

# Embattled Montpelier Votes at Last to Share Governance with Descendants

*First Step in Repairing Leadership, Reputation, Finances*

ORANGE, VIRGINIA, USA, May 16, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- This morning The Montpelier Foundation board of directors voted to welcome [eleven new members](#) drawn from a list of twenty esteemed nominees advanced by the Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC). This momentous decision brings parity in the governance of President James Madison's estate. At last, descendants of the hundreds of the persons enslaved by the "Father of the Constitution" and on nearby plantations will now share power on Montpelier's board.

The Foundation promised structural parity in June 2021 to national acclaim, retracted its commitment in March 2022 to [national condemnation](#), and then appeared to promise it again earlier this month to national skepticism. In protest of the board's actions, eleven thousand visitors and donors signed [a petition](#). Massive public backlash also criticized the board's retaliatory firing highly regarded staff who had spent decades building a collaborative relationship with the descendant community that had made Montpelier the toast of the museum world. Dozens of national organizations expressed their concern at the board's retreat from the path toward parity, ranging from an organization of the descendants of Japanese American citizens interned during World War II to an international association of sites of conscience that includes Holocaust museums and of which Montpelier is a member.

New appointee the Reverend Cornell William Brooks, Harvard Professor of the Practice of Public Leadership and Social Justice and former President and CEO of the NAACP, remarked: "As our nation grapples with and even grieves over the racial injustices of this day, the work of the Montpelier Foundation is all the more important: teaching the lessons of the living legacy of President James Madison, studying the past and possibilities of our Constitution, and sharing across our Republic and beyond the ongoing story of those enslaved at Montpelier. For these reasons and more, I am humbled and honored to serve on the board—at the call of the Montpelier Descendants Committee."

In an editorial in this morning's Washington Post MDC Chairman and Foundation board member James French stated: "If our candidates are voted and fully vested on the board at today's meeting, and if the foundation does not engage in any further acts of retaliation...then Montpelier can at last begin to fulfill its potential as one of the nation's brightest stars among museums and cultural institutions. In this unique partnership with descendants, we will study

the past with a commitment to the present and build hope for the future.”

The Montpelier Descendants Committee and the new appointees have invited remaining candidates not chosen by the Foundation to join an Advisory Council so that they all can assist Montpelier.

MDC’s leader James French, and former President and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation Stephanie Meeks, were reappointed to second terms. Board chairman, Gene Hickok, completing his fourth term, stepped down.

Retired pediatrician and Foundation board member Betty Kearse remarked: “Efforts to tell the truth about race in America are not ivory-tower debates. Yesterday’s mass murder in Buffalo by a self-acclaimed white supremacist shows us that lives are at stake.”

Hopes turn now to efforts to restore Montpelier’s role as a model for forward-thinking governance of historic sites worldwide. Attorney Greg Werkheiser of Cultural Heritage Partners, counsel for the MDC, is confident of board support for an ambitious plan of recovery from Montpelier’s self-inflicted wounds that includes rehiring staff, regaining the trust of donors and partners, and restarting stalled programs. He stated: “This fight proved that the vast majority Americans cherish the wisdom we glean from the whole history of our Republic—our triumphs and hypocrisies alike. Those millions of concerned witnesses to Montpelier’s recent stumbles must now be engaged in writing its powerful next chapter.”

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About the Montpelier Descendants Committee

The Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit devoted to restoring the narratives of enslaved Americans at plantation sites in Central Virginia, including but not limited to James Madison’s Montpelier, from the margins to the center of historical discourse. The MDC promotes a more accurate understanding of the lives of enslaved people based on broader, richer and more truthful interpretations of American history. Through a series of public programs, events, research, and communications the MDC seeks to demonstrate how the lives of enslaved persons made possible and informed the ideals of universal liberty enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution yet denied to them. Membership in the MDC is open to all descendants of enslaved ancestors in the central Virginia area, known as the Arc of Enslaved Communities.

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