

Daily Lenten Devotional

Saturday, April 12, 2025

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39—Thomas Jefferson/Monticello



In November of 2016 I visited Monticello and the nearby town of Charlottesville, Virginia. Two memories of that visit linger with me. The first is the sense of not wanting to leave. Monticello is a place of tremendous beauty. When I considered the years Jefferson was in Paris and Washington, I was struck by the sense of sacrifice. “I never would have left this place,” was the thought that came to me as I walked the grounds. The bluff, the sky, the rolling hills in the distance: I am there in a heartbeat.

The second memory came from the informational video visitors watch before being shuttled up to the house. After a brief overview of Jefferson’s life and accomplishments, his inventions and leadership, the video pivots to slavery and the life of Sally Hemings. It is as if one world was laid aside and another taken up. To borrow from the work of Ruskin, we moved from the sublime seen in grandeur to the sublime seen in the grotesque.

As delightful as the first memory is to me, the second is still disturbing. The disturbance was found in the blunt and honest description of slavery in Virginia as a society, and slavery at Monticello as a life Jefferson lived. What was so disturbing was my expectation was all wrong. I expected to hear a subtle reference, a passing comment, perhaps a modest recognition of the more than 600 slaves working the estate of Monticello. But the video at Monticello took no prisoners and offered no quarter. The impression left by the video was not about economics; it was about rape and abuse.

I remember thinking, “this is not what folks would ever imagine coming here.” Yet, when you hear that Jefferson owned Sally Heming as a child, began to have sexual relations (rape) with her at the age of 14 when he was 43, that she gave birth to six of his children, and at one point

only agreeing to leave France and return to America if Jefferson agreed to free their children upon maturity, what you imagine of Jefferson changes quickly.

Knowing of Hemings before, knowing Monticello was a slave plantation (both as a farm and as part of the domestic slave trade), knowing role Jefferson played in expanding the slave trade after the Louisiana Purchase, knowing all that I was still stunned by how much my perspective, my definition of antebellum Virginia was remade as I walked the grounds. Since that visit and the visitor center video, I have come to see Monticello as a kind of antidote to the Jefferson Memorial. As great a failure as the Memorial is in terms of authenticity and honesty, Monticello creates a true offering.

I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable
that the best man of the farm. What she produces is an addition to capital,
while his labors disappear in mere consumption.¹

—Thomas Jefferson

No mention was made of negroes or slaves in this constitution, only
because it was thought the very words would contaminate the glorious
fabric of American liberty and government.

—John Adams²

Like my visit to Monticello in 2016, what has surprised me in writing these vignettes is how often the false narrative of American history has revealed itself. And it is not the past which has surprised me it is the present.

A year after my visit, Charlottesville would become a focus of attention as they tried to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee. If it were not for the death of a counter protester, Heather Hayer being run over by a white supremacist there to "defend the right," if it were not for this tragedy, I am uncertain Charlottesville would have been a great focus of attention. But she did die the day after neo-Nazis paraded around the statue with tiki torches. And perhaps these awful events would not have become a national conversation were it not for the infamous declaration of the president, "there are good people on both sides of this."

It would be nearly 200 years after the death of Jefferson that the story of Sally Hemings would be told beyond the confines of rumor and innuendo. More than 200 years after the first time the claim of her being Jefferson's concubine was put into print. The complexity of their life can only be considered after the simplicity is stated. A fourteen-year-old slave was the concubine of her forty-three-year-old owner. The simple honest truth is owed before nuanced questions of legacy can be considered. Hemings was there for the Louisiana Purchase and the outlawing of importing slaves which made the domestic production of slaves a key component of Virginia's

¹ *The World that Made New Orleans*, 232.

² *Ibid.*, 238.

economy. Telling the story of Jefferson without her is like telling his life without the magnitude of those events.

Another key aspect of Monticello is found when we consider it as a "site." A site, in terms of monuments and memorials, is that the ground itself, what Lincoln claimed at Gettysburg, the ground is valuable in and of itself, or to borrow from the *Address*, "sacred." The Jefferson Memorial overlooking the Tidal Basin of D.C. is a great example of the opposite, a space. With the Jefferson memorial the space was poorly chosen, poorly designed, and poorly constructed. The Memorial was sinking. It had a weak foundation.

Work has been done to restore the foundation to prevent further damage and yet the real damage is being done above. When Jefferson is memorialized without honesty, with a blind eye so to speak, the debt of penance not only goes unpaid, but increases in terms of destruction. The tragic events in 2017 in Charlottesville evidence this, the persistent claims of the "lost cause" and the intent to speak of America without the lens of slavery deepens the perpetual failure of Emancipation.