



# On Monroe Hill

Heritage Film  
Project Focuses  
on The Oldest  
Building  
at UVA

**A** small, white, brick house, built circa 1789 and predating every building on the rest of the university Grounds for 30 years, sits on Monroe Hill at the University of Virginia. The other buildings here also hold their own history, begun well before it became the distinctive home of UVA's Brown College. Monroe and his wife, Elizabeth, lived there off and on for 10 years while it served as his law office; the subsequent owner, John Perry, had the main house renovated in 1814 and gave it a Greek revival façade, thus differentiating it from Jefferson's Palladian designs.

Brown College student-interns and Director of Studies Stephen Plaskon, an associate professor in the Curry School of Education, have joined independent documentary filmmaker Eduardo Montes-Bradley and producer Soledad Liendo in an exciting new documentary for the Heritage Film Project called *On Monroe Hill*, about the decade in which Monroe owned the property, and the students who lived there.

"James Monroe tried to make Monroe Hill a working farm and planted all kinds of seeds that ended up failing," Montes-Bradley said. Though it never met his agricultural goals, Monroe instead used this land to plant the seed of public education: he stood alongside Thomas Jefferson and James Madison as the cornerstone of the University of Virginia was laid in 1817.

Brown College student-interns are actively researching the history of this plot, learning about Monroe's failed farming conversions as well as outside events like the French Revolution that robbed him of his time there. Montes-Bradley also said he wants the students to get an idea of what disciplines and skills intersect throughout the filmmaking process, so they are receiving experience in academic research, scriptwriting, conducting interviews, and sound and light work.

Talking on WTJU's *Soundboard* program, Montes-Bradley recently said he would like the film to "restore to the premises the soul that has been lost." He explains the beauty surrounding the place in that "from his letters, we can see that Monroe dreamt about this place from overseas."

Among other specialists, Montes-Bradley and the students will interview Maurice McInnis, a UVA professor of American Art and Material Culture who also serves as Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, is a 1988 alumna and former Monroe Hill resident.

"The film making project on Monroe Hill is uncovering important information about the role that area played in the University's history," she said. "Just next door to the Academical Village, it was originally not part of the University, but as the school grew, it became incorporated into the University proper. One of the most interesting details...is the fact that it became the home to some the University's earliest scholarship students. These students were the Access UVA students of the 19th century: students of academic merit with financial need whose expenses were covered."

Exploring the history of students who signed their names on the mortar between bricks, Montes-Bradley and students researched "all identifiable signatures," Montes-Bradley said. "They reveal the presence of extraordinary individuals, many veterans from the [Spanish-American] War, university presidents, renowned scientists and other fascinating characters."

Other scholars contributing their knowledge to the film are Ferraro, associate editor of the *Papers of George Washington*, located at UVA; archaeologist Ben Ford, a UVA alumnus and co-owner of Rivanna Archaeological Services; and Dan Preston, editor of the *Papers of James Monroe*, housed at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg.

Professor Stephen Plaskon has lived and worked in Monroe's former law office for five years, overseeing many of Brown College's short courses, programs, and activities, which often draw in UVA deans and alumni. He feels that, through this project, he is "channeling Monroe."

Montes-Bradley expects the film project to wrap up sometime in the fall once the fall weather allows him to capture certain scenes. He hopes that *On Monroe Hill* will be a part of the celebration of UVA's upcoming bicentennial.

With an award for production from the Jefferson Trust, and support from Brown College, the Curry School, Ash Lawn-Highland (Monroe's more famous home), and the Presidential Precinct, the film has already secured worldwide distribution in the academic market for universities and libraries. *On Monroe Hill* will be featured in fall 2017 at the Virginia Film Festival.

To learn more about the Heritage Film Project and *On Monroe Hill*, visit [www.heritagefilmproject.com](http://www.heritagefilmproject.com).