

MonuMental Man

Story by JOHN BEAHLER
Photos by ROB HILL

With his usual thoroughness Thomas Jefferson left precise instructions for the stone obelisk that would mark his grave — although at the same time he questioned whether “the dead feel any interest in monuments or other remembrances of them.”

On a tattered scrap of paper, Jefferson sketched a rough granite marker. The stone, he said, should include “the following inscription and not a word more. Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.”

For more than a century the battered monument has found a refuge at MU. Jefferson was bankrupt when he died in 1826. Monticello, his beloved Virginia home, was sold to pay off creditors, and over the years souvenir hunters vandalized the family graveyard, chipping pieces from his tombstone.

When a new stone was placed on his grave, family members presented the original monument to the University in 1883. Now, in a pocket park just off Francis Quadrangle, the gravestone is a link between Jefferson and MU.

Jefferson was a fervent advocate of state-supported higher education, and Mizzou was the first state university in the vast western lands he added to the union in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase. Francis Quadrangle itself, with a rectangular lawn flanked by academic buildings, mirrors the blueprint Jefferson developed for the University of Virginia.

“Certainly, with the University of Virginia, Jefferson set down a different kind of plan for university and college campuses,” says Dr. Osmund Overby, professor of art history. “It’s distinctively American, and Francis

Quadrangle is very much in the tradition that Jefferson started.”

And with decades of solid scholarship, Dr. Noble Cunningham has forged another link between MU and Thomas Jefferson. Cunningham, Curators’ professor of history, has written seven books that dissect Jefferson’s presidency, his role as an administrator and party leader and the age in which Jefferson lived. In the process he has been recognized as one of the country’s foremost Jefferson scholars.

That modest epitaph Jefferson wrote for himself doesn’t begin to describe his accomplishments as a politician, scholar, scientist, architect and farmer. Cunningham’s 1987 biography, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, explores the brilliant, compulsive, complicated man who was the third president of the United States.

In public statements Jefferson claimed to abhor political life, but the political arena consumed him.

His writings sparked the political agenda of a fledgling republic, but he was a notoriously poor speech maker. He mumbled his first inaugural address so softly that hardly anyone could hear it. An aristocrat from Virginia, this second occupant of the White House shocked some visitors when he greeted them with uncombed hair, dressed in a shabby coat and rundown slippers.

A student of science, mathematics, languages, architecture and agriculture, Jefferson constantly tinkered with machinery and scientific contraptions. He developed an improved type of plow that helped farmers till their fields more efficiently. As secretary of state, Jefferson invented a cipher machine that used wooden wheels of type to code diplomatic messages.

At Monticello he was forever trying new crops — such as rice and olives — from seeds that admirers sent from around the world. But the worn-out soils of his Virginia estates

barely supported Jefferson and his family. In his plantation records Jefferson fretfully calculates how many wagonloads of manure his livestock could produce to restore the fertility of his fields.

As steadily as his political star rose, Jefferson’s finances dwindled. Family debts, misplaced financial confidence in his friends, and shaky investments all took a toll on his pocketbook.

Jefferson opposed slavery, yet as a Virginia planter he owned scores of slaves. In the Declaration of Independence he embraced the equality of all men. In other writings he offered his suspicion that blacks were inferior to whites “in the endowments both of body and mind.”

He held out a free press as a cornerstone of democracy, yet once suggested that a few selected prosecutions of journalists might quiet his political enemies.

“In this case, like most presidents, Jefferson felt the burdens of all the attacks on him,” Cunningham says. “He doesn’t always successfully live up to his highest beliefs.”

Cunningham has seen another side of Jefferson. One night several years ago, he drove slowly up the winding road to Monticello, Jefferson’s mountaintop retreat near Charlottesville, Va.

The walkways were lined with lanterns, and the old mansion gleamed with candlelight. He sat down to a dinner in the dining room, where Jefferson entertained such notables as James Madison, the Marquis de Lafayette and James Monroe.

Cunningham was there to receive a gold medal from the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation for his contributions to Jeffersonian scholarship, one in a long line of honors Cunningham has received for his years of research.

“No doubt about it,” says Daniel P. Jordan, executive director of the Jefferson Foundation. “On any short list of the prominent scholars of Thomas Jefferson the name of Noble Cunningham certainly would be conspicuous. His scholarship is impeccable.”

But Jefferson wasn’t the focus when Cunningham began his career. “I started out to work on the beginnings of political parties in the United



Thomas Jefferson gave medallions, like this replica owned by Dr. Noble Cunningham, to American Indians as a sign of friendship.

States," Cunningham says. "I was concerned with how political parties really operated — the political campaigns, organizations and political mechanisms, rather than what the parties stood for."

He soon was caught up tracing the rivalry between the Federalist Party of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton and Jefferson's Republican Party — a forerunner of today's Democrats. In 1800 Jefferson unseated Adams in a rancorous election that left the two men so bitter they didn't speak for nearly a decade.

They finally patched up their differences after Jefferson left office. Then, for years they carried on a devoted correspondence, discussing everything from their grandchildren to the remarkable events they had lived through. The two old revolutionaries died within a few hours of each other — July 4, 1826 — 50 years to the day after the Declaration of Independence was signed.

Jefferson described that election of 1800 as a revolution; Cunningham calls it a constitutional crisis. A tie vote in the Electoral College with fellow Republican Aaron Burr threw the contest into the House of Representatives. It took 36 ballots before Jefferson was confirmed as the third president.

"It was the first time the transfer of power from one party to another was accomplished peacefully," Cunningham says. "Now we don't think of that as unusual."

Cunningham describes himself as an archival historian. That means that during summer breaks, sabbaticals and research leaves, he's in the Library of Congress, the National Archives or other libraries and museums, studying original documents of the period.

He has read his way through thousands of letters Jefferson wrote or received during his lifetime, and box after box of yellowing government papers.

That focus on documentation and detailed scholarship comes through in his writings. For instance, Cunningham rebuts the notion held by some biographers that Sally Hemmings, one of Jefferson's slaves, was his mistress for many years.

Back in 1802 James Callender, a hack journalist and disappointed of-

fice-seeker, was the first to trumpet the supposed sexual liaison. The scandal was picked up by opposition newspapers, and it deviled Jefferson for the rest of his life.

"There simply is no evidence to support this, and the evidence that other writers have presented to make their case is not very convincing," Cunningham says.

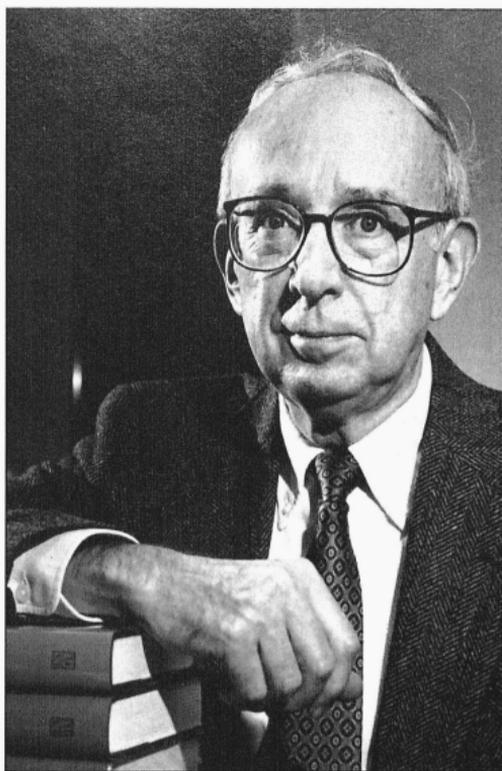
"I take a scientific approach to research, accumulating all the evidence I can find, weighing that evidence and drawing conclusions from the evidence," he says. "I suppose that makes me a more cautious historian than some, but I don't think of myself as an apologist for Jefferson. I don't think I've covered up the contradictions."

"He's a dreamer, but he's also practical in terms of implementing his dreams," Cunningham says.

He points to Jefferson's work to establish the University of Virginia after he retired from public life. While in his 70s, Jefferson paced out the boundaries of his proposed "academical village." With a surveyor's transit and locust pegs, he laid out the campus and designed each building. He even set up a brickyard to fire the bricks and sent an emissary to Europe to recruit the finest faculty.

"The more I've studied Jefferson, the more I've come to respect his intellect. He was extraordinarily well-informed and competent. That's not to say he doesn't have faults, but he clearly was an extraordinary person," Cunningham says.

"His impact has been lasting; most of all was his incredible faith in the will of the majority. He was a leading advocate to opening up public life to everyone, no matter what the circumstances of their birth. I think that is really fundamental to the success of American democracy." 



Cunningham has extensively researched the life and times of Thomas Jefferson.

Happy birthday, Mr. Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson's passion for public higher education is shared by Jefferson Club members. The group, formed in 1970, acknowledges substantial contributions to MU.

The club will note Jefferson's 250th birthday at its annual dinner April 24. Dr. Jack Pellason, AB '43, MA '44, nationally known educator and president of the University of California System, will be the featured speaker.

Jefferson Club members include individuals who pledge a minimum of \$10,000 to MU over a 10-year period. More than 1,300 individual and 46 corporate members have made gifts and pledges in excess of \$94 million. For information, write to Linda L'Hote at 306 Donald W. Reynolds Alumni and Visitor Center, Columbia, Mo. 65211, or call (314) 882-6516.