

# Asking the big questions



PHOTO BY HILARY HOLLADAY

**New Montpelier CEO Roy Young first pursued a career in architecture and design before a second one in the administration of historic house museums. He comes to Montpelier having previously served as vice president for guest experience at George Washington's Mount Vernon.**

## New CEO Young shares his vision for James Madison's Montpelier

**BY HILARY HOLLADAY**  
Staff Writer

**R**oy F. Young II began his new position as president and CEO of The Montpelier Foundation at James Madison's Montpelier on April 20, in the middle of the pandemic. Orange County's landmark tourist destination was closed to the public, but Young's mind was wide open to all the possibilities around and ahead of him.

On a warm June afternoon at Lewis Hall, the administration building on Montpelier's grounds, Young spoke with hope and enthusiasm of the 2,700-acre property he is charged with leading during a time of unprecedented uncertainty. The impact of the public health crisis on tourism and the overall economy is a paramount concern, but the nattily dressed and personable new president appears undaunted.

> Montpelier will begin offering indoor house tours during select hours July 3-5.  
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Young, 58, said he envisions Montpelier not just as a historic site “but as a place of conversation” where artists, scholars, students and the general public can discuss and respond to crucial, contemporary issues.

During a tumultuous season when “Black Lives Matter” is the rallying cry heard around the world and politics has become uncommonly ugly and divisive, Young sees Montpelier as an incubator of ideas and artistic expression relevant to the nation’s roiling present and the dream of its future, not just its endlessly complicated past.

“What’s pretty clear to all of us is that we need to use Montpelier as an organization to access a better understanding of the Constitution and the questions that contemporary society poses to that. And so what we’re going to embark on is a 10-year plan to rebrand the Center for the Constitution into a platform—both here, on site, and virtually—to crack open an important contemporary question about the Constitution each year,” he said.

Young stressed that this new initiative will be the basis for much of his fundraising work—which in his first months on the job has taken the form of Zoom meetings rather than cross-country flights to visit prospective donors.

Rather than fret over the unusual circumstances, he has rolled with the changes. He said he has enjoyed hunkering down at Bassett House, the president’s home at Montpelier. It’s all part of his lifelong immersion in history.

## From Massachusetts to Virginia

One of four children, Young

was born in Athol, Mass., and grew up in Hingham, Mass. His mother is a retired nurse and his father was vice president of a security company.

As a child, curious about everything, Young delighted in traveling around Massachusetts as his father researched family genealogy dating back to the nation’s early years. His personalized study of Massachusetts’ founding era history stoked his later interest in what was happening in Virginia during the same time period.

He took his first drafting course in seventh grade and quickly developed a love of sketching and painting, which he continues to this day. When he was 22, he bought and restored a 17th-century house on the South Shore of Boston and lived there for six or seven years. His entwined interests pointed him toward a first career in architecture and design and a second one in the administration of historic house museums.

In the years before he earned a B.S. in environmental design from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1996, Young raised a family and got his start in the design business. He rose to managing partner and owner of an international design and building firm with offices in Boston and Phoenix. Seeking a change in careers, he went back to school and earned an M.A. in art and visual culture education in 2011 from the University of Arizona. Later, he earned an M.A. in architecture from the University of Missouri. More recently, he completed coursework for a doctoral degree, also at the University of Missouri, focus-

ing on environment and visitor experience at historic house museums.

## “The power of place”

Before coming to Montpelier, Young was vice president for guest experience at George Washington’s Mount Vernon. It was a big job that reawakened Young’s interest in founding era history. Watching throngs of visitors show up at the Alexandria property every day, he recognized “the power of place” and set about making George and Martha Washington’s home a site for contemplative learning, not just a quick stop on a tourist’s to-do list.

At Montpelier, Young follows in the footsteps of Kat Imhoff, who served as president and CEO for seven years. Imhoff helped raise more than \$60 million for Montpelier’s operation and endowment, opened the grounds to the public free of charge, oversaw the installation of the award-winning exhibit called “The Mere Distinction of Colour” and put nearly 2,000 acres under conservation easement. In an interview with the Review shortly before she stepped down, Imhoff spoke happily of the progress made on her watch while acknowledging that raising funds for Montpelier was a constant challenge, especially as house museums across the country have seen a decline in attendance.

Money remains a pressing issue. Young said there were layoffs at Montpelier before his arrival. He is clearly aware that raising funds will be a challenge during the pandemic. But he is quick to credit his staff and board for their role

in helping him develop ambitious plans, notably the 10-year rebranding of the Center for the Constitution.

Young said he will seek funding for this major initiative, which will sponsor formal programs for teachers and other professionals and host scholars and artists in residence. It will all be in the service of addressing a significant question that will involve an understanding of the Constitution. As Young sees it, the endeavor also will provide a forum for schoolchildren, interns and pretty much anyone interested in thinking through the topic under discussion “in a safe place, in a safe format.”

Young said he and his staff and board will involve multiple stakeholders in the selection of the big question to be addressed each year. Among those he plans to approach are the descendant community of Montpelier and residents of Orange County. Through Montpelier’s website, he said “the national community” also will have the opportunity to weigh in on the big questions Montpelier could and should be asking about the Constitution and the endless debates surrounding its meaning.

“The benefit of being a cultural institution,” Young continued, “is that we’re not tied by many of the certifications or requirements of other learning institutions. As a museum, as a site where the Constitution was created and as a site that was home to 300 Black enslaved people, we have the unique ability and the unique power of place to ask some of these questions and allow this conversation

to happen in an uncensored manner.”

In the meantime, Gov. Ralph Northam’s phased reopening of the state has allowed Montpelier to begin welcoming the public back to the property. On May 15, Montpelier opened its grounds Thursday through Monday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The grounds are open free of charge to Orange County residents and Montpelier members. Those who live outside the county or are not members may purchase day passes, annual passes or annual memberships.

And more good news came this week. Montpelier is once again offering house tours. A limited slate of tours will begin this weekend and coincide with the Fourth of July. Visitors are encouraged to book tours on the Montpelier website and pay in advance, as a means of preserving social distancing and preventing the spread of the new coronavirus.

How does Young feel about getting the house tours up and running again?

“I would say that we’re thrilled,” he said by phone on Tuesday morning. “The foundation has been looking forward to continuing the reopening plan.”

His voice filled with delight, he said almost half of this weekend’s tours already were sold. The tours are meeting what he sees as “a real demand, a real need,” among families eager to contemplate the natural beauty and the vast, complex legacy that makes Montpelier both a national treasure and a place where questions of historical and topical import grow as high as the trees in the old-growth forest.