

CELEBRATE LIFE IN  
JEFFERSON'S VIRGINIA

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## the lives of Montpelier

Unearthing the past at  
the home of James and  
Dolley Madison

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**A WILD LIFE: A VISUAL BIOGRAPHY OF ALBEMARLE PHOTOGRAPHER MICHAEL NICHOLS • MORVEN: THE NEXT CHAPTER • MILLER CENTER: A HOME FOR THE PRESIDENCY • VIRGINIA WINE: SLIGHTLY CHILLED, VERY REFRESHING**  
• ALBEMARLE CHAPTER DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION  
• EVENTS IN AND AROUND JEFFERSON'S VIRGINIA



Montpelier descendants Leontyne Peck, holding an oyster shell, and Lillian Pitchford on the South Yard of the property.

EDUARDO MONTES-BRADI/ETHE MONTPELIER FOUNDATION

# THE DESCENDANTS

Montpelier's exhibition *The Mere Distinction Of Colour* reimagines how to tell the story of slavery during the time of our founding fathers

By Katie Henry

Leontyne Peck hugs her friend Mary Alexander in the middle of Hot Cakes, a lively cafe in Charlottesville, VA.

"Hey ladybug looking all beautiful. Hey queenie," says Peck adding a playful nudge. They treat each other like family, which they may actually be. Peck and Alexander recently mailed a test tube of saliva to Ancestry.com, a website that offers genetic testing, to find out if they're cousins.

Alexander runs her hand over her necklace, slides into a chair, and invites Leontyne to her birthday party next Wednesday.

Today Alexander wears a navy wool coat with an oversized fur lapel, heavy layered strands of pearls around her neck, and an embroidered scarf styled like a turban to crown the ensemble.

She looks like she stepped out of fashion magazine from 1950.

"I dress the old fashion way. If we had a time machine and it turned the hands of time back, I would be just as comfortable walking around with white gloves and a purse and a hat," says Alexander.

Peck shares Alexander's passion for history and genealogy. She's published two books about her family history. But the two women didn't know each other at all until two years ago when they met at a Montpelier Board of Advisors meeting. They became fast friends. The pair share a similar family history. Both women trace their roots to slaves in Orange County, VA, about a 45-minute drive northeast of the cafe. Alexander is the great great granddaughter of

Paul Jennings, James Madison's butler while Madison lived at Montpelier—his estate in Orange County. Madison was the fourth President and father of the Constitution.

Montpelier started unearthing the past of the slaves who lived there in 2014 thanks to a \$10 million grant from co-founder and co-CEO of The Carlyle Group David Rubenstein. Uniting a previously scattered community of slave descendants has been a byproduct of this effort. Since Dolley and James Madison didn't have biological children together, this community has arguably the most direct tie to Montpelier today. Montpelier is incorporating passed-down stories from the slaves who worked the property to create a type of slavery exhibition that's never been done before.

## A NEW KIND OF EXHIBITION

What might you expect walking into the cellar space of a historic home? It might be cast-iron pots and pans or weathered tables and chairs. On most plantation sites, slavery exhibitions narrate the work performed by the slaves—how heavy a pan is or how hot the fire was. Exhibitions often remove the humanity of the story and set the lives of enslaved people apart from the main house. After all, it's decidedly negative, a story of pain and suffering. But just recreating slave quarters or describing their routines reduces the lives of nearly 300 slaves at Montpelier to labor.

The Montpelier exhibit aims to redefine what it means to tell the story of slavery at the home of a founding father. Picture a modern art museum, rather than a reconstructed slave-run kitchen.

Visitors will see photos, voices and storytelling from the descendants themselves—stories that have survived generations in their families to bring the slaves to life and to show how those stories affect descendants, like Alexander, today.

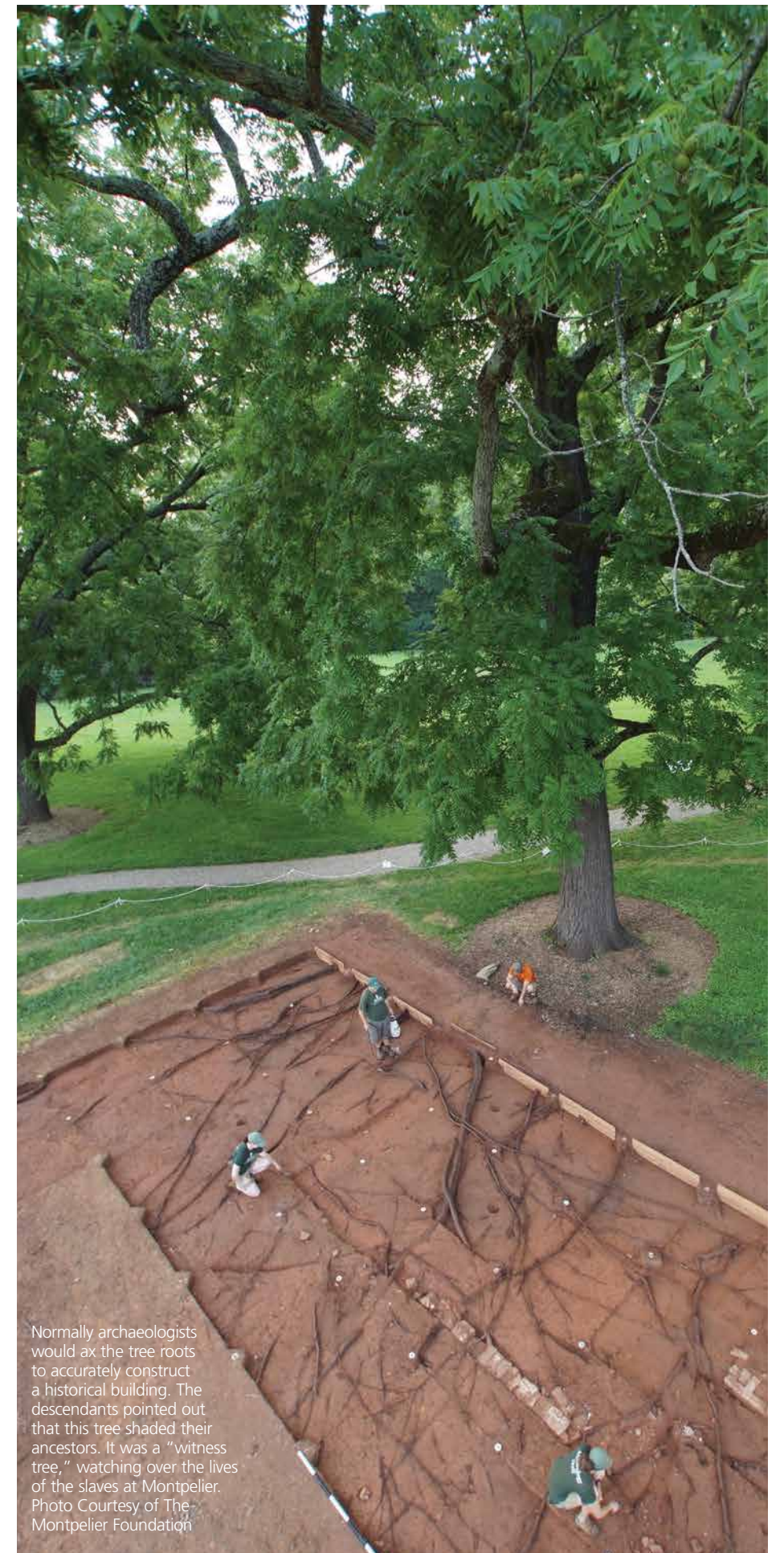
"Paul Jennings never let the case of him being a slave serve as an excuse for anything in his life. When he died, all of his children were free. He owned two houses in Washington, DC," says Alexander. "I don't make excuses for myself, and I don't take others' excuses lightly."

Montpelier's goal is to get visitors to understand the slaves as individuals, not just workers. This approach challenges the way historians have traditionally shaped their understanding of the past because oral histories were often discounted until about 25 years ago. Now they're being taken more seriously. For one, it's often all we have. There's scarce written information from the slaves themselves.

Alexander has a deeper understanding of her ancestor than most slave descendants. She knows that Jennings stood in the room with power players of the American Revolution from Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe to Madison and Marquis de Lafayette. She's read the book Jennings wrote about his relationship with the former president.

Montpelier asked Alexander, Peck and other the slave descendants to advise and shape the direction of the exhibition and be a part of it in a direct and visible way. Descendants requested that Montpelier not leave slavery in the past and emphasize the humanity of their ancestors.

"We didn't just want to say, 'Hey here's where they lived and what they



Normally archaeologists would ax the tree roots to accurately construct a historical building. The descendants pointed out that this tree shaded their ancestors. It was a "witness tree," watching over the lives of the slaves at Montpelier. Photo Courtesy of The Montpelier Foundation

# MONTPELIER THROUGH TIME

The architectural restoration and preservation of Montpelier, the rural Virginia Piedmont home of James and Dolley Madison, is among the most complex and fascinating of our generation. James Madison's grandfather, Ambrose Madison, was born in Virginia in 1696. In 1723 he acquired 4,675 acres of land in what would become Orange County. There he developed a tobacco plantation known as Mount Pleasant (and later as Montpelier). To clear the land to secure title, Madison bought 29 African slaves, likely Igbo. The Madison family moved to the plantation in 1732 after a house had been built and tobacco cultivation had started.

James Madison, Sr., father of President Madison, expanded the plantation to include building services and blacksmithing in the 1740s. In the early 1760s, Madison, Sr. built a two-story brick Georgian house half a mile away. This structure forms the heart of the main house at Montpelier today.

..... 1751 .....

President James Madison born at Montpelier

..... 1809-1812 .....

Final period of construction/renovation of original home by President Madison

..... 1844 .....

Dolley Madison sells the Montpelier estate

..... 1863 .....

Civil War encampment located on property

..... 1901-1984 .....

DuPont Era at Montpelier

..... 1966 .....

Montpelier declared a National Historic Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places

..... 1984 .....

National Trust purchases Montpelier

..... 1987 .....

Montpelier opens as museum

..... 2000 .....

The Montpelier Foundation becomes steward of Montpelier 2000

..... 2008 .....

Montpelier re-opens fully restored house 2008

Thanks to a generous gift from historical philanthropist David Rubenstein, Montpelier began restoring the slave quarters in the South Yard in 2014, and finalizing a groundbreaking exhibition on slavery, *The Mere Distinction of Colour*, opening 2017.

did,' without bringing in context. You can't just come to Montpelier and learn about James Madison and Dolley's ice cream parties without knowing who the people were (behind it all)," says Peck. "We can't let that go unnoticed."

Peck can only trace her genealogy to Orange County, not to Montpelier. She can count herself among the descendants community because Montpelier interprets its descendants more broadly to include locals who feel a connection to the cause and anyone with roots in Orange County.

This strategy is different from what's been done at many other historic houses. Montpelier reasons that there were marriages between families and a lack of written documentation, so the community is hard to define. Anyone with roots in the area would likely have some connection to the property.

#### A SHIFTING MUSEUM LANDSCAPE

The level of cultural debate around race has come to a boil in the past few years, thanks to current events from the Black Lives Matter movement to immigration policies. This debate encouraging museums and historic properties to engage African American people in a deeper way.

African Americans make up 13% of the US population, but only account for 3% of museum attendees according to Reach Advisors, a consumer research group. There are many reasons for this, but it's partly because historical exhibits often don't focus on African American history. Montpelier aims to change this, and it isn't alone in this new effort to try to delve deeper into African Americans' history and attract a more diverse community of visitors.

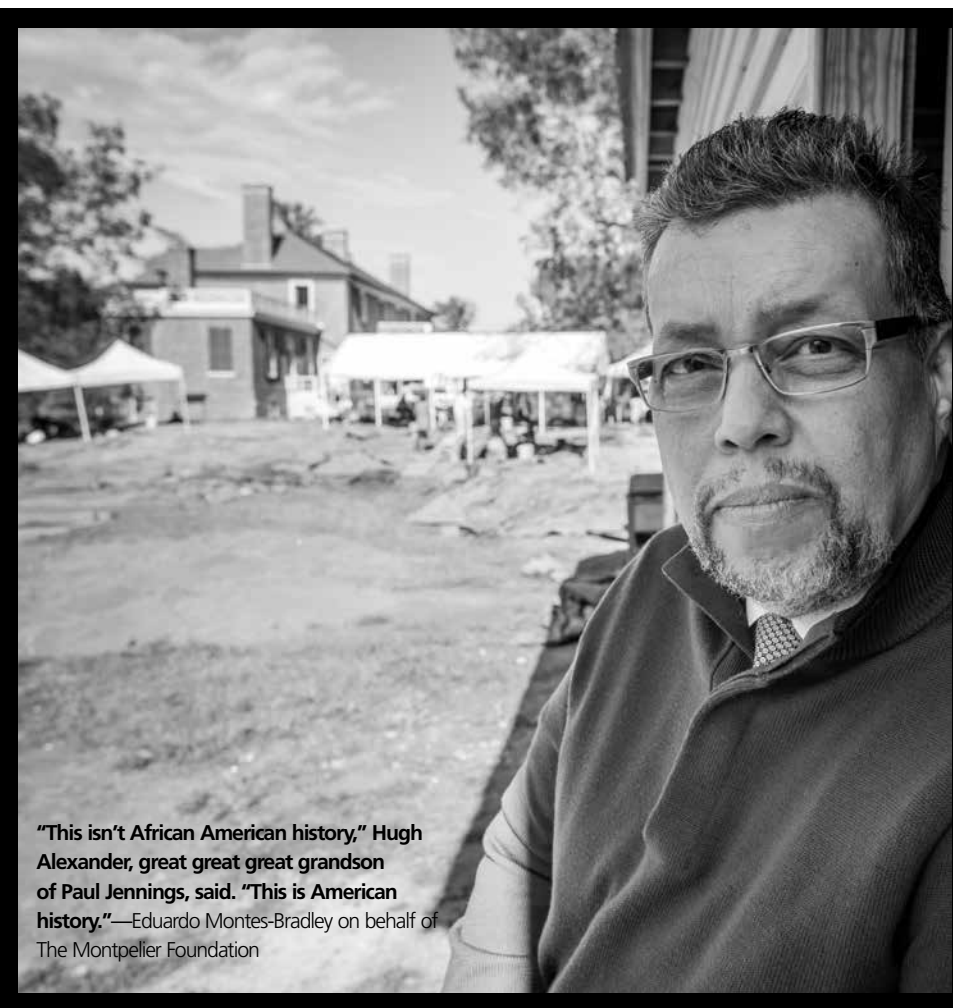
Opening the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) took decades of planning and strategizing. Now getting in demands waiting in a line that stretches almost half a mile plus registering far in advance. It's the hottest ticket in Washington, DC. The NMAAHC consulted and advised Montpelier about their plans for the exhibition.

Nancy Bercau, a curator at the NMAAHC, worked with Montpelier to ensure that visitors would see the role slavery had in building our society and tell a more complete history.

"Often enslaved people are flattened into narrow categories such as 'workers,' or 'rebel.' This can define people as a category rather than as a human being. We emphasize the fullness of human life—how people live within and live beyond a system that works



Paul Jennings, James Madison's butler while Madison lived at Montpelier. Photo Courtesy Estate of Sylvia Jennings/The Montpelier Foundation



"This isn't African American history," Hugh Alexander, great great great grandson of Paul Jennings, said. "This is American history."—Eduardo Montes-Bradley on behalf of The Montpelier Foundation

to dehumanize them...Montpelier has taken the important step of making slavery fully visible as you approach the site," says Bercau.

The new two-part exhibit in Montpelier's cellar addresses this challenge. One side looks at the legacy of slavery in America today. It explains slavery's connection to nationalism, economics and policy with an eye on Madison and the Constitution. Interactive maps about the international slave trade hang on brick walls. Dots shoot across the Atlantic to show every documented slave voyage that made it across the ocean since 1866. Diagrams illustrate how anyone with money was connected to the slave trade, how the whole world had industries supporting the institution.

The other side of the cellar tells the human side using individual stories of the slaves who lived and worked at Montpelier. Visitors approach screens displaying common questions about slavery. They touch the screen and pick up a wand to listen to answers from the descendants of Montpelier slaves and other experts at each station. Black and white photographs punctuate these stories.

A six-minute documentary airs in a small screening room. It illustrates how

the legacy of slavery is seen in the US today.

"For many folks, slavery is something that happened 200 years ago, and it doesn't impact life today, (but) there is a real power of place. You can walk in the footsteps, see the objects. You can hear the voice of the descendants. That's what people will experience. They'll be able to see it, smell it, experience it and put themselves in other people's shoes," says Kat Imhoff, president and CEO of James Madison's Montpelier.

#### DIGGING UP THE PAST

When you walk behind the house to the so-named "South Yard," you'll approach two reconstructed smoke houses and two living quarters. A few years ago this place was four ghost buildings sparsely constructed with planks of lumber.

Terry Brock, the senior research archaeologist at Montpelier, steps onto the windy South Yard viewing deck. He often works with volunteers during excavations at Montpelier, but he'd never dug with volunteers with such a powerful stake in soil as the slave descendants. He gestures toward the recently overturned red Virginia clay.

"Everything they pulled out of the ground had an extra layer of meaning to them. When they find a nail, I always tell people you're the first person to touch this in 200 years. For them it's not just an old rusty nail. It's an old rusty nail that covered the roof of my ancestors," says Brock.

When Peck felt the ground in her hands, the same earth that her slave ancestors touched, it was a spiritual experience.

"I felt that when I touched that earth, I was touching something that people who could not leave that place felt. It was very emotional, and I didn't expect that," says Peck.

Each shovel full of dirt tossed sparked conversations between slave descendants, many of whom didn't know each other before the project. They lived together in a house on the property during their week-long excavation.

"It was really funny sitting there, and you could see the family traits in everybody. Facial shapes, sometimes just a smile," says Alexander. A couple of the faces she recognized. They were her neighbors growing up in DC.

The group collaborated to shape the outcome of the exhibit by weighing in



Rebecca Gilmore Coleman stands in the doorway of her family's cabin, restored by Montpelier in 2005.—Eduardo Montes-Bradley on behalf of The Montpelier Foundation

Montpelier's strong ties to the local descendants started with Rebecca Gilmore Coleman, granddaughter of George Gilmore, an Orange County freedman formerly enslaved at Montpelier. Her family's ancestral home sits right across the road from Montpelier's main gates.



on what mattered to them and what might have mattered to their ancestors.

One of the first orders of business when the excavations kicked off was to wrestle with the roots of an over 200-year-old spindly walnut tree that soars over the Montpelier house. Its roots weave their way under the slave quarters. Normally archaeologists would ax the tree roots to accurately construct a historical building. The descendants pointed out that this tree shaded their ancestors. It was a "witness tree," watching over the lives of the slaves at Montpelier. The tree had to stay.

The excavation uncovered two tobacco

pipes, each with a simple inscription, loaded with clues about the lives of the slaves that smoked from them. The first pipe displays the word "Liberty."

"That's political action. It's not writing the Constitution or voting, but he couldn't do those things," says Brock. "It shows that it's on his mind and that it matters to him. When he's in the house and listening to conversations, it shows that he's hearing that and sees the contradiction."

The second pipe displays a symbol of the masonic order, a guild of stone craftsmen. The symbol stands for freedom and equality, the claiming of a craft

and skill. It's a fraternal order.

"I found the pipe that had a masonic symbol on it," says Peck. "What it said to me is that for the enslaved, despite us being enslaved we've created a community."

The dig revealed details about slaves' lives like the exact placement of windows and location of the hearth that the drawings alone didn't show. A wall divides each of the two slave living quarters in half. In Madison's time, six to eight slaves would live in each small room, about the size of one and a half horse stalls. Rooms housed families, but who was in the family had to be flexible. It



## SIGN UP FOR A DIG!

Over the past 30 years, public archaeology has become a signature element of the Montpelier experience. By making it visible and participatory, visitors not only learn about the past, but they personally connect with it.

The public archaeology programs at Montpelier are designed to give participants an immersive, team-based archaeological experience. Montpelier offers a wide-range of opportunities for the public, including visiting the site and lab, attending week-long expedition program, participating in a field school, or volunteering in the lab. More information can be found at [www.montpelier.org/learn/unearthing-the-past](http://www.montpelier.org/learn/unearthing-the-past).



could be a married couple with their children, but slaves lives depended on the inclination of whomever owned them. Members could be sold to other plantations, so their social and family structure stayed in flux.

Today in the reconstructed living quarters, visitors watch videos of black and white photographs of slave descendants. The descendants, standing in their ancestors homes, tell passed-down narratives to paint a picture of slaves' lives. They tackle questions like why literacy was important to their ancestors.

Madison was much more likely to ask a slave to fetch a book of Plato than a hunting rifle. Slaves at Montpelier would have to be able to read to do this. Many houses had literate slaves at this time.

As the community of Montpelier slaves' great, great, great grandchildren webs back together, ambitions grow. They strive for a more in depth approach confronting the history of slavery in the US.

Peck and Alexander discuss their goals for exhibition.

"My personal hope is that they recognize that the basement exhibition is not going to be adequate to tell the story and that in the future they look toward building a museum that's totally dedicated to the whole community at Montpelier," says Alexander.

That museum would tell the stories of field workers and the average person in the slave quarters, not just the household staff. Peck sets her latte down and nods.

"They had flesh. They had a story. What did they feel?" say Peck. "I think they (Montpelier) made a wonderful start, but it's a start. It's not the finish."

A month after Peck and Alexander leave the cafe, an email pops into Peck's inbox from Ancestry.com with the results of her saliva test. She double clicks to find out that she has seven cousins related to members of Madison's family. She herself isn't directly related to either Madison's extended family or Jennings. Peck still wants to find out whether she and Alexander are cousins, but they already feel closer than that.

"Either way...we're pretty much like sisters," says Peck.

*Katie Henry is a multimedia freelance journalist who grew up in Charlottesville. She is an alumna of Tandem Friends School, the University of Virginia and Georgetown University. She enjoys writing feature stories that start fresh conversations about her community.*