

Uriah Phillips Levy

Uriah Phillips Levy (1792-1862), U.S. naval officer and third owner of Monticello after Thomas Jefferson's death, is one of the great characters in American Jewish history. He was pugnacious, determined, eccentric, confirmed in the righteousness of his causes, an able businessman who was quite wealthy, and an admirer of Thomas Jefferson. His admiration rested on Mr. Jefferson's well-deserved reputation as a champion of religious liberty — not toleration, but liberty. "I consider Thomas Jefferson to be one of the greatest men in history," Levy declared, "the author of the Declaration and an absolute democrat. He serves as an inspiration to millions of Americans. He did much to mold our Republic in a form in which a man's *religion* does not make him ineligible for political or governmental life."¹ Levy's admiration for Jefferson first expressed itself in a unique gift that the lieutenant made to the government and the people of the United States. "There is no statue to Jefferson in the Capitol in Washington," he wrote, "As a small payment for his determined stand on the side of religious liberty, I am preparing to commission a statue."² And the statue, in its way, led to Monticello.



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There are three stories as to why and how Levy purchased the house. The first two are interesting, one for its implicit antisemitism and the other for its romantic nonsense. Both are totally unsubstantiated by any evidence whatsoever; after being told once, however, they wound up being repeated elsewhere. According to the first account, after Martha Jefferson Randolph sold Monticello to Charlottesville druggist James Barclay, she went to live with her daughter Ellen in Boston. A group of patriotic Americans decided that at the very least Jefferson's daughter ought to be able to live at Monticello, since Jefferson had given his life, in a way, for his country. They sent a representative to Boston to see if Mrs. Randolph would accept the gift, and upon her assent, the gentleman hurried back to Virginia to consummate the purchase from Barclay. But he stopped in New York for a few days to raise funds, and at a dinner one evening met Lieutenant Levy and told him of his plan. The next morning, the "crafty Jew" Levy sped south, purchased Monticello, and thus thwarted the noble and patriotic effort to return the family homestead to Jefferson's beloved daughter.³ The second unsubstantiated account has Levy in the White House, meeting with President Andrew Jackson. Levy supposedly told Jackson that he had heard about the sad state of Monticello, and had been thinking of buying it "in honor of Mr. Jefferson, whom I love." General Jackson replied with vigor, "I order you, sir, to buy it." "I always obey the orders of my superior, Mr. President," Levy replied, and headed up the mountain.⁴

The third account seems far more reliable, plus we have some corroborating evidence to support it. Levy had

gone to France in 1832 to study advanced naval tactics, and while there arranged to meet a man who was undoubtedly a hero to many of Levy's generation, the Marquis de Lafayette. He told Lafayette about his plan to have a statue made, and the nobleman, who had been a friend of Jefferson for nearly half a century, lent Levy a portrait of Jefferson by Thomas Sully that he owned.⁵ The great French sculptor Pierre Jean David d'Angers then executed a full-length likeness of Jefferson based on the portrait, and in March 1834, Levy presented the statue to Congress. It still stands in the great rotunda of the Capitol, the only statue there provided for by private funds.

During Levy's visit with Lafayette, the aging marquis had inquired about the well-being of Martha Randolph and of Monticello. Levy did not know, but he promised to find out as soon as he returned to America.⁶ After taking care of business matters — Levy was a very successful real estate speculator and property owner in New York — he did go south and discovered that Monticello had been shabbily treated by Barclay, who was then eager to sell. In early April 1834, barely two weeks after presenting the statue to Congress, Levy and Barclay struck a bargain — the house and some acreage for \$2700. Because Barclay had been selling off land, it was not clear just how much property remained to go with the house, and it took a lawsuit to quiet title. In May 1836 the suit was settled, and Levy received the house and 218 acres of land in a deed of conveyance. "My heart leaped," Levy declared when he became the owner of Monticello.⁷

For those of us who are used to seeing Monticello as it is today, lovingly restored to what our best knowledge tells us was Mr. Jefferson's plan, it is hard to envision the great house as seedy or run-down. In fact, it was already looking that way in the last years of Jefferson's life. He was so far in debt that he did not have the money necessary to make the needed repairs or to do the preventive maintenance that the house required. A visitor in 1824 — two years before Jefferson's death — reported that the mansion was "old and going to decay," and that the gardens and lawns were "slovenly."⁸

Barclay, of course, did nothing to repair the damage. Having bought the property to indulge a hare-brained scheme of turning Monticello into a silkworm farm, Barclay thought nothing of cutting down the beautiful poplar trees that Jefferson had so lovingly planted. He planted vegetables next to the house and kept his silkworms in the conservatory. Despite his widow's recollection years later that they had taken good care of the house, contemporary reports belie that contention. The house that Uriah Levy bought was outstanding in design and built on a strong foundation, but badly in need of repair.⁹

Levy gladly embarked on this work, and from all reports did so successfully. Levy assembled a small army of workers — including over a dozen slaves whom he purchased — and put them to work cleaning out the interior of the house, making needed repairs on the outside, and restoring the landscaped gardens and lawns. There are conflicting accounts as to whether Levy managed to buy some of the original furnishings that had been sold at auction after Jefferson's death, but he did go to great lengths to restore the house to its former glory. He put in working order the seven-day clock that had been made to Jefferson's specifications in 1793, and also restored the body of a two-wheel carriage that tradition, if not fact, claims to be the one Jefferson rode to Philadelphia in 1775 for the Continental Congress.¹⁰

Levy was in residence at Monticello only sporadically due to his career as a naval officer and his business holdings in New York. However, he brought his mother, Rachel Phillips Levy, to preside over the estate in his absence, and when she died, she was buried on the mountaintop not far from the house. Levy also hired Joel Wheeler as an overseer and, although he would later do great damage to Monticello, Wheeler initially shared his employer's passion for restoring the house and grounds.¹¹

Levy died in 1862 and is buried in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn, in the cemetery of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. In his will drawn in 1858, Levy bequeathed a dower's share to his wife, various gifts and mourning rings to friends and family, and then left Monticello to the government of the United States. Additionally, Levy left the U.S. government the income from his considerable estate, valued at over \$300,000, for the support of an agricultural farm at Monticello for the orphaned sons of seamen and others. Should the federal government decline, Monticello was to be offered to the Commonwealth of Virginia, and then to the three Sephardic synagogues of Philadelphia, New York, and Newport.¹² With the Civil War in progress, the Confederate government seized and then sold the property. Following the war, and after a long period of litigation, Commodore Levy's nephew, Jefferson Monroe Levy, assumed ownership of Monticello. — Melvin Urofsky, 2001. Originally published in *Fall Dinner at Monticello, November 2, 2001, in Memory of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2001).

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- Look for more sources about Uriah Levy in the Thomas Jefferson Portal.
 1. Levy to John Coulter, November 1832, quoted in Donovan Fitzpatrick and Saul Saphire, *Navy Maverick: Uriah Phillips Levy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 128.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Paul Wilstach, *Jefferson and Monticello* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1925), ch. 14; William H. Gaines, "From Desolation to Restoration: The Story of 'Monticello' Since Jefferson," *Virginia Cavalcade* 1, no. 4 (Spring 1952): 5.
 4. George Alfred Townsend, *Monticello and Its Preservation Since Jefferson's Death, 1826-1902* (Washington, D.C.: Gibson Bros., Printers and Bookbinders, 1902), 9. Scholars agree that Jefferson Monroe Levy, Uriah Levy's nephew, either wrote or directed the writing of this work.
 5. Fitzpatrick and Saphire, *Navy Maverick*, 128.
 6. Ibid. See also James A. Bear, Jr., "Monticello," in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1986), 447.
 7. Bear, "Monticello," in Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Biography*, 447.
 8. Samuel Whitcomb, Jr., "An Interview with Thomas Jefferson," May 3, 1824, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Accession # 2816, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library. A transcription of Whitcomb's memorandum is available in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Visitors to Monticello* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 93-96.
 9. See Mary Cable and Annabelle Prager, "The Levys of Monticello," *American Heritage* 29, no. 2 (1978): 33; see also Melvin I. Urofsky, *The Levy Family and Monticello, 1834-1923: Saving Mr. Jefferson's House* (Charlottesville: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 2000), 42-44.
 10. See Charlotte Crystal, "Uriah P. Levy: Savior of Monticello," *Albemarle Archives* [n.d.]: 52; Fitzpatrick and Saphire, *Navy Maverick*, 141-42; William Howard Adams, *Jefferson's Monticello* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), 246-47; Henry N. Ferguson, "The Man Who Saved Monticello," *American History Illustrated* 14 (1980): 23; Urofsky, *The Levy Family and Monticello*, 68-69.
 11. Urofsky, *The Levy Family and Monticello*, 68
 12. Last Will and Testament of Uriah Phillips Levy, Probate Court Records, Liber 141 of Wills, 254, Surrogate's Court of New York County, Hall of Records, County Court House, 31 Chambers Street, New York, NY.