FROM THE PRESIDENT

What’s Past Is Prologue

Dear Friends,

At some point, it seems, all great writers turn their attention to the past. In a letter to John Adams in 1816, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.” William Faulkner, 135 years later, famously reflected on our complex connection to history, declaring, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” We are predisposed to Jefferson quotes around these parts. But I think my favorite musing on this subject came from the late Toni Morrison. Speaking to graduates at a 2004 commencement address, she said:

“Contrary to what you may have heard or learned, the past is not done and it is not over. It’s still in process. Which is another way of saying that when it’s critiqued, analyzed, it yields new information about itself. The past is already changing as it is being reexamined, as it is being listened to for deeper resonances.”

At Monticello, we are listening. Bringing history forward — critiquing, analyzing, reexamining — is central to our mission. This is especially true as we look back to the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, in 2026. As we build out our programming and update our interpretation, we continue to focus on the two universal themes enshrined in that document: equality and freedom. Every day, we work to make founding-era history relevant to our modern, pluralistic society, and inspirational to younger generations. For all of us, Monticello can be a place to reflect on and commit to progress — to doing the work to make real the promise that all Americans are endowed with “unalienable Rights.”

In this edition, you’ll see some of the concrete ways we are bringing history forward on the mountaintop. We welcome Andrew Davenport, who earlier this year began his role as public historian and manager of the Getting Word African American Oral History Project. For nearly three decades, this project has preserved the recollections of descendants of Monticello’s enslaved communities — stories of individuals and families, of struggle and triumph, of resilience and hope. You’ll also learn about storytelling through objects and artifacts. Our curatorial and archaeological teams have worked for decades to locate and recover items original to Jefferson’s era, unearthing clues that teach us more about life on the mountaintop, and that help us — much as Getting Word does — to fill in historical gaps.

We look back, as well, at our inaugural Civics Season. This past summer, Monticello partnered with more than 100 museums, and with the youth-led group Civics Unplugged. This collaboration encouraged examination of the past to guide us in shaping a better future for all.

Those great American writers got it right: the past speaks to us today. We know you agree; since the Thomas Jefferson Foundation was incorporated in 1923, 27 million people have visited Monticello. Please keep engaging with us — whether in person, online, or in the pages of this magazine — as we bring history forward to realize the “dreams of the future.”

Wishing you well,

Leslie Greene Bowman
President