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Monticello historian Cinder Stanton to leave lasting legacy

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NO HISTORIAN HAS BROUGHT as many gifts to the study of Thomas Jefferson as Monticello's Shannon Senior Historian Lucia ("Cinder") Stanton. A musician, artist, writer and historian, her talents are as diverse as those of Jefferson himself, "the Draftsman, Surveyor, Astronomer, Natural Philosopher" described by the Marquis de Chastellux in 1782. In dozens of articles and four books, Cinder has addressed an astonishing array of subjects, from the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the history of science to harpsichords, domestic servitude, wine, currency, travel, conversation, dogs, botany and sheep.

Cinder is probably best known, however, for her groundbreaking research and publications on the Monticello plantation and its people, which she has studied for decades. Serious scholarship on this topic begins with her work. Peter Onuf, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Professor of History at the University of Virginia, says, "Cinder Stanton has made indispensable contributions to Jefferson studies. Her work on Monticello slaves has transformed the way we



Cinder Stanton, Monticello's Shannon Senior Historian, prepares to retire, leaving a lasting legacy on Jefferson scholarship. TJF

think about life on the mountain-top—and therefore about Jefferson himself."

"*Those Who Labor for My Happiness*": *Slavery at Monticello* (forthcoming in 2012) and *Free Some Day: The African-American Families of Monticello* (2000) are perfect examples of her scholarship. They reflect Cinder's deep understanding of the historical record, and they contain some of the most eloquent writing on the topic.

Cinder's methodical 20-year study of Jefferson's financial records has

made her the eminent authority on Jefferson's personal life. With James A. Bear, Monticello's former Resident Director (1971-1984), she edited and annotated Jefferson's vast *Memorandum Books*, thus making available 1,419 pages with thousands of entries describing Jefferson's expenditures—from the gloves he purchased on July 4, 1776, to books, food, furniture, horses, what he gave to charity, and his last recorded purchase (for cheese, on June 13, 1826). The *Memorandum Books* describe virtually every business transaction

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he made. Published as part of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (1997) by Princeton University Press, these two weighty volumes are invaluable for the study of the operation of the Monticello plantation, the furnishing of the house, and much more. The *Memorandum Books* enable any reader to make sense of Jefferson's purchases and the daily life he led.

Virtually every major Monticello initiative has been enriched by Cinder's remarkable knowledge of the many sources of information about Monticello and by her acute insight resulting from more than 30 years of study. After studying American history at Harvard, she arrived at Monticello in 1968, took some time away, and returned full-time in 1979. Since then, Cinder's research and writing have inspired and helped to shape a constellation of efforts, including a stellar exhibition at the first Monticello Visitor Center, which opened in 1985. She helped launch the popular Plantation Community tours in 1993 and the Plantation Database, an index of 600 enslaved people. With curators, historians and archaeologists, she has actively participated in the interpretation of the Monticello dependencies and Mulberry Row. Curator Elizabeth Chew reports that Cinder's voice was essential in shaping the *Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello* exhibition, which will open in January at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

In 1993, Cinder started Getting Word, a continuing oral history project that has gathered the recollections of 170 descendants of Monticello's enslaved families. These interviews, supplemented by research and photographs, create a vital connection to the history of an important group of



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Monticello's people, whose descendants ultimately fulfilled Jefferson's vision for equality and freedom. Their stories will be featured in the *Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello* exhibition in Washington, D.C. as well as a searchable database and website.

"Cinder's research has helped to shape our understanding of Thomas Jefferson. Her work is truly a gift to Jefferson scholarship and has created a lasting legacy for generations to come," said Leslie Greene Bowman, president and CEO of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello.

The impact of Cinder's research extends beyond Monticello; it is immensely important to historians everywhere. Authors of books and articles published about Jefferson, including Pulitzer Prize winner Annette Gordon-Reed in *The*

Hemingses of Monticello, credit Cinder's guidance. Cinder's soft-spoken, unassuming and articulate manner has made her a favorite of conference organizers, documentary filmmakers and the media.

The introduction to Cinder's forthcoming *"Those Who Labor for My Happiness": Slavery at Monticello*, by Professors Peter Onuf and Annette Gordon-Reed, rings true. They wrote: "A few gifted and fortunate historians can make history seem different and therefore enable us to see ourselves differently. Cinder Stanton has played this role at Monticello." As she nears retirement in spring 2012, we thank Cinder for allowing us to see Jefferson and Monticello differently and more completely. We wish her the best in her pursuit of happiness.