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History of Monticello¹

Thomas Jefferson was 26 when he designed and began building Monticello in 1769. He had had no formal training in architecture but taught himself from books that he read. He also picked up ideas from other buildings that he saw and was particularly influenced by both classical ruins and modern buildings that he visited when he lived in France. Building and remodeling Monticello was a task that Jefferson worked at for the rest of his life.

Monticello means “little mountain” in Italian. Jefferson selected as his building site a favorite hill 867 feet high on the estate he inherited from his father. The hill caused many problems for the builders, but it also gave Jefferson a magnificent view of the surrounding area. The home is near Charlottesville, Virginia, and about 100 miles from Washington, D.C.

Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton in 1772 when he was 29. Construction on Monticello was not finished, so the newlyweds moved into the one-room South Pavilion, which is now known as the “Honeymoon Cottage.” They did not occupy Monticello itself until 1775, and even then, the

house was not done. One source says that, when Martha died 10 years and nine months after the Jeffersons’ wedding, construction on Monticello was still not completed.

When Thomas returned from France in 1789, he brought with him many new ideas for Monticello. From 1793 through 1809, Jefferson rebuilt his home. He changed it from a two-story building with 13 rooms to a three-story mansion with 43 rooms. During this period, Jefferson’s many family members spent one winter in their home partially without a roof!

Jefferson so enjoyed “pulling down and putting up” that Monticello was not yet finished to his satisfaction when he died at age 83. He had spent 40 years working on his masterpiece, and it had nearly bankrupted him. When he died in 1826, Jefferson owed \$100,000.

His heirs had to sell most of the slaves, the livestock, crops, farm equipment, furniture and works of art to try to pay off the debt. Eventually, they even had to sell Monticello.



¹ *A Personal Tour of Monticello* by Robert Young, Minneapolis, Lerner Publications Company, 1999.
Cornerstones of Freedom: Monticello by Norman Richards, Chicago, Children’s Press, 1995.
Monticello by Catherine Reef, New York, Dillon Press, 1991.
Jefferson’s Monticello by William Howard Adams, New York, Abbeville Press, 1983.

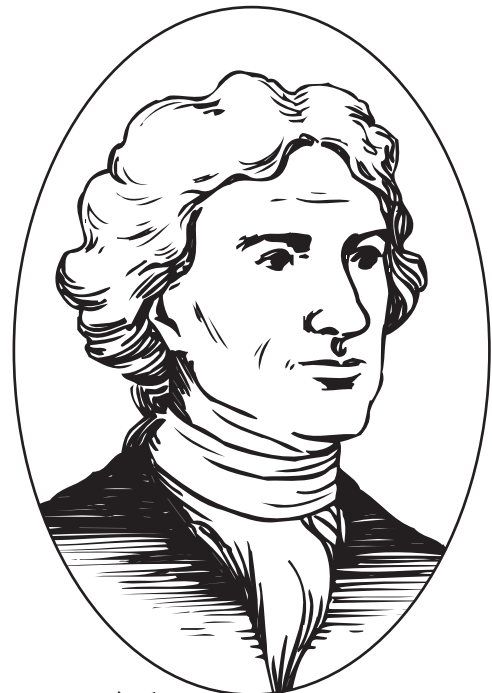
History of Monticello



James Barkley bought the mansion in 1831. Three years later, he sold it to a U.S. Navy officer named Uriah P. Levy. When Levy died, a farmer was hired to take care of Monticello. The farmer used the parlor to store bins of grain and built pigpens in Jefferson's prized gardens. From 1861 until 1865, the government of the Confederacy took over the house. The mansion was vandalized during this period: people wrote their names in the dome room, stole shingles from the roof and chipped off pieces of Jefferson's tombstone for souvenirs. The house was abandoned after 1865 when the Confederacy lost the Civil War.

Monticello entered a new period in its life in 1789 when Uriah Levy's nephew started to use it as his summer home. He began restoring the building, but did not live to finish the work. His descendants, particularly Jefferson Monroe Levy, continued the work on Monticello. He and other family members searched out and bought heirlooms from the estate that had been sold off by the Jefferson family. However, Levy changed the structure of the house to suit his tastes and the architectural ideas of his time.

Concerned citizens created the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in 1923 with the purpose of raising enough money to purchase and restore Monticello. They finally achieved their goal, and the mansion became a public memorial on July 4, 1926, the 100th anniversary of Jefferson's death. By the late 1950s, the house and gardens looked much as they had during Jefferson's life. Martha and Thomas Jefferson are buried on the grounds of their beloved home.



Thomas Jefferson

History of Monticello Questions

1. What was Jefferson's training in architecture? _____

2. What were two ways that the second Monticello was different from the first one?

3. Why did Jefferson's heirs have to sell off most of Jefferson's possessions after the President's death? _____

4. Name in chronological (time) order the five owners of Monticello after the Jefferson family and before the Foundation bought the historical mansion. _____

5. Give four examples that show that later owners of Monticello did not value the mansion as much as Jefferson had. _____

6. Thought Question: Why did it take nearly 100 years for people to realize the historical importance of Monticello and make it a public monument? _____

