

Redeeming the Wilderness

SHORTLY AFTER RETIRING FROM the presidency, Jefferson was the victim of theft. He had long been yearning to retire to his beloved Monticello to continue the remaking of the house and to build a new one at his Poplar Forest plantation in Bedford County. Also beckoning were numerous intellectual projects, such as planning the University of Virginia and digesting the results of the transcontinental Lewis and Clark expedition.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson had mused on the origins of the American Indian peoples and their diversification into so many tribes, each with its own language. He suggested that there had been immigration both from the west (from Asia) and from the east (from Greenland). He also believed that “a knowledge of their several languages would be the most certain evidence of their derivation which could be produced.”¹ Jefferson had been collecting notes and vocabularies for years. Now he finally would have the leisure to pull all his information together for analysis.

When Jefferson’s goods were packed up in Washington, DC, the precious vocabularies were placed in a trunk and treated with great care during the boat trip to Richmond. At Richmond, the James River became impassable to large vessels, and all goods had to be transferred to “bateaus” to be poled and rowed up the Rivanna to Charlottesville. Jefferson’s tobacco crops annually made the reverse journey to be transported to Europe.

But in this case some dishonest boatmen, seeing that a chest was marked out for special care, assumed that it contained valuables and stole it. When they opened it and found only papers, they threw them into the river in disgust. Fortunately, a number of the vocabularies were rescued,