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James Madison's Montpelier, Where the Constitution was Conceived, Votes to Share Power with Descendants of Plantation's Enslaved People

Unprecedented Decision Provides Model for Historic Sites Worldwide

Historic Vote Provides Montpelier Descendants Committee Equal Co-Stewardship Authority with Montpelier Foundation over Museum and Estate of James Madison

ORANGE, VA--In a first-ever milestone for museums and historic sites that are former places of enslavement, The Montpelier Foundation (TMF) board of directors voted Wednesday, based on a proposal from the Descendants, to approve bylaws to establish equality with the Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC) in the governance of James Madison's Montpelier, the home of the fourth president and "Father of the Constitution."

"More than 300 American men, women and children were enslaved at Montpelier and played vital roles throughout the founding era of our country. The true history of Montpelier cannot be known or shared without including the stories and perspectives of those who were enslaved," said James French, founding chair of MDC and board member of TMF.

"This historic decision means that for the first time, the descendants of enslaved persons at a major national historic site will be co-equals in sharing governing power and responsibility for the very site that enslaved their ancestors," said Gene Hickok, chair of the board of directors of TMF.

The vote on bylaws on June 16, 2021, during the week of Juneteenth, followed a resolution passed by the Board of TMF on May 27 which stated, "The Board of The Montpelier Foundation affirms its commitment to collaborate with the Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC) to achieve structural parity with descendants at all levels of the organization."

This vote came after tremendous leadership from, and collaboration with, MDC and represents an important step toward equity and reckoning with histories of racism. The relationship provides a national model for resolving historic imbalances in decision making, power, and authority.

“This has been difficult, yet important work on the part of both the TMF Board and MDC, and the conversation continues,” stated Roy Young, President and CEO of Montpelier. “The May 27 resolution and bylaws vote were crucial steps forward and a substantive commitment to our partnership. We have many shared accomplishments to be proud of, and we look forward to future conversations with MDC to find ways to increase our collaborations and contribute to our “Whole Truth History” as a site of former enslavement, Presidential Plantation, and the place the United States Constitution was conceived.”

“The Montpelier Descendants Committee was founded during the week of Juneteenth in 2019,” said Patricia J. MacDaniel, a board member of MDC. “Exactly two years later, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives declared Juneteenth a federal holiday, signed into law this week by President Joe Biden. We are proud to honor our ancestors with this momentous achievement.”

“This vote to grant equal co-stewardship authority to the Descendants of those who were enslaved is groundbreaking,” said French. “The decision moves the perspectives of the Descendants of the enslaved from the periphery to the center and offers an important, innovative step for Montpelier to share broader, richer and more truthful interpretations of history with wider audiences.”

Paul W. Edmondson, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said, “On behalf of the National Trust, the owner of Montpelier, I want to say how pleased we are that the board of directors of the Montpelier Foundation has approved a proposal to amend the Foundation’s bylaws to provide equal representation of the Montpelier Descendants Committee on the board. By this action today, the Montpelier board of directors and the MDC have shown critical leadership in creating equitable governance of a site that is not only the ancestral home of James Madison, but also of hundreds of people enslaved by the Madison family. The National Trust strongly supported this proposal, and we worked with both parties over the past year to achieve this new level of partnership.

“We commend both The Montpelier Foundation and the Montpelier Descendants Committee for working together to achieve this breakthrough,” said Edmondson.

“This is the culmination of a 28-plus years engagement with the Montpelier Descendants community, and more recently, a deliberate, year-long process by the Board to achieve organizational and structural parity which reflects the complete history of this specific place and America as a whole,” said Hickok.

Mediators Selena Cozart and Frank Dukes of the Institute for Engagement & Negotiation at the University of Virginia congratulated TMF, MDC, and the National Trust on this historic partnership. “We hope that the brave conversations that nurtured new relationships and that led to this truly momentous agreement will inspire other organizations to action.”

Descendant Engagement and The Montpelier Foundation

James Madison’s Montpelier is recognized nationally as a leader in collaboration between staff and Descendants of those who were enslaved at the sites.

In 2018, Montpelier hosted The National Summit on Teaching Slavery to develop a set of standards or [Rubric](#), titled “Best Practices in Descendant Engagement in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites.” The Rubric is valuable for any historic site or museum where enslaved people played a role in its history.

As an entity independent from TMF, MDC serves as the sole representative organization of the Montpelier Descendant community, as that community is defined by the Rubric. The MDC is committed to the important work of challenging dominant historical narratives. TMF and MDC will remain as two separate organizations, working in collaboration, guided by the principles of the Rubric.

The February 2018 National Summit on Teaching Slavery, a partnership between James Madison’s Montpelier and the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, was the first national, interdisciplinary effort to formulate a recognized model for best practices in descendant engagement. The resulting Rubric lays out a set of standards against which an organization can measure its progress towards exemplary work in collaborative research, interpretation, and the overall relationship with a Descendant community.

In 2019, Montpelier received a Museums for America Program award from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, to complete the final design, fabrication, and installation of an interactive exhibition to foster conversations about fairness, justice, and race between children and their caregivers. It is an addition to the award-winning *The Mere Distinction of Colour* exhibition that opened in 2017 and is located in a newly-reconstructed ca. 1790 spinning house-turned-slave quarter at Montpelier. An advisory group from the Montpelier Descendant community contributed to and reviewed the content design.

Most recently, TMF and MDC worked in full partnership to apply for - and were awarded - funding from the Commonwealth of Virginia to lead a Memorialization Project. This will include the creation of a memorial to the enslaved and partnerships with other Descendant groups to expand memorialization efforts throughout Virginia; educational programs for teachers and law enforcement officers; curriculum development for anti-racist curriculum that would be available for use in public schools throughout Virginia; and free public tours, community conversations, and other programs.

About James Madison's Montpelier

Montpelier is the lifelong home of James Madison, Father of the Constitution, Architect of the Bill of Rights, and fourth President of the United States. As a monument to James Madison and the Enslaved Community, a museum of American history, and a center for constitutional education, Montpelier engages the public with the enduring legacy of Madison's most powerful idea: government by the people. The historic home and 2,700-acre grounds are open to visitors and student groups throughout the year; and the Robert H. Smith Center for the Constitution at Montpelier offers world-class residential and online educational programs. Montpelier is administered by The Montpelier Foundation and is a National Trust for Historic Preservation site. <https://www.montpelier.org/>

About the Montpelier Descendants Committee

The Montpelier Descendants Committee is a nonprofit organization devoted to restoring the narratives of enslaved Americans at plantation sites in Central Virginia, including but not limited to James Madison's Montpelier, from the periphery to the center of historical discourse. The MDC promotes a better understanding of the lives of the enslaved based on broader, richer and more truthful interpretations of American history. Through a series of public programs, events, research, and communications the MDC seeks to demonstrate how the lives of enslaved persons informed ideals of universal liberty enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, yet denied to them. <https://montpelierdescendants.org>