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Screenshot from "The Levys of Monticello," streaming this month as part of the East Bay International Jewish Film Festival.

CULTURE > FILM

'The Levys of Monticello': S.F. filmmaker tells story of the Jewish family who saved Jefferson's estate

BY **ANDREW ESENSTEN** | MARCH 11, 2022

Today, Monticello — Thomas Jefferson's plantation in the hills overlooking Charlottesville, Virginia — is a UNESCO World Heritage site and a popular tourist attraction. But the fate of the property was very much in doubt following Jefferson's death in 1826. It lay in disrepair for eight years until a Jewish Navy lieutenant came along, bought the place and began restoring it as a way of honoring Jefferson's legacy.

Uriah Phillips Levy and his nephew, Jefferson Monroe Levy, owned Monticello for 89 years, longer than Jefferson himself. Their story is the subject of independent filmmaker Steven Pressman's new documentary, "The Levys of Monticello." The film premiered at the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival last month and can be **streamed** as part of the East Bay International Jewish Film Festival beginning March 17.

"As I was working on the film, when I would tell people about the Levys, a lot of them said, 'You gotta be kidding,'" Pressman told J. in a phone interview from his office in San Francisco. "I enjoy telling Jewish stories that are new to audiences."



Pressman, 66, said he learned about the Levys from Marc Leepson, his former colleague at Congressional Quarterly magazine in Washington, D.C., in the 1980s and the author of the 2003 book "Saving Monticello: The Levy Family's Epic Quest to Rescue the House that Jefferson Built."

A patriotic, fifth-generation American, Uriah Levy descended from Sephardic Jews who fled Portugal during the Inquisition and helped found the city of Savannah, Georgia. Born in Philadelphia in 1792, Levy served in the Navy, fought in the War of 1812 and was the first Jew to achieve the rank of commodore.

In 1834, he bought Monticello for \$2,700 and put the 20 enslaved people he owned to work repairing the house and tending the grounds. The Confederacy seized the property during the Civil War, and when Levy died in 1862, he bequeathed it to the U.S. government. But the government refused the gift, so the Levy family sued for ownership. Eventually, Levy's nephew Jefferson Monroe Levy, a millionaire investor and a future congressman, took control of it. He did not live on the property, but he put approximately \$1 million into its upkeep and hosted annual Fourth of July parties there.

As Pressman relates in the film, Jefferson Monroe Levy was the target of an antisemitic campaign by Maude Littleton, the wife of a congressman who wanted him to sell Monticello. "She would refer to Jefferson Monroe Levy as an alien or outsider," Pressman said. "Most people would have understood those to be code words. She no doubt was unhappy that a Jewish owner was standing in the way of her dream of turning Monticello into a shrine to Jefferson."

Pressman said he was conflicted about how to address the issue of slavery in the film. "When I was doing my initial production work, I got sort of defensive on the subject," he recalled. "I was thinking, this is not a film about Thomas Jefferson, so therefore it's not going to be a film about slavery. In retrospect I was a little naive about that."

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One interview subject, Niya Bates, a senior fellow of African American history at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, points out the contradiction between Uriah Levy's reverence for the principle of religious liberty and his being a slaveholder.

Richard Lewis, a Levy family descendant, says in the film: "The fact that he did have slaves, that's something that has dampened the appreciation of his role in this whole matter."

Pressman also shares the story of Eliza Tolliver Coleman, an African American woman who worked at Monticello as a gatekeeper — welcoming visitors and collecting entry fees — from the late 1870s to early 1920s.

This is Pressman's third documentary, and it was financed by private donors, he said. The others are "Holy Silence" (2020), on the Vatican's controversial policies and actions during the Holocaust, and "50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus" (2013), about a Philadelphia couple who rescued children from Nazi-occupied Vienna.

Pressman said one of the highlights of making "The Levys of Monticello" was shooting interviews and other footage inside Monticello before it opened to the public in the morning. "We got there one morning at 4:30 a.m. to set up, it was pitch dark and I pinched myself: 'Oh my god, I'm walking in Thomas Jefferson's home,'" he recalled. "It was a real privilege."

The Levys were not religiously observant, and Pressman said the Foundation found no evidence that mezuzahs hung on the doorposts. But Rachel Phillips Levy, Uriah Levy's mother, is buried on the property, and there is a plaque that pays tribute to the Levy family near her gravesite.

The documentary ends with footage from the 2017 Unite the Right rally, during which white nationalists marched on the grounds of the nearby University of Virginia chanting "Jews will not replace us." "It was a dramatic way to remind audiences that we've come a long way but we're still the outsiders in this country," Pressman said.

"The Levys of Monticello"

Streaming March 17 to 23. Introduced by the director. Not rated, 71 minutes. eastbayjewishfilm.org

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