

*Thomas Jefferson's 'Ferme Ornée'
at Monticello*

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THOMAS JEFFERSON was the first person in Virginia, if not the colonies, to build on the top of a mountain. His fellow Virginians selected house sites 'with a good prospect,' high enough to drain well and to command a view of the adjoining landscape, but low enough to be protected from the elements and near to a good supply of water. At 867 feet above sea level, Jefferson's site was exposed to the severest weather and it was distant from a good source of water. Scenery meant much to Jefferson. He had lived at neighboring Shadwell since the age of nine and knew that this untouched site was the place where he could both conduct the normal activities of a plantation, and enjoy commanding views of the taller mountains nearby and the valleys and rivers below. He named the site Monticello, little mountain in Italian, because some of the mountains nearby were half again as tall.

He began work on his landscaping plan in 1768, the year before he began to build his plantation home. Right from the start, his concern for nature and his desire to respect everything she had to offer was evident as he initiated the landscaping of the site to impose his needs upon the land. As he read and traveled, he incorporated new ideas into the scheme for his mountaintop landscape.

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By the time of his death in 1826, Jefferson had achieved a large, working plantation of over 5,000 acres at Monticello and farms with other names that were part of the system.

The plan at Monticello followed the contours of the land. He rejected the use of formal gardens surrounding the mansion, the type that many of his fellow citizens had been installing. Favoring the Roman architecture revived by Andrea Palladio in the sixteenth century, he could not accept the grid plan for landscape often associated with these buildings. Instead, he adopted the natural style of landscape favored by eighteenth-century English gentry, which allowed him to express his interest in the preservation of the natural site.

Thomas Jefferson was keenly interested in natural history and landscapes as an observer, reader, and writer. He collected books on the subject.¹ Five chapters in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, first published in 1781, were devoted to its natural history.² Another influence was Thomas Whately's *Observations on Modern Gardening*, which he carried as a guide in 1786 when he visited gardens in southern England with his friend John Adams, the future president.

The theme of Whately's book was that 'Nature, always simple, employs but four materials in the composition of her scenes, *ground, wood, water, and rocks*. The cultivation of nature has introduced a fifth species, the buildings requisite for the accommodation of men. Each of these again admits of varieties in figure, dimensions, colour, and situation. Every landskip is composed of these parts only; every beauty in a landskip depends on the application of their several varieties.'³ Later in the book Whately describes the concept of the 'ornamented farm,' where, to quote

1. Selected titles in natural history and travel appear in the Appendix. For a complete list of the books on landscape, agriculture, and horticulture in Jefferson's library, see *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 1766-1824*, annotated by Edwin M. Betts (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1944), pp. 655-62.

2. The chapters devoted to natural history were entitled, Rivers, Mountains, Cascades, Productions, mineral, vegetable, and animal, and Climate. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1829).

3. Thomas Whately, *Observations on Modern Gardening* (London: 1770), p. 2.

from Jefferson, 'the minor articles of husbandry' are arranged 'into a *ferme ornée* by interspersing occasionally the attributes of a garden.'⁴

Among the landscapes visited by Jefferson and Adams were The Leasowes near Shrewsbury, previously owned by the poet William Shenstone, and Woburn Farm near Chertsey, formerly owned by Phillip Southcote. Whately gives a description of Woburn Farm: 'The flat is divided into cornfields; the pastures occupy the hill; they are surrounded by the walk, and crossed by a communication carried along the brow . . . and which divides them into two lawns, each completely encompassed with a garden. These are in themselves delightful; the ground in both lies beautifully; they are diversified with clumps and single trees, and the buildings in the walk seem to belong to them. The hills were crowned with temples, the ruin of a chapel, and a 'neat Gothic building' and the grounds were plentifully furnished with little seats and bridges, decorations which were to become familiar objects in the landscape garden.'⁵ Although Thomas Jefferson made disapproving comments about specific features in both these ornamented farms, he highly approved of the concept. The experience greatly enriched his own ideas about creating a *ferme ornée* at Monticello.

THE PLAN

Most eighteenth-century Virginia plantations followed a similar pattern in plan. Nearest the house were the ornamental gardens, shade trees, and household services. In a zone further away were the orchards, vegetable gardens, barns and sheds, and some of the farm land. Further out were pastures, hay and grain fields, and forests. The plan for Monticello followed this traditional plan excepting that it included a grove for a collection of ornamental trees and shrubs and some special plots for growing experimental grains and forages. (Fig. 1.)

In giving order to the mountaintop landscape, Jefferson encir-

4. Betts, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, p. 360.

5. Whately, *Observations*, p. 177.

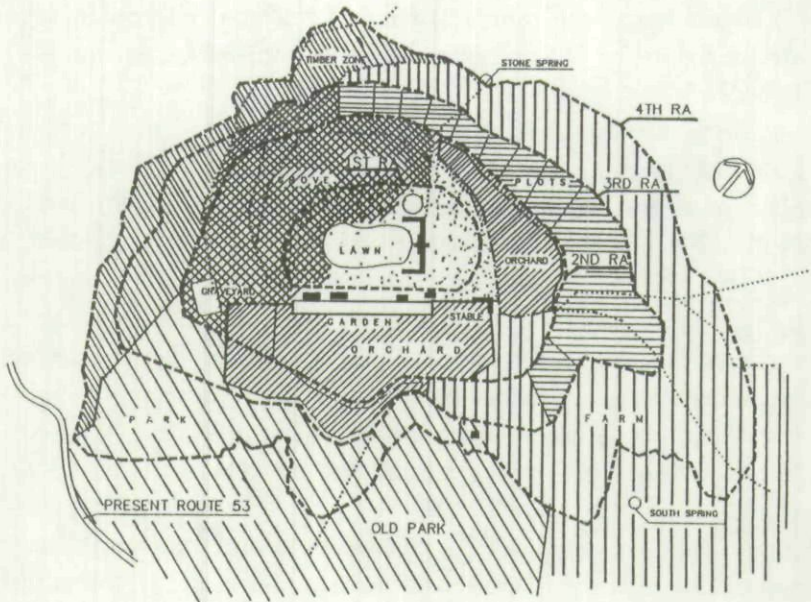


Fig. 1. A drawing of Monticello Mountain showing the four roundabouts with intervening land uses. Note how the roundabouts essentially define each use zone. (Drawing based on a composite drawing by William L. Beiswanger, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc., 1980.)

clad each of these zones with what he called a roundabout road. (See figs. 1 and 2.) These roundabouts generally maintained a single contour elevation, forming a series of concentric rings around the mountain. The distance between the four roundabouts varied according to the amount of acreage required for each purpose.

Between 1768 and 1809, about twenty miles of roads were built. Some of the roads and paths were placed obliquely to make the grade easier. There were connecting paths, such as the 1:10 and the 1:20, as well as The Road Descending and the path to the burying ground. There were also direct roads perpendicular to the contours leading to the mill on the bank of the Rivanna River and to the springs that provided water, as well as to other places on the plantation. This extensive road network made the farms easily

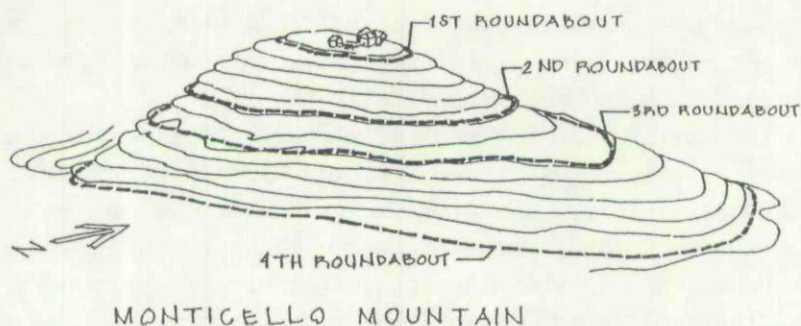


Fig. 2. Elevation of Monticello Mountain above the fourth roundabout. Generated by computer from a USGS topographic map, with the four roundabouts superimposed. Note that they generally maintain a consistent elevation.

accessible and permitted walking for pleasure. Vistas were accentuated by each curve in the roads and stone seats were provided to enjoy them. Plans were made to have stanzas of poetry carved into rustic plaques to enhance the pleasure.⁶

THE WEST LAWN FLOWER GARDENS

On June 7, 1807, Thomas Jefferson wrote to his granddaughter, Anne Randolph, 'I find that the limited number of our flower beds will too much restrain the variety of flowers in which we might wish to indulge, and therefore I have resumed an idea, which I had formerly entertained, but had laid by, of a winding walk surrounding the lawn before the house, with a narrow border of flowers on each side. This would give us abundant room for a great variety. I enclose a sketch of my idea, where the dotted lines on each side of the black line shew the border on each side of the walk. The hollows of the walk would give room for oval beds of flowering shrubs.'⁷ This plan was adopted the next year and completed by 1809, in time for Jefferson's retirement from the presidency, and

6. Betts, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, p. 27.

7. The sketch which appears on the reverse side of the letter is printed as Pl. XXIV in Betts, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, p. 334. The letter of June 7, 1807, from Jefferson to Anne Randolph is in the Jefferson Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

it is the restored plan now evident at Monticello. It was restored by the Garden Club of Virginia in 1939–40 and recently improved by the inclusion of appropriate historic plants.⁸

The concept of the serpentine or winding walk around a central lawn probably evolved early in eighteenth-century England from a desire to create a naturalistic landscape. Jefferson and Adams visited Stowe, in Buckinghamshire, one of the large estates, which has a long winding drive around the circumference of the property. Another example is at Woburn Farm, where a walk encircled a lawn and fields.

Jefferson may also have been influenced by several publications to which he had access. While he was minister to France, he had no doubt seen Georges le Rouge's *Jardins Anglo-Chinois* (1776). Bound in fourteen volumes, this work contains a series of plans of gardens in the English natural style constructed in England and on the continent, most of which include the winding or serpentine walk. Another influential source may well have been George Isham Parkyns's 'Six Designs for Improving and Embellishing Grounds,' which appeared in 1793 and presents case studies of estates showing serpentine walks around lawns, fields, and gardens. Parkyns, like William Birch, was an English landscape artist, who went to Philadelphia from England, and is said to have advised Jefferson's friend William Hamilton, on the plan for his estate called Woodlands. In a letter to Hamilton, Jefferson wrote, 'I had once hoped to get Parkyns to go and give me some outlines [for Monticello], but I was disappointed.' Jefferson also invited Hamilton to Monticello to give him advice by flattering him that 'you would have the opportunity of indulging on a new field some of the taste which made Woodlands the only rival I have known in America to what may be seen in England.'⁹

8. The list of annual and perennial plants compiled by Edwin M. Betts appears in Betts and Hazlehurst Bolton Perkins, *Thomas Jefferson's Flower Garden at Monticello*. 2d ed. (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1971) and has been reprinted in Dorothy Hunt Williams, *Historic Virginia Gardens* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976) with identification of the flowers actually planted in the restored garden.

9. G. I. Parkyns, 'Six Designs for Improving and Embellishing Grounds. With Sections and Explanations,' in John Soane, *Sketches in Architecture* (London: Taylor and Holborn,

The idea of the winding walk was not original with Jefferson, though the concept of bordering it with narrow beds for growing flowers appears to be his own. In 1785 George Washington installed a winding walk around his pear-shaped bowling green at Mount Vernon, and then planted deep borders of trees and shrubs on either side. In the late 1790s, Samuel McIntire is said to have drawn three concepts for the gardens at the Elias Haskett Derby House in Salem, Massachusetts, one of which resembled Jefferson's plan. However, it also included a grove in the center lawn panel. There is no evidence that Jefferson and McIntire corresponded on the subject, and Jefferson's 1784 visit to Salem was too early for any collaboration.¹⁰

In addition to the flower borders along the walk, Jefferson sketched twenty oval flower beds to be situated in the 'angles' of the house on both the east and west fronts. In this 1807 plan, each bed was to be planted with a different species or combination of species. One assumes that the proximity of these beds to the house enabled him to see these flowers at close range from inside the mansion. At each corner of the main house, circular beds containing trees and shrubs were intended to 'embosom' the house in shade.¹¹

THE GROVE

One of the earliest features in the Monticello landscape was the grove planned in 1771 as a backdrop for the West Lawn flower gardens. Extending over eighteen acres, the grove had the dual purposes of providing an area for family and visitors to walk in the shade and places to sit in one of the labyrinths that he had built to look out over the valleys to the distant mountains beyond. In addition, an elk, and possibly a buffalo, were to be in residence, which may account for the installation of a ha-ha wall between the

1793), cited in Eleanor McPeck, George Isham Parkyns, *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 30 (July 1973): 171-82.

10. Fiske Kimball, *The Elias Hasket Derby House in Salem* (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1924), fig. 33.

11. Pl. XXIII, Betts, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, p. 334.

grove and the West Lawn.¹² Basically the grove falls between the first and second roundabouts.

There are two written sources which shed light on Jefferson's intent in planting the ornamental grove. As early as 1772, he had written instructions for the plantings in the grove, relying perhaps on one of the volumes in his library, *The Gardener's Dictionary*, by Philip Miller. The planting is a curious arrangement of two staggered rows of wild crabapples (*Malus coronaria*), backed by two more staggered rows of Pride of China (*Melia azedarach*) trees. Then behind these groupings were catalpas (*Catalpa bignoniodes*), umbrella magnolias (*Magnolia tripetala*), trembling aspens (*Populus tremuloides*), and elms (*Ulmus Americana*). One's first reaction to this arrangement is that it is curious texture-wise. But upon studying the characteristics of the tree species, it is obvious that, following Miller, each tree has subtle pigmentation and textural interest in the spring and autumn, as well as varied foliage color during the summer months.

A second indication that the grove was intended to be ornamental was in Jefferson's reference to the shade that such a feature could provide. It was to be 'our Elysium . . . under the beaming, constant, and almost vertical sun of Virginia.' He recommended pruning the lower branches of the trees very high off the ground so they would provide a canopy for the lawn beneath, and yet allow enough light for an undergrowth of smaller trees and shrubs.¹³

Today we might call Jefferson's grove an arboretum because its purpose was for the collection of trees, shrubs, and vines, as well as other perennials for observation and study. Many of the plants sent to him by friends and those sent from the Lewis and Clark expedition were planted here.

THE ORCHARDS AND VEGETABLE GARDEN

The grove occupied a quarter of the acreage between the first and second roundabouts. The rest of the land was divided among two

12. Betts, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, p. 27.

13. Jefferson to William Hamilton, July, 1806 in Betts, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, pp. 322-24.

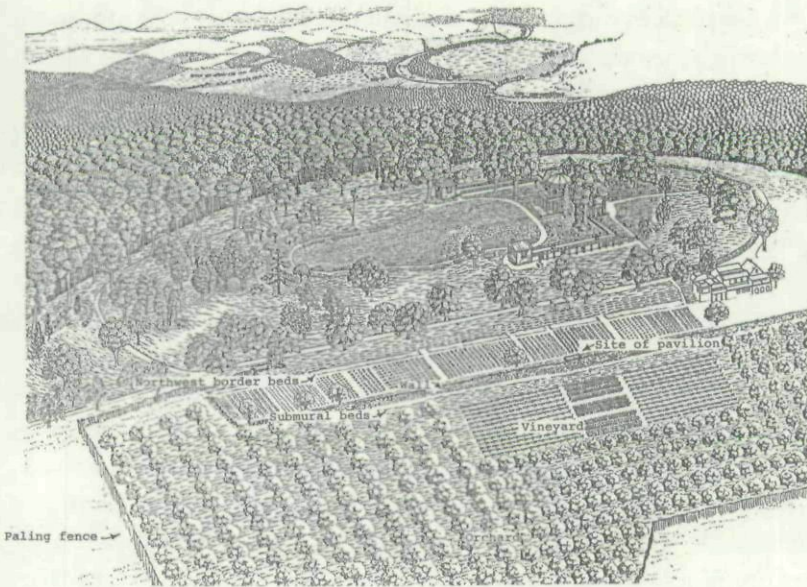


Fig. 3. A bird's-eye view of Monticello mountain above the second roundabout. In the center is the West Lawn. To the upper left is the eighteen-acre grove. In the foreground is the vegetable garden terrace with the large South Orchard below it. In the center of the orchard are the vineyards and the berry patch. (Drawn by Lucia Stanton, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc.)

large orchards and the vegetable garden terrace. The largest orchard contained four hundred trees with a large berry patch and two vineyards in the center. (Fig. 3.) On the north side of the mountain were two hundred trees comprising the smaller orchard of peaches and apples. These orchards and gardens were enclosed with hawthorn hedges (*Crataegus*, exact species unknown) and a ten-foot-high paling fence, high and tight enough to exclude both deer and rabbits. From the vegetable garden terrace, which was at the highest elevation, Jefferson, his family, and guests had a view over the top of the orchard across to the distant mountains and valleys. Imagine what a sight this was when the four hundred trees were in bloom! The orchard and vineyards have recently been restored and will soon provide a similar scene.

Thomas Jefferson had raised vegetables at Monticello since the

early 1770s, but the garden was planted on the side of the mountain following the contours of the land. In 1806, he started to create an ornamental vegetable garden. The plan called for a plot of 1,000 feet by 60 feet secured by a retaining wall and filled with soil. Within the 60,000 square feet were to be two drops of four to six feet each, thus creating three terraces within the length of the garden.

The terraces were ornamental plots for growing vegetables for the table. Jefferson grew over 250 varieties of vegetables, with as many as forty varieties of beans and seventeen of lettuce.¹⁴ However he also wanted the garden to be ornamental, so he gave it an order by making twenty plots, each surrounded by a grass path, and directed that the vegetables be organized within them according to the portion of the plant that was eaten: roots, fruits, or leaves. Along the outer edge of the garden, midway along the high retaining wall, he had built a pavilion in the classical style, twelve-and-one-half feet square, in which he could sit and enjoy the garden as well as the distant views. Today such a structure might be termed a summerhouse or gazebo. His original plan was to build four pavilions, each in a different architectural style and connected by an arbor, but this plan was rejected. While many Americans were building walled vegetable gardens, Jefferson used changes in levels to set his garden apart from the rest of the landscape.

In addition to the ordered planting of the vegetable plots, at the southwest end of the garden and just one valley away, was Montalto (1,250 feet), now Carter's Mountain, on which Jefferson made plans to construct a belvedere 200 feet in height with a water cascade tumbling down the mount in the foreground. These plans did not materialize.

THE FARM AND DEER PARK

Between the second and fourth roundabouts, and extending well beyond into the remaining 5,000 acres of the plantation were the

¹⁴ Peter J. Hatch, *The Gardens at Monticello* (Charlottesville: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc., 1992), p. 37.

forests, pastures, fields, and farmland in general, as well as related structures. The forests were a source of firewood, as well as construction lumber and fence posts. Space was allotted for chickens, cows, hogs, horses, and colts. A large deer park, enclosed by a twelve-rail-high fence, sat on the southwest side of the mountain and encompassed what is now the visitors' parking lot.

It is believed that much of the forest land was on the steepest and roughest terrain, namely the northwest side of the mountain. The pastures and hay and grain fields were to the south and east where they could benefit from the sun. Between the second and third roundabouts on the northeast side of the mountain were at least twelve 'lots' or plots laid out by Jefferson in 1790 for the experimental cultivation of various forage and grain crops.¹⁵ (See fig. 1.)

On the slope above these plots and in the grove was to be an elaborate labyrinth, planted with Scotch Broom in the form of a pinwheel. One could sit in this and enjoy the plots, with their tall, nodding stems of flowers and seed, and a background of a large field of Jerusalem artichokes.

One can imagine the well-ordered scenery from the top of the mountain, looking across the gardens, orchards, fields, and pastures, all neatly fenced, with the distant valleys and mountains beyond. This was the view which Jefferson described with contentment: 'Of prospect I have a rich profusion and offering itself at every point of the compas. Mountains distant & near, smooth & shaggy, single & in ridges, a little river hiding itself among the hills so as to shew in lagoons only, cultivated grounds under the eye and two small villages. To prevent a satiety of this is the principal difficulty. It may be successively offered, & in different portions through vistas, or which will be better, between thickets so disposed as to serve vistas, with the advantage of shifting the scenes as you advance on your way.'¹⁶

15. Pl. XXVI, Betts, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, p. 357.

16. Letter, Thomas Jefferson to William Hamilton, 1806 in Betts and Perkins, *Thomas Jefferson's Flower Garden*, p. 1.

It is quite clear that Thomas Jefferson was successful in creating a *ferme ornée* at Monticello. This was achieved by first acquiring a thorough understanding of the natural qualities of the site and respecting these qualities as his plans developed from 1768 through 1826. He made certain that every functional aspect of the plantation was laid down in such a way as to be functional and ornamental at the same time. The beauty of the scenery, both natural and created, could be viewed from above, or by communication with each portion of the farm as afforded by the twenty miles of roads and paths.

APPENDIX

NATURAL HISTORY AND TRAVEL
SELECTED TITLES FROM JEFFERSON'S LIBRARY

- Barton, Benjamin Smith. *Elements of Botany*. Philadelphia, 1803.
- Bradley, Richard. *Dictionarium Botanicum: or, a Botanical Dictionary for the Use of the Curious in Husbandry and Gardening*. London, 1728.
- Catalogue of the Botanic Garden at Liverpool*. Liverpool, 1808.
- Catalogue of the Plants of New York*. [n.d.]
- Chambers, William. *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew*. London, 1763.
- A Description of the House and Gardens of the Most Notable and Puissant Prince, George-Grenville-Nugent-Temple, Marquis of Buckingham. London, 1797. [Description of Stowe.]
- Duméril, Andre Marie Constant. *Traité Élémentaire D'histoire Naturelle*, 2 v., Paris, 1807.
- Gouan, M. *Explication du Système Botanique du Chevalier von Linné*. Montpellier, 1787.
- Heely, Joseph. *Letters on the Beauties of Hagley, Envil, and Leasowes. With Critical Remarks; and Observations on the Modern Taste in Gardening*. London, 1777.
- James, John. *The Theory and Practice of Gardening, from the French of J. B. Alexandre le Blond*. Paris, 1712.

- Linnaeus, Carolus. *Critica Botanica*. Lugduni-Batavorum, 1737.
- Michaux, Andre. *Histoire des Cbênes de l'Amerique*. Paris, 1801.
- Michaux, F. A. *Mémoire sur la Naturalisation des Arbres Forestiers de l'Amerique Septentrionale*. Paris, 1805.
- Michaux, F. A. *Histoire des Arbres Forestiers de l'Amerique Septentrionale*. Paris, 1811.
- Michaux, F. A. *The North American Sylva*, 3 vols. in 2. Paris, 1819.
- Miller, Philip. *The Gardener's Calendar*. London, 1768.
- Muhlenberg, H. *Catalogus Plantarum Americae Septentrionalis*. Lancaster, 1813.
- Parkinson, John. *Theatrum Botanicum: The Theater of Plants, Or, an Herball of a Large Extent. . .* London, 1640.
- Persoon, C. H. *Synopsis Plantarum*, 2 vols. Paris. 1805-07.
- Rafinesque, C. S. *A Flora of the State of Louisiana*. New York, 1817.
- Saint-Germain, J. J. de. *Manuel des Végétaux* (Lat. et Fr.). Paris, 1784.
- Shecut, John L.E.W. *Flora Carolinaeensis*. Charleston, 1806.
- Walter, Thomas. *Flora Caroliniana*. Londini, 1788.
- Whately, Thomas. *Observations on Modern Gardening*. London, 1770.

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