

Smith Education Center will elevate many programs

MOVING INTO a new home is always a big step. For Monticello's education programs, it will be a huge leap.

The opening of the Smith Education Center, scheduled for November, will offer an entirely new set of experiences to the thousands of students and teachers who visit Monticello each year. Shifting operations to the new facility will provide Monticello's education staff



Workers installing brick pavers outside the Smith Education Center's classrooms.

TJF / Mike Merriam

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DANIEL P. JORDAN

with increased space, upgraded facilities, new resources, and additional opportunities to better inform greater numbers of those students and teachers – and other visitors – about Thomas Jefferson's life, ideas, and ideals.

The 7,200-square-foot, two-level Smith Education Center is the largest component of the Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center currently under construction on the grounds of Monticello.

“Education is central to our mission, and we believe that young people need to know American history now more than ever,” said Daniel P. Jordan, president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. “Our department has, despite some formidable obstacles, become a model for excellence in museum-based education. The move to the Smith Education Center will allow the education staff to build upon its achievements and to improve significantly the scope, variety, and quality of its programs and to reach a great deal more young people and teachers. This is an extraordinary facility that will address multiple needs in an area of great importance.”

The Smith Education Center is named for Hunter J. Smith, an emeritus trustee of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, and her late husband, Carl W. Smith, in recognition of their generous support of Monticello's educational efforts. In 2003 the Smiths, longtime Charlottesville residents, made a leadership gift for development of the new education facility and endowment of the department and the position of director. Subsequent

consequential gifts by Mrs. Smith have advanced the building project.

“This is truly enlightened philanthropy in that it will benefit countless students and teachers in the years to come,” Jordan said. “We are tremendously grateful for this vital support, and for the leadership and guidance that Hunter Smith has provided as we have moved toward completion of this transformational facility.”

Since the education program was established in 1986, more than 200,000

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elementary and secondary school students have experienced Monticello through curriculum-based programs created and conducted by the department staff. But while the number of students in grades 2 through 12 participating in these Study Tours grew substantially over the years – from approximately 4,500 in the 1986-87 academic year to more than 13,000 in 2006-07 – the department’s facilities didn’t.

“We’ve been using the same makeshift classroom since 1986,” said Robin Gabriel, Monticello’s Hunter J. Smith Director of Education. “It’s been a very useful space, but we’ve badly outgrown it.”

The location of that one makeshift classroom and the department’s offices – in the 30-year-old Monticello Visitors Center building on Route 20, about a mile and a half from the entrance to Monticello – also posed difficulties.

“The distance from the house has always made transportation an issue,” Gabriel said. “Plus, the atmosphere just isn’t the same as being on the grounds of Monticello.”

The Smith Education Center will change all of that.

The new facility will boast three specially designed classrooms wired for various media, which will allow the department to accommodate many more students each year. Additionally, just yards away from the center’s doors will be a 1,200-square-foot educational pavilion, a fully heated and furnished space suitable for Study Tour activities and other purposes year-round. This pavilion, which will have a large stone fireplace and a seating capacity of 50, has received major support from Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Smith of Arlington.

Along with the Study Tours, participants in other department offerings – including Family Programs, Children’s Workshops, Teacher Training Workshops, and Summer Adventures Camp – will benefit from the opening of the new center.

“Having the new classrooms and the pavilion will be fantastic,” said Caroline Lowry, assistant director of education.



A Study Tour group on Mulberry Row.

TJF

“We’ll simply be able to do more than we ever have.”

The Smith Education Center also will feature an innovative and inventive space, the Griffin Discovery Room.

This hands-on activity center will offer a variety of ways for children ages 6 to 12 and their family members to learn about Jefferson, the enslaved people who lived and worked at Monticello, and plantation life in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Visitors will be able to “get in touch” with aspects of Monticello through reproductions of such items from the house as Jefferson’s polygraph machine and alcove bed; interactive stations; a re-created slave cabin; and other installations. The Griffin Discovery Room is named in honor of Alice and John Barry Griffin, the parents of TJF Board of Trustees member John A. Griffin.

“The Griffin Discovery Room will be a unique and exciting extension of our

programming,” said Gabriel. “It will be a place where families can have some fun while learning.”

The upper floor of the Smith Education Center, on the Thomas Jefferson Visitor Center’s courtyard level, will house a state-of-the-art theater where a new introductory film, currently in production, will be shown to visitors. The theater and the classrooms have been designed so they will be suitable as venues for talks, meetings, workshops, and other Foundation events and activities.

“We are tremendously excited by the wealth of opportunities the Smith Education Center will provide,” said Jordan. “Monticello itself, of course, will remain the main attraction, but this new center will be a wonderful complement to the house and grounds by offering numerous avenues for increased knowledge of Jefferson’s life and legacies.”