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This book, a National Book Award nominee in 1988, is the life of Thomas Jefferson as seen through the prism of his love affair with Monticello. For over half a century, it was his consuming passion, his most serious amusement. With a sure command of sources and skilled intuitive understanding of Jefferson, McLaughlin crafts an uncommon portrait of builder and building alike. En route he tells us much about life in Virginia; about Monticello's craftsmen and how they worked their materials; about slavery, class, and family; and, above all, about the multiplicity of domestic concerns that preoccupied this complex man. It is an engaging and incisive look at the eighteenth-century mind: systematic, rational, and curious, but also playful, comfort-loving, and amusing. Ultimately, it provides readers with great insight into daily life in Colonial and Federal America.

Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder Details

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From Reader Review Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder for online ebook

Mary says

Fascinating book about the building of Monticello. As a person interested in architecture, I really enjoyed reading about the construction practices of Jefferson's day. Monticello was built and rebuilt over most of Jefferson's life.

Jefferson had difficulty obtaining skilled laborers for many of the things he needed done with his house. Brick making was time consuming and he needed lots of bricks for his house. He had some of his slaves learn to make bricks. He needed skilled craftsmen to lay the bricks, frame the doors and windows. Craftsmen were in short supply in those days. He had some of his slave learn the crafts of the skilled craftsmen he hired. He even built his own shop to make nails.

Jefferson designed many unique features into his home. Readers gain a great deal of insight into Jefferson's personality by reading this book. Jefferson was interested in everything. He kept a garden book tracking what he planted and its progress. He often did calculations to determine the cheapest and best way to do things. He played the violin, studied science and various other fields. What a remarkable man Jefferson was!

I did not know that Jefferson was not good at keeping track of his finances. He could see the leaves in minute detail but lost track of the forest. He died about a \$100,000 in debt a huge sum in those days.

If you are interested in either architecture or Jefferson, this is a great book to read. I really enjoyed it.

Rachel says

Besides the less-than-HD audiobook recording (to say the least), I expected to hear more about the art and architecture of the house. At least now I don't have to read another separate biography about TJ -- although this one included the most info about his wife that I've ever heard/read just about anywhere.

Chris says

- interesting to see how the grid/colonial style windows were made and how, due to technique, each grid was a separate piece of glass
- when he brought his bride, on a small part of it, his bachelor pad, was done
- how much he had to be in charge of things, and then why it was so behind
- how much, even though you never hear of it, he was controlling and did not view women as equal

Benjamin Thomas says

I can remember way back when I first visited Monticello. I was 14 years old and an apparently impressionable youth but I remember touring Thomas Jefferson's house and becoming completely fascinated

with all things Jeffersonian. Not only did the house impress my young mind but the stories of how Jefferson slowly built it over decades, incorporating all sorts of cool features that he had learned on his travels to Europe and invented himself was just incredible.

So last month I revisited Monticello for the first time in more decades than I care to count and obviously viewed it from mature adult eyes, eyes that have seen many an historical mansion/house/hovel since my teen years. My nostalgia was hard to live up to and I confess to feeling a bit disappointed this time around. So when I saw this book in their bookstore, I had to have it hoping that magic was still there and could be rekindled. There is just something about Jefferson that clicks with me and the house that he built and rebuilt over his entire adult life seems to provide a better understanding of the man than just about anything else.

Jefferson, of course, was a man of many contradictions...and so is Monticello. This book provides plenty of details for all aspects of the building of Monticello. There are the surface facts on what was built, when parts were constructed, how it was built, and who built it (including a thorough analysis of the slave labor that went into it). But the book goes much deeper than that, really capturing Jefferson's exacting persona and the way he poured his heart and soul into designing and constructing Monticello. He was a hands-on architect, builder, and gardener to be sure and this gigantic and long-lasting labor of love is fun to read about. Don't expect to read much about Jefferson's political life, the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clarke, or writing the Declaration of Independence. The only real references to such things in this book are how they relate to Monticello (i.e. giving the desk upon which he wrote the Declaration to one of his master furniture makers to help compensate for the loss of the man's best-made piece in a sunken ship). There are references to Jefferson's time in Paris and London but not focusing on his political positions there but rather his insights on architectural ideas he gained.

I had a lot of fun reading this and took my time with it, enjoying every aspect. I am happy to report the magic is back.

Kelly says

I want to admire Jefferson, I really do: the Declaration of Independence, the Louisiana Purchase, the University of Virginia, his love and pursuit of science, his devotion to family, and...Monticello. But as this thoroughly researched and intriguingly written biography highlights, Monticello was built using a tremendous quantity of slave labor. Slaves made the brick, sawed the lumber, dug the foundations, and terraced the gardens at Monticello. Despite Jefferson's careful attention to recording the smallest details of daily life, he never balanced his accounts and at the end of his life not only could not afford the upkeep of Monticello, but left his estate with a debt that took 50 years to settle. Then, of course, there is Sally Hemmings (only treated lightly in this account) and the less-than-noble treatment of John Adams (not addressed in this book). Nevertheless, admiration for Jefferson as an architect-builder does not escape me, nor does admiration for the masterpiece that Monticello is.

Another point that struck me is that the Monticello that you walk through today is quite different from the unfinished and already deteriorating building that Jefferson inhabited. Today's Monticello is a meticulously-kept museum and shrine.

Mike Doyle says

A must read for anyone interested in Architecture, history or biographies. An amazing look into the world of

Thomas Jefferson and his life long trial of building his Palladian mansion Monticello.

Roger Woods says

Interesting account of Thomas Jefferson's building of Monticello in Virginia which he continued remodelling and changing for fifty years. I would love to visit Monticello.

Susan says

Bio through building of Monticello.

Craig says

Interesting biography of Jefferson, written mainly as a tribute to his skills and love of architecture and the construction of Monticello. Don't look for vignettes from his Presidency or assume they'll be much in here on the authorship of the Declaration of Independence or time in Paris. Obviously much of Jefferson's life did take place at Monticello so there is some important content this book covers, but it does bog down at times with mundane architectural notes. All in all, not the best Presidential bio I've ever read.

Jodi says

After visiting Monticello last summer, I picked this book to get an idea of the history of the home, and the complex man who built it. I had been disturbed by the hypocrisy of slave owner/champion of liberty President Jefferson for years, but have come to a better understanding of the man over time. This book provided so much insight into Jefferson's personality, and life history. Parts of it were slow reading, such as when the author went into great detail about the workmen, and how Jefferson kept such detailed records of the materials. Overall, however, the details added up like pieces of a huge jigsaw puzzle creating a picture of our third president that I enjoyed learning to appreciate, FLAWS and all.

Joshua Gates says

Monticello, the accumulation of one man's dream and irregular work habits, Thomas Jefferson, enshrined in history as a father of the Declaration of Independence. Among his many jobs, he was an admired architect, tho not by profession. His skills came from years of study and a couple of diplomatic visits to France for inspiration. With the help of slave labor and hired professionals from Europe and parts of America, Monticello was finally completed after fifty years of interruptions and alterations. A meticulous minded Jefferson was known for letting the skilled workers go because of a dispute he had or their lack of precise attention to his specifications. One reason his mansion, or retreat from the trials of the world took so long to be constructed was that Jefferson acted as sole supervisor. With irregular intrusions from social functions, government appointments and elections, and diplomatic tenures Monticello quickly became a labor of love. A labor that would weather the passing of his life's love and presidential obligations. Monticello stands today

as a building that attests to Jefferson's influence from France and Palladio, his unique planning and construction methods, and desire of privacy from the world found in the study with only one accessible door. Everything about Monticello reflects how Jefferson carefully designed it to function as a world renowned Virginia hospitable dwelling complete with a round roof tower and Chinese fences. Thomas Jefferson created a unique building, constructed with his precise instructions and material interests that served a variety of roles throughout his life. His labor of love still stands, but is now in need of significant preservation and so too does his tombstone express his ideas of being a builder and creator of The University of Virginia and the Declaration of Independence.

Steve Godfrey says

rec. Jim Van Eerden

Jill says

A fascinating account of Jefferson's trials and tribulations through the many years of his constructing, tearing down, and reconstructing his home, Monticello. I was absorbed by all the details of his efforts to achieve perfection, architecturally, while, at the same time, creating a home for his wife (who sadly died long before it was even close to completion) and children, not to mention the myriad guests who crossed the threshold of his perpetual work in progress. I learned a great deal about the making of nails and bricks and how he paid the craftsmen and the role of his slaves (yes, they played a major role in the building), and about the meticulous detail he attended to while away being president among other responsibilities. Amazing book!

Stan Prager says

Review of: Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder, by Jack McLaughlin
by Stan Prager (4-24-16)

It was my great good fortune to happen upon a copy of Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder, by Jack McLaughlin, at a used book store some months prior to my scheduled "Behind the Scenes" tour of Monticello. I had read about half of the book by the day of the tour, and when I mentioned it to the outstanding docent who led us through the unique architecture of Jefferson's lifetime building project – including steep staircases to upstairs bedrooms and the iconic dome not part of the standard tour – he nodded approvingly and exclaimed that it is a "great book." I read the second half in the days that followed the tour, and upon completion I have to agree with my guide: it is a truly great book on every level! And while I did not plan to read it in two installments, with the Monticello visit sandwiched in, in fact it certainly enriched the experience.

Perhaps my favorite comment about Thomas Jefferson was the one made by President John F. Kennedy at a 1962 White House dinner honoring Nobel Prize recipients: "I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone." JFK's remarks were hardly glib: Jefferson was a remarkably brilliant man who mastered seven languages, possessed an encyclopedic mind, had a highly intuitive, analytic intellect and brought innovation to virtually everything he touched or encountered. Jefferson was also a polymath extraordinaire: author, thinker, political philosopher, statesman, inventor, musician, wine connoisseur, farmer, scientist, meteorologist, equestrian, politician – the list goes on and on.

And that catalog usually includes architect and builder, but what is eminently clear from visiting his mansion and reading McLaughlin's fine work is that for Jefferson Monticello – it means “little mountain” – was not simply another of his multifarious projects and obsessions, but rather it was part of his DNA. Jefferson spent his lifetime building, tearing down, rebuilding and adding to Monticello. The “museum” visitors tour today was only structurally completed (with the installment of the Doric columns on the West Portico) in 1823, some three years before Jefferson's death; it probably never looked exactly the way it does today at any actual moment of Jefferson's lifetime. It was always, like the man himself, a work in progress. In his provocative work *The Phenomenon of Man*, philosopher and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin advocated for turning each new day into a process of “becoming” a new person based upon the insight and experience gleaned from the days that have gone before. While the latter was written more than a century after he was gone, in a way it seems that Jefferson lived his life in just this fashion and that Monticello was the structural reflection of his own unique evolution of “becoming.” It remains his most tangible physical legacy. Thus the subtitle of McLaughlin's wonderful book -- *The Biography of a Builder* – is especially apt. The author helps the reader to understand that Jefferson and Monticello were in a sense twin manifestations of a single soul.

While there are breaks to explore specific themes, Jefferson and Monticello generally traces Jefferson's life and the construction of Monticello in parallel. Jefferson's design of Monticello was inspired by the influential sixteenth century Venetian architect Andrea Palladio, who was himself deeply influenced by classical Greek and Roman forms. But the genius of Jefferson was ever his ability to innovate and transform, so while Palladio's work remained a significant model, Monticello took shape as nothing less than a true iconic Jefferson structure. Along the way, McLaughlin teaches the uninitiated much about architecture and building techniques in the eighteenth century and the kinds of compromises requisite when under construction in the relative wilds of Virginia in those days. I never knew, for instance, that the reason why brick buildings of that era varied so markedly in color across regions was because brick was typically fired on-site with local clays mixed with water. Jefferson added an additional challenge by choosing to build on a mountain top, something almost unheard of at the time, which meant there were issues with accessibility to resources – and especially to water, which is the other essential ingredient to brickmaking. In the end, rather than attempt to transport tens of thousands of bricks to the mountaintop, Jefferson opted to source water and build kilns on the site. Nails were also made there. McLaughlin, somewhat of a polymath himself, was not only professor of English and Humanities at Clemson University, but he also built his own home. His passion for both history and construction is evident in his prose, which is almost poetic at times. He relates a fascinating story with some pregnant detail, yet the narrative never grows dull.

With all of his talents, Jefferson also had a paradoxical side, as showcased superbly in Joseph Ellis' masterwork, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*. Jefferson had an uncanny ability to hold two almost diametrically opposed notions in mind simultaneously without the sort of cognitive dissonance this would provoke for most people. The dark side of this contradiction is tragically underscored as he famously decried the great evil of chattel slavery yet throughout his lifetime owned some two hundred human beings and likely fathered a half-dozen children by one of them. Despite his obvious admiration for his subject, McLaughlin hardly gives Jefferson a pass in this regard, devoting an exceptional chapter entitled “To Possess Living Souls,” to this great incongruity. As McLaughlin and the tour guides these days at Monticello make incontrovertibly clear, it was primarily the labor of African-American slaves that built Monticello, and their master was the great statesman who wrote that “All men are created equal.” The author makes clear that while Jefferson was not a cruel master, and that he seemed to genuinely care for the welfare of his “property,” human slavery in itself is a cruelty. Moreover, slaves were whipped at Monticello, as on other plantations, and those who did not fall into line were sold away from their families to distant lands. Although this book was published in 1988, before DNA evidence seems to have settled the argument about rumors of the long liaison between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, McLaughlin implies that he takes this for fact and repeatedly points to the special treatment members of the Hemings family received at Monticello. On her deathbed, Jefferson promised his wife Martha (“Patty”) that he would never again wed, but this pledge did not stop him apparently from begetting some six children with (ironically!) Martha's much younger mulatto half-sister, Sally. For all of his accomplishments, this paradox of Jefferson as slave-owner will forever leave an indelible stain on the great man's reputation.

Jefferson and Monticello, which was nominated for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, is one of the finest books I have read in some time on a variety of levels. Sadly, Jack McLaughlin died very recently (in November 2015, at eighty-nine years old) so I could not share my praise of this wonderful volume with him. Still, his work lives on. I highly recommend this book to all who seek a greater understanding of Jefferson, of American history, and of architecture. And be sure to visit Monticello, because in that ancient homestead a part of Thomas Jefferson still thrives.

My review of: Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder, by Jack McLaughlin, is live on my book blog <https://regarp.com/2016/04/24/review-...>
<https://www.amazon.com/review/R32J8U5...>

Anastasia Hobbet says

A wholly different way of looking at Jefferson, through the lens of Monticello, and his obsessive building and rebuilding of the house. Jefferson's public life is scrupulously avoided, mentioned only when it bears directly on his (always desperate) cash situation or his changing taste. His 8 years in the White House is mentioned only because it almost bankrupted him; and his long stay in France is mentioned only because it refined his architectural esthetics. True, all that's been covered endlessly elsewhere, but it disconcerted me in the reading. By leaving the core of his existence out of the book, you end up with a Jefferson who seems to have nothing on his mind when he's at Monticello except ripping the place up once again, and the effort makes him seem almost insane by the end of the book, when the house is unfinished and falling apart despite his 40 years of almost non-stop building and remodeling, and he is so far in debt that his daughter has to sell Monticello not long after he's dead. You begin to wonder: Americans elected this nut to two terms as President?!

To help counter this effect, I kept my iPad close by as I read, and filled in the gaps here and there by reading about Jefferson's fuller life. At the same time, the book was meaty with period detail, and I appreciated McLaughlin's discussion of slave life and status at Monticello, particularly the question of whether Jefferson fathered several children with a black mistress. McLaughlin says yes, but he settles the question not by reviewing the genetics but by teasing from the estate's records the many ways in which Jefferson treated his black family with much greater interest and concern for their welfare than his other slaves. This sticks with me as one of the great strengths of the book, and gave a much more human face to this brilliant, restless, contradictory man.
