

# The Dark Side of Thomas Jefferson

A new portrait of the founding father challenges the long-held perception of Thomas Jefferson as a benevolent slaveholder

By Henry Wiencek

*Smithsonian* magazine, October 2012,

With five simple words in the Declaration of Independence—“all men are created equal”—Thomas Jefferson undid Aristotle’s ancient formula, which had governed human affairs until 1776: “From the hour of their birth, some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” In his original draft of the Declaration, in soaring, damning, fiery prose, Jefferson denounced the slave trade as an “execrable commerce ...this assemblage of horrors,” a “cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberties.” As historian John Chester Miller put it, “The inclusion of Jefferson’s strictures on slavery and the slave trade would have committed the United States to the abolition of slavery.”

That was the way it was interpreted by some of those who read it at the time as well. Massachusetts freed its slaves on the strength of the Declaration of Independence, weaving Jefferson’s language into the state constitution of 1780. The meaning of “all men” sounded equally clear, and so disturbing to the authors of the constitutions of six Southern states that they emended Jefferson’s wording. “All freemen,” they wrote in their founding documents, “are equal.” The authors of those state constitutions knew what Jefferson meant, and could not accept it. The Continental Congress ultimately struck the passage because South Carolina and Georgia, crying out for more slaves, would not abide shutting down the market.

“One cannot question the genuineness of Jefferson’s liberal dreams,” writes historian David Brion Davis. “He was one of the first statesmen in any part of the world to advocate concrete measures for restricting and eradicating Negro slavery.”

But in the 1790s, Davis continues, “the most remarkable thing about Jefferson’s stand on slavery is his immense silence.” And later, Davis finds, Jefferson’s emancipation efforts “virtually ceased.”

Somewhere in a short span of years during the 1780s and into the early 1790s, a transformation came over Jefferson.

The very existence of slavery in the era of the American Revolution presents a paradox, and we have largely been content to leave it at that, since a paradox can offer a comforting state of moral suspended animation. Jefferson animates the paradox. And by looking closely at Monticello, we can see the process by which he rationalized an abomination to the point where an absolute moral reversal was reached and he made slavery fit into America’s national enterprise.

We can be forgiven if we interrogate Jefferson posthumously about slavery. It is not judging him by today’s standards to do so. Many people of his own time, taking Jefferson at his word and seeing him as the embodiment of the country’s highest ideals, appealed to him. When he evaded and rationalized, his admirers were frustrated and mystified; it felt like praying to a stone. The Virginia abolitionist Moncure Conway, noting Jefferson’s enduring reputation as a would-be emancipator, remarked scornfully, “Never did a man achieve more fame for what he did not do.”

Thomas Jefferson's mansion stands atop his mountain like the Platonic ideal of a house: a perfect creation existing in an ethereal realm, literally above the clouds. To reach Monticello, you must ascend what a visitor called "this steep, savage hill," through a thick forest and swirls of mist that recede at the summit, as if by command of the master of the mountain. "If it had not been called Monticello," said one visitor, "I would call it Olympus, and Jove its occupant." The house that presents itself at the summit seems to contain some kind of secret wisdom encoded in its form. Seeing Monticello is like reading an old American Revolutionary manifesto—the emotions still rise. This is the architecture of the New World, brought forth by its guiding spirit.

In designing the mansion, Jefferson followed a precept laid down two centuries earlier by Palladio: "We must contrive a building in such a manner that the finest and most noble parts of it be the most exposed to public view, and the less agreeable disposed in by places, and removed from sight as much as possible."

The mansion sits atop a long tunnel through which slaves, unseen, hurried back and forth carrying platters of food, fresh tableware, ice, beer, wine and linens, while above them 20, 30 or 40 guests sat listening to Jefferson's dinner-table conversation. At one end of the tunnel lay the icehouse, at the other the kitchen, a hive of ceaseless activity where the enslaved cooks and their helpers produced one course after another.

During dinner Jefferson would open a panel in the side of the fireplace, insert an empty wine bottle and seconds later pull out a full bottle. We can imagine that he would delay explaining how this magic took place until an astonished guest put the question to him. The panel concealed a narrow dumbwaiter that descended to the basement. When Jefferson put an empty bottle in the compartment, a slave waiting in the basement pulled the dumbwaiter down, removed the empty, inserted a fresh bottle and sent it up to the master in a matter of seconds. Similarly, platters of hot food magically appeared on a revolving door fitted with shelves, and the used plates disappeared from sight on the same contrivance. Guests could not see or hear any of the activity, nor the links between the visible world and the invisible that magically produced Jefferson's abundance.

Jefferson appeared every day at first light on Monticello's long terrace, walking alone with his thoughts. From his terrace Jefferson looked out upon an industrious, well-organized enterprise of black coopers, smiths, nailmakers, a brewer, cooks professionally trained in French cuisine, a glazier, painters, millers and weavers. Black managers, slaves themselves, oversaw other slaves. A team of highly skilled artisans constructed Jefferson's coach. The household staff ran what was essentially a mid-sized hotel, where some 16 slaves waited upon the needs of a daily horde of guests.

The plantation was a small town in everything but name, not just because of its size, but in its complexity. Skilled artisans and house slaves occupied cabins on Mulberry Row alongside hired white workers; a few slaves lived in rooms in the mansion's south dependency wing; some slept where they worked. Most of Monticello's slaves lived in clusters of cabins scattered down the mountain and on outlying farms. In his lifetime Jefferson owned more than 600 slaves. At any one time about 100 slaves lived on the mountain; the highest slave population, in 1817, was 140.

Below the mansion there stood John Hemings' cabinetmaking shop, called the joinery, along with a dairy, a stable, a small textile factory and a vast garden carved from the mountainside—the cluster of industries Jefferson launched to supply Monticello's household and bring in cash. "To be independent for the comforts of life," Jefferson said, "we must fabricate them ourselves." He was speaking of America's need to develop manufacturing, but he had learned that truth on a microscale on his plantation.

Jefferson looked down from his terrace onto a community of slaves he knew very well—an extended family and network of related families that had been in his ownership for two, three or four generations. Though there were several surnames among the slaves on the "mountaintop"—Fossett, Hern, Colbert, Gillette, Brown, Hughes—they were all Hemingses by blood, descendants of the matriarch Elizabeth "Betty" Hemings, or Hemings relatives by marriage. "A peculiar fact about his house servants was that we were all related to one another," as a former slave recalled many years later. Jefferson's grandson Jeff Randolph observed, "Mr. Js Mechanics and his entire household of servants...consisted of one family connection and their wives."

For decades, archaeologists have been scouring Mulberry Row, finding mundane artifacts that testify to the way that life was lived

in the workshops and cabins. They have found saw blades, a large drill bit, an ax head, blacksmith's pincers, a wall bracket made in the joinery for a clock in the mansion, scissors, thimbles, locks and a key, and finished nails forged, cut and hammered by nail boys.

The archaeologists also found a bundle of raw nail rod—a lost measure of iron handed out to a nail boy one dawn. Why was this bundle found in the dirt, unworked, instead of forged, cut and hammered the way the boss had told them? Once, a missing bundle of rod had started a fight in the nailery that got one boy's skull bashed in and another sold south to terrify the rest of the children—"in terrorem" were Jefferson's words—"as if he were put out of the way by death." Perhaps this very bundle was the cause of the fight.

Weaving slavery into a narrative about Thomas Jefferson usually presents a challenge to authors, but one writer managed to spin this vicious attack and terrible punishment of a nailery boy into a charming plantation tale. In a 1941 biography of Jefferson for "young adults" (ages 12 to 16) the author wrote: "In this beehive of industry no discord or revilings found entrance: there were no signs of discontent on the black shining faces as they worked under the direction of their master....The women sang at their tasks and the children old enough to work made nails leisurely, not too overworked for a prank now and then."

It might seem unfair to mock the misconceptions and sappy prose of "a simpler era," except that this book, *The Way of an Eagle*, and hundreds like it, shaped the attitudes of generations of readers about slavery and African-Americans. *Time* magazine chose it as one of the "important books" of 1941 in the children's literature category, and it gained a second life in America's libraries when it was reprinted in 1961 as *Thomas Jefferson: Fighter for Freedom and Human Rights*.

In describing what Mulberry Row looked like, William Kelso, the archaeologist who excavated it in the 1980s, writes, "There can be little doubt that a relatively shabby Main Street stood there." Kelso notes that "throughout Jefferson's tenure, it seems safe to conclude that the spartan Mulberry Row buildings...made a jarring impact on the Monticello landscape."

It seems puzzling that Jefferson placed Mulberry Row, with its slave cabins and work buildings, so close to the mansion, but we are projecting the present onto the past. Today, tourists can walk freely up and down the old slave quarter. But in Jefferson's time, guests didn't go there, nor could they see it from the mansion or the lawn. Only one visitor left a description of Mulberry Row, and she got a glimpse of it only because she was a close friend of Jefferson's, someone who could be counted upon to look with the right attitude. When she published her account in the *Richmond Enquirer*, she wrote that the cabins would appear "poor and uncomfortable" only to people of "northern feelings."

The critical turning point in Jefferson's thinking may well have come in 1792. As Jefferson was counting up the agricultural profits and losses of his plantation in a letter to President Washington that year, it occurred to him that there was a phenomenon he had perceived at Monticello but never actually measured. He proceeded to calculate it in a barely legible, scribbled note in the middle of a page, enclosed in brackets. What Jefferson set out clearly for the first time was that he was making a 4 percent profit every year on the birth of black children. The enslaved were yielding him a bonanza, a perpetual human dividend at compound interest. Jefferson wrote, "I allow nothing for losses by death, but, on the contrary, shall presently take credit four per cent. per annum, for their increase over and above keeping up their own numbers." His plantation was producing inexhaustible human assets. The percentage was predictable.

In another communication from the early 1790s, Jefferson takes the 4 percent formula further and quite bluntly advances the notion that slavery presented an investment strategy for the future. He writes that an acquaintance who had suffered financial reverses "should have been invested in negroes." He advises that if the friend's family had any cash left, "every farthing of it [should be] laid out in land and negroes, which besides a present support bring a silent profit of from 5. to 10. per cent in this country by the increase in their value."

The irony is that Jefferson sent his 4 percent formula to George Washington, who freed his slaves, precisely because slavery had made human beings into money, like "Cattle in the market," and this disgusted him. Yet Jefferson was right, prescient, about the

investment value of slaves. A startling statistic emerged in the 1970s, when economists taking a hardheaded look at slavery found that on the eve of the Civil War, enslaved black people, in the aggregate, formed the second most valuable capital asset in the United States. David Brion Davis sums up their findings: “In 1860, the value of Southern slaves was about three times the amount invested in manufacturing or railroads nationwide.” The only asset more valuable than the black people was the land itself. The formula Jefferson had stumbled upon became the engine not only of Monticello but of the entire slaveholding South and the Northern industries, shippers, banks, insurers and investors who weighed risk against returns and bet on slavery. The words Jefferson used—“their increase”—became magic words.

Jefferson’s 4 percent theorem threatens the comforting notion that he had no real awareness of what he was doing, that he was “stuck” with or “trapped” in slavery, an obsolete, unprofitable, burdensome legacy. The date of Jefferson’s calculation aligns with the waning of his emancipationist fervor. Jefferson began to back away from antislavery just around the time he computed the silent profit of the “peculiar institution.”

And this world was crueler than we have been led to believe. A letter has recently come to light describing how Monticello’s young black boys, “the small ones,” age 10, 11 or 12, were whipped to get them to work in Jefferson’s nail factory, whose profits paid the mansion’s grocery bills. This passage about children being lashed had been suppressed—deliberately deleted from the published record in the 1953 edition of Jefferson’s Farm Book, containing 500 pages of plantation papers. That edition of the Farm Book still serves as a standard reference for research into the way Monticello worked.

By 1789, Jefferson planned to shift away from growing tobacco at Monticello, whose cultivation he described as “a culture of infinite wretchedness.” Tobacco wore out the soil so fast that new acreage constantly had to be cleared, engrossing so much land that food could not be raised to feed the workers and requiring the farmer to purchase rations for the slaves. (In a strangely modern twist, Jefferson had taken note of the measurable climate change in the region: The Chesapeake region was unmistakably cooling and becoming inhospitable to heat-loving tobacco that would soon, he thought, become the staple of South Carolina and Georgia.) He visited farms and inspected equipment, considering a new crop, wheat, and the exciting prospect it opened before him.

The cultivation of wheat revitalized the plantation economy and reshaped the South’s agricultural landscape. Planters all over the Chesapeake region had been making the shift. (George Washington had begun raising grains some 30 years earlier because his land wore out faster than Jefferson’s did.) Jefferson continued to plant some tobacco because it remained an important cash crop, but his vision for wheat farming was rapturous: “The cultivation of wheat is the reverse [of tobacco] in every circumstance. Besides cloathing the earth with herbage, and preserving its fertility, it feeds the labourers plentifully, requires from them only a moderate toil, except in the season of harvest, raises great numbers of animals for food and service, and diffuses plenty and happiness among the whole.”

Wheat farming forced changes in the relationship between planter and slave. Tobacco was raised by gangs of slaves all doing the same repetitive, backbreaking tasks under the direct, strict supervision of overseers. Wheat required a variety of skilled laborers, and Jefferson’s ambitious plans required a retrained work force of millers, mechanics, carpenters, smiths, spinners, coopers, and plowmen and plowmen.

Jefferson still needed a cohort of “labourers in the ground” to carry out the hardest tasks, so the Monticello slave community became more segmented and hierarchical. They were all slaves, but some slaves would be better than others. The majority remained laborers; above them were enslaved artisans (both male and female); above them were enslaved managers; above them was the household staff. The higher you stood in the hierarchy, the better clothes and food you got; you also lived literally on a higher plane, closer to the mountaintop. A small minority of slaves received pay, profit sharing or what Jefferson called “gratuities,” while the lowest workers received only the barest rations and clothing. Differences bred resentment, especially toward the elite household staff.

Planting wheat required fewer workers than tobacco, leaving a pool of field laborers available for specialized training. Jefferson

embarked on a comprehensive program to modernize slavery, diversify it and industrialize it. Monticello would have a nail factory, a textile factory, a short-lived tinsmithing operation, coopering and charcoal burning. He had ambitious plans for a flour mill and a canal to provide water power for it.

Training for this new organization began in childhood. Jefferson sketched out a plan in his Farm Book: “children till 10. years old to serve as nurses. from 10. to 16. the boys make nails, the girls spin. at 16. go into the ground or learn trades.”

Tobacco required child labor (the small stature of children made them ideal workers for the distasteful task of plucking and killing tobacco worms); wheat did not, so Jefferson transferred his surplus of young workers to his nail factory (boys) and spinning and weaving operations (girls).

He launched the nailery in 1794 and supervised it personally for three years. “I now employ a dozen little boys from 10. to 16. years of age, overlooking all the details of their business myself.” He said he spent half the day counting and measuring nails. In the morning he weighed and distributed nail rod to each nailer; at the end of the day he weighed the finished product and noted how much rod had been wasted.

The nailery “particularly suited me,” he wrote, “because it would employ a parcel of boys who would otherwise be idle.” Equally important, it served as a training and testing ground. All the nail boys got extra food; those who did well received a new suit of clothes, and they could also expect to graduate, as it were, to training as artisans rather than going “in the ground” as common field slaves.

Some nail boys rose in the plantation hierarchy to become house servants, blacksmiths, carpenters or coopers. Wormley Hughes, a slave who became head gardener, started in the nailery, as did Burwell Colbert, who rose to become the mansion’s butler and Jefferson’s personal attendant. Isaac Granger, the son of an enslaved Monticello foreman, Great George Granger, was the most productive nailer, with a profit averaging 80 cents a day over the first six months of 1796, when he was 20; he fashioned half a ton of nails during those six months. The work was tedious in the extreme. Confined for long hours in the hot, smoky workshop, the boys hammered out 5,000 to 10,000 nails a day, producing a gross income of \$2,000 in 1796. Jefferson’s competition for the nailery was the state penitentiary.

The nailers received twice the food ration of a field worker but no wages. Jefferson paid white boys (an overseer’s sons) 50 cents a day for cutting wood to feed the nailery’s fires, but this was a weekend job done “on Saturdays, when they were not in school.”

Exuberant over the success of the nailery, Jefferson wrote: “My new trade of nail-making is to me in this country what an additional title of nobility or the ensigns of a new order are in Europe.” The profit was substantial. Just months after the factory began operation, he wrote that “a nailery which I have established with my own negro boys now provides completely for the maintenance of my family.” Two months of labor by the nail boys paid the entire annual grocery bill for the white family. He wrote to a Richmond merchant, “My groceries come to between 4. and 500. Dollars a year, taken and paid for quarterly. The best resource of quarterly payment in my power is Nails, of which I make enough *every fortnight* [emphasis added] to pay a quarter’s bill.”

In an 1840s memoir, Isaac Granger, by then a freedman who had taken the surname Jefferson, recalled circumstances at the nailery. Isaac, who worked there as a young man, specified the incentives that Jefferson offered to nailers: “Gave the boys in the nail factory a pound of meat a week, a dozen herrings, a quart of molasses, and peck of meal. Give them that wukked the best a suit of red or blue; encouraged them mightily.” Not all the slaves felt so mightily encouraged. It was Great George Granger’s job, as foreman, to get those people to work. Without molasses and suits to offer, he had to rely on persuasion, in all its forms. For years he had been very successful—by what methods, we don’t know. But in the winter of 1798 the system ground to a halt when Granger, perhaps for the first time, refused to whip people.

Col. Thomas Mann Randolph, Jefferson’s son-in-law, reported to Jefferson, then living in Philadelphia as vice president, that

“insubordination” had “greatly clogged” operations under Granger. A month later there was “progress,” but Granger was “absolutely wasting with care.” He was caught between his own people and Jefferson, who had rescued the family when they had been sold from the plantation of Jefferson’s father-in-law, given him a good job, allowed him to earn money and own property, and shown similar benevolence to Granger’s children. Now Jefferson had his eye on Granger’s output.

Jefferson noted curtly in a letter to Randolph that another overseer had already delivered his tobacco to the Richmond market, “where I hope George’s will soon join it.” Randolph reported back that Granger’s people had not even packed the tobacco yet, but gently urged his father-in-law to have patience with the foreman: “He is not careless...tho’ he procrastinates too much.” It seems that Randolph was trying to protect Granger from Jefferson’s wrath. George was not procrastinating; he was struggling against a workforce that resisted him. But he would not beat them, and they knew it.

At length, Randolph had to admit the truth to Jefferson. Granger, he wrote, “cannot command his force.” The only recourse was the whip. Randolph reported “instances of disobedience so gross that I am obliged to interfere and have them punished myself.” Randolph would not have administered the whip personally; they had professionals for that.

Most likely he called in William Page, the white overseer who ran Jefferson’s farms across the river, a man notorious for his cruelty. Throughout Jefferson’s plantation records there runs a thread of indicators—some direct, some oblique, some euphemistic—that the Monticello machine operated on carefully calibrated brutality. Some slaves would never readily submit to bondage. Some, Jefferson wrote, “require a vigour of discipline to make them do reasonable work.” That plain statement of his policy has been largely ignored in preference to Jefferson’s well-known self-exoneration: “I love industry and abhor severity.” Jefferson made that reassuring remark to a neighbor, but he might as well have been talking to himself. He hated conflict, disliked having to punish people and found ways to distance himself from the violence his system required.

Thus he went on record with a denunciation of overseers as “the most abject, degraded and unprincipled race,” men of “pride, insolence and spirit of domination.” Though he despised these brutes, they were hardhanded men who got things done and had no misgivings. He hired them, issuing orders to impose a vigor of discipline.

It was during the 1950s, when historian Edwin Betts was editing one of Colonel Randolph’s plantation reports for Jefferson’s Farm Book, that he confronted a taboo subject and made his fateful deletion. Randolph reported to Jefferson that the nailery was functioning very well because “the small ones” were being whipped. The youngsters did not take willingly to being forced to show up in the icy midwinter hour before dawn at the master’s nail forge. And so the overseer, Gabriel Lilly, was whipping them “for truancy.”

Betts decided that the image of children being beaten at Monticello had to be suppressed, omitting this document from his edition. He had an entirely different image in his head; the introduction to the book declared, “Jefferson came close to creating on his own plantations the ideal rural community.” Betts couldn’t do anything about the original letter, but no one would see it, tucked away in the archives of the Massachusetts Historical Society. The full text did not emerge in print until 2005.

Betts’ omission was important in shaping the scholarly consensus that Jefferson managed his plantations with a lenient hand. Relying on Betts’ editing, the historian Jack McLaughlin noted that Lilly “resorted to the whip during Jefferson’s absence, but Jefferson put a stop to it.”

“Slavery was an evil he had to live with,” historian Merrill Peterson wrote, “and he managed it with what little dosings of humanity a diabolical system permitted.” Peterson echoed Jefferson’s complaints about the work force, alluding to “the slackness of slave labor,” and emphasized Jefferson’s benevolence: “In the management of his slaves Jefferson encouraged diligence but was instinctively too lenient to demand it. By all accounts he was a kind and generous master. His conviction of the injustice of the institution strengthened his sense of obligation toward its victims.”

Joseph Ellis observed that only “on rare occasions, and as a last resort, he ordered overseers to use the lash.” Dumas Malone

stated, “Jefferson was kind to his servants to the point of indulgence, and within the framework of an institution he disliked he saw that they were well provided for. His ‘people’ were devoted to him.”

As a rule, the slaves who lived at the mountaintop, including the Hemings family and the Grangers, were treated better than slaves who worked the fields farther down the mountain. But the machine was hard to restrain.

After the violent tenures of earlier overseers, Gabriel Lilly seemed to portend a gentler reign when he arrived at Monticello in 1800. Colonel Randolph’s first report was optimistic. “All goes well,” he wrote, and “what is under Lillie admirably.” His second report about two weeks later was glowing: “Lillie goes on with great spirit and complete quiet at Mont’o.: he is so good tempered that he can get twice as much done without the smallest discontent as some with the hardest driving possible.” In addition to placing him over the laborers “in the ground” at Monticello, Jefferson put Lilly in charge of the nailery for an extra fee of £10 a year.

Once Lilly established himself, his good temper evidently evaporated, because Jefferson began to worry about what Lilly would do to the nailers, the promising adolescents whom Jefferson managed personally, intending to move them up the plantation ladder. He wrote to Randolph: “I forgot to ask the favor of you to speak to Lilly as to the treatment of the nailers. it would destroy their value in my estimation to degrade them in their own eyes by the whip. this therefore must not be resorted to but in extremities. as they will again be under my government, I would chuse they should retain the stimulus of character.” But in the same letter he emphasized that output must be maintained: “I hope Lilly keeps the small nailers engaged so as to supply our customers.”

Colonel Randolph immediately dispatched a reassuring but carefully worded reply: “Everything goes well at Mont’o.—the Nailers all [at] work and executing well some heavy orders. ...I had given a charge of lenity respecting all: (Burwell absolutely excepted from the whip altogether) before you wrote: none have incurred it but the small ones for truancy.” To the news that the small ones were being whipped and that “lenity” had an elastic meaning, Jefferson had no response; the small ones had to be kept “engaged.”

It seems that Jefferson grew uneasy about Lilly’s regime at the nailery. Jefferson replaced him with William Stewart but kept Lilly in charge of the adult crews building his mill and canal. Under Stewart’s lenient command (greatly softened by habitual drinking), the nailery’s productivity sank. The nail boys, favored or not, had to be brought to heel. In a very unusual letter, Jefferson told his Irish master joiner, James Dinsmore, that he was bringing Lilly back to the nailery. It might seem puzzling that Jefferson would feel compelled to explain a personnel decision that had nothing to do with Dinsmore, but the nailery stood just a few steps from Dinsmore’s shop. Jefferson was preparing Dinsmore to witness scenes under Lilly’s command such as he had not seen under Stewart, and his tone was stern: “I am quite at a loss about the nailboys remaining with mr Stewart. they have long been a dead expence instead of profit to me. in truth they require a vigour of discipline to make them do reasonable work, to which he cannot bring himself. on the whole I think it will be best for them also to be removed to mr Lilly’s [control].”

The incident of horrible violence in the nailery—the attack by one nail boy against another—may shed some light on the fear Lilly instilled in the nail boys. In 1803 a nailer named Cary smashed his hammer into the skull of a fellow nailer, Brown Colbert. Seized with convulsions, Colbert went into a coma and would certainly have died had Colonel Randolph not immediately summoned a physician, who performed brain surgery. With a trephine saw, the doctor drew back the broken part of Colbert’s skull, thus relieving pressure on the brain. Amazingly, the young man survived.

Bad enough that Cary had so viciously attacked someone, but his victim was a Hemings. Jefferson angrily wrote to Randolph that “it will be necessary for me to make an example of him in terrorem to others, in order to maintain the police so rigorously necessary among the nail boys.” He ordered that Cary be sold away “so distant as never more to be heard of among us.” And he alluded to the abyss beyond the gates of Monticello into which people could be flung: “There are generally negro purchasers from Georgia passing about the state.” Randolph’s report of the incident included Cary’s motive: The boy was “irritated at some little trick from Brown, who hid part of his nailrod to tease him.” But under Lilly’s regime this trick was not so “little.” Colbert knew the rules, and he knew very well that if Cary couldn’t find his nailrod, he would fall behind, and under Lilly that meant a beating.

Hence the furious attack.

Jefferson's daughter Martha wrote to her father that one of the slaves, a disobedient and disruptive man named John, tried to poison Lilly, perhaps hoping to kill him. John was safe from any severe punishment because he was a hired slave: If Lilly injured him, Jefferson would have to compensate his owner, so Lilly had no means to retaliate. John, evidently grasping the extent of his immunity, took every opportunity to undermine and provoke him, even "cutting up [Lilly's] garden [and] destroying his things."

But Lilly had his own kind of immunity. He understood his importance to Jefferson when he renegotiated his contract, so that beginning in 1804 he would no longer receive a flat fee for managing the nailery but be paid 2 percent of the gross. Productivity immediately soared. In the spring of 1804, Jefferson wrote to his supplier: "The manager of my nailery had so increased its activity as to call for a larger supply of rod...than had heretofore been necessary."

Maintaining a high level of activity required a commensurate level of discipline. Thus, in the fall of 1804, when Lilly was informed that one of the nail boys was sick, he would have none of it. Appalled by what happened next, one of Monticello's white workmen, a carpenter named James Oldham, informed Jefferson of "the Barbarity that [Lilly] made use of with Little Jimmy."

Oldham reported that James Hemings, the 17-year-old son of the house servant Critta Hemings, had been sick for three nights running, so sick that Oldham feared the boy might not live. He took Hemings into his own room to keep watch over him. When he told Lilly that Hemings was seriously ill, Lilly said he would whip Jimmy into working. Oldham "begged him not to punish him," but "this had no effect." The "Barbarity" ensued: Lilly "whipped him three times in one day, and the boy was really not able to raise his hand to his head."

Flogging to this degree does not persuade someone to work; it disables him. But it also sends a message to the other slaves, especially those, like Jimmy, who belonged to the elite class of Hemings servants and might think they were above the authority of Gabriel Lilly. Once he recovered, Jimmy Hemings fled Monticello, joining the community of free blacks and runaways who made a living as boatmen on the James River, floating up and down between Richmond and obscure backwater villages. Contacting Hemings through Oldham, Jefferson tried to persuade him to come home, but did not set the slave catchers after him. There is no record that Jefferson made any remonstrance against Lilly, who was unrepentant about the beating and loss of a valuable slave; indeed, he demanded that his salary be doubled to £100. This put Jefferson in a quandary. He displayed no misgivings about the regime that Oldham characterized as "the most cruel," but £100 was more than he wanted to pay. Jefferson wrote that Lilly as an overseer "is as good a one as can be"—"certainly I can never get a man who fulfills my purposes better than he does."

On a recent afternoon at Monticello, Fraser Neiman, the head archaeologist, led the way down the mountain into a ravine, following the trace of a road laid out by Jefferson for his carriage rides. It passed the house of Edmund Bacon, the overseer Jefferson employed from 1806 to 1822, about a mile from the mansion. When Jefferson retired from the presidency in 1809, he moved the nailery from the summit—he no longer wanted even to see it, let alone manage it—to a site downhill 100 yards from Bacon's house. The archaeologists discovered unmistakable evidence of the shop—nails, nail rod, charcoal, coal and slag. Neiman pointed out on his map locations of the shop and Bacon's house. "The nailery was a socially fractious place," he said. "One suspects that's part of the reason for getting it off the mountaintop and putting it right here next to the overseer's house."

About 600 feet east of Bacon's house stood the cabin of James Hubbard, a slave who lived by himself. The archaeologists dug more than 100 test pits at this site but came up with nothing; still, when they brought in metal detectors and turned up a few wrought nails, it was enough evidence to convince them that they had found the actual site of Hubbard's house. Hubbard was 11 years old and living with his family at Poplar Forest, Jefferson's second plantation, near Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1794, when Jefferson brought him to Monticello to work in the new nailery on the mountaintop. His assignment was a sign of Jefferson's favor for the Hubbard family. James' father, a skilled shoemaker, had risen to the post of foreman of labor at Poplar Forest; Jefferson saw similar potential in the son. At first James performed abysmally, wasting more material than any of the other nail boys. Perhaps he was just a slow learner; perhaps he hated it; but he made himself better and better at the miserable work,



swinging his hammer thousands of times a day, until he excelled. When Jefferson measured the nailery's output he found that Hubbard had reached the top—90 percent efficiency—in converting nail rod to finished nails.

A model slave, eager to improve himself, Hubbard grasped every opportunity the system offered. In his time off from the nailery, he took on additional tasks to earn cash. He sacrificed sleep to make money by burning charcoal, tending a kiln through the night. Jefferson also paid him for hauling—a position of trust because a man with a horse and permission to leave the plantation could easily escape. Through his industriousness Hubbard laid aside enough cash to purchase some fine clothes, including a hat, knee breeches and two overcoats.

Then one day in the summer of 1805, early in Jefferson's second term as president, Hubbard vanished. For years he had patiently carried out an elaborate deception, pretending to be the loyal, hardworking slave. He had done that hard work not to soften a life in slavery but to escape it. The clothing was not for show; it was a disguise.

Hubbard had been gone for many weeks when the president received a letter from the sheriff of Fairfax County. He had in custody a man named Hubbard who had confessed to being an escaped slave. In his confession Hubbard revealed the details of his escape. He had made a deal with Wilson Lilly, son of the overseer Gabriel Lilly, paying him \$5 and an overcoat in exchange for false emancipation documents and a travel pass to Washington. But illiteracy was Hubbard's downfall: He did not realize that the documents Wilson Lilly had written were not very persuasive. When Hubbard reached Fairfax County, about 100 miles north of Monticello, the sheriff stopped him, demanding to see his papers. The sheriff, who knew forgeries when he saw them and arrested Hubbard, also asked Jefferson for a reward because he had run "a great Risk" arresting "as large a fellow as he is."

Hubbard was returned to Monticello. If he received some punishment for his escape, there is no record of it. In fact, it seems that Hubbard was forgiven and regained Jefferson's trust within a year. The October 1806 schedule of work for the nailery shows Hubbard working with the heaviest gauge of rod with a daily output of 15 pounds of nails. That Christmas, Jefferson allowed him to travel from Monticello to Poplar Forest to see his family. Jefferson may have trusted him again, but Bacon remained wary.

One day when Bacon was trying to fill an order for nails, he found that the entire stock of eight-penny nails—300 pounds of nails worth \$50—was gone: "Of course they had been stolen." He immediately suspected James Hubbard and confronted him, but Hubbard "denied it powerfully." Bacon ransacked Hubbard's cabin and "every place I could think of" but came up empty-handed. Despite the lack of evidence, Bacon remained convinced of Hubbard's guilt. He conferred with the white manager of the nailery, Reuben Grady: "Let us drop it. He has hid them somewhere, and if we say no more about it, we shall find them."

Walking through the woods after a heavy rain, Bacon spotted muddy tracks on the leaves on one side of the path. He followed the tracks to their end, where he found the nails buried in a large box. Immediately, he went up the mountain to inform Jefferson of the discovery and of his certainty that Hubbard was the thief. Jefferson was "very much surprised and felt very badly about it" because Hubbard "had always been a favorite servant." Jefferson said he would question Hubbard personally the next morning when he went on his usual ride past Bacon's house.

When Jefferson showed up the next day, Bacon had Hubbard called in. At the sight of his master, Hubbard burst into tears. Bacon wrote, "I never saw any person, white or black, feel as badly as he did when he saw his master. He was mortified and distressed beyond measure....[W]e all had confidence in him. Now his character was gone." Hubbard tearfully begged Jefferson's pardon "over and over again." For a slave, burglary was a capital crime. A runaway slave who once broke into Bacon's private storehouse and stole three pieces of bacon and a bag of cornmeal was condemned to hang in Albemarle County. The governor commuted his sentence, and the slave was "transported," the legal term for being sold by the state to the Deep South or West Indies.

Even Bacon felt moved by Hubbard's plea—"I felt very badly myself"—but he knew what would come next: Hubbard had to be whipped. So Bacon was astonished when Jefferson turned to him and said, "Ah, sir, we can't punish him. He has suffered enough already." Jefferson offered some counsel to Hubbard, "gave him a heap of good advice," and sent him back to the nailery, where

Reuben Grady was waiting, “expecting ...to whip him.”

Jefferson’s magnanimity seemed to spark a conversion in Hubbard. When he got to the nailery, he told Grady he’d been seeking religion for a long time, “but I never heard anything before that sounded so, or made me feel so, as I did when master said, ‘Go, and don’t do so any more.’” So now he was “determined to seek religion till I find it.” Bacon said, “Sure enough, he afterwards came to me for a permit to go and be baptized.” But that, too, was deception. On his authorized absences from the plantation to attend church, Hubbard made arrangements for another escape.

During the holiday season in late 1810, Hubbard vanished again. Documents about Hubbard’s escape reveal that Jefferson’s plantations were riven with secret networks. Jefferson had at least one spy in the slave community willing to inform on fellow slaves for cash; Jefferson wrote that he “engaged a trusty negro man of my own, and promised him a reward...if he could inform us so that [Hubbard] should be taken.” But the spy could not get anyone to talk. Jefferson wrote that Hubbard “has not been heard of.” But that was not true: a few people had heard of Hubbard’s movements.

Jefferson could not crack the wall of silence at Monticello, but an informer at Poplar Forest told the overseer that a boatman belonging to Colonel Randolph aided Hubbard’s escape, clandestinely ferrying him up the James River from Poplar Forest to the area around Monticello, even though white patrollers of two or three counties were hunting the fugitive. The boatman might have been part of a network that plied the Rivanna and James rivers, smuggling goods and fugitives.

Possibly, Hubbard tried to make contact with friends around Monticello; possibly, he was planning to flee to the North again; possibly, it was all disinformation planted by Hubbard’s friends. At some point Hubbard headed southwest, not north, across the Blue Ridge. He made his way to the town of Lexington, where he was able to live for over a year as a free man, being in possession of an impeccable manumission document.

His description appeared in the *Richmond Enquirer*: “a Nailor by trade, of 27 years of age, about six feet high, stout limbs and strong made, of daring demeanor, bold and harsh features, dark complexion, apt to drink freely and had even furnished himself with money and probably a free pass; on a former elopement he attempted to get out of the State Northwardly . . . and probably may have taken the same direction now.”

A year after his escape Hubbard was spotted in Lexington. Before he could be captured, he took off again, heading farther west into the Allegheny Mountains, but Jefferson put a slave tracker on his trail. Cornered and clapped in irons, Hubbard was brought back to Monticello, where Jefferson made an example of him: “I had him severely flogged in the presence of his old companions, and committed to jail.” Under the lash Hubbard revealed the details of his escape and the name of an accomplice; he had been able to elude capture by carrying genuine manumission papers he’d bought from a free black man in Albemarle County. The man who provided Hubbard with the papers spent six months in jail. Jefferson sold Hubbard to one of his overseers, and his final fate is not known.

Slaves lived as if in an occupied country. As Hubbard discovered, few could outrun the newspaper ads, slave patrols, vigilant sheriffs demanding papers and slave-catching bounty hunters with their guns and dogs. Hubbard was brave or desperate enough to try it twice, unmoved by the incentives Jefferson held out to cooperative, diligent, industrious slaves.

In 1817, Jefferson’s old friend, the Revolutionary War hero Thaddeus Kosciuszko, died in Switzerland. The Polish nobleman, who had arrived from Europe in 1776 to aid the Americans, left a substantial fortune to Jefferson. Kosciuszko bequeathed funds to free Jefferson’s slaves and purchase land and farming equipment for them to begin a life on their own. In the spring of 1819, Jefferson pondered what to do with the legacy. Kosciuszko had made him executor of the will, so Jefferson had a legal duty, as well as a personal obligation to his deceased friend, to carry out the terms of the document.

The terms came as no surprise to Jefferson. He had helped Kosciuszko draft the will, which states, “I hereby authorize my friend, Thomas Jefferson, to employ the whole [bequest] in purchasing Negroes from his own or any others and giving them liberty in

my name.” Kosciuszko’s estate was nearly \$20,000, the equivalent today of roughly \$280,000. But Jefferson refused the gift, even though it would have reduced the debt hanging over Monticello, while also relieving him, in part at least, of what he himself had described in 1814 as the “moral reproach” of slavery.

If Jefferson had accepted the legacy, as much as half of it would have gone not to Jefferson but, in effect, to his slaves—to the purchase price for land, livestock, equipment and transportation to establish them in a place such as Illinois or Ohio. Moreover, the slaves most suited for immediate emancipation—smiths, coopers, carpenters, the most skilled farmers—were the very ones whom Jefferson most valued. He also shrank from any public identification with the cause of emancipation.

It had long been accepted that slaves were assets that could be seized for debt, but Jefferson turned this around when he used slaves as collateral for a very large loan he had taken out in 1796 from a Dutch banking house in order to rebuild Monticello. He pioneered the monetizing of slaves, just as he pioneered the industrialization and diversification of slavery.

Before his refusal of Kosciuszko’s legacy, as Jefferson mulled over whether to accept the bequest, he had written to one of his plantation managers: “A child raised every 2. years is of more profit then the crop of the best laboring man. in this, as in all other cases, providence has made our duties and our interests coincide perfectly.... [W]ith respect therefore to our women & their children I must pray you to inculcate upon the overseers that it is not their labor, but their increase which is the first consideration with us.”

In the 1790s, as Jefferson was mortgaging his slaves to build Monticello, George Washington was trying to scrape together financing for an emancipation at Mount Vernon, which he finally ordered in his will. He proved that emancipation was not only possible, but practical, and he overturned all the Jeffersonian rationalizations. Jefferson insisted that a multiracial society with free black people was impossible, but Washington did not think so. Never did Washington suggest that blacks were inferior or that they should be exiled.

It is curious that we accept Jefferson as the moral standard of the founders’ era, not Washington. Perhaps it is because the Father of his Country left a somewhat troubling legacy: His emancipation of his slaves stands as not a tribute but a rebuke to his era, and to the prevaricators and profiteers of the future, and declares that if you claim to have principles, you must live by them.

After Jefferson’s death in 1826, the families of Jefferson’s most devoted servants were split apart. Onto the auction block went Caroline Hughes, the 9-year-old daughter of Jefferson’s gardener Wormley Hughes. One family was divided up among eight different buyers, another family among seven buyers.

Joseph Fossett, a Monticello blacksmith, was among the handful of slaves freed in Jefferson’s will, but Jefferson left Fossett’s family enslaved. In the six months between Jefferson’s death and the auction of his property, Fossett tried to strike bargains with families in Charlottesville to purchase his wife and six of his seven children. His oldest child (born, ironically, in the White House itself) had already been given to Jefferson’s grandson. Fossett found sympathetic buyers for his wife, his son Peter and two other children, but he watched the auction of three young daughters to different buyers. One of them, 17-year-old Patsy, immediately escaped from her new master, a University of Virginia official.

Joseph Fossett spent ten years at his anvil and forge earning the money to buy back his wife and children. By the late 1830s he had cash in hand to reclaim Peter, then about 21, but the owner reneged on the deal. Compelled to leave Peter in slavery and having lost three daughters, Joseph and Edith Fossett departed Charlottesville for Ohio around 1840. Years later, speaking as a free man in Ohio in 1898, Peter, who was 83, would recount that he had never forgotten the moment when he was “put up on the auction block and sold like a horse.”

**Find this article at:**