Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) is best remembered as the author of the Declaration of Independence. The ideas of the Declaration — that “all men are created equal” and have a right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” — established the foundations of self-government and individual freedom in America. Jefferson’s eloquent words of 1776 still inspire people around the world today.

Jefferson’s actions were strongly influenced by the Enlightenment, the 18th-century movement stressing human reason, knowledge, and inquiry — and how they could be used to improve the human condition. The American democratic system was founded on Enlightenment principles.

After writing the Declaration, Jefferson spent the next 33 years in public life, serving as a delegate to the Virginia General Assembly and to Congress, governor of Virginia, minister to France, the first U.S. secretary of state, the second vice president, and the third president (1801-1809).

Notable achievements of Jefferson’s presidency included the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In retirement, he founded the University of Virginia.

In addition to his public service, Jefferson, an “enthusiast” in the arts and many branches of applied science, contributed to architecture, horticulture, ethnography, paleontology, archaeology, and other fields.

Monticello, his plantation near Charlottesville, Va., was the center of Jefferson’s world. To understand Jefferson, one must understand Monticello; it can be seen as his autobiographical statement.

Monticello encompassed a house, an ornamental landscape, a farm, a plantation, a small mountain, and a large and diverse community. It encapsulated the interests, talents, ideals, ambitions, and realities of its
creative and complex owner.

The Monticello mountain was at the center of a 5,000-acre plantation that Jefferson inherited from his father, Peter Jefferson, in 1764.

Monticello was home not only to Jefferson and his extended family but also to as many as 150 slaves who worked the farms, helped construct the house and outbuildings, and performed household tasks.

Monticello occupied Jefferson’s attention and imagination for more than 50 years. He designed the exceptional neoclassical house — his “essay in architecture” — and supervised its construction, expansion, and furnishing from 1769 into the 1820s.

From the beginning, Jefferson envisioned the house as part of an ornamental landscape. His gardens were laboratories for the cultivation of myriad species of trees, flowers, vegetables, and fruit.

Despite Jefferson’s ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence, his way of life was dependent on the labor of people he held in slavery. And despite Jefferson’s efforts, the plantation was unprofitable and he was deeply in debt when he died at Monticello on July 4, 1826. His family was forced to sell the land, house, household contents, and enslaved workers shortly after his death.

For most of the period between 1834 and 1923, Monticello was owned by Commodore Uriah Phillips Levy and his nephew, Jefferson Monroe Levy, who maintained the house without making any major structural changes.

In 1923, Monticello was purchased by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, a private, nonprofit corporation, and opened as a public attraction in 1924.

Since then, the Foundation has instituted numerous research and educational programs and major restoration and renovation projects, and Monticello has attracted more than 27 million people.

Visitors to Monticello today can tour the original, authentically furnished house, which has been restored to its appearance circa 1809, when Jefferson retired to Monticello after his second term as president; stroll the cultivated landscape of restored flower, vegetable, and fruit gardens; explore Mulberry Row, where Monticello’s slaves lived and labored; and enjoy scenic views of the pastoral countryside. Monticello is also the venue for a variety of special events, workshops, classes, talks, and other public programs throughout the year, including a naturalization ceremony every July 4.

Monticello is a National Historic Landmark and the only house in the United States designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.