



Original Jefferson-owned chairs return

This might well be called the “Year of the Chair” at Monticello. Three French chairs and a Monticello-made Campeachy chair have arrived back at Thomas Jefferson’s home in the early months of 2006 following differing, even mysterious paths. Made by craftsmen ranging from Queen Marie Antoinette’s favorite furniture maker to an enslaved joiner on the Monticello plantation, the chairs reflect the eclecticism of Jefferson’s furnishings.

Two chairs owned by Jefferson that were purchased for the White House by Jacqueline Kennedy in 1962 are among the recent arrivals. These neoclassical *fauteuils en cabriolet*, made of beech stained to look like mahogany, are believed to have been among the 48 chairs Jefferson shipped home from Paris in 1790. Along with many Monticello furnishings, they were sold by Jefferson’s surviving daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph, after his death to help pay the family debt.

Discovered in 1907 in the attic of a stable on an Albemarle County estate, the chairs were next in the possession of a Maryland family, then were sold to Mrs. Kennedy and used by her in the West Sitting Room of the White House and later in her New York City apartment. Auctioned in 1996 in a widely publicized estate sale at Christie’s, they were jointly purchased by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation and local businesswoman and philanthropist Patricia M. Kluge. Mrs. Kluge displayed the chairs in her Albemarle County house for almost 10 years before turning them over to Monticello, where they will remain in perpetuity.

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While American minister in Paris from 1784 to 1789, Jefferson was responsible for furnishing his own house. When he returned to the United States, 86 crates of goods followed him home and reappeared in the houses he subsequently occupied in Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, and, of course, Monticello. Shopping in Paris, Jefferson, as was the custom, acquired several large sets of seating furniture for use in his house, the Hotel de Langeac. Such sets could consist of *chaises* and *fauteuils* (side and arm chairs), *bergères* (easy chairs with closed arms), as well as settees, stools, fire screens, folding screens, and daybeds, all with matching upholstery. He shipped four or five such sets to the United States in 1790.

A previously unknown French chair identical to eight distinctive chairs in Monticello's collection recently was discovered in New York state. A visitor on a tour of Monticello noticed that chairs in the Parlor matched one in her home. Designed and stamped by the celebrated French furniture maker Georges Jacob, a favorite of Marie Antoinette, the chair appears to belong to Jefferson's set of 10 mahogany *fauteuils à la reine*, large armchairs with flat rectangular upholstered seats and backs. All of the other known chairs in the set descended in the families of Jefferson's grandchildren. Simple and sleek, with flat planes, almost no decorative carving, and neoclassical curving "saber" legs, these armchairs would have been a "fashion-forward" selection by Jefferson during his Paris furniture shopping.

Another newly acquired chair was almost certainly made in the joinery on Monticello's Mulberry Row. Unknown prior to 2002, this chair is virtually identical to a joinery-made Campeachy with a scalloped crest rail in Monticello's Parlor. It was most likely made at the same time as its twin, and by the same craftsman,



Courtesy Brian Conditine

This is one of the two French chairs formerly owned by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis that have been added to Monticello's collection.

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Chairs

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probably John Hemmings. It was presumably sold to an unknown buyer at the Monticello dispersal sale in 1827.

The form of this comfortable chair, known since ancient Egypt and popular in France, Spain, and their colonies during the 17th and 18th centuries, consisted of a leather seat slung over an X-shaped mahogany stretcher. Jefferson favored them in his old age, when he suffered from rheumatism. The chair was a combination gift and sale by distinguished folk art collectors Allan and Kendra Daniel. Mr. Daniel said he was gratified that “after a diaspora of 179 years the chair is returning home.”

— ELIZABETH CHEW

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for collections at Monticello.*

COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org