of rhyming couplets used by Sarton, wrote about how love, verses, or monuments can survive the death of the people who made them.

Like Littleton though, Sarton did not see in Monticello a pastoral scene. Not once does she mention the grounds or landscape. Instead, Sarton brought something new: a sense of Monticello as an architectural wonder, a beautiful house in itself. By 1948, the foundation had restored the place, and the "ruin" seen by earlier visitors was gone. Sarton could now speak of a structure "[e]legant, various, magnificent—and plain": as good as a description yet written of the neoclassical façade.

Like Littleton and the members of the St. Louis club, Sarton admired Jefferson. But her Monticello was more complicated than theirs. (An interesting question: had Sarton actually been to Monticello, or was hers, like mine, an entirely imagined place?) The last stanza of the poem suggests the America she knew had not lived up to Jefferson's dream: "the time" she speaks of, when "government grows to meet the stature of a man," has not yet come.

In the year Sarton wrote these lines, President Truman referred to the United States as "the greatest nation the sun ever shone upon." He had reason to boast: America was the richest nation in the history of the world, she had just won a World War, and her armies occupied Western Europe and Japan. Nevertheless, Sarton did not share in the sense of triumphant satisfaction. Unlike the people who made Jefferson's home a national shrine, she saw the place as something of a reproach. Using Monticello as a metaphor for perfect construction, Sarton suggests that Jefferson's other dream, America, has not fulfilled the design of *its* original architects (the poem would perhaps have been even better if Sarton had known that Monticello, far from being finished at Jefferson's death, was very much a work-in-progress).

Another complicated vision of Monticello is found in a kind of prose poem published in 2003. It is both a short story and a nonfiction reflective piece, with the narration going back and forth in time between a contemporary tour of Monticello and imaginary scenes from the life of the plantation's slaves. The piece was published in *Callaloo*, a journal produced by Johns Hopkins University for African and African-American writers. The author was Vesper Osborne, a black woman, and for her, the beauty of Monticello was only for "Jefferson and the white family"; for the slave, "Monticello was only an invisible cage." Nevertheless, Osborne's conception of the meaning of Monticello is far from one sided. Despite the "reality of slavery," the place also represents "the ideal of a free democracy," and the "sorrow" of its history coincides with a "majestic, elegant" façade.

Osborne's piece reflects a movement of recent years, which, though it may not have *tarnished* Monticello as a national monument, has at least made its place in the American imagination more ambiguous. Certainly, Osborne is hardly a "popular" writer, and her work was probably read by only a handful of Americans. But the story of Sally Hemmings *has* become part of popular culture

since a DNA test in 1998 proved the descendents of Hemmings had Jefferson blood in their veins. A best-selling book—*Sally Hemmings: A Novel*—has been made into a telemovie starring New Zealander Sam Neil as Jefferson.



Sketch of Mr. Jefferson's Seat, Monticello, Durant, engraver, 10.3 x 15.4 cm. Frontispiece for *The Literary and Scientific Repository* (New York, Oct. 1820). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In neither the novel nor Osborne's prose poem is Jefferson portrayed as a bad man. Rather, he is seen as a flawed human being imprisoned by the assumptions of his time. Jefferson knows slavery is wrong and that by owning slaves he violates his declared principles; but he cannot bring himself to free them. In its way, this split-minded character of the potboiler and daytime television is actually more *historical* than the glass-museum figure admired by Maud Littleton. The irony is that it was a growing popular interest in the past that helped make Monticello a shrine in the first place; now, nearly a hundred years later, it has made it more complicated, more difficult, and more interesting.

Since the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation bought Monticello in 1923, a whole Jefferson industry has grown up around the estate and the nearby University of Virginia in Charlottesville. There is a post called the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor of History at UVA, now occupied by Peter Onuf. The foundation itself has a Website devoted to [Monticello](#), where the viewer can take virtual tours of the house. They also sell Monticello-themed mugs, t-shirts, and action figures and release their own newsletter, called, imaginatively, *Monticello*. In 2004, the trustees of the foundation announced a new initiative called "Jefferson Lives: A Campaign for Monticello in the Twenty-First Century." The aim of this initiative—achieved—was to raise \$100 million in a little under a year.

Obviously, the finances of Monticello have not suffered under private ownership. The foundation also does its best to spread a certain image of the place in the public sphere. One of its offerings, a photographic portrait done in a lush coffee-table edition, had its introduction written by David McCullough and its blurb by Ken Burns.

In 2003, something very interesting happened: the U.S. Treasury took Monticello off the reverse side of the nickel. This was not meant as an anti-Jefferson slight; his profile had been on the obverse side and a picture of Monticello on the reverse side since 1938. The new coins—which celebrated the bicentennial of the Jefferson-sponsored Lewis and Clark expedition—would be minted for only two years, after which a newly designed Jefferson/Monticello coin would be created. Nevertheless, people complained. Congressman Eric I. Cantor, with the support of the Virginia delegation in the House, proposed legislation specifying that the five-cent coin “shall bear an image of Monticello.” Cantor also released a press statement saying that keeping Monticello on the coin was necessary to ensure that “our heritage as Americans and Virginians is accurately represented.”

It is hard to say if there was any real “public outrage” behind this effort. The president of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, certain that Monticello would return to the coin in 2006, was “totally supportive” of the Treasury Department’s actions. Most likely, the majority of Americans never heard of the battle and failed to notice the new coins when, despite the protests, they came into circulation the next year.

Nevertheless, the fight—and the agreement by all parties that Monticello would ultimately stay on the coin—says something. Jefferson’s old home remains one of America’s public places. Though different, its image is as vital as it was in 1938. Today, Monticello is back on the coin, a symbol of the hidden presence of history itself in daily life; for when millions of Americans buy and sell things each day, the house of Jefferson passes through their fingers, whether they see it or not.

Postscript

In 1956, President Sukarno of Indonesia, a Muslim, made a trip to Monticello. According to a report in the *New York Times*, he described his visit as “a pilgrimage” and referred to Jefferson as his “great teacher.”

It is hard to say what all this meant. Publicly owned or not, Monticello had been established after the 1920s as one of America’s national monuments. Sukarno’s visit may have been sincere, proof of Monticello’s fame abroad, at least amongst the educated elites of certain countries. But it may also have been mere form and ceremony, a ploy to curry favor with a powerful ally. In 1956, the height of the Cold War, Sukarno’s government was dependent on the United States for money and arms. Nevertheless, the mere fact of the visit says something: the Indonesian wanted to make a statement in America, and he felt Monticello was the place to do it.

Further Reading:

Merrill Peterson's *Visitors to Monticello* (Charlottesville, Va., 1989), an edited collection of eyewitness accounts, contains extracts from the writings of Latrobe, Tyng, Lossing, Littleton, and others. Patricia West's *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, D.C., 1999) explores the general topic of the growth of antiquarianism and its connections with the party politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Marc Leepson's *Saving Monticello* (Richmond, Va., 2003) offers a thorough and generally fair account of the efforts to make Monticello publicly owned.

For general material on the history of Monticello—or to apply for the position open in “cultural property protection” (dead presidents need security too)—see the [Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation's lushly produced Website](#). On the infinite, and infinitely interesting, subject of the growth of historical consciousness in America, see the musings of John Lukacs in his *A New Republic* (New Haven, 2004). For an introduction to the whole question of place, its meaning in history, and the evolution of the way in which humans relate to the natural and nonnatural worlds, see Simon Schama's rambling, often frustrating, but occasionally brilliant epic, *Landscape and Memory* (London, 1996).

This article originally appeared in issue 8.4 (July, 2008).

Jack Sexton is a writer and historian. He lives in Sydney.