



# Richmond Pupils Experience Plantation Life

What in the world is a bilbo catcher? Was it possible for slaves at Monticello to earn money? Did they really have sunglasses in those days?
















These were among the questions asked and answered in classrooms and at Thomas Jefferson's home by fourth-graders participating in a unique program conducted by the Monticello Education Department.

Supported by a generous grant from the Roy R. Charles Charitable Trust of Richmond, the Education Department was able to take its Plantation Life Outreach Program into fourth-grade classes at 10 public schools in Richmond and then play host to the pupils on field trips to Monticello. The program fit right in with the pupils' study of Virginia history for the state Standards of Learning tests.

The Outreach Program, directed by Education Program Officer Caroline C. Dobranski, was established in 1998. While Monticello instructors had previously gone to schools in the Charlottesville area and in Fairfax, Henrico and other counties, the Richmond trips represented the program's first contact with a large urban school system.

Before the classroom visits, each teacher received a packet of materials providing background information on life at Monticello to help prepare the students. When the Monticello instructors arrived, they carried baskets of supplies to help the pupils

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# MONTICELLO



## Children's Outreach

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discover that there's more to history than memorizing dates, names and places.

After being divided into small groups, the youngsters were given any one of six collections of reproduction artifacts that someone living on a plantation such as Monticello would have owned or used. The pupils

Caroline C. Dobranski



**Fourth-graders at Richmond's John B. Cary Elementary School with Plantation Life objects.**

learned about the lives and responsibilities of the plantation owner, his wife, their children, enslaved African Americans, an overseer and free tradesmen. The students were encouraged to identify, analyze, and draw conclusions about what the objects and documents revealed about the lives of those who possessed them.

For example, the students examining the contents of a basket belonging to a child of the plantation owner found a wooden contraption consisting of a ball, stick and string; a slate board and pencil; an unfinished sampler; and a small wax figure of an animal. The students quickly figured out that the ball-stick-string item – a bilbo

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## Children's Outreach

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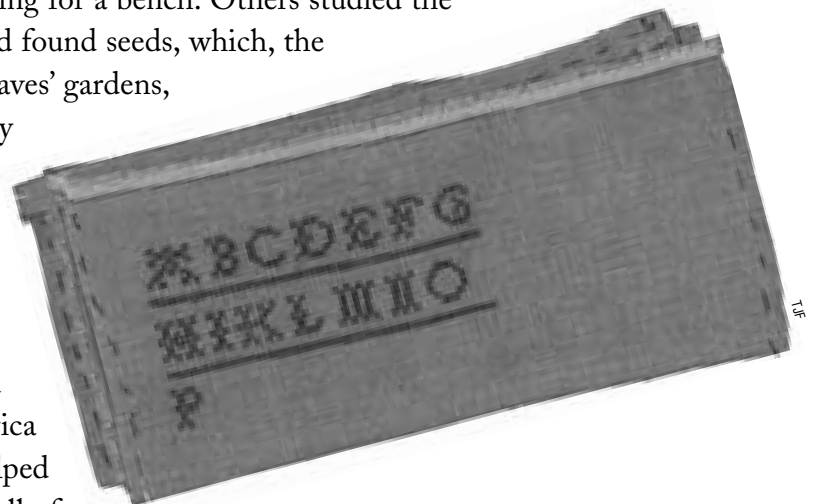
catcher – was a fun, though challenging, toy enjoyed by children during Jefferson's time. They decided that the slate and slate pencil were just like a chalkboard, and found out that Jefferson's daughter Martha Randolph used them in teaching her 11 children to read and write. After studying the sampler, most of the girls were shocked to hear that by their age they would have been expected to sew well enough to have completed one. And the little wax figure? A playing piece for the "Royal and Most Pleasant Game of Goose," a popular pastime enjoyed by Jefferson's grandchildren at Monticello.

Other students examined artifacts in the haversack of a free tradesman, which included a mallet and a copy of Jefferson's handwritten instructions and drawing for a bench. Others studied the contents of a slave's pouch and found seeds, which, the pupils learned, were for the slaves' gardens, where they grew food not only to supplement their diets but also quantities to sell to the plantation mistress.

The classroom visits were followed by the trips to Monticello. A special reduced bus rate from Tourtime America Motorcoach of Richmond helped make it possible to transport all of the students and teachers, plus many parents.

"Many of our students would not have the opportunity to visit Monticello if it were not for this [program]," Patsy Garrett, lead teacher for the fourth-grade classes at Miles Jones Elementary School, wrote in evaluating the program.

As usual, the great clock in the Entrance Hall, the Parlor's mysterious double doors, and the dumbwaiter were favorites on the Monticello tours. But, after studying plantation life in the classroom, these young visitors also were excited to see that Jefferson really did have a pair of funny-looking tinted spectacles, that they could



**A reproduction of a sampler, one of the objects "belonging" to a plantation owner's child.**



## Children's Outreach

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“recognize” some of his grandchildren in portraits and silhouettes, and that they actually could sit on the benches for which they had seen Jefferson's sketches.

“The kids were very excited to come here,” Denise Fairman, a teacher at Whitcomb Court Elementary School, said during her class' Monticello visit. “They seem to have remembered what they learned because they're answering all the questions. They've even remembered what 'Monticello' means.”

Basically, the program was a hit with everybody.

“This experience has enriched all of us – teachers, students, Monticello instructors – and we are thankful for the opportunity,” said Dobranski. “We here at Monticello are looking forward to working with more Richmond students next year.”

**COMMENTS? [newsletter@monticello.org](mailto:newsletter@monticello.org)**