

The Evolving Legacy of Thomas Jefferson and Monticello

Primary Source Documents

**Source A**

*Peter Fossett's Recollections of 1898 Published in the New York World, January 30, 1898*  
*"ONCE THE SLAVE OF THOMAS JEFFERSON.*

Jefferson was a man of sober habits, although his cellars were stocked with wines. No one ever saw him under the influence of liquor. His servants about the house were tasked. If you did your task well you were rewarded; if not, punished. Mrs. Randolph would not let any of the young ladies go anywhere with gentlemen with the exception of their brothers, unless a colored servant accompanied them. On July 4, 1826, exactly fifty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson and Adams died. I was eleven years old. `Sorrow came not only to the homes of two great men who had been such fast friends in life as Jefferson and Adams, but to the slaves of Thomas Jefferson. The story of my own life is like a fairy tale, and you would not believe me if I told to you the scenes enacted during my life of slavery. It passes through my mind like a dream. Born and reared as free, not knowing that I was a slave, then suddenly, at the death of Jefferson, put upon an auction block and sold to strangers. I then commenced an eventful life. `I was sold to Col. John R. Jones. My father was freed by the Legislature of Virginia. At the request of Mr. Jefferson, my father made an agreement with Mr. Jones that when he was able to raise the amount that Col. Jones paid for me he would give me back to my father, and he also promised to let me learn the blacksmith trade with my father as soon as I was old enough. My father then made a bargain with two sons of Col. Jones--William Jones and James Lawrence Jones--to teach me. They attended the University of Virginia. `Mr. Jefferson allowed his grandson to teach any of his slaves who desired to learn, and Lewis Randolph first taught me how to read. When I was sold to Col. Jones I took my books along with me. One day I was kneeling before the fireplace spelling the word "baker," when Col. Jones opened the door, and I shall never forget the scene as long as I live. ` "What have you got there, sir?" were his words. `I told him. ` "If I ever catch you with a book in your hands, thirty-and-nine lashes on your bare back." He took the book and threw it into the fire, then called up his sons and told them that if they ever taught me they would receive the same punishment. But they helped me all they could, as did his daughter Ariadne. ` Among my things was a copy-book that my father gave me, and which I kept hid in the bottom of my trunk. I used to get permission to take a bath, and by the dying embers I learned to write. The first copy was this sentence, "Art improves nature." ` Col. Jones, when he bought me, promised my father to let him have me when he could raise the money, but in 1833 he refused to let him have me on any conditions. Mrs. Jones declared that she would sooner part with one of her own children. They had become very attached to me, and then I was a very valuable servant, notwithstanding that all the time I was teaching all the people around me to read and write, and even venturing to write free passes and sending slaves away from their masters. Of course they did not know this, or they would not have thought me so valuable.

**Source B**

*Last Will and Testament*

*Below is an excerpt from the transcription of Thomas Jefferson's last will and testament.*

I give to my good, affectionate, and faithful servant Burwell his freedom, and the sum of three hundred Dollars to buy necessaries to commence his trade of painter and glazier, or to use otherwise as he pleases. I give also to my good servants John Hemings and Joe Fosset their freedom at the end of one year after my death: and to each of them respectively all the tools of their respective shops or callings: and it is my will that a comfortable log house be built for each of the three servants so emancipated on some part of my lands convenient to them with respect to the residence of their wives, and to Charlottesville and the University, where they will be mostly employed, and reasonably convenient also to the interest of the proprietor of the lands; of which houses I give the use of one, with a curtilage of an acre to each, during his life or personal occupation thereof. I give also to John Hemings the services of his two apprentices, Madison and Eston Hemings, until their respective ages of twenty one years, at which period respectively, I give them their freedom. and I humbly and earnestly request of the legislature of Virginia a confirmation of the bequest of freedom to these servants, with permission to remain in this state where their families and connections are, as an additional instance of the favor, of which I have recieved so many other manifestations, in the course of my life, and for which I now give them my last, solemn, and dutiful thanks

**Source C**

*1868 MEMOIRS OF ISRAEL JEFFERSON*

I was born at Monticello, the seat of Thos. Jefferson, third President of the United States, December 25--Christmas day in the morning. The year, I suppose was 1797. My earliest recollections are the exciting events attending the preparations of Mr. Jefferson and other members of his family on their removal to Washington D.C., where he was to take upon himself the responsibilities of the Executive of the United States for four years. My mother's name was Jane. She was a slave of Thomas Jefferson's and was born and always resided at Monticello till about five years after the death of Mr. Jefferson. She was sold, after his death, by the administrator, to a Mr. Joel Brown, and was taken to Charlottesville, where she died in 1837. She was the mother of thirteen children... The reason for my name being called Jefferson will appear in the proper place. After Mr. Jefferson had left his home to assume the duties of the office of President, all became quiet again in Monticello. But as he was esteemed by both whites and blacks as a very great man, his return home, for a brief period, was a great event. His visits were frequent, and attended with considerable ceremony. It was a time looked forward to with great interest by his servants, for when he came home many of them, especially the leading ones, were sure to receive presents from his hands. He was re-elected President in 1804, and took his seat

# *Mr. Jefferson* MONTICELLO

for the second term in 1805. Of course, his final term ended in March 1809, when he was succeeded by James Madison. At that time I was upwards of twelve years of age. About the time Mr. Jefferson took his seat as President for the second term, I began the labors of life as a waiter at the family table, and till Mr. J. died was retained in Monticello and very near his person. Mr. Jefferson died on the 4th day of July, 1826, when I was upwards of 29 years of age. His death was an affair of great moment and uncertainty to us slaves, for Mr. Jefferson provided for the freedom of 7 servants only: Sally, his chambermaid, who took the name of Hemings, her four children-- Beverly, Harriet, Madison and Eston--John Hemmings, brother to Sally, and Burrell Colburn [Burwell Colbert], an old and faithful body servant. Madison Hemings is now a resident of Ross county, Ohio, whose history you gave in the Republican of March 13, 1873. All the rest of us were sold from the auction block, by order of Jefferson Randolph, his grandson and administrator. The sale took place in 1829, three years after Mr. Jefferson's death. I was purchased by Thomas Walker Gilmer, I married Mary Ann Colter, a slave, by whom I had four children--Taliola (a daughter), Banobo (a son), Susan and John. As they were born slaves they took the usual course of most others in the same condition of life. I do not know where they now are, if living; but the last I heard of them they were in Florida and Virginia. My wife died, and while a servant of Mr. Gilmer, I married my present wife, widow Elizabeth Randolph, who was then mother to ten children. Her maiden name was Elizabeth Farrow. Her mother was a white woman named Martha Thackey. Consequently, Elizabeth, (my present wife) was freeborn. She supposes that she was born about 1793-1794. Of her ten children, only two are living-- Julia, her first born, and wife of Charles Barnett, who live on an adjoining farm, and Elizabeth, wife of Henry Lewis, who resides within one mile of us. My wife and I have lived together about thirty-five years. We came to Cincinnati, Ohio, where we were again married in conformity to the laws of this State. At the time we were first married I was in bondage; my wife free. When my first wife died I made up my mind I would never live with another slave woman. When Governor Gilmer was elected a representative to Congress, he desired to have me go on to Washington with him. But I demurred, I did not refuse, of course, but I laid before him my objections with such earnestness that he looked me in the face with his piercing eye, as if balancing in his mind whether to be soft or severe, and said, "Israel, you have served me well; you are a faithful servant; now what will you give me for your freedom?" "I reckon I will give you what you paid years ago--\$500," I replied. "How much will you give to bind the bargain?" he asked. "Three hundred dollars," was my ready answer. "When will you pay the remainder?" "In one and two years." And on these terms the bargain was concluded, and I was, for the first time, my own man, and almost free, but not quite, for it was against the laws of Virginia for a freed slave to remain in the State beyond a year and a day. Nor were the colored people not in slavery freed they were nominally so. When I came to Ohio I considered myself wholly free, and not till then. And here let me say, that my good master, Governor Gilmer, was killed by the explosion of the gun Peacemaker, on board the Princeton, in 1842 or 1843, and had I gone to Washington with him it would have been my duty to keep very close to his person, and probably I would have been killed also, as others were. I was bought in the name of my wife. We remained in Virginia several years on sufferance. At last we made up our minds to leave the confines of slavery and emigrate to a free State. We went to Charlottesville Court House, in Albemarle county, for my free papers. When there, the clerk, Mr. Garret, asked me what surname I would take, I hesitated, and he suggested that it should be Jefferson, because I was born at Monticello and had been a good and faithful servant to Thomas Jefferson. Besides, he said, it would give me more dignity to be called after so eminent a man. So I consented to adopt the surname Jefferson, and have

*Th. Jefferson*  
**MONTICELLO**

been known by it ever since. When I came to Cincinnati, I was employed as a waiter in a private house, at ten dollars a month for the first month. From that time on I received \$20, till I went on board a steamboat, where I got higher wages still. In time, I found myself in receipt of \$50 per month, regularly, and sometimes even more. I resided in Cincinnati about fourteen years, and from thence came on to the farm I am now on, in Pebble township, on Brushy Fork of Pee Pee creek. Have been here about sixteen years. Since my residence in Ohio I have several times visited Monticello. My last visit was in the fall of 1866. Near there I found the same Jefferson Randolph, whose service as administrator I left more than forty years ago, at Monticello. He had grown old, and was outwardly surrounded by the evidence of former ease and opulence gone to decay. He was in poverty He had lost, he told me, \$80,000 in money by joining the South in rebellion against the government. Except his real estate, the rebellion stripped him of everything, save one old blind mule. He said that had he taken the advice of his sister, Mrs. Cooleridge [Ellen Coolidge], gone to New York, and remained there during the war, he could have saved the bulk of his property. But he was a rebel at heart, and chose to go with his people. Consequently, he was served as others had been--he had lost all his servants and nearly all his personal property of every kind. I went back to Virginia to find the proud and haughty Randolph in poverty at Edge Hill, within four miles of Monticello, where he was bred and born. Indeed, I then realized more than ever before, the great changes which time brings about in the affairs and circumstances of life. Since I have been in Ohio I have learned to read and write, but my duties as a laborer would not permit me to acquire much of an education. But such as I possess I am truly thankful, and consider what education I have as a legitimate fruit of freedom. The private life of Thomas Jefferson, from my earliest remembrances, in 1804, till the day of his death, was very familiar to me. For fourteen years I made the fire in his bedroom and private chamber, cleaned his office, dusted his books, run of errands and attended him about home. He used to ride out to his plantations almost every fair day, when at home, but unlike most other Southern gentlemen in similar circumstances, unaccompanied by any servant. Frequently gentlemen would call upon him on business of great importance, whom I used to usher into his presence, and sometimes I would be employed in burnishing or doing some other work in the room where they were. On such occasions I used to remain; otherwise I retired and left the gentlemen to confer together alone. In those times I minded but little concerning the conversations which took place between Mr. Jefferson and his visitors. But I well recollect a conversation he had with the great and good Lafayette, when he visited this country in 1824 and 1825, as it was of personal interest to me and mine. General Lafayette and his son George Washington, remained with Mr. Jefferson six weeks, and almost every day I took them out to a drive. On the occasion I am now about to speak of, Gen. Lafayette and George were seated in the carriage with him. The conversation turned upon the condition of colored people--the slaves. Lafayette spoke indifferently; sometimes I could scarcely understand him. But on this occasion my ears were eagerly taking in every sound that proceeded from the venerable patriot's mouth. Lafayette remarked that he thought that the slaves ought to be free; that no man could rightly hold ownership in his brother man; that he gave his best services to and spent his money in behalf of the Americans freely because he felt that they were fighting for a great and noble principle--the freedom of mankind) that instead of all being free a portion were held in bondage (which seemed to grieve his noble heart); that it would be mutually beneficial to masters and slaves if the latter were educated, and so on. Mr. Jefferson replied that he thought the time would come when the slaves would be free, but did not indicate when or in what manner they would get their freedom. He seemed to think that the time had not then arrived. To the latter proposition of Gen. Lafayette, Mr. Jefferson in part assented. He was

in favor of teaching the slaves to learn to read print; that to teach them to write would enable them to forge papers, when they could no longer be kept in subjugation. This conversation was very gratifying to me, and I treasured it up in my heart. I know that it was a general statement among the older servants at Monticello, that Mr. Jefferson promised his wife, on her death bed, that he would not again marry. I also know that his servant, Sally Hemmings, (mother to my old friend and former companion at Monticello, Madison Hemmings,) was employed as his chamber-maid, and that Mr. Jefferson was on the most intimate terms with her; that, in fact, she was his concubine. This I know from my intimacy with both parties, and when Madison Hemmings declares that he is a natural son of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, and that his brothers Beverly and Eston and sister Harriet are of the same parentage, I can as conscientiously confirm his statement as any other fact which I believe from circumstances but do not positively know. I think that Mr. Jefferson was 84 years of age when he died. He was hardly ever sick, and till within two weeks of his death he walked erect without a staff or cane. He moved with the seeming alertness and sprightliness of youth.

#### **Source D**

*Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles on the subject of emancipating enslaved peoples. 25 August, 1814.*

As to the method by which this difficult work is to be effected, if permitted to be done by ourselves, I have seen no proposition so expedient on the whole, as that of emancipation of those born after a given 7 day, and of their education and expatriation at a proper age. this would give time for a gradual extinction of that species of labor and substitution of another, and lessen the severity of the shock which an operation so fundamental cannot fail to produce. the idea of emancipating the whole at once, the old as well as the young, and retaining them here, is of those only who have not the guide of either knowlege or experience of the subject. for, men, probably of any colour, but of this color we know, brought up from their infancy without necessity for thought or forecast, are by their habits rendered as incapable as children of taking care of themselves, and are extinguished promptly wherever industry is necessary for raising the young. in the mean time they are pests in society by their idleness, and the depredations to which this leads them. their amalgamation with the other colour produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent.

... this enterprise is for the young; for those who can follow it up, and bear it through to it's consummation. it shall have all my prayers...

my opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed & clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen, and be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them, and our duties to them. the laws do not permit us to turn them loose, if that were for their good: and to commute them for other property is to commit them to those whose usage of them we cannot control...