When I arrived at the University of Virginia to begin graduate work in architectural history, my home in Pasadena seemed a long way away. Thomas Jefferson’s university—with its World Heritage–designated central campus, The Lawn—breathed a sense of history and a pattern of rural life that contrasted strongly with the sophisticated urban setting of the University of Southern California, where I had completed my undergraduate degree in planning and development two years earlier.

As a native Californian, I chose the program in Virginia because I wanted to learn how other regions of the United States approach the history and
preservation of their built and natural environments—places whose history stretches back through the centuries. Little did I know when I arrived in Charlottesville that I would become involved with an archaeological investigation tracing thousands of years of history. Critical to my collaboration with archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and Thomas Jefferson experts was a rare map from The Huntington whose significance to the Virginia landscape had gone unnoticed since its acquisition by Henry E. Huntington in the early 1920s.

My participation in a research project at a historic estate began innocently enough. Shortly after my arrival in...
Charlottesville, I met Stewart Gamage, who recently had become the director of the University of Virginia’s Morven Project. The Morven estate is located in the Southwest Mountains above Charlottesville, about two and a half miles from Jefferson’s famous Monticello. In 2001, philanthropist John W. Kluge donated it to the university as part of a 7,379-acre gift of Albemarle County property. When the University of Virginia Foundation began planning for public outreach, civic engagement, and various academic efforts related to the property’s ecology, land use, and sustainability, Gamage realized what was needed was a history of the property’s previous owners. She asked me to take on the job.

At that point, everything about Morven was terra incognita for me. I started by reading the history of both the state and Albemarle County. Over the next few months I unearthed information about the property and its former owners, moving from one
When the 1,334-acre property was first subdivided from a larger land grant in 1795, it was known as “Indian Camp”; it was later renamed “Morven” (Scottish for “ridge of hills”) by its second owner, David Higginbotham. A few local historians suggested there had been a Native American settlement nearby, but none gave specific information about its location, nor did they provide landmarks or other features to identify it.

By early winter I had made some progress with the project but headed home to Southern California for the holidays. I was still intrigued by the name “Indian Camp” when Gamage telephoned with an unexpected assignment. With the help of a local researcher, Christopher Owens, she had come across a copy of a map of “Indian Camp” that was reproduced in Frederick Doveton Nichols’s 1988 book *Thomas Jefferson’s Architectural Drawings*. It appeared to have been created as a survey when the property was sold in 1796 to diplomat William Short, with his friend and mentor Thomas Jefferson serving as the real estate broker. The original map was part of The Huntington’s collections, and Gamage asked me to obtain an archival-quality reproduction to add to our reference materials. I shook my

**Henry Huntington and the Brock Collection**

Three years after establishing The Huntington, Henry E. Huntington purchased what was said to be the largest private collection of Virginia manuscripts and printed material ever assembled. Amassed by historian Robert Alonzo Brock, who served as the secretary of the Virginia Historical Society from 1875 to 1892, it contains an estimated 50,000 manuscripts and 800 manuscript volumes as well as an astonishingly broad range of materials, including letters, books, government publications, Civil War documents, newspapers, and graphic materials—and some documents by Thomas Jefferson. After Brock’s death in 1914, the collection was not auctioned as expected, and its price was too high for the Virginia State Library or other Virginia collectors to acquire it. With Huntington’s 1922 purchase, the collection remained intact. In 2002 The Huntington Library and the Library of Virginia undertook a project to digitize the contents of the Brock collection, making this vast resource available on microfilm to researchers.
head in disbelief. As anyone who has spent time in Charlottesville will attest, sometimes it seems like everything leads back to Mr. Jefferson.

Returning to Virginia for the spring semester, I enrolled in a research seminar to assess all available information about the Morven property and to help identify options for its use by the University of Virginia Foundation. As I got deeper into the project, I began considering the property’s potential to yield archaeological information, something that historic preservationists ponder when evaluating a site. While comparing the Huntington map to a current map, I had a presentiment—or premonition—that the stream formerly called “Indian Camp Branch” might be historically significant. It was now named Slate Quarry Creek, and on my hunch I recommended that no development be proposed in its vicinity until this possibility could be investigated. But I also realized that the quizzical looks I got from the other classmates were justified. I needed something to go on.

I had no archaeological training, but on a cold, late winter afternoon a few weeks later I hiked down to the creek and followed it across the property—in some cases climbing over fences and scrambling from bank to bank bypassing dense undergrowth. At the point where the creek takes an almost 90-degree turn to the east, I had a strong sensation of place as I looked up to where the fields climb to a low ridge above the stream. On that day, I did not know this was the point where the stream had met the old road that led from an intersection near Monticello to Carter’s Bridge. But I could tell that something had been there.

Back at Morven’s “Claim House,” I gathered around a table with other project staff members and several fac-

As pairs of students dug the earth from the one-foot-diameter test pits, they rubbed the dirt and mud through framed screens to capture possible artifacts.
ulty members who were more familiar with the area and could interpret more from the map. Anthropology professor Jeffrey Hantman had been working over the course of eight years on archaeological investigations in Charlottesville near the “Indian mounds” beside the Rivanna River that are described in Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). An expert in the history of the Monacan Indian tribe, he had been interested in following up on local lore that there had been an Indian settlement in the vicinity of the estate formerly called “Indian Camp.” As the director of archaeology at Monticello, Fraser Neiman was also interested in the possibilities of the Morven site. Over the last decade, Monticello archaeologists have teamed with specialists in paleoethnobotany, geology, and forest ecology to unravel the settlement and environmental history of Jefferson’s Monticello plantation tract from the time of its initial settlement by Europeans and enslaved Africans in the early 18th century to the present. To Neiman, Morven seemed like an ideal comparative case study.

We excitedly compared The Huntington’s “Indian Camp” survey map with current topographical maps. Hantman noted the size and placement of the agricultural fields shown near the waterways, including Indian Camp Branch. They were consistent with the 18th-century pattern elsewhere of white settlers planting in the same fields that had been cultivated earlier by Native Americans. Morven’s fields offered a rare opportunity for Hantman, because they had been relatively undisturbed since the colonial era. An archaeological dig on the site might yield rich evidence that would show the various uses of the land—first by Indians and then by white settlers—in the Virginia Piedmont, far from the usual Indian sites along larger rivers.

After a follow-up meeting, I escorted the group down to the Indian Camp Branch stream, beginning at a spring some distance above the stream’s sharp turn. It had recently rained, and as we were walking through the farm fields, Hantman picked up a piece of quartz along the muddy path. It was an Indian scraper tool, characteristic of the Monacan settlement he had studied along the Rivanna River but not previously documented in this part of the Southwest Mountains. We knew we were indeed onto something, and the group agreed to do a reconnaissance archaeological survey to determine the site’s significance.

With the archival scan of the map from The Huntington, we were able to read for the first time Jefferson’s hand-written notes, indicating the names of farmers and sizes of their fields at the “Indian Camp” estate. I recently had found corresponding references to the tenants who rented these fields in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* at Monticello’s Jefferson Library, and together they offered a more accurate picture of which areas of the property were being cultivated, and whether its agricultural products at the turn of the 19th century reflected a Jeffersonian system of crop rotation.

Meanwhile in the Monticello archaeology lab, Derek Wheeler, a research archaeologist, used a GIS program to digitally align key points shown in the 1795 “Indian Camp” map with current topographical data. Thanks with the 200-year-old map from The Huntington, researchers now had the landmarks and points of reference that had been lacking in local histories. The so-called Indian Camp map was now Neiman and Hantman’s digitized base map for Phase I of the archaeological
survey; the new map of the 200-acre survey area was overlaid with a grid of targeted excavation locations using equipment and field-recording protocols developed at Monticello.

Beginning in May, the digging was undertaken by students participating in summer field schools from the University of Virginia and Washington and Lee University. They were guided by Alison Bell, a colleague of Neiman’s at Washington and Lee University; Wheeler; and Elizabeth Bollwerk, a doctoral student working with Hantman. Wheeler used portable GPS surveying equipment to position marker flags that corresponded to the digital map’s grid. These markers served as a guide for the “shovel test pit” locations—regularly spaced sample areas (in this case, every 80 feet) in which field workers could conduct a preliminary assessment of the soil layers.

Whether in the humid heat of a Southern summer or during soggy intervals of rain, two things were constant: insects and mud. As pairs of students dug the earth from the one-foot-diameter test pits, they rubbed the dirt and mud through framed screens to capture possible artifacts. After reaching the level of undisturbed soil, which varied between one and three feet below the surface, the students measured and recorded the characteristics of each location before replacing the dirt and moving on to the next marker. By the end of each day, everyone was smudged, anointed, and imbued with the orange-tinged mud.

As often is the case with research, what we found was different from our expectations. Instead of a density of domestic artifacts that would confirm the location of an Indian village, the lighter concentration suggested a repeated seasonal use of the site, perhaps as a hunting camp. And rather than artifacts from the period shortly before European contact, recovered items included a lanceolate quartz Guilford projectile point from the Late Archaic period—about 2,000 B.C. Hantman described it as a multipurpose, bi-faced A Society to Our Taste

In the late 1780s, after his wife’s death, Thomas Jefferson urged James Madison, James Monroe, and William Short to buy land near his beloved Monticello and settle there to form “a society to our taste.” Jefferson had met Short, a distant relation, while he was studying law at the College of William and Mary with Jefferson’s mentor, George Wythe, and he asked Short to serve as his secretary when he was appointed the nation’s second minister plenipotentiary to France. Jefferson referred to him as his “adoptive son.” After Jefferson’s return to the United States, Short remained in Europe, serving as the next American ambassador to France and subsequently as the ambassador to The Netherlands and to Spain. It was thus in 1795 that Jefferson wrote to Short about “a tract called Indian camp” near Monticello that had recently been surveyed, and which Jefferson was purchasing on Short’s behalf.

Laura Voisin George, the author of the article, with Jeffrey Hantman.
tool that could be used for cutting and scraping tasks or as a spear point for hunting or defensive purposes.

In addition to these prehistoric Native American artifacts, the Phase I survey made some other important discoveries related to later land use. These included the foundations of a building and fragments of household items from Jefferson’s era as well as evidence of changing methods of agricultural production. While such findings provide a greater context for understanding Jefferson’s agrarian experiments, they go a long way toward illuminating the little-documented lives of the “middling folks” who rented the fields and their role in the rapidly evolving western frontier. Alison Bell—one of the organizers of the summer dig in 2009—had written her dissertation on the subject under the guidance of James Deetz and Huntman and is now participating in the analysis of the evidence found at Morven.

I was indeed a long way from Pasadena. While starting to build a framework of the history of this part of the Virginia Piedmont, I had been challenged to recognize scattered references in a variety of archival sources and to align them with present-day data. What moved this collection of data into the archaeological survey was the Huntington survey map of Indian Camp—itself separated from its original context.

Gamage nicknamed me the “bird dog.” I’m not always sure what these Southerners mean, but I take it as an accolade for the presentiments of this Californian abroad in the Old Dominion—Virginia Jones, if you will.

It is rather amazing that I ended up close to home after all, with a centuries-old link to The Huntington, but as I said, sometimes it seems like everything in Charlottesville leads back to Mr. Jefferson.

Layers of Meaning

In 1798, Thomas Jefferson received what Annette Gordon-Reed calls “one of the most extraordinary letters in all of his correspondence—a bolt out of the blue that appears to have stunned him.” The correspondent was the very same William Short whose property was outlined in the “Indian Camp” map.

Gordon-Reed, the author of The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family, received the Pulitzer Prize in History in 2009 for what the award committee described as “a painstaking exploration of a sprawling multi-generation slave family that casts provocative new light on the relationship between Sally Hemings and her master, Thomas Jefferson.”

In February 1798, Short wrote to his mentor and openly addressed the beauty that comes from the mixing of the races. Jefferson ignored Short’s musings in a reply, and the young protégé persisted with the issue in two subsequent letters. Jefferson, explains Gordon-Reed in her book, “had been checkmated.” If he challenged Short, he would be drawn into a debate that would reveal him to be a hypocrite. If he conceded, he would be contradicting the firm position on race that he had already outlined in his Notes on the State of Virginia while, according to Gordon-Reed, “leaving for posterity a Rosetta stone that might help crack the code of a part of his life that he wanted to remain totally private.”

Instead, Jefferson changed the subject, admitting he had mismanaged one of Short’s accounts and now owed his “adopted son” thousands of dollars. Short never brought up the issue of race again.

Annette Gordon-Reed on iTunes U

Go to itunes.huntington.org to listen to Gordon-Reed’s recent Huntington lecture on “Writing the Life of an Enslaved Family.”