



## Caretaker contributed to Monticello's decline

When Benjamin Franklin Ficklin purchased Monticello in 1864, the property was in disrepair.

"The place was once very pretty, but it has gone to ruin now," wrote a young woman who visited in the summer of that year. "The parlor retains but little of its former elegance, the ballroom ... on the second floor ... has a thousand names scratched over the walls."

Maintaining property in Virginia during the Civil War and the following years was difficult at best, but Monticello's decline in the 1860s and 1870s was evidently aggravated by its longtime caretaker, Joel Wheeler.

When Uriah Phillips Levy took possession of Monticello in 1836, Thomas Jefferson's estate was in less-than-pristine

condition. Levy hired Wheeler, a local resident, to direct needed repairs and renovations. Levy – who resided at Monticello only for brief periods – and Wheeler are credited with doing a commendable job of restoring and maintaining the house and grounds over the next 15 years.

Wheeler stayed on at Monticello after the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 and Levy's death in 1862, and apparently became more cantankerous – and less concerned with upkeep – as the years unfolded.

During the war, Wheeler, who was not being paid by the Levy family, started charging groups to use the Monticello house and grounds for parties, picnics, and other activities, while doing little to discourage souvenir-taking.

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**The West Front of Monticello circa 1870, photographed by William Roads.**

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Monticello



## Caretaker

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Wheeler also, according to various accounts, planted vegetables on the West Lawn, allowed pigs to roam the property, stabled cattle in the basement, and stored and milled grain in the parlor.

“As for the house, he seems not to have done anything,” Melvin I. Urofsky wrote in *The Levy Family and Monticello: 1834-1923*, a Monticello Monograph published in 2001. “The gutters fell away, the roof rotted, rainwater flooded the basement, and the elements took their toll on every part of the great house.”

Wheeler was able to keep charge of Monticello into the late 1870s, as the Levy family squabbled over Uriah’s estate. When Jefferson Monroe Levy bought the property in 1879, he determined that he had to remove Wheeler, who by that time, according to Urofsky, “believed he owned Monticello.” But Wheeler wasn’t easily dislodged; it would ultimately take a court order to terminate his two decades of control and evict him from Jefferson’s mountaintop.

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