

## **Curatorial/Education and Visitor Programs Internship:**

### **The Thomas Jefferson Foundation**

This summer, I participated in a 12-week internship at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, the private nonprofit that owns and operates Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson in Charlottesville, Virginia. The foundation has two main prerogatives: education and preservation. To educate the public about Thomas Jefferson's life and legacy, the foundation offers 45-minute tours through the house, which Jefferson called his "essay in architecture." In addition to participating in a house tour, guests to Monticello can explore the grounds of Jefferson's property, go on a "Slavery at Monticello" tour or a "Garden" tour, attend various lectures and presentations by Monticello scholars, use resources provided by the Jefferson library, and further immerse themselves in Jeffersonian history in three museum galleries which cover everything from Palladian architecture to the tax policies of the British empire.

My main responsibility as an intern in the Education and Visitor Programs (EVP) Department was to give these 45-minute house tours. I introduced guests to an overview of Jefferson's life as an architect, a family man, a statesman, an educator, a president, a farmer, and a scientist before leading them through the house and delving deeper into each of these roles. Not merely a biographical speech, my tours also included ample references to objects in the home and how they related to bigger themes. For example, the entablature frieze in

the Parlor exemplifies Jefferson's architectural tastes. The Roman sacrificial motifs carved over the doors and windows are textbook Neoclassicism. The large fossilized bones of a juvenile American mastodon, which William Clark excavated for Jefferson in 1807, are laid out in the Entrance Hall as evidence of Jefferson's love for learning and scientific mind. And the Binns engraving of Jefferson's most famous piece of writing, the Declaration of Independence, serves as a segue into discussions of the "American mind," as Jefferson called it, but also into the great contradictions of Jefferson's legacy, namely, his lifelong status as a slave owner. I presented my prepared comments on objects and ideas such as these, also answering guests' questions about topics ranging from the faux-finish on the interior doors to states' rights.

I also worked for the Curatorial Department. Under the supervision of Assistant Curator Emilie Johnson, I researched the "dependencies"—spaces located underneath the terraces at Monticello that housed the dairy, the smokehouse, the washhouse, and other operations run by enslaved laborers. After reviewing transcriptions of Jefferson era documents and perusing decades-old research by past Monticello staff, I wrote website articles for five of these spaces, which are largely overlooked on the Monticello website currently, in order to give the dependencies the same degree of academic attention paid to the main house. I also tried to paint a picture of the individuals who worked in these spaces. I came to realize that slaves such as Edith Fossett, the cook trained in French cuisine who served the Jeffersons after 1809, led fascinating lives and should not be overlooked simply because they lived in bondage. The articles I wrote will be published

online in the Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia and the Monticello Explorer tool. Occasionally, I also cleaned the house with assistant curators, giving me experience in object-handling. The most exciting morning of cleaning was probably when I got to dust Thomas Jefferson's original books. I never knew that dusting could be so inspiring. I now know how to clean, carry, and catalogue furniture, fine art works, and other artistic treasures.

I probably know more about Thomas Jefferson than any sane person should, but I learned much more from this internship than simple facts about our third president and his home. I learned significant lessons, for example, in communication and interpretation, skills necessary for a potential career as a professor. Every single day, I was required to conduct myself professionally, confidently, and in a friendly manner no matter how challenging my tour group or how difficult the information. I never imagined I would be discussing Classical architecture with third graders until I had a group of 25 of them during my first week in the house. One of my favorite parts of leading tours was the opportunity to interact with guests from around the world. I'll always remember trying to explain American slavery to a man from India, who didn't know that slaves were technically considered property. These important conversations and cross-cultural exchanges about history do not take place at many people's summer jobs, but at Monticello, they are commonplace.

I also underestimated the level of planning and research involved in just one sentence of exhibition literature. Every sign and every brochure is such an intentional decision, and our curators are responsible not only for getting the facts straight, but also for

understanding the importance of those facts. I have learned that history is more than lists and dates, and that no matter how objective historians try to be, history is always influenced by who is doing the interpretation. In other words, history interpretation is not simply about knowledge; it's about responsibility and self-awareness. Working at Monticello heightened my critical thinking skills on these matters, skills that will suit me well for a potential career in curation or teaching.