While excavating three dwellings occupied by enslaved field workers on the south slope of Monticello Mountain, archaeologists discovered four small, bow-shaped artifacts in the northernmost cabin. By looking closely at the material, size, and shape of these objects, archaeologists recognized they were similar to artifacts identified as jaw harps found at other Monticello sites. A jaw harp is a musical instrument played by placing the round or bow-shaped frame between one’s teeth and plucking a thin metal piece called a lamella to create a sound.

Jaw harps were perhaps the most common musical instruments available to early Americans, regardless of their social or economic background. Most harps from this period were made in England and exported to North America. The small size and simple construction of harps, coupled with the growth of mass production of goods and global trade, made them a relatively inexpensive and easily acquired commodity. Not surprisingly, jaw harps have been found at a wide variety of archaeological sites, ranging from military forts and trading posts to domestic dwellings of enslaved and free laborers.

What is the significance of the four jaw harps that were discovered? Monticello archaeologists offer several explanations. One possibility is that several individuals from the northern cabin owned and played jaw harps. The instruments also could have been the property of a very talented musician who acquired different harps to be able to play tunes in different keys. The fact that harps were only found in the northern dwelling and not the other two dwellings also may reflect a difference in wealth. The discovery of jaw harps at Monticello has caused scholars of early American music to reimagine the plantation’s musical landscape. We now know that the twangy notes of jaw harps — along with the sounds of harpsichords, violins, fiddles and guitars — were part of the musical traditions at Monticello.
In 2016, archaeologists excavated the first floor of the South Pavilion as part of a larger restoration project. Built in 1770, the Pavilion is the oldest standing structure on the mountaintop, and included Jefferson's first kitchen on the ground floor.

The Pavilion had undergone multiple renovations over the course of two and a half centuries, suggesting that few if any of the original historical deposits were left intact. The first major construction project occurred in 1809, when Jefferson moved the main kitchen to the end of the newly constructed South Wing and had the old kitchen filled in with three feet of dirt to match the new ground level of the Wing. Restoration efforts in the 1940s and the later installation of a visitor restroom led to even more disturbance.

After removing modern plumbing and three feet of fill, archaeologists uncovered an amazing find: remnants of the original kitchen floor, stew stove, fireplace and “dresser” where various dishes were prepared. Along with these architectural remains, they also recovered more than 150,000 artifacts. Among the more fascinating artifacts dating to the period of the first kitchen was a cast-brass object found on the original floor of the kitchen.

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While the artifact looked like a bowl, other excavations and research show that most bowls and dishes used for eating were made of ceramic and not brass. We also know 18th- and 19th-century cooks used brass mortars and pestles to grind and mix up ingredients. A critical document provides further proof that the brass object was a mortar possibly used in the Jefferson kitchen. In 1796, Thomas Jefferson’s enslaved cook James Hemings compiled an inventory of the pans and other “furniture” in the kitchen. Listed in this inventory was “1 Brass pistle & mortar.”