

Th: Jefferson

MONTICELLO

WINTER 2013

www.monticello.org

VOLUME 24, NUMBER 2

MEET MONTICELLO TOUR GUIDE BRANDON DILLARD

Visitors often recall the Great Clock in the entrance of Monticello, Jefferson's strange objects and contraptions in his Cabinet, and the size of his alcove bed. While these details are often imprinted in visitors' minds, many times their overall experience is reliant on their interaction with their tour guide.

Monticello is open 364 days a year and welcomes about 440,000 visitors annually from all over the world. As part of the Monticello Day Pass, visitors take a guided tour of the house. Monticello's 70 tour guides give more than 19,000 house tours each year.

"I try to bring the people of Monticello 200 years ago alive for the people who visit today. The best tours happen when we all connect—the guests and the guide—and together we discover something new in Monticello and in ourselves," said Brandon Dillard, a tour guide at Monticello for more than three years.

A self-described history lover, Dillard was born in Virginia and was raised in the tiny town of Inman, Georgia. He came to Monticello as a bartender with a passion for knowledge. These days his deep voice resonates through the halls of Jefferson's house. You might find him walking through Jefferson's Cabinet in the morning to gather inspiration from objects of the Enlightenment.

During a tour, he often pauses when he talks about tough topics like slavery, to give his audiences a moment to think.

"The most difficult to comprehend, the most difficult to confront, this aspect of Jefferson's life is the reason I am still here—love of history brought me to Monticello, love of justice keeps me at Monticello," said Dillard.

He said he thinks it's important for visitors on his tours to understand that history is subjective.

"I feel it is truly unfair to place the Founding Fathers on a pedestal. It's not unfair only to us, it is unfair to them. Understanding that Thomas Jefferson was a man, a human being with thoughts and feelings, emotions and conflicts, a man who achieved great things and had great failures, and most importantly, a man who was *variously* described as giving *very different* impressions of himself to others," he said. "I often tell guests:



Watch Brandon Dillard during a tour of Monticello on Monticello's YouTube Channel: www.youtube.com/MonticelloVisit

there are many faces of Thomas Jefferson; he was, after all, a politician. But the reality is that each of these faces may represent an accurate Jefferson, and the truest understanding of Jefferson is in considering all of the ways others described him—and that is, of course, true for us all."

Q&A with Brandon Dillard

Describe what you like most about your job.

People. I've always enjoyed teaching and learning from others—this position allows me to discuss complex issues with people from all walks of life.

What's the wildest question you've been asked?

I get asked a variation of this question frequently: "Is the house haunted?" That, in itself, is not particularly wild. It's the variations that get interesting—by far my favorite "unique" guests are those interested in the paranormal. The most outlandish comments are never presented in the form of a question, rather they are statements intended for my edification.

What is your favorite Jefferson fact?

Jefferson once paid \$1 to see a monkey.

What is the most important topic for you to discuss on a tour?

Slavery. By far, the most confounding aspect of Thomas Jefferson is his complicity in slavery. Two hundred years ago, the rights described in the Declaration of Independence did not apply to Native Americans, African Americans, or women. Slavery is the most tangible of these inequalities at Monticello. There have been many suggestions as to why—so many books have been written on the subject, but not one satisfies the glaring immorality that even Jefferson described time and time again. The failure of the Founding Fathers in eradicating the injustice of slavery left a lasting legacy this country continues to struggle with every day.

Favorite room at Monticello?

Jefferson's Cabinet is my favorite room—sometimes, when alone in the morning, I walk into the bedroom and take a moment to lose myself in the trappings of the Enlightenment strewn about Jefferson's office.

Do you feel like you're continually learning?

I am always, always, always learning; every day I learn something new. "Knowledge indeed is a desirable, a lovely possession."—Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., August 27, 1786.

What makes a great tour?

A great tour comes from understanding your audience and adjusting accordingly. Many people can recite facts and dates—such information is sterile if it doesn't connect. It is important to see who is on tour and to try to tell what they want to hear about. Ideally, the guest will ask, but not everyone is so willing to speak publicly. It's great when people laugh at my bad jokes.

What should people ask on their tours?

Everything! People should ask about anything at all. But if a guest asks a specific question about something I don't know about, I know which of my colleagues does know about that subject. I can always get an answer quickly at Monticello; that's one of the greatest joys of working with such a diverse and insightful group of people. Hopefully (time permitting), we can connect the guest with the guide most suited to their interests, but we all welcome questions!

