

Monticello to return to past

Officials plan big changes

By David Dadurka
Daily Progress staff writer

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At Monticello, a second-floor family bedroom doubles as an office for one of the curators. File cabinets line the wall where Thomas Jefferson's relatives once slept.

Outside the stately mansion, a building that once served as a weaver's cottage is the administrative office for the foundation that owns and operates the historic Albemarle County plantation.

"It is a Rube Goldberg world here," said Daniel P. Jordan, president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation.

That's all about to change.

Monticello officials are undertaking a massive, \$60 million effort to return the mountaintop to its original 18th-century state. They also plan to construct two new facilities to consolidate administrative offices and create a visitors' complex, which would house museum exhibits, shops and an education center.

"It's the most ambitious undertaking since the foundation was incorporated in 1923," Jordan said, "but we believe Thomas Jefferson deserves it."

Monticello is one of many historic homes nationwide getting a makeover. Montpelier officials announced plans in October to remove additions the DuPont family made to James Madison's Barboursville mansion, restoring it to the original 22-room home of the 1820s. Chicago's Robie House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, is yet another – though more modern – house being restored to its historic appearance.

Monticello, however, is lucky in that few changes or additions have been made over the years.

The Levy family, which purchased Monticello in 1836 and sold it to the foundation in 1923, made only superficial changes, Jordan said. (This after James T. Barclay, an eccentric Charlottesville pharmacist, attempted to turn the property into a silkworm farm and, by some accounts, left it in shambles.)

"The Levys were great stewards and preserved the essential structures," he said.

Removing 20th-century additions such as Monticello's gift shop will be of little historical importance, noted Richard Guy, a professor of architecture history at the University of Virginia.

"People come to Monticello to step back to the point in time when Jefferson strode through there," Wilson said. Monticello "is far better maintained or pristine than it was in his time."

Though work on the mountaintop villa was largely completed in 1782, the third president constantly fiddled with it, Wilson said.

"It was a construction zone there the entire time."

New structures

The shuttle station, located in the parking lot below Jefferson's home, is a quaint, wood structure where thousands have waited to get a glimpse of early American life. It one day would be replaced by a new visitors complex.

The new administration building, meanwhile, would be built on a site near the Jefferson Library, about half a mile from Monticello. The exact location still is unclear, officials said.

The foundation selected Baltimore-based architecture firm Ayers/Saint/Gross in December to design the buildings as well as to advise the foundation on removing roughly 35,000 square feet of modern mountaintop intrusions. The firm worked on renovations and expansion of UVa's School of Law.

Though no conceptual drawings of the new buildings have been made, principal architect Adam Gross said the designs of the proposed visitors complex and the new administration building will not compete with or mimic Monticello.

Respectful designs

"We are charged with designing something that is respectful to the site and landscape," Gross said.

The parking lot "is the only site we could ethically incorporate changes because it had already been disturbed," said Katt Imhoff, Monticello's chief operating officer.

A slave cemetery is located in the parking lot, which served as an agricultural field in Jefferson's time. Imhoff said that one idea is to create a wooded corridor from the new complex, leading visitors to the burial site.

"Right now, you are lucky to stumble upon it on the way out," she said.

The shuttle station, Imhoff added, has served its function as a place to buy tickets and has a rustic charm. But the station's simplicity offers little opportunity or space for educating visitors while they wait to catch a bus to Monticello.

Monticello houses its exhibits and operates its education center from the Charlottesville area's visitor center on Route 20, about 2 miles below the historic home's entrance.

Only about a quarter of the half-million tourists who visit Monticello yearly stop at the visitors' center, Imhoff said.

Monticello officials hope to unveil an advance ticket reservation system later this year.

"If you get there and have to stand in line, you will be cranky," Albemarle Supervisor Sally H. Thomas said. "If you know for sure you will get in at 1:30, it will free up people to feel that they can visit other tourism, shopping and eating attractions."

Long-term plans

The effort to create a visitors complex has been in the works for more than a decade.

The foundation originally planned to use the site of the former Blue Ridge Hospital, in partnership with UVa.

Jordan said that despite an "agreement in principle" with UVa, the two organizations weren't able to craft a satisfactory lease and "departed as friends."

In 2002, Leonard W. Sandridge Jr., UVa's executive vice president, said the university planned to develop its third research park there. A UVa spokeswoman said last week that though the plans are still a possibility, a final decision on what the university will do with the site is years away.

Construction on Monticello's new facilities won't start for at least two more years.

The foundation will submit its plans to Albemarle County in June and hopes to complete the zoning process by spring of 2005, Jordan said. Construction, he estimated, would start roughly eight to 12 months after that.

All of that, however, depends on how much money the foundation raises to pay for the \$60 million project.

The initial fund raising, Jordan said, has been encouraging. So far, the foundation has raised \$18 million.

Albemarle Supervisor Lindsey G. Dorrier Jr. said the project should have a positive impact on the area's tourism industry.

"The rising tide lifts all the boats," he said. "The tide of tourism will certainly rise with the renovations at Monticello."
