THE JEFFERSON MONUMENT

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI
On the campus of the University of Missouri in Columbia stands a rough-hewn block of granite surmounted by a weather-beaten obelisk approximately six feet in height. This scarred and battered monument is the original tombstone that for half a century marked the grave of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. Its history, including the details which culminated in its being presented as a gift to the University of Missouri in Boone County, Missouri, is a chequered one.

Shortly after Jefferson’s death on July 4, 1826, his descendants found among his personal effects the rough sketch of a tombstone and directions for its inscription. “Could the dead,” Jefferson had written on the back of a partially-mutilated envelope, “feel any interest in Monuments or other remembrances of them,” he would be gratified by a “plain die or cube . . . surmounted by an Obelisk” bearing the words:

“Here was buried
Thomas Jefferson
Author of the Declaration of American Indepandence
of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom
& Father of the University of Virginia.”
The instructions left by Thomas Jefferson for his design of the monument which now stands on the campus of the University of Missouri in Columbia.
He also requested that on the base should be carved the dates of his birth and death, recording his birth-date as "Apr. 2. 1743. O.S.," the O.S. referring to the old style calendar in use when he was born. Jefferson further directed that these memorials be made from "the coarse stone of which my columns are made, that no one might be tempted hereafter to destroy it for the value of the materials."

Jefferson was buried between the graves of his wife and their daughter Maria in the graveyard at Monticello. Within a month, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, his favorite grandchild and executor of the estate, attempted to follow his grandfather's instructions, but the estate was so heavily encumbered with debts that Monticello could not remain in the family as Jefferson had intended. House, out-buildings and 552 acres of land were sold, successively, to James T. Barclay, a "local eccentric," in 1831 and, five years later, to Lt. Uriah Levy, U.S.N., a Jefferson admirer from New York; the graveyard, however, "with free access," was to be kept in the family.

The monument itself was not erected until seven years after Jefferson's death, apparently because of his bankruptcy. It is possible that a small temporary marker may have been placed over the grave, but it seems certain that no monument was erected until 1833. The monument followed Jefferson's instructions to the letter, with one notable exception. Because of the coarseness of the specified granite, it was not possible to cut the inscriptions into the face of the obelisk; instead they were carved upon a marble plaque which was set into its face.

The graveyard, meanwhile, was in "neglected and wretched condition." Souvenir hunters were undeterred by the iron gates and

1. According to family tradition, Jefferson and Dabney Carr, his boyhood friend, William and Mary classmate, and husband of his sister Martha, had promised each other that the survivor would see that the other was buried at the foot of a favorite oak tree at Monticello. A week after Carr's death on May 16, 1773, Jefferson had men at work preparing a burial place.

2. Levy bought the property, reduced to 218 acres, for $2,700; Barclay had paid $7,000 for the original purchase.
The monument, shown here in its original location in the graveyard at Monticello before it was given to the University of Missouri in 1883; c. 1870.

high brick wall which had replaced an earlier wall and pyracanthus hedge enclosing the burying place at the time of Jefferson’s death; splinters had been chipped from the monument itself; the white marble slabs over the graves of Jefferson’s wife and daughter had been “similarly desecrated”; the turf was “trodden up”; and the marble plaque, “loosened by . . . rude treatment,” was rescued from probable destruction by Lt. Levy. 3

In the following decades, particularly during the War Between the States when Jefferson’s name and fame were temporarily eclipsed, vandalism and decay increased rather than diminished.

3. When Levy, who stayed at Monticello primarily during the summers, stopped using Monticello as a “vacation resort,” he gave the plaque to Thomas Jefferson Randolph. It remained at the Randolph family place, Edgehill, until 1883 when it was given, with the monument itself, to the University of Missouri.
This marble plaque carved with the inscription written by Thomas Jefferson was originally affixed to the granite obelisk of the monument. It is now kept in Jesse Hall.
PREAMBLE AND RESOLUTIONS OF THE BOARD OF CURATORS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF MISSOURI.

PREAMBLE AND RESOLUTIONS.

WHEREAS, Mrs. Mary H. Randolph, Mrs. Sarah A. Randolph, Miss Corney H. Randolph, Mrs. Ellen W. Harrison, Mrs. Maria Mason and Dr. W. F. N. Randolph, great-grandchildren of the illustrious patriot and statesman, Thomas Jefferson, residing in Allegheny county, Virginia, having upon the request of Rev. S. S. Laws and Prof. A. F. Fleet presented to the Curators of the University of the State of Missouri the old granite monument (a new one having been substituted for it by the Congress of the United States) which has for more than fifty years marked the burial place of Mr. Jefferson at Monticello: also the marble tablet accompanying same, on which is inscribed the memorable epitaph prepared by Mr. Jefferson himself, a short time before his death, and which is in the following words:

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. And on the obelisk is the following:

Born April 2nd, 1743. 6th. 8th.
Died July 4th, 1826.

This gift is a most appropriate one associated as in the name of Thomas Jefferson with the cause of Human Freedom, Religious Liberty, the establishment of Free Institutions upon the American continent, and of the cause of Common School and University education, in the State that gave him birth; and for the further reason that it was during the administration of Mr. Jefferson that the vast country stretching from the mouth of the Mississippi river to the mouth of the Columbia river upon the Pacific Ocean, then known as Louisiana, embracing within its boundaries a vast empire one and a half times as large, if not larger than the territory at that time owned by the United States on the west side of the Mississippi river, and out of which among others was carved the great State of Missouri. These and similar facts make this a most gracious and appropriate gift, coming as it does from the descendents of this illustrious citizen of the American Republic, and the beautiful campus of the University of the State of Missouri a most fitting resting place for this time-worn granite shaft around which gather so many delightful memories forever to be associated with the history of the American Republic, and so well calculated to strengthen the patriotism and awaken the admiration of the ingenuous youth of Missouri and other states who shall come hither to seek in these classic halls, that mental culture and all the other refinements which education and knowledge give to those who diligently seek them, and at the same time inducing a landward ambition to imitate the example of him whose memory and whose fame this obelisk is intended to perpetuate: be it therefore,

Resolved, By the Curators of the University of the State of Missouri, in regular session assembled, that the thanks of this Board are hereby tendered to the donors for this generous and acceptable gift, assuring them that it is not only properly appreciated by the members of the Board and all who are connected with the University, but also by the entire people of the State of Missouri for the benefit of whose sons and daughters this University was established, and to assure them that this sacred relic has already found a permanent resting place in our campus.

Resolved, That the thanks of the Board are also due and are hereby tendered to President S. S. Laws and Prof. A. F. Fleet for their unselfish, timely and active energy in not only originating the purpose to procure the monument of Jefferson for the University, but for presenting that purpose in the mildest of difficulties to success.

Resolved, That the Secretary of this Board cause to be prepared in a suitable manner a copy of the foregoing preamble and resolutions, signed by the President of the Board and countersigned by the Secretary with the great seal of the University attached thereto and forward it to the donors, and also to President S. S. Laws and Prof. A. F. Fleet.

JAMES S. ROLLINS,

Pres. Board of Curators University of Missouri.

ROBERT L. TODD,

Secretary.
When Levy, then a Commodore, died in 1862, he left instructions willing Monticello either to Virginia or to the nation, but the will was attacked by his heirs and became a subject of litigation, and Monticello was sold, finally, at auction in 1879, to his nephew, Jefferson Monroe Levy. During most of this seventeen-year period, the house was occupied by Levy's tenant overseer. Bats, it has been said, made their nests in the Dome Room where Jefferson's favorite daughter had reared her children; livestock were bedded down in the spacious entry hall; Thomas Jefferson Randolph had had to force his way into the estate "to assert his ownership of the graveyard and his right of access to it."

Such conditions gave credence to varied unsubstantiated reports that the Jefferson monument had been destroyed and replaced. As early as 1838, for example, a Washington publication had commented on a visitor's report that he had found the grave of Jefferson in "forlorn condition," a report vigorously denied in the Charlottesville Advocate. Forty years later, Harper's Weekly commented that "three successive headstones have been quietly chipped away and now ornament many a mantle piece throughout the Country he loved so well. A fourth stone will soon be required." In the same year, after a visit to Monticello, Congressman Augustus A. Hardenbergh of New Jersey stated (in the Congressional Record) that the "original monument . . . had been all chipped away; that a second one had also been chipped away; and a third is now undergoing the same process . . . . Last night a week ago during a heavy gale the lower part of the brick wall surrounding the tomb was blown down . . . . The inscription is gone; not a trace remains. An obelisk stands over the tomb, but the whole site bears the evidence of a nation's neglect . . . ."

By this time, Jefferson's descendants, public officials, the press, and some private individuals had made various unsuccess-

4. For full discussion, see Kean, "History of the Graveyard at Monticello."

The Curators' resolution, printed on satin, was sent to Mr. Jefferson's descendants in January, 1884.
Academic Hall, the main building of the University of Missouri, was destroyed by fire in 1892; the monument was not damaged.

ful attempts to remedy the situation. An 1878 Resolution of Congress appropriating five thousand dollars for a replacement bogged down, but four years later the Congress appropriated twice that sum to repair the graveyard and erect a new shaft commemorating the memory of the man who had been Governor of Virginia, American Minister to France, Secretary of State, Vice President, and President. A colonel in the Corps of Engineers was ordered to "report to the Secretary of State for duty in connection with the erection of a monument over the grave of Thomas Jefferson," designs were submitted and approved, contracts awarded, and by mid-April, 1883, the monument arrived at Monticello: the "weight was about 16,000 pounds and it required ten horses to draw it."5

5. The new obelisk was twice the size of Mr. Jefferson's original, the result, perhaps, of bureaucratic love of bigness-as-such.
Prior to proposed ceremonies to dedicate the new monument, Jefferson's descendants had received numerous requests for the tombstone. One such request came from the University of Missouri. As the first state university in the Louisiana Purchase Territory which Jefferson had been instrumental in acquiring during his first administration as President, the University of Missouri presented an appealing claim. The claim, or rather supplication, was strengthened because of Jefferson's life-long labors in behalf of state-supported education (Jefferson, in effect, originated the concept of the state university, and Missouri's university had projected a curriculum and a concept of higher education similar to those which Jefferson had put into practice some years before at the University of Virginia), and because of his faith in the western portions of the nation.

Even more relevant, probably, many first and second generation residents of Columbia and Boone County were originally from
Commencement Exercises, Francis Quadrangle, c. 1906.
Virginia and could claim "cousinship" of one kind or other with Mr. Jefferson; Thomas Jefferson Randolph himself had at one time considered emigrating to Missouri; and the sponsors of the University of Missouri's efforts to obtain the monument were Virginians, including President Samuel Spahr Laws who had been confined to several Union prisons because of his outspoken sympathy for the cause of the Confederacy (and who apparently paid personally the expenses attendant on moving the monument from Monticello to the Columbia campus), and Professor of Greek Alexander Frederick Fleet, a graduate of the University of Virginia who had been a member of the 26th Virginia Regiment from the beginning of the War until General Lee's surrender at Appomattox and who seems to have originated the quest to acquire the monument.  

At any rate and whatever the reasons, the monument and the marble plaque inscribed with Jefferson's epitaph were finally given to the University of Missouri. Professor Fleet journeyed to Virginia to attend projected but never-performed dedicatory ceremonies at Monticello; under his supervision the old base, obelisk, and plaque were shipped from Monticello to Columbia, whereupon the Curators praised President Laws and Dr. Fleet for their "unsolicited, timely and active agency in not only originating the purpose to procure the monument of Jefferson for the University, but for prosecuting that purpose in the midst of difficulties to success" and expressed their gratitude in a formal statement, "printed on white satin, thanking certain great-grandchildren of Mr. Jefferson for giving to the University of Missouri . . . this most gracious . . . gift."

Mrs. Ellen Wayles Harrison, Thomas Jefferson Randolph's daughter, responded even more graciously, in a letter to Professor Fleet, concluding:

"We gladly accorded our assent to the proposition that they

6. The fact that the Missouri capital city, Jefferson City, was named after Mr. Jefferson probably further strengthened the appeal of Missouri's request.

7. "Let us hang our heads in shame," a writer lamented in the Charlottesville Jeffersonian, for this "exhibition of the great want of public spirit which characterizes our people."
[the representatives of the University of Missouri] should become the possessors of what we venerated so highly. We have never regretted the gift, and feel that in no other state of the union would its poor, battered, weatherworn front have met with such a welcome.

“Our admiration for the State of Missouri could not have been heightened, but she has won our lasting gratitude by the veneration she has shown and honor she has done Mr. Jefferson.”

The “sacred relic” was placed to the right of the entrance to Academic Hall, the main building of the University at that time, where it was unveiled on July 4, 1885, the final day of commencement exercises, in a ceremony, said to have been the most elaborate in the history of the University, which included addresses by Missouri Senator George E. Vest, Thomas F. Bayard, national Secretary of State, and Captain James B. Eads, noted Missouri engineer.

The marble plaque was subsequently mounted on the obelisk, but was removed some time thereafter, for safekeeping, to Academic Hall. Ironically enough, when this building was destroyed by fire on January 9, 1892, the shaft was unmarred but the plaque was “cracked and burned.” Since then the restored tablet is kept in a vault in the University’s administration building, Jesse Hall, where it remains today except for the annual celebration of Jefferson’s birthday at which times it is customarily displayed.

The monument itself was frequently moved from one campus site to another, virtually ignored and without a marker—although certain individuals and patriotic societies occasionally placed a wreath upon it on Jefferson’s birthday—until 1931. In that year, Jefferson’s birthday was declared a state holiday by the General Assembly of the state of Missouri.

Following this action of the Missouri legislature, University of Missouri President Walter Williams and Representative Joseph B. Shannon of Kansas City were active in renewing interest in Thomas

8. Except in 1904 when it was lent to the St. Louis World’s Fair. When asked to repeat the favor at the Jamestown Exposition a few years later, the apprehensive Curators declined “for fear that if it were ever taken into... Virginia” it might never be returned.
Jefferson at the University. On April 13, 1932, ceremonies were conducted at the tombstone which included unveiling a new marker for the monument and addresses by President Williams and Mr. Shannon who had been influential in obtaining funds for the marker and for the passage of the bill making Jefferson's birthday a state holiday.

In America's bicentennial year the monument was again moved, to a site adjacent to the Chancellor's Residence and alongside a much-frequented walk on Francis Quadrangle. It was re-dedicated the day after Mr. Jefferson's birthday, as a part of the University's bicentennial observances, and aided by a gift from the class of 1926. In its impressive new setting, atop an 18-inch concrete block surrounded by a brick-paved courtyard and evergreen plantings, it was estimated that in three days more students saw the monument than had been even aware of its existence during the preceding year. Chancellor Herbert Schooling, in his dedicatory comments, observed that the monument would be a continuing reminder that Mr. Jefferson considered his founding of the University of Virginia to be one of his major accomplishments and that “the establishment of the University of Missouri in the territory Jefferson had acquired will continue to be a most important accomplishment” in Missouri.

Such annual ceremonies signify a continuing awareness of a great American whose faith in education and in the American people is best summarized in his own words:

"Educate and inform the whole mass of the people . . . . They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."
The monument was rededicated at its present location on Francis Quadrangle, adjoining the Chancellor’s residence, during bicentennial ceremonies honoring Thomas Jefferson’s birthday, April 1976.
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