



THE FIFTH IN OUR SERIES OF RETROSPECTIVES
 COMMEMORATING THE UVA BICENTENNIAL

TOM THE BUILDER

*Sure, Jefferson had the big idea for the University,
 but he also sweated the small stuff, brick by brick.*

BY TRAVIS MCDONALD

We think of Thomas Jefferson as the Academical Village's architect and great visionary. What gets overlooked is his other founding role, one less glamorous yet no less important: Jefferson as construction manager. Along the way to reinventing higher education, Jefferson also undertook the monumental task of supervising one of the country's largest construction projects for more than seven years.

So, while we tend to focus on the influence of Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio on Jefferson's aesthetic sensibilities, we also need to pay tribute to first century architect-engineer Vitruvius. From Vitruvius' writings Jefferson learned, as had Palladio before him, that architects can't just learn the lessons of design; they must also study how buildings are actually constructed.

Jefferson had done that his entire adult life. He designed and supervised his first project, Monticello, while still in his 20s, and then proceeded to study

TIMOTHY COOK ILLUSTRATION

building practices wherever he went. Returning from France in the 1790s, he undertook the second Monticello, rebuilding and nearly doubling the size of his mountaintop home. While U.S. president, he was intimately involved in the construction of the White House, U.S. Capitol and other public buildings. It was also in those years that he began construction of Poplar Forest, his octagonal dream house 70 mountainous miles southwest of Charlottesville. Jefferson's lifelong compilation of his building notebooks clearly show the education and mind of a builder.

So it was that by the start of construction on the University in 1817, Jefferson was an experienced builder. The bricklayer Hugh Chisholm was one of the first workers hired to begin construction of Pavilion VII, whose cornerstone would be laid Oct. 6. Writing from Poplar Forest to Chisholm in Charlottesville on Aug. 31, Jefferson sounds like a general contractor coordinating his subcontractors: "[I] am glad to learn that the bricks are in such forwardness. I wish you would by every week's mail drop a line stating what the progress then is. I am anxious to know that the cellars are dug, and their walls commenced laying. But be careful to inform me in time and exactly by what day you will have got the walls up to the surface of the earth; because there [Mr.] Knight must begin, and by that day I will make it a point to be in Albemarle, and have him there."

You see Jefferson the builder in the obsessive detail that fills thousands of pages in the University construction records, heroically summarized in Frank Grizzard's (Grad '89, '96) Ph.D. dissertation "Documentary History of the Construction of the Buildings at the University of Virginia, 1817-1828." The copious numbers show Jefferson envisioning each building in three dimensions, with quantities of bricks and lumber and calculations for the labor it took to put the many elements together.

As a construction supervisor, Jefferson was uncompromising in his expectations. "[T]o have the work done in the best manner, is the first object," his instructions to the brick mason Chisholm continue. "I consider it as the interest of the College the town and neighborhood to introduce a reform of the barbarous workmanship hitherto practiced there, and to raise us to a level with the rest of the country." The statement about "barbarous workmanship" shows Jefferson's lifelong quest for innovative and quality

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—JEFFERSON'S LETTER TO HIS UVA BRICK MASON, AUGUST 1817

construction practices essential for creating a long-lasting architectural heritage.

Jefferson published detailed specifications and quality standards in newspapers as he searched and recruited along the East Coast for the best workers. He set a high bar and insisted that his principal workers know the classical rules of architecture and "execute with exactness" even their own drawings. Over his lifetime, Jefferson invested time in finding and educating his hired workers, saying: "Of one truth I have had great experience that ignorant workmen are always dearest," using "dearest" here in the sense of costliest.

Also in the summer of 1817, Jefferson wrote to John Perry, the builder who had not only sold the land for the University, but eventually got the lion's share of the construction work. Having used Perry at Monticello and Poplar Forest, Jefferson warned him, "[W]e all know that your skill does not go either to the execution of the work yourself properly, or to the knowing when it is properly executed ... and constant inspection of a competent eye is necessary."

Like most building contractors of the time, Perry deferred to the superior skill of his enslaved workers, in Perry's case 27 of them. Two of Jefferson's most competent tradesmen, John Neilson and James Dinsmore, did execute finished wood elements themselves but also used enslaved workers, as did most of the principal builders working on the University.

Whether a contractor owned, rented or leased enslaved workers, the practice of using slaves was ubiquitous. As John Neilson remarked about University work in 1823: "[O]ur workmen are nearly all Africans. Peck employs four of the Proctor's carpenters; his old man Sam is an appendage to the university being a master of all Arts, at one time a carpenter then tin man next painter."

With the drive for perfection came impracticality. Jefferson could be blind to the realities of some of his own idealistic

inventions, like a hidden "terras" roof design that allowed for a flat deck above the student rooms, or the use of an innovative tin shingle roof covering that leaked. Jefferson was never good at explaining his vision, for instance why some of the column capitals had to be carved in Italy; he just relied on friends like James Madison who argued for the increasingly higher state funds.

Even so, Jefferson could be shrewdly pragmatic when it came to the politics of his projects. With each passing year, Jefferson refused to allow the University to open early, lest his funding dry up before all the buildings were completed. He insisted on waiting until 1825, when the Rotunda was well underway.

Jefferson referred to his university as "the last of my mortal cares, and the last service I can render my country." He had put all his remaining energy into construction details large and small. He told a friend, "The little of the powers of life which remains to me, I consecrate to our University."

He played the part of construction foreman to the end. The month before his July 4, 1826, death, he corresponded with his grandson in Boston about the proper water pipes for the University. On the day he died, University bursar Alexander Garrett was on hand at Monticello to discuss University business.

Jefferson confided to a friend the year before he died: "I am closing the last scenes of my life by fashioning and fostering an establishment for the instruction of those who are to come after us. I hope its influence on their virtue, freedom, fame, and happiness will be salutary and permanent." The historical record can only begin to capture the years and labors Jefferson spent to get his big academic idea built to last. ■

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