



**National Trust for
Historic Preservation**
Save the past. Enrich the future."

March 24, 2022

Dr. Eugene W. Hickock, Chair
The Montpelier Foundation
11350 Constitution Hwy
Montpelier Station, VA 22957

Re: Structural Parity and the Montpelier Foundation

Dear Gene:

Thank you and the other officers of the Montpelier Foundation for writing to notify the National Trust of your intentions to propose changes to the bylaws of The Montpelier Foundation as they relate to the goal of achieving structural parity as defined by *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites: A Rubric of Best Practices Established by the National Summit on Teaching Slavery* (the "Rubric"). The proposed bylaws amendments would reverse the commitment of the Montpelier Foundation to have the Montpelier Descendants Committee serve as the sole representative organization of the Montpelier descendant community for purposes of recommending members of that community to the Foundation's board in order to achieve structural parity, as defined in the Rubric.

We urge you in the strongest possible terms not to move forward with the proposed bylaws changes.

According to the Rubric, "working with descendant communities is about building trust and restoring justice." In our view, the bylaws changes you have proposed are likely to irretrievably damage the relationship between the Montpelier Foundation and the descendant community represented by the Montpelier Descendants Committee, risking the loss of a historic opportunity for structural parity at Montpelier and all of its potential benefits.

Montpelier is nationally recognized as a leader in interpreting the history of slavery and in engaging with the descendant community, as well as being a place for thoughtful examination of the Constitution and its ongoing relevance. All of this work is enhanced, strengthened, and made more broadly relevant to the public by a strong relationship between the Montpelier Foundation and the Montpelier Descendants Committee, which was created out of a collaborative process at Montpelier, following decades of work between staff and descendants at Montpelier.

The Montpelier Foundation made a commitment to treat the Montpelier Descendants Committee as the sole representative organization of the descendant community pursuant to the Rubric, while also acknowledging that all of the descendants of the enslaved population of Montpelier deserve the opportunity to speak on their own behalf. This commitment, confirmed through the June 2021 bylaws revisions, constituted a historic and purposeful gesture toward a future of

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elevated and enlightened governance, and was widely lauded at the time, including by the National Trust.

Most critically, this commitment acknowledged the right of the descendant community to define itself, *rather than to be defined by the Foundation*. The newly proposed revisions to the bylaws would do the opposite. We believe this change would undermine decades of important work that led to the formation of the Committee in the first place, and in turn would set back Montpelier's efforts to continue the necessary work of uplifting descendants' voices, and repairing the relationship between the broader African American community and Montpelier, the former site of generations of enslavement.

The National Trust is keenly aware that reaching mutual agreement between the Montpelier Foundation and the Montpelier Descendants Committee has been a deeply challenging process. Recognizing this, the National Trust has paid for facilitators to assist in the parties trying to reach agreement, and we have continued to provide grant funds and other support to both the Montpelier Foundation and the Montpelier Descendants Committee. Across all of our work—including at National Trust Historic Sites and through the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund—we are also engaged in advancing racial justice and equity through historic places and their stewardship. This work is very far from complete and the National Trust is deeply committed to it. We also recognize that this work is not easy, and it will not happen quickly.

In the case of Montpelier, the initial bylaws changes were made less than a year ago; we think it is far too soon for the Foundation to give up on the worthy commitments it made only last June. The Montpelier Descendants Committee has retained a new intermediary and made a new proposal. Rather than reject that proposal out of hand, we urge the Foundation to continue to work to find common ground with the Montpelier Descendants Committee.

In sum, we strongly support the concept of structural parity at Montpelier through the framework set forth in the June 2021 bylaws, and we urge you to continue to work with the Montpelier Descendants Committee to achieve that goal, which we believe is central to the future of Montpelier. The ideas conceived and articulated at Montpelier have changed the world for the better and they continue to have the potential to do so. Please carry that legacy forward in collaboration with the Montpelier Descendants Committee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Paul Edmondson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Paul W. Edmondson
President and CEO

cc: Montpelier Board of Directors
Roy Young, President & CEO
Jay Clemens, Chair of the Board of the National Trust