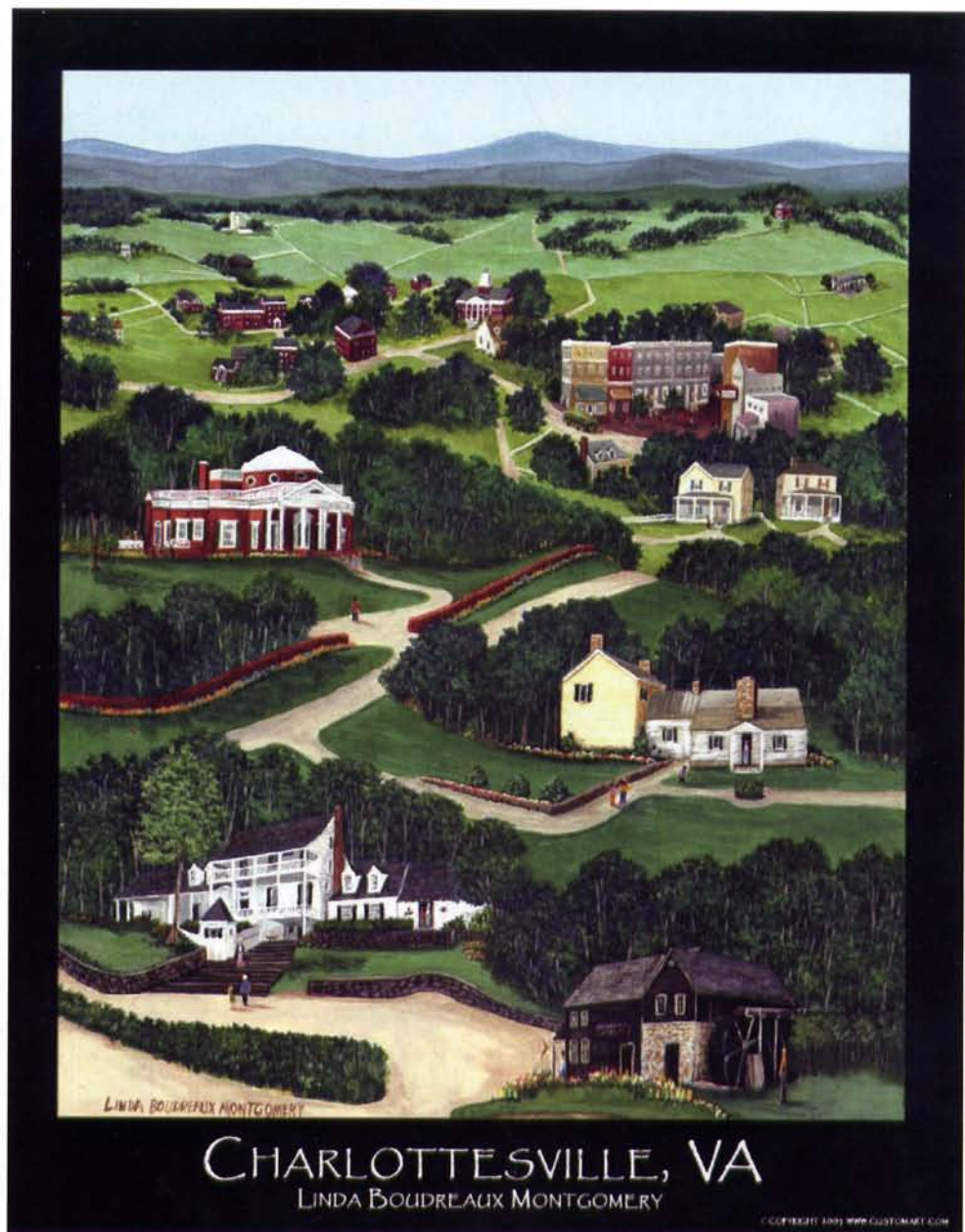




LINDA BOUDREAUX MONTGOMERY





Historic Virginia in Perspective

BY STEVE EVANS

Linda Boudreaux Montgomery paints in honor of presidents—past and present.

These days she mostly paints their historic real estate—Mr. Jefferson's Monticello, Mr. Madison's Montpelier, and, most recently, Mr. Monroe's Ash Lawn. But her resume also includes a Christmas card commissioned by First Lady Laura Bush in 2000 when then-President-elect Bush was governor of Texas. That card was eventually distributed to the homes of 750,000 people—an early success for an artist who, at 59, is fulfilling a lifelong dream that took nearly half a lifetime to realize.

A Louisiana native who found her way to Virginia via Texas, Montgomery recast herself as a graphic designer nearly 30 years ago after a career hiatus to raise two sons. The work paid the bills and offered a modest creative outlet, but a yearning to paint—an idea for something bigger and better and soul satisfying—lay dormant in her heart. Turns out that the act of painting

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As it happened, the opportunity to pursue art based on history made Montgomery think it might be time to move. Virginia, as it turned out, beckoned to her free spirit. Central Virginia, specifically, offered everything she was looking for.

could be a metaphor for life, since the complete picture seldom reveals itself until very nearly finished. Along the way, a painting, like a life, continues to evolve, to take shape and acquire character. Montgomery found her calling, and now she has found her niche.

"I have a fine arts degree, but I was always working for high-tech companies," she says from her gallery in Orange County. "Painting was something I had wanted to do since the third grade. Years ago when I was in graphic design, a friend of mine had a client who wanted a book about their bank for kids. So we came up with this little coloring book and spun that off into an Austin (Texas) coloring book, a San Antonio book, and then I started thinking about little tour books for children, historic sites, museums and things like that. I went to the places and took photographs in 11 western states. I would stop and say, 'hey you,

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want a book?" She laughs at the memory, but a lot of people said "yes," and a lot of books were illustrated and sold. "I even did a book of the Dr. Pepper Museum in Waco, TX," Montgomery says.

Her art today evolved from that extensive touring, creating special projects for museums and eventually paintings of historic sites. Soon, ideas began to percolate for new projects. "It went from museums to painting state capitols," Montgomery says. "I would call up the state preservation board and tell them about my work. So I thought if I'm doing state capitols and they're interested in my work, maybe there is more I can do."

Taking a chapter from her past experience with history, the idea of life-history paintings was born.

"When I was starting out, if I didn't have any money for a birthday gift, ev-



erybody in my family got a painting," Montgomery says. "I did story paintings, a montage of images, all the little vignettes of their life."

Expanding on that idea, Montgomery started offering wedding paintings that essentially deliver the same concept. "I paint a church and then I put people and objects in there representing all the stages of the couple's life," she says.

Success with the Bush Christmas card followed a protracted period of letter writing to solicit new business, including missives to the daughters of President Lyndon Johnson, among other Texas society women.

"Today I would call it overnight success after 25 years," she says. Commissions began to trickle in. The word got out. She was being discovered. As it happened, the opportunity to pursue art based on history made Montgomery think it might be time to move. Virginia, as it turned out, beckoned to her free spirit. Central Virginia, specifically, offered everything she was looking for.

"I decided to come here because of the mountains, the history, and the four distinct seasons," Montgomery says. "There was another thing. I had always had this dream of opening a gallery someplace."

With her niece, Corine LaBry, who works at Michie Tavern, she bought a house on Main Street in the Town of Orange, converting the first floor into an art gallery in April 2006 and the second floor into living space. Diligence and talent are paying dividends. She is now a licensed arts vendor for Monticello, Montpelier, and Ash Lawn-Highland, "and I'm working on Mt. Vernon," Montgomery says.

Not long after relocating, she took a job at Montpelier and quickly learned the ins

and outs of managing, maintaining, and, above all, restoring historical properties.

Montpelier Director of Archaeology Matt Reeves and Director of Education Beth Taylor were familiar with the artist's work because her prints are sold in the gift shop on the main grounds. They asked Montgomery if she would be interested in doing interpretive paintings of the original homestead and slave quarters that once stood near the mansion.

"But the buildings they wanted me to paint are no longer there," she says.

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"So that was extremely difficult because I had to line everything up from photographs and do perspective drawings. They gave me all the measurements, the pitch of the roof, and an insurance policy that showed the places where these slave quarters were next to the mansion. They've found the foundations to a couple of the buildings. We used all of the available information from the diggings, and we had the National Trust and Colonial Williamsburg people, the best in their field, to give input into what the sidings would look like, the doors. And needless to say the drawings were redone several times. It's got to be historically correct."

Montgomery's niece suggested that they build scale models of the long-gone structures using cardboard, and



take pictures from various angles. This gave Montgomery the perspective she needed. The process began in February of 2006. Then she was asked to populate her paintings with people in period costumes from the early 19th century. As always, historical accuracy was essential. Research showed that Montpelier slaves were devoted to community and culture, and Montgomery's interpretations had to reflect the historical record.

Following a year of drafts and revisions, the paintings are now complete and on display on the Montpelier grounds where the buildings once stood.

"I'm hoping this will get me into more historic paintings and interpretations," Montgomery says. "This is a great area for this sort of artwork. I'd love to prepare a painting of people's farms and estates."

See a virtual exhibit of Montgomery's work anytime by visiting www.customart.com, or tour the Corner House Gallery online at www.cornerhousegalleryva.com.

Steve Evans is an Albemarle-based writer who prefers the art of his children to the work of abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock, despite the similarities in their respective styles.

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