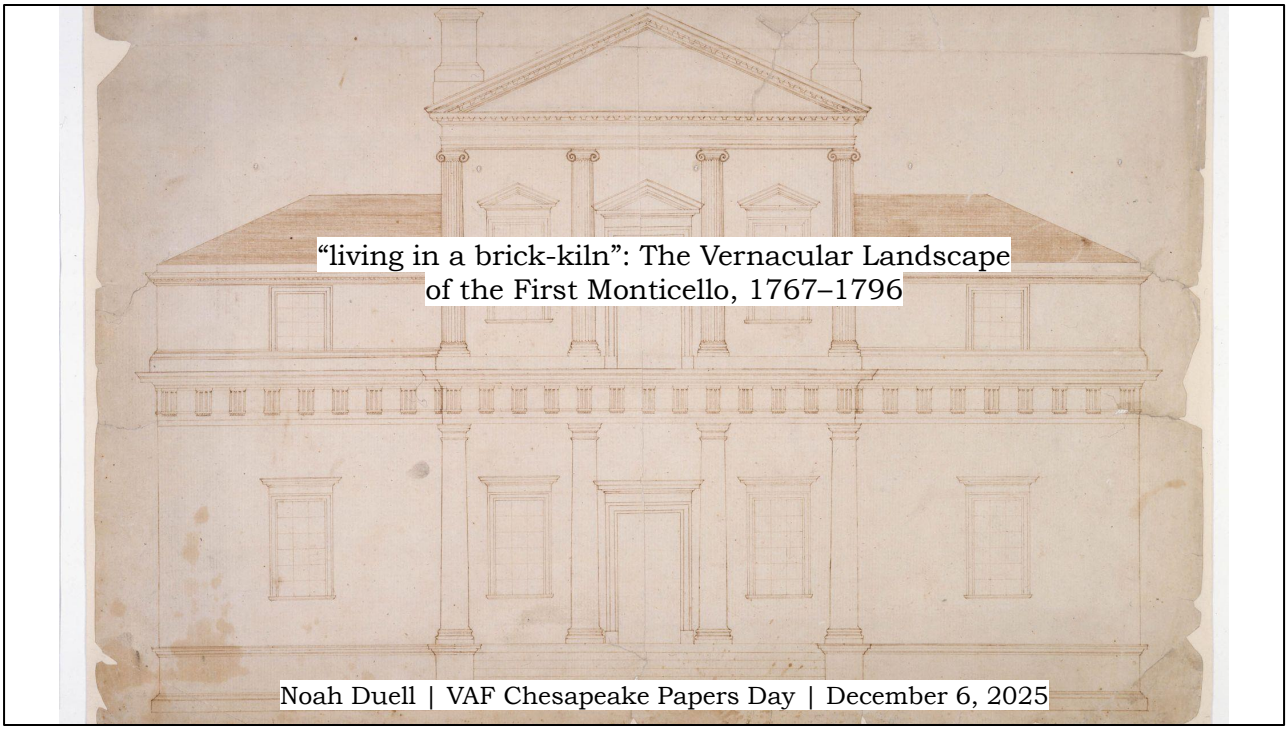
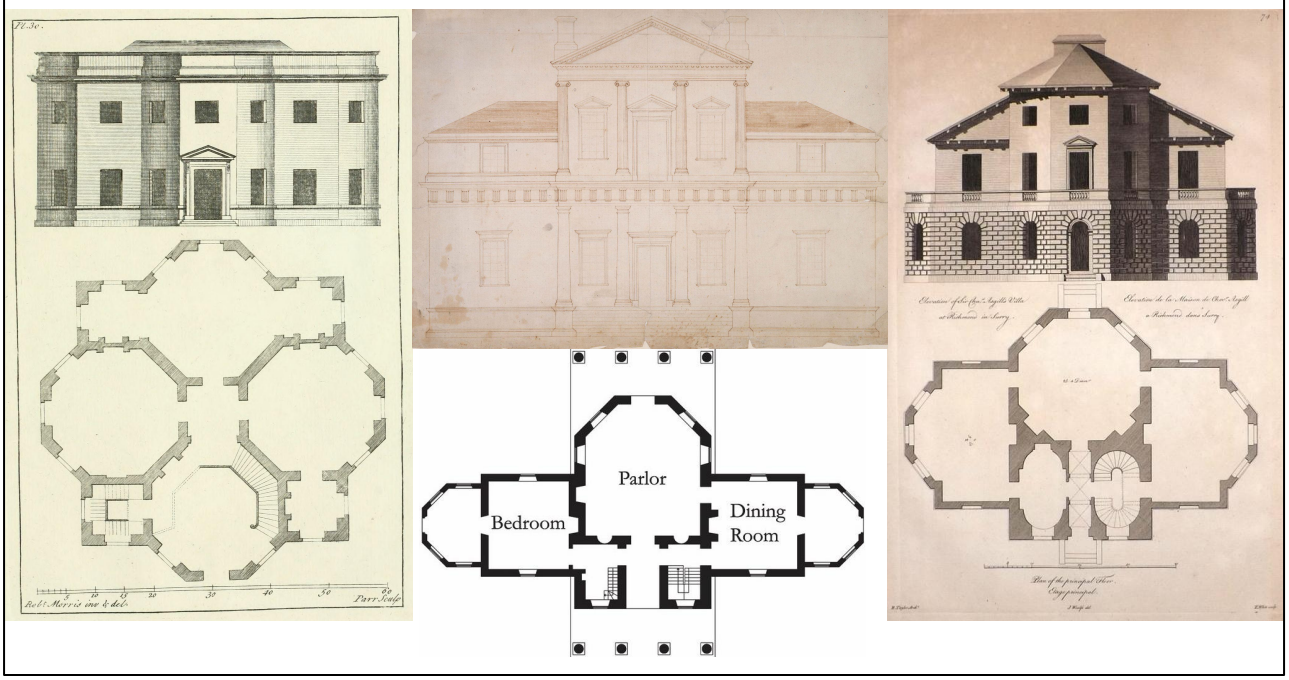
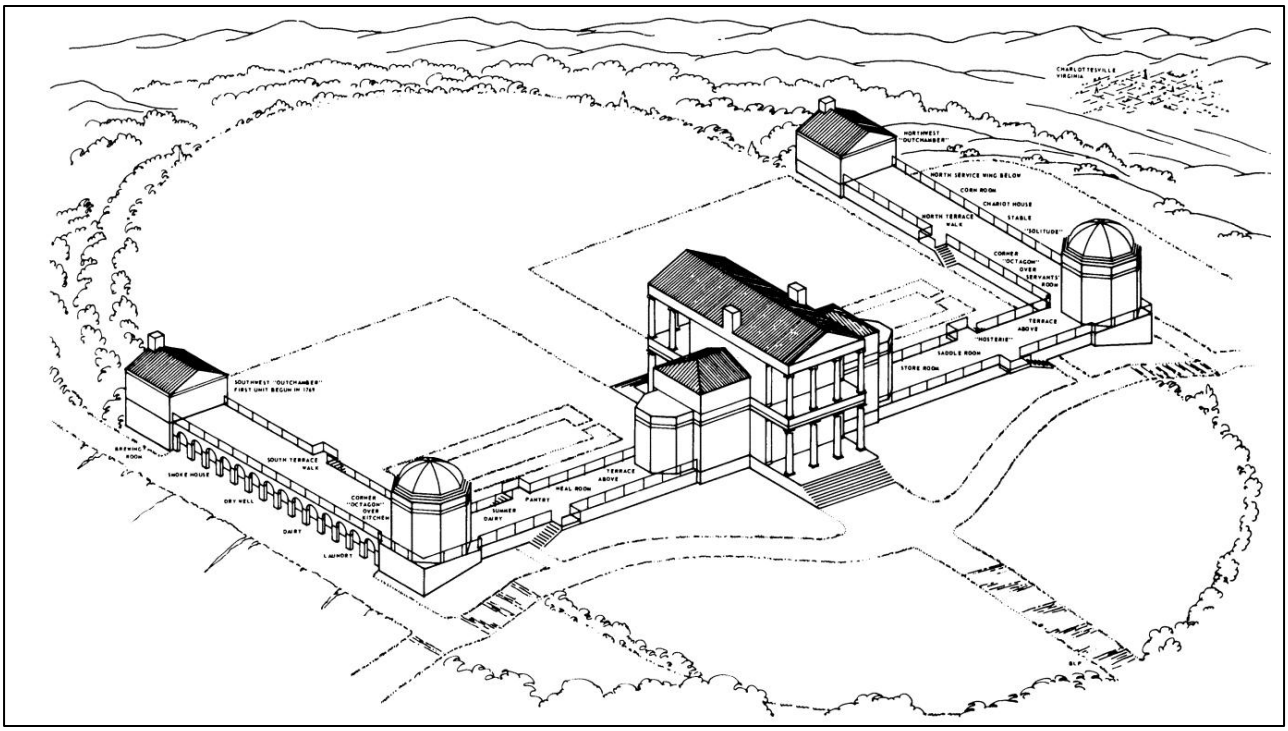


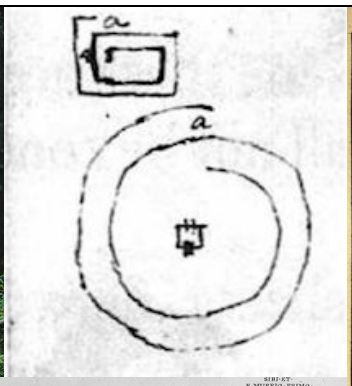
Good morning! Before I begin, I wanted to share a little about myself. While my professional career has thus far focused on non-profit and especially museum fundraising, my educational background and research is as an architectural historian, focused primarily on the works and influence of Thomas Jefferson. I graduated this past May with my Master of Architectural History from the University of Virginia, where I studied under Louis Nelson, and my presentation today builds on my graduate thesis, “‘living in a brick-kiln’: Intent and Reality at the First Monticello, 1767—1796.” My thesis emphasized the differences between the ambitious designs of the First Monticello and the more commonplace life-as-lived. Historically, historians have tended to overemphasize the extraordinary design of the house at the expense of what actually existed in situ. Today, I intend to show how these narratives have obscured the ways in which the house and landscape at Monticello were, for most of its history, caught between the ordinary and extraordinary and the vernacular and elaborately self-expressive. My goal, both in my thesis and in the work that’s followed, has been to recover the early period to illuminate what life might have been like for those who lived there, and at the same time get a better sense of the house’s construction history, which is not as well established as one might think.

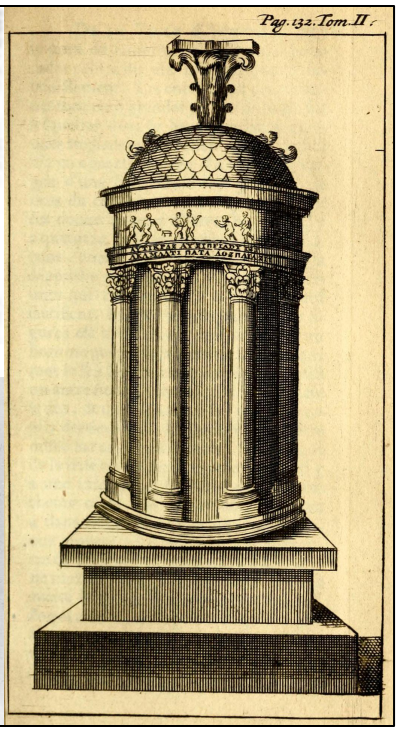


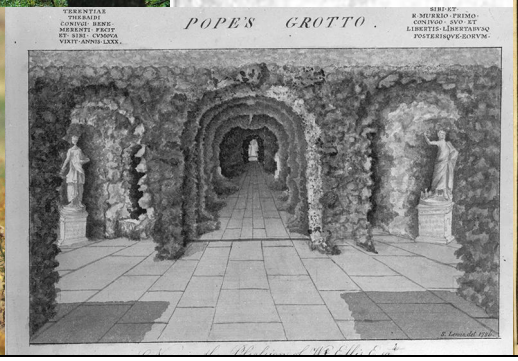
As a house, the First Monticello was a compact Palladian villa, first of six rooms and later eight. We can see the original plan and elevation in the center here. On the primary floor was a bedchamber, parlor, and dining room, with a study and two additional attic bedchambers above. In form, it fit neatly into a prevailing mid-to-late-18th century trend in the Anglo-American world, where well-to-do patrons commissioned or designed small villas as retreats, often outside major metropolitan areas and after Palladian and Anglo-Palladian pattern book sources. On the right, for example, is Sir Robert Taylor's 1758 Asgill House just outside London, and on the left is plate 30 in Robert Morris's 1755 *Select Architecture*. Morris noted that "[t]he Situation of this Structure should be on an Eminence whose Summit should overlook a long extended Vale, and, if attainable, quite round the Horizon, so that each Room is a quick and easy Transition to some new Object..."



Jefferson intended such a view for his house at Monticello, which he further enhanced with two L-shaped dependencies as depicted here in a conjectural view by Buford Pickens. Jefferson probably sourced the shape of these dependencies from the Villa Saraceno in Plate 41 of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture*, but he departed from his source in having the wings face away from the main entrance—thereby sacrificing the traditional Palladian forecourt—and by embedding the dependencies in the slope of the mountain to allow a full vista from the terraces above while accommodating workspace and living quarters for enslaved laborers below.



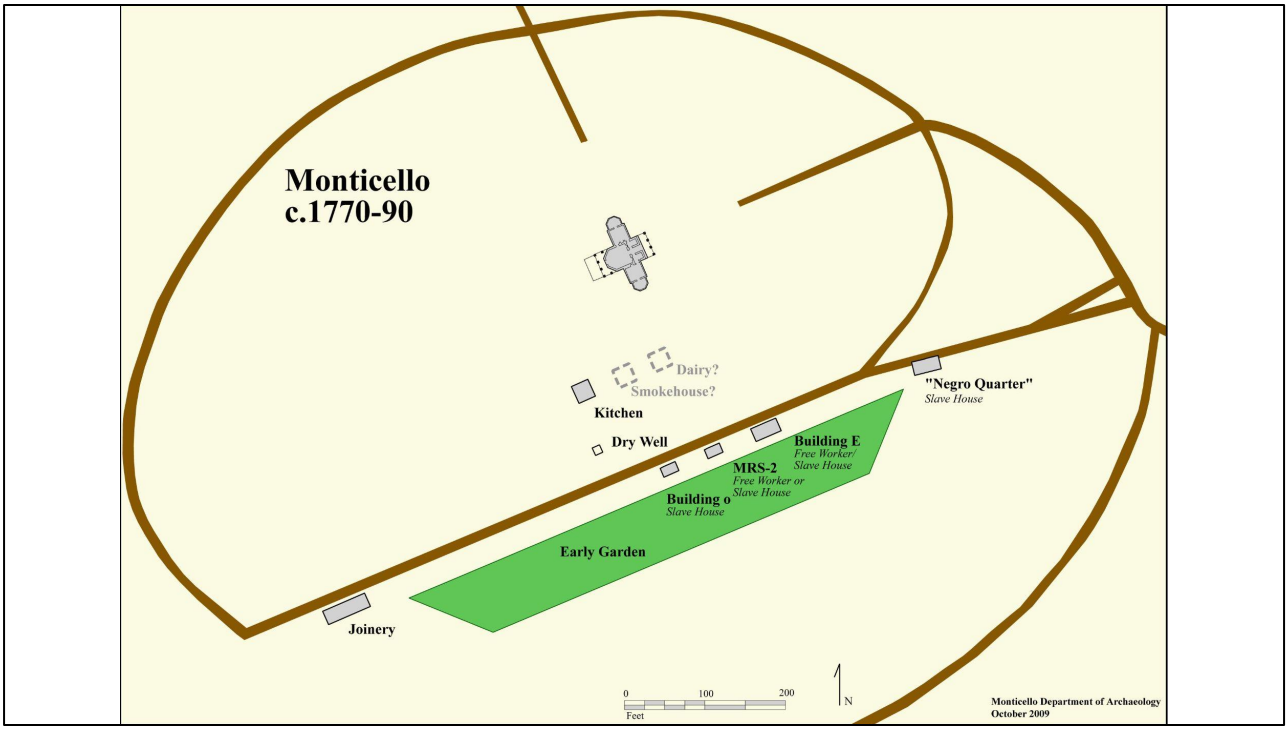




The cultivated vistas produced by the dependencies were an essential part of the broader English landscape that Jefferson planned for the estate, which contained a number of fanciful elements that he intended to delight his friends and family. These included, as Jefferson wrote in his Memorandum Book, “a cave or grotto” based on that at Alexander Pope’s Twickenham, and a temple at his burying ground, with a roof that “may be Chinese, Graecian, or in the taste of the Lanthern of Demosthenes,” now known as the Chroagic Monument of Lysikrates in Athens. Jefferson would have known this building from Jacob Spon’s 1678 *Voyage d’Italie*, the plate of which is pictured here at right.

Jefferson also suggested he might “procure a buck elk, to be as it were Monarch of the wood; but keep him shy, that his appearance may not lose it’s effect by too much familiarity.” And if that wasn’t enough, he noted that, “A buffalo might perhaps be confined also.” With these features, we get a sense of what Jefferson’s imagination had conjured for his mountaintop estate in the Virginia Piedmont. Part English landscape garden, part classical villa, it was undoubtedly one of the most ambitious and extraordinary architectural and landscape projects in Colonial North America.

What he had in reality after almost a quarter century of stop-and-start construction was a considerably different story. The conjectural view shown here depicts the landscape as it probably appeared around 1790, a few months after Jefferson's four-year stay in Paris. It is this landscape—that is, the landscape of reality, rather than of design or intent—that is my focus today. In my thesis, I argued that the vast difference between Jefferson's intent and reality boiled down to four factors: the lack of skilled labor of the caliber Jefferson sought; financial limitations wrought by his impractical demands and incurred debt; his extensive personal and political activity; and the institution of slavery, which plagued him throughout his life. Jefferson complained in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that "a workman could scarcely be found capable of drawing an order," and indeed on that count he was mostly correct. Jefferson's search for stone carvers and masons, for example, was more often than not a wild goose chase, in part because he could not coax skilled workmen to leave places like Philadelphia and London for central Virginia. When he did, he instructed that they "should not stay one day in Richmond: as even an hour may give them ideas which may destroy their utility to me afterwards." In addition, building on a plan as ambitious outpaced even Jefferson's considerable resources as a planter, especially when we consider the debts he inherited after the death of his father-in-law. If that wasn't enough, Jefferson's activities first as a lawyer and later as a politician kept him away from Monticello, often for months at a time. Recognizing this need, he wrote to his London agent in 1771 to procure him a competent "architect"—which is to say builder—but these efforts, like many that followed, essentially went nowhere. Thus construction at Monticello was delayed, stalled, and limited when compared to his plans.



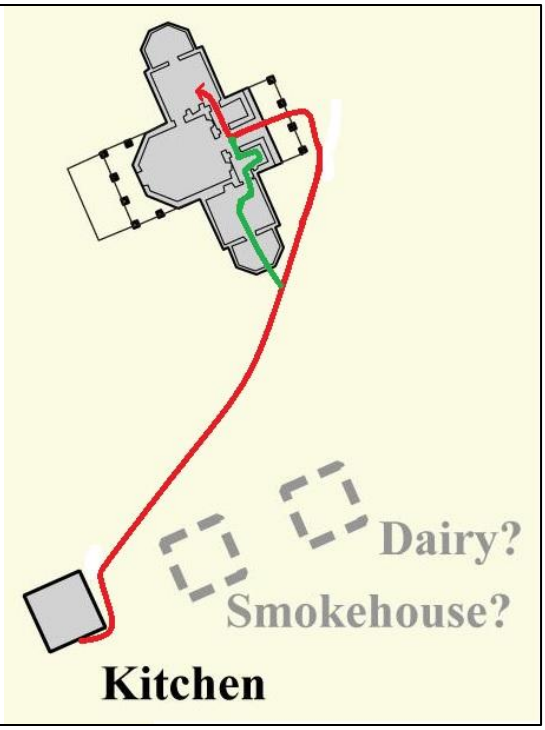
Instead of a crowning Palladian villa, Monticello was better defined by its broader landscape, which included a number of plantation outbuildings like those that appeared across the Chesapeake. This plan by Monticello archaeologist Fraser Neiman and his team shows the structures that are confirmed to have been on Monticello based on archaeological evidence. These included:

- The outchamber—or sometimes romantically called Jefferson's "Honeymoon Cottage"—which was a two-room, two-story brick structure that served as Jefferson's and later his wife Martha's living quarters while free and enslaved laborers constructed Monticello. The structure contained a kitchen below that served the plantation until free and enslaved laborers constructed a new kitchen in 1809.
- There was also a joinery, wherein free and enslaved laborers built the fundamental elements of the main house;
- building o, probably a log structure that has evidence of both domestic and industrial use before 1800;
- MRS-2, a domestic log structure constructed in the 1780s that Jefferson never recorded or mentioned but which archaeologists nevertheless unearthed in the 1980s;
- Building E, a two-room stone building constructed in the 1770s to house enslaved people, including at one point Critta Hemings;
- And the Negro Quarter, a barracks-style structure that probably housed several families at once before its destruction around 1790

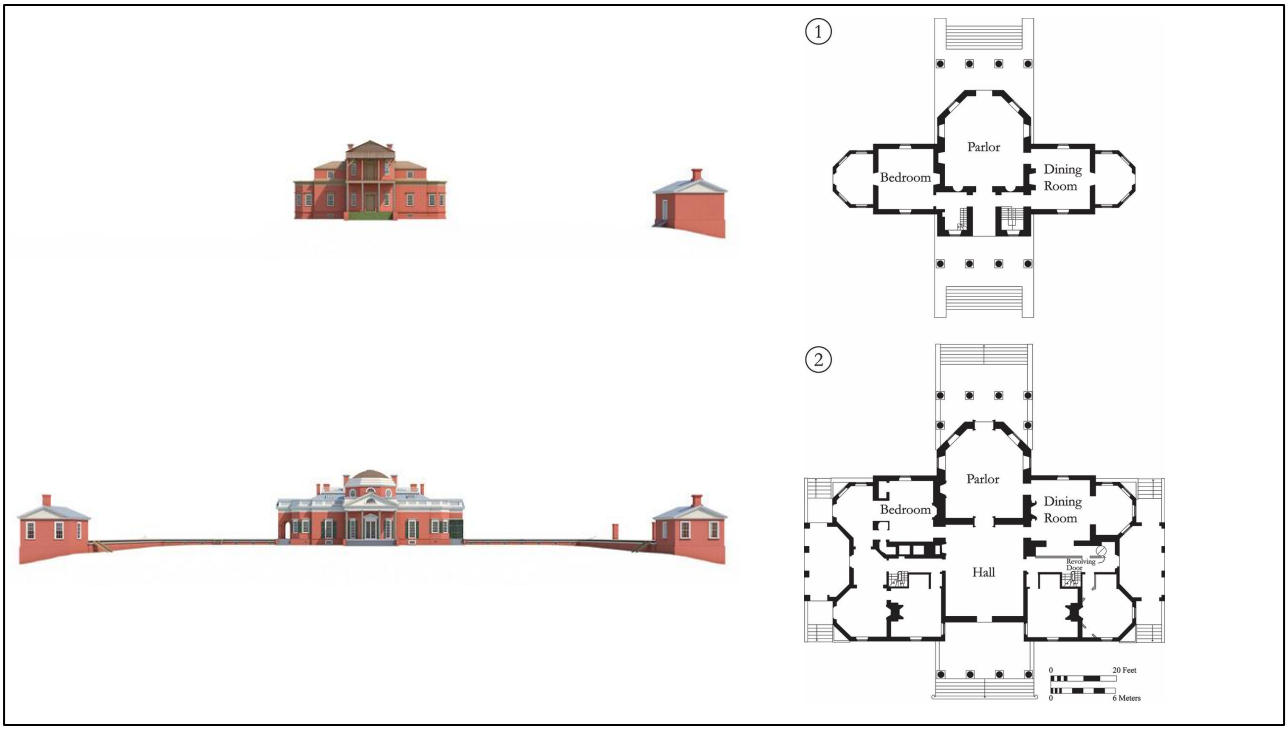
While the stone Building E, with its Tuscan entablature and fanlight, was architecturally elaborate and permanent than the other structures on Mulberry Row, it is clear that these more commonplace buildings comprised most of the landscape of Monticello and its immediate surroundings.

Speaking of the house specifically, it's important to note that it was only habitable after 1775, when Jefferson and his wife moved their from the one-room outchamber nearby. The title of my thesis and of this presentation references this fact directly. The quote comes from a 1794 letter to George Wythe in which Jefferson described the state of the house: "We are now living in a brick-kiln," he wrote "for my house, in it's present state, is nothing better." That the house was still largely if not entirely unplastered before the redesign commenced in 1796 is an important fact that historians have generally failed to emphasize in their analyses. In referencing Jefferson's elevation drawing, there is a propensity to assume that its finely articulated Ionic and Doric columns, for example, reflect construction, and indeed there are extant drawings by Jefferson for the Ionic entablature, but there is no evidence that the upper order was ever constructed. The house on the left, then, only ever existed on paper, and in fact it was not until 1823 that the west front of Monticello—pictured here—ever received columns. As late as 1807, British diplomat Augustus John Foster remarked that "[t]he house has two porticoes of the Doric order, though one of them was not quite completed, and the pediment had in the meanwhile to be supported on the stems of four tulip trees…" Although Foster noted that these stems were "really, when well grown, as beautiful as the fluted shafts of Corinthian pillars," they were a far cry from the two-tier portico of Jefferson's initial design and a consolation for the redesigned, single-story portico.

This arrangement of transitional architecture—of brick-kilns and tulip poplar stems—had a parallel at the Arlington House just a few miles from here. The white parlor—pictured here at left—remained unpainted and unplastered for 39 years, much like the parlor at Monticello pictured at right. Writing around 1875, a cousin to the Lees recalled that in 1845, the room was “unfinished and unfurnished, except for one or two old sofas & tables, & many pictures hanging on the lath’d but unplastered walls. The dark shades to the windows are most always drawn, making a light congenial with the aged furniture, the gapping fireplaces, the exposed laths and the painted faces.” At both sites, museum staff have interpreted this space at the height of their grandeur, obscuring its much longer unfinished state. While we don’t have accounts of the First Monticello in an unfinished state as such, the Marquis de Chastellux, speaking of the house in future tense after his visit in 1782, wrote that “The ground floor consists chiefly of a very large lofty saloon, which *is to be decorated* in the antique style…”



With an incomplete house and a developing landscape, life at the First Monticello was one of constant transition, with an operation not unlike other gentry plantations in the Chesapeake. Rather than the elaborate underground passageways or cryptoporticus that Jefferson intended from an early point, enslaved laborers in the early period traveled in open air from the cellar of the outchamber and across the lawn, either to a the front door on the northeast portico—the path of which is in red—or, more likely, to a door in the cellar level of the semi-octagonal wing, shown here in green and in the image on the left. Once inside, enslaved laborers climbed an interior stair to the dining room, where they served food directly. Before the dumbwaiters and revolving doors that Jefferson had installed in the expanded Monticello, which we know best today in their restored state, enslaved laborers served food from a buffet, which Jefferson made note of in a very early drawing of the dining room space before free and enslaved laborers constructed the semi-octagonal wings in 1777. Thus Monticello had a dining room–outbuilding arrangement that was comparable to others of his wealth and stature.



The First Monticello's room arrangement, or space syntax, was also not unlike many other Chespeake gentry houses. Although the house had a transverse rather than a central passage, an individual could plausibly access the same kinds of rooms: the dining room from the parlor, and the bedroom, parlor, dining room, cellar, and upper floor from the passage. Although the plan is idiosyncratic in that anybody moving from one side of the house to another was required to cross an open air area Jefferson called a "lodge" or loggia, In form, the First Monticello would have been easily comprehensible to any person of Jefferson's class who crossed the threshold into the house, in part because its arrangement—from the landscape and their circulation patterns to the space syntax of the house itself—matched many of those at gentry plantations across the Chesapeake.

To summarize, I argue that extraordinary features that have come to define Monticello—features which have captivated millions of visitors over the past two centuries—were not those that defined the house for much of Jefferson's occupation. It was instead the common features of plantations more broadly that determined what life looked like for all those who lived on the mountaintop, free or enslaved, and it was those common features that defined Monticello in the memory of those who experienced it at that time—people like Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson, who spent all ten years of her marriage to Jefferson in this environment and who never lived to see the second Monticello. While it is my hope that the story of the First Monticello plays a stronger role in our modern interpretation of the site, I argue that this early period is worth studying on its own terms, so that we might demystify and *demythify* the construction of Monticello and synthesize the rich body of data from archaeology,

architectural analysis, documentary research, and Jefferson's many architectural drawings. This is the task I have set upon, and I thank you all for giving me the opportunity to share my research with you. I look forward to hearing any suggestions, comments, and questions you might have.