

“Mr. Jefferson’s Servants”

By Captain Edmund Bacon

Captain Edmund Bacon was chief overseer of Monticello for twenty years while Jefferson was alive. He offered his recollections of life at Monticello to Hamilton W. Pierson, the president of a local college, who, in the early 1860’s, sought out Bacon at Bacon’s Kentucky home.

Mr. Jefferson was always very kind and indulgent to his servants. He would not allow them to be at all overworked, and he would hardly ever allow one of them to be whipped. His orders to me were constant, that if there was any servant that could not be got along with without the chastising that was customary, to dispose of him. He could not bear to have a servant whipped, no odds how much he deserved it. I remember one case in particular. Mr. Jefferson gave written instructions that I should always sell the nails that were made in his nailery. We made from sixpenny to twenty-penny nails, and always kept a supply of each kind on hand. I went one day to supply an order, and the eight-penny nails were all gone, and there was a full supply of all the other sizes. Of course they had been stolen. I soon became satisfied that Jim Hubbard, one of the servants that worked in the nailery, had stolen them, and charged him with it. He denied it powerfully. I talked with Grady, the overseer of the nailery, about it, and finally I said, ‘Let us drop it. He has hid them somewhere, and if we say no more about it, we shall find them.’ I examined his house, and every place I could think of, but for some time I could find nothing of the nails. One day after a rain, as I was following a path through the wood I saw muddy tracks on the leaves leading off from the path. I followed them until I came to a tree-top, where I found the nails buried in a large box. There were several hundred pounds of them. From circumstances, I knew that Jim had stolen them. Mr. Jefferson was at home at the time, and when I went up to Monticello I told him of it. He was very much surprised, and felt very badly about it. Jim had always been a favorite servant. He told me to be at my house next morning when he took his ride, and he would see Jim there. When he came, I sent for Jim, and I never saw any person, white or black, feel as badly as he did when he saw his master. He was mortified and distressed beyond measure. He had been brought up in the shop, and we all had confidence in him. Now his character was gone. The tears streamed down his face, and he begged pardon over and over again. I felt very badly myself. Mr. Jefferson turned to me, and said, ‘Ah, sir, we can’t punish him. He has suffered enough already.’ He then talked to him, gave him a heap of good advice, and sent him to the shop. Grady had waited, expecting to be sent for to whip him, and he was astonished to see him come back and go to work after such a crime. When he came to dinner—he boarded with me then—he told me, that when Jim came back to the shop, he said, ‘Well, I’ve been a-seeking religion a long time, but I never heard any thing before that sounded so, or made me feel so, as I did when master said, “Go, and don’t do so any more;” and now I’ve determined to seek religion till I find it;’ and sure enough, he afterwards came to me for a permit to go and be baptized. I gave him one, and never knew of his doing any thing of the sort again. He was always a good servant afterwards

Mr. Jefferson had a large number of favorite servants, that were treated just as well as could be. Burwell was the main, principal servant on the place. He did not go to Washington. Mr. Jefferson had the most perfect confidence in him. He told me not to be

at all particular with him—to let him do pretty much as he pleased, and to let him have pocket money occasionally, as he wanted it.

Once or twice every week while Mr. Jefferson was President, I opened every room in the house, and had it thoroughly aired. When I was so busy that I could not attend to this myself, I would send the keys to Burwell, and he would air the house, and was, if possible, more particular than I was. He stayed at Monticello, and took charge of the meat-house, garden, etc. and kept the premises in order. Mr. Jefferson gave him his freedom in his will and it was right that he should do it.

The house servants were Betty Brown, Sally, Critta, and Betty Hemings, Nance, and Ursula They were old family servants, and great favorites. They were in the room when Mrs. Jefferson died. She died before I went to live with him, and left four little children. He never married again. They have often told my wife, that when Mrs. Jefferson died, they stood around the bed. Mr. Jefferson sat by her, and she gave him directions about a good many things that she wanted done. When she came to the children, she wept, and could not speak for some time. Finally she held up her hand, and spreading out her four fingers, she told him she could not die happy if she thought her four children were ever to have a step-mother brought in over them. Holding her other hand in his, Mr. Jefferson promised her solemnly that he would never marry again. And he never did. He was then quite a young man, and very handsome, and I suppose he could have married well; but he always kept that promise.

These women remained at Monticello while he was President. I was instructed to take no control of them. They had very little to do. When I opened the house, they attended to airing it. Then every March we had to bottle all his cider. Dear me, this was a job. It took us two weeks. Mr. Jefferson was very particular about his cider. He gave me instructions to have every apple cleaned perfectly clean when it was made. Here are his instructions:

We have saved red Hughes enough from the north orchard to make a smart cask of cyder. They are now mellow, and beginning to rot. I will pray you, therefore, to have them made into cyder immediately. Let them be made clean one by one, and all the rotten ones thrown away, or the rot cut out. Nothing else can ensure good cyder.'

Sally Hemings went to France with Maria Jefferson when she was a little girl. Mr. Jefferson was Minister to France, and he wanted to put her in school there. They crossed the ocean alone. I have often heard her tell about it. When they got to London, they stayed with Mr. Adams, who was Minister there, until Mr. Jefferson came or sent for them. I have read a beautiful letter that Mrs. Adams wrote to her sister, Mrs. Cranch, about her. Here it is:

'I have had with me for a fortnight a little daughter of Mr. Jefferson's, who arrived here with a young negro girl, her servant, from Virginia. Mr. Jefferson wrote me some months ago that he expected them, and desired me to receive them. I did so, and was amply repaid for my trouble. A finer child of her age I never saw. So mature an understanding, so womanly a behavior, and so much sensibility, united, are rarely to be met with. I grew

so fond of her, and she was so attached to me, that, when Mr. Jefferson sent for her, they were obliged to force the little creature away. She is but eight years old. She would sit, sometimes, and describe to me the parting with her aunt, who brought her up, the obligations she was under to her, and the love she had for her little cousins, till the tears would stream down her cheeks; and how I had been her friend, and she loved ma. Her papa would break her heart by making her go again. She clung round me so that I could not help shedding a tear at parting with her. She was the favorite, of every one in the house. I regret that such fine spirits must be spent in the walls of a convent. She is a beautiful girl, too.'

Ursula was Mrs. Randolph's nurse. She was a big fat woman. She took charge of all the children that were not in school. If there was any switching to be done, she always did it. She used to be down at my house a great deal with those children. They used to be there so much, that we very often got tired of them; but we never said so. They were all very much attached to their nurse. They always called her 'Mammy.'

John Hemings was a carpenter. He was a first-rate workman—a very extra workman. He could make any thing that was wanted in woodwork. He learned his trade of Dinsmore. He made most of the wood-work of Mr. Jefferson's fine carriage. Joe Fosset made the iron-work. He was a very fine workman; could do any thing it was necessary to do with steel or iron. He learned his trade of Stewart. Mr. Jefferson kept Stewart several years longer than he would otherwise have done, in order that his own servants might learn his trade thoroughly. Stewart was a very superior workman, but he would drink. And Burwell was a fine painter. He painted the carriage, and always kept the house painted. He painted a good deal at the University.

Mr. Jefferson freed a number of his servants in his will. I think he would have freed all of them, if his affairs had not been so much involved that he could not do it. He freed one girl some years before he died, and there was a great deal of talk about it. She was nearly as white as anybody, and very beautiful. People said he freed her because she was his own daughter. She was not his daughter; she was 's daughter. I know that. I have seen him come out of her mother's room many a morning, when I went up to Monticello very early. When she was nearly grown, by Mr. Jefferson's direction I paid her stage fare to Philadelphia, and gave her fifty dollars. I have never seen her since, and don't know what became of her. From the time she was large enough, she always worked in the cotton factory. She never did any hard work.

While Mr. Madison was President, one of our slaves ran away, and we never got him again. As soon as I learned that he was gone, I was satisfied that he had gone with Mr. Madison's cart to Washington, and had passed himself off as Mr. Madison's servant. But Jeff. Randolph did not believe it. He believed he had hid himself somewhere about the plantation, and he hunted everywhere for him. Finally he said he was sure he was hid in the loft of the stable where we kept our mules. I told him it was no use to look; but he would do it, and while crawling over the hay-mow, he tumbled through. I thought the mules would tread or kick him to death, but when he came out he said the mules were as badly scared as he was, when he fell among them, and did not move or hurt him at all.

We afterwards learned that he went off with Mr. Madison's servant, as I had supposed. No servants ever had a kinder master than Mr. Jefferson's. He did not like slavery. I have heard him talk a great deal about it. He thought it a bad system. I have heard him prophesy that we should have just such trouble with it as we are having now.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/slaves/bacon.html>

Excerpted from Hamilton W. Pierson's, *Jefferson at Monticello: The Private Life of Thomas Jefferson From Entirely New Materials*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1862, pp.103-111.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=P3gEAAAAYAAJ&dq=hamilton%20pierson&pg=PA103#v=onepage&q&f=false>