



Refurbished Kitchen is Opened to Visitors

Monticello's reconfigured, restored, refurnished, and reinterpreted Kitchen is now open, allowing visitors to enter a workspace that combines elements of traditional Virginia kitchens with aspects of French design, organization, and equipment.

The recently completed Kitchen approximates the room's appearance after 1809, when the small cooking room under the South Pavilion, which dated to the early 1770s, was replaced by a more elaborately equipped facility in the larger space at the east end of Jefferson's new South Dependency wing.

This second kitchen reflects Jefferson's desire to replicate at Monticello the sophisticated cuisine and the refined style of dining and

entertaining that had captivated him during his years in France and at the President's House in Washington.

The project – a major part of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation's ongoing initiative to restore and reinterpret all of the living quarters, work areas, and storage spaces beneath the house – represents the first thorough revamping of the room since the 1940s, when an American Colonial Revival-style kitchen was installed.

Following extensive research, the room was architecturally reconfigured to bring it in line with both documentary evidence and extant examples of kitchen details associated with Jefferson's builders.

The Kitchen's southeast door was moved approximately one foot toward



The 'new' kitchen approximates the room's appearance after 1809.

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-  [SATURDAYS IN THE GARDEN](#)

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

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Monticello



Refurbished Kitchen

CONTINUED, PAGE TWO

the all-weather passageway to more accurately align it with Jefferson's plan and to accommodate installation of the revised space's most significant built-in feature – an eight-opening stew stove (essentially the precursor of cast-iron ranges and modern multi-burner stoves) with an integrated set kettle (which provided a constant supply of hot water).

Other work included installing a new brick floor and rebuilding the fireplace wall by reconfiguring the bake oven, replacing the wooden lintel over the hearth with an iron-supported arch, and uniformly white-washing the re-faced fireplace wall and stew stove. A viewing space for visitors was established with exhibition panels containing text, images, and artifacts.

The Kitchen's furnishings are based on several inventories, including the list of items Jefferson sent home from Paris in 1790 and one created by James Hemings in 1796. The equipment is more extensive and sophisticated than was typical in Virginia kitchens of the era, in which open-hearth cooking and cast-iron cookware were the rule.

Most prominent in the "new" Kitchen are more than 40 pieces of 18th-century French copper cookware obtained from specialty dealers in Paris to recreate Monticello's collection. Though it was relatively rare in America, Jefferson favored copperware for its lighter weight and superior heat conductivity, which made it ideal for use on the stew stove and well-suited for French-style dishes and sauces.

Most of the copper pieces and other items – platters, bowls, baskets, ironware – are displayed on the walls as well as two pieces of furniture, a rectangular work table with a lower shelf and a nearly 14-foot-long "dresser," which provided the equivalent of a modern countertop and additional shelves for storage. Based on surviving examples at Bremond, a house of the same era on the James River,



A section of the stew stove with the set kettle.



Refurbished Kitchen

CONTINUED, PAGE **THREE**

both were made in 2004 by Robert Self, Monticello's conservator of architecture and furniture.

French copperware notwithstanding, Monticello cooks also employed more common technologies and methods, including use of the spit-jack mounted on the fireplace wall whose clock-like mechanism turned meat on iron rods suspended across the hearth; hanging pots and kettles from the moveable crane in the fireplace; and placing skillets and pans on trivets in the hot ashes of the hearth floor.

The complexities of this Kitchen – not to mention the culinary demands of Jefferson and the sheer volume of food required by Monticello's residents and its numerous houseguests – required highly skilled personnel. Jefferson's daughter Martha or one of his granddaughters would have directed daily kitchen operations after 1809, but the bulk of the responsibilities undoubtedly fell to the enslaved head cook, Edith Hern Fossett, and her assistant, Francis (Fanny) Gillette Hern. Both had spent time in Washington learning cooking techniques from the Frenchmen Jefferson employed as his chef and maitre d'hôtel at the President's House.

As for Jefferson himself, he apparently didn't spend much time in the Kitchen. Isaac Jefferson, a onetime slave at Monticello, recalled that Jefferson never went there "except to wind up the clock."

Visitors today can mark their time in the Kitchen by the tall case clock that stands in the room's northeast corner, a faithful reproduction of Jefferson's original.



The tall case clock in the Kitchen's northeast corner.

COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org