NEWS & NOTES

MONTICELLO BOOKSHELF

Several new books with ties to Monticello all share a common thread — an exploration of how the legacies of slavery and racism continue to loom large in today’s world.

On Juneteenth
By Annette Gordon-Reed
Gordon-Reed, a Monticello trustee and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, weaves together American history, family chronicles and episodes of memoirs to tell a sweeping story of Juneteenth’s integral importance to American history. Her book provides a stark reminder that the fight for equality is exigent and ongoing.

How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America
By Clint Smith
In his new book, Smith visits sites throughout the country, including Monticello, that are essential to understanding the history of slavery in America. In an interview with National Public Radio, Smith says, “Monticello ... is a really fascinating example of a place that evolves and changes over time and responds to new information and shapes the curation of their museum experience in that way.”

My Monticello
By Jocelyn Johnson
Johnson’s debut work of fiction comprises six stories that explore racial identity. In its list of Most Anticipated Books of Fall 2021, Time magazine writes, “The narrative is bold, harrowing and unfolds with urgency. Johnson’s collection … [creates] an unnerving portrait of a country wrestling with its ugly past and present.”

Reclamation: Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson, and a Descendant’s Search for Her Family’s Lasting Legacy
By Gayle Jessup White
In Reclamation, White chronicles her journey to understanding and reclaiming her heritage, offering a compelling portrait of what it means to be a Black woman in America and to pursue the American dream while reconciling the legacy of racism. White is a descendant of the families of Thomas Jefferson and Peter Hemings and is Monticello’s public relations and community engagement officer.

Take a break from the books and check out High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America, a new series from Netflix. The episode titled “Our Founding Chefs” tells the often-overlooked stories of Thomas Jefferson’s and George Washington’s enslaved chefs James Hemings and Hercules.

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In *The Illimitable Freedom of the Human Mind: Thomas Jefferson’s Idea of a University*, Andrew O’Shaughnessy offers a twin biography of Jefferson in retirement and of the University of Virginia in its earliest years. He reveals how Jefferson’s vision anticipated the modern university and profoundly influenced the development of American higher education. UVA was the most visible apex of what was a much broader educational vision that distinguishes Jefferson as one of the earliest advocates of a public education system.

O’Shaughnessy discussed his new book with *Monticello* Magazine.

**What are some of the things that impressed you about Jefferson’s founding of the University of Virginia?**

Jefferson was unique among heads of state throughout history in the energy and time that he spent developing a university and overseeing every aspect of its creation. His vision and its execution revealed his greatest talents as a lawyer who drafted the legislation; a politician who cajoled the assembly into supporting him against furious opposition; an architect who designed the layout, chose the building materials and corresponded with the craftsmen; and as an intellectual who developed an innovative curriculum and suggested the books for the library and the criteria for selecting the faculty. His achievement was all the more remarkable for a man in his 70s and early 80s.

**Much has already been written about Jefferson and UVA. Does your book break new ground?**

Thanks largely to the work of the Jefferson papers at Monticello, the book contains new material. The best example is the Rockfish Gap Commission, which wrote the blueprint of the university in 1818. Jefferson had written three drafts of the report before the commission had even met. The drafts reveal the process of his thinking. The ground-laying ceremony is only described briefly elsewhere. The book devotes several pages, based on sources unfamiliar to other historians, describing the remarkable occasion with the presence of Jefferson, James Madison and the then-sitting president, James Monroe.

In addition, the book makes use of the papers and memoirs of the faculty, along with the first generation of students, to tell new stories of Jefferson. The first chapter opens with a description by students of what it was like to dine with Jefferson at Monticello.

**On his tombstone, Jefferson listed the founding of the University of Virginia — along with the Declaration of Independence and the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom — as his three top achievements. But he did not see some of his aspirations for UVA realized during his lifetime. Can you tell us more about that?**

Jefferson did not live to see students graduate and achieve his hope that they would help guide the state and the nation. He wanted them to think for themselves and improve their society and not to be held back by what he called the dead hand of the past. He recognized that his generation would be regarded as backward, much like his witch-burning ancestors. He did not live to see the fruits of the research of the faculty and their important contributions to knowledge. He did at least see the potential and the virtual completion of the university. Symbolically, he watched, on his last visit to the university, the Corinthian marbles lifted to complete the Rotunda. It was symbolic of a university that was still part of what he regarded as an incomplete revolution.

**“This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.” — Thomas Jefferson, on UVA**

Andrew J. O’Shaughnessy is vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello and Saunders Director of the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies. His previous books include *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* and *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire*, winner of the George Washington Book Prize.