

In conjunction with the launch of Monticello's "Getting Word" website, comes a powerful 3-minute film

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This year Monticello launched the new 'Getting Word' website (<https://www.monticello.org/getting-word>),—a vast collection of oral histories, images, and documentation encompassing seven generations of families descended from Monticello's African American community. The website is the result of decades of research, nearly twenty years of locating descendants and recording oral histories, and tens of thousands of miles traveled. This moving, three-minute video about Getting Word encompasses the power of the project.

Getting Word: African American Families of Monticello



The Getting Word oral history project at Monticello locates and records the oral histories of the descendants of Monticello's enslaved families. This rich treasure house of memories enriches understanding of life at Monticello two hundred years ago. The information gathered has contributed to an expanded interpretation of the African American community at Monticello and laid the critical

groundwork for providing a more balanced picture of slavery and the enslaved to the American public, through public programs and publications. Oral interviews are supplemented with research in newspapers, private papers, and public records.

“Before Getting Word, much of what we knew about the enslaved men and women who lived and worked at Monticello came from the meticulous notes Jefferson kept about his plantation. Getting Word has provided the missing human dimension in the study of the African American community at Monticello. This project has helped us to fill in the gaps with family histories, images, and documents that might never have surfaced,” said Cinder Stanton, project director for Getting Word and Monticello’s Shannon Senior Historian.

What has been learned reveals an incredible trajectory, essentially the entire history of the African-American experience from Jefferson’s death in 1826 to the present—through slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow period. Interview after interview, document after document, reveals the extraordinary strength of family bonds in situations where the realities of race in America threatened those bonds. The importance of education and the struggles necessary to obtain it were a constant theme. The central role of religion was almost universal. Particularly for members of the Hemings family, issues of racial identity were paramount, as they negotiated the color line through changing times.

“The Getting Word website reveals the journey of Monticello’s African American families from Jefferson’s plantation to the present. Across the generations, a number of the descendants of Monticello’s enslaved people made headlines. But many others worked without fanfare: fighting for justice, building their communities, and keeping their families strong,” said Leslie Greene Bowman, President and CEO of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation.

Since 1993, Getting Word staff has traveled over 40,000 miles, interviewing descendants all over the United States, from Alabama to Ohio and Massachusetts to California. Nearly 200 people have contributed to the project by sharing their family stories, as well as photographs and memorabilia.

These interviews create a vital connection to a Monticello community whose descendants ultimately helped to fulfill Jefferson’s vision of equality and freedom. Their stories will be featured in the Slavery at Jefferson’s Monticello exhibition in Washington, D.C. as well as on a searchable database and website.

Some notable discoveries and achievements since Getting Word’s launch in 1993:

- Discovery of almost ten previously unknown surnames of enslaved families at Monticello. This has led both to finding descendants and to helping combat the stereotype of “nameless” slaves who took their owners’ surnames after the Civil War.
- Discovery of a fourth recollection of life at Monticello by a former slave. Peter Fossett, son of Monticello head blacksmith and cook, Joseph and Edith Fossett, gave a lengthy interview to the New York World in 1898.
- Discovery that one of only a dozen surviving sound recordings of former slaves is an interview with a descendant of Monticello slaves: Fountain Hughes.
- Collection and digital storage of over 200 photographs of descendants from the nineteenth century to the present.

Getting Word (<https://www.monticello.org/slavery/>), debuted in connection with the landmark Monticello/Smithsonian exhibition ‘Slavery at Jefferson’s Monticello: Paradox of Liberty’ on January 27, 2012. The Getting Word project, a program of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., which owns and operates Monticello, has received support from The Coca-Cola Company, the Ford Foundation, the River Branch Foundation, the Virginia Foundation for Humanities, The History Channel, The Fritz and Claudine Kundrun Foundation, Virginia Folklore Society, Dominion Virginia Power as well as individual donors: Clover Nicholas, Susan F. Hutchinson, Josef Beery, Eric Henson and Charles L. Warren.

‘Getting Word’ Staff

Lucia “Cinder” Stanton has worked at Monticello for more than 30 years as a research associate, Director of Research, and, since 1996, Shannon Senior Historian. She is recognized as the leading interpreter of the lives of Monticello’s enslaved families and of Jefferson as a slaveholder and plantation manager. Her recently published book, “Those Who Labor for My Happiness”: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello (January 2012), vividly reveals a dynamic community. The essays address a rich variety of topics, from family histories (including the Hemingses) to the temporary slave community at Jefferson’s White House to stories of former slaves’ lives after Monticello. Each piece is characterized by Stanton’s deep knowledge of her subject and by her determination to do justice to both Jefferson and his slaves. In 1993, Stanton started the oral history project Getting Word, with Dianne Swann-Wright as project historian and consultant Beverly Gray.

Dr. Dianne Swann-Wright, project historian and lead interviewer for the Getting Word project, was Monticello's Director of African-American and Special Programs from 1998 to 2005. From 2005 to 2009 she was the founding curator and director of the Douglass Myers Maritime Museum in Baltimore, the only African American maritime museum in the country. She is the author of *A Way Out of No Way: Claiming Freedom and Family in the New South* (2002), published by the University of Virginia Press. She has received numerous professional and community service awards and is now the principal of Swann Associates, a museum consulting firm advising on exhibits related to American history and African American culture. She was guest curator for six exhibitions at the Legacy Museum in Lynchburg, VA. Dr. Swann-Wright joined the Getting Word project at its inception in 1993 and has been centrally involved in all its initiatives since then.

Beverly Gray, project consultant, is the co-founder and director of the David Nickens Heritage Center in Chillicothe, Ohio, showcasing African American history. She was an elementary, middle school, and high school teacher for more than 30 years, as well as an adjunct professor of education for Ohio University. On retiring from teaching, she was Education Specialist at the historic Adena Mansion and Gardens in Chillicothe. Beverly Gray has been a historian of the Underground Railroad and the African American experience in Ohio for decades. In 1993 she agreed to share her years of study of former Monticello slaves and their descendants as consultant to the Getting Word project. For the project's first trip in 1993, she organized a reception in Chillicothe, attended by 40 descendants of the Fossett and Hemings families of Monticello.

[BRINGING HISTORY FORWARD \(HTTPS://WWW.MONTICELLO.ORG/EXHIBITS-EVENTS/BLOG/?CATEGORY=BRINGING-HISTORY-FORWARD\)](https://www.monticello.org/exhibits-events/blog/?category=bringing-history-forward)

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[SLAVERY AND THE LEGACY OF RACE \(HTTPS://WWW.MONTICELLO.ORG/EXHIBITS-EVENTS/BLOG/?CATEGORY=SLAVERY-AND-THE-LEGACY-OF-RACE\)](https://www.monticello.org/exhibits-events/blog/?category=slavery-and-the-legacy-of-race)

ADDRESS:

1050 Monticello Loop
Charlottesville, VA 22902

GENERAL INFORMATION:

(434) 984-9800