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FOREIGNERS

## A Modern Monticello

Do we really need interactive exhibits to bring Jefferson to life? Yes, we do.

By Anne Applebaum

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Odd though it sounds, I can confirm that there is deep satisfaction to be had in watching one's child clutch the pen of Thomas Jefferson's "[polygraph machine](#)," steady it with his grubby hands, and carefully draw two identically wobbly circles. The machine in question wasn't really Jefferson's own, of course; it is a copy, part of the children's exhibit at the new Monticello [visitor center](#), which officially opens April 15.

Whether it was new or old, my 8-year-old couldn't have cared less. He instantly understood the principle of the thing—the pen is attached to a metal contraption, which is itself attached to another pen—as well as why Jefferson called it "the finest invention of the present age": In an era before Xerox machines, the polygraph automatically made copies of his written correspondence. For a man who wrote some 19,000 letters, this was a real time-saver.

When I first visited Monticello more than 30 years ago, there was no polygraph machine to play with. Inside the house, one could gaze, in silence, upon the original. One could also hear the guide's reverent description of how Jefferson had invented it, along with the seven-day clock in the hall, the dumbwaiter that brought wine from the cellar, and the revolving bookstand. Nowadays, the tour guides agree—disappointingly—that [Jefferson's only original invention](#) was a rather dull plow. All the quirkier gadgets at Monticello were either adapted or copied from something else.

Other aspects of the Monticello visit have changed. In the new exhibition halls and on the house tour, a lot more is said about the people whom our guide called the "enslaved residents" of the estate. Some of them, it turns out, built those gadgets by hand. Others helped bring Jefferson's architectural, agricultural, and culinary visions to life. One of them, Sally Hemings, may have been the mother of some his children. The foundations of slave cabins are clearly marked in the garden, and the remains of slave pottery and tools, recent archeological finds, are prominently displayed.

It makes for a different experience from the one I remembered. Nowadays, hagiography is out. Historical reconstruction is in. Silent contemplation of the great man's possessions is out. Recent scholarship about those possessions is firmly in. Interactive games and objects are in, too. This is not unique to Monticello—[Mozart's house in Vienna](#) has undergone a similar transformation—but it is particularly striking at the home of our third president. The piety that once surrounded all relics of all Founding Fathers has given way to galleries where adults can press buttons to read Jefferson quotations and then see the Venezuelan Declaration of Independence those quotes inspired as well as a "discovery room" where children can build mini-Monticellos with wooden blocks.



Some people won't like it, and I understand their skepticism, at least in theory. The words "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are part of our national DNA. Do we really need to reread that famous preamble on a screen or to hold the polygraph in our hands in order to understand how it works? Actually, we do. Monticello's longtime curator Susan Stein reckons that many Americans who visit the house no longer know Jefferson's words, let alone the way they have echoed around the world. Besides, as an Easter-weekend activity, Monticello now has a lot of competition: amusement parks, *Monsters vs. Aliens*, Grand Theft Auto. Every generation rewrites its history books, so why shouldn't every generation redesign its museums, too?

In practice, the new Monticello exhibitions are superb. The honest discussion of slavery makes Jefferson more complicated, more interesting, and more real than he used to be. The displays of his meticulous account books and daily weather records show off his appetite for knowledge as well as his persnickety love of detail. The high-tech exhibits take some getting used to, but at least they are aimed well above the eighth-grade level to which most American museums aspire. There is something for everybody: In one room, I watched a Muslim woman reading about Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom on one wall while some children gleefully stamped on the floor in order to make Jeffersonian quotations appear on the wall opposite.

I won't say, "Jefferson would love it," because, given his love of rural peace and quiet, I suspect he wouldn't. Still, it seems appropriate—and rather a relief in these gloomy times—to report on the successful modernization of a place that was, after all, built as a monument to progress. Jefferson's ideas have kept up with the times; it's great that his house has, too.

*Anne Applebaum is a Washington Post and **Slate** columnist. Her most recent book is [Gulag: A History](#).*

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