



# James Monroe's Highland Interpretive Plan

August 2020



PHOTOGRAPH BY GENE RUNION

James Monroe's Highland | 2050 James Monroe Parkway | Charlottesville, VA 22902  
<https://highland.org> | [sbonharper@highland.org](mailto:sbonharper@highland.org) | (434) 293-8000

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Process .....	5
Sharing History through Individual and Place-Based Stories: Highland Interpretive Plan .....	6
About Highland .....	6
Mission.....	7
Vision.....	7
Values.....	7
Historic Discoveries.....	8
Historical Significance of James Monroe’s Highland .....	10
The Visitor Experience .....	10
Phase 1 Objectives .....	11
Phase 2 Objectives .....	12
Exhibition Theme and Scope.....	12
Spaces .....	13
Conclusion.....	23

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Hannah and Nelson discuss the construction of the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse: Highland augmented reality tour. ....	4
Figure 2. Spoken interpretation at Highland. ....	5
Figure 3. The 1818 Presidential Guesthouse .....	8
Figure 4. The public visit at Highland is centered on the core of the property, consisting of the evolved (1818-c.1870) house complex, original, reconstructed and moved outbuildings, the historic Piccirilli statue of Monroe, and manicured yards and gardens. ....	9
Figure 5. Highland guided tour in the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse mapped by Prof. Steve Hanna, University of Mary Washington, September 18-21, 2019. ....	11
Figure 6. September 6, 1818: James Monroe to George Hay (Courtesy James Monroe Museum, University of Mary Washington).....	15
Figure 7. An enslaved spinner reflects on the threat of the cotton industry in the West Basement Front Room in Highland’s Augmented Reality tour .....	19
Figure 8. The reconstructed Quarters at Highland. ....	22



*Figure 1. Hannah and Nelson discuss the construction of the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse: Highland augmented reality tour.*

## Executive Summary

Highland engages the public with the history of Highland and the people who inhabited it. Highland as a historic place is a collection of individual stories that comprise a complex and interconnected historical narrative of the emergence of the U.S. as a growing nation. James Monroe and his career in public service, the lives of enslaved men and women, and the operation of Highland all reflect arcs of early U.S. history, especially geopolitics, agriculture, and economics. Important events and themes in U.S. History between 1776 and 1831 can be illustrated by their intersections with people and events at Highland. Individual stories will be entry points to historic threads emphasizing geopolitics, slavery, agriculture, and economics. Monroe's career, the lives of enslaved people, and the operation of Highland will be contextualized in the historic threads. Highland's recent archaeological and architectural discoveries provide the impetus and backdrop for revised interpretation in current exhibit spaces: the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse and its 1850s addition, the c.1870 Massey House, the lower levels of these, and the dependency buildings. New interpretation includes exhibitions, and revised spoken interpretation. Creation of new exhibits and re-curation of existing period rooms is completed with the collaboration of a Descendants Advisory Panel in a practice of shared authority for the narratives of Highland's history. Due to a new and urgent need to provide self-guided non-group visit experiences, re-curation of spaces in the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse have been defined as an immediate Phase 1 plan, and all other items of site re-interpretation are designated Phase 2.





*Figure 2. Spoken interpretation at Highland.*

## Process

This interpretive plan is a document created in 2020 incorporating archaeological and architectural research discoveries announced in 2016 and three subsequent years of planning. A change in strategy occurred March-May 2020 to

accommodate self-guided individual access to interior spaces.

The process of creating the plan benefited from the following steps that contributed to the concepts presented here.

- 
- Monroe Commission and Monroe Legacy Working Group retreat February 1-2, 2018
  - National Summit on Descendant Engagement and Slavery Interpretation at James Madison's Montpelier, February 2018
  - Strategies of Interpretation, Professor Lisa Reilly, University of Virginia ARH/ARTH 4591 and ARH/ARCH 5500, Spring 2017
  - Strategies of Interpretation 2, Professors Lisa Reilly and Elgin Cleckley, University of Virginia, ARH/ARTH 4591 and ARH/ARCH 5500, University of Virginia, Spring 2019, supported by Jefferson Trust grant
  - University of Virginia undergraduate student Veronica Merrill internship at Highland, summer 2019
  - Interpretive Planning Advisory meeting of external advisors, October 16, 2018
  - Highland descendants' meetings May 16 and July 23, 2019, January 23, 2020, and June 25-6, 2020
  - On-site visitor surveys by Professor Steve Hanna, University of Mary Washington and University of Mary Washington students, September 19-22, 2019
  - Iterative collaboration of Highland Staff

# Sharing History through Individual and Place-Based Stories: Highland Interpretive Plan

August 2020

## About Highland

Highland is a public history museum and historic site owned by William & Mary as the result of a bequest from the last private owner in 1974. It was a property owned by fifth U.S. President James Monroe and intermittently occupied by Monroe and his family between political appointments elsewhere, and by enslaved Americans, up to a recorded high of 49 men and women at a time, engaged in farming tobacco and grains, and harvesting timber from the wooded slopes of the Southwest Mountains. Both grains and timber were milled on the property. A gristmill and a sawmill on the property were part of Monroe's attempt to profitably manage Highland. Highland also engaged in farming Merino sheep for their wool, processed by enslaved women, and planted orchards and vines. A series of overseers struggled to meet the financial benchmarks Monroe demanded. Environmental and financial parameters were tipping the balance toward the flourishing cotton market in the Deep South, making it harder for Piedmont Virginia farmers to break even, and creating a precarious position for enslaved people whose stability was threatened by the demand for enslaved labor in cotton fields, fueling a burgeoning domestic slave trade.

Monroe had purchased the property in 1793 at the urging of his friend and mentor Thomas Jefferson living at neighboring Monticello. Almost immediately Monroe left the original 1,000 acres in the care of Jefferson when he departed for France in 1794 as President

Washington's minister to France. At that time, Jefferson engaged with Monroe via a slow and faulty correspondence on the layout of the farm complex. By 1799 construction was completed on a main house that appears to have burned as early as end-of-year 1829, and was subsequently forgotten. By the 1810s Monroe himself spent increasing time at another of his properties, Oak Hill in Loudoun County, Virginia, where he had an imposing house better situated for access to Washington, DC. He was still invested at Highland however, and during his presidency had a guesthouse constructed to support the needs of visitors. The 1818 Presidential Guesthouse was identified through research in 2016. Monroe sold Highland in two parts, the core to Edward O. Goodwyn in 1826 and the remainder through a Bank of the United States transaction in 1828. In the years after Monroe's ownership, the property was called Ash Lawn, and then between the mid-1980s and 2016 it was Ash Lawn-Highland. In 2016 Highland's Monroe Commission led the efforts to resume the use of Monroe's name for the property, and returned the name to Highland.

In the past decade Highland has served approximately 50,000 visitors annually with guided tours, public programs and events, and private functions. The current re-interpretation is the first major overhaul of the spaces in recent memory and will provide significantly revised visitor experience and content.

## Mission

Highland's mission is to engage the public in learning about U.S. history through inclusive narratives of Highland and the people who lived

on the property, with a focus on the period of James Monroe's ownership.

## Vision

Highland promotes diverse narratives of historic Highland, including the histories of James Monroe, his family, visitors, and the enslaved people who lived and worked there. Interpretation at Highland connects individuals' stories with the themes and events of U.S. history relevant to the years of Monroe's public career. Highland is distinguished by its joining of public and academic history and advancing this

vision using new and traditional technology. Highland is uniquely placed to serve as a laboratory for creative public history as a division of William & Mary, an institution of higher education with a commitment to excellence in research and teaching at all levels and renowned doctoral programs in history, anthropology, and American studies.

## Values

We believe that the study of history can spark imaginations and foster empathy and is a valuable means by which to improve lives of all members of communities. The respect for histories of marginalized communities is especially important to increase an awareness of shared commonality. Inclusive and thoughtful exploration of the founding and early national periods of U.S. history bolsters the value placed

on civic processes and structures. The interpretation of history in our communities increases our understanding of our shared past, influences our perspectives in the present, and creates new and better futures. Highland, as a public history arm of William & Mary, is committed to thoughtful and inclusive public engagement in the pursuit of history serving broad and overlapping communities.





*Photo: Gene Runion*

*Figure 3. The 1818 Presidential Guesthouse*

## Historic Discoveries

In 2016 Highland announced that it had identified recently-discovered archaeological remains as the foundations of an entirely forgotten main house built in 1799, a rare new find in the archaeology of presidential homes. The research announcement also corrected a longstanding misinterpretation of the surviving house, now correctly identifying it as a guesthouse Monroe had constructed in 1818. Re-curating the existing site spaces to incorporate these research results provides a unique opportunity to overlay an inclusive set of historic narratives across the whole site, and to bring Monroe's story out of the shadows in the public view.

The discovery of James Monroe's original house at Highland presents an opportunity to engage a new generation's interest in the historic offerings of Central Virginia. For a world where there's not much known that we can't discover on a cell phone in the palms of our hands, we envision Highland offering history unfolding in real time, with discovery through archaeology

and through the best available technology for visitor interpretation. We picture visitor experiences that emphasize exploration and new learning, and the confrontation of contested histories.

Our vision for the new visitor experience at Highland encompasses our existing facilities (the current project), and a new Learning Center (separate from the current project) providing much-needed gallery space. We envision transforming the site experience with an integrated set of exhibits and reimagined active interpretation. Re-curation of the standing 1818 Guesthouse is included in Phase 1 of new exhibits.

A visit to Highland should allow the public to explore essential events during the decades of U.S. history framed by Monroe's service at the state and national levels. The interpretation of individual lives and daily functioning of the Highland property will create accessible entry points to larger political and economic histories.



Slavery and its impact at the individual and political levels are essential concepts throughout, and interpretation of the Highland property and the people who lived there will reflect national contexts of economy and agriculture. Our central themes for interpreting the career of James Monroe include foreign affairs, national expansion, and perseverance of the United States through times of crisis.

The 1799 Main House archaeological site will provide a future point of engagement for visitors. Archaeological interpretation for visitors should include dialogue about current and completed work, and the physical layout will include viewing areas for any research underway. Interpretation of the 1799 Main House archaeological site is not included in the current Interpretive Plan.

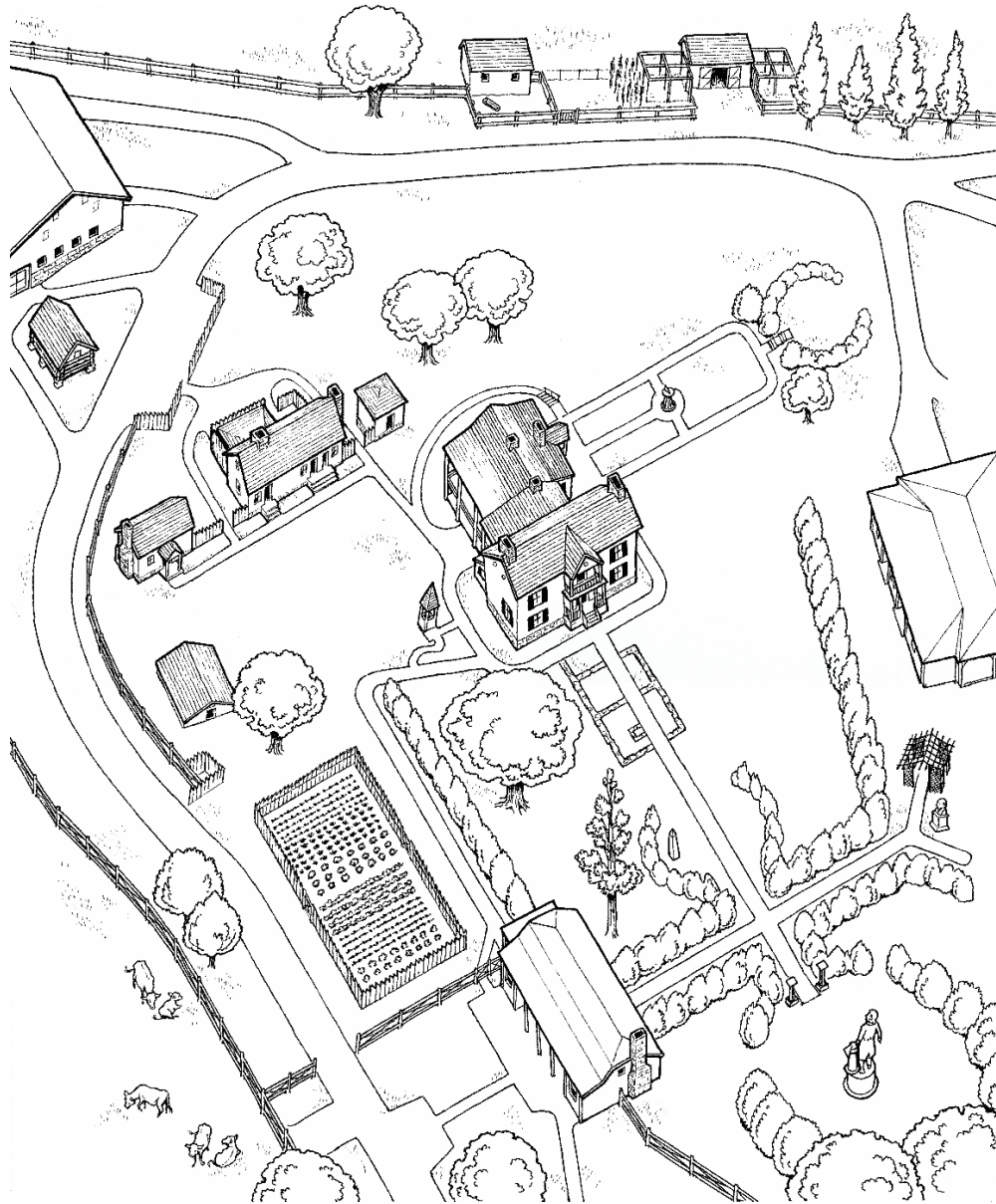


Figure 4. The public visit at Highland is centered on the core of the property, consisting of the evolved (1818-c.1870) house complex, original, reconstructed and moved outbuildings, the historic Piccirilli statue of Monroe, and manicured yards and gardens.

## Historical Significance of James Monroe's Highland

As the only one of James Monroe's personal residences open to the public, Highland offers a backdrop for the fifth President's influence and through it, a critical period of national development. Highland offers a stage on which to witness events relevant to U.S. history during years of Monroe's career. These pivotal decades are presented through their intersection with Monroe's career itself, through the concept of Highland as a place of social, economic and agricultural activities, and the lives of enslaved people.

In the fifty years that spanned Monroe's career from his role in the American Revolution through his second term in office, the thirteen colonies won independence and collectively developed the norms of domestic governance and geopolitics that established the United States as a formidable international presence. During this time and for the decades to follow, the American economy relied on enslaved labor, and created systems that protected and furthered slavery. Monroe can be seen as participating in the global emergence of the United States through an array of actions as multiple-term minister abroad, Secretary of State, and President. He will also be portrayed in his role at Highland, where enslaved men and

women comprised the largest population on the property. The other offices Monroe held enter the narrative as supporting facts. Highland will present Monroe's career as illustrating the global emergence of the young United States, with the political, economic, and human systems that developed to support it.

Highland's current moment of opportunity brings the potential for a transformed visitor experience, creating a laboratory for innovative historic interpretation. As a society, we are exploring ways to approach the history of the founding era in a way that appropriately highlights the accomplishments of the young United States' "experiment in governance" and also truthfully includes diverse narratives, especially those of enslaved African Americans, and acknowledges the long shadow of slavery in the American experience. Supported by a \$1 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Highland has an engaged descendant community who collaborates and advises in the creation of inclusive narratives across the site, sharing insight into history from diverse viewpoints.

---

## The Visitor Experience

Visitors to Highland currently take a guided site tour that begins at the museum shop, stops at the James Monroe statue and site of the archaeologically discovered main house, and enters the north door of the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse. Groups are led through the door to the north shed addition, through shed addition and the two original 1818 rooms, and the 1850s room. The tour concludes in the front hall of the Massey House, where guests are invited to view the objects on exhibit there, and to explore the foreign affairs exhibit in the front exhibit room at their own pace.

The tour has followed the same route through the guesthouse since 2013. Its emphasis is on Monroe's career and its context within U.S. history. The tour is supported by the rich collection of furnishings on exhibit in the presidential guesthouse. Among the themes in the spoken tour are geopolitics as a connecting category dominating the synthesis of Monroe's historical significance, and issues of slavery, national growth, and economics.

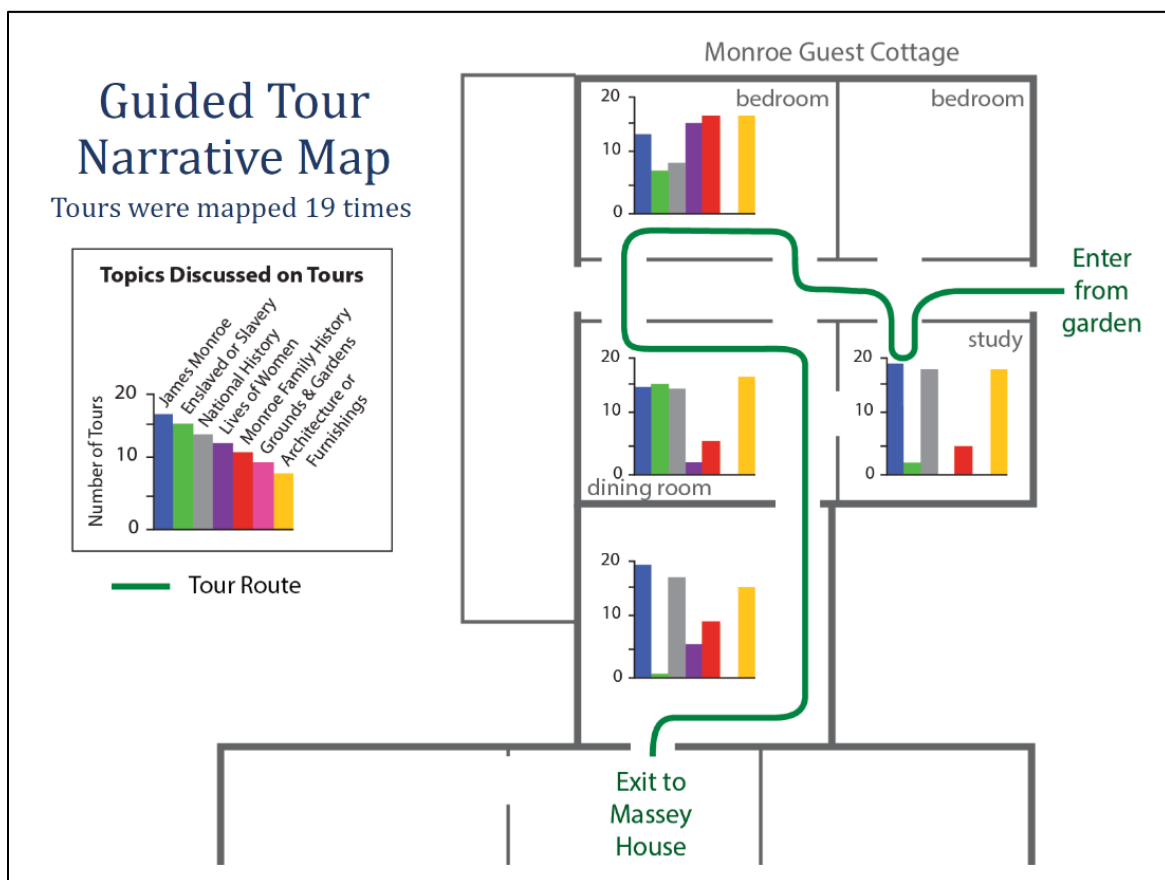


Figure 5. Highland guided tour in the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse mapped by Prof. Steve Hanna, University of Mary Washington, September 18-21, 2019.

## Phase 1 Objectives

Through individual stories of people and events intersecting at Highland, exhibits will overlay an interpretation of the emergence of the U.S. as a growing nation in the arenas of national government, foreign affairs, and economics, with slavery as an engine of prosperity for some, a deeply crippling social institution, and traumatic in its impact on generations of Black Americans. Loosely shorthand as geopolitics, these themes form the backbone of our narratives.

There are two immediate goals for Phase 1 of site re-interpretation. This phase is focused on the interior of the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse. The first goal is to re-curate the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse with vignettes

consistent with our new research-informed understanding of its original use, using these newly curated spaces to create exhibits in these original rooms and the adjacent ones in the shed addition and 1850s addition. New exhibits will allow the second objective: a self-guided visitor experience throughout the guesthouse, acknowledging a continuing need to maintain physical distances between guests, and a pre-existing visitor interest in exploring at their own pace through passive interpretation. Prior to Spring 2020 museum industry knowledge would have included interactive exhibits, though with new sensibilities to the spread of disease expected to continue for the foreseeable future, no-touch exhibits are planned for Phase 1. Self-guided visits will allow visitors to abbreviate and

expand their viewing time of any elements of their museum experiences according to their own interests.

Phase 1 will build on the richness of Highland’s historic collections and allow the many Monroe family pieces to illustrate themes and events in U.S. history. Entrance and exit from the guesthouse/Massey House will be ambidirectional through the north door of the guesthouse and the Massey House front door. The content of these exhibit spaces is discussed below.

## Phase 2 Objectives

In the second phase of site reinterpretation, the dependency spaces will be treated with new exhibits with defined themes and topics. The goals of Phase two are to create an enriched visitor experience throughout the site, with defined themes and narratives that sustain the

## Exhibition Theme and Scope

The central goal for the re-interpretation of Highland is to re-curate and re-interpret existing exhibit spaces using individual and Highland-based stories to reveal arcs of early U.S. history. We will create a single set of narratives that include politics, challenges within the emergence of a national government, and economics as the central themes. The lives of James Monroe, his family, enslaved people, overseers, and events at Highland are the vehicles for these narratives of U.S. history, and will all be presented within these themes. The experiences of enslaved and free will be presented in the same spaces, as actors with political and economic agency. All historic individuals at Highland functioned within the same systems and will be presented as coequal components.

Re-interpretation of existing spaces is the scope of the current project. The first phase will

Group tours organized by schools and tour companies will need guide staff with them for the duration of the visit, even though the majority of indoor educational content on site will be delivered through passive interpretation, with the addition of drop-in interpretation stations.

Exhibits will be attentive to layers of visitor resources for casual and first-time visitors, those willing to take a “deep dive”, and school groups.

---

engagement of visitors’ imaginations about the past and its contributions to our lived experiences now.

---

include installations in the two original rooms of the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse (currently Monroe bedroom and dining room) and the 1850s room. These spaces will have period furnishings with text and images on interpretive panels. The two rooms of the north shed addition will be exhibit spaces with defined focus on the context of 1818, and the discovery and interpretation of the historic architectural landscape at Highland. There will be no true period rooms in this building, as all will use panels, presumably reader rails, to provide written and pictorial interpretation. The second phase will include dependency spaces in the guesthouse and outbuildings, the Massey House front hall and front exhibit room. The designated spaces for each phase of re-interpretation are listed below, along with concepts for design development by design teams.

---



## Spaces

The standing evolved structure at Highland includes the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse and its undated shed addition and 1850s addition, and the c.1870 Massey House. The guesthouse, shed addition, and the 1850s room also have lower level spaces used as dependencies, that will be treated during the second phase of reinterpretation.

### *Massey House*

Both Massey House exhibit spaces will be re-interpreted in Phase 2.

The **Massey House Front Hall** will be one of the two entry points in a self-guided visit through the evolved standing house. The Front Hall should frame the visit in the people and place of Highland, introducing the concept of varied individual experience, and the agricultural property of Highland, with the historic setting of both. James Monroe's career is introduced and frames the temporal focus and brings in the political and social themes of agriculture, national unity vs. regionalism, and foreign affairs. *Concepts: Highland as a property is representative of plantations in the upper south in the early 19<sup>th</sup> c, and the stories of this place and its people reflect significant events in the United States of James Monroe's public career, ca. 1799-1825.*

Strategies: short videos, aerial images, and relatable drawings of Monroe, enslaved men and women, will emphasize the feeling of place and connection with people. A timeline is appropriate here if not used in the museum shop/outside the museum shop.

The **Front Room Exhibit Space** currently houses a Foreign Affairs exhibit, and will remain as the Foreign Affairs exhibit during the Phase 1 re-

curation of the guesthouse, with or without the accommodation of additional objects that are being moved from the guesthouse. In the Phase 2 re-interpretation it will be used to deepen visitor connection with the individuals interpreted at Highland, and to provide agricultural and economic context for Highland. Both of these goals offer depth and specifics to the themes introduced in the Front Hall. This space is where we will create the essence of Highland, balanced in weight with the exhibits in the shed addition, where those will dive into the social/political setting of the guesthouse "moment" and the research discoveries that have changed our narratives in recent years.

### *The 1818 Presidential Guesthouse and North Shed Addition*

The 1818 Presidential Guesthouse and its north shed addition and added 1850s room were long believed to be remnants of Monroe's main house. Their re-curation here is the most fundamentally needed element of Highland's site re-interpretation. Highland has continued to present erroneously curated rooms since its 2016 research announcement, even while spoken interpretation explains the discrepancy.

The **1818 Presidential Guesthouse** consists of two original rooms, currently presented as the Monroe bedchamber and a dining room. A shed addition on the north side is currently interpreted as a "daughter's" or "Maria Hester's" bedchamber and Monroe's study. The shed addition is likely from the late 1820s. The wood used in its construction is the oldest dated in the building, though the addition clearly post-dates the 1818 guesthouse. The shed addition may have been constructed just after Monroe's sale of the property, as early as 1826-1830. The 1850s room connects the 1818 guesthouse and the Massey House.

One of the key transformations in Phase 1, the **Currently-Interpreted Dining Room (East Guest Room)** will depict a ca. 1818 guest room with

interpretive text and images, likely via reader rails. This exhibit will explore the stories of visitors to Highland in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and should convey the use of the guesthouse during Monroe's presidency.

Strategies: Potential furnishings include the replica Monroe bed 1974.001.008 or the "Lafayette" bed 2010.004.001 (*note*, another 19<sup>th</sup> c. bedstead in the Overseer's House loft 1974.001.100), and the Monroe French sofa 1970.001.043. Interpretive elements include historic maps showing roads and inns in Virginia that chart Monroe's travels, period images or text depicting traveling with the enslaved, accoutrements for traveling (trunks with reproduction contents), reproduction books and/or newspapers *ca.* 1818-1825, a period letter writing interactive where visitors could make a keepsake to bring home.

Considering potential visitors, we can identify associates of Monroe and introduce his professional relationships with cabinet members and secretaries. Some dated lists of enslaved people allow us to interpolate presence of individuals and their roles at Highland as well as at the White House. Monroe's enslaved manservant, Peter Marks, would also be a key individual involved in the coordination of hospitality at Highland to interpret in this space.

Needs: Finishes such as wall coverings/paint, mantels, and lighting to be planned and adjusted.

COVID-19 Changes: The planning process for this space had included the use of reproductions and touchable items. Currently all touch-oriented exhibitions are on hold.

Supporting interpretive panels could explore the categories of likely guests who stayed in the

lodgings while Monroe was president, and discuss the intersection of official business, family life, and enslaved work that created the experience surrounding the guesthouse. This exhibit is about the use of these spaces. The context of their creation, which includes the experiences of enslaved carpenters Peter Malorry and George, is found in the East Room of Shed Addition (see below).

The second key element of Phase 1 re-curation is the **Currently-Interpreted Master Bedroom (West Guest Room)**, which will become an exhibit exploring the use of the guesthouse during Monroe's presidency. The room is currently furnished with bedchamber pieces that belonged to the Monroe family and has long been presented as the Monroes' "master" bedroom. We may choose to retain many of the original family furnishings. The central component of the exhibit is how the guesthouse was used during Monroe's presidency, with his travel and absences included, and what the guesthouse was while he was away—with the role of enslaved people opening, cleaning, and when Monroe returned, signaling the return of guests visiting the president.

The primary story in the West Guest Room should be the space. We could imagine it like a stage, where actors appear, and their actions and voices also give us glimpses of activity that occurs offstage.

Strategies: Monroe's travel to and from Highland can be used to illustrate his presence at Highland and the degree to which he considered Highland a home for his family, especially during the years when he was in office.

Routing: Museum visitors will enter from the north side of the house, and could proceed through the room to the south lobby entrance to access the East Guest Room.

for the accommodation of young men, & servants while  
 then. In this place, I have made, & am making,  
 some small change. The three rooms, in which  
 the servants lodged, below, the well, have been  
 furnished inside, painted, & made habitable for  
 friends. I have a new house, with two rooms,  
 framed, just below the present one, for lodgers.  
 It will be closed in, while here, & finished before our  
 return. This is done by a carpenter, I bought of  
 Peter Malorri, last winter, <sup>for \$5.00</sup> & George. I mention this  
 to show the difference, between doing work, in  
 that way, & putting yourself in the hands, of

Figure 6. September 6, 1818: James Monroe to George Hay (Courtesy James Monroe Museum, University of Mary Washington)

The East Room of the Shed Addition is the **Currently-Interpreted Study**. In both Phase 1 and Phase 2 it will be used to provide a temporal setting and context for the construction of the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse through panels and potentially small exhibit cases. The exhibit in this space can be based around the “portkey” of the **September 6, 1818 letter** where Monroe revealed to his son-in-law he had a “new house” at Highland. This letter sets the scene for the role of Highland to Monroe during the presidency, and provides a rare insight into the participation of two enslaved men in specific tasks on the property. Deconstructing the historic background of Highland through the details of the letter will provide historical context around the construction of the 1818 Guesthouse.

As the most significant extant building from Monroe’s occupation of Highland, the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse has a unique contribution to Monroe’s history. It bears the story of Monroe’s occupation of Highland as

President when he required additional space for guests, and is witness to the fact that guests likely had more formal relationships with the president than those that visited in the prior 18 years of his part time residency at Highland.

Strategies: The stories of enslaved carpenters Peter Malorri and George as builders of the 1818 Guesthouse provide rich detail about the experiences of enslaved individuals, their families, and connections with Oak Hill. This is an example of multivocal perspective on the core events of Highland. An example of this strategy is presented on the augmented reality tour, with a discussion between enslaved cook Hannah, and enslaved carpenter Nelson, introducing the 1818 Guesthouse with observations about the impact of its construction on the family lives of Peter Malorri and George.

The September 6, 1818 letter will serve as a portkey in the east shed addition room (current study) to transport the visitor to the issues and experiences of that time.

Contextualization of the September 6, 1818 letter presents details about life at Highland and the property's uses during Monroe's presidency. James and Elizabeth Monroe left Washington, DC and stayed at Highland from August 3 through October 6, 1818. During this time, the President worked from Highland as well as initiated a building campaign in the core of the property. Emphasis on written records leads to centering the Monroe narrative, and experiences of others will be extrapolated from these documents to form a more inclusive view.

Personal details learned from the letter include that James Monroe:

- Had recently recovered from an injury caused by a box falling on his leg in a carriage "In consequence of a jolt"
- Was riding horseback every morning
- Was planning to sign "thousands" of patents "to save the trouble and loss of time" in mid-winter.
  - What patents did Monroe sign during this time? [US Patent Activity 1790-present](#).
- Directed the refurbishing of a building: "The three rooms, in which the servants lodged, below, the well have been finished inside, painted, and made habitable for friends"
- Oversaw the completion of a new building: "I have a new house with two rooms framed, just below the present one for lodgers. This is done by a carpenter, I bought of Judge Brooks, last winter (for \$450) and George."

World affairs drew Monroe's attention while he was at Highland. Some of the significant happenings in 1818 will provide a backdrop for local events:

- A Delicate Dance with Spain: Monroe had been keen to obtain the Florida territory from Spain since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, even traveling to Madrid in 1805 as an envoy to negotiate. As Spain's empire teetered, Monroe's presidency was poised for the right moment to angle for Florida and secure the southern border.
- Andrew Jackson in Pensacola and St. Marks: *"That attack may produce a good effect, in promoting a cession which the restoration of the posts enables her to do with honor."*

---

The **West Room of the Shed Addition**, currently interpreted as **Maria Hester's Bedroom**, will also be exhibit space. In Phase 1 and Phase 2 it will be used to share the recent archaeological and architectural research that contributed to a new

understanding and re-interpretation of the property. The exhibit may also frame an understanding of the layout of the plantation, both buildings and exterior spaces, according to most recent architectural and archaeological



analysis. The exhibit works both as an entry point to the Guesthouse and as an interpretation of the historic Highland property based on recent research.

Strategies: The temporary exhibit panels prepared for the research announcement may form the basis of new panels for the exhibit.

The **1850s Room** will focus on elements of geopolitics through Monroe's career. His involvement with key geopolitical issues allows us to identify and illustrate themes in the foreign affairs of the early United States. The room will form a vignette as a basis for interpretation of geopolitics. Specific attention should be on the Louisiana purchase and the Monroe Doctrine. The former will draw on Monroe's diplomacy in France during the Jefferson administration and the issues, foreign and domestic, of national expansion. The latter will present the eponymous statement as the position of a maturing young nation, with Monroe's goals for foreign policy. The room's finishes will not need to be changed, as the scenic Zuber wallpaper and mantelpiece may be incorporated into the vignette elements. Here as elsewhere, vignette may be distinguished from period room by employing low platforms to raise and group furniture, and the use of interpretive reader

rails. Vitrines may contain smaller items on exhibit.

After serving in the American Revolution, furthering the spread of republican government was the rallying cry of Monroe's political career for the next five decades. He brought particular energy to the cause of republicanism in his diplomatic appointments, which laid essential groundwork for his rise to the presidency.

The 1850s room exhibit may contrast Monroe's two appointments to France (one in 1794 by President Washington, and the second in 1803 by President Jefferson) and especially delve into Monroe's role in the Louisiana Purchase. Monroe's later appointments as Minister to Great Britain (1803-1807) and envoy to Spain (1805) are less significant within his career, but play supporting roles in their influence on the eventual stance of the Monroe Doctrine. The Louisiana Purchase and westward expansion are directly connected to devastating impact on Native Americans and the growth of the domestic slave trade, with the door opening to greater cotton production. These ramifications should inform our thinking about the complexity of national growth.

**A variety of collections items and exhibit panels could illustrate geopolitics in the 1850s Room**

- Miniatures of Elizabeth Kortright Monroe (L1982.006.001), Eliza Monroe Hay (L192.006.003) and Hortense de Beauharnais (L1982.006.002)
- *A View of the Conduct of the Executive* (1999.004.001)
- *La Constitution de la Nation Française* (2012.003.001)
- Portraits of Madame Campan (L1981.003.002), Eugene de Beauharnais (L1981.003.001), Hortense de Beauharnais, Queen of Holland (L1980.016.001)
- Napoleon bust (1974.001.012)
- Set of two *Fauteuils en Cabriolet* (1974.001.013 & 14)
- The reader rail might include a historic map of France, Great Britain, and Spain; la Folie de la Bouëxière, and an interpretive map of period Latin America
- Pier Mirror (1974.001.011)

Highland visitors are most likely to know about the Monroe Doctrine if they know any elements of Monroe's political career. The 1850s room will deepen their understanding of the Monroe Doctrine and its original intent to ensure Latin and South American countries could declare independence from Spain and maintain the goal of a western hemisphere free from monarchy. Examples of later presidents who used the doctrine for their own purposes would bring modern relevance and tie to the Piccirilli statue commissioned by Venezuela. Importantly, Monroe's efforts at spreading republicanism around the world would be framed within the

tension of his active participation buying and selling enslaved people held in bondage at his Virginia properties.

Slavery was an element of geopolitics in the U.S. from its founding role in agricultural and therefore economic production. White fear led to the proposed removal of free Blacks to Africa. This topic may be woven into the 1850s room, with pending development of a discussion for Phase 2 (front exhibit room, Massey house). Introduction leads to a discussion of Liberia and its capital city, Monrovia.

***Provide an opportunity for visitors to answer for themselves!***

Pose essential question to visitors relating to Monroe's life-long dedication to the cause of republicanism. What cause are you devoted to? What are you most proud of doing to promote your cause?

(Drop a token in your choice of box to vote for choices!).

---

Lower Level and Exterior Dependency Spaces

The exhibit spaces in the lower rooms of the 1818 Presidential Guesthouse and the rooms in the dependency buildings will all be refreshed in Phase 2 of reinterpretation. These spaces will house exhibits using people and events at Highland as insight into U.S. history. These exhibits will be Highland's most creative installations, though they are also small spaces, demanding focus on a limited range of topics. The essential strategies of using individual and place-based accounts to illustrate U.S. history, and to include the experiences of enslaved men and women as equal components of narratives

including politics, the presidency, and the growth of the young United States.

**The West Basement Front Room** will be presented with its likely historic uses as a laundry and potential textile production space. If public health conditions allow by that time, it will serve as an exhibit space with touchable examples of period wool processing. Earlier drafts of this Interpretation Plan proposed hands-on processes using period or reproduction equipment. Currently all thoughts of interactive exhibit items are being reconsidered in deference to new sensibilities around public health.



*Figure 7. An enslaved spinner reflects on the threat of the cotton industry in the West Basement Front Room in Highland's Augmented Reality tour*

Historic practices of wool production at Highland and Monroe's Loudoun County Oak Hill will also be interpreted in this space, using Monroe's plantations as illustrations of larger agricultural and economic trends. Among the historic events impacting Highland, agricultural and economic developments were essential to Monroe, whose interest in Highland was largely economic, and to enslaved workers, whose daily activities were shaped both by larger economic and economic trends and the day to day of agricultural production. The basement interpretation will employ soundscapes and shadow projects reminiscent of people passing through, conducting work, and interacting. Peter Malorry and George, as well as other named enslaved people are represented in these spaces.

The **West Basement Back Room** is likely Highland's only surviving room that was originally a designated slave quarter. The reconstructed slave quarters are a 1980s reconstruction, likely of a *ca.* 1840s quarter that may have replaced an earlier quarter in that same place. Other spaces in the main house

complex would have served as sleeping spaces for enslaved people, though in the surviving building those uses would have been secondary. It is essential that the basement Back Room be interpreted as domestic quarters for an enslaved family, likely of cook or laundress and her offspring and potential husband. Because of cost, for this iteration, we will use a tromp-l'oeil panel on the door with a depiction that matches the tone of the exhibits in the surrounding spaces.

The **East Basement Outer Room** will interpret Highland as a microcosm of Virginia agriculture in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, detailing the plantation industries at Highland (gristmill, sawmill, tobacco, etc.) and illustrating the process of shipping from nearby Milton, and a large map of Highland. The content will connect the people of Highland to larger agricultural trends of westward expansion from coastal Virginia, the decline of Virginia's agricultural primacy and the rise of cotton cultivation in the Deep South, all culminating in Monroe's

retirement with the sale of Highland and a group of enslaved families to the Florida territory.

This exhibit will show Highland's spatial relationship to Monroe Hill and Oak Hill, as well as place Highland within the context of neighboring properties in Albemarle County.

The **East Basement Inner Room** may be observed from the doorsill. This would be the place for additional audiovisual components. Projections on the walls could be a visual "part two" to the south room interpretation. Possibly a projection-style story of the growth of the US during Monroe's ownership of Highland (1793-

1828) and changing agricultural trends. If we are able to convey a nuanced narrative, we may observe the relationship between agriculture and Monroe's finances, and the related the sale of property and enslaved families. The experiences of enslaved Americans would be part of this story, as the domestic slave trade was experienced by individuals and families. These historic narratives are relevant to Highland's Florida and Albemarle County descendants' family experiences.

#### Historical Details to Consider in the West Basement Room:

- Textile production was intimately connected to slavery both throughout this period. To convey with most urgency in this exhibit, the cotton industry was the engine of the domestic slave trade by the 1810s, a fact central to the lives of enslaved people in the upper South.
- The Embargo Act of 1807 spurred Americans to increase production at home which impacted wool production on a national scale.
- Merino sheep became easier to import to the U.S. after Napoleon invaded Spain in 1808 (period images of merinos owned by DuPonts and Robert Livingston)
- Wool was a source of clothing for free and enslaved people at Monroe's properties and a source of income for Monroe.
- Sukey the enslaved spinner clashed with Joseph Jones Monroe, which caused their separation (Sukey's fate elsewhere)  
[Joseph Jones to JM, January 16, 1796.](#)
- Monroe's discussion with William Benton that enslaved women were more productive because they could "spin in the winter"
- Essential to the discussion of wool production is the growth of the cotton industry in the Deep South. As depicted in the augmented reality scene between Hannah and the spinner, cotton intensified the domestic slave trade in ways that threatened to survival of families at plantations such as Highland.



The **1850s Kitchen** will contextualize larger systems of economy and agriculture with specifics as experienced in Albemarle County. With an economic lens, the use of land surrounding Highland will be seen as a complex reflection of society and its attempts to occupy, and steward the land in productive ways in a thread through the present day. This space will connect the history of Highland and its environment with the earliest through to current practices of economy and land

ownership. The exhibit may work backward in time from current Albemarle County, including African American land ownership since the early 1800s, to the large plantations, the area's early English land grants, and Monacan occupation.

Here or in the Quarters, we propose a kiosk of descendant oral histories, including "stories from under the windowsill" of older generations' narratives.

**Topics in the 1850s Kitchen will include:**

- Acknowledgement of Monacan tribes in Albemarle County historically, and current presence of Native people in Central Virginia
- Original English land grants and the Carter occupation
- Presence and scale of large 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c. plantations.
- Sale of Highland core in 1826, remainder to the Bank of the United States in 1828
- Concise coverage of post-Monroe owners and clues to the date of the fire: Goodwyn, Buckner, Garrett, Massey, Johns, William & Mary
- Histories of free Black communities near Albemarle County, such as Monroetown
- 2016 research announcement and name change
- 2019 *Sharing Authority* grant from the Mellon Foundation and news items related to co-authority for interpreting history
- Continued themes of descendant collaboration and focus on changing our future



*Figure 8. The reconstructed Quarters at Highland.*

The **Reconstructed Quarters** will function as a resource on the historic people of Highland. The free white family, overseers, and enslaved people will be presented as individual actors in historic context. Our prior plans for interactive exhibits need revision based on the new demand for touchless experiences. The main concept is the exploration of names and short biographies paired with key primary documents relevant to each included individual.

One of the **Quarters** rooms may serve as an ancestry research station. One area will be specific to Highland and provide digital versions of site-specific documents such as the Garrett Farm Journal, the Massey Farm Journal, Monroe family trees, names of people enslaved through emancipation at Ash Lawn. An open-ended area will provide access to many databases. A non-exhaustive list would include databases from

Michigan State, Georgetown University, and Emory's Slave Trade database, Ancestry.com, and newspaper databases. A significant component is referral to community resources for building genealogy skills after the visitor leave the property.

The final topic to be covered in the **Quarters** is the period of Reconstruction in Virginia, and Reconstruction's eclipse by the Lost Cause and the Jim Crow South, including significant events such as the Virginia Constitution of 1902, and the participation by Highland descendants in integration and the Great Migration. We propose including civil rights struggles, including mass incarceration, housing segregation, police brutality, generational impacts of slavery and racism, potentially in a section about the Civil Rights Era 1950s-Present.

## Conclusion

The re-interpretation of Highland will occur in two phases, the first allowing re-opening of Highland's interior spaces post-COVID-19, and the second to be accomplished in the next three years. The exhibit concepts here are the result of deliberation and dialogue, and are poised to incorporate additional thinking and approaches. Highland has never undertaken a re-interpretation of this scale. We believe that public history has a contributing role to play in

community recovery from COVID-19 through stories of resilience and economic uncertainty giving rise to new ideas and directions. Public history and thoughtful focus on our shared past has the potential to guide future community actions in overcoming political, social, and economic divisions. These divisions may be the biggest threat to our communities in our lifetimes.

*Sara Bon-Harper, August 2020*

### Contact:

Sara Bon-Harper, Ph.D.  
Executive Director, James Monroe's Highland  
*and*  
Research Professor of Anthropology, William & Mary

2050 James Monroe Parkway  
Charlottesville, VA 22902  
(434) 293-8000  
sbonharper@highland.org