

Thomas Jefferson

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Thomas Jefferson Foundation acquires Plantation-made version of French chair

After years of research and curatorial detective work, a chair believed to have been made by a Monticello joiner, likely John Hemmings, is now property of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation.

Susan Stein, Richard Gilder Senior Curator and vice president of Museum Programs, began tracking down the chair 23 years ago.

The chair was documented in 1975 by field researchers from the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Winston-Salem, N.C., who conducted extensive surveys of Southern furniture in private homes. Several letters from TJF via MESDA to the owner went unanswered. Finally, through the estate of the former owner, curators were able to identify and contact his daughter, Mrs. Hildreth Segar Bottom, who agreed to sell the chair to the Foundation.

The chair descended in the family of James Steptoe (1750-1826) of Bedford County, Va. Steptoe and Jefferson met at the College of William and Mary and were lifelong friends. The Steptoe family lived at an estate called Federal Hill, adjacent to Poplar Forest, Jefferson's plantation and retreat in Bedford County. Through Jefferson, Steptoe obtained the clerkship of the Bedford County Court, a position he held for 54 years.

The chair may have been made by John Hemmings at either Monticello or Poplar Forest, where he worked on the house construction from 1806-1809.

Jefferson presumably gave the chair to James Steptoe, with whom he

socialized frequently while staying there. Its shorter form might indicate that it was meant to be used near a fireplace; the low form of chair is known in France as a *chauffeuse*, and was used for pulling close to the fireplace for warmth.

An 1826 portrait of Steptoe seated in the chair hangs in the Clerk's office of the Bedford County Courthouse, where it was given by his descendants in the 1950s. In the painting there is a profile portrait of Jefferson and the Fry-Jefferson map, a map made by Jefferson's father, Peter.

"As a Monticello Joinery interpretation of a high-style French chair, this object sheds light on the acquisition of furniture at Monticello at the end of Jefferson's life," said Elizabeth Chew, Monticello curator. "It is not known when the Joinery version was made, or whether there were others like it. John Hemmings was Monticello's principal joiner after 1809, and was involved in the construction of the house at Poplar Forest, so we assume he had a role in making this chair."

"We are delighted about this exciting find. After so many years it is wonderful to have the chair as part of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation's collection," said Stein.

The Jefferson-Steptoe-Bottom chair is undergoing conservation treatment. It will be part of the special exhibition on slavery at Monticello planned by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture, opening at the National Museum of American History in January 2012.



1826 portrait of James Steptoe seated in the chair most likely given to him by Jefferson.

Courtesy of the Bedford County Courthouse

