



Education Department celebrates 20th year

By Kim Curtis

Do you remember the first time you visited Monticello? A frequent answer to that question is: Yes, it was on a school trip.

Countless schoolchildren have visited Thomas Jefferson's home on field trips over the years, but in the past two decades

more than 200,000 young people have experienced Monticello on curriculum-related tours created and operated by Monticello's Carl and Hunter Smith Department of Education

These Monticello Study Tours are only one of the programs conducted by the department, which in

2006 is observing its 20th year of fostering Jefferson's belief in the value of learning and playing an integral role in advancing the Thomas Jefferson Foundation's mission of preservation and education.

"From an empty and cavernous building in 1986, the Education Department has become a national model for excellence in museum education," said TJF President Daniel P. Jordan. "The scope, variety, and quality of its programs have reached hundreds of thousands of school-age students."

The department has had only one director, Robin Gabriel. When she joined Monticello as the sole education staffer, she found herself without a job



Monticello's Mary June Platten with students in a classroom session.

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Monticello



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description, staff, or budget, and her office was in an empty building. But what Gabriel did have was the freedom to develop curricula and programming about Jefferson and Monticello that was specifically designed for young people.

What resulted were Monticello Study Tours: in-depth house tours with classroom components focusing on grade-appropriate topics. In the department's first academic year of programming (1987-88), Gabriel and the eight instructors she recruited led 4,829 students and adult chaperones on these tours.

As the numbers have grown over the years – in the 2005-06 academic year, 13,150 students in grades 2 through 12 and their chaperones participated in Study Tours – so has the size of the department, which now includes three full-time staff members and 19 part-time instructors.

The department's programming also has expanded a great deal since 1986, to include Family Workshops, Children's Workshops, Summer Adventures Camp, and the Plantation Life Outreach Program, plus the summertime Hands-On Discovery Room.

The Monticello Web site, which was launched in 1996, has become a major element of the Education Department's outreach to both students and teachers. In 2005, the education pages on the site attracted nearly 118,000 unique visitors. One of the popular online features is "Ask Thomas Jefferson," a way for students to send questions directly to Monticello and to receive a response via e-mail. The Monticello Digital Classroom, currently in development, will be a Web project with specific resources for students and teachers at various grade levels.

The department's list of activities and accomplishments also includes conducting numerous workshops and other developmental sessions for teachers; participating in a variety of professional programs and conferences; working in conjunction with many museums, historic sites, and other cultural entities; and developing an impressive array of resource materials and educational products, including the 15-poster exhibition, *Jefferson's America: Lewis and Clark and Western Exploration*, that was distributed free of charge to nearly 10,000 schools and educational institutions throughout the United States, and *Exploring Monticello: A Guide for Young People*, a 16-page, full-color booklet that is distributed free to Monticello visitors ages 6 through 11.

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The department, as part of the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, also offers Barringer Research Fellowships for Teachers of American History, which annually allow selected elementary and secondary school teachers to do independent research while in residence at Monticello.

In 2003, the department received a major boost when it was endowed and, in recognition of the gift, renamed the Carl and Hunter Smith Department of Education. The director's position was also endowed as the Hunter J. Smith Director of Education.

The Education Department has throughout its existence been housed in the Monticello Visitors Center, located on Route 20 approximately a mile and a half from the grounds of Monticello. This facility has proved adequate over the years, if not ideal. However, in the not-to-distant future the department will move to the new Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center and Smith History Center at Monticello. The two-level Smith History Center is being designed with the department's specific needs in mind and will have five times more space than the current facility.

"We're really excited by the prospect of having new facilities and added features," Gabriel said, "but we're also thrilled that we'll be able to accommodate more Study Tours once the new center opens."

To mark its anniversary, the department held a reception and program Aug. 16 on Monticello's West Lawn. Among those in attendance were Nancy Buxton, Carol McIvor, Sandy Richardson, Ellen Sadler, and Ramona Shugart – five of the eight instructors who joined Gabriel in conducting those first Study Tours nearly 20 years ago.

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Education Instructor Penny Kiser leads a Monticello Study Tour group on Mulberry Row.

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