

Thomas Jefferson, Runner

by Derek Baxter - May 6, 2014

Guest blogger and Monticello enthusiast Derek Baxter -- who ran the Montalto Challenge 5 race on May 3rd -- opines about whether our third president would have run himself.

Thomas Jefferson, a Renaissance man, jack of all trades and master of them too. But would he have been a runner? I decided to find out by running up Jefferson's Montalto mountain, which faces Monticello, while dressed as Thomas Jefferson.

Every May, Monticello puts on the Montalto 5K challenge to raise money for the maintenance of the Saunders-Monticello Trail (<https://www.monticello.org/visit/the-saunders-monticello-trail/>) that winds through the woods. I showed up dressed in my Halloween costume—a tricorned hat and leggings, both acquired at Colonial Williamsburg; a puffy shirt, left over from a themed wedding a long time ago; and a black cape. The cape had the words “Thomas Jefferson” helpfully sewn on the back.



“A little walk of half an hour in the morning when you first rise is adviseable also,” wrote Jefferson. “It shakes off sleep.” The trailmaster gave the signal to start the race, at the base of the Saunders-Monticello Trail. A dozen or so serious runners disappeared like a flash. The rest of the field took off through the woods. The trail climbed upwards—surprisingly so, because this was the easy part of the run. We ran past Jefferson’s favorite trees—white oaks and tulip poplars (the “Jupiter and Juno” of trees in his mind), and fragrant paw-paws, a native source of fruit that Jefferson found delicious. We only heard quiet breathing, with the expectation of the mountain brooding before us.

The race was to climb over 800 feet over the course of its 3.1 miles. I checked my pace on my Garmin GPS running watch. Jefferson traveled with a small odometer, obsessing over his mileage, and sometimes with an ancient-looking theodolite to take surveying measurements. He would have absolutely loved a GPS watch, which is basically a combination of the two. I could see him filling out a running chart each day.

Finally came a slight descent and we emerged out of the trees. Montalto lay to our right. A few volunteers cheered at the crossroads. “Go Paul Revere!” one shouted. My costume may need some work. But now the mountain was on us.

In Italian, Montalto is “big mountain,” compared to the “little mountain” of Monticello. A playful sign encouraged us that there were only seven switchbacks to go. In true Jeffersonian fashion (he recorded the temperature and his expenses each day and carried a small ivory notebook with him wherever he went), I decided to scientifically record the switchbacks of Montalto.

The First Switchback: Uphill. But I’m filled with energy. I think Jefferson would have liked this—he encouraged exercise to anyone who would listen. “A strong body makes the mind strong.” Someone once said that Jefferson “was like a fine horse; he had no surplus flesh.” He recorded his pace as 4 miles 264 yards an hour while walking—that’s a 14:27 minute mile. I should be able to at least do that up Montalto.

The Second Switchback: water break. Perhaps just a little bit of walking would make sense, so I don’t spill my cup of water. Jefferson’s preferred form of exercise? Walking with a gun in case you come across some game.

The Third Switchback: Grueling. We see Monticello for the first time across the way. Jefferson famously said “I cannot live without books.” Apparently he could live without running. I have long since shaken the sleep off and am now shaking off the remaining supplies of glycogen in my legs.

The Fourth Switchback: “Games played with the ball and others of that nature, are too violent for the body and stamp no character on the mind,” wrote Jefferson. Now a runner from Albemarle County Fire and Rescue in front of me stops and starts walking. I take this as a sign and do the same. My mind is fully stamped with character. I’m concluding that Jefferson was too logical to run up a mountain.

The Fifth Switchback: “The object of walking is to relax the mind,” Jefferson wrote. “You should therefore not permit yourself even to think while you walk.” I am breaking this rule and thinking dark thoughts. We are now far above Monticello, which looks like a Lego house below us. “The ascent of this steep, savage hill, was as pensive and slow as Satan’s ascent to Paradise,” wrote one visitor to Monticello. Montalto is more of an ascent up the rings of Dante’s Hell.

The Sixth Switchback: Jefferson was always humming Scottish tunes as he worked in his garden or rode his horse. My transformation into TJ must nearly be complete because I now have bagpipes careening in my head. I turn the corner and there is a full Scottish pipe and drum band. At least I haven’t gone crazy. I try to run a bit.

The Seventh Switchback: "You got it, TJ," yells a volunteer. I keep trudging up. My legs are screaming. The old Jefferson complained that "a single mile is too much for me."

Finally, we reach the summit and the grade levels off. "To render it practicable only requires that you think it so," wrote Jefferson. I pick up the pace from a crawl to a brisk trot. "You got it TJ!" yells someone in the crowd. "Watch out, Thomas Jefferson is going to pass you," someone else warns his buddy. I hit the finish line.

An older woman comes up to me and says, "I was running behind you up the mountain and I thought, if a 300 year old man could do it, so could I." A string band was playing. There's free coffee ("the favorite drink of the civilised world."). Sweeping views of Charlottesville lay below.

The results of my scientific-historical experiment? You should run the Montalto 5K at least once in your life. Jefferson would have ridden a horse.

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