

Th: Jefferson

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New Discoveries

Rare Letter Describes Hemmings Cabin Interior

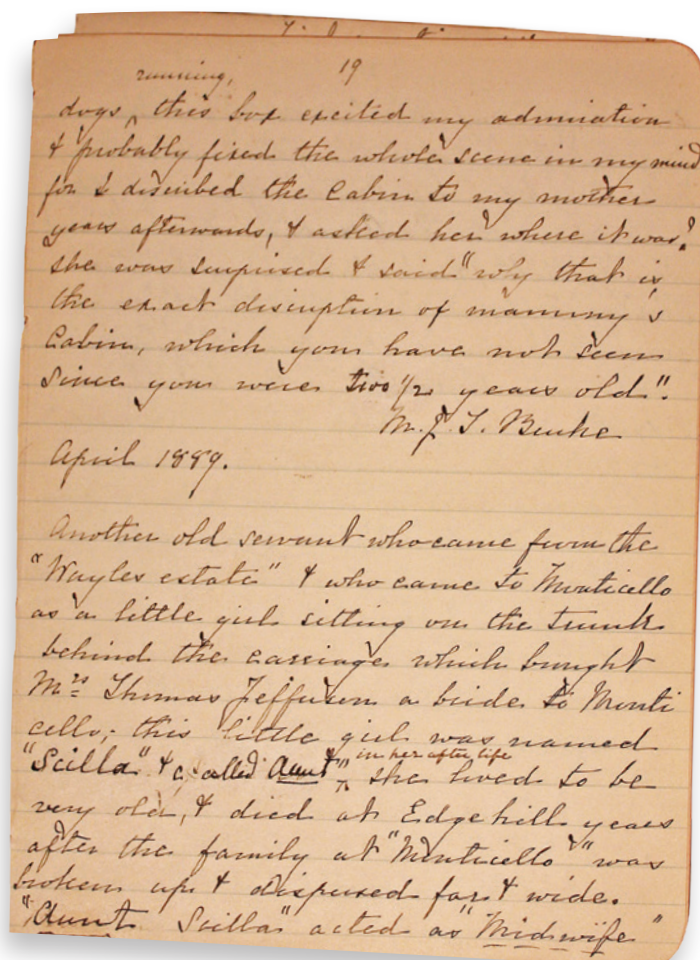
SUSAN STEIN, Richard Gilder Senior Curator and Vice President for Museum Programs at Monticello

While study of Mulberry Row has been underway for nearly 60 years, Monticello curators just discovered important new information about the furnishings of John and Priscilla Hemmings's cabin. We could hardly believe our luck to find a rare, first-person account about the interior of a slave dwelling. It was written by the last great-grandchild born at Monticello, Martha Jefferson Trist Burke (1826-1915). Amazingly, Martha Burke vividly remembered the interior of the Hemmings's dwelling because of the strong impression it made upon her at 2 ½ years of age. Written later in her own hand in a lined notebook in 1889, she notes,

"I remember the appearance of the interior of that cabin, the position of the bed with it's white counterpane & ruffled pillow cases & of the little table with it's clean white cloth, & a shelf over it, on which stood an old fashioned band box with wall paper covering, representing dogs running, this box excited my admiration and probably fixed the whole scene in my mind..."

Her mother, Virginia Randolph Trist (1801-1882), corroborated her daughter's memory and identified the cabin as that of John and Priscilla Hemmings. Jefferson descendants, who had carefully preserved the notebook for generations, generously loaned it to Monticello for study.

This description will allow us to reveal their home much more accurately. We believe that the Hemmingses lived in one of the three dwellings erected on Mulberry Row in 1793, all occupied by members of the large Hemmings family (John Hemmings spelled his name with two m's while other family members used one). Hemmings was a highly skilled woodworker and cabinetmaker who served as Monticello's head joiner after 1809. His wife Priscilla, who belonged to Jefferson's daughter Martha Randolph, was nursemaid to the Randolph children.



The Hemmings cabin (called *Servant's House* by Jefferson) is one of two structures recently re-created on Mulberry Row.