Understanding Jefferson

Through Monticello

by Patrick J. Burkhardt

Monticello, the home designed and built by the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, has a long and colorful history. After Jefferson’s death, the house changed hands and was inhabited by several people, including Uriah P. Levy, the first Jewish officer in Naval history, and Levy’s nephew, Jefferson Monroe Levy, a three time U.S. Congressman and real estate mogul. This article examines the history of Monticello from the time of the Civil War until the development of Monticello as an historic house museum in the 1920s rather than the Jeffersonian period—the time frame in which most people come to understand and hear about Monticello.

This article examines how the authors of secondary sources in different eras view and interpret Monticello. Secondary sources are written documents that discuss, analyze, interpret, and/or evaluate primary sources. Primary sources are original sources of information that can include, but are not limited to, interviews with people who were present during a given time (i.e. witnesses), newspapers, and diaries. The purpose of investigating these secondary sources, written during different time periods, is to compare and contrast how scholars in each of those eras viewed the confiscation of Monticello by the Confederate States. By examining literature on one single subject over a long time period, we can learn how scholars’ views and interpretations of the American Civil War changed in accordance with the values and views of their respective populations.

This type of study is beneficial because it allows us to see a variety of different viewpoints written by scholars who hail from a wide range of historical, cultural, and educational backgrounds outside the academic discipline of history. This interdisciplinary approach to history is important because people from outside the discipline can significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of history. Geologists and other natural scientists can contribute to environmental history, economists can contribute to labor history, and sociologists and anthropologists can contribute to social history. History inherently borrows from other disciplines to gain an understanding beyond just the facts.

The literature reveals that as early as the 1860s, historians have used a crude idea of what is now called ‘material culture.’ Material culture is any human made or human modified artifact and those artifacts can embody metaphors for aspects of the human condition such as states of being, activities, relationships, needs, fears, and hopes (Prow 2000: x). Despite their different backgrounds, the one commonal-
ity that the authors of the sources in this article share is that they treat Monticello as an artifact. Instead of only focusing on his political life, the authors concentrate on his home and his home life in an attempt to find a better understanding of Thomas Jefferson.

The history of Monticello after Thomas Jefferson’s death is an interesting story and one that is important to understanding many of the sources used in this study. The story begins in 1832 when Uriah Levy purchased the estate and began to repair the damage resulting from 6 years of neglect. Uriah died on March 22, 1862. Before his vague condition could be interpreted, the Civil War had begun and the Confederacy confiscated the Virginia home under the Alien Enemies Act on August 8, 1862. After the Civil War, the Union auctioned Monticello and it was purchased on May 1, 1879 by Jefferson Monroe Levy, a nephew of Uriah Levy and U.S. Representative from New York. Levy kept Monticello as his private property, despite many offers that were made for the historic home, as well as congressional hearings to take it away from him. Finally, on May 31, 1923, Jefferson Levy sold Monticello to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation for $500,000. On July 4, 1925, one hundred years after Jefferson’s death and one hundred and fifty years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, Monticello was dedicated as an historic house museum.

In 1863, Jefferson at Monticello: The Private Life of Thomas Jefferson from Entirely New Materials by Hamilton W. Pierson was published. The core of this publication mainly consists of an interview with Captain Edmund Bacon, the chief overseer and business manager for Thomas Jefferson’s estate. For over twenty years Captain Bacon was Monticello’s caretaker while Jefferson was busy, and often absent from, the plantation during his political career. Even though Jefferson at Monticello is essentially an interview with someone who knew Jefferson, it is considered a secondary source because Pierson was making an historical thesis and conclusion and using the interview as support for his argument.

One of Pierson’s major theses is that through studying Thomas Jefferson’s home and his home life, rather than his political life, people can attain a greater understanding of Thomas Jefferson the man. In the Preface to Jefferson at Monticello, Pierson writes:

“Its simple purpose is, so to describe his home, his personal appearance, and all his personal and business habits, as to set the man fully before the reader. It is believed that the portraiture of Mr. Jefferson’s Private Life, thus presented, is much more full and complete than any that has heretofore been given to the public” (Pierson 1971:5-6).

The above quote was written in 1863, long before the term ‘material culture’ was coined. However, some historians consider Pierson’s premise—that a structure has the ability to provide data about a historical figure—to be a form of material culture today. Pierson also uses his interview with Captain Bacon to support his argument that a deeper understanding of Thomas Jefferson can be gained by studying Monticello.

It is very clear throughout the interview, and in his conclusions, how Pierson felt about the confiscation of Monticello was and why Pierson felt compelled to pursue this interview and write a book about Jefferson at Monticello. Pierson quoted Bacon on his recollections of Jefferson’s views on slavery:

“He did not like slavery. I have heard him talk a great deal about it. He thought it was a bad system. I have heard him prophesy that we should have just such trouble with it as we are having now” (Pierson 1971:111).

Pierson footnoted this quote saying, “Capt. Bacon is a stanch Union man, utterly opposed to the whole secession movement” (Pierson 1971:111). Pierson and Bacon clearly state their objections to the Confederate Secession and both believed that, in their opinion, Thomas Jefferson would have opposed the secession movement as well, and it was this opposition that compelled Pierson to write this historical work.
opposed to the United States Bank because in addition to being contrary to his party's policies, it was also founded by one of his political rivals, Alexander Hamilton. In fact, it was Jefferson's first vice-president, Aaron Burr that challenged Alexander Hamilton to the famous duel that ended Hamilton's life.

Captain Bacon recalled many other details about Thomas Jefferson's personal life at Monticello that would not necessarily be found in a history of his political career, but may explain many of his political views. Bacon remembered that even though Jefferson would not be absent for long periods of time from Monticello, that Jefferson knew the names of every animal and plant on his property and that Jefferson kept a written list of all of his business transactions, which shows a level of attention to detail that may have informed his political life. Thomas Jefferson could be very liberal and very conservative in very different ways. Bacon recalled that he never swore, used tobacco, played cards, or even danced (Pierson 1971:72). However, in the same chapter Bacon recalls how liberal, kind, and generous Jefferson was not only to his family but to strangers as well. These all give us insight into Thomas Jefferson, the man.

Another secondary source, Jefferson and Monticello by Paul Wilstach, was first published in 1925. Wilstach discusses many of the same points that Pierson did in his interviews, and even uses those interviews as sources to support some of his own arguments. However, Wilstach forms new conclusions about Thomas Jefferson based on his own study of Monticello:

"The story of Monticello is the story of the domestic life of Jefferson, and the story of his domestic life, his aspirations and activities, is the story of his home. The story of the one is bound up in the story of the other that the two are one" (Wilstach 1925:1).

Much like Pierson, Wilstach is writing about an uncommon idea for historians at that time: that a person's home and home-life can give a historian a deeper understanding of that person's life.

Wilstach examines many of the same aspects of Thomas Jefferson's home life that Pierson does—Jefferson's farm, animals, personal appetites, and Jefferson's relationship with his family. However, Wilstach also includes new facets in his monograph that Pierson did not. For example, Wilstach believes that the time Jefferson spent traveling through Europe as Secretary of State influenced his final design of Monticello after his return (Wilstach 1925:96). The return Wilstach is referencing is Jefferson's return from Washington, D.C. after serving as Secretary of State, Vice-President, and two terms as President. Just as Jefferson was returning to Monticello from his political life he was very close to finishing the designing and building of Monticello and his experience had influenced those final changes.

Wilstach also looks at Thomas Jefferson as a friend and quotes him as saying, "I find friendship to be like wine, raw when new, ripened with age, the true old man's milk and restorative cordial" (Wilstach 1925:96). Wilstach relates this quote about friendship to Jefferson's home life at Monticello by saying, "From the time he began to build Monticello his thoughts ran strongly on building up the neighborhood about it" (Wilstach 1925:96). The neighbors that Thomas Jefferson sought were his fellow former presidents, including President's James Madison and James Monroe. Jefferson was successful in gaining his friends as neighbors and this shows the importance of friendship to Jefferson and how that may have influenced his political career.

Wilstach is also interested in Thomas Jefferson as an American inventor and scientist, stating that Jefferson was one of, if not the first, American geographers who was also interested in mathematics, physics, botany, natural history, astronomy, surveying, and architecture (Wilstach 1925:142-143). Wilstach's inquiry into Jefferson's scientific curiosity and inventions of gives us a better understanding of the intelligence, and some say the genius, of the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence and brokered the Louisiana Purchase. Although Wilstach barely discusses the Confederate Army's confiscation of Monticello, this oversight can tell us something about the way people viewed the Civil War during the 1920's. Wilstach published his book in 1925, sixty years after the end of the Civil War and ten years after the semicentennial (fiftieth anniversary) of the Civil War. The semicentennial is important to the history of the memory of the Civil War because as historian David Blight acknowledges, "Reconciliation joined arms with white supremacy in Civil War memory at the semicentennial in an unsteady triumph" (Blight 2001:397). The years between 1911 and 1915 were filled with the hope of unifying the United States fifty years after a traumatic Civil War.

"The tumult of World War I spurred a resurgence of interest in history and the increased level of education in America produced a thriving 'middle brow' market by the 1920s. With professional historians largely uninterested in writing for this burgeoning market, amateur historians assumed prominence with major studies" (Hattaway and Raubeson 2004:16).

Paul Wilstach was one of those amateur historians writing for that market with his book Jefferson and Monticello.

A third publication, Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder by Jack McLaughlin, was first published in 1988. McLaughlin's work is the first of these sources to clearly discuss material culture in his writing. In the introduction to that book, McLaughlin states that he,

"attempts to capture a personal and private Jefferson, to detail his relationships with his extended family and friends. My premise is simple: those who construct their own shelter replicate themselves, at their deepest and most significant level, in their houses. They are what they build" (McLaughlin 1988:vii).

McLaughlin's goal of understanding Thomas Jefferson's personal life through
Maud Littleton, left, with Monticello Petitions, 1912
Photograph LC-H261-1887 courtesy Library of Congress

his home is similar to the earlier works that have been examined, but he is making a very new point. McLaughlin is not just saying that Monticello is important to understanding Jefferson, but that Jefferson's home is an artifact of his life and a part of him. McLaughlin believes that Monticello can reveal Jefferson's private life to historians.

In the Afterword to Jefferson and Monticello, McLaughlin reveals how Jefferson's tombstone reflects what was important to him. Jefferson's tombstone is inscribed with the following words:

"Here lies buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia" (McLaughlin 1988:375).

McLaughlin believes that Jefferson wanted to be remembered as an architect and builder (McLaughlin 1988:375), and that by simply reading Thomas Jefferson's tombstone, he can tell that that Jefferson wanted to be remembered as an architect and nothing else, despite his numerous political accomplishments.

McLaughlin ends his book by warning against the dangers of reading too much into material culture such as historical museum houses (McLaughlin 1988:383), and believes that it is important to remember that Jefferson's Monticello was not finished in 1809 and that it did look like it does today as it did when Jefferson was alive. McLaughlin concludes his book by looking at larger issues of history and material culture. Stressing the importance of not accepting the common conception of a historical figure until it becomes a myth, McLaughlin advises that people continue to study and discuss subjects, such as Jefferson and Monticello, within cultural and historical context, which will allow historians to possibly discover new histories and material culture.

Even though historical events and objects cannot be returned to their original state, does not mean that historians cannot continue to glean information from studying them. McLaughlin maintains that even a refurbished Monticello can provide us information about Thomas Jefferson's intellectual and emotional life.

According to McLaughlin, Monticello is not just a piece of material culture that has been lost through time, it is in fact a reminder from Thomas Jefferson himself that we should seek the pursuit of happiness through the comforts of house and home- the same way he found happiness in building and living in Monticello. Even though Thomas Jefferson tried to maintain a private personal life while he was alive, McLaughlin was able to formulate new conclusions about Jefferson's home life based on his study of Monticello.

McLaughlin discusses the history of Monticello during the Civil War very little. However, his book divulges for the first time how the Confederates exploited Monticello after their confiscation of the building (McLaughlin 1988:380). This revelation, that Monticello was used as a hospital and the legal battle over it, contradicts the account given by Paul Wistach. Historian Stuart McConnell explains that this discrepancy in history is not uncommon:

“The great wave of democratization unleashed during the 1960s started historians on the path of studying ‘ordinary people,’ writing narrative ‘from the bottom up,’ and taking seriously the histories of previously neglected groups. By the 1980s it was a commonplace of scholarly discourse that there are many versions of the past, all potentially true from somebody’s point of view” (Fahs and Waugh 2004:264).

The standards that dictate how history should be recorded have continuously changed over time. Recently, a focus on the little known perspectives and acceptance of differing views has been the norm. This is an important point to remember when discussing modern historical sources.

In 1999 and 2001, two secondary sources were published that revealed the vastly different viewpoints of Jefferson Monroe Levy and Maud Littleton: Levy owned Monticello after the Civil War, and Maud Littleton, wife of U.S. Representative Martin Littleton from New York, led a campaign to force Levy to give up ownership of Monticello to the federal government.

Author Patricia West focuses on Maud Littleton to support the major overall theme in her book of gendered issues in the historical house museum movement:

“While celebrating the ‘womanliness’ of the task of memorializing the houses of patriots, Littleton also emphasized that it was not women’s ‘particular duty or especially incumbent upon them,’ suggesting that the newly expanded state take some of the responsibility for historic ‘shrines.’ Like other turn-of-the-century women’s voluntary organizations, Littleton’s Jefferson-Monticello Memorial Association invoked the ‘domestication of politics’ on behalf of a realm of cultural and social responsibilities that women no longer felt were exclusively their domain.” (West 1999:107).

The “newly expanded state” that West refers to is the Progressive Era federal government, which West argues is the basis for women’s increased activity in the historical house museum movement. The Progressive Era was a reform move-
ment during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that sought to expose the political corruption of the time, exclude illiterate people from voting, and promoted women's suffrage and also the prohibition of alcohol.

In addition to gender issues, West also points to Maud Littleton as instigating the government intervention in the historic house museum movement (West 1999:127), and how Littleton spoke to a House committee hearing concerning the fate of Monticello, she cited the Fifth Amendment's right to condemn and seize property for "public use." The term "public use" is in quotations because it was during the Progressive Era that this terminology was more clearly defined; Littleton took full advantage of that situation to try and secure Monticello for the "public." However, West overwhelmingly fails to include data in her text regarding the Levy family and their historic upkeep of Monticello.

On the other hand, in Marc Leepson's Saving Monticello the Levy family is a focal point because a major purpose of his work was to illuminate the importance of their story. When Leepson presents his account of the House Committee Hearing involving Littleton and Levy, the author presents Littleton as a villain:

"She [Littleton] faulted Levy for using Monticello as a 'personal exhibit' and intimedated his wealthy and luxurious social life there was 'grotesque'" (Leepson 2001:153)...

"She [Littleton] accused Levy of being a pawn of Tammany Hall, which she said, is responsible for Mr. Levy's appearance in the House of Representatives?"

"...just because two historians have differing opinions of how an event in history occurred does not mean that one is absolutely correct or incorrect..."

(Leepson 2001:182).

Although Leepson includes negative statements made by Littleton that West does not mention in her account, he still shows a negative side of Jefferson Levy. For example, Leepson discusses how Levy refused to meet with Littleton in person to discuss the sale of Monticello. However, Leepson takes great care to portray the Levy's as the saviors of Monticello. While he also discusses gendered issues of the historic house museum movement in terms of Maud Littleton's contributions, he focuses on a different aspect than West. At the conclusion of her testimony at the congressional hearing, Littleton began crying and that did not sit well with gossip columnist and suffragist Flora Wilson who extorted:

"Is this the way women are to plead for what they want? Can we ever achieve our purposes employing as does a spoiled child the last resort to get his own way? When, pray tell me, will committees take us seriously if we argue in that manner? [Monticello] can never serve more public benefit, utility, or advantage than is now true in the conduct of the place. It is open from sunrise to sunset" (Leepson 2001:163).

According to Leepson, Maud Littleton was not the feminist pioneer of the historic house museum movement that Patricia West presents in her writing. However, just because two historians have differing opinions of how an event in history occurred does not mean that one is absolutely correct or incorrect. Both accounts, when read together, give the reader a richer understanding of Monticello's metamorphosis from a home to an historic house museum.

When analyzed together, these five published secondary sources offer a deeper, larger understanding of the life of Thomas Jefferson through Monticello, the history of how Monticello became an historic house museum, and even about how the Civil War has been remembered. The authors of each source come from different fields and backgrounds, which offers unique perspectives on the topic. The fact that there is such a wide variety of histories about Thomas Jefferson and Monticello with such differing views and opinions means that the subject is still wide open for new interpretations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ADDITIONAL READING

Rep. Robert L. Henry and Mrs. Littleton about 1912
Photograph LC-82- 2466-2 courtesy Library of Congress

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