Jefferson called Christmas “the
day of greatest mirth and jollity.”
As was customary during the
time, he celebrated the full 12
days of the Christmas season. Traditional
activities included traveling to the
homes of friends and family, plac-
ing greenery around the house, and
hosting and attending parties.

Details of how the holiday was
observed at Monticello are scarce. A
recent discovery in a set of Jefferson
family letters that were written at
Christmas provides insights into the
cominings and goings of the household.
One December, Jefferson’s grand-
daughter Cornelia Randolph
composed a hasty letter to her sister
Virginia Randolph Trist asking her to
send the family recipe for plum pud-
ding as quickly as possible.

Although Cornelia’s letter does not
survive, her request and its urgency
are clear in Virginia’s surviving reply.
Virginia’s response from Philadelphia
was dated December 22, probably
in 1860. She wrote, “I received your
letter last night and hope the direc-
tions for the pudding may reach you
to-morrow morning.” And despite
having a “sick headache,” she tran-
scribed and annotated the recipe so
that her sister, who may have been
with family in Alexandria, Virginia,
could have the plum pudding that
they both remembered from their
childhood.

Once Virginia had copied the
ingredients — the sugar and flour,
bread crumbs from a penny loaf
bread, the dozen eggs, the cinnamon
and citron, the suet and the brandy
— she added one powerful word:
“Monticello.” Virginia specifically
associated this Christmas pudding
with Monticello and, by extension,
her Christmases past and pres-
ent. Perhaps Virginia and Cornelia
felt the same way about this exact
pudding as I do about my nana’s
Swedish pepparkakor recipe; it is not
Christmas without this food.

When I read this exchange
between sisters, I was struck by how
modern the events seemed. I imme-
diately empathized with Cornelia’s
evident upset at not being able to
find the pudding recipe. Have we
not all been there, especially at this
time of year? I was also immensely
touched by her sister’s reaction —
promptly copying and sending the
recipe — despite feeling poorly. And
what about the U. S. Post Office and
its one-day turnaround time, in 1860?

Earlier this year, a collection
of Jefferson family letters at the
University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill yielded a refer-
ce to the Randolph family
looking forward to playing
whist and drinking eggnog
at a Christmas gathering
in the 1850s. While the time
period may seem too late to
apply to Monticello, it likely
reveals a tradition that the
family had kept for quite
a while, considering
that both whist
and eggnog
first became
popular in the
18th century.

When I saw
the recipe for
plum pud-
ding and the
date of December
22, I knew this was
another discovery to
add to our Christmas
file.

Bust of Cornelia Randolph and
facsimile of Virginia’s reply to
her sister’s letter requesting the
pudding recipe.

Read Virginia’s version of the Christmas pudding at blog.monticelloshop.org.