

EARTHWATCH INSTITUTE FIELD REPORT

Project Title: Archaeology of James Madison's Montpelier—Investigations of the Formal Front Gate of the Mansion Grounds—1808-1844

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Position/Affiliations: Director of Archaeology, Montpelier Foundation

Local Management Status of the Research Site: National Landmark Status

Key Research Objectives:

- Locate and excavate the front gate posts to the mansion grounds
- Locate and excavate the fence associated with the front gate
- Identify the fills and anomalies identified during Ground Penetrating Radar Surveys carried out in spring 2006
- Identify the nature of the burnt surface in the front yard
- Locate the front road/carriage road for the mansion grounds

Data Collection and Results

The data we have collected during the past field season consists of exposing the postholes for the Madison-era fence and gate in front of the mansion and the pavement for a carriage siding within this curved fenced area. The data we collected from the site consists of artefacts recovered in the field, drawings and photographs of all features located during the field season, and hundreds of rock and soil samples taken during the course of excavation. In the lab, we have processed all of the soil samples to identify the non-local rounded rocks that Madison had his slaves haul up from the Rapidan River for pavement.

We have achieved our original objectives for the field season. This success of our field season is very heartening after our initial concerns over whether we would be able to find any evidence of the Madison front fence! Currently, we are cataloguing and analyzing the artefacts and rock samples collected this season and over the winter months will be writing a report that summarizes these finds.

We successfully located the front gate and the immediate front fence system that the Madisons had in place during the 1808-1844 period. The evidence for the fence system consists of a series of post holes and molds (the molds have a charred edge and are 4" square in dimensions for the fence posts). This arrangement is a remarkable match to the Baroness de Neuville painting from 1808 (see Figure 1)—which provides information on the above-grade portion of the fence appearance. In addition, inside the fence we have located an area paved with cobblestones (from the Rapidan River) that appears to be a siding for carriages. The main carriage road appears to run in front of this paved siding heading roughly from the temple area over to the current location of the guide trailer. The cobbled road and fence posts were filled around 1848 when the driveway

was relocated to the front of the Portico (its current location). This act in the late 1840s ensured the incredible preservation of Madison-era remains we have located in the front yard.

What is particularly exciting is that the location of the front gate (88' from the edge of the Portico steps) exactly matches the location predicted by Allan Brown in his landscape analysis of the mansion grounds. His estimate was based on the breadth of the main core of the house (1765 + 1797 block) which is a standard measurement increment used at other sites and suggested in 18th and 19th century garden books. What makes this discovery exciting is not simply that Allan was right, but the combination of the archaeological discoveries matching with period landscape increments shows there is a larger conceptual plan for the layout of the landscape that is based on Euclidean geometry and 18th century landscaping practices. With the discovery of the front gate we are not only relocating the aesthetics of the Madison landscape but also the larger conceptual plan Madison put into place with his landscape. We will be using this conceptual plan to locate additional landscape features in our future research at the garden, temple, boxwood grotto, and other areas of the mansion grounds.

Significance/Benefits of Research

One of the goals of the archaeology department is to identify the exact layout of the front landscape (fence, gates, road, and path network) so that when we open the mansion in 2008, every visitor to the mansion will follow the same entrance route as would have been used in the 1820s. It is only through archaeology that we can reconstruct the layout of the front yard of the mansion - essential for making the modern-day visitor experience as authentic as possible. Such a goal entails not simply reconstructing the aesthetic appearance of the mansion, but to immerse visitors into the Montpelier experience in such a way that the surroundings (the entrance gate, path to the front Portico, mansion, and backyard) are a given and do not need to be reconstructed through imagery, interpretive messages, or props. With the visitor being able to experience the aesthetic through the restored elements, our interpretation of the mansion can delve into more complex topics such as how the mansion landscape would have been seen, moved through, and used very differently by the various classes of people who lived, entertained, and worked on the estate - namely the Madisons and their enslaved community. For example, while an early 19th century visitor might see the front gate system as means to move through the formal landscape while enjoying the carefully constructed views, the enslaved population would approach the front yard from the side and not have the same views. Our goal in presenting such alternating perspectives is to provide visitors with an appreciation for the complexity of plantation life. The critical awareness gained through exploring the social history surrounding the mansion will hopefully provide visitors with a new perspective on slavery, the founding fathers such as Madison, and the history of our country.

The local community would benefit from joining this new landscape information with the restored mansion, connecting visitors in a tangible way with James and Dolley Madison. It was at Montpelier, as one scholar observed, that James Madison "thought about government more deeply and with greater effect than anyone in history". The restored mansion and landscape will allow visitors to see a physical form of Madison's ideas and who he was as a person. This Earthwatch opportunity would be a stepping stone towards completely returning James Madison to the American people. The benefits apply to local, regional, and national audiences. The direct economic benefit to the Town

of Orange and Orange County, Virginia, will be realized primarily through increased tourism to the region.

Today, we are wrestling with issues of global warming, massive deforestation of rain forests, and the destruction of wildlife habitats. Leading the charge on critically examining humans' impact on environmental change are scientists, activists, and politicians who encourage choices that allow for a sustainable environment. The issues and philosophy behind environmental activism have roots that date back to the enlightenment era. Madison's scholarly pursuits (similar to Jefferson's) of curiosity regarding the natural world were born from this ideology and in many ways have as their expression the landscape that he created at Montpelier. By balancing elements of classical geometry with natural plantings, shapes, and forms, Madison was expressing the ideology of the beauty of the natural world and the pleasure that could be derived from nature. Such a view was in marked contrast to the Georgian ideology of dominance over nature and its expression through rigid symmetry of landscape elements. By more fully fleshing out Madison's expression of this view of the natural world in his own mansion landscape, we can come to a better understanding of how an appreciation of the natural world began to take expression in the early years of our country and ground some of our own conservation efforts with their historical origins.

Dissemination of Results

- Local media coverage (newspaper and television)—we had a press release late in September in which the results of excavations were announced through articles and TV news reports.
- In January 2007, we will be presenting the results of our finds to the Society for Historical Archaeology.
- By March, we hope to complete a report summarizing our finds and make this report available as a pdf file on the internet.