THOMAS JEFFERSON AT

MONTICELLO

ARCHITECTURE · LANDSCAPE · COLLECTIONS
BOOKS · FOOD · WINE

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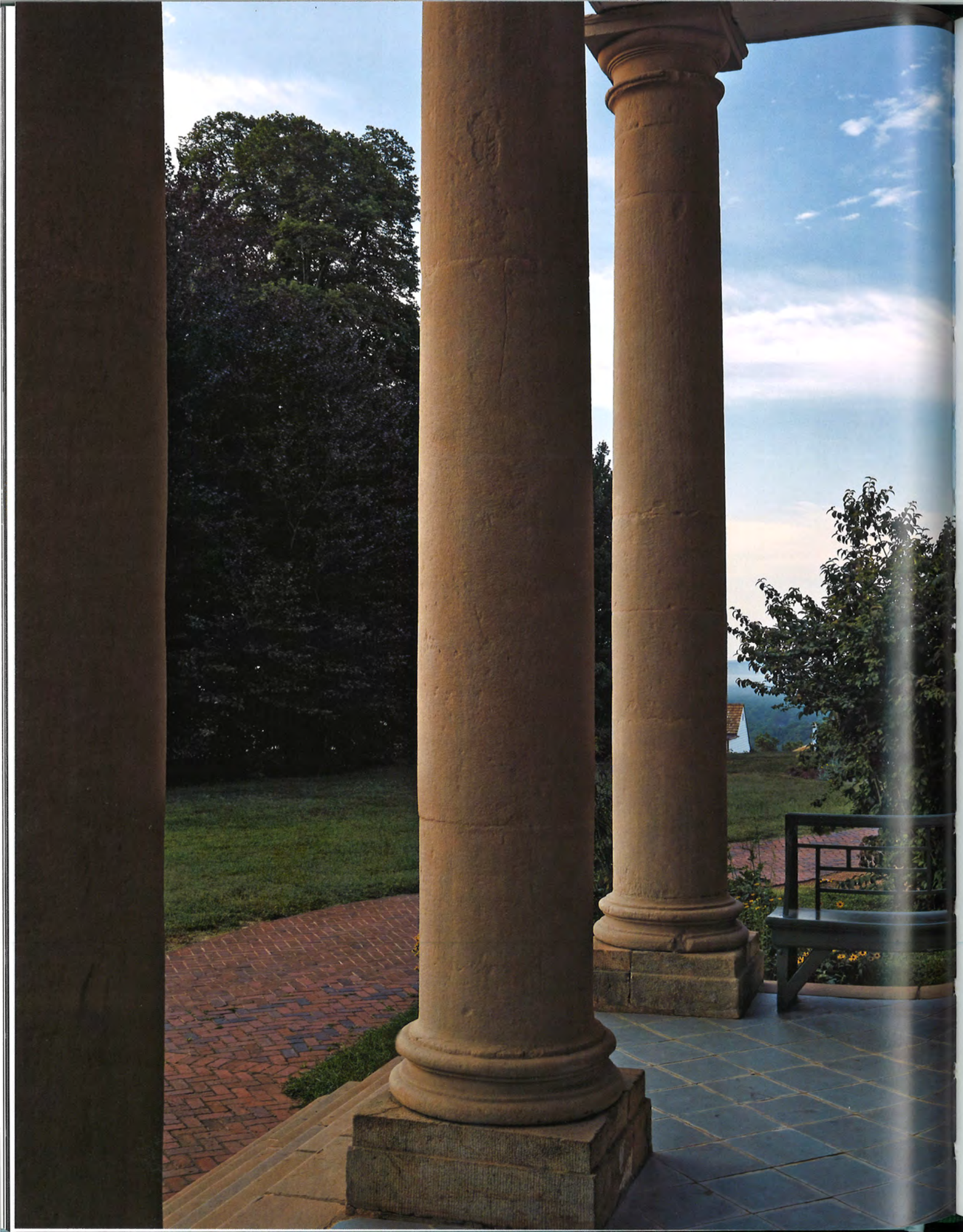

ARCHITECTURE

THE PERFECT AND THE PERSONAL

Gil Schafer III

Monticello, the home that Thomas Jefferson created from 1768 until 1826 (with time off to write the Declaration of Independence, serve two terms as president, and address various other distractions), remains one of the most studied and written-about private houses in our nation, and there is little I can add to this voluminous scholarship. In short, I'm not an expert. But as an American residential architect working in the classical tradition—as someone who has pondered, admired, and learned from my great predecessor's example, and at times considered my (much more modest) efforts through the prism of Jefferson's experience—I've discovered parallels between his journey and my own that have been personally meaningful, in particular the ways in which the maturity of years and experience impacts creativity.

Each time I visit Monticello, which I do with regularity, I am reminded of the multilayered character of its author's accomplishment. Jefferson often expressed the belief that good architecture could benefit the nation he'd helped to establish. He believed that the arts—of which he professed architecture was the "most important"[1]—were essential to "improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile them to the respect of the world and procure them it's praise."[2] The architecture of Monticello does all that, without question. But it also achieves something else—something at once more personal and, more particularly, American.

A precocious creator, Jefferson discovered architecture at the College of William & Mary, where, apparently on a whim, he purchased an architectural pattern

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Jefferson used the visually striking Doric order in his design for the porticos. Perhaps Jefferson's favorite, four different versions of this robust order can be seen at Monticello.

LEFT
Jefferson was around thirty years old when he designed these chimneys for the original Monticello. Referencing Palladio's plans for a Doric pedestal and featuring caps and bases carved from local quartzite, they are a poignant expression of the young architect's dedication to faithful interpretation of classical precedent.

OPPOSITE
Despite his love of symmetry, Jefferson had to raise two of the Dome Room's windows, including the one seen on the right, to avoid the abutting roofline.

book from a drunken Williamsburg cabinetmaker. In time, books became essential to his process: throughout his life, Jefferson felt unable to design without them, and *Select Architecture* by Robert Morris, James Gibbs's *Book of Architecture*, and in particular the first of Andrea Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture*—Jefferson's "bible"[3]—powerfully influenced the largely self-taught practitioner.

If imitation is truly the sincerest form of flattery, all three architects would have appreciated Jefferson's first pass at Monticello. He had to start by having the mountaintop leveled, a formidable task achieved by slave labor over several months in 1768 when Jefferson was twenty-five years old. Then work commenced on the south pavilion—a single-room structure measuring 18 by 18 by 18 feet, with a shallow gabled roof. The pavilion was finished two years later. The final design of the main house, arrived at over a long series of iterations and adjusted continually after construction began in 1769, grew from a square into a rectangle and, finally, a cruciform plan (all indebted to Gibbs) with six-sided "bow" rooms at the north and south ends, and two-story central porticos to the east and west that deviated from Palladian precedent in that both stories were precisely the same height (an idea that, according to the historian Gene Waddell, the magpie Jefferson got from an essay by Francis Bacon).[4] Monticello in its first form featured three grand rooms on the main floor—Jefferson's bed chamber, a parlor, and a dining room—each of which could be accessed via its own door from the open-air "lodge" that formed the house's vestibule. Jefferson equally addressed the site in these early designs: in his planning, Monticello sat at the center of a U-shaped arrangement of walkways that partially enclosed a lawn to the west and terminated in the north and south pavilions.

Jefferson was also a man obsessed with facts and figures—he kept records of the number of bricks required at each stage of construction and calculated dimensions out to multiple decimal points. He recorded the rate at which enslaved laborers could dig cellars, clear and

grade roads, cut and split rails, forge nails, and harvest wheat. For the people tasked with this labor, Jefferson's expectations were likely unrealistic. His mathematical exactitude often failed to account for human variation.

With certain exceptions, the first Monticello, which was partially demolished in 1796 when Jefferson began the renovations that created the house we see today, reflects its architect's passion for symmetry, accuracy, and proportion. "Everything worked together, everything was proportional—it was an academic, mathematical exercise,"[5] observes Gardiner Hallock, vice president of architecture, collections, and facilities at Monticello today. It was, to be sure, a remarkable accomplishment: the Marquis de Chastellux, who visited in 1782, noted that Jefferson was "the first American who . . . consulted the Fine Arts to know how he should shelter himself from the weather."[6] Yet the design, begun when Jefferson was in his early twenties, was the work of a gifted amateur, a student who had made an exacting study of his heroes but had yet to come into his own.

One wonders how we'd feel about the original design if it were the one that, since 1938, has famously graced the reverse of the American nickel. But the first Monticello was, in fact, never finished. After his wife died, in 1782, Jefferson went into a depression, and work more or less stopped. Then, in 1784, he was sent to Paris to negotiate treaties with the nations of Europe and North Africa, and subsequently succeeded Benjamin Franklin as minister to France. When he departed, Monticello might have passed for an early example of a downtown loft: paintings and mirrors hung on unplastered interior brick walls.

Jefferson remained in Europe until 1789, and it was there he found his mature style—in large measure through the irreplaceable act of looking. In his half-decade abroad, Jefferson traveled widely, in Italy and England as well as France; seasoned by revolution, political authority, and personal tragedy, his tastes, knowledge, and, not least, his confidence grew. As someone whose own eye and design instincts have also improved with time and travel, I would speculate that what Jefferson saw gave him permission to be less rule-bound—to trust that his sensibilities would let him take liberties without violating his aesthetic principles.

Several things influenced Jefferson in particular. One was his discovery that "all the new and good houses are of a single story."[7] Another was the Hôtel de Salm on the Seine's Left Bank. Home today to the French Legion of Honor, it was constructed as a private residence during Jefferson's stay in Paris, and its dome, massing,

OPPOSITE
Jefferson preserved these calling cards, along with invitations and other ephemera, from his time serving as minister to France, a critical period in his intellectual and aesthetic development. "Behold me at length on the vaunted scene of Europe!" he enthused in a letter from Paris. "Were I to proceed to tell you how much I enjoy their architecture, sculpture, painting, music, I should want words. It is in these arts they shine."

and neoclassical reserve impressed him enormously. So did the dome of the Halle aux blés, the circular grain exchange (now the site of the Bourse de commerce). Both buildings, as well as the au courant preference for one-story residences, found their way into the reinvention of Monticello, which began in 1796. In his *History of Virginia*, Edmund Jennings Randolph observed that "it constituted a part of Mr. Jefferson's pride to run before the times in which he lived."[8] This impulse toward the avant-garde is entirely evident in what today is often referred to as "Monticello Two."

Needful of more space; not pleased, speculates Waddell, with "Monticello One's" disproportionate appearance;[9] and desirous of a dwelling that reflected his Continental sensibilities (and social and political standing), Jefferson both compressed the house and thickened it—even though it gained considerable square footage, the subtraction of the double portico paradoxically made Monticello look smaller. Jefferson preserved his three original great rooms, but on the east side he tore off the facade, added a grand entry hall opposite the Parlor, expanded his personal precinct to include a two-room library (to the south), and balanced this with a pair of guest bedrooms (to the north). While the Parlor, Dining Room, and Jefferson's bed chamber retained their original eighteen-foot ceiling heights, the secondary main-floor spaces drop down to ten feet (per the French style); the ceilings fall to eight feet on the second floor and even lower in the garret spaces under the roof.

Though Monticello Two is effectively a three-story house, Jefferson's design cleverly conceals that fact. My favorite device is the setting of some second-story windows at floor height, so that from without they appear to be transoms on the first-story windows directly below them; meanwhile, the balustrades encircling the parapet hide the garret spaces. The trick works—on the eastern facade, at any rate. On the western elevation, the illusion is undercut somewhat by the looming presence of Monticello's signature feature, the dome.

How, precisely, that stunning if hard-to-reach room beneath the iconic dome was meant to be used isn't entirely clear (at Jefferson's death it was a storage room). To me, it's a kind of folly, a permissible indulgence by a man whose aspirations had been inflamed by Parisian peregrinations. Yet the dome is a delight to experience, and it contains some of Jefferson's most adroit design moves. Tasked with fitting an octagon atop a rectangle, he stretched the sidewalls slightly and adjusted the height so that the structure could cohabitate comfortably with the roof line. Jefferson also elevated the two

OPPOSITE
Jefferson's elder daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph, returned to Monticello as a married woman to assist her widowed father and manage the household. Her second-story bedroom reflected her French education and taste. The floor-level windows (one seen at right here) appeared on the exterior to visually unite with their first-story counterparts directly below.

windows flanking the doorway—they're roughly a foot higher than the others—so as to hide the view of the attic framing (replacing the lower part of the glazing with mirrors as an extra measure). The dome also features a baseboard inspired by Palladio's drawing of the Attic order of the Temple of Nerva Trajan, which is so enormous that it can only be described today as pre-postmodern. The architect followed the dictates of necessity and the demands of his heart. The outcome isn't necessarily "correct"—but so what?

While Hallock describes Jefferson as "an innovative collector of ideas rather than an inventor,"[10] one of the joys of experiencing Monticello lies in its spirited embrace of novelty. This begins at the beginning, with the compass on the ceiling of the entry portico that spins in concert with the weathervane above it, and continues above the front door, on the interior, with a wall clock controlled by cannonball-like counterweights. Doors that magically spring open with the twist of a knob continue the amazements, as do the wine dumbwaiters concealed in the dining room mantelpiece. The Parlor's parquet floor—stunningly expensive, diabolically difficult to build—was one of America's first, and there were structural innovations as well: Jefferson's sawtooth roof may have leaked, but the low pitch made it less "offensive to the eye";[11] so-called air closets ventilated the house from the ground floor to the roof. He also tweaked the landscape, moving the Palladian front courtyard to the rear and half-burying the support spaces beneath the terrace decks so that they wouldn't obstruct the views.

Thomas Jefferson was, to be sure, a complicated individual. Like wealthy men before and since, he

OPPOSITE
In the center of the Hall ceiling is a soaring eagle in plaster relief surrounded by eighteen stars, similar to the Great Seal of the United States. The number of stars suggests installation between 1812 and 1816, when states numbered eighteen.

RIGHT
Jefferson was keenly aware of time management. He custom ordered the Great Clock and mounted it over the front door, with a corresponding face on the exterior wall. Its works were connected to a gong on the roof, which sounded the hours across the plantation.

insisted upon having his way, whether that involved settling his entire multifaceted life on a mountaintop—necessitating the near-constant hauling of wagonloads of essentials (including ten cords of wood per month) up steep, winding nineteenth-century roads—or scouring the world to find precisely the right Chinese gong to bong out the hours from Monticello's roof.

And there is the harsh reality that Jefferson's dream house was put together, in large measure, with the labor of enslaved people, many of whom were highly skilled artisans. John Hemmings (1776–1833) was trained by and succeeded the Irish joiner James Dinsmore. Burwell Colbert (1783–1862), Jefferson's personal servant and butler, was also a painter and window glazer for the house. Thrimston Hern was a carpenter and stonecutter. Jupiter (1743–1800), whose last name might have been Evans and who had known Jefferson since birth and served as his valet in Williamsburg, learned stonemasonry and worked on the columns of the house's east front. Their achievements and those of countless others attest to the reality and horror of slavery, and permeate one's entire experience of Monticello.

Thus, in all of its aspects, Monticello has important lessons to teach—from the profound to the practical. One such lesson is embodied, for me, by Jefferson's famous bed, which sits in a niche that opens to his bed chamber on one side and to his study on the other. Eccentric, yes, but for a reason: so that, upon waking, Jefferson could choose immediately between his personal and professional lives.

My generation of classical architects emerged into a profession dominated by modernists, and at first we

LEFT
The Chinese gong Jefferson imported in the mid-1790s continues to ring out the hours from its rooftop housing. Peter Fossett, born into slavery at Monticello, recalled that it could be heard six miles away.

OPPOSITE
Jefferson derived his elegant designs for the roof balustrade from examples by Andrea Palladio and James Gibbs, but they were brought to life by a talented enslaved woodworker known to posterity only as "Lewis."

stuck close to precedent, and to the rules. But classicism is a language, and as we became conversant with its grammar and syntax, we felt increasingly free to interpret it, to speak in a more personal way. Like Jefferson, when I first built a house of my own, I made a close study of historical precedent, and while my design was driven to a degree by memory, it was rooted firmly in architectural correctness. In the years since, I've allowed instinct and intuition to play a stronger role in my work. And—also like Jefferson—the houses I have built are a reflection not so much of an historical ideal but of who I am. You might say that the Monticello we so admire today reflects that same dichotomy: a place of stunning classical grandeur, exceptional eccentricity, and the seductive tension between the two; it is a conversation between the younger and elder Jeffersons, and a meditation on the strengths of both. There is much that is perfect—but where perfection exists, it's there because it's personal. Therein lies the lesson, whether you're building a home or a life. Follow it, and like the great man himself, you'll never get up on the wrong side of the bed.

Over time I've come to understand that an architect's profession has the power to do more than provide shelter; it has the power to stand for enduring values and ideals. I recognize that aspect of my journey in Jefferson as well. Our third president believed in the power of architecture to elevate his nation, and in the course of a long life—he died on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration—he contributed much to the public realm, including the development of the capital and the Olympian campus of the University of Virginia. Surely he thought of Monticello as an emblem of his country's potential. Yet Jefferson's true gift was to create an architecture that personified our great national experiment—indeed, our character: an architecture, like the nation, unafraid to break with the past and one that privileged freedom of expression, both individual and collective.

The American spirit, in three dimensions: that's what you'll find at Monticello.

OPPOSITE
Jefferson admired alcove beds in Paris and installed them at Monticello. He opened his own bed both to his chamber and his cabinet, so as to enter either upon waking.

1 Thomas Jefferson, "Hints to Americans Travelling in Europe," June 19, 1788, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (vols. 1–20), Barbara B. Oberg (vols. 29–41), and others (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950–), 13:269. Hereafter cited as *PTJ*.
2 Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, September 20, 1785, in *PTJ*, 8:535.
3 Isaac A. Coles, "Account of a Conversation with Thomas Jefferson," [before February 23, 1816], in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, ed. J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004–), 9:500.
4 Gene Waddell, "The First Monticello," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (University of California Press) 46, no. 1 (March 1987), 16.
5 Gardiner Hallock, interview, January 13, 2020. The author is indebted to Mr. Hallock for this and other insights for this essay, and his deep command of Monticello history.
6 Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781, and 1782*, trans. Howard C. Rice, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 391.
7 Thomas Jefferson to John Brown, April 5, 1797, in *PTJ*, 29:345.
8 Edmund Jennings Randolph, *History of Virginia*, ed. Arthur H. Shaffer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970), 181.
9 Ibid., 24.
10 Gardiner Hallock, interview, January 13, 2020.
11 Thomas Jefferson to James Dinsmore, January 3, 1803, in *PTJ*, 35:296.