

Take Heart, *Tell the Story*



Peggy Precely

the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and a Freedom Rider who was jailed for her civil rights activism in the 1960s.

Precely says her mother, the late Ellen Craft Dammond, was “the griot of the family” and shared the oral history that had been passed down to her from her own mother and older relatives. Family lore connected them to Monticello, says Precely, but no one was sure of exactly how. That changed in 2004, when a historian with the *Getting Word African American*

Getting Word Project Shares the Voices of Descendants of Monticello’s Enslaved Families

By Samantha Willis

Whenever Peggy Dammond Precely speaks about her ancestors, including her kin who were enslaved at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello hundreds of years ago, she first asks their permission.

“I always, always get their blessing before I tell their story,” she says, adding that she usually performs an African libation ritual in their honor. “My mother taught me the importance of keeping our people’s story sacred.”

Precely’s lineage is legendary. Her great-great-grandparents were the famed abolitionists William and Ellen Craft, who escaped slavery in Georgia. Her great-uncle was the pioneering journalist and activist William Monroe Trotter. Trotter’s father and Precely’s great-great-grandfather, James Monroe Trotter, fought for the 55th Massachusetts United States Colored Troops regiment in the Civil War. His wife, Virginia Isaacs Trotter, connects the family to Monticello: She descends from the Fossett and Hemings families.

Activism “is in my blood,” says the 77-year-old civil rights advocate and artist, who was a founding member of

the *Getting Word African American Oral History Project* contacted the family.

Getting Word began in 1993, led by Lucia “Cinder” Stanton and another Monticello historian, Dianne Swann-Wright. They sought out the descendants of Monticello’s enslaved families in an effort to learn a more complete story of the plantation. The histories recorded by the project represent the diverse experiences and legacies of Monticello’s African American families, and the indelible impression they left on American history.

“I and my family have celebrated *Getting Word’s* attempt to rewrite history correctly by giving credence and a voice to the families like ours that actually built and ran Monticello,” Precely says. “There’s a pride for me in being related to the people who built this place up.”

To others who are investigating their family’s roots at Monticello – especially if their family was enslaved – Precely asks that they take heart. “We must have the curiosity and the courage to seek out the truth of our stories so that our own lives can be enriched, and so we may enrich the lives of the next generation of Americans.”



African American Oral History Project

[Hear more descendants’ stories at monticello.org/gettingword](http://monticello.org/gettingword)

TIME AFTER TIME

Monticello’s Great Clock Restored to the Hall

By Gardiner Hallock, Robert H. Smith Director of Restoration and Collections

Jefferson owned an amazing collection of clocks and watches. Among the greatest is the iconic “Great Clock” crowning Monticello’s Hall. Built in Philadelphia in 1792, this one-of-a-kind clock has both exterior and interior faces and accurately tracks hours, minutes, seconds and days.

Typical for him, Jefferson wrote instructions for the mechanical works that operate the clock and designed the

approximately four-foot-tall, Palladian-inspired case that holds them. Jefferson even suggested the correct method of building the striking mechanism when a “bungling” journeyman clockmaker could not get the clock to run. The suggested mechanism worked, and Jefferson used it to ring an imported Chinese gong installed on the rooftop.

Problems with this striking mechanism initiated the recent clock conservation project. Inspections of the works revealed that they required significant repairs. As with any working machine, the need for periodic repairs was not surprising. Jefferson had the clock repaired in 1807 and 1817. What was surprising was a report from a paint conservator that revealed that the faux-wood graining on the case – layers of paint and glaze applied to make the common pine look like expensive mahogany – dated from Jefferson’s time. Unfortunately, we also discovered that this paint