



# The Story Behind the West Portico Steps

The West Front of Monticello is one of the most widely recognized views of Thomas Jefferson's home. New U.S. citizens are sworn in on the West Portico steps every July 4, and thousands upon thousands of visitors have posed on the same masonry steps to have their images recorded in front of the facade that has graced coins, postage stamps, and countless other objects over the years.

But were there finished steps in front of the West Portico in Jefferson's day?

Several well-known paintings and drawings of Monticello's West Front made during Jefferson's lifetime and shortly after his death depict finished steps leading to the West Portico. But drawings and photographs of the West Front made from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s show an earthen ramp where the masonry steps, built in 1926, now stand.

To clarify the mystery of the steps,

Monticello's Department of Archaeology, in collaboration with the Department of Restoration, decided to do some digging.

In the spring of 1999 two excavation units measuring 5 feet by 5 feet were dug along the southern edge of the West Portico steps, revealing that no masonry steps were ever


















TJF / Larry Swank

The West Portico today.

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# MONTICELLO



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constructed during Jefferson's lifetime. The excavation work and historical documents found that a massive brick substructure capable of supporting masonry steps was constructed during a phase of building in the early 1820s. But if there were any steps there in Jefferson's day, they were likely temporary fixtures made of wood.



Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, UVA Library

**Photograph of Monticello's West Front, taken between 1870 and 1880.**

The construction work of the early 1820s did see the installation of the West Portico's existing brick and plaster columns, the laying of the portico's floor, and the building of the brick substructure for a set of steps, but the project was not completed, for reasons unknown. The area that was to have been taken up by the steps was eventually backfilled with sediment, creating the earthen ramp that first appears in artists' renderings of the mid-19th century. The ramp – an inexpensive substitute for the intended masonry steps – likely appeared very late in Jefferson's life or shortly after his death in 1826.

Earthen ramps, definitely less costly than any stonework, may have been an acceptable form of entrance to even grand country estates during that period. For example, it is well documented that Barboursville, designed by Jefferson in 1814 for James Barbour, Virginia's governor from 1812 to 1814, had earthen ramps at both front and back entrances. The ramps, in fact, are still apparent today at the ruins of the building, which burned in 1884.

But what about the steps that appear in those drawings and paintings of Monticello from the early 1800s? The 10 depictions from the period 1802–1835 on file at Monticello show finished steps in front of the West Portico, with no temporary steps or any earthen ramp in sight. In the majority of depictions it isn't entirely clear what materials the steps are made of, but there are none that could be regarded as makeshift or even clearly as wooden. Worth noting is the inconsistency in the images: Among the 10 depictions, the number of steps ranges from three to 11; three images show no cheek walls (walls alongside the steps themselves)

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T.J.F. / Edward Owen



while the others depict cheek walls as wide as the portico columns, which archaeological excavation has shown to be false.

All post-1850 images, however, show cheek walls with an earthen ramp between them.

The variations in the appearance of the West Portico in the pre-1835 depictions may have occurred because those artists felt a need to render Monticello in a way that would be considered appropriate by Jefferson or members of his family. The artists therefore created idealized versions of the house's architecture, substituting finished steps for wooden steps or the earthen ramp. Similarly, none of the three earliest depictions shows the unfinished West Portico columns, although documentary sources indicate that these were not masonry, but rather trunks of tulip poplar trees until the summer of 1822.

It is likely that the consistency of the later depictions represents the distancing of Monticello from the reputation of its creator. Once Jefferson had died and his family had sold and left the plantation, the

**View of  
Monticello's  
West Front,  
painted by  
Jane Braddick  
Peticolas in  
1825.**

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social pressure to depict Monticello in a positive way had dissipated. These later images – like the indisputable photographs that date as early as 1860 – presented Monticello as it had been left, in an unfinished state. (A complete report on the West Portico steps research project is available online at [www.monticello.org/icjs/archaeology/publications/westportico.pdf](http://www.monticello.org/icjs/archaeology/publications/westportico.pdf).)

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**COMMENTS? [newsletter@monticello.org](mailto:newsletter@monticello.org)**