

# Plantation Economy

**Reading Level: Middle School**



Aerial image showing Monticello Mountain and some of the areas that would have been farmed by Jefferson's slaves.

Monticello was a large plantation of 5,000 acres that was divided into two to four separate quarter farms. Like most plantations, it tried to be self-sustaining. That meant that most things—food, cloth, shoes, brick, nails, barrels—were either grown or made on the plantation. But it also needed to make a profit. The plantation owners wanted to earn money to buy items such as sugar and coffee, and fine china and clothing, which were not made on the plantation.

The owner of a Virginia plantation was considered wealthy if he owned 20 or more slaves. In 1790, Jefferson owned 118 slaves. At times there were as many as fourteen free white workers and craftsmen living at Monticello. In order to support Jefferson's family, his slaves and the craftsmen, Monticello needed to run efficiently and make a profit. In plantation economies, enslaved laborers and craftsmen supplied most of the labor. Hired overseers managed them.

## Cash Crops

Plantations needed to grow a “cash” or “staple crop.” This meant a crop was grown and sold for profit, not for use on the farm. Before the American Revolution, Virginia plantation owners grew tobacco to sell overseas. They were often paid in credit. The credit was used to “buy” expensive items such as wine, books, fine china and cloth from England and Europe. Growing a cash crop required large numbers of workers. At Monticello, slaves supplied the labor.

Jefferson's first cash crop was tobacco. It required steady labor over eighteen months. Enslaved workers

planted, weeded, topped, de-wormed, cut, and cured the tobacco. Once it was cured, it was packed into wooden barrels called hogsheads. These were rolled or dragged to the Rivanna River. Flat-bottom boats called bateaux took the crop down the Rivanna and then the James River to markets in Richmond.

By 1794, Jefferson, like most of his fellow Virginians, grew wheat as his cash crop. All the slaves except for the house slaves (who were busy with their daily chores) were involved in harvesting the wheat in June. For two weeks they worked from sunup to sundown, six days a week. In 1796 Jefferson boasted of a fine harvest, which resulted in 546 stacks of grain. Until 1808, the wheat crop was shipped to Richmond for market. Afterwards, when Jefferson had a large grain mill on the Rivanna River, the crop was ground into flour before shipping.

Merchants paid Jefferson for the tobacco and wheat in goods or with credit. Profit from the cash crop was not shared with the enslaved workers. Jefferson used the profit to buy goods from England and Europe for himself and his family. Like many plantation owners, Jefferson often bought more than he sold and became indebted to the merchants.

## Food for All

Food also needed to be grown on the plantation to feed the people, enslaved and free, who lived at Monticello. Over the years, Jefferson grew over 300 varieties of vegetables in his two acre “kitchen” garden. In the spring, slaves plowed the garden and sowed the seeds. They pruned the 300 trees in the orchards and the bushes in the “berry squares.” In the summer, they weeded and watered. They picked fresh vegetables and fruits when ripe. Jefferson especially loved English peas, asparagus, tomatoes and fresh salads. In late summer and fall, slaves pickled and preserved the vegetables and fruits to feed Jefferson’s family during the winter months.

Jefferson provided a weekly food ration, or allotment, to his slaves, consisting of cornmeal, preserved pork, and salted fish. Slaves were not given fruits or vegetables from Jefferson’s gardens. During their “own time,” after long hours of work, they tended their own gardens. They grew cabbage, squash, and melons to add to their diets. They stored them in crocks and in root cellars beneath their cabins. Their gardens were so successful that they often sold vegetables to Jefferson for his table.

Pork and beef were an important part of the diet for those living on the plantation. Enslaved workers tended the hogs and cattle, which were brought to fattening pens after months feeding on acorns and other nuts in the surrounding woods. They cured and salted the meat so it would keep over the winter. Chickens were also raised for meat and for eggs. Most slave families had a chicken yard somewhere on



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

the plantation.



## Plantation Industries

Skilled craftsmen, both white and black, created goods for the plantation. They made tools, plows, and carriages, and built barns and sheds. In the textile shop, enslaved women and girls spun thread and wove rough cloth for the slaves' clothing. Workers in the joinery crafted windows and doors, woodwork, and furniture for Jefferson's home.

Besides shoeing horses, blacksmiths made hoes and axes, hardware for the house and mills, and wagon and carriage parts.

Jefferson hoped to make a profit with several of his industries. In the nailery, enslaved boys aged ten to sixteen made from 8,000 to 10,000 nails a day. Those not used on the plantation were sold, making money in the early years. Farmers from the neighborhood brought horses to be shod at the blacksmith shop. Joseph Fossett, an enslaved man who ran the shop from 1807 to 1827, received a share of the payments for work he did for neighbors "in his own time."

## Overseers

Jefferson was often absent from Monticello. He hired free men as overseers to manage the enslaved workers. Edmund Bacon was overseer of Monticello from 1806 to 1822. Earlier, William Page was an overseer at the Shadwell farm. He had a reputation for cruelty. Great George was Jefferson's trusted black overseer for three years. He was the only Monticello slave to be paid a wage although it was half the amount a white overseer earned. When Great George died in 1799, Jefferson hired a white overseer. The new overseer was known to whip sick slaves, and sometimes failed to give them their supplies.

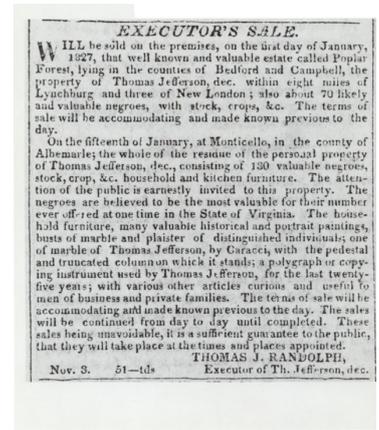
How did the slaves react to cruel overseers? Letters note several attacks on overseers at Jefferson's Poplar Forest plantation. One slave tormented a Monticello overseer by cutting up his garden and destroying his things.

## Debt

As a Virginia plantation owner, Jefferson was always looking for new ways to make Monticello more productive. But he was always in debt. Jefferson loved Monticello, but he was away from his beloved home for years at a time. During his service as a delegate, diplomat, and

president, Jefferson had to leave the management of his farms to others. He was also generous with his home, entertaining many guests. He loved to buy expensive foods and wines and often owed money to merchants. Plus, he was never satisfied with the plantation system of enslaved workers. In 1799 he wrote, "I am not fit to be a farmer with the kind of labour that we have."

Despite Monticello's cash crops and industries, the plantation seldom made a profit. In 1824, a visitor noted that Jefferson's home was "rather old and going to decay." In 1826, Jefferson died. A year later, his slaves and the furnishing of his home were sold to help to pay off his debts of over \$100,000. Not long afterward, Monticello was sold, too.



Jefferson's grandson ran this ad announcing the public sale of Monticello and other personal property including "130 valuable negroes."

*Th. Jefferson*  
MONTICELLO