

“Mindful of my dear comrade”

Thomas Jefferson’s Watch Key Returns to Monticello

By Diane Ehrenpreis, associate curator for decorative arts

It passed from father to daughter, then through the hands of descendants and Americana collectors. Now Thomas Jefferson’s watch key has returned to Monticello. This ornamented key was an essential tool used by Jefferson to wind his pocket watch, a daily ritual in an era when



timekeeping was increasingly important. Once wound, the pocket watch (one of several that he owned during his life) and key were hung from a chain attached to his waistcoat. Fragile and tiny, watch keys were easy to lose.

Thankfully, this most important of watch keys — with its engraved sentiment and plait of hair — survived. Probably commissioned by Jefferson from a jeweler in Philadelphia or London around 1790, the gold case is engraved with his deceased wife’s name, Martha Wayles Jefferson, and the dates of

her birth and death. The obverse features a plait of her fair hair beneath a beveled natural crystal.

With these meaningful additions, Jefferson transformed a utilitarian object into a *memento mori*, a tribute to the dead. That he selected a watch key to serve this somber purpose makes sense when one considers that he used it daily, always keeping it on his person. It was the most intimate of love tokens, a personal counterpoint to the public tombstone he had erected in his wife’s honor that proclaimed, in Greek, “Nay, if even in the House of Hades the dead forget their dead/yet will I even there be mindful of my dear comrade.”

One can imagine Jefferson touching the crystal lens or running his finger over the inscription “Died 6 Sept. 1782,” a poignant reminder of Martha Jefferson and their happy decade-long marriage. Such a token reveals Jefferson as a man of sentiment and feeling, traits few contemporaries saw. This watch key is now recognized as one of the most intimate and personal objects ever associated with Jefferson. Today the watch key has returned to Jefferson’s Bedchamber, the most private room of a very private man. It sits atop another keepsake he saved from the days when she was his wife, the mahogany dressing table the family called “Mrs. Jefferson’s bureau.”

Monticello thanks the following supporters for making possible the purchase of the watch key: Mrs. M.L. Coolidge, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Jefferson Coolidge, Mrs. Sarah. F. Perot, and Mr. and Mrs. William H. Walton.

