The monumental pier mirrors in the Parlor have been reflecting the events and the people of Monticello since the mirrors’ arrival in 1793. Once thought to be French, they are now attributed to master carver James Reynolds of Philadelphia. Standing more than 9 feet tall, the pair was commissioned by Jefferson to hide wall niches originally intended for classical sculpture. Visitors likely marveled at their beauty and remarkable scale, which signaled Jefferson’s wealth and taste. Such mirrors had the added benefit of amplifying the artificial and natural light in the room.

Secured to the wall and considered too large to move, they have remained sentinels at their Parlor post for more than 225 years. These mirrors silently witnessed family weddings and christenings, heated arguments and failed courtships, games of whist at Christmas, and musical evenings. Everyone who ventured into the Parlor — including enslaved servants who kindled the fire, distinguished guests such as the Marquis de Lafayette and mud-clad auctiongoers attending the dispersal sale of Jefferson’s personal estate — would have gazed into the mirrors. Among the few furnishings of the public rooms not sold in 1827, the towering pier mirrors remained in place.

Today we can reflect on the history these mirrors have seen, and on our role as participants in that history, whenever we venture into the Parlor and gaze into the glass.

Sentinels of Monticello

By Diane Ehrenpreis, associate curator of decorative arts