

# THE HOLIDAYS *at Monticello*

## Mirth, Jollity and “Plumb” Pudding

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Jefferson called Christmas “the day of greatest mirth and jollity.” As was customary during the time, he celebrated the full 12 days of the Christmas season. Traditional activities included traveling to the homes of friends and family, placing greenery around the house, and hosting and attending parties.

Details of how the holiday was observed at Monticello are scarce. A recent discovery in a set of Jefferson family letters that were written at Christmas provides insights into the comings and goings of the household.

One December, Jefferson’s granddaughter Cornelia Randolph composed a hasty letter to her sister Virginia Randolph Trist asking her to send the family recipe for plum pudding as quickly as possible.

Although Cornelia’s letter does not survive, her request and its urgency are clear in Virginia’s surviving reply. Virginia’s response from Philadelphia was dated December 22, probably in 1860. She wrote, “I received your letter last night and hope the directions for the pudding may reach you to-morrow morning.” And despite having a “sick headache,” she transcribed and annotated the recipe so that her sister, who may have been with family in Alexandria, Virginia,

could have the plum pudding that they both remembered from their childhood.

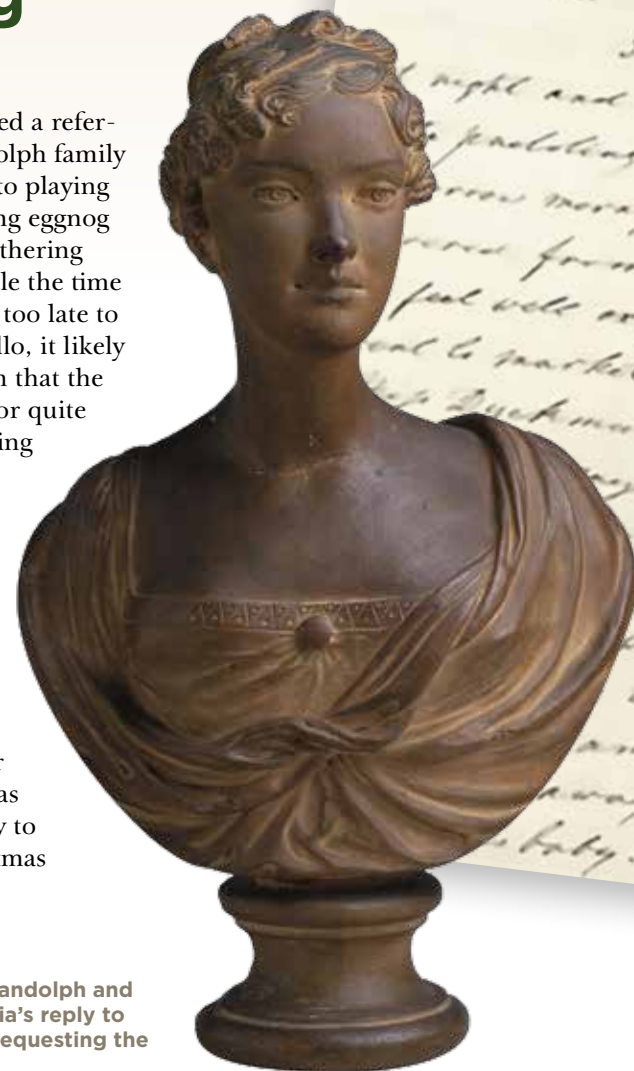
Once Virginia had copied the ingredients – the sugar and flour, bread crumbs from a penny loaf bread, the dozen eggs, the cinnamon and citron, the suet and the brandy – she added one powerful word: “Monticello.” Virginia specifically associated this Christmas pudding with Monticello and, by extension, her Christmases past and present. Perhaps Virginia and Cornelia felt the same way about this exact pudding as I do about my nana’s Swedish *pepparkakor* recipe; it is not Christmas without this food.

When I read this exchange between sisters, I was struck by how modern the events seemed. I immediately empathized with Cornelia’s evident upset at not being able to find the pudding recipe. Have we not all been there, especially at this time of year? I was also immensely touched by her sister’s reaction – promptly copying and sending the recipe – despite feeling poorly. And what about the U. S. Post Office and its one-day turnaround time, in 1860!

Earlier this year, a collection of Jefferson family letters at the University of North Carolina at

Chapel Hill yielded a reference to the Randolph family looking forward to playing whist and drinking eggnog at a Christmas gathering in the 1850s. While the time period may seem too late to apply to Monticello, it likely reveals a tradition that the family had kept for quite a while, considering that both whist and eggnog first became popular in the 18th century.

When I saw the recipe for plum pudding and the date of December 22, I knew this was another discovery to add to our Christmas file.



Bust of Cornelia Randolph and facsimile of Virginia’s reply to her sister’s letter requesting the pudding recipe.

Read Virginia’s version of the Christmas pudding at [blog.monticelloshop.org](http://blog.monticelloshop.org).

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#### Best of Monticello Gift Box

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#### Flatware

Arriving in Paris in 1784, Jefferson began equipping himself for a lifetime of lively entertaining. Among his first purchases were two dozen silver forks and spoons, in a variation of the popular fiddle and thread pattern. He brought them home to Monticello and used them for the rest of his life. The original French pattern has been handsomely adapted to the modern table by Reed & Barton in 18/10 stainless steel. The 40-piece service for eight includes teaspoons, place spoons, dinner forks, salad forks and dinner knives.

#### Revolving Book Stand

Among the many ingenious devices found in Jefferson’s Cabinet, this one perhaps most clearly suggests his passion for knowledge. Our bookstand is a reproduction of the original, which was made in the joinery at Monticello, probably from Jefferson’s own design.



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