

Found: Mementos of 1901 pilgrimage

IN DECEMBER 2006, construction work at the site of the Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center and Smith History Center required that a monument to Thomas Jefferson be moved.

The granite tribute had been placed at Monticello in October 1901 by members of the Jefferson Club of St. Louis, who traveled to Charlottesville as a group 250 strong to pay homage to Jefferson and his ideals. The monument to “Thomas Jefferson, Citizen, Statesman, Patriot, The Greatest Advocate of Human Liberty,” erected “To Commemorate His Purchase of Louisiana,” initially had been placed on the West Lawn but years later was moved to a site near the ticket office and shuttle station – a site that had to be cleared to make way for the new visitor center.

In the process of moving the monument to its new location (a new picnic area near the terminus of the Saunders-Monticello Trail), workers made an interesting discovery in the ground beneath its base – a copper box measuring about one foot square and three inches high.

Opening the container revealed its contents, primarily paper, to be in very poor condition, damaged by water that had seeped in through the box’s unsealed edges. In fact, most of the material inside was a sodden mass.

However, an account of the pilgrimage to Monticello published by the Jefferson Club in 1901 provided a list of the box’s contents: documents chronicling the trip from St. Louis, a roster of the participants, a program of events, a photograph of the monument and its inscription, a copy of the constitution and bylaws of the Jefferson Club, a

sketch of Jefferson’s life, and copies of newspapers from various cities.

Though the original materials are too deteriorated to be restored, they have been stabilized through freeze-drying, a process completed in August at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory in Calvert County.

“While the term ‘time capsule’ didn’t come into use until later in the 20th century, this box certainly fits the definition,” said Monticello Archaeology Research Manager Sara Bon-Harper, who has overseen the preservation of the box and its contents.

While the Jefferson Club of St. Louis numbered some 5,000 at the time of the trip to Monticello, it disbanded around 1909. Barring wishes to the contrary from any descendant group of the organization, the box and its contents will be housed at Monticello’s Jefferson Library.



Materials from the Jefferson Club of St. Louis trip to Monticello were stabilized by freeze-drying.

Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory

[<< Back to Table of Contents](#)

COMMENTS?

newsletter@monticello.org

Thomas Jefferson
MONTICELLO

Monticello is a newsletter published twice each year by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation is the private, nonprofit corporation that has owned and operated Monticello since 1923. Its mission is preservation and education.

© Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., 2007