

Th: Jefferson

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Getting Word Celebrates 20 Years



A PROJECT THAT BEGAN TWO DECADES AGO WITH LITTLE MORE THAN A TAPE RECORDER, SEVERAL NOTEBOOKS AND A VERY COMMITTED STAFF TODAY INCLUDES NEARLY 200 RECORDED INTERVIEWS AND HAS ACHIEVED NATIONAL RECOGNITION.

by Christa Dierksheide, Monticello Historian

The Getting Word oral history project – an initiative that preserves the histories of the descendants of the Hern, Hemings, Granger, Gillette and other families of Monticello – has helped “humanize the story of slavery at Monticello and allowed us to see enslaved men, women and children as fully formed human beings who had skills, dreams and values,” said Lucia Stanton, project director of Getting Word and Shannon senior historian emeritus at Monticello.

Getting Word was first launched in 1993, during the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Jefferson’s birth. Awareness of the “gaps in the treatment of the African-American experience at Monticello” had begun to emerge, said Dianne Swann-Wright, Getting Word

project historian. An initial grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities as well as support from Monticello’s then-president Daniel P. Jordan and the African-American Advisory Committee helped jump-start the initiative. Swann-Wright and Stanton then made several trips to southern Ohio, where a large

contingent of Monticello descendants had settled. There they joined Getting Word consultant Beverly Gray, a historian who had been studying the descendants of Monticello slaves for decades. “She organized our initial interviews and became an invaluable colleague and mentor,” said Swann-Wright. In the decades since the team’s first meetings in Ohio, Stanton and Swann-Wright have traveled over 40,000 miles to 14 states in order to record interviews, explore archives and cemeteries, examine family photographs, and understand “how Jefferson and Monticello had shaped their [descendants’] lives” and “what they wanted the world to know about their families,” said Swann-Wright.

For many of the descendants interviewed by Swann-Wright and Stanton, Getting Word made a deep impression. Virginia Trotter Rose-Niles



Virginia Craft Rose, 2003, a descendant of the Fossett family at Monticello.

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said that the interview of her mother, Virginia Craft Rose, in 2006 was a “pivotal” experience. Craft Rose and her family are descended from Joseph Fossett, a highly skilled blacksmith at Monticello who was one of five slaves freed in Jefferson’s will. The Getting Word interview gave Craft Rose the “opportunity to speak to the power and pride of our family,” and allowed her mother to make

“sure that her children and grandchildren would understand their place in history and the valuable efforts that they could make to keep the family story alive,” said Rose-Niles. Her sister, Mary Ellen Butler, said that, including her mother, the Getting Word project “has had an impact on four generations of our family” and has given “our children and grandchildren an inkling of part of our heritage.”

Recently, the Getting Word project gained national attention as the heart of “Slavery at Jefferson’s Monticello: Paradox of Liberty,” an exhibition jointly sponsored by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation and



Since 1993, descendants have often gathered at Monticello to honor their ancestors whose lives were essential to Jefferson, his house and his plantation.

the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. Since February 2013, the exhibition has traveled to Atlanta, Ga., and St. Louis, Mo. It opened April 11 at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. In addition, Getting Word’s people and their stories will play an important role in Monticello’s new Mountaintop Project, a multiyear effort that will preserve and restore Jefferson’s mountaintop. A forthcoming Mulberry Row app will allow visitors to hear descendants tell of the struggle to make real Jefferson’s principles of liberty and equality despite the injustice of slavery and

segregation. Mary Ellen Butler praised the integration of Getting Word in the Mountaintop Project, saying “the more we can learn about life at Monticello the more we will close the gap between the mythology and the reality of American history.”

Both Swann-Wright and Stanton emphasize that Getting Word’s future should be just as vibrant as its past. “I think we need to con-

tinue to interview people – there are people out there who have not come forward” as descendants, Swann-Wright said. Stanton noted that the project “sheds light back into the shadows,” transforming slaves who existed as mere entries in Jefferson’s account books into “real people.” The Getting Word project illuminates not just individual struggles, but also a national struggle. “That the home of Thomas Jefferson is emblematic of the paradox of liberty seems a powerful position from which to gain a better perspective on our past,” Stanton said.

Visit monticello.org/getting-word to learn more.



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Visit monticello.org/mountaintopproject to learn about changes underway.