

Th: Jefferson MONTICELLO

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THE JOURNEY HOME

Jefferson retires to Monticello

By Gaye Wilson

BY MARCH 1809, Thomas Jefferson was genuinely eager to complete his duties as president and begin his long-awaited retirement at Monticello.

“Within a few days I retire to my family, my books and farm; and having gained the harbor myself, I shall look on my friends still buffeting the storm with anxiety indeed, but not with envy,” Jefferson wrote to Pierre Samuel du Pont on March 2.

Jefferson felt confident about his successor, James Madison. The vision they shared for the nation and the years they had worked together had forged a trust he could have felt with few others, and Jefferson had no misgivings that he was leaving the presidency in very capable hands.

Despite his eagerness to leave Washington, in response to a query from his daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph as to what day he might be expected home, Jefferson was vague. Martha was trying to plan her own schedule, and a group from Jefferson’s home county of Albemarle was hoping to meet him upon his approach with an entourage of citizens and militia and to escort him the final distance to Monticello. Never especially com-

fortable with public fanfare, Jefferson expressed gratitude for the sentiment behind this proposed welcome by his neighbors but added that he did not feel his return warranted “giving so many the trouble of leaving their homes to meet a single individual.”

He also still had much to do in Washington before he could project a definite date of departure.

To assist with the move, Jefferson summoned his Monticello overseer, Edmund Bacon, to Washington. Bacon would later recall that he was to attend to packing and running errands as needed. When not busy with such duties he took pleasure in going to the Capitol to listen to debates in Congress and accompanying the president’s chief steward, Etienne Lemaire, on his early morning trips to the Georgetown market. These daily market visits were necessary for the provisioning of the kitchen and the regular dinners for 10 to 14 people that Jefferson continued to hold at the

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The “Edgehill” portrait of Thomas Jefferson was painted from life by Gilbert Stuart in 1805, during Jefferson’s second term as president.

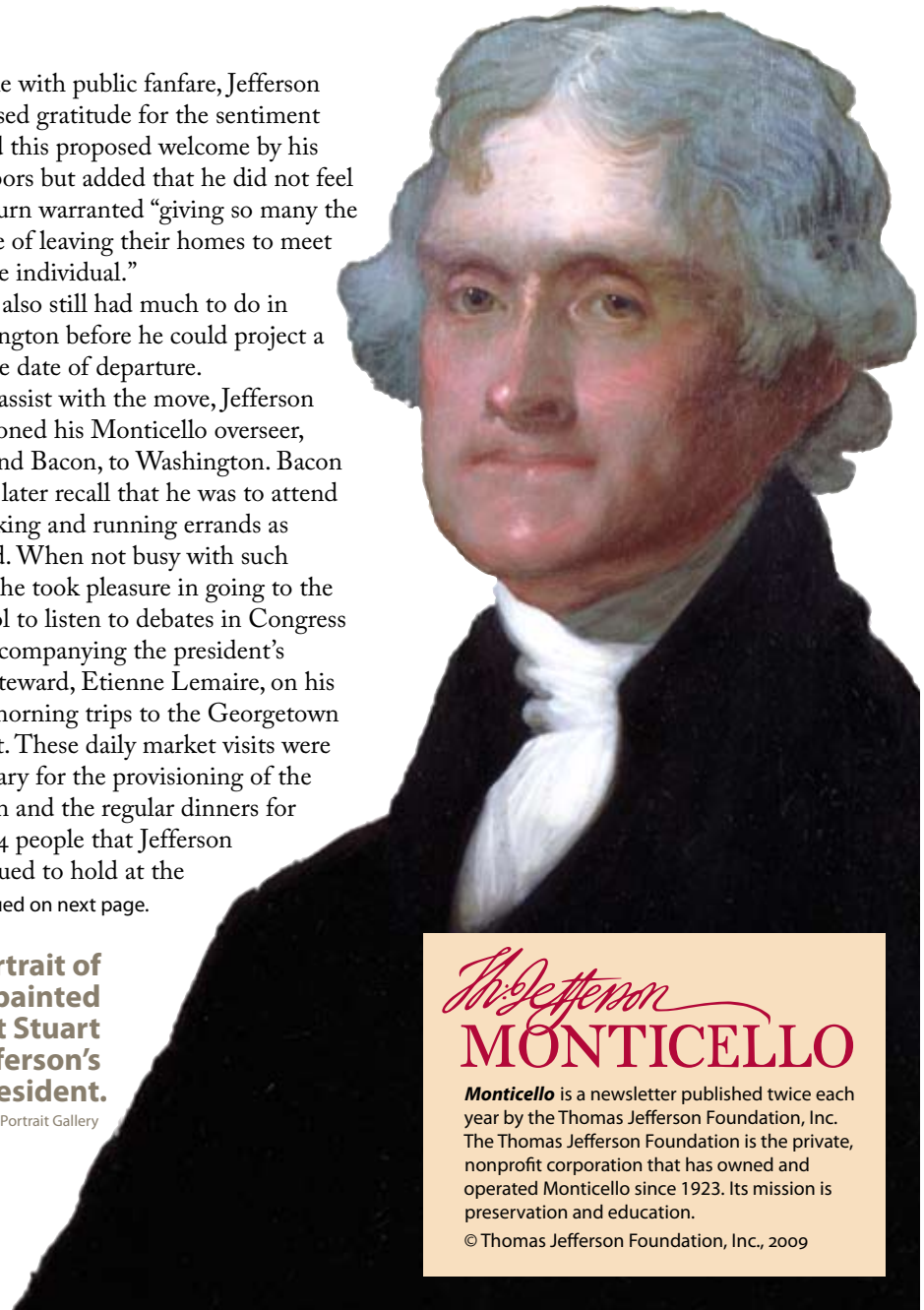
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President's House until the week before Madison's inauguration. Jefferson preferred these smaller dinner parties that allowed personal conversation to large levees and balls, but even they demanded attention and energy. According to Bacon, "He was perfectly tired out with company."

Jefferson could not possibly leave Washington before his duties were concluded on March 3, and he fully intended to be present at the inaugural events the following day. The presidential office would pass ceremoniously from the incumbent to the president-elect — unlike Jefferson's first inauguration in 1801, from which the outgoing president, John Adams, was noticeably absent.

A close mutual friend noted that Jefferson declined an offer to accompany the Madisons in their carriage for the ride to the Capitol for the inauguration on March 4, as he did not want to compromise any attention that should belong to the incoming president. Rather, he rode on horseback among others on their way to attend the ceremony, accompanied only by his teenage grandson, Thomas Jefferson "Jeff" Randolph.

Following the inauguration the new president and his wife, Dolley, held an

"...[I am returning] to the scenes of my birth & early life, to the society of those with whom I was raised, & who have been ever dear to me."

THOMAS JEFFERSON

open house at their residence. Jefferson quietly arrived to pay his respects, which was a surprise to many in attendance, who had fully expected the ex-president to be receiving as well and had wished to pay their final tributes. According to one

observer, Jefferson left as quietly as he had arrived and, wishing to disappoint no one, went to the President's House to receive the guests waiting for him there. He could not assume the "condition of private citizen" just yet.

Nevertheless at the inaugural ball that evening, Jefferson's good spirits were evident. One attendee observed that it might appear he was the incoming president, but Jefferson was quick to point out that his happiness came from the burden of office being lifted from his shoulders.

With all formalities passed, Jefferson turned his full attention to the final preparations for moving home to Virginia. He would continue to occupy the President's House for several more days, but there is nothing indicating that this was a problem for the Madisons. As packing of Jefferson's belongings was completed, the wagons were loaded. The drivers, David Hern and Jerry, were enslaved men from Monticello. Overseer Bacon would follow the wagons, driving Jefferson's carriage with his carriage horses.

Two passengers returning with them were David's wife, Fanny Hern, and Edith Fossett. These enslaved women had been apprentices in the presidential kitchen for several years under head chef Honoré Julien. Upon their return to Monticello, they would be given

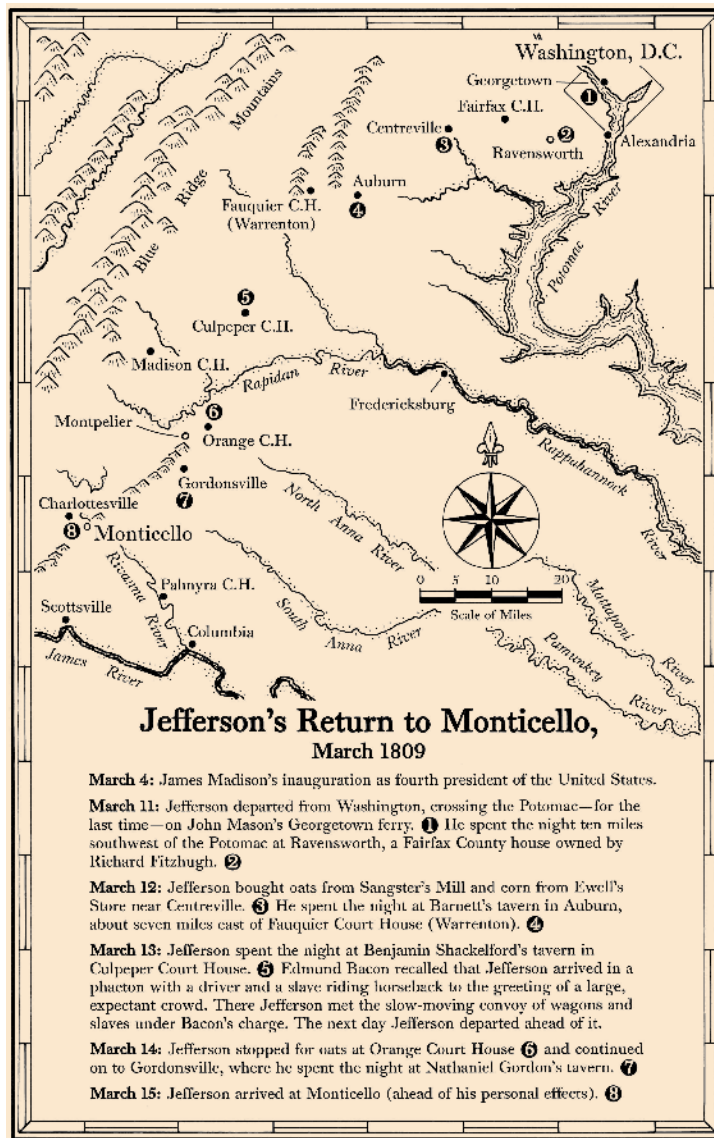
charge of the kitchen. Julien later would make a trip to Monticello to assist in the final setup of the kitchen and give his last instructions. Even in retirement, Jefferson would enjoy the French style of cooking that he had come to favor.

On March 9, Jefferson gave Edmund Bacon \$10 for "road expenses" and the wagons set off. Jefferson would follow two days later. Bacon, who recorded his version of the trip in his memoirs, recalled that about halfway to Charlottesville there was a heavy winter storm, with snow "a half leg deep" by the time the party reached Culpeper Court House on March 13.

A large crowd had gathered in front of the tavern there to welcome the former president, and upon seeing the carriage the people assumed that Jefferson had arrived. When Bacon

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TJF/Rick Britton



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stepped out, he was greeted largely by laughter. In the tavern he ordered a private room with a warm fire for Jefferson, whom he thought might be arriving shortly. Shouts and cheers from the crowd outside proved he had guessed correctly. People crowded into the tavern and, like it or not, Jefferson had to make a brief address before the well-wishers and the curious would leave.

The party set out again the next morning, but because of the snow Jefferson gave up his one-horse phaeton that had carried him to Culpepper Court House and opted to proceed on horseback. Traveling via Orange Court House and Gordonsville, where he spent the night of March 14, Jefferson arrived at his beloved Monticello on March 15, far ahead of the caravan of wagons and carriages. He reported to President Madison that it had been a “fatiguing journey, having found the roads excessively bad.”

Arriving days later, Bacon assumed that he had missed the large reception

given Jefferson when he reached home.

But Bacon had missed nothing; there was no large reception.

Lacking a definite date of Jefferson’s arrival, the committee from Albemarle County had abandoned the idea of meeting him on the road with the militia and a citizens’ parade, but set to work drafting a welcome address. A week after Jefferson’s return to Monticello, he received a copy of the address with a note from the committee’s chairman, David Merriwether, requesting a time and place for the address to be presented.

When the idea of an official greeting was first put forward, Jefferson had suggested that instead of a formal gathering, perhaps he could simply meet his neighbors and acquaintances at the local courthouse and there, “taking them individually by the hand,” they could exchange “assurances of mutual esteem.”

Jefferson again suggested this smaller gathering, saying that perhaps he and the committee members could meet on

the next court day at the county seat. He even deflected the purpose of the meeting, “as other business will probably call us all there on that day.” But more than a handshake was desired by his Virginia neighbors, and on April 3, 1809, the next court day, Jefferson was officially welcomed. He received the welcome statement from the “prominent citizens,” and then delivered his prepared reply to the “Inhabitants of Albemarle County in Virginia.”

As Jefferson stated in the opening sentence of his address, he had returned “to the scenes of my birth & early life, to the society of those with whom I was raised, & who have been ever dear to me.”

Jefferson’s public life was over. He had finally rejoined his family, his books, and farm at Monticello. Aside from trips to his Poplar Forest retreat in Bedford County, he never left again.

Gaye Wilson is a research historian at Monticello’s Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies.

Jefferson’s 1809 return commemorated with West Lawn event

The Thomas Jefferson Foundation marked the bicentennial of Jefferson’s 1809 return to Monticello on March 15 with an event on the West Lawn.

For the occasion, Jefferson was portrayed by Bill Barker, the noted character interpreter from Williamsburg, who rode onto the West Lawn on horseback in weather not unlike that encountered by Jefferson himself on the same date 200 years ago.

The welcome message that was presented to Jefferson in 1809, “From the Inhabitants of Albemarle County,” was read by Charlottesville Mayor Dave Norris and Albemarle County Board of Supervisors Chairman David L. Slutzky. Barker then read Jefferson’s response, “To the Inhabitants of Albemarle County.” Afterward, he mingled with the crowd of spectators.

Music at the event was provided by the Williamsburg Field Musick fife and drum corps.



TJF/Stephanie Gross

Bill Barker portrayed Jefferson at the March 15 commemoration.