

Thomas Jefferson MONTICELLO

SPRING 2014

www.monticello.org

VOLUME 25, NUMBER 1



Restoring Monticello's Historic Blinds

This spring, Monticello launched the Mountaintop Project, a multiyear effort to restore Monticello as Jefferson knew it, and to tell the stories of the people — enslaved and free — who lived and worked at Monticello. Visitors to Monticello will see historic changes underway, including the restoration and preservation of Mulberry Row, the upper floors of the house and Jefferson's historic roadway system.

One of the first phases of the Mountaintop Project involves the restoration of the house's exterior blinds to more accurately represent those that Jefferson intended and used. The blinds at Monticello date to the early 20th century and have reached the end of their serviceable life. Most exterior blinds, or "shutters" on today's buildings, are merely decorative. However, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, blinds were an essential feature of virtually every house.

Photographs taken in the late 1880s by Rufus Holsinger show what appear to be Jefferson's original blinds still

in place. These photos were crucial in helping Monticello restoration experts determine essential details of Jefferson's design, including the number and spacing of the slats and the size of the stock used for the frames.

There was also a paper trail. According to Jefferson's 1804 memorandum on Venetian blinds to be made by Peter Lenox, Jefferson ordered Monticello's Venetian blinds with "laths moving on 2. pivots." What Jefferson meant by "2. pivots" had been a mystery until examples fitting this description were discovered. Most recently, in 2012, Monticello historians visited the National Statuary Hall



Photograph of the West Front ca. late 1880s by Rufus Holsinger shows what are believed to be the original shutters still in place.

Courtesy of the Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

at the U.S. Capitol to see Lenox's 1817 blinds that still survive today. These original blinds, along with an example made by Jefferson's master joiner James Dinsmore for Montpelier, James Madison's home in Orange County, Va., illuminated Jefferson's 1804 memorandum note as never before.

The ability to change the angle of the slats depending on the time of day and the season provided an extra measure of adjustment for controlling light levels and air flow. They might have also provided some protection during summer thunderstorms while still allowing windows to remain open to take advantage of the cooling



THE MOUNTAINTOP PROJECT

breezes. The double-pivot system likely added stability to the movable slats, which are unusually wide.

The Mountaintop Project is made possible by a transformational contribution from David M. Rubenstein. Leading support was provided by Fritz and Claudine Kundrun, along with generous gifts and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Cabell Foundation, the Richard S. Reynolds Foundation, the Garden Club of Virginia and additional individuals, organizations and foundations.

Plan a visit to Monticello to see historic changes underway. Learn more at www.monticello.org/mountaintopproject, our behind-the-scenes blog featuring posts from Monticello's curators, archaeologists, restoration specialists and historians.



An overview of the landscape changes anticipated from the Mountaintop Project.