

ALLA CORRENTE Italian Influence at Monticello

June's ALLA CORRENTE celebrates Italian influences at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's elaborate home and grounds in Virginia. A part of the Italian influence there comes from one of the ancestors of a Cenacolista (a past-president and current treasurer)...David Giannini. His ancestor (Anthony Giannini) is mentioned in this piece that I have included. Whenever you visit Monticello, be sure to see the orchards and beautiful grounds that are a part of its landscape and recall that it was Italians who first laid these orchards out and thus added so much to the historic beauty of the place.

The first Italian feature of Thomas Jefferson's orchard was the name he gave to its mountaintop site. By August 1767 he was using the name Monticello, which was both a place name and a noun meaning "small mountain." He eventually gave the name Montalto to the adjoining higher land which he eventually acquired, purchasing only that part visible from his own summit. He may have derived from his reading the idea of translating into Italian the local terms for the two landmarks, Low or Little Mountain and High Mountain. Jefferson's first serious study of the Italian language probably began in 1764, when he purchased an Italian-English dictionary and three historical works in Italian. By 1767 he probably had seen a copy of Andrea Palladio's Four Books of Architecture in the original Italian, and he may have been struck by Palladio's account of his most famous structure, the Villa Rotunda near Vicenza. Palladio was the architect who most influenced the design of the first Monticello house and he had described the Villa Rotunda's particularly delightful situation on the top of "monticello," on one side washed at its base by a navigable river and on the other surrounded by cultivated hills abounding in fruits and forming a "gran Teatro."

Whatever the direct inspiration, the indirect source of the name Monticello was undoubtedly Jefferson's early and intense study of the classical world and his deep identification with Roman culture. He filled pages of his Commonplace Book with extracts from well-loved poems of Augustan Rome. He derived continuous architectural inspiration from Roman villas and their sixteenth-century Palladian descendants, and he considered the agriculture of the time of Cato and Varro as the origin of and model for modern husbandry. It is apparent that he regarded modern Italians as the heirs of the classical tradition. He believed perhaps that traces of the idealized rural life so vividly portrayed in the poetry of Horace and Virgil might yet survive on Italian soil.

And so, when a boatload of Tuscan farmers, animals and plants arrived in Virginia in 1773, Jefferson may have viewed it as a delegation from an ancient world. The conductor of this small band of colonizers was Filippo Mazzei, who in his forty-three years had been an itinerant surgeon, a teacher of Italian, and a wine merchant, and was now intent on initiating trade between Virginia and Italy and establishing in Virginia the culture of some of the agricultural products of the Mediterranean. Mazzei, on his way to the Shenandoah Valley to settle, was intercepted in his passage by Jefferson at Monticello, where he had stopped for an introductory visit. Jefferson gave him a small parcel of land on the fringes of his own property. Mazzei purchased additional acreage, and a third Italian hill, Colle, joined Monticello and Montalto in a neighborhood of farms that also included farms with names like Clover Fields, Edgehill and Buck Island.

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For a time a Mediterranean Eden in Albemarle County seemed possible. Undaunted by a May frost in 1774 which killed almost all the plants he had brought with him, Mazzei imported more and in late 1775 declared in the pages of the *Virginia Gazette* that hundreds of orange, lemon and olive trees were growing luxuriantly at Colle. There were no further bulletins from Mazzei on their progress. Jefferson quietly recorded their epitaph in his *Garden Book*, when in 1778 he removed from Colle to Monticello root sprouts (the sole survivors of a severe late spring frost) of his semitropical plantation—one olive and four sour orange trees.

Mazzei's grapes fared better, but they too suffered from a climate in a state of transition. The Italian, who had been told in London by the Virginians who encouraged his emigration that Virginia had the best spring climate in the world, could only blame "the solar system." Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on Virginia* that the moderating climate had since 1769 produced uncharacteristic springs, in which "an unfortunate fluctuation between heat and cold" was often fatal to fruits.

Mazzei was one of the first to contribute to the diversity of an orchard later known for the remarkable variety of its fruits. In 1774, the first spring after the arrival of the Italians, Jefferson recorded in the *Garden Book* the planting not of apricots and cherries, but of albicocche and ciliegi. Besides the apricot stones and almost two hundred cherry pits given him by Mazzei, Jefferson planted four fruits of the only Italian tree he named, the "Cornelian Cherry", apparently unaware that this was actually a species of European dogwood, *Cornus mas*, cultivated for its fresh and preserved fruits. He probably continued to add exotic fruits from his Italian neighbor at Colle until 1778, when the Revolutionary War shifted Mazzei's attention from agriculture to politics and dispersed his workforce.

In 1778, Jefferson enlarged his orchard and made a detailed plan of its contents. He also decided that he needed to introduce Italian fine arts, especially music, which he said was in a state of "deplorable barbarism" in Virginia. He requested that Mazzei's friend, Giovanni Fabbroni, send six artisans sufficiently skilled on the French horn, clarinet, oboe and bassoon to provide him with a resident band of musicians. No harmonious Italian weavers or stonemasons ever appeared at Monticello, but Jefferson did inherit from Mazzei some of his Tuscan farmworkers. Of the eleven peasants Mazzei had brought with him from Italy, at least six settled in Albemarle County. Anthony Giannini, who had come from near Lucca with a wife and child, was a skilled gardener and vigneron who worked for Jefferson off and on from 1778 to 1791. Jefferson may have thought of Virgil's celebration of the art of grafting and his admonition, in Book Two of "The Georgics," to "soften the wild fruits by cultivating them," when Anthony Giannini took over the care of the Monticello orchard and performed the annual grafting and budding operations. Giannini left a number of descendants whose keen interest in genealogy has shed light on one Italian's life in Albemarle County. Almost nothing is known, however, of the second Tuscan who worked at Monticello, Giovannini da Prato. After serving Jefferson in an unknown capacity in Williamsburg and Richmond in 1780, Giovannini returned with Jefferson to Monticello in 1781 and worked in the gardens and orchards for several years.

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Mazzei in the meantime had gone to Europe in 1779, returned briefly to Virginia in 1783, joined Jefferson in Paris in 1785, and retired to Pisa in 1792. Although Jefferson found this irrepressible Italian at times exasperating, once admitting that he dreaded his appearance more than the return of his periodic headache, he valued him highly and remained a constant friend through the political embarrassment caused by Mazzei's publication of one of his letters where Jefferson had bemoaned the Anglophile trappings of George Washington's administration. He also dealt with a series of financial emergencies of both Mazzei and his penniless relations in Virginia.

Looking ahead to his retirement even while at the beginning of his first term as President, Jefferson wrote to his friend in Italy in March 1801, asking for plants of "good fruit, and especially of peaches and eating grapes." Peaches, always a Jefferson favorite both for their blossom as well as their fruit and also gratifying because of their early bearing age, had become a principal article for the renewal of the Monticello fruit collection. Mazzei, who at this time occupied himself almost solely with the tending of his garden and orchard and had earned the local nickname "Pippo the gardener," responded by sending sixty stones of four varieties of peaches. Jefferson planted these stones in his nursery, and then transplanted the ten surviving trees to his orchard in 1810.

In early 1804 Mazzei again sent a collection of plants and stones of several varieties of peaches, apricots and plums. Included, in addition to those sent previously, were three new varieties of peaches. As the shipment reached Jefferson in Washington, he kept the young trees there for a year and transplanted the four surviving peaches to the Monticello orchard in March 1805. He gave the stones to Washington, DC nurseryman Alexander Hepburn, who raised 150 young fruit trees which Jefferson sent to Monticello in the spring of 1806. His instructions and plan for their planting in a new section of the orchard survive, but their absence from later records raises some doubts about their fate.

The flow of plants from one fruit collector to another continued and Mazzei no doubt sent more of the peaches and apricots in which his orchard excelled. Jefferson's Italian trees were the only reminder of his early dreams of transplanting Italian civilization and its culture to his mountaintop. He had done more than that, by "planting the arts" in America, as one friend phrased it. And at Monticello he found satisfaction in practicing the fine art of gardening, "for, as they tell us," he wrote, "we all sprung from the earth, so to that we naturally return."

-Dr. James J. Boitano

*(Based on Lucia S. Goodwin, "Monticello">Keepsake, April 12, 1982;
adapted from <http://www.monticello.org/site/italian-influence-monticello>)*