

Focusing In

A closer look at Monticello's details

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Photos by Ian Atkins

From the overall design of the house to the smallest details, Jefferson carefully designed Monticello to elevate American taste, calling it his “essay in Architecture.” The house is also a window into Jefferson’s mind — as Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian Jon Meacham says, “Monticello is as close as any of us can ever get to having a conversation with Thomas Jefferson.”

Here, we explore some of the details that might be easy to overlook but that tell important stories about life at Monticello.



Entablature in the Hall

Monticello’s most impressive interior architectural features are the wooden entablatures crowning the public rooms. For the Hall, Jefferson, ever dedicated to his books, copied an entablature from the 15th-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio’s *Four Books of Architecture*. He embellished this entablature by having griffins and candelabra ornaments — perhaps symbolizing the need to fiercely protect light,

which symbolizes knowledge — mounted onto the flat friezes. These ornaments were made by pressing a low-cost material called “composition,” or simply compo, into wooden molds. Because workmen can quickly produce architectural ornaments in compo, Jefferson added these beautiful sculptural elements to his entablatures without paying for expensive hand carvings.



Lectern in the Cabinet

A pair of wall-mounted lecterns enabled Jefferson to work while standing and utilized every inch of space in his small Cabinet. The lecterns are identical except for two parallel notches cut into the frame of the desk nearest the window. A little detail can mean a lot. Here, a piece of wood spanned the surface, fitting securely into the notches, preventing any papers from blowing away.

Octagonal Table in the Library

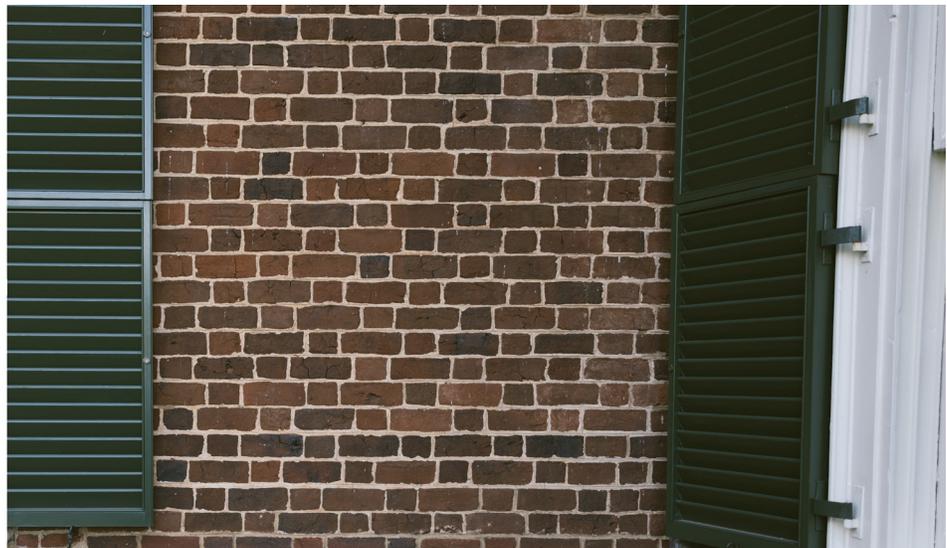
Commissioned by Jefferson to securely store his incoming letters, this unique octagonal table features eight drawers of varying sizes. This correspondence workstation was well used by Jefferson, who depended on letters to keep him connected to the outside world. In 1819, for example, he received well over 500 letters. Guests with a keen eye for detail will notice that the alphabetical headings on the drawer fronts are painstakingly inlaid in a contrasting light wood rather than simply painted on the surface.





Ribbed Urns in the Dining Room

Overshadowed by the colorful Wedgwood tablets set in the mantelpiece, the Greco-Roman-style urns with rosette finials and swags deserve their due. Purchased as a stock pattern from composition manufacturer George Andrews, these plaster-like neoclassical ornaments were installed as early as 1801. Like the ornamental urns, the various rosettes, putti, bucrania (or ox skulls) and ewer (or jug) decorations that enrich Monticello's entablatures and mantels also came from Andrews' manufactory in Alexandria, Virginia.



Fingerprints in the Bricks

Visible in numerous exterior bricks, sets of fingerprints leave behind a poignant and personal record of those who built Monticello. Jefferson's records indicate that the bricks were made during the first firing of bricks for the house in 1769. Local brickmaker George Dudley set up a kiln at the base of Monticello mountain and used water, clay and firewood to make the bricks. Jefferson calculated that it was more efficient to make the bricks closer to the source of their raw materials, and then cart the finished product up to the construction site. It's unknown whose fingerprints are on the bricks, but they may have belonged to Dudley and to both the free and enslaved workers who helped make and transport them.



Weather Vane

Weather was one of Jefferson's lifelong passions. He recorded detailed observations of temperature and precipitation and, despite inadequate measuring devices, attempted to collect data on humidity and wind speed. A weather vane on the roof was connected to the compass rose on the ceiling of Monticello's East Portico in 1817. The rotation of the rose allowed Jefferson to record which direction the wind was blowing at any given time without having to step outside.



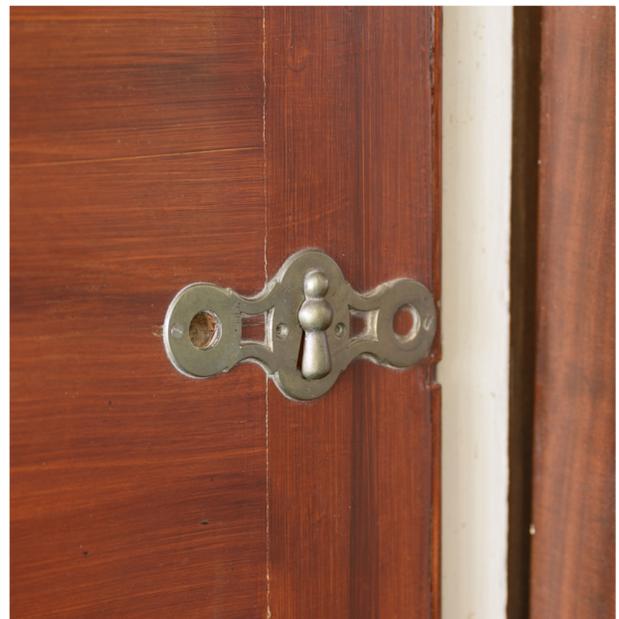
Parquet Floor in the Parlor

Have you ever walked atop a true masterpiece? Answer affirmatively if you have visited the Parlor, with its intricately plotted, cut and assembled parquet floor made from cherry and beech — likely based on designs Jefferson admired while in France. Partly protected by carpet today, this floor was so difficult to install that the lead carpenter, an Irish immigrant named James Dinsmore, hoped never to work on another one!



Parlor Doors

Both light and heat were in short supply when the Jeffersons lived at Monticello. Jefferson designed many elements to conserve these precious resources. A prime example is the double doors leading into the Parlor from the Hall. Jefferson could have used a typical solid door to keep heat from escaping the Parlor, but that would have robbed the room of morning light from the Hall. Instead, he designed massive glazed doors. These doors, which feature rare examples of glass from Jefferson's time, are also the famous self-closing doors — open one side and the other springs open!





Marble in the Bedchamber

One of eight marble “chimney mantles” ordered from Italy in 1825, this red-hued example is a standout. Described as “mischio” (Italian for mixture or medley) in the correspondence, it may be metamorphosed breccia, a type of sedimentary rock. A similar stone is used to top a Tea Room table that Jefferson’s family called the “Brescia table.”

Remote Lock

Have you ever gotten out of bed to answer a knock on a locked door? If so, you will understand why Jefferson installed a remote-controlled door lock on his Bedchamber door. Called a chamber bolt, the original brass slide bolt — this reproduction dates to 2017 — was attached to a length of thin wire connected to a fabric cord that may have been mounted near Jefferson’s bed or perhaps his desk. When he received a knock on the door, he could simply draw down the cord to raise the bolt. The door could then be opened without Jefferson needing to walk across the room. Similarly, Jefferson could relock the door by again pulling on the cord as visitors closed the door behind them.



Vitruvian Scroll on Stairs

While Jefferson believed that the grand stairs typical of houses built by Virginia’s gentry were “expensive, and occupy a space which would make a good room in every story,” he still ensured that his smaller, simpler stairs were beautifully ornamented. The most prominent ornaments are the stair brackets mounted to the stairs’ stringers. Made from a wave or Vitruvian scroll motif used for thousands of years. They also showcase Jefferson’s desire to simplify some architectural features to fit his preferred, plainer style.