

## Jefferson's ideas and ideals to be central in new visitor center

By Susan R. Stein

THE NEW Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center and Smith History Center will be the tangible gateway to a 21st-century appreciation of Jefferson's principles and to the educational experience at Monticello.

Building upon the Thomas Jefferson Foundation's outstanding existing programs, the new center's theater, classrooms, exhibitions, and other installations are being designed to prepare adults and children for the mountaintop experience and to provide a broader and deeper understanding of Jefferson and his global legacy.

*Visitors should connect with the Jeffersonian principles that Abraham Lincoln considered "the definitions and axioms of a free society."*

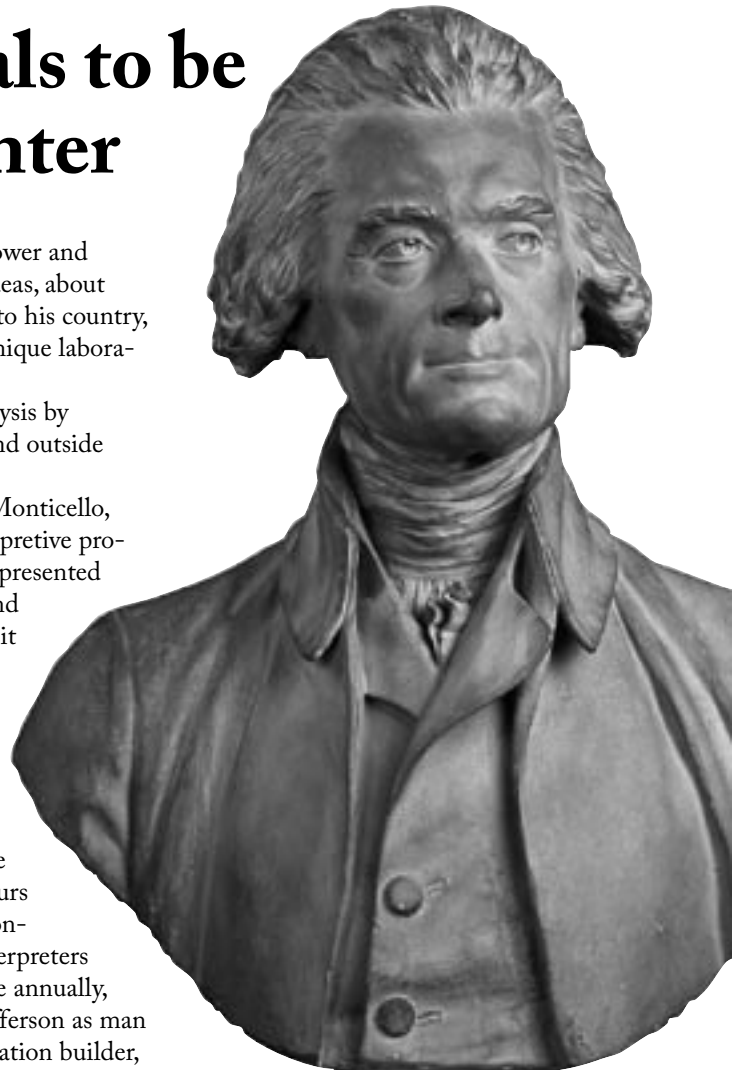
Jefferson's ideas and ideals will be at the heart of the experience that will serve as the foundation for all visits to Monticello, visits that we hope spark a lifelong interest in Jefferson and his home. Underpinning our vision is the belief that visitors should connect with the Jeffersonian principles that Abraham Lincoln considered "the definitions and axioms of a free society." Visitors will

be able to learn about the power and consequence of Jefferson's ideas, about Jefferson's active dedication to his country, and about Monticello, his unique laboratory.

Based on thoughtful analysis by Monticello staff members and outside consultants of what – and how – visitors learn at Monticello, the new visitor center's interpretive programs will augment what is presented on the mountaintop. First and foremost, the anchor of a visit to Monticello is – and will remain – the mountaintop, touring the house and exploring the gardens and grounds. Our findings have shown that visitors consistently give high marks to the guided tours of the house. These tours, conducted by highly trained interpreters to more than 450,000 people annually, cover three large topics – Jefferson as man of the Enlightenment and nation builder, Monticello as architectural achievement, and Monticello as a plantation and community – while also describing everyday life at Monticello. But a half-hour tour, however accomplished and engaging, cannot provide the depth of discussion about Jefferson's ideas and ideals that we would like to present. Consequently, the introductory film, interpretive spaces, and four different exhibitions at the new Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center – which is scheduled to open in the fall of 2008 – will present both a larger contextual framework and more specific information about Monticello.

Jefferson's ideas and values will be the center of a brief but powerful introductory film that will be shown to all visitors

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**This original 1789 bust of Thomas Jefferson by Jean-Antoine Houdon will be displayed prominently in the new Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center and Smith History Center.**

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*Th. Jefferson*  
**MONTICELLO**

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## New visitor center

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to Monticello. Produced by Donna Lawrence Productions of Louisville, Ky., the film will set the stage for visiting Monticello. Intended both to inform and to inspire, the film will describe how Jefferson's vision for America and his optimism for the future were driven by his fundamental belief in human rights, individual liberty, and democratic values. It will explain the character, force, and lasting consequence of Jefferson's revolutionary belief in liberty while also discussing slavery, an important issue in Jefferson's time as well as today. The film will introduce the "whole" Monticello – its house, farms, daily life, and people. The visually rich film will feature glimpses of the house, grounds, and

*The Griffin Discovery Room will include tactile and fun reproductions that will allow children to touch "forbidden" elements of the house museum.*

gardens in different seasons and present impressionistic portrayals of plantation life. The film will convey Jefferson's transcendent vision and the lasting consequence of his ideas.

Children and their parents will be captivated by the Griffin Discovery Room, a vibrant, hands-on educational environment for learning about Jefferson and life at Monticello. The space will feature fun, self-directed activities designed to encourage visitors ages 6 to 12 and their families to "discover" details about Jefferson and the community of individuals who lived and worked on the plantation. Through tangible activities and play, children will learn about various



**The exhibition "To try all things": Jefferson's American Experiment will include original objects illustrating Jefferson's quest to obtain and apply practical knowledge.**

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household features of Monticello. The Griffin Discovery Room will include tactile and fun reproductions that will allow children to touch "forbidden" elements of the house museum. Reproductions will include Jefferson's alcove bed, polygraph machine, wheel cipher; mastodon bones, ornamental friezes, and more. Replicas of hand tools used on the plantation, inscribed with quotes and facts specific to each tool, will encourage children to identify with those who lived and worked at Monticello.

Visitors will learn about the extent, topography, and features of Jefferson's 5,000-acre plantation through a touchable bronze scale model showing his land holdings in Albemarle County, from Milton to Montalto. The model, sized large enough to allow school groups to gather around it in the visitor center's courtyard, will enable visitors to see how

the mountaintop activities and house related to the larger environment in which they were situated. In addition to the house and other mountaintop features, the model will display Monticello's four quarter farms, its fields, slave dwellings, and road networks.

Four separate exhibitions at the new visitor center will provide different perspectives on Jefferson, his ideas, and his home. Foundation staff members are developing the content of the exhibitions in conjunction with exhibition designers Staples & Charles of Alexandria, Va. The Small Design Firm of Cambridge, Mass., which specializes in interactive and dynamic graphic applications, is collaborating on two of the exhibitions.

*Jefferson's Words* will be the first exhibition experienced by visitors  
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# New visitor center

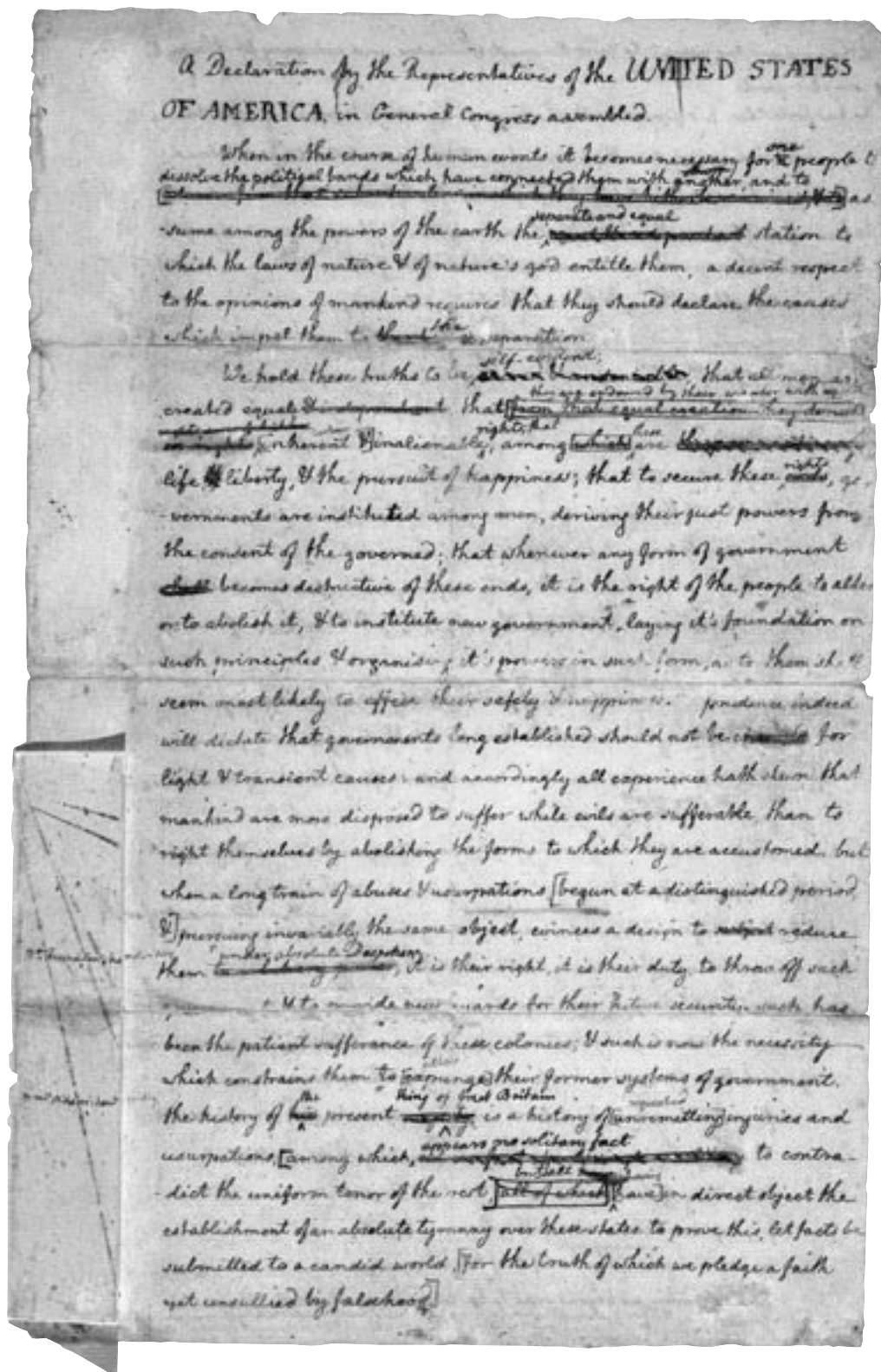
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upon arrival. Terms etched in the blue-stone floor of the center's entry gallery – America, The Arts, Conduct, Education, Government, Knowledge, Liberty, Monticello, Nature, Reason, Rights, Progress, Science and Thomas Jefferson – will call attention to the broad range of Jefferson's interests. As they enter the space, visitors will activate projections (in light) on the floor and wall of more than 175 quotations by and about Jefferson.

*The Boisterous Sea of Liberty*, located in the adjacent south gallery, will provide the context, ideas, and influence of the Declaration of Independence and discuss how it transformed our nation and the world. This highly interactive exhibition will present Jefferson's ideas and the role they played in establishing political, religious, and intellectual freedom in the new nation. A wall of liquid crystal display screens will create a dynamic display tracing the quest for liberty from the British Empire of the 18th century to Tiananmen Square in the 20th. Visitors will be able to interact with seven touchable screens exploring more than 200 ideas, images, events, and quotations. The gallery will be enhanced by the superb original 1789 bust of Jefferson by French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon and a large version of Jefferson's rough draft of the Declaration of Independence.

*"My Essay in Architecture": The Making of Monticello* will tell the complex story of the design and construction of Monticello. Organized by William L. Beiswanger, the Robert H. Smith Director of Restoration, and Robert Self, Monticello's architectural conservator, the exhibition will treat the more than 40-year process through which Jefferson created his neoclassical house. From the leveling of the mountaintop and the making of bricks on site to the laying out of the roundabouts and the erection of the first structure in 1770 and on to the final completion of the second house in 1809, the exhibition will describe exceptional work and activities of the people responsible for realizing Jefferson's vision. Drawings, models,

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**A large version of Jefferson's rough draft of the Declaration of Independence will be part of the exhibition *The Boisterous Sea of Liberty*.**

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books, drafting instruments, tools, and an amazing animation showing the trans-

people, young and old, male and female, free and enslaved. Like many of his peers around the world, Jefferson was a perpetual optimist who believed that human reason could guide people to progress, freedom, and happiness. He was deeply committed to recording, preserving, and disseminating knowledge applicable to all aspects of life. At Monticello, Jefferson tried out many different ideas, some successful and some not, all in an effort to enhance

efficiency, productivity, and convenience. Curator Elizabeth Chew has chosen more than 200 original objects from the Monticello collection for the exhibition, which will introduce visitors to Jefferson's quest for useful knowledge, through his education, voracious reading, correspondence, and travel. It will also provide examples of Jefferson's efforts to put the latest technology to work across the Monticello plantation in agricultural operations, plantation industries, gardens, and the main house. An interactive biography will allow visitors to learn about Jefferson's life.

Through these installations in the Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center and Smith History Center, we look forward to carrying Jefferson's vision to new generations.

*Susan R. Stein is Richard Gilder Senior Curator and vice president for museum programs at Monticello.*

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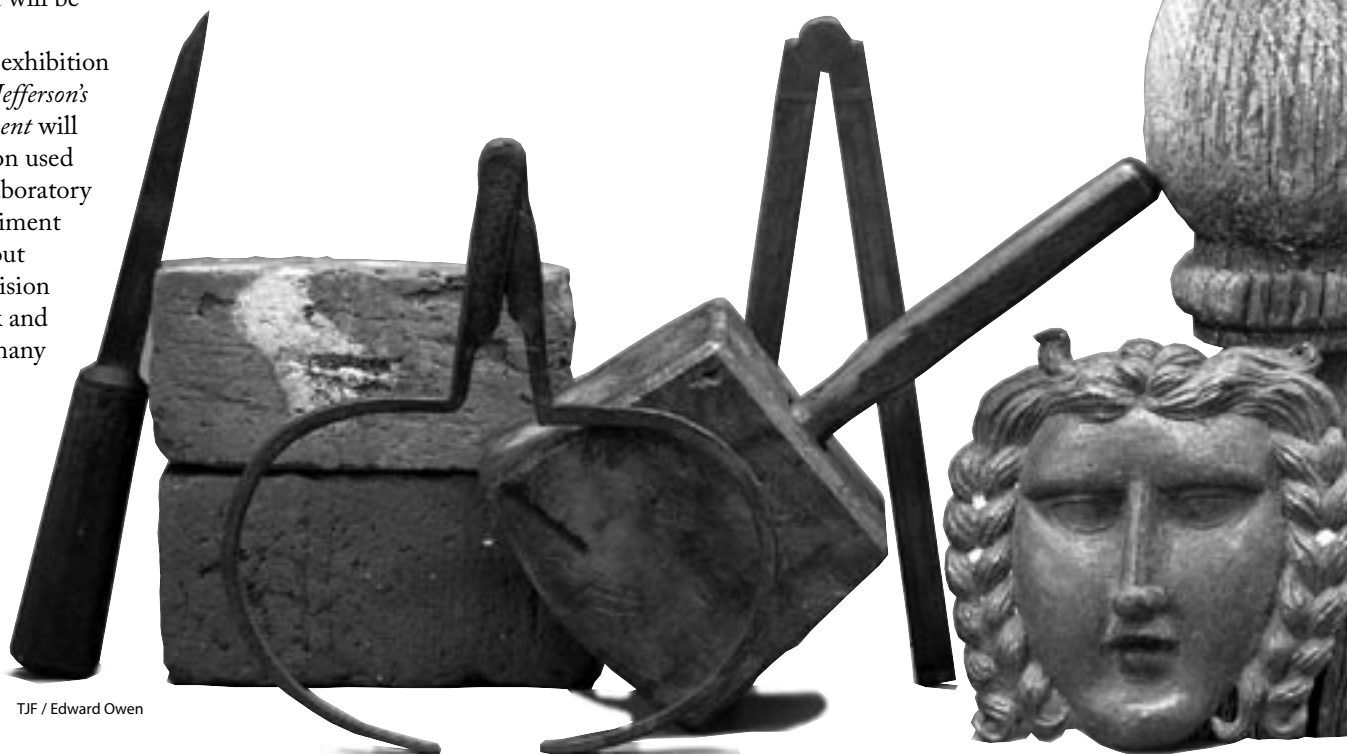


**The exhibition "My Essay in Architecture:" The Making of Monticello will relate the story of the design and construction of Monticello. The exhibition will feature architecture books, drawings, and drafting instruments (above) and tools, building materials, and architectural elements (below right).**

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formation from Monticello I to Monticello II will be featured.

Visitors to the exhibition "To try all things": Jefferson's American Experiment will learn how Jefferson used Monticello as a laboratory in which to experiment with his ideas about how to live. His vision required the work and collaboration of many



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