

Life in Slavery at Monticello

Reading Level: Middle School

In a typical year, Thomas Jefferson owned about two hundred slaves, and the labor of these enslaved people ran his plantations. Skilled workers and craftsmen built fences and barns, crafted wheelbarrows and wagons, repaired threshing machines, and wove cloth. Farm laborers planted, hoed, plowed, and picked crops. Enslaved house servants cooked meals and washed clothes. Up to 140 slaves lived and worked at the 5,000-acre Monticello plantation. The others lived at Poplar Forest, Jefferson's plantation ninety miles away in Bedford County. Information about their lives comes through accounts left by some of the enslaved people, oral histories shared by descendants of Monticello's enslaved community, Jefferson's records, and archaeological research of their living and working spaces. Under the oppressive conditions of slavery, they were not legally in control of their own lives. But they were still people. They had families, hopes, and even decisions to make. People enslaved at Monticello were active participants in history.

Jefferson as a Slave Owner

Jefferson owned over 600 people during the course of his life. He grew up in a world supported by the labor of enslaved people, and he inherited slaves from his father, Peter Jefferson, and his father-in-law, John Wayles. Like on other plantations, the lives of Jefferson and his family were very closely connected to the people they enslaved. He even fathered children by an enslaved woman named Sally Hemings. Jefferson's life and accomplishments were possible because he had enslaved people taking care of his needs.

Jefferson wrote about wanting to "ameliorate" or better the conditions of slavery, but he did not always live up to that and slavery was – by its nature – a cruel system. Life as an enslaved person was just as difficult at Monticello as at other plantations in Virginia. Some people were whipped and some people ran away.

Jefferson provided the enslaved people at Monticello with some food, clothing, firewood, shelter and medical care. The enslaved workers were given weekly food rations and twice yearly clothing rations, but they had to add to that with whatever they could grow and make themselves – in the limited time they had to themselves.



Display approximating the ration of food (cornmeal, fish, and pork) given to each adult slave per week.

Enslaved Families

Enslaved families living at Monticello were strong and served as important networks of community. However, these connections were not legally recognized and there was always the terrifying possibility of losing a family member through sale or gift.

Although slaves in Virginia could not marry legally, enslaved couples still considered themselves as husband and wife. Jefferson's records also show that few marriages ended in 'divorce,' and when enslaved people married someone outside of the Monticello community, or "abroad," they often "petitioned" (asked) Jefferson to be united with their families through sale.

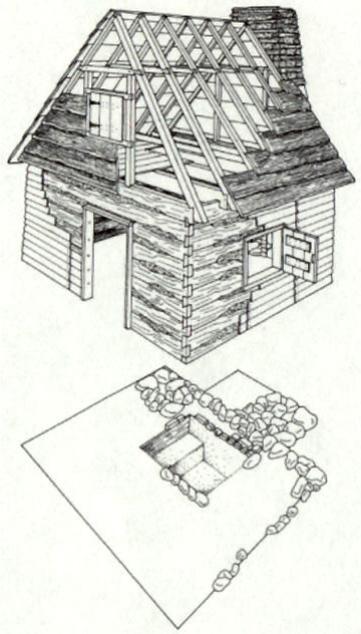
Jefferson wrote about wanting to keep families together, but the reality at Monticello was sometimes different. There was always the fear of being separated from your family. In one instance, Jefferson recognized the marriage between Joseph and Edith Fossett, but ignored it when he temporarily separated them. He took Edith Fossett to Washington, D.C., away from her husband. Joseph Fossett "ran away" from Monticello, only to come up and see her. In Jefferson's letter about the incident, he is shocked at the disobedience of Joseph Fossett and only refers to a former connection between the husband and wife. Jefferson also gave people as gifts to his family members. In childhood, Joseph Fossett lost his two older siblings who were gifted away as children. Joseph Fossett had also lost his mother when she was sold to and freed by her free white husband, but Jefferson refused to sell the twelve-year-old Joseph and his nine-year-old sister Betsey with their mother.

Enslaved families at Monticello were often large. David and Isabel Hern had twelve children. Edward and Jane Gillette also had twelve children. However, Jefferson recorded the deaths of many children. Some died at birth, others died from measles, 'fever,' and whooping cough.

Enslaved children began working by the age of ten. They became *nailers* and weavers, house servants, and cooks' helpers. When Sally Hemings was about thirteen, she was sent to France with Thomas Jefferson's daughter Maria as her enslaved 'nurse companion.' When James Hubbard turned eleven, he was taken from his home at Poplar Forest and moved ninety miles to live at Monticello. There he learned nail making in a shop on Mulberry Row, Monticello's industrial street. Isaac Jefferson remembered his boyhood jobs in the Monticello. Every morning he woke early to make a fire for the free white children who were taught in the South Pavilion.

Housing

Most of the enslaved people lived in log cabins. They were usually one room with lofts. They ranged in size from 12 by 14 feet to 12 by 20 feet. The log sides were chinked with mud. The roofs were made of pine slabs. The cabins had wooden chimneys and earthen floors with root



Artist's rendition of "Building s", a slave cabin along Monticello's Mulberry Row

cellars dug into them.

Several of the house slaves, including the head cook, lived in the enslaved servants' rooms under the South Terrace of the main house. These rooms were made of stone and brick and built into the side of a hill. Isaac Jefferson recalled sleeping on a blanket on the floor of the South Pavilion.

Education

During Jefferson's lifetime, teaching slaves was not against the law. Although Jefferson believed in public education for free white children, there are no records that he formally educated his slaves. Israel Gillette Jefferson, a Monticello slave, recalls hearing Jefferson say that he was "in favor of teaching the slaves to learn to read print; that to teach them to write would enable them to forge [free] papers."



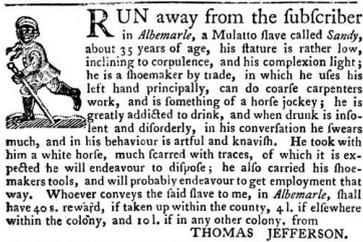
Writing slate and pencils excavated at Monticello.

However, many enslaved workers at Monticello knew how to read and write. John Hemmings, a woodworker, wrote to Jefferson about his progress building Poplar Forest. Joseph Fossett, a blacksmith, left records of his work. James Hemings, Jefferson's chef, kept lists of the kitchen equipment. Jefferson also left written instructions to David Hern, a skilled laborer, and to Great George, his African-American overseer.

How did these slaves learn to read and write? Some learned from Jefferson's grandchildren and some from each other. Madison Hemings recalled in his memoirs: "I learned to read by inducing the white children to teach me the letters." Peter Fossett, an enslaved house servant, recalled that Jefferson "allowed" those eager for learning to study with his grandchildren. Peter then used his skills to teach others. "Peter Fossett taught my father to read and write by lightwood knots in the late hours of night." remembered Charles Bullock.

Selling Slaves

Jefferson wrote that he didn't like to sell slaves except "for delinquency, or on their own request." However, Jefferson sold 70 slaves in 1790 to pay off debts he owed and he gifted people to family members. He also sold slaves as punishment. An eighteen-year-old young man named Cary who had attacked another enslaved young man was sold to someone "so distant as never more to be heard of among us. It would to the others be as if he were put out of the way by death." Jefferson also sold slaves who continued to run away.



Jefferson ran this ad offering a reward for the return of "Sandy" in "The Virginia Gazette" on September 14, 1769.

Runaways

Between 1769 and 1820, there were twenty known runaways from Monticello, most of them slaves whom Jefferson had hired by the year. In 1781, during the American Revolution, Lord Cornwallis and his British soldiers invaded Jefferson's plantation Elk Hill. When Cornwallis left, nineteen of Jefferson's slaves went with him. Jefferson noted that two families including nine children under twelve had "fled to the enemy." About fifteen of the runaways died from disease. A few were found and brought back to Monticello "in the last stages of the disease." Several returned on their own and were later sold. Only three slaves, Sam, Jenny and Harry, were never accounted for. They may have found freedom.

Punishments

Enslaved people were punished at Monticello, and life in slavery on Jefferson's mountain was just as bad as at other southern plantations. In his memoirs, overseer Edmund Bacon wrote that Jefferson "could not bear to have a servant whipped, no odds how much he deserved it." But Jefferson did sometimes have his slaves whipped. When runaway James Hubbard was captured, Jefferson "had him severely flogged in the presence of his old companions, and committed to jail." Three other runaways were also whipped and "sent as an example to New Orleans to be sold." Letters and slave narratives also revealed several cruel overseers on Jefferson's quarter farms. William Page, overseer of Shadwell and Lego, had inspired "terror" in the slave community.

"Our own Time"

Enslaved people at Monticello worked all day to run Jefferson's plantation and his home, and they had Sundays, holidays and after-work hours as their "own time." During their "own time," they worked for themselves and their families. They crafted furniture and household utensils. They kept a poultry yard for

chickens and eggs. They grew squash, cucumbers, peas and melons in garden plots. They hunted, trapped and fished for their own use. Jefferson's grandson recalled moonlit adventures following the African-American men on the trail of possums and bee trees.

They also sold fish, fruit, beeswax, and walnuts to the Jefferson family. Household accounts show that slaves were paid for items ranging from eggs to squirrel skins. On Sunday, when Jefferson's slaves had some free time, they took extra goods to Charlottesville to sell at the Sunday market. Records show that sometimes slaves were paid for working on their own time. Hauling and earthmoving earned fifty cents a day. On Sundays, slaves could travel to Charlottesville to the market to sell goods to earn money. Some of the enslaved people were also religious and practiced various forms of worship.

Letters and accounts say almost nothing about the amusements of enslaved people. Pieces of violins and jaw harps have been unearthed by archaeologists at Monticello's slave cabins. The sons of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson played the fiddle. Isaac Jefferson recalled that Thomas Jefferson's brother would "come out among the black people, play the fiddle and dance half the night." Sundays and a four-day holiday at Christmas gave slaves an all-too-brief chance to visit with friends and family in the plantation community.