

'THIS 6TH-GENERATION AMERICAN WAS STILL LABELED AN OUTSIDER'

The lost story of how a Jewish family saved Thomas Jefferson's famous home – twice

New documentary film 'The Levys of Monticello' shows how uncle and nephew fought antisemitism to rescue Monticello from ruin and preserve it for future generations to enjoy

By RENEE GHERT-ZAND | 17 February 2022, 1:56 am



Members of the Levy family owned Monticello for 89 years, longer than Thomas Jefferson and his descendants (undated photo). (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

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When white supremacists [marched in Charlottesville](#) in August 2017, they encircled the famous statue of Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia, shouting "Jews will not replace us." Ironically, the statue of the American founding father was made by the patriotic Jewish sculptor [Moses Ezekiel](#).

The antisemites were also unlikely to be aware that Jefferson's nearby historic home [Monticello](#) — a National Historic Landmark and the only presidential house in the United States designated a UNESCO World Heritage site — survived ruin twice thanks to the efforts of a Jewish family named Levy.

Great admirers of Jefferson, [the Levys](#) were fiercely proud and loyal Americans. Grateful for the religious freedom granted by the United States Constitution, members of the family devoted themselves to military and political service. The Levys, particularly Uriah Phillips Levy and his nephew Jefferson Monroe Levy, owned, preserved and stewarded Monticello for 89 years — longer than Jefferson and his descendants.

Yet few are aware of this. The Levys' connection to Monticello was lost to history for most of the 20th century. A new documentary film, "[The Levys of Monticello](#)," illuminates the Levys' critical connection to the treasured landmark, and also the nefarious reasons why the Jewish family's important role was erased for so long.

"You can't get more American than the Levys, yet they, as Jews, were dismissed as aliens and outsiders," said director

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“I wanted to make a film with a narrow focus on a personal experience of a single family, but also a broader focus on the Jewish American experience,” he said.



Uriah Phillips Levy had a 50-year career in the US Navy and was the Navy's first Jewish commodore. (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

In particular, Pressman uses the Levy story to explore the antisemitism Jews have faced in America since before the United States declared independence from Great Britain in 1776. And by including the history of slavery at Monticello, the film also raises troubling questions about Jewish Americans' slave ownership and selective understanding of the concept of liberty.

The Levys were among the first Jews in colonial America. The Sephardic family descended from Zipra Nunez, the daughter of Samuel Nunez, a medical doctor who was one of a small group of Jews who arrived in Georgia in 1733 around the time of the founding of Savannah. He arrived via London, after escaping persecution by the Catholic Church in Portugal.

“The Levys of Monticello” was premiering by streaming at the [Atlanta Jewish Film Festival](#) on February 16. Its [first in-person screening](#) will take place March 6 at [Congregation Mickve Israel](#) in Savannah. The site is meaningful, as Samuel Nunez was among the founders of Mickve Israel, the third-oldest Jewish congregation in America.



Uriah Levy in the 1830s commissioned a bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson, which today stands in the US Capitol. It is the only statue gifted by an individual to do so. (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

Using a limited number of available archival images, on-screen interviews with experts (including leading American Jewish history scholar [Jonathan Sarna](#)), and dramatic readings of historical letters and statements, Pressman conveys a compelling narrative.

It's a story that Pressman was not himself aware of from his visits to Monticello in the early 1980s. The tours guides didn't mention the Levys. The focus was on the impressive architecture, decorative art, historical artifacts, and beautiful grounds. But the narrative oddly jumped from Jefferson's era to 1923, when Monticello was purchased by the private nonprofit [Thomas Jefferson Foundation](#).

"I can't claim to have discovered the Levy connection to Monticello myself. Two of the people who appear in my film, [Marc Leepson](#) and [Melvin Urofsky](#), wrote books on the subject around 20 years ago. But I thought that for most viewers this story would be new," said Pressman, whose previous two films were Holocaust-related.



Members of the Levy family at Monticello in an undated photo. (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

Jefferson built Monticello (Italian for little mountain) near Charlottesville in 1772 as his family home. While US president from 1801 to 1809, he spent at least three months every year there. He filled the impressive house with art pieces, books and scientific instruments that reflected his varied interests and accomplishments.

Profligate and bad at business, Jefferson was out of money by the 1820s, and he let the upkeep of Monticello go.

When Jefferson died in 1826, he left debts in the millions of dollars. The sale of nearly all his belongings and holdings, including most of his slaves, was not enough to pay his creditors, and his family regretfully decided to sell Monticello in 1831.



Amelia Mayhoff, Jefferson Levy's sister, enjoyed occasional visits to Monticello with other members of her family. (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

A local man named James Turner Barkley bought the property for \$7,000 and the swap of a home in Charlottesville,

but he stayed in Monticello only two years and did nothing to improve its state.

Jefferson's daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph remarked, "The garden is plowed up to the door and planted in corn. The terrace is a complete wreck. The place, I am told, is so totally changed that it is distressing to see it. It will all be one mass of ruins so rapid has the work of destruction been."

When Monticello was again put on the market, it was bought by Jefferson admirer [Uriah Phillips Levy](#) for \$2,700. Despite enduring antisemitism, Levy, a fifth-generation American, had a 50-year career in the US Navy. He was a hero of the War of 1812 and became the first Jewish commodore. Levy is also known for abolishing the punitive practice of flogging in the US Navy.



The grave of Rachel Phillips Levy, Uriah Levy's mother, along Mulberry Row at Monticello. (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

In what is considered the first act of historic preservation in America, Levy maintained and preserved Monticello, rather than choosing to remodel it. Yet, written accounts of the sale of Monticello to Levy mention his Jewish background in an uncomplimentary tone.

Uriah's mother, Rachel Phillips Levy, came to live at Monticello in 1836. She died there in 1839, while her son was at sea. Rachel was interred in a plot on the house's grounds. The grave went unnoticed and untended for decades. (In 1985, the then-new executive director of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Daniel Jordan, learned of the Levys and decided to give them their due. Rachel's gravesite was refurbished and has since then been the focus for educating visitors about the Levys' contributions to Monticello.)

The Civil War spelled disaster for Monticello. The Confederacy confiscated the property because Uriah Levy was a staunch supporter of the Union. Levy fought in the Confederate courts to regain Monticello, but failed before dying in 1862. Levy's brother Jonas Levy, a Confederate supporter, took over the running of the property and flew the Confederate flag above it.



Monticello had fallen into near ruin in the immediate years after the Civil War. (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

After a prolonged battle in court over Uriah Levy's will with regard to Monticello, in 1879 his nephew [Jefferson Monroe Levy](#) (Jonas Levy's son) gained legal possession of his namesake's home. He bought out the other heirs for \$10,500 to take on what was once again a totally dilapidated property.

A New York investor and three-term Democratic member of Congress, Jefferson Levy poured around \$1 million of his own money into restoring and conserving Monticello during the 44 years he owned it. He returned some of Jefferson's belongings, and also furnished the home with opulent pieces he brought over from Europe. Levy opened Monticello to the public, and proudly hosted dignitaries from the US and abroad.



Jefferson Monroe Levy, a wealthy businessman, served three terms in Congress, representing a district from New York. (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

Not everyone Levy invited to enjoy Monticello thought it was in the right hands.

After Maud Littleton dined with her husband Congressman Martin Littleton as Levy's guest at the mansion in 1909, she made veiled antisemitic comments.

"I did not get the feeling of being in the house that Jefferson built and made sacred. He seemed to be brushed aside and fading into a dim tradition. Somebody else was taking his place in Monticello — an outsider, a rank outsider," Maud Littleton wrote.

According to director Pressman, the prolonged national battle Maud Littleton waged in the press and Congress to have Monticello removed from the private possession of the "alien" and "oriental" Levy shows just how antisemitic things were at the time.



Maud Littleton led a national campaign, tinged with antisemitism, to take Monticello away from Jefferson Levy in the early 1900s. (Courtesy of PerlePress Productions)

"Levy was a sixth-generation American, yet still labeled an outsider. And when we consider the events of today — a century later — it seems we as American Jews will forever be seen this way," Pressman said.

The antisemitic tropes and coded language used against Levy angered him, leading him to refuse to sell. But ultimately he ultimately had to put Monticello on the market when his finances became strained in 1919. Monticello was bought by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation for \$500,000. All items not dating to Jefferson's era were removed from the property. Levy died a year later.

The Levys of Monticello - Trailer



In the film, Niya Bates, senior fellow of African American history at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, emphasized that the initial building of Monticello under Jefferson, as well as the subsequent preservations by Uriah Levy, were carried out by slave labor.

"I really struggled with the slavery piece. I initially resisted having it in the film, but you can't tell any story about Monticello without addressing the slavery issue," Pressman said.

[Far from being a benevolent slaveowner](#), Jefferson freed only 10 or 11 of the 607 enslaved individuals he owned over his lifetime.

"By the time Uriah Levy came to own Monticello, it was no longer a functioning plantation, but he did own some 20 slaves," Pressman said.

Levy was a product of centuries in which Jews were persecuted for their beliefs and religious practices. He, therefore, regarded the religious freedom offered by America as a precious gift and supreme value.

"[But] people who believed in religious freedom could also not believe in liberty for enslaved people," said Bates.