

The Philadelphia Inquirer

The glowing eyes on Market Street represent the hidden history of Thomas Jefferson's enslaved valet, Robert Hemmings

'Descendants of Monticello' is part of a Monument Lab public art project that examines the life of Robert Hemmings through the eyes of the descendants of Thomas Jefferson's enslaved people.
by Elizabeth Wellington

Published July 21, 2024, 5:00 a.m. ET



The Declaration House, where Thomas Jefferson wrote the the Declaration of Independence. The Monument Lab partnered with artist Sonya Clark to animate more than 50 eyes of the descendants of enslaved people at Monticello that will blink in the historic building's windows through September. Read more Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

Digitally enhanced eyes peer through Declaration House's 18 windows, blinking as Philadelphians meander in and out of the nearby Dunkin' and wait for SEPTA. It's not clear who the eyes belong to, but the glowing 5-foot-tall eyes are Instagrammable. Cell phone cameras click from street level.

But these aren't random eyes. Many of them belong to descendants of Robert Hemmings, Thomas Jefferson's enslaved valet, who lived with him in Declaration House. As Jefferson declared all men equal in the Declaration of Independence, Hemmings — an enslaved man — watched.

The animated eye images — some featuring dancing pupils, others furrowed brows — in *The Descendants of Monticello* are Monument Lab's attempt at centering Hemmings' life within a narrative that at best ignores his existence and, at worst, denies it. It's the marquee exhibit

of *Declaration House*, a public art project examining the tangled legacies of freedom and enslavement sitting at the crux of United States history.



At Seventh and Market Streets, the installation by Sonya Clark, “The Descendants of Monticello,” at Declaration House in Independence National Historical Park, photographed at night. The art features the blinking eyes of the descendants of the over 400 people enslaved at Monticello, including those biologically related to Jefferson. Read more [Steve Weinik/Monument Lab](#)

“*Descendants of Monticello* cuts through the contradiction of the American experiment,” said Paul Farber, director of Monument Lab and cocurator of *Declaration House*. “Jefferson didn’t come to Philadelphia alone. He brought someone with him to keep him safe and take care of him. They lived side by side. Yet, Hemmings is almost forgotten.”

“I see these eyes as an angelic force keeping watch over our humanity,” added Sonya Clark, *The Descendants of Monticello*’s lead artist. Clark combed through hundreds of images and worked with photographers to enlarge and animate the images. About 50 of the descendants’ right eyes rotate through Declaration House’s windows, darting east and down Market Street. “It’s a haunting space, a lighthouse where eyes are beacons that illuminate the meaning of freedom.”

Seek Robert Hemmings, find America

Hemmings and Jefferson arrived in Philadelphia in 1775 from Monticello, where more than 400 enslaved people from six Black families lived. The Hemings are the most well-known, largely because Robert Hemmings’ sister, Sally Hemings, was the mother of six of Jefferson’s children. As many as 70 Hemingses lived at Monticello over five generations, intermarrying with the plantation’s other enslaved families: the Gillettes, the Hems, the Fossetts, the Grangers, and the Hubbard brothers.

Earlier this year, Hemmings’ signature on his daughter Elizabeth’s 1812 marriage certificate revealed that he spelled Hemmings with two m’s instead of one, which has been the historically prevalent spelling. Hemmings could read and write, a rarity for enslaved people. No engravings or illustrations of Hemmings exist. Jefferson did, however, keep meticulous notes about his enslaved workers, referring to Hemmings as a “bright mulatto.” Hemmings was

inoculated against smallpox — also unusual for enslaved people — in all likelihood to ensure Jefferson’s health. In 1794, Jefferson freed Hemmings, making him the first to be free among Jefferson’s enslaved staff. Jefferson never freed Sally, but he did free all of her children. “Hemmings’ story isn’t just a side story,” Farber said. “The path toward healing this democracy includes telling everyone’s story. We should be asking these questions with open eyes at this crucial time in American democracy. When you seek Robert Hemmings, you find America.”

Clark, known in Philadelphia’s art circles for her 2019 Fabric Workshop and Museum exhibit, Monumental Cloth, The Flag We Should Know, was working on Ancestral Eyes — a collection of photos featuring the eyes of more than 60 Black cultural icons like James Baldwin and Chadwick Boseman — when Farber reached out to her about Declaration House. Farber was struggling with finding a way to show Hemmings’ presence at Declaration House without a picture of him. Clark suggested using the eyes of Hemmings’ descendants to represent him. “When you look into the eyes of a camera, you don’t only see your reflection, but the eyes of your ancestors,” she said.



Artist Sonya Clark standing in front of "The Descendants of Monticello" at Declaration House Monument Lab

Clark reached out to a friend, Gayle Jessup White, the fifth great-granddaughter of Sally Hemings, a former television anchor, and the first public relations and community engagement officer at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. Clark asked her for help in securing photos of the eyes of Hemings’ family members. White put her in touch with Andrew Davenport, director of Getting Word: The African American Oral History Project, which preserves the history of enslaved families of Monticello. Davenport, a descendant of Robert’s brother, Peter Hemings, asked Clark if she would consider incorporating eyes from all the enslaved families of Monticello. She agreed.

“It can be argued that all of the people enslaved on Monticello are a part of the legacy of the Declaration House,” Clark said.

Declaration House’s legacy

Declaration House stood at Seventh and Market for centuries, before falling into disrepair and getting torn down. The National Park Service unveiled a replica of the Declaration House in 1976 as part of America's Bicentennial celebration. Tours in the replica building ended in 2013. The house is a window into examining Jefferson's contradictory relationship with Black Americans and Indigenous people, Farber said. This matters a lot, especially as America prepares to celebrate the Semiquincentennial — its 250th birthday — in 2026. Monument Lab received more than \$400,000 in grants from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, the National Endowment of the Arts, and VIA Art Fund.



The Monument Lab partnered with artist Sonya Clark to animate more than 50 eyes of the descendants of enslaved peoples at Monticello that will blink in the historic building's windows through September. Read more Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

The art project *Declaration House* isn't confined to the Seventh and Market Street brick building. Jeannine Cook, owner of Harriett's Bookshop, unveiled an installation on July 19 at Cherry Street Pier honoring Phillis Wheatley, a colonial-era Black woman and poet who, Jefferson publicly claimed, did not write her own poetry, because Black people weren't smart — or human — enough to create original art. Ty "Dancing Wolf" Ellis has been tapped to lead a powwow in August paying homage to the Lenape Indians, who lived in Philadelphia for 10,000 years before white settlers came.

The Descendants of Monticello's focus on Hemmings — an uncle to Jefferson's six children — is a reclamation story, Farber said, and speaks to the nonprofit's mission of reimagining American monuments as gathering places for learning, healing, and belonging. "The eyes are vigilant," Clark said. "They are a witness and judge to all that happened then and all that is happening now."

"The Descendants of Monticello" will be on display through September at the Declaration House, located at 700 Market St. During the weekends, Monument Lab hosts a welcoming station to learn more about the exhibit.