



Foundation Purchases Jefferson's Montalto

The "high mountain" has been reunited with the "little mountain."

The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., has purchased a 330-acre parcel on the mountain immediately facing Monticello to the southwest, land once owned by Jefferson and known to him as Montalto.

The realization of a long-held goal, the purchase marks a momentous step in the Foundation's ongoing efforts to safeguard the historic and scenic nature of the views from Monticello. Of the 330 acres acquired, 225 are in Monticello's viewshed.

"When presented with the rare opportunity to purchase the land that

most impacts Mr. Jefferson's beloved Monticello, we acted to protect and preserve for posterity the environs he treasured," said Thomas A. Saunders III, chairman of the Foundation's Board of Trustees.

The property was purchased from the Mountaintop Land Trust for \$15 million, making it the largest single acquisition in the history of the Foundation, the private, nonprofit corporation that has owned and operated Monticello since 1923.

"It is a substantial amount of money, but not too much for the preservation of Monticello's immediate viewshed and a community landmark," said Daniel P. Jordan, the Foundation's president. "This is not a commercial transaction but an attempt to protect Jefferson's legacy for future generations."

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Montalto as seen from Monticello's Vegetable Garden.

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At 1,278 feet, Montalto (“high mountain”) rises more than 400 feet above Monticello (“little mountain”) at the northeast end of the larger geological formation known as Carter’s Mountain. It is separated from Monticello by a depression known in Jefferson’s time as Thoroughfare Gap that is now the site of Saunders Bridge, the stone-arch span that serves as the main entrance to Jefferson’s home.

The mountain property was patented by John Carter in 1730, part of a grant of approximately 10,000 acres from the king of England. In March 1771, just three years after he began clearing the land and leveling the top of Monticello, Jefferson wrote that John Carter’s son, Edward, had agreed to “give me as much of his nearest mountain as can be seen from mine, and 100 yards beyond the line of sight.” The transaction was not recorded until October 1777, with Jefferson taking formal ownership of 483 acres in exchange for 190 pounds.

Montalto was wooded in Jefferson’s time, and the property served both as a source of lumber and the site of woodlands grazing for pigs and cattle. Jefferson contemplated numerous plans for the mountain – he sketched two designs for observation towers and wrote about constructing a 200-foot-tall column and building a system to carry water from Montalto to Monticello – but these were never realized.

In 1832, six years after Jefferson’s death, his heirs sold a 493½-acre tract that included Montalto for \$5,100. The property changed hands numerous times in subsequent years and was known by a variety of names, most recently Brown’s Mountain, after the family that acquired it in 1950 and added apartment units, some in renovated farm buildings, in the 1960s. Mountaintop Land Trust, whose trustee is John C. Haskell Jr. of Richmond, purchased the property for \$601,783 in 1974.

The land was put on the market in 2003 at a price of \$20 million. Earlier this year, the asking price was dropped to \$15 million and the Foundation, aware of active interest by commercial entities and the possibility that the land could be subdivided and developed, decided to act. Following a rapid series of meetings and conference calls

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involving senior Monticello officials, the Board of Trustees, and expert advisers, the Foundation made its bid and reached a purchase agreement in late January. The purchase was concluded April 20.

The Foundation is in the process of developing a comprehensive plan for the use and administration of Montalto. It is likely that Monticello's network of walking trails will be extended to provide public access to the "high mountain."

"As always, preservation is our fundamental impulse," Jordan said.



A winter view of Monticello from the "high mountain."

COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org