

Joseph Fossett, an enslaved blacksmith

Reading Level: Middle School

Joseph Fossett was born in 1780 in Richmond, Virginia. His mother was Mary Hemings, a household slave. When he was twelve, Joseph lived at Monticello, working in the nailery on Mulberry Row. In the main house, he also fetched wood and water, ran errands, and waited tables.

At sixteen, Joseph began to learn blacksmithing. From 1807 to 1827, he ran Monticello's blacksmith shop. He shod horses and sharpened hoes and plows. He was described as "a very fine workman; could do anything it was necessary to do with steel or iron." Unlike most slaves, Joseph received a share of the shop's profits, earning one-sixth of the money collected.

Joseph Fossett married Edith Hern; they had ten children. When Thomas Jefferson died, his will freed Joseph. He was given tools and an acre of land. When Jefferson died and Monticello and all its property was sold, Joseph watched as his wife Edith and four of their children were sold for a total of 1,350 dollars.

Joseph continued to work as a blacksmith, purchasing a shop in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 1837, he entered the Charlottesville courthouse, which was only a block from his shop. There he signed a deed of manumission that freed his wife, five of their children and four of their grandchildren, giving them "all rights and privileges of free persons . . ."

The family settled in Cincinnati in the free state of Ohio about 1840. Joseph died in 1858.



Partial horseshoe uncovered by archaeologists at Monticello.