

"Jefferson's Legacy"

By Dan Schlossberg

Every rocket fired into the heavens this Independence Day could represent one of Thomas Jefferson's achievements. A slave owner who hated the concept, he crafted the phrase "all men are created equal." He also wrote that all Americans have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." As president, he made the Louisiana Purchase, tripling the size of the United States, and commissioned Lewis & Clark to explore it.

When John F. Kennedy hosted his first state dinner in the White House some 50 years ago, he said, "Never has so much brain power resided in this room, except when Thomas Jefferson dined here alone."

Although Jefferson is best remembered as the author of the Declaration of Independence, he was also a governor, ambassador, secretary of state, vice president, and two-term president, as well as a scholar, writer, scientist, and architect. He was a voracious reader, with an insatiable appetite for learning, and collected nearly 7,000 books.

His legacy lives in the University of Virginia, which he designed, and his nearby Monticello homestead, which he called "an essay in architecture" while its size, shape, and scope evolved over more than four decades. It even included early weather instruments designed to report the speed and direction of the prevailing winds – and warn of approaching storms.

Jefferson weathered several storms, from local controversies in Virginia to conflicts in Congress, but invariably prevailed. It took 36 ballots by the House of Representatives to put him into the White House in 1801 but he turned out to be one of its most distinguished occupants.

The first secretary of state and third president, Jefferson actually preferred the privacy of his 3,000-acre mountaintop estate to the daily demands of public life. The peaceful appearance of his property today suggests why: it's the perfect place to sit and think, to meditate, to read, or to write.

Located high above the town of Charlottesville, Monticello overlooks the university and its landmark Rotunda. The only American home designated a World Heritage site by the United Nations, Monticello features a museum, a movie, and a myriad of escorted tours that begin with a shuttle bus ride to the mansion. It's not only a great photo opp – especially coupled with spring blooms or fall foliage – but an exceptional educational experience for visitors of all ages.

Other Virginians who advanced to the White House also have homesteads that draw visitors. James Monroe's Ash Lawn is just minutes from Monticello, while James Madison's Montpelier is about 20 miles north.

The creator of both the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, Madison served as Jefferson's Secretary of State before reaching the White House himself. He also ensured the future of the new republic by guiding the United States through the War of 1812 – often called the second American Revolution. Numerous events this year are marking the Bicentennial.

Like Jefferson, Madison was a native Virginian raised on a plantation worked by slaves. He held a variety of government positions before becoming the fourth president, succeeding Jefferson, in 1809. Dolley Madison, his wife, is remembered for rescuing the portrait of George Washington, yet another Virginian who became chief executive, when the British burned the White House during the 1812 conflict.

Although she sold the Montpelier property in 1844, it later had preservation-minded owners in William and Annie duPont. Their heirs eventually transferred it to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which completed its architectural restoration in 2008 and started work on the furnishings.

It's easy to understand why prominent politicians had affinity for the area: the site of Charlottesville rests in a valley surrounded by rolling hills, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and Shenandoah National Park. The vistas from Skyline Drive, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and a 20-mile urban wilderness called the Rivanna Trail practically beg to be photographed.

The Blue Ridge Parkway meanders for 469 miles, climbing above 6,000 feet as it clings to mountain ridges between Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks. Shenandoah alone has 197,000 acres of land and 500 miles of trails, some shared by the Appalachian Trail.

Beyond Monticello, which lies 30 miles east of the intersection of Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway, horse farms, farm stands, and vineyards make up much of the landscape not already occupied by historic structures.

Jefferson himself selected the site of Ash Lawn-Highland, a 535-acre property that became the home of his close friend, James Monroe, in 1799. A statue of Monroe presides over the working plantation, where peacocks patrol boxwood gardens while visitors view wooden slave quarters and attend cooking and spinning demonstrations.

Jefferson also had a hand in designing the Rotunda to house the library at the University of Virginia. Based on Rome's Pantheon, he called the edifice his "temple of knowledge," even though 10 Jefferson-designed pavilions, on either side of the open commons that fronts the Rotunda, house students who maintain a perfect 4.0 academic average. The prestige of landing a room there supersedes the

minuscule size of the accommodations.

Before Jefferson died on July 4, 1826 – exactly fifty years after the Declaration of Independence was signed – one of the UVA students who dined at Monticello was Edgar Allen Poe, the future writer. Topping the roster of more recent graduates was TV personality Katie Couric.

Couric might not recognize the pedestrian mall that marks the middle of the downtown historic district. With the notable exception of a free trolley that links the town to the campus, the area consists of 150 restaurants, bistros, and businesses, including a 19th century drug store that still features an old-fashioned soda fountain, a 1931 movie palace, and several brick buildings that predate the Civil War. Monuments to Robert E. Lee and fellow Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson stand nearby, along with 20 sculptures crafted by local artists.

The Visitors Center, at the front end of the mall, provides a plethora of planning material for out-of-towners seeking to extract maximum mileage from minimum time. Because this is the city's 250th birthday, the list of special activities, events, and concerts is almost as long as the list of worthwhile restaurants.

This writer recommends The Nook, where food and ambience hark back to its 1951 founding; The Local, featuring local produce on the menu; and Michie Tavern, where fried chicken and servers in period costumes combine to convey the inn's 1784 origin. Service and selections are exemplary at the Old Mill Room, which overlooks a laconic lake at the Boar's Head Inn.

Many area inns are steeped in history. The Clifton, built by former Virginia governor Thomas Mann Randolph before his father-in-law moved from Monticello to the White House, has evolved into an upscale pastoral property with 18 rooms, including a honeymoon cottage, and a main house with a back porch suitable for indoor or outdoor dining. Built on the original stone foundations, the house also features a reading room and a well-stocked wine cellar.

A private home until 1985, it expanded from a five-room inn into its current configuration, earning a place on the prestigious Relais & Chateaux roster. A lush blend of trees, flowers, and well-manicured grounds, the Clifton covers 100 acres on a back road that leads to Ash Lawn and Monticello.

Just west of town, the Boar's Head is a one-time grist mill that now includes 573 acres, 170 rooms, 26 tennis courts, and the only Virginia restaurant that has won a four-diamond designation from AAA Mid-Atlantic for 25 consecutive years. An Audobon sanctuary, its aptly-named Birdwood golf course has 18 holes, 500 acres, and Blue Ridge views.

Thomas Jefferson, a wine connoisseur who had his own vineyards at Monticello, would be impressed with the explosion of wineries in the region. There are more than 20, including one (Barboursville) where an April tasting consisted of 21 different wines plus a souvenir glass – all

for the paltry sum of \$5.

Also not be missed are the Exchange Hotel Civil War Museum, Confederate soldier memorial, and statues and highway markers relating to Jefferson-appointed explorers Lewis & Clark, both native Virginians.

With only 43,475 full-time residents, Charlottesville would not be much more than a speck on the map if it didn't have a list of natural and man-made attractions disproportionate to its size. It is located an hour from Richmond, two hours from Washington, and more than six hours from most points in New Jersey. But getting there is easy, with good train, plane, and highway connections (and no tolls for those who take I-78 west to Harrisburg and I-81 south to I-64 east).

A note of caution: hotel rooms are hard to come by on weekends when the University of Virginia has a home football game. Advance reservations are also recommended for tours of Monticello.

For further information, contact the Charlottesville Albermarle County Convention and Visitors Bureau, 610 E. Main St., Charlottesville, VA 22902 (Tel. 877-386-1103, www.charlottesville.org).

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