



Database will provide details about slavery

How many slaves did Jefferson own over his lifetime? What were the ages of the boys who worked in the nailery on Mulberry Row? Did the number of single-parent families increase over the half-century for which we have records?

It will be possible for Internet users to ask – and get answers to – questions such as these early in 2006 when the Demographic Database of the Monticello Plantation becomes accessible to the public through the Web site monticello.org.

Entering information into the database, which began in 1996, was the task of a succession of graduate student interns from the University of Virginia's Institute for Public History – Melanie Kielb, Joshua Rothman, Charles Irons, and Benjamin Fagan. Drawing data from Jefferson's records, particularly his Farm Book, they were able to pin down a figure that we had often tried to determine: From 1774 to 1826, a total of 606 men, women, and children lived in bondage on

Jefferson's landholdings in five counties of Virginia.

In the mid-1770s, Jefferson opened a leather-spined volume of almost 400 blank pages and penned a title, "Farm-book," in his finest copperplate script. This misnomer headed the book for many years during which farming did not figure at all in its contents. Horses had pride of place. Above the title Jefferson drew a family tree of his favorite riding horse, Caractacus, and on the first two pages he recorded the age and pedigree of 28 horses, from the brood mare Allycrocker to a nameless bay foaled in 1780. This horse census was followed by censuses of Jefferson's



Peter Fossett, born a slave at Monticello in 1815.

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Monticello



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human property – column after column containing names like Ambrose, Bagwell, and Hercules, Belinda, Dinah, and Phoebe.

These lists became Jefferson's management tools. He used them each year to determine how much corn or how many hogs he had to raise or how much cloth he had to buy to feed and clothe his enslaved laborers. He grouped the names by family (probably to minimize omissions) and he provided birth dates (since rations of meat and cloth were based on age). Thus the calculations of plantation management two centuries ago produced a valuable human record for historians today, a collection of personal and family information that few Southern historic sites can match.

The Demographic Database of the Monticello Plantation is packed with vital statistics about Monticello's enslaved population as well as details of slave occupations and the transactions – sale, purchase, gift, and hiring – that were an inevitable part of the institution of slavery.

When the database becomes available online, users will be able to focus on individuals or explore patterns of management and living conditions across time. A search for Peter Fossett, for example, will bring up basic information about the person born at Monticello

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Page 31 of Jefferson's Farm Book is a register of slave births arranged by gender.

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who in freedom became a well-known caterer and the “father of Ohio black Baptists,” as well as links to his photograph and other resources. Searching by occupation will reveal that enslaved boys usually began working in the Mulberry Row nail factory at age 10 or 11. And a database query will reveal that the percentage of female-headed households did increase over time – from about one-third in the 1770s to two-thirds fifty years later. (It is believed that most of the apparently single mothers had “abroad” marriages with husbands who lived on other plantations.)

Development of the Demographic Database of the Monticello Plantation has been made possible by the generous support of Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Smith of Arlington for programs at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies.

New information will be added to the database as it comes to light, with the ultimate goal of encompassing all aspects of the Monticello plantation – its residents (both free and enslaved), livestock, crops, and buildings. In the meantime, we look forward to seeing what questions people will ask. Here’s a start: How many slaves tried to run away? Did any slave marriages end in the equivalent of divorce? Was there a difference between the life expectancy of a farm laborer and a house servant? How many slaves did Jefferson own on July 4, 1776?

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