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Around the Columns

Restoring Jefferson's epitaph, a national treasure

Kee Groshong's fascination with the carved marble epitaph from Thomas Jefferson's original tombstone started when he was a student at Mizzou in the 1960s. The tablet inscription, intended as part of the tombstone, arrived at the University of Missouri in the 1880s as a gift from Jefferson's descendants. But before that, the tablet had been removed from the Monticello cemetery, where vandals damaged it not long after Jefferson died in 1826.

By the time Groshong, BS BA '64, saw the stone, it was a longtime resident of Jesse Hall and before that Academic Hall, where workers salvaged it after the devastating 1892 fire. "They used to get it out for Tap Day, and they'd bounce it around on a cart on Jesse's north patio." After graduating, Groshong spent his career at MU, retiring in 2002 as vice chancellor of administrative services. "I saw it periodically in the building. At one point they kept it in the cashier's vault



The epitaph from Thomas Jefferson's tombstone needs restoration. Former MU administrator Kee

on the first floor. Over the years it Groshong is on the job. Photo by Rob Hill deteriorated, probably from fire damage and age. I thought it would be great to get it repaired and put back on display.”




Even in retirement, Groshong’s dream remained on his bucket list. “As I’m getting close to sinking my bucket, I thought I’d better get on it.” He is working with campus leaders to raise money for restoration costs and to display it in the Jesse Hall foyer.

The tablet is delicate, says conservator Marianne Marti of Russell-Marti Conservation Services in California, Mo. Parts of the marble surface are chipping away. “Just beneath the surface, the material is friable, or sugary,” she says. “If you touched it, it would rub away.”

Restoration would start with a deep cleaning to remove nearly two centuries of dirt in the stone’s pores. Then conservators would treat it with a chemical to make it more solid. Eventually, she says, the stone could be used as a mold to produce a copy of the epitaph, which could go back on the monument on Francis Quadrangle.

It would be worth all the trouble, Groshong says. “Jefferson’s epitaph is important not just to Mizzou but also the nation.”

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