

Mr. Jefferson

MONTICELLO

WINTER 2011

www.monticello.org

VOLUME 22, NUMBER 2

Jefferson's sofa returns to Monticello

By Diane C. Ehrenpreis

Research Assistant, Curatorial Department

A mahogany neoclassical sofa, an original furnishing of Monticello, has returned home. The sofa, exhibited at Monticello during the 1993 Worlds of Thomas Jefferson exhibition, likely dates to 1790-1810 and is believed to have once been in Jefferson's cabinet (his private study). A direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson made the generous gift this fall.

In addition to its history, the sofa is exceptional for two reasons. First, both ends of the seat bench curve inward, forming C-shaped side rails; second, the sofa was reported to have had completely removable arms, although they are now secured to the back and seat rails. The current upholstery dates from the 1930s, but it is hoped that fragments of the original material might be found. Curators are examining the sofa, looking for clues about the upholstery and construction. After conservation and reupholstery, the sofa will be exhibited in the house.

The exact circumstances of how and when Jefferson acquired this sofa are unknown, but it appears that he might have commissioned it to use with an armchair that he acquired from Thomas Burling while serving as secretary of state in New York in 1790. A shipping list for Jefferson's move from New York to Philadelphia in 1790 includes a crate with the tall armchair, but no sofas appear on the manifest.

The revolving circular seat of the armchair fits fairly neatly into the incurvate ends of the sofa. The sofa's removable arms coupled with the armchair's design would provide a multifunctioning set of seating furniture, allowing Jefferson to enjoy the ease of his high-back armchair while extending his legs out on the bench of the sofa. This posture apparently was comfortable for his 6'2-1/2" frame, judging by his use of a Windsor bench in his study.

While the exact origin and maker of this piece are yet to be determined, evidence indicates that this sofa was a personal possession of Thomas Jefferson. Knowing that the sofa could work in conjunction with the revolving armchair, it seems probable that both objects served as part of a suite of furniture for the cabinet. A plan of the first floor of Monticello drawn by Cornelia Randolph, Jefferson's granddaughter, shows a "Couch ... which T.J. used when studying" situated on the west wall under

the window. Jefferson wrote on November 25, 1800, that the object he wanted was "under the window by the red couch in the Cabinet."

Virginia Randolph Trist, Jefferson's granddaughter, and her husband, Nicholas, received a sofa as a gift from Jefferson but did not take it from Monticello until 1829. On May 8, 1829, Nicholas wrote to his wife with instructions for their move to Washington, D.C., saying, "Perhaps it will be a good opportunity for sending the bed-room sofa, wh. yr. grandfather gave me." Jefferson's cabinet and bedroom are adjoining spaces, which might explain Trist's reference to the "bed-room sofa." Another possibility is that the sofa was moved from time to time, depending on room function and the seasons.

This sofa descended through the Trist line of Jefferson's family, with generations of thoughtful caretakers ensuring its survival. Each generation made a special point to preserve the history of the Monticello objects, even affixing a brass plaque with the sofa's history on the rear rail.

"We thank the donor for nearly 200 years of faithful protection by his family and celebrate this happy and historic occasion," said Susan R. Stein, Richard Gilder Senior Curator and Vice President for Museum Programs.

Sofa, possibly Philadelphia or Washington, D.C., 1790-1810

