

SPECIAL REPORT

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Education doesn't happen just in a classroom. Every year, millions of Americans visit historic sites to learn about the nation's past. They may be alarmed to discover that at some places, the critical race theory narrative animates the American story. The legacies of the Founders are being distorted or erased. This is particularly disheartening because preserving historic sites and presidential homes carries with it the special obligation to represent their legacies fairly and in a spirit of gratitude. Jefferson asked Madison to "take care of me when dead." For Jefferson, Madison, Washington, and others, this trust now falls to the American people: Jefferson's wish is now the responsibility of all Americans. The Founders always intended that it be so.

Preface

In our era of rampant political strife with scores of public policy disputes, the casual observer may question the importance of worrying about the teaching of history and the interpretation of historical sites. But as Brenda Hafera so articulately and thoroughly explains in this report, any assessment of Americans' understanding of our nation's founding principles must necessarily take account of the quality of historical interpretation at three leading historic homes—George Washington's Mount Vernon, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and James Madison's Montpelier.

The diagnosis is sobering. Though Mount Vernon should be lauded for its balanced portrayal of history, the tour scripts and exhibit text at Monticello and Montpelier relegate the achievements of their owners to the background—at best, an indefensible oddity, considering the contributions of Jefferson and Madison. Unfortunately for visitors to those two homes, historical interpretation has descended into a contorted narrative poisoned

by the inanity of modern political correctness. The fact that these distorted views are funded by so many radically left-wing foundations and activists at least proves the point: History matters.

The problem today is that the predominant way we “do history” in our classrooms, museums, and historic homes is a violation of the historian’s first objective—to let the evidence, not our personal biases or modern sensibilities, form the basis of our narrative. As Hafera shows, some sites like Mount Vernon have mitigated the damage from this fallacy of presentism, but the trends are still troubling.

What’s needed is a correction to this hyper-revisionism. Historians of slavery (like me) who were trained a quarter-century ago, mostly by Marxist-leaning or neo-Marxist social historians, were charged by our mentors with bringing to life the voices of the forgotten. Though the historical records of the enslaved—that is, as individual human persons—are scant, earnest historians have augmented our national narrative with stories of heroic resistance to oppression. These are important, good, and even rejuvenating, both for our history and for our contemporary civic life. Emphasizing them, however, at the expense of the achievements of those very men whose ideas and actions made it possible to build, however imperfectly and slowly, a republic in which everyone was free undermines not just the accuracy of our history, but also the belief in our shared principles as a pluralistic republic animated by our zealous commitment to self-governance.

That, unfortunately, is the very purpose of this historical revisionism. And that is precisely why analyzing it—and then correcting it—is as important as any other public policy issue of our era.

Kevin Roberts, PhD
President
The Heritage Foundation

Introduction

“[T]ake care of me when dead.”¹ This was Thomas Jefferson’s request to his beloved friend and ally in the cause of freedom, James Madison. He trusted Madison to look after his reputation, to answer mistaken accounts and encourage a just appreciation of his legacy. As the posterity of Madison, Jefferson, Washington, Hamilton, and others, contemporary Americans have inherited this trust of integrity.

This report is an assessment of how the Founders are remembered at three famous presidential homes: George Washington’s Mount Vernon, Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, and James Madison’s Montpelier. This triad of Founders contributed intellectually, politically, militarily, and diplomatically to the establishment and continuation of our experiment in self-government. Few are of equal—and arguably none are of superior—significance.

The report examines the physical exhibits at each home as well as the more popular guided tours. We recognize that presentations will vary depending on the guide (this author has gone on many of the tours multiple times). Overall, the guides are knowledgeable and patriotic individuals with a genuine interest in presenting and preserving our nation’s history. The guides at Mount Vernon are particularly well-informed.

Visitors to any of these presidential houses gain an understanding of what life was like for those residing on the estate, including both enslaved and free people. Guides address how the grounds were run and the house was furnished, as well as the significance of the paintings, adornments, and books that line its structures.

All three houses describe the institution of slavery, an institution that runs contrary to the principles of the American Founding. As landowners and farmers living in 18th-century colonial Virginia, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison owned slaves. Their views and actions on slavery were complex, informed by the conditions of the time. The current proprietors of their homes address the issue differently—at times in ways that are modest and historically informed and at other times in ways that seem ideologically driven.

Those visiting the homes of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison should gain a deep understanding of the remarkable achievements of these three statesmen.

- What were their principal accomplishments as political thinkers and public servants?

TABLE 1

Overview of Operations for Presidential Homes

**Monticello****Mount Vernon****Montpelier**

	Monticello	Mount Vernon	Montpelier
Average visitors per year	500,000	1,000,000	125,000
Annual operating costs	2018: \$33,097,076 2019: \$31,678,144	2018: \$49,683,181 2019: \$50,835,920	2018: \$10,867,685 2019: \$9,404,857
Revenue per year	2018: \$23,076,134 2019: \$69,372,865	2018: \$60,068,021 2019: \$66,250,790	2018: \$6,923,533 2019: \$7,946,640
Year built	1772	1734	1764
Year opened	1923	1860	1987*
Parent organization(s)	Thomas Jefferson Foundation	Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union	National Trust for Historic Preservation, operated by The Montpelier Foundation

* When opened in 1987, the home was as it was left by the DuPont family. In 2008, the home was restored to the 1820 version.

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- What were their deeds in war and in peace?
- How did they contribute to forming this place we now call America?

The results of this study are decidedly mixed in that regard. In its careful attention to Washington's accomplishments, dedication to historical honesty and standards, and overall modest tone, Mount Vernon is the gold standard.

Monticello and Montpelier fall short, as they devote little time to Jefferson's and Madison's achievements. They expand on each of the Founders' shortcomings without also providing an adequate account of their contributions. A site should not portray our Founders as exemplary but flawed without first explaining how they were, in fact, exemplary. There are even some discordant notes at Mount Vernon—an indication that the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union will need to be diligent in maintaining the high standards they have set not only for themselves, but also for other historical institutions.

Most concerning, James Madison’s legacy at Montpelier has been effectively erased, as there are no exhibits dedicated to his significant contributions. Montpelier can now be counted among the ranks of projects and actors that promote a distorted view of American history, suffused with critical race theory (CRT). There is a great deal of overlap between the curriculum developed by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a political interest group that is widely regarded as extremist and that maligns reputable organizations it disagrees with as “hate groups,”² and the exhibits at Montpelier. Montpelier has solicited SPLC associates’ involvement on multiple occasions, and the results are dispiriting and insidious.

What follows is a detailed assessment of each presidential home: its exhibits, main tours, and treatment of the Founders.

Mount Vernon (Owned by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union)

George Washington. It is almost impossible to exaggerate George Washington’s importance to our nation. He was America’s indispensable man, a patriot committed to the service of his country. While some Founders were remarkable orators or writers, in Washington we find that rare combination of the virtues of the commander, statesman, and President.

As leader of the Continental Army, Washington defeated the greatest military force of his time. England’s army was larger, more experienced, and better equipped than the ordinary Americans who courageously left their farms to become soldiers. For this reason, Washington’s task during the Revolutionary War required not just military genius but statesmanship. Through the example of his own unimpeachable conduct, Washington inspired his men to act with courage and discipline as they fought for American’s right to self-government. He urged them—especially his officers—to dispense with their local prejudices and unite as one people.

“Washington made the army not just an instrument of war but also a mechanism for demonstrating and transmitting a national character.”³ Inculcating our national character, one that is animated and bound by republican principles, was the lifelong project of America’s first statesman.

Washington was measured and discreet during the Constitutional Convention. While he seldom spoke, he commanded respect and attention by his mere presence. Many of the delegates would not have attended without Washington. The Virginian, who acted first as an American, lent credibility

to the gathering and the momentous task before the delegates. Public opinion about whether to ratify the Constitution followed his support; as historian Mercy Otis Warren wrote,

[N]o man in the union had it so much in his power to assimilate the parties, conciliate the affections, and obtain a general sanction to the new Constitution as a gentleman who commanded their obedience in the field, and had won the veneration, respect, and affections of the people, in the most distant parts of the union.⁴

The people would accept no other as their first President. Having just thrown off the king of Great Britain, they were suspicious of concentrating power in a single executive, but they presumed that Washington would be the one to fill the post and were reassured by his character.

Everything Washington did as President set a precedent: from the proper way the office is addressed (some, like John Adams, wanted the President to have a title) to how a President should conduct foreign policy.⁵ His presidency faced immense challenges, all requiring delicate navigation. The nation was financially decimated after the war, struggling with high inflation and all-pervasive debt. Division and unrest continued, both internally and abroad. The two-party system developed, and France underwent a revolution and war with Britain while Washington struggled to keep America neutral. He signed the controversial Jay Treaty establishing relations between America and Britain. The statesman's final political act was to step down from power, an act of republican virtue that preserved the American experiment in self-government.

The House Tour. Approaching Mount Vernon brings to mind Elizabeth Bennet's reaction upon first seeing Pemberley in *Pride & Prejudice*. Like Elizabeth, most will have "never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste."⁶ The house and grounds are a picture of magnificence and grandeur. The 8,000 acres owned by George Washington along the Potomac boasted gardens and 3,000 acres of cultivated farmland. He inherited the estate in 1761, expanded it, and later crowned the mansion with a weather-vane: the dove of peace.

A tour of George Washington's mansion, which includes the servants' quarters, a large front room (an add-on by Washington), upstairs bedrooms, Washington's study, and a kitchen, takes about 20 minutes. Approximately one million guests visit Mount Vernon per year, and during peak season,

staff are constantly cycling visitors through the house. The in-depth tour is 45 minutes long and takes visitors through the upstairs rooms and basement. There are also many specialty tours, such as self-guided audio tours, Mrs. Washington's Mount Vernon, and a Through My Eyes character tour, and impersonators are often roaming the grounds.

The highlight of the house tour is the Key to the Bastille—the French prison that was a symbol of royal oppression—which Marquis de Lafayette gave to Washington in 1790. Lafayette fought in both the American and French Revolutions and was a lifelong friend of Washington's.⁷

With its large front room and nine guest rooms, the mansion is equipped to entertain and accommodate visitors. Some guests, including foreign dignitaries, came announced, while others were unexpected strangers. Washington, impatient with perpetually playing the host, once quipped that “Unless someone pops in, unexpectedly, Mrs. Washington and myself will do what I believe has not been [done] within the last twenty years by us, that is to set down to dinner by ourselves.”⁸

The added front room highlights Washington's work as a farmer and his vision for the new nation. Engravings of farm tools and crops decorate the room, and six river landscapes remind visitors of Washington's enterprise of connecting the country through the Potomac River project to which he devoted a substantial amount of time.

In Washington's study, guides often draw attention to his unique fan chair (a fan, powered by a foot pedal, hangs over the occupant). He was a voracious reader, leaving behind 1,200 titles. Yet Washington's more significant legacy includes allowing for the peaceful transfer of power by stepping down from the presidency and declaring the importance of the principles of liberty and equality by freeing the slaves under his power through his will.

As visitors tour the house, guides talk about residents of the estate, including enslaved people owned by George and Martha Washington. They show a chart of the number of enslaved versus free people who lived there and are careful to present a nuanced and objective account.

Many of the slaves on the estate were dower slaves, brought to Mount Vernon upon George's marriage to Martha, and were owned by the Custis estate (Martha's first husband was Daniel Parke Custis). Washington had no authority to free those slaves, but he decreed through his will that all other slaves at Mount Vernon would be freed upon Martha's death, the old and infirm cared for, and the children educated and trained.⁹ Freeing slaves during this time was no simple task; Virginia law from 1723 to 1782, for example, prohibited the freeing of slaves “except for some meritorious services.”¹⁰

Slavery at Mount Vernon. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, a private nonprofit that owns and maintains Mount Vernon, has incorporated the story of slavery into the story of Mount Vernon. There is no overt ideological agenda in the telling of this story; rather, the visitor is presented with a fact-driven account.

There is a slave cemetery on the grounds, honoring the freed and enslaved individuals who died on the estate. The quarters have been reconstructed and contain informational plaques that identify individuals and detail what life was like for them.

The issue of slavery is also addressed through an hour-long Enslaved Peoples Tour, held once or twice a day depending on the season, during which a guide walks visitors through the reconstructed quarters. Mount Vernon's thesis is that Washington changed his mind about slavery over the course of his lifetime. He initially engaged in the trade (sometimes to reunite families)¹¹ but then vowed not to buy or sell slaves and was especially concerned about separating families.

The guide discusses some of the conditions of those who were enslaved: They could not legally marry, and family members sometimes labored on separate farms on the estate. Some women worked as seamstresses, making clothes for those who were enslaved on the estate; men could labor as carpenters or shoemakers, and children generally started work at age 11. Many supplemented their food rations by hunting, fishing, or growing food of their own.

The guide also tells the stories of specific individuals, such as William Lee, Sambo Anderson, and Oney Judge. Oney was Martha's lady's maid and fled to freedom. The story of her bold escape and yearning for freedom encapsulates the American spirit.

Washington initially attempted to find her, according to Mount Vernon's guide. Washington was wary of inciting a riot in the North and fearful of the example of a successful escape. However, left unmentioned was one part of the story: Washington was also initially concerned that Oney had been seduced by a Frenchman. Motivated by Martha, he hired someone to approach Oney with the instruction that she be invited to return but was not to be returned against her will. Oney indicated she had left on her own and did not come back to Mount Vernon.¹²

Washington stated in his will that slaves under his authority were to be freed upon Martha's death (she freed them before she died), and the Mount Vernon guide uses this fact as an opportunity to criticize Washington. Reminding visitors that Washington had vowed never to separate slave families, the guide points out that by freeing his slaves, this was precisely what happened, since many of the Washington and Custis slaves had intermarried.

Though the guide notes that limited documentation exists about slavery as it was practiced at Mount Vernon, at times the guide does speculate about emotions and events that might have occurred but cannot be verified.

It is also surprising and troubling that the gift shop is selling *The 1619 Project*, which has been exposed as inaccurate and misleading by many respected historians.¹³ As Peter W. Wood states, “The 1619 Project aligns with the views of those on the progressive left who hate America and would like to transform it radically into a different kind of nation.”¹⁴ It is not a project that is respectful of Washington’s legacy; rather, it misrepresents and rejects that legacy.

Mount Vernon Museum and Education Center. After touring the mansion, visitors are guided around George and Martha Washington’s tomb and through the grounds, navigated less by the signage than by the natural curvature of the paths. The paths deposit their wanderers at the Museum and Education Center, which is filled with artifacts, interactive exhibits, and short films, to end their day.¹⁵ Children will be particularly delighted by the artificial snow that comes flurrying from the vents as George Washington crosses the Delaware during one of the films.

The museum is extensive and impressive. Time and space are granted to those who lived on the estate, including the Custis family and enslaved people. Personal possessions, artifacts, maps, and portraits make the stories concrete. Other portions focus on the construction, expansion, restoration, and preservation of Mount Vernon.

Mount Vernon is an especially popular destination for class field trips, and its interactive exhibits are aimed at young people. Participants are presented with a controversy, such as the Genet Affair,¹⁶ and Washington’s advisors, such as Thomas Jefferson or Alexander Hamilton, step forward to voice their opinions. Students must decide what they would do if they were in Washington’s place, which helps to demonstrate the intricacies and difficulties involved in making such choices.

The remainder of the museum is dedicated to Washington himself and his accomplishments. Visitors are offered biographical information, including his early life and relationship with Martha, and then progress through Washington’s deeds in war and peace. The museum highlights his military career in the French and Indian War and, of course, his role as commander of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. A short film focuses on the latter, depicting the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Valley Forge, and Yorktown and noting the difficulties Washington overcame in preparing, supplying, and leading the army.

After resigning his commission as commander, Washington was persuaded to preside over the Constitutional Convention. In 1789, Washington was the unanimous choice of all 69 electors in the first presidential election. He faced daunting challenges during his presidency: the threat of the Whiskey Rebellion, debates over whether to establish a national bank, and opposition to the Jay Treaty with Great Britain, among others. Visitors are taken through all of this and end their journey with Washington's Farewell Address.

Mount Vernon distinguishes itself from the other presidential houses by having a museum on its grounds that is dedicated to educating the public about the President's unique achievements and contributions to establishing the American Republic. The members of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union have taken seriously their trust of preserving George Washington's legacy. Their detailing of Washington's accomplishments, commitment to historical accuracy and standards, informative tours and exhibits, and modest tone make Mount Vernon the gold standard against which Montpelier and Monticello are measured in this report.

Monticello (Owned by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation)

Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson was one of the Founding era's staunchest republicans, firmly believing in government by the people. As a young man, he represented Virginia in the Continental Congress and was selected by his colleagues to draft the Declaration of Independence. He continued to serve Virginia as a legislator and governor during the Revolutionary War and later served the nation as Minister to France, Secretary of State, Vice President, and President.

Jefferson placed supreme value on free inquiry and freedom of the mind with religious freedom being part of the former. He authored *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which defended religious freedom, the separation of church and state, and the superiority of a republican system over a monarchy. The Virginia Bill for Religious Freedom "opened with Jefferson's hard-hitting defense of complete religious freedom, and not simply the halfway 'toleration' on the English pattern."¹⁷

Jefferson served as Minister to France from 1785 to 1789 and developed a love of French culture. His support for the French Revolution stemmed from an ardent belief in the people's capacity for self-government. He counseled some of the leaders of the revolution and famously remained a supporter even as the new French regime descended into violence.

As our first Secretary of State, Jefferson often opposed the policies of Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists, believing that they would centralize too much authority in the federal government. In this opposition, he was assisted by his good friend James Madison (the two went on to establish the Democratic-Republican Party). After John Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts, Jefferson and Madison again teamed up to write the controversial Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, which protested against and challenged the constitutionality of these laws. At the time, Jefferson was serving as Vice President under John Adams, but the Sedition Act threatened one of Jefferson's highest principles: freedom of the mind and inquiry, the source of human dignity.

As President, Jefferson secured the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the United States and thwarted lingering French designs on the American continent. After signing and then repealing an embargo against Britain, he left Madison to manage the ensuing war.

Thomas Jefferson's final great accomplishment was establishing the University of Virginia, a revolution in American higher education. In his retirement, he determined to further a "general diffusion of knowledge." This project took nine years of preparation, and Jefferson catalogued more than six thousand items for the university's library.¹⁸

Touring Monticello. In some ways, Mount Vernon feels more modest than Monticello. Prominent at Mount Vernon is nature's beauty; at Monticello, it is mankind's progress. Something of the personalities of the Presidents is captured in their homes.

The grounds at Monticello—its extensive backyard and vegetable and flower gardens—are stunning. If conditions are just right, visitors can see a reflection of the back of the house (etched into our nickel) in the estate's fishpond. The staff at Monticello are very knowledgeable and have done much to make touring the house and grounds at a delightful experience.

There is a great deal to see. The tour of the house lasts approximately 45 minutes, and there are additional tours of the gardens, a 90-minute behind-the-scenes tour, scavenger hunts, a family tour, VIP and private tours, presentations by a Jefferson impersonator, a 45-minute tour on slavery, and a 2.5-hour From Slavery to Freedom Tour. This last tour is a replacement for the 90-minute Hemings Family Tour, which this author took in April 2022. Both include(d) "dialogue on race and the legacies of slavery in the United States."¹⁹ The Hemings Family Tour was available on weekends; From Slavery to Freedom is held daily. There are also many self-guided exhibits on slavery and life at Monticello on the grounds and in the cellars, including one on The Life of Sally Hemings.

Many of the exhibits in the cellar are filled with artifacts and explain the purpose of each room (wine cellar, kitchen, etc.). They name and tell the stories of enslaved individuals and families. The Hemings Family Tour strived to tell the story not only of Sally, but also of other members of the Hemings family and how they were typical or atypical of slave families.

The 45-minute tour on slavery (separate from the Hemings Family/From Slavery to Freedom Tour) is a popular tour, held several times a day. Guides tell the history of slavery in the United States and at Monticello as visitors walk along the reconstructed quarters and workshops, named Mulberry Row. They learn about some of the slaves who lived at Monticello and of Jefferson's alleged sexual relationship with Sally Hemings. (The guide for my tour remarked that Jefferson "blamed" the paternity of Hemings's offspring on his nephews). There was a nailery and blacksmith house on the grounds where some children worked. The enslaved people would grow their own food to supplement their meal allowance and sometimes sell it back to the estate for an income. Guides note the contradiction between Jefferson's actions and words pertaining to slavery and claim he did not believe that "all men are created equal" (a contention reiterated during the house tour).

The house tour of Monticello focuses mostly on the mansion, its architecture, and its contents rather than on Thomas Jefferson and his political career. Nevertheless, in touring the house, the visitor gets a sense of Jefferson's lifestyle. He loved French cooking and incorporated French designs into Monticello. The mansion is filled with books (he read six languages and owned more than 9,000 volumes), wine, and pictures to educate and entertain. Portraits of the "three greatest men that have ever lived"²⁰ (John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Francis Bacon) are on display in his parlor. The front room is filled with artifacts sent back from the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Jefferson was an amateur inventor, and his home bears witness to his efforts: Various contraptions are littered about the mansion. A clever dumbwaiter transports bottles of wine from the cellars through the side of the fireplace to the first-floor dining room. Jefferson's alcove bed straddles two rooms: Upon waking, he could begin working in his study or pass the morning in his bedroom. Some of Jefferson's designs functioned quite well. Others had to be finagled and made to work. He carved a hole into the floor of his front room, for example, to give a large clock's pulley system enough space to operate.

During the tour, guides mention some of Jefferson's accomplishments, such as his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom and founding of the University of Virginia. They talk about his time in France, introducing the story of Sally Hemings, and

contend that she struck a deal with Jefferson while in Paris to ensure freedom for her children when they turned 21. Jefferson's great contradiction, of course, was that he knew slavery was wrong in principle but benefitted from the institution throughout his life. Almost all of the enslaved people who lived there were auctioned off in an awful and disquieting event on Monticello's lawn following his death.

The Behind the Scenes Tour makes mention of most of the above, and guides take visitors through the upstairs, giving a history of those rooms (who occupied them, how were they furnished, etc.).

The David M. Rubenstein Center includes a short film on Jefferson and exhibits that focus primarily on Jefferson as an architect and scientist, the construction of Monticello, and the enslaved and free people who lived on the "little mountain." Jefferson drew inspiration from the ancients and moderns, enlarging and remodeling Monticello multiple times. A 7.5-minute film briefly discusses Jefferson's political accomplishments and philosophy as well as slavery and the construction of Monticello. These exhibits seem less popular, perhaps because they are located at the base of the mountain; most visitors spend their time at the top after riding a shuttle up to the house.

Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. It will come as a surprise to many of Monticello's visitors that historians disagree over whether Jefferson had a relationship with Sally Hemings and whether he fathered one or more of her children. It is beyond the scope of this report to examine the evidence point by point or to opine one way or the other as to the answers to those questions. Other scholars have devoted more thought and attention to these issues, and those who are interested can read the two major conflicting reports as well as other sources to reach their own conclusions.²¹

DNA testing in 1998 revealed that a male member of the Jefferson family (not necessarily Thomas Jefferson) fathered Eston Hemings. Following further investigation, in 2000, Monticello's Thomas Jefferson Foundation issued a statement noting that:

Although paternity cannot be established with absolute certainty, our evaluation of the best evidence available suggests the strong likelihood that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had a relationship over time that led to the birth of one, and perhaps all, of the known children of Sally Hemings. We recognize that honorable people can disagree on this subject, as indeed they have for over two hundred years.²²

Members of Monticello’s research committee disagreed among themselves. One wrote a minority report arguing that paternity had not been definitively proven and recommending further research:

As new historical evidence is found, it should continue to be incorporated into interpretive presentations. However, historical accuracy should never be overwhelmed by political correctness, for if it is, history becomes meaningless. Construction of historically inaccurate buildings on the mountaintop at Monticello would detract from the historically accurate picture that the Thomas Jefferson Foundation is trying to portray.²³

The responses between the committee members are publicly available.²⁴

The Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society also launched a year-long investigation into the question, engaging a number of well-respected scholars. Their commission’s report, released in 2000, “agrees unanimously that the allegation is by no means proven.... With the exception of one member, whose views are set forth below and in his more detailed appended dissent, our individual conclusions range from serious skepticism about the charge to a conviction that it is almost certainly false.”²⁵ The report notes that, though they were investigating only Thomas Jefferson, it seems more likely that his brother, Randolph, rather than Jefferson himself fathered Eston Hemings.²⁶

Although many books have been written on this topic, Monticello’s Thomas Jefferson Foundation continues to believe that the report it issued in January 2000 remains the “most complete summary of evidence.”²⁷ Nevertheless, there are now multiple exhibits on Sally Hemings at Monticello with no qualifiers acknowledging that the degree of intimacy in her relationship with Jefferson remains controversial. Instead, the Foundation announced that:

In the new exhibit exploring the life of Sally Hemings, her choices, and her connection to Thomas Jefferson, as well as in updates to our related online materials and print publications, the Foundation will henceforth assert what the evidence indicates and eliminate qualifying language related to the paternity of Eston Hemings as well as that related to Sally Hemings’s three other surviving children, whose descendants were not part of the 1998 DNA study. While it remains possible, though increasingly unlikely, that a more comprehensive documentary and genetic assemblage of evidence could emerge to support a different conclusion, no plausible alternative with the same array of evidence has surfaced in two decades.²⁸

The Foundation underwent a leadership change in 2008.²⁹ The Mountaintop Project, which included the Life of Sally Hemings exhibit, was made possible by a “transformational gift” by David M. Rubenstein and was completed in 2018.³⁰ Rubenstein has given \$20 million (half in 2013³¹ and the remainder in 2015³²) to Monticello and funded the Mere Distinction of Colour exhibit at Montpelier.³³

Monticello’s website and pages addressing Sally Hemings and slavery have evolved over the years.³⁴ The conflicting reports were released in 2000. In 2018 and 2019, the pages on slavery and Sally Hemings were expanded and reimagined, and the qualifiers were eliminated. These changes, along with the recent replacement of the Hemings Family Tour with a longer and more frequently held additional tour on slavery (which is more than twice the length of the house tour), suggests a shift in focus at Monticello that is building momentum.³⁵

The story of a Jefferson–Hemings relationship has become so widespread that many take its absolute validity for granted.³⁶ A more evenhanded approach would be to detail the conflicting theories in a fair manner, sticking to the facts and presenting what we know to be true on such a sensitive topic. That would promote inquiry and allow visitors to decide for themselves based on the available evidence. Honorable people will disagree.

Jefferson’s Legacy. Jefferson’s accomplishments extended to politics, diplomacy, and education; yet they are not given much attention at Monticello. As the house itself is so fascinating, much of the house tour is spent discussing the items and contraptions in the mansion.

Missing are any exhibits on Jefferson as President, Vice President, Secretary of State, diplomat, governor, drafter of the Declaration of Independence and Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom, or founder of the University of Virginia.³⁷ Each of these is a significant achievement—made all the more remarkable by the fact that they are all attributed to a single man. They reveal Jefferson’s commitment to a life of public service and republican principles. As respected scholar Adrienne Koch has written:

The Bill for Religious Freedom was one of the three acts for which Jefferson wished to be remembered, ranking with the Declaration of Independence and the creation of the University of Virginia. Thus a trilogy of related causes—independence, freedom of conscience and conviction, and education—can be interpreted as the symbolic definition of Jefferson’s career.³⁸

With these causes largely neglected, Monticello is presented as merely a slaveholder’s plantation. This is not to suggest that slavery or Jefferson’s ownership of slaves should be ignored. As historian Dr. Paul Rahe writes:

Despite the distaste that he expressed for the propensity of slaveholders and their relatives to abuse their power, Jefferson either engaged in such abuse himself or tolerated it on the part of one or more members of his extended family. In his private, as in his public, life, there was, for all his brilliance and sagacity, something dishonest, something self-serving and self-indulgent about the man.³⁹

Thomas Jefferson's lavish lifestyle and poor decision-making meant that he was unable to follow Washington's example and affirm his principles by freeing those slaves who were under his power. This is a serious moral failing. But while this does represent a side of Jefferson—and a lamentable one—it is not the only side.

Studying documents like the Declaration and the Founding principles, even independent of the man himself, is important for understanding our character as Americans. We have perhaps lost sight of the significance of the claims of human equality and autonomy as recognition of these principles has grown in much of the West. Our moral imaginations benefit from a reminder of that remarkable achievement. As Abraham Lincoln explained:

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.⁴⁰

Lincoln's words help to illuminate the Founders' intent in the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration puts forth an abstract truth—that all people are capable of reason and self-government—and looks toward the time when that principle will be fully realized. It proclaims a set of universal, natural rights common to all mankind.⁴¹

Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration, in which he assailed King George for his inhumanity toward enslaved peoples, provides further evidence of this understanding:

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death into their transportation thither.... Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce....⁴²

Men is a substitute for mankind, not a reference to men (or white men) instead of women.⁴³

Montpelier (Owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Operated by the Montpelier Foundation)

James Madison. James Madison was America’s political philosopher.⁴⁴ The question that consumed him was of the highest political order: how to establish a regime based on self-government. With the dedication of a scholar, he pored over the histories of ancient republics and the writings of modern thinkers. Predominant opinion held that republics needed to be small so that the voice of the people could be collected and heard. Yet direct democracies are chaotic, and small countries are at risk of being conquered in a modern world of nation-states.

Like no one else among the Founders, Madison dedicated himself to solving this political problem. His view was that a multiplicity of opinions and interests will arise in a territory as extensive as America, and their number will make it more difficult for any one group to carry the majority. As the political process slows, reasoned discourse will earn the support of the people.

These were the arguments James Madison made at the Constitutional Convention and to the American public through *The Federalist Papers*. Co-authored by Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* were a series of newspaper articles written in defense of the Constitution. They are, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, “the best commentary on the principles of government which ever was written.”⁴⁵

At 36 years old, Madison was one of the youngest representatives at the Constitutional Convention, an unassuming man who was only five feet four inches tall, was often dressed in black, and had a weak voice.⁴⁶ Yet he was an indispensable delegate, matched in argument perhaps only by Pennsylvania’s James Wilson. It was Edmund Randolph who presented Madison’s Virginia Plan that gave structure to the new Constitution and framed the conversation for the remainder of the Convention. In his defense of individual liberty, Madison advocated for separation of powers, checks and balances, bicameralism, and federalism. When the American people (and some of the delegates from that same Convention) clamored for a Bill of Rights, James Madison took the lead in drafting it.

Of utmost importance to Madison was freedom of conscience—America’s “first freedom.”

The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable, because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator.⁴⁷

Undermining that freedom would undermine all others, violating both the rights of the individual and the duties he owes his Creator.

Missing Madison. Montpelier, like its owner, is more unassuming than Washington's Mount Vernon and Jefferson's Monticello. The Montpelier Foundation has been managing the estate since 1998 and in 2003 began the painstaking work of restoring the house to its original condition. It is an active archeological site, as they continue to excavate the grounds.⁴⁸

The house is a large two-story brick building with four grand white columns spanning the front, looking toward vast, rolling green farmlands and distant mountains. Visitors are free to explore the grounds, gardens, walking trails, and cemeteries of the Madison family and the estate's enslaved people. The tours and exhibits at Montpelier include a tour of the house; videos at the David M. Rubenstein Visitor Center; an exhibit on the DuPont family (former owners of Montpelier); the Mysteries of Montpelier (an archeology exhibit); the Gilmore Cabin (an exhibit on a man enslaved at Montpelier); the Train Depot (an exhibit on Jim Crow);⁴⁹ and the Mere Distinction of Colour exhibit, a compilation of several exhibits on slavery in the cellars of the mansion and reconstructed slave cabins in the yard. Available on weekends is also an enslaved community walking tour.

The Enslaved Community Tour tells the individual stories of some of those who lived at Montpelier, such as valet and author Paul Jennings, manservant Billey Gardner, and lady's maid Sukey. The guide describes what life was typically like for enslaved peoples, both at Montpelier and in Virginia. Children began work at a young age, sometimes making bricks, and enslaved people would resist by working slowly or running away to freedom. It is mostly an informative account that humanizes those who endured the horrors of slavery. However, as at Monticello, guides claim that "all men are created equal" applied only to some.

The main house tour lasts approximately an hour. The guides are at liberty to write their own scripts but must discuss Dolley and James Madison, the Constitution, and the enslaved people. Leading up to the house, they typically give a brief history of the Madison family and the house itself.

Madison was one of 12 children and made additions to the house after inheriting it from his father. They highlight the trappings of the front room: Christian and pagan art, busts and portraits of the Founders and ancient philosophers, and reconstructed furniture. Visitors then move to the dining room to learn about Dolley's contributions as a hostess and model First Lady. A cutout of Paul Jennings stands in a corner of the room, and guides draw attention to it as a way to discuss slavery.

The final stop is the upstairs library where Madison worked. Here guides note Madison's role in shaping the Constitution. During one of these tours, a guide remarked that the Constitution has expanded to apply to those whom Madison would not have included, such as LGBTQ+ individuals.

Madison's signal contributions to the American Founding are given attention only during this final portion of the tour. In this, Montpelier follows Monticello's model, not Mount Vernon's. Absent is a serious focus on Madison the political philosopher and statesman. There are no written displays dedicated to his acts of public service. Many of his singular tasks, such as drafting the Bill of Rights, could have been the subject of an extended exhibit, but they are barely mentioned. Montpelier focuses on only one aspect of America's (and Madison's) past rather than telling the full story.

Two brief films are shown at the Rubenstein Visitor Center. The introductory video provides an overview of the exhibits on the property and the significance of Montpelier itself.⁵⁰ An eight-minute video discusses Madison's "Big Ideas": extending the sphere,⁵¹ federalism, and protecting the rights of the minority.⁵² The video also labels Madison a slaveowner and the Constitution as racist, stating that it applied only to white men like himself. Yet the delegates at the Constitutional Convention deliberately rejected codifying the principle of property in men. While the Constitution does contain provisions that pertain to slavery, such as the Fugitive Slave Clause, that decision proved crucial as it "became the constitutional basis for the politics that in time led to slavery's destruction."⁵³

Slavery Exhibits at Montpelier. With the exception of a *Mysteries at Montpelier* archeological exhibit (currently closed) and the DuPont family exhibit, all of the galleries and exhibits at Montpelier focus on slavery and Jim Crow.⁵⁴ There is a palpable lack of education about Madison's ideas and contributions to the American Republic. Visitors could leave Montpelier knowing much about slavery and little about Madison and his great work as America's political philosopher.

Some of these exhibits depict what life was like for those enslaved at Montpelier, housing artifacts and artwork and answering common

questions. They tell the individual and family stories of those who were enslaved at Montpelier, and their names span the walls of one room in the cellars. A brief movie, *Fate in the Balance*, tells the story of the Stewart family, and another room is filled with various quotes about slavery.

One of the cabins in the south yard is directed at children, with a reading nook in the corner and a display noting that “[b]ooks are great tools for introducing young children to topics like race, identity, and justice.” They tell individual stories and depict the gruesome realities of slavery and the courage and resilience of those who were enslaved. For example:

- *Love Twelve Miles Long* is a beautiful rendition of Frederick Douglass’s childhood and the love between a mother and son.
- *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* by Julius Lester and Rod Brown includes separate “imagination exercises” for “White People,” “African Americans,” and “Whites and Blacks.” The final one asks children to “Imagine not the victim, but the aggressor. We may think that we would never whip someone until their flesh cried blood.” But “[e]vil is as mesmerizing as a snake’s eyes. Though difficult, we must imagine our capacity for evil. Unless and until we do, unseen shadows of hung men will blot the walls of our homes.”⁵⁵ This text is accompanied by illustrations of an enslaved man hanging from a rope, his back raw and bloodied by lashes from a whip, and a silhouette of a hanged man.

In addition to the children’s books in this exhibit, books such as *Born on the Water*, co-authored by Nikole Hannah-Jones, architect of the 1619 Project, and *Antiracist Baby*, by Ibram X. Kendi, are available for purchase in the gift shop. Books from CRT advocates like Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin DiAngelo, Hannah-Jones, and Kendi⁵⁶ are nested among those of biographers and historians. Coates, a journalist who rejects American exceptionalism, is also quoted in the Mere Distinction of Colour exhibit.

Slavery and the Constitution. The exhibit on the Constitution, located in the cellars of the Father of the Constitution, focuses on slavery rather than on the meaning and significance of the Constitution or Madison’s role in shaping it. The exhibit is often misleading, as it does not contextualize certain facts or compromises and does not recognize that the Founders purposefully avoided recognizing slaves as property in the Constitution. The omitting of such details seems an attempt to portray the Constitution as a pro-slavery document, an interpretation that has gained traction in the past 30 years.

The visitor is left with the impression that slavery was the central animating force behind the laws and economy of the United States. “Though they never expressly used the words ‘slave’ or ‘slavery,’” an exhibit panel states, “the framers of the Constitution protected the institution and the economy it supported. There is no way to understand the Constitution, the government it created, the political culture it shaped, or the history that followed without understanding slavery’s central role in the framing of the nation” because “[t]he economy of slavery permeated every state. From tobacco cultivation in Virginia to shipbuilding in Rhode Island, industries throughout the states both supported, and were supported by, slavery.”

During a video shown in another room, poet Regie Gibson comments that “[t]his country started as a venture capitalist adventure. So, slavery was a huge part that created the economic engine of this country.” Dr. Edward Ayers, Tucker–Boatwright Professor of the Humanities and President Emeritus at the University of Richmond, further remarks that “80% of all American exports in 1860 are produced by enslaved.” However, exports were not a substantial part of the U.S. economy during this time. Cotton output, for example, contributed about 5 percent—6 percent of the antebellum economy—a significant portion but hardly the keystone of the entire U.S. economy.⁵⁷ The industry and innovation in the North, not the slave labor of the South, drove prosperity despite the claims of southern slaveholders and others. The historical existence of slavery negatively impacts the income of a state or nation rather than furthering its growth.⁵⁸

The economic dimension of slavery has been overestimated, and that overestimation has been proliferated by the authors of *The 1619 Project* and others.⁵⁹ When Ta-Nehisi Coates (quoted in Montpelier’s exhibit) argued for reparations in front of Congress, he contended that \$600 million—almost half of the economic activity in the U.S.—came directly or indirectly from cotton produced by slave labor. This number was from Edward Baptist’s 2014 book *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*.⁶⁰ Following its publication, many economists pointed out that Baptist had made an egregious accounting error: That percentage is closer to the mid to high single digits.⁶¹ Baptist was among the participants Montpelier invited to its National Summit on Teaching Slavery (discussed below).

There is an error in Montpelier’s exhibit as well. A panel in the exhibit contends that the economy of slavery permeated every state and lists the percentage of the population enslaved in various states in 1790. New Hampshire is listed at 11 percent. The actual figure was 0.11%.⁶² The panel describes the relation of New Hampshire’s economy to slavery as “NH cod fed slaves in West Indies.”

Along with presenting slavery as integral to the economy of the United States, Montpelier seems to be portraying the Constitution as pro-slavery—a contentious claim.⁶³ The exhibit panel states that the Convention delegates “protected” southern interests and “appeased” northern states. It would be more accurate to say the opposite.

While noting that the Constitution never uses the terms “slavery” or “slave” (it refers to “persons” instead), the exhibit panels do not detail that this was deliberate and a matter of principle. As historian Sean Wilentz demonstrates in *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation’s Founding*, “The convention’s key arguments over how to describe slaves and slavery in the Constitution had little or nothing to do with the prudent suppression of distasteful language.... It aimed to exclude not just the word ‘slavery,’ but any validation of the thing itself.”⁶⁴ Wilentz’s book receives its title from Madison himself, who wrote that the delegates at the Convention had “thought it wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men.”⁶⁵ Yet James Madison’s words are not included in the exhibit or given any consideration at his own house.

Slavery was a contentious issue at the Convention, and there was no guarantee (indeed, it was highly doubtful) that America would come to exist at all if no compromises were reached. If the southern states had refused to join the Union, the anti-slavery northern states would have had no way to influence them to abolish slavery. Without ratification, arguably very few if any slaves would have been freed. By preserving the Union, the Founders preserved the possibility of extinguishing slavery at some point in the future.⁶⁶

Another display focuses on the provision in the Constitution that protected the slave trade until 1808. This, too, seems like an attempt to portray the Constitution as a pro-slavery document. However, leaders such as Frederick Douglass reached exactly the opposite conclusion. Douglass believed the clause looked to the abolition of slavery:

The abolition of the slave trade was supposed to be the certain death of slavery. Cut off the stream, and the pond will dry up, was the common notion at the time....[I]t should be remembered that this very provision, if made to refer to the African slave trade at all, makes the Constitution anti-slavery rather than for slavery.... [I]t is anti-slavery, because it looked to the abolition of slavery rather than to its perpetuity.⁶⁷

Slavery was “solely a creation of state laws.”⁶⁸ Many at that time knew that giving the federal government authority to outlaw the slave trade

set a pro-freedom trajectory for the new nation and gave antislavery advocates a powerful weapon against slavery.⁶⁹ Congress abolished the slave trade the first day the Constitution empowered it to do so, on January 1, 1808.⁷⁰

Most people would identify the 3/5 Compromise, fugitive slave law, and slave trade provision as those portions of the Constitution pertaining to slavery. Montpelier goes further. The exhibit points to the Electoral College and domestic violence and insurrection clauses as well. The latter exhibit panel says that “[s]lave societies always lived in fear of slave revolts. Bloody uprisings during the 18th century influenced the Constitutional clauses that promised protection from ‘insurrections’ and ‘domestic violence.’” The bottom half of the panel lists five rebellions that took place in 1739, 1741, 1791, 1800, and 1831; the Constitution was written in 1787, so only the first two of those incidents could have had any influence on its text.

Maintaining order and quelling violence is a basic governmental power. Suggesting that such a power is fundamentally about slavery is an inadequate and incomplete explanation that ignores historical context. Shays’ Rebellion, during which 1,500 people in Massachusetts seized control of the roadways to protest state efforts to collect taxes (which had nothing to do with slavery), ended in January of 1787.⁷¹ The Constitutional Convention began in May 1787.

Shays’ Rebellion had led many to conclude that the Articles of Confederation were feeble and granted too little power to the federal government. Again, in James Madison’s own words, the Rebellion had shown “new proofs of the necessity of such a vigour in the Genl. Govt. as will be able to restore health to any diseased part of the federal body.”⁷² One power the delegates enshrined in the Constitution was federal authority to abolish the slave trade, a provision that was absent from the Articles of Confederation.⁷³

Unfortunately, the exhibit on the Constitution has the feel of a “gotcha” campaign that attempts to discredit the entire Founding generation because of their connections to slavery. One display, for example, is composed of pictures of the first 18 Presidents with blurbs about their relationships with slavery. Some of the descriptions, like Madison’s, note how many slaves a President freed: “The father of the Constitution and author of the Bills of Rights never freed a single enslaved person.” Under Washington, there is no mention of the fact that he freed his slaves upon Martha’s death and provided for the care of the old and infirm and education of the young through his estate.⁷⁴ Even John Adams, who never owned slaves, doesn’t

escape censure as “some of his legal clients did, including John Hancock. Adams’s wife Abigail grew up in a Massachusetts family that enslaved two people, Pheby and Tom.”

Slavery and the SPLC. The Mere Distinction of Colour exhibit in Madison’s basement also features an 11-minute film on slavery’s enduring legacy that seeks to connect “the history of slavery to many of the racial and cultural issues we still contend with today.”⁷⁵ It seems intended to provoke an emotional response: Boxes of tissues scatter the room, and Montpelier states that historic sites should provide “a space for reflection and contemplation after engaging with difficult material.”⁷⁶

The film shows protesters carrying signs saying “stop police brutality,” “I can’t breathe,” and “Black Lives Matter” and others waving Confederate flags. Video of encounters with police officers and images of black prison inmates flash across the screen. Montpelier’s website states that “[f]rom mass incarceration, to the achievement gap, to housing discrimination, and the vicious cycle of poverty, violence, and lack of opportunity throughout America’s inner cities, the legacies of 200 years of African American bondage are still with us.”⁷⁷

Professor Hasan Kwame Jeffries, featured prominently in the video, claims, “There are probably more defeats in the pursuit of justice and fairness and equality in American history than there are moments of triumph.” Dr. Jeffries and others were tasked with developing this video for Montpelier.⁷⁸ It is not difficult to discover Jeffries’ ideological motivations. He is chairman of the Teaching Hard History (rebranded “Learning for Justice”) advisory board of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The SPLC’s teacher resources and education materials are extensive. Meg Kilgannon, Senior Fellow for Education Studies at the Family Research Council, wrote a detailed report on the Learning for Justice materials, noting that they address “race, the problem of whiteness, white supremacy, systematic racism, and similar CRT-based concepts.... The source of those CRT-based materials can often be traced back to the SPLC and groups like it.”⁷⁹ The SPLC’s literature is often mailed directly to administrators; it delivered 900,000 copies of its *Teaching Tolerance* magazine in 2019 alone.⁸⁰

The SPLC’s materials (labeled “frameworks) tailored for grades K–5 and 6–12 are not simply about teaching the history of slavery. They are also about forming students into activists. Their K–5 content notes that “the study of American slavery creates opportunities to learn about activism and action civics.”⁸¹ Those in K–2 should “examine how power is gained, used and explained. They should describe what it means to have power and

identify ways that people use power to harm and influence situations” and be able to “contrast equity and equality, identifying current problems where there is a need to fight for equity.”⁸²

There is a great deal of overlap between these SPLC materials, which were publicly released starting in 2018, and Montpelier’s Mere Distinction of Colour exhibit, which opened in 2017. Dr. Ayers, for example, is featured in the video at Montpelier and produced a video for the SPLC.⁸³

Dr. Jeffries co-authored the SPLC’s K–5 and 6–12 materials and also wrote the preface for the 6–12 materials.⁸⁴ In that preface he writes, “Some say slavery was our country’s original sin, but it is much more than that. Slavery is our country’s origin.”⁸⁵ The Montpelier video echoes and paraphrases lines from this preface. For example, Jeffries notes that “[l]iterary performer and educator Regie Gibson had the truth of it when he said, ‘Our problem as Americans is we actually hate history. What we love is nostalgia.’”⁸⁶ Gibson, a performer and artist, is also featured in the video delivering those remarks. In the preface, Jeffries writes that people are more comfortable with the “Disney version of history,” something he also contends in the video.

The SPLC’s 6–12 curriculum emphasizes the “legacies” of slavery, including inequalities in employment, housing, educational opportunities, health care, workplaces, sports setting, churches, and mass incarceration, and all eight books featured in Montpelier’s “reading nook” for children are recommended in the SPLC’s K–5 publication. *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* is for students in grades 3–5, and the economic dimension of slavery is detailed and emphasized in the curriculum.

The SPLC’s materials for children grades 6–12 provide objectives for students, including that they should be able to “demonstrate the ways that the Constitution provided direct and indirect protection to slavery and imbued enslavers and slave states with increased political power.”⁸⁷

The majority of the clauses listed by the SPLC (though one is errantly labeled because there is no ninth paragraph in Article I, Section 9) are the same ones identified in Montpelier’s exhibit on the Constitution, including clauses, such as the one dealing with domestic insurgencies, that many would argue are not primarily about slavery.

In 2018, the Montpelier Foundation, in partnership with the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, hosted a National Summit on Teaching Slavery, the product of which was a rubric for working with the descendants of slaves and presenting slavery at historical sites.⁸⁸ It lists criteria detailing how an institution can obtain a ranking from “unsatisfactory” to “exemplary.”

In the rubric's introduction, the Foundation notes that "[a] recent study by the Southern Poverty Law Center described the inadequate state of education in elementary and high schools regarding the teaching of American chattel slavery. The authors of that study participated in the National Summit on Teaching Slavery."⁸⁹ Maureen Costello, (now former) Director of Teaching Tolerance, and Dr. Kate Shuster of the SPLC, as well as Dr. Jeffries, were in attendance; Dr. Shuster is another author of the content produced under Costello.

The National Summit on Teaching Slavery was aimed at expanding the SPLC's work beyond the classroom and into our broader culture: "While this assessment targets the teaching of slavery in America's schools, it is equally applicable to museums, historic sites, and other cultural institutions."⁹⁰

Montpelier's Rubric on Teaching Slavery. The Montpelier Foundation's reported guidelines provide further insight into the underlying narrative that permeates Montpelier.

According to its rubric, the Montpelier Foundation approaches American history through the lens of "restorative justice." It seeks to prevent "inauthentic accounts and meaning-making that serves to alienate and traumatize visitors of color." Its political agenda is clear: "For institutions that interpret slavery, it is not enough simply to discuss the humanity and contributions of the enslaved. It is imperative that these institutions also unpack and interrogate white privilege and supremacy and systemic racism."⁹¹

Montpelier recommends that staff at historical sites undergo "significant and ongoing anti-racist training (which includes interpreting difficult history, deconstructing and interrogating white privilege, white supremacy, and systemic racism, and engaging visitors on these subjects)."⁹² Its goal is a more "equitable version" of history.

To achieve this, Montpelier encourages "incorporating essential family oral histories, long dismissed as unreliable resources by many academic historians," and using "sources to 'read between the lines' (even documents that are not on the surface 'about' slavery or enslaved people often contain valuable information). Genealogy, oral history, documents, archeology, material culture, study of buildings, community research, and outreach are placed on equal footing."⁹³

Placing various sources on an "equal footing" is problematic. Oral histories can be valuable, but they also should be approached with skepticism, especially when not accompanied by supplementary documents confirming their authenticity and accuracy. Memories are often unreliable, as are accounts that have been passed down through the generations. When telling stories of themselves or their loved ones, people can be biased or misinformed.⁹⁴

It is not just direct descendants that Montpelier wants involved in determining the content of exhibits at historical sites. According to its recommendations, descendants can “transcend” those who have a genealogical connection to enslaved peoples to include those “who feel connected to the work the institution is doing, whether or not they know of a genealogical connection.”⁹⁵

Montpelier’s Board. This expanded definition of who can qualify as a descendant recently led to a notable board change at Montpelier. In June 2021, the Montpelier Foundation approved “bylaws to establish equality with the Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC) in the governance of James Madison’s Montpelier.”⁹⁶ In March 2022, the board passed new bylaws that permitted the MDC to continue making recommendations but did not require the Foundation to seat those candidates.⁹⁷ The board wanted to consider others who are descendants but not necessarily members of the MDC. Board member Mary Alexander, for example, is a descendant of Paul Jennings, James Madison’s valet, but not a member of the MDC. She has argued that the MDC should be disbanded, that it is “a Black history and Black rights organization that could [not] care less about James Madison and his legacy.”⁹⁸

The conflict between the board and the MDC led to considerable media coverage, the firing of employees, and pressure on Montpelier board members, including from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the organization that owns Montpelier. The board eventually agreed to appoint at least nine candidates selected by the MDC and ultimately chose 11, which meant that MDC associates now constituted a majority on the board.⁹⁹ Of the 20 nominees, two listed themselves as descendants of those who were enslaved at Montpelier.¹⁰⁰ One of those two was selected as a board member.

Following the vote, Board Chair Gene Hickok and Foundation CEO and President Roy F. Young resigned.¹⁰¹ James French, the leader of the MDC, has been named Montpelier’s new Board Chair. Newly elected board members include Dr. Jeffries; Dr. Leslie Alexander, whose research appears in *The 1619 Project*; and journalist and former CNN host Soledad O’Brien. Maureen Costello was nominated but was not approved; however, she was invited to serve on an advisory council for Montpelier.¹⁰²

Montpelier’s Funders. Montpelier’s National Summit on Teaching Slavery was made possible “by the generous support of Sonjia Smith. Rubric development was funded by the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation with support from The JPB Foundation.”¹⁰³ These organizations and this individual have both considerable resources and shared political beliefs.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation owns Montpelier (as well as 26 other historical sites) and the organization that operates the estate, the Montpelier Foundation. The National Trust is a privately funded organization established by an act of Congress in 1949 and has made recommendations to the House of Representatives regarding congressional appropriations for historic preservation.¹⁰⁴ In 2020, the Trust issued the following statement:

Black Lives Matter. Black History Matters. Historic places of all types and periods should be places of truth-telling and inclusivity. Historic preservation must actively advance justice and equity for all people. Historic preservation organizations have an obligation to confront and address structural racism within our own institutions....¹⁰⁵

The Trust's subsidiary, the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, is funded by such organizations and individuals as the Ford Foundation; MacKenzie Scott, ex-wife of *Washington Post* owner Jeff Bezos; and George Soros's Open Society Foundations.¹⁰⁶

Sonjia Smith and her husband Michael Bills are a billionaire couple who have considerable political influence in Virginia and donate to Democratic candidates.¹⁰⁷ They control two political action committees, the Clean Virginia Fund and Commonwealth Forward. From April 2020 to November 2021, Smith donated more than \$2.7 million to Virginia PACs.¹⁰⁸

The JPB Foundation operates through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The president of Democracy Alliance, an organization *Politico* has called "the most powerful network of Democratic donors," sits on their advisory council."¹⁰⁹

In addition to these individuals and groups, David M. Rubenstein, a billionaire "patriotic philanthropist" and co-founder and co-chairman of The Carlyle Group, made possible the Mere Distinction of Colour exhibit. Rubenstein helped to repair the Washington Monument and has given "lead funding" to rehabilitate other historical sites like Montpelier and Monticello, expressing the hope that restoring such places might enhance "interest in learning more about American history."¹¹⁰

Rubenstein mistakenly believes that when Thomas Jefferson wrote that "all men are created equal," he "really meant all white men who were Christian are equal if they have some money."¹¹¹ In the SPLC's content for K-5 students, one of the essential knowledge points is that "[s]tudents will know that the United States was founded on protecting the economic interests of white, Christian men who owned property."¹¹²

Montpelier is expanding its efforts. In 2019, Montpelier received a federal grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services for an interactive exhibit that fosters “conversations about fairness, justice, and race between children and their caregivers.”¹¹³ We can deduce that this is the exhibit in the south yard that is equipped with children’s books.

In 2020, Montpelier received \$2,000,000 from the Commonwealth of Virginia for a Memorialization Project.¹¹⁴ The project “will include the creation of a memorial to the enslaved and partnerships with other descendant groups to expand memorialization efforts throughout Virginia” as well as “educational programs for teachers and law enforcement officers; curriculum development for anti-racist curriculum that would be available for use in public schools throughout Virginia...”¹¹⁵

Most troubling is the development of an antiracist curriculum for use in Virginia public schools. There is reason to believe this curriculum will mimic the SPLC’s materials by promoting a radical CRT narrative. Given former SPLC Director Maureen Costello’s past affiliations and current connections, Montpelier would have the strategy to distribute the curriculum to teachers and administrators without parental knowledge.

Conclusion

The origin story of any nation holds a special place in its history, but America’s Founding is perhaps even more essential to understanding the American ethos. We are not a nation based on ethnicity or religion but one united by principles: those of our Founding. Those ideas were enshrined in our Declaration and Constitution and have worked on us over time, developing in us the habits of a free people. Our principles and character are our Founders’ legacy, and our reciprocal duty is the watchful guarding of those principles and that character.

We must be ever vigilant, as much has been done in recent years to tear down our Founding. Nikole Hannah-Jones and *The New York Times* released their biased and inaccurate 1619 Project.¹¹⁶ Critical race theory has seeped into our schools, taking aim at our children.¹¹⁷ It is now present at our historical sites. If Mount Vernon is the good and Monticello the bad, Montpelier is the ugly.

Those who seek to tear down our Founding are at best reckless and at worst destructive. Their purported aim is for Americans to acknowledge the sins of our past, and their contention is that those sins have been overlooked. But few goodhearted and honest Americans truly want to whitewash our history in an unfair manner.

A choice between teaching CRT or not discussing slavery and race at all is a false one. CRT posits that slavery and racism define America, elevating them as driving forces of our history rather than properly placing them as tragic elements that contradict our principles. CRT leaders' mission extends beyond Americans examining our past: "[I]t is not enough simply to discuss the humanity and contributions of the enslaved. It is imperative that these institutions also unpack and interrogate white privilege and supremacy and systemic racism."¹¹⁸

If they are successful in denigrating the Founders and the ideas of the Founding, CRT practitioners create the opportunity for those ideas to be replaced by something else. Such opportunists are the advocates of identity politics and view our history as a struggle between oppressed and oppressor groups. Contemporary citizens are divided between transgressors and innocents with no hope for common redemption. "In the world [identity politics] constructs," as Dr. Joshua Mitchell has noted, "tradition is not an inheritance through which civilization is sustained; it is the tainted résumé of transgressions perpetrated."¹¹⁹ When those traditions, our heritage of republican principles, are sufficiently and irredeemably stained, the American regime will be ready for its transformation. Undermining the Founding generation is part of that revolutionary project.

Education doesn't happen just in a classroom. Every year, millions of Americans flock to our historic sites to learn about our past.¹²⁰ They may be alarmed to discover that at some places, the CRT narrative animates the American story. Rather than being remembered for their remarkable contributions, the Founders are being discredited, their legacies distorted or erased. This approach is particularly disheartening, as preserving historic sites and presidential homes carries with it the special obligation to represent their former residences fairly and in a spirit of gratitude.

Jefferson asked Madison to "take care of me when dead." For Jefferson, Madison, Washington, and others, this trust now falls to the American people: What Jefferson wished for is now our responsibility. The Founders always intended it to be so. With his faith in public opinion, Madison had "confidence that sufficient evidence will find its way to [our] generation" to ensure, now that they are gone, "whatever of justice may [have been] withheld whilst [they were] here."¹²¹

Endnotes

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