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### History

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**Ralph Ketcham**

**THE MADISONS AT MONTPELIER**  
 Reflections on the founding couple  
 192pp. University of Virginia Press. \$23.95.  
 978 0 8139 2811 1

**David B. Mattern and J. C. A. Stagg,**  
 editors

**THE PAPERS OF JAMES MADISON**  
 Retirement Series, Volume One: 1817–1820  
 720pp. University of Virginia Press. \$85.  
 978 0 8139 2849 4

Like Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and George Washington's Mount Vernon, Montpelier in Virginia, the estate of America's fourth President, James Madison, is readying itself to become a national shrine. In recent years, the house has undergone a radical and, at times, controversial restoration in which all the parts built by subsequent owners have been demolished, and today the mansion can be seen as it was during Madison's retirement from 1817 to 1836.

Ralph Ketcham cites this spectacular restoration as the reason for writing his book, which uses visitors' accounts to paint a homely picture of daily life on the plantation, Madison's retirement, and of the stream of visitors who wanted to see the former President and the "Father of the Constitution". "He was a capital story teller", one visitor said, "his small bright blue eyes would twinkle most wickedly". There are also stories of the long friendship with Thomas Jefferson, the foundation of the University of Virginia and Madison's battle to keep John Payne Todd, Dolley's son from her first marriage, out of his gambling troubles (costing the already cash-strapped stepfather thousands of dollars). Ketcham illustrates the struggle of a man who had fought for the liberty and equality of Americans but who owned more than one hundred slaves, and who died as the largest slave owner in his county.

*The Madisons at Montpelier* is an update of the final chapter of Ketcham's definitive biography of Madison (1971). Large chunks of text are shared, but the latest discoveries from the extensive archaeological digs as well as new documentary sources are included. The result is a book that accompanies the newly restored Montpelier, while at the same time making letters and visitors' descriptions available which will remain difficult to access until all seven volumes of the James Madison Papers Retirement Series are published.

The first volume of this series covers the first three years of Madison's retirement and offers an invaluable insight into his thinking and activities during this time. Like Washington and Jefferson before him, Madison retired from the presidency to his beloved agricultural pursuits. Madison was, according to Jefferson, "the best farmer in the world", because

he approached agriculture as a science, experimenting with the latest innovations and corresponding with progressive farmers in America and Europe. For Madison (as for many of the Founding Fathers), farming was the bedrock of Republicanism and of America's future. Husbandmen, he said, were "the best basis of public liberty, and the strongest bulwark of public safety". Meticulously researched footnotes provide important contextual and biographical information, which makes this first volume a magnificent resource for understanding Madison and his world.

ANDREA WULF

Wulf, Andrea. "History." *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5559, 16 Oct. 2009, p. 29. *The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200559141/TLSH?u=viva\\_uva&sid=bookmark-TLSH](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200559141/TLSH?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-TLSH). Accessed 15 Nov. 2023.