



Mr. Jefferson's Memorial

"We have secured a treasure."

So said Professor Alexander F. Fleet in 1883. This year the University will celebrate 85 years of ownership of the original Thomas Jefferson monument, which now stands on the north side of Jesse Hall. The monument stood over Jefferson's grave in Virginia from shortly after his death on July 4, 1826 until July 4, 1883, when it was given to the University by the Jefferson heirs.

Dr. Samuel Spahr Laws, then president of the University, and Fleet, professor of Greek, had taken the initiative to have the monument removed to the Columbia campus. In 1883 Congress erected a new \$10,000 memorial for Jefferson's grave. Although many applied for the original monument, Fleet and Laws felt that it should be given the University for two reasons: Missouri was the second state carved out of the Louisiana Purchase territory, one of the great achievements of Jefferson as President; and Jefferson was the founder of the state university concept. The University of Missouri was the first such institution in the Louisiana territory.

A letter from Mary B. Randolph, one of the heirs of Jefferson, to Fleet in 1883 discusses the University's acquisition of the monument: "As Dr. Laws has seen the monument and knows its dilapidated condition, and still desires to place it in the grounds of the University of Missouri, thereby doing honor to Mr. Jefferson's memory, we all agree it would be the best disposition to make of the old monument, and we will send the marble slab that has the inscription on it with the monument.

"I would advise the monument should be

removed at once, as we found a few days ago that it was being broken, in spite of the precautions taken to protect it. If you are in Virginia or likely to be soon, you would do well, I think, to see the monument, for we fear it is not worth the removal."

Miss Randolph thought that the University would not want the monument because after Jefferson's death, his estate had fallen into a stranger's possession, and the graves were neglected, mutilated, and defaced. The slabs over the graves of Jefferson's wife and two daughters, for example, were carried off, piece by piece.

"The stone shows marks of chipping from visitors to the grave, but is in a remarkably good state of preservation, when we consider the number of years it has stood in its place and the many thousands who have visited the grave and gone away with relics of the spot," said Laws.

Professor Fleet was more effluent, "I feel that that old monument is as much more valuable than the new, as the bullet-pierced and torn and soiled battle flag that has passed through the war is expressibly more precious because of its memories, than the most costly and elegant new one that could be presented."

When the Missouri prize became known in Charlottesville, many persons expressed regret that the monument had not been given the University of Virginia. A St. Louis newspaper reported the rumor that Virginians were prepared to stop removal of the monument by force, and that Fleet and those helping him had to remove it from Monticello at night to prevent a riot.

But in any case, on July 27, 1883, the Missouri Statesman of Columbia said that "The

granite monument of Thomas Jefferson, recently removed from his grave at Monticello, Va., to be substituted by a new and larger one, arrived here on Friday last, and on the next day was placed in temporary position, on the university campus. It will in due time be placed in permanent position, and . . . unveiled with appropriate ceremonies. No object of our town or the state university will be the center of greater public interest.

"The monument is composed of two pieces of unpolished, rusty granite — the base three feet square, surmounted by a shaft of five and one half feet, with the date of Jefferson's death, July 4, 1826 — inscribed in rude letters and figures on one of the faces of the base.

"On a highly polished tablet of white marble some two feet by eighteen inches in size is the following inscription which was written by Mr. Jefferson himself and found among his papers at his death:

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

"This tablet is nailed up securely in a box, is in an excellent state of preservation, and will not be opened for public inspection till the ceremonies of unveiling occur."

One of the high lights of the University commencement on June 4, 1885, was the unveiling of the Jefferson monument. The principal address was given by United States Sen. George Graham Vest, who is more famous for his

"Elegy to a Dog." Other talks were given by Thomas F. Bayard, national Secretary of State, and James B. Eads, noted Missouri engineer who built Eads bridge in St. Louis.

The marble tablet featuring Jefferson's epitaph was located in the administration building. When that structure burned in 1892, the tablet was damaged. Cracked and blackened, it was repaired and placed in the vaults of the new administration building, Jesse Hall, where it remains today, only to be displayed on Jefferson Day.

In 1931 the 56th general assembly of Missouri enacted a law making April 13, Jefferson's birthday, a state holiday. On this day the next year a bronze marker for the monument was presented the University by Congressman Joseph B. Shannon of Kansas City, who was responsible for collecting funds for the marker.

The bronze tablet carries the inscription: "This original marker, placed at the grave of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, Virginia, in 1826, constructed from his own design, was presented July 4, 1883, by the Jefferson heirs to the University of Missouri, first state university to be founded in the Louisiana Territory purchased from France during President Jefferson's administration.

"The obelisk, dedicated on this campus at commencement, June 4, 1885, commemorated Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States, whose faith in the future of western America and whose confidence in the people has shaped our national ideals; commemorates the author of the Declaration of Independence and of the Virginia statute for religious freedom, founder of the University of Virginia, fosterer of public education in the United States." Then follows the original epitaph as written by Jefferson and the dates of his birth and death.

As the *Columbia Missouri Herald* of July 12, 1883, commented ". . . Welcome then any reminder of Jefferson to Missouri. May these souvenirs from his grave be a fresh inspiration to Missourians, not only in maintenance of the true principles which underlie the government which he helped to found, but also of the cause of higher education of which he was of all Americans the most conspicuous pioneer." — *Ruth Coder Fitzgerald*.

Ruth Coder Fitzgerald and her husband, Barry, are young graduates of the School of Journalism who now are serving with the Peace Corps in the Republic of the Philippines. While in Columbia, she worked for the State Historical Society, where she researched this story.