“The work is very heavy”

Gardeners at Jefferson’s Monticello

Documentary and archaeological evidence generally fails in revealing the quality of the horticulture at Monticello 200 years ago: for example, the smoothness of the turf, the vigor of garden plants, or the abundance of weeds and other pests. Statements such as, “It was messier back then,” or, “they had fewer bugs in Jefferson’s time,” may reflect our own modern aesthetic sensibility more than the true quality of early nineteenth century landscape gardening. The nature of the labor in the Monticello fruit, flower, and vegetable gardens evolved dramatically over a long period between 1769, when fruit trees were first planted on the south side of the mountain, until Thomas Jefferson’s death in 1826. Each garden feature also varied in terms of who took care of what. There are no easy generalizations, such as “slaves did all the work,” although they did most of it, or else, “Jefferson did this, and planted that,” a simplistic interpretation that is likely even more flawed. Although garden maintenance at Monticello seemed occasional, sporadic, and sometimes haphazard, gardening intensified when Jefferson returned from public office – whether as Virginia’s Governor, Minister to France, Secretary of State, or President – and he was determined to revive both his ornamental and functional landscape, his gardens and his farms.

“Tom has been a man of his honor in respect to the manure”

The mature flower gardens at Monticello, the winding walk and oval beds installed in 1807 and 1808, were cared for by Jefferson’s granddaughters, especially his oldest, Anne Cary Randolph, and by enslaved African-American Wormley Hughes, sometimes called “Monticello’s Head Gardener.” According to the poignant reminiscence of granddaughter Ellen Randolph Coolidge years after Jefferson’s death, Jefferson himself “directed” the work, spaced bulbs, and labeled the varieties with inscribed wooden stakes. Wormley was “armed with spade and hoe,” preparing the beds for Jefferson’s daughter, Martha, and her two daughters, Anne and Ellen, to do the actual planting. Documentary references suggest that Anne was charged with the responsibility of both directing Wormley to

Jefferson’s granddaughter Anne Cary Randolph as a young women.

Alpine Strawberries
dig up bulbs and sow seeds, but to water plants and divide and transplant herba-
cceous flower roots herself. The “Monthly,” or alpine, strawberries, for example, were
“put under her care,” probably similarly
to other choice plants in the Monticello
collection. In 1809, after she’d married
and moved away, Jefferson wrote to Anne,
“What is to become of our flowers. I left
them so entirely to yourself, that I never
knew any thing about them, what they are,
where they grow, what is to be done for
them.”

Reports suggest that the daughter’s
and granddaughter’s supervisory role was
more challenging than the gardening it-
self. Bulbs at Monticello were commonly
dug up during their dormancy and stored
during the sum-
mer months for
fall replanting. A
misstep occurred
in 1808 when Anne
complained to her
grandfather that
Wormley had failed
to thoroughly scour
a bed, so that dur-
ing the following
spring flowers “have
come up about in
the bed & not in
the rows with the others.” The same year,
Ellen wrote to Jefferson that Edmund
Bacon, the newly appointed overseer at
Monticello, when directed to manure the
lawn about the house, mistakenly covered
it with charcoal: “It is quite black, and is
especially dirty to walk on.” Jefferson was
compelled to write Bacon himself to “rake
and sweep the charcoal into little heaps,
and carry them off.” Ellen, in the same
letter, also complained about the sheep
grazing on the orange trees on the south
terrace. Gardening dramas at Monticello
often turned into mildly comic tragedy.

Jefferson’s daughter, Martha suggested
her dependence on the labor and skill
of slave gardeners, and her willingness
to shrug off ultimate responsibilities for
gardening misfortunes, when she wrote
her father in 1792: “You will see that I
am a much better gardener than last year
though in truth old George is so slow
that I shall never shine in that way with-
out your assistance.” Two months later,
Martha’s confession to her father reflects
the illusionary peaks and depressive reali-
ties facing any valiant gardener: “What I
told you of my garden is really true indeed
if you see it at a distance it looks very green
but it does not bear close examination, the
weeds having taken possession of much
the greater part of it.” A gardener’s work is
never over, particularly in weeding a 1000-
foot-long garden, and Martha added, “Old
George is so slow that by the time he has
got to the end of his labour he has it all to
do over again.” The supervision of slave
gardeners may have required delicate nego-
tiation rather than rigid, iron-clad demands.
The same year, 1792, Jefferson wrote and
asked Martha if Tom Shackleford had
spread manure over the vegetable garden:
“Shackleford promised me on his honor.”
Martha replied affirmatively, that, indeed,
Tom had “been a man of his honour with
respect to the manure,” suggesting how
labor could be delegated through a process
that involved playful, mock pleading.

Wormley Hughes: “Armed with
spade and hoe”
Wormley Hughes was among the most
trusted and dutiful slaves at Monticello. 
Born at Monticello in March, 1781, the
grandson of the African-American matri-
arch, Betty Hemings, Wormley had many
responsibilities aside from gardening. He
worked in the Nailery from the age of 1704
Robert Hughes

Monticello's historic beech receiving careful attention in the 1920s.

Milton, the Rivanna river town three miles and 600 vertical feet away.

Wormley was informally freed by Jefferson's daughter Martha, but continued to live with, and care for, members of the Jefferson family until his death in 1858. Referred to as “Uncle Wormley,” he nursed Jefferson's grandson, James M. Randolph, whose sister recalled, “I never saw such a servant as he is. He keeps his room like a picture. Harriet goes in to make his bed twice a day and Wormley does everything else and there is never a spot on the paint or hearth.” As a family confidante, Wormley’s optimistic nature inspired family members to recall his sunny refrain, “I am in no wise discouraged,” when circumstances became particularly bleak. Wormley’s son, Robert Hughes, was founding minister of Union Run Baptist Church at Shadwell; Robert’s son, George, became a church minister. Until at least 1809, and was considered the “least wasteful” of the youthful nail makers. He dug the “ha-ha' around the mountaintop along the first Roundabout, cleared and graded several major roads, blasted rock for the construction of the Shadwell canal, and succeeded Jupiter as hostler in the Monticello stables, charged with caring for the horses. “One of the most trusty servants I have,” according to Jefferson, Wormley dug his master’s grave in July, 1826.

Wormley was delegated many skilled horticultural tasks, including the sowing of precious seeds in the Monticello nurseries, collecting and packaging seeds and plants for shipment to Jefferson's gardening friends, and planting exotic specimen trees around the house. At least two of Wormley’s trees survived well into the twentieth century, including two Purple Beeches, one of which fell in 1950, the other in 1974. Jefferson’s horticultural directives were often written from afar to overseer, Edmund Bacon, or else to Anne or Ellen. Instructions sometimes included the reassuring phase, “Wormley will do it,” or “Wormley knows where” this or that plant is. Wormley’s propagating skills were expressed in the varied species of seeds he sowed in the nursery, including sesame, peach and cherry stones, ground oak, hickory nuts, cucumber tree, mountain laurel, and assorted grasses. Wormley’s horticultural assignments also involved less delicate tasks than seed propagation or bulb planting; in 1808 he was assigned the role of manuring the entire 1,000-foot-long vegetable garden, “a good wagon load of dung every five yards . . . . This will take between 60. & 70. loads in the whole, which will do for the first year.” The commitment was onerous; each wagonload was filled with manure from Milton, the Rivanna river town three miles and 600 vertical feet away. Wormley was informally freed by Jefferson’s daughter Martha, but continued to live with, and care for, members of the Jefferson family until his death in 1858. Referred to as “Uncle Wormley,” he nursed Jefferson’s grandson, James M. Randolph, whose sister recalled, “I never saw such a servant as he is. He keeps his room like a picture. Harriet goes in to make his bed twice a day and Wormley does everything else and there is never a spot on the paint or hearth.” As a family confidante, Wormley’s optimistic nature inspired family members to recall his sunny refrain, “I am in no wise discouraged,” when circumstances became particularly bleak. Wormley’s son, Robert Hughes, was founding minister of Union Run Baptist Church at Shadwell; Robert’s son, George, became a church minister. Until at least 1809, and was considered the “least wasteful” of the youthful nail makers. He dug the “ha-ha’ around the mountaintop along the first Roundabout, cleared and graded several major roads, blasted rock for the construction of the Shadwell canal, and succeeded Jupiter as hostler in the Monticello stables, charged with caring for the horses. “One of the most trusty servants I have,” according to Jefferson, Wormley dug his master’s grave in July, 1826.

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deacon; and Fountain Hughes, Wormley’s great grandson, furthered the family legacy as a professional gardener as late as 1949.

“The work is very heavy”
The most enduring landscape project, and perhaps the most significant garden undertaking during Jefferson’s tenure at Monticello, was the terracing of the 1000-foot-long, 80-foot-wide vegetable garden into what one visitor described as a “hanging garden.” This massive earth-moving project took place between 1806 and 1809 and was carried out by seven to nine slaves that Jefferson leased from a Spotsylvania County farmer. Overseer, Edmund Bacon, supervised the work, which involved carving dirt from the high side of the future garden, manually loading a mule-driven cart and moving the earth to the low side, where a rock wall, in some places fourteen-feet-high and ten-feet deep, retained the unloaded earth. Although Bacon lamented, “The work is very heavy,” the end result was most gratifying: “I think it looks very beautiful,” he exclaimed in 1808 when the terracing was half completed. Jefferson, then serving as President in Washington, often exhorted Bacon to complete the work, “my heart is most set on finishing the garden,” but other essential tasks such as the construction of a mill, the digging of a canal, and the planting and cultivation of cash crops, delayed progress in the leveling of the garden plateau.

Interestingly, a separate crew composed of a European carpenter and three resident Monticello slaves was involved in a parallel and supporting project: the fencing of the six-acre garden and South Orchard below it. Mr. Watkins’s first assignment upon arriving at Monticello in September, 1808, was constructing the ten-foot-high paling fence. Davy, Abram, and Shepherd were assigned to work with him: collecting then de-barking twelve-foot-long locust posts; digging post holes; harvesting poplar and pine logs; splitting them into rails and attaching them to the posts; and hammering the pales, or thin boards, to the rails. Although the Spotsylvania County, leased slaves were involved in diverse labors, including the construction of a mill, it’s puzzling why Jefferson contracted out the garden leveling while relying on resident labor for the fence work.

“For amusement he would work sometimes in the garden...”
Jefferson’s Garden Kalendar, compiled yearly between 1809 and 1824 is so convincingly detailed, with notes about the spacing of seed and the amount allotted to each row, and at least ninety per cent of the Kalendar notations took place when Jefferson was at Monticello, that it suggest he regularly planted the kitchen garden himself. Isaac, a slave blacksmith freed by Martha Jefferson, recalled in 1847, “For amusement he [Jefferson] would work sometimes in the garden for half an hour at a time in right good earnest in the cool of the evening.” Margaret Bayard Smith, a friend of Jefferson’s and a chatty chronicler of Washington society, described a portable seed closet used at Monticello, “a frame, or stand, consisting of two upright pieces of about two inches
Tulips blooming along the flower garden walk on the West Lawn.

thickness, in which were neat little truss 
hooks. On these were suspended phials 
of all sizes, tightly corked, and neatly 
labeled, containing garden seeds, of the 
smaller kind; those of the larger were in 
tin canisters. When in his garden this 
stand could be carried about and placed 
near him, and if I remember, there must 
have near a hundred kinds. It is well wor-
ththy the adoption of all gentlemen and 
lady gardeners."

The image of Jefferson as a “gentle-
man gardener,” carefully sowing seeds in 
the freshly cultivated earth, is difficult 
to reconcile with the picture of him as a 
manure slinger that he suggests in a let-
ter to his daughter, Martha, in 1793. After 
she complained of pest damage to her 
plantings in the kitchen garden, Jefferson 
replied, “We will try this winter to cover 
our garden with a heavy coating of ma-
nure. When earth is rich it bids defiance 
to droughts, yields in abundance, and of 
the best quality. I suspect that the insects 
which have harassed you have been en-
couraged by the feebleness of your plants; 
and that has been produced by the lean 
state of the soil. We will attack them 
another year with joint efforts.”

“Old George is so slow”

Although one might presume Wormley 
Hughes worked in the Monticello 
Kitchen Garden, there are few docu-
mentary references to him performing 
any task other than spreading manure. 
Other slave gardeners, such as Isaac’s fa-
ther, Great George, Gardener John, Tom 
Shackleford, and Goliah periodically 
toiled in the kitchen garden. George 
(1730-1799), a larger than life figure at 
Monticello, worked in the orchards and 
vineyards while Jefferson was in Paris 
as Minister of France and was among 
the handful of Monticello slaves not 
leased to neighboring farmers. George, a 
skilled blacksmith, also helped Martha 
Jefferson in the kitchen garden during 
the 1790’s, and while she complained 
that “Old George is so slow,” he soon 
rose to the role of overseer, the most 
responsible position on the farm. In
1796 Great George was charged with the oversight of fifty men and responsibility for the cash crop of tobacco. Although the 1797 harvest was a failure, the 1798 crop was, according to Jefferson, “so extraordinary that I may safely say if there ever was a better hogshead of tobacco brought or sold in New York I may give it [the Monticello tobacco] to the purchaser.” According to Monticello’s Senior Research Historian, Cinder Stanton, George was “a man struggling with his dual roles,” as both the representative of, yet overseer to, the slave community. Jefferson’s son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, suggested there was widespread insubordination under George, in contrast to the discontent wrought by William Page, the cruel white overseer at two other Jefferson farms at Shadwell and Lego. Despite being paid a premium for his supervision, George received only half the salary of a white overseer.

John or John Gardener (or Gardener John), the appellations attached to differentiate him from enslaved Monticello joiner, John Hemings, followed Great George in the kitchen garden in 1798 and 1799. Trained as a carpenter, it seems possible John was also tutored in gardening by professional European gardeners at Monticello, Robert Bailey and Anthony Giannini, because of the skilled nature of his labors. On the other hand, gardening may have been the job of last resort for John, who was rejected as a “guard” at Monticello because he “sleepwalked,” and was dismissed as cidermaker because of his weakness for strong drink. Nevertheless, John propagated cherished seeds of horsechestnut, pecan, and valuable grasses in the Monticello nurseries. He also “espaliered” vines in the vineyards, a task requiring detailed awareness of grape production and skill with the pruning knife. Gardener John was also charged with planting a large shipment of trees from the Bartram Nursery of Philadelphia in 1798. Jefferson, then Vice-President, instructed Thomas Mann Randolph to “direct John where to
plant them. He would do well perhaps to
dig his holes beforehand, to mellow the
earth. All the trees to be well staked, the
number preserved.” The order included a
sugar maple that Jefferson wanted planted
on the south side of the West Lawn. This
tree survived into the twentieth century,
when it was described as one of the best
distinct species of its kind in the United
States. Toppled by tornado-like winds in
1994, the “original” sugar maple was an
enduring testament to the skills of at least
one slave gardener at Monticello.

Goliath (1731 – 1810) followed John in
the garden. From the President’s House in
Washington, Jefferson announced to his
daughter Maria, “Goliath is our gardener,
and with his veteran aids will be directed
to make what preparations he can for you.”
Goliath was the only slave gardener with
assistants, who were also referred to as the
“senile corps.” The garden seemed a likely
refuge for laborers unfit for laboring over
a cash crop of tobacco or wheat.

Gardeners as Classical
Musicians

Jefferson had a boundless faith in classi-
cultural life. His personal library included
what was considered the finest collec-
tion of Greek and Latin books in the
young United States, and his vision of the
American, agrarian paradise was based on
his admiration for the integration of art,
intellect, labor, and nature found in the
pastoral landscapes of Virgil, Ovid, and
others. He transferred this classical devo-
tion to, at least in Jefferson’s imagination, a
deep respect for the well rounded citizens
of late nineteenth-century Italian culture.
This sparked an idea, idealistic yet naïve,
of importing Italian workmen who could
also form a musical orchestra. Jefferson
wrote Giovanni Fabbroni in 1778 with a
plan for a clever “twofer”:

“The bounds of an American fortune
will not admit the indulgence of a domes-
tic band of musicians, yet I have thought
a passion for music might be reconciled
with that economy which we are obliged
to observe. I retain for instance among
my domestic servants a gardener, a weav-
er, a cabinet maker and a stone cutter, to
which I would add a vigneron. In a coun-
try where like yours music is cultivated
and practiced by every class of men I
suppose there might be found persons of
those trades who could perform on the
French horn, clarinet or hautboy & bas-
soon, so one might have a band of two
French horns, two clarinets, & hautboys
& a bassoon, without enlarging their do-
mestic expenses.”

Curiously, at this time Jefferson was
employing an Italian gardener, Anthony
Giannini, who had arrived in Virginia
in 1773 with a group of Italian farmers
and artisans led by Jefferson’s future
friend, Philip Mazzei, an experimen-
tal agriculturist, political writer, and
American soldier. Mazzei and his band
of Italian workers were on their way to
the Shenandoah Valley to purchase and
establish a farm when they were waylaid
by Jefferson, who persuaded Mazzei to
settle on land adjacent to Monticello.
Mazzei’s Italians planted ambitious vine-
yards, but he left Charlottesville to aid
the American effort in the Revolutionary
war. His workmen also disbanded, and
Giannini came to work at Monticello,
where he budded fruit trees, managed
the young vineyard, planted the North
Orchard with apple trees, and collected
seeds of native plants, such as the um-
rella magnolia and wild turk’s cap lil-
ies, for the gardens and for shipment to
Jefferson in Paris. Giannini worked regu-
larly in the fruit gardens of Monticello
between 1778, when he planted hundreds
of trees in the South Orchard, and 1786,
and was especially relied upon during
Jefferson’s absence and tenure as Minister
to France. His work became more spo-
radic upon Jefferson's return in 1791, but he contracted for occasional skilled work, grafting and budding fruit trees and planting choice grape vines.

Giannini’s ultimate fate may have been troubled, as Jefferson observed in a letter that after thriving as an Albemarle County farmer, he “has become embarrassed and little esteemed.” Nonetheless, his descendents thrive today in central Virginia, and often recall Anthony’s service at Monticello. Another Italian workman that gardened at Monticello as a result of the Mazzei residency was Giovannini di Prato, who was paid wages in 1781 and 1782: as much as 600 pounds of pork and 291 pounds in cash. Jefferson described him as “sober, industrious, and honest,” yet by 1799 Giovannini was “sickly and miserably poor.” Thirteen years later, however, Jefferson was still paying for Giovannini’s work in the vineyards.

The Fruit Garden may also have been the primary workplace of another European professional gardener, Robert Bailey, a Scotsman who worked for three years at Monticello during the 1790’s, following Jefferson’s return from France. Bailey was paid fifteen pounds cash, along with 500 pounds of pork and “bread for his family,” for a year’s service. A list of the seeds of forty-two vegetable varieties saved from the growing season of 1794, and a road through the South Orchard, “Bailey’s alley,” perhaps because he lived there with his family, are his chief Monticello legacies. Bailey moved to Washington, D.C. around 1797 and tried to establish a commercial nursery. Jefferson asked him to grow weekly supplies of endive through the winter for the President’s House table, and Bailey was a regular supplier of woody plants that were shipped by Jefferson to Madame de Tesse, an old and dear friend in Paris. Jefferson’s patronage, however, wasn’t enough to support Bailey, who died in poverty of “bilious fever” in 1804.

The impoverished fate of the three European gardeners at Monticello and the sporadic role slave gardeners played in the documented Monticello garden suggests how horticultural maintenance, for whatever reason, may never have complemented or enhanced Jefferson’s idealized vision for the landscape. Jefferson wrote Philadelphia portrait painter Charles Willson Peale in 1811, “If heaven had given me choice of my position and calling, it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered, and near a good market for the productions of the garden.” Notwithstanding Jefferson’s personal fantasy of becoming a market gardener and his quirky vision of the gardener as a well-rounded artist-craftsmen, despite his own playful delight in the process of gardening and the presumed pride he took in the unfolding of his plans for the landscape, Jefferson’s most beautiful garden, as Henry Mitchell, the iconoclastic garden writer for the Washington Post observed, was the garden of his imagination. In many ways, however, Mitchell’s candid appraisal is universal among brothers and sisters of the spade.

Peter J. Hatch, Director Monticello Gardens and Grounds