

Th: Jefferson

MONTICELLO

SPRING 2012

www.monticello.org

VOLUME 23, NUMBER 1

Pembroke Table Returns to Monticello

MONTICELLO ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATOR DISCOVERS JOINERY-MADE TABLE

It was by chance that Monticello's architectural conservator Bob Self stopped at a local tag sale, a visit that led to the discovery of a table that once belonged to Thomas Jefferson. Now the table has returned home to Monticello as a gift from Self and his wife, Ruth Ewers.

Self said the small Pembroke table caught his eye immediately. "The table has some unique and unusual characteristics. When I saw it I recognized it as a possible joinery-made piece."

Due to Jefferson's extensive record keeping and correspondence, curators know Jefferson had four Pembroke tables made at Monticello by James Dinsmore, the Irish joiner responsible for much of the fine woodwork at Monticello. Dinsmore worked at Monticello from October 1798 to 1809, often assisted by Monticello enslaved joiner John Hemmings.

Pembroke tables are small, lightweight, multi-purpose tables with leaves that were



popular in mid-18th-century England. They were often used for serving tea, dining, writing, games, or at bedside. Jefferson's joinery-made Pembroke tables were sent to Poplar Forest on June 24, 1808, and appeared on Poplar Forest tax records in 1815.

Self, also an expert furniture conservator, recognized the table as an exact match to one acquired by Poplar Forest in 2001. That table has a family tradition related to Jefferson and Poplar Forest dating to 1858 when it was purchased from an estate auction at a farm neighboring Poplar Forest.

Both tables have the same dimensions and type of wood specified by Jefferson in 1807—a top board more than two feet wide made from fine Santo Domingo mahogany.

"Dinsmore used some very unusual techniques to construct the bases for these tables, in particular, the use of screws where one would expect more traditional joinery. This correlates with his use of screws to construct the individual squares for the parquet floor at Monticello," explained Self.

"Other interesting details include the offset rail/leg joints and the use of American beech as a secondary wood. The combination of dimensions, wood, and construction details make these tables unmistakable."

The table is in original condition except for two replaced leaves and hinges restored by Self. "These excellent replacements, based on Jefferson's specifications, succeeded earlier poor replacements," said Susan Stein, Richard

Gilder Senior Curator and Vice President for Museum Programs.

"We are thrilled by this discovery and grateful to Bob for his generosity and commitment to Monticello. Bob restored the leaves and hinges, stabilized the table's frame, and conserved the finish before he and his wife donated the table to Monticello," she added.

"I'm really happy to have helped this table find its way home to Monticello. Monticello has defined my entire working career and given it a meaning that it otherwise wouldn't have had. It's a pleasure to return the favor." Self has worked at Monticello for 18 years.

The table is now on view in the Parlor.

A series of 10 letters and other references detail their story, beginning with a request written from Washington by then-President Jefferson on October 12, 1807, to Richmond joiner James Oldham:

"I have a job of 4. Pembroke tables on hand at Monticello, but we have not the Mahogany for the tops... will you be so good as to chuse & procure for me 2. planks of 2f. 4I. by 10f. of very fine mahogany and forward them to Monticello..."

On June 24, 1808, James Dinsmore, Monticello's master joiner from 1798 to 1809, wrote the President to say that he had packed the tables on a wagon for their journey down to Poplar Forest.