

The Sale of the “Choicest Collection of Books in the US”

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Facsimile of *U.S. Capitol After Burning by British* by George Munger, 1814.

The year 2015 marks the 200th anniversary of the 1815 sale of Thomas Jefferson's library to Congress. Between May 2 and 8, 1815, Jefferson watched as 10 wagons carried his prized collection from his mountaintop home in the Virginia Piedmont on a 125-mile journey to its new home in the nation's capital,

Washington, D.C. Jefferson had sold his 6,500-volume library to replace the congressional library that was destroyed when the British burned Washington and the Capitol building the year before, during the War of 1812 (image at left).

Painstakingly assembled by Jefferson over a span of 50 years, the library was the largest personal book collection of its kind at the time, especially comprehensive in the areas of Americana and American politics. His books were the inspiration for his ideas and the source of what Enlightenment thinkers regarded as “useful knowledge.” He ceded it to the nation in order to ensure that Congress had the reference library it needed to function and govern effectively.

As the last wagonload of books left Monticello, Jefferson remarked with pride in a letter to Samuel Harrison Smith, “an interesting treasure is added to your city, now become the depository of unquestionably the choicest collection of books in the US and I hope it will not be without some general effect on the literature of our country.” Today, Jefferson's books are still celebrated as the founding collection for the Library of Congress.

Did You Know?

- = The sale price was **\$23,950** – only half what the collection was worth.
- = The cased collection weighed some **27,000** pounds.
- = Jefferson utilized the sale proceeds to pay debts and to acquire more books!
- = On Christmas Eve 1851, a fire destroyed **two-thirds** of Jefferson's books at the Library of Congress.
- = Today, his library has been recreated in a permanent exhibit in the Thomas Jefferson Building at the Library of Congress, consisting of over **2,400** surviving original volumes, along with replacement copies.

Monticello Seeds Go Around the World

AFTER RETIRING from the presidency to Monticello, Jefferson wrote to painter Charles Willson Peale, “No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden.”

Jefferson's 1,000-foot long garden boasted over 300 varieties of vegetables and herbs. In the words of Peter Hatch, author of *A Rich Spot of Earth: Thomas Jefferson's Revolutionary Garden at Monticello*, “He distributed seeds of his latest novelty vegetable to neighbors, political allies ... and an international community of plantmen with the persistence of a religious reformer, a missionary of seeds.” Today Monticello gardeners still preserve and grow heirloom seeds to share around the world.

On March 27, 2014, President Obama met with Pope Francis at the Vatican, roughly a month after he visited Monticello. The president presented the pope with a gift that the White House press pool described as “a custom-made seed chest featuring a variety of fruit and vegetable seeds used in the White House garden... In keeping with the spirit of the gift, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello will donate seeds that will yield several tons of produce to a charity of Pope Francis' choosing.”

Monticello President Leslie Greene Bowman stated, “We were honored to be part of this historic moment.”

BELOW President Obama presented Pope Francis with heirloom seeds from Monticello's garden. Getty Images.

RIGHT Viet Nguyen (right) presented Vietnamese rice seeds to Monticello President Leslie Greene Bowman (left) and Jeff Looney, editor of the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*.



Jefferson's Pursuit of Rice Seeds

In 1787, Jefferson was serving his country in Paris as Minister to France. He envisioned the new American nation as an agrarian society – a nation of small-scale farmers – and he believed that agricultural exports were a key to America's lasting success.

Jefferson became interested in obtaining rice seeds from Vietnam (referred to as Cochinchina at that time). In his letter to William Drayton of South Carolina, Mr. Jefferson wrote, “The dry rice of Cochinchina has the reputation of being whitest to the eye, best flavored to the taste, and most productive ... it would enable us to get rid of those ponds of stagnant water so fatal to human health and life.”

In Paris, Jefferson shared his idea with a Vietnamese prince, who promised to send seeds to Jefferson. Unfortunately, the prince was unable to keep his promise due to a civil war in his country.

Some 200 years after Jefferson first inquired about the seeds and on the 20th anniversary of the initiation of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Vietnam,



Viet Nguyen, a University of Virginia alumnus from Hanoi, gifted Monticello with rice seeds from Vietnam. “I presented the seeds to express my personal respect, admiration and gratitude to the ‘Father of the University’ where I studied, and to fulfill Jefferson's noble wish,” said Mr. Nguyen.



Only at Monticello: Heirloom Seeds from Jefferson's Garden

Today, Monticello's gardeners package thousands of seeds each year, many of which are collected from the gardens, so that they can continue to share and preserve the rich history of Jefferson's heirloom vegetables and flowers. Monticello's Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants partners with home gardeners, collectors and other institutions to distribute seeds and plants so that these heirloom varieties are not lost. Enthusiasts and novice gardeners alike will find over 100 varieties of seeds for sale at www.monticelloshop.org.

To read the full story of Jefferson's quest for rice, visit www.monticello.org/blog.