



Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

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Architect; Autobiographer; Educationalist; Lawyer/ Barrister/ Solicitor; Letter-writer/ Diarist; Man/ Woman of Letters; Political Philosopher; Politician; President.

Active 1769-1826 in United States

“Author of the Declaration of American Independence[,] of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom & Father of the University of Virginia”: when Thomas Jefferson composed the epitaph for his tombstone, these were the three achievements which he listed, as he put it, “as testimonials that I have lived” (Jefferson, *Writings* 706). Instead of enumerating, for instance, his various political offices – secretary of state, vice president, and president of the United States among them – Jefferson chose to present himself to posterity as a man of the Enlightenment committed to the ideas of political and religious liberty, member of a generation who had given, as he claimed in his last political statement, “the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government” (JW 1517).

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743 (or April 2, Old Style, as recorded in the epitaph), at Shadwell in what is now Albemarle County, Virginia. He was the first son and the third of eight children born to Jane Randolph and Peter Jefferson. Jane Randolph Jefferson belonged to one of the most prominent families in the colony's planter elite. Peter Jefferson was a self-taught surveyor and mapmaker who became a large landowner and local magistrate in the piedmont region of Virginia, then on the fringe of western settlement. Looking back to his childhood and youth, Thomas Jefferson was relatively silent about his mother, and little is known about their relationship. By contrast, he liked to reminisce about his father who had died in 1757. The mature Jefferson paid tribute to his father's legacy by praising the Frye-Jefferson map, a collaborative effort by Joshua Frye and Peter Jefferson from 1751, with some exaggeration as “the 1st map of Virginia which had ever been made” (JW 3).

Jefferson retrospectively also credited his father with having instilled in him a lasting love of education. Throughout his life he cherished, in particular, the “sublime luxury” (JW 1072) of reading classical authors in the original, a proficiency which he attributed to his father's early decisions about his schooling. After being tutored at home for several years, the young Thomas entered a local Latin school in 1752 and continued his studies at the school of the Reverend James Maury (“a correct classical scholar”, as Jefferson later recalled) (JW 4) from 1758-1760. In the following two years, he studied at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg. There Jefferson was befriended by the Scotsman William Small, professor of mathematics and natural philosophy and the only layman on the faculty. Besides contributing to Jefferson's acquaintance with the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment, Small introduced him to influential men in the provincial capital, most

importantly to the lieutenant governor Francis Fauquier and the lawyer George Wythe. In their company, Jefferson could cultivate his various talents, whether in chamber music (as a violinist), or in conversation on a wide-ranging array of topics. (Jefferson's early love, for instance, of *belles lettres* is documented in his *Literary Commonplace Book*, which covers this period until the early 1770s.) Having finished his studies at William and Mary in 1762, Jefferson read law with Wythe who became his mentor as well as a life-long ally and friend. Guided by Wythe, Jefferson became deeply interested in the philosophical and historical, rather than merely the practical aspects of the law. However, he successfully worked as a lawyer between his admission to the bar in 1767 and his retirement from legal practice in 1774.

In 1772, Jefferson married the young widow Martha Wayles Skelton. The couple moved to his favorite plantation Monticello, whose Palladian mountaintop mansion he had just begun to design and would continue to build and rebuild over the next half-century. Soon after their marriage, he came into possession of large holdings in land and slaves from his father-in-law John Wayles, which, together with the inheritance from his father's estate, made Jefferson the owner of roughly ten thousand acres of land and an average of around two hundred slaves, divided among several plantations in three Virginia counties. Throughout his life, Jefferson's wealth and social status thus rested on the exploitation of enslaved labor. One way for him to rationalize his part in an institution which he criticized, in principle, as a terrible “evil” and a gross “injustice”, was its close association with the problem of debt, seemingly corroborating his impression that slavery was an inherited evil. With his inheritance, Jefferson had also assumed responsibility for Wayles's debts, which would continue to grow over the next decades until he died himself, like many planters of his generation, deeply in debt. A life-long opponent of slavery, as he saw himself, Jefferson manumitted merely five of his slaves in his will. His estate and slaves, sold to the highest bidder, did not cover his debts.

In a marriage which Jefferson later described as “ten years of unchequered happiness” (JW 46), Martha and Thomas Jefferson had six children, only two of whom, Martha and Maria, lived till adulthood. Few records of Jefferson's wife survive since he destroyed almost all objects related to her after her early death in 1782 from the complications of childbirth. Among the few souvenirs he kept was a sentimental reflection on the brevity of life from the ninth volume of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, copied both in Martha's hand and his own. Jefferson did not remarry but can be assumed to have begun, a few years afterwards, a sexual relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, who was probably his wife's half-sister (illegitimate daughter of John Wayles and his slave Elizabeth Hemings). He never commented on the nature of his relation to Sally Hemings, even when directly confronted with this question during his presidency by a disappointed protégé-turned-enemy, the journalist James Callender. DNA-findings from 1998, in combination with recent scholarship on the Jefferson and Hemings families, suggest that Jefferson was the father of at least one and perhaps all of Sally Hemings's children.

Jefferson's active political life began in 1769 when he took his seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses and became part of its radical bloc. In contrast to his colleague Patrick Henry, Jefferson excelled markedly less in oratory than in literary craftsmanship. His first major written contribution to the American Revolution began as a draft of instructions for the Virginia delegates to the first Continental Congress. Too radical in tone and content to be adopted in 1774, the text, attributed to “A Virginian”, was published in pamphlet form and reprinted in London under the title *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. Relying on an idealized version of Anglo-American history, its argument for a natural right of emigration – first exercised, supposedly, by the Anglo-Saxons – remained central to Jefferson's later political thought. The moment for his most famous piece of writing came two years later in the Continental Congress. Along with John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston, Jefferson was elected to a committee to draft a declaration of independence in June, 1776. He was originally considered a mere scribe or “penman” of the *Declaration of Independence* – the idea of his “authorship” did not fully emerge until it became politically useful in the party battles of the 1790s. As Jefferson himself claimed in a debate about the origins of the *Declaration* in the 1820s, he had not tried to be original when drafting the document, but had hoped to present “an expression of the

American mind” (JW 1501): as it were, a skillful blend of ideas, most conspicuously, from Locke, Scottish writers, and George Mason's *Virginia Declaration of Rights* (itself a compilation of revolutionary philosophy). From the outset, however, Jefferson deeply resented the changes made to his draft by Congress (among them, the deletion of a controversial passage on the slave trade); he circulated his own version among friends, and finally included it in his *Autobiography* in 1821.

In the fall of 1776, Jefferson was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates. He had drafted a new constitution for Virginia while still in Congress (only the preamble of which had been adopted) and now engaged in the project of adapting Virginia's legal code to a republican government. Among his proposals were bills concerning the abolition of primogeniture and entail, the reform of the criminal law, the establishment of public education and of religious freedom. While most of his *Bill for the General Diffusion of Knowledge* failed to be enacted, Jefferson could present the fate of the other bills as a success in his *Autobiography* – especially his *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*, which eventually passed with a modified preamble. Compared to his activities on the Committee of Revisors, Jefferson's war-time governorship of Virginia from 1779 till 1781 proved a frustrating experience. Faced with British invasions, it ended with an official investigation into Jefferson's conduct and rumors of his cowardice, which – although he was formally vindicated – would still haunt him decades later.

Jefferson's first retirement from political office gave him leisure to compose an elaborate answer to a set of queries which the secretary of the French legation, François de Marbois, had circulated in Congress, in an effort to gain information about the new American states. After several revisions, Jefferson published versions of the resulting text in France in 1785 and England in 1787 under the title *Notes on the State of Virginia*. This book, to which Jefferson liked to refer in the plural (indicating that he continued to think of it as separate “notes” instead of a finished work), conveys a complex impression of the temporal and spatial “state” of his native Virginia. Often arranging its information from natural and civil history in lists and tables that are familiar from his *Garden and Farm Books*, the text at first sight has a scientific and aesthetically unassuming appearance (as in its presentation of Jefferson's meteorological studies). Yet Jefferson subtly manipulated the fragmented form of *Notes on Virginia* to combine scientific, moral, and aesthetic perspectives (as in his rebuttal of Buffon's and Raynal's theses of American degeneration or in his celebration of the Virginian landscape). In Jefferson's own time, his statements on religion and his praise for the Indian Chief Logan, whose story he sought to authenticate in an appendix published in 1800, were the most controversial parts of the book. Modern readers are more disturbed by a passage revealing Jefferson's prejudice against African Americans in embarrassing detail. Part of a transitional worldview, however, his proto-racism did not keep him from including in the book one of his strongest indictments of slavery.

By Jefferson's own account, his wife's death had “wiped away” all his plans for a happy life centered around “domestic & literary objects”, (JW 780) throwing him back into the turmoil of politics. Serving again as a delegate in Congress in 1783, he drafted a number of state papers, including a report regulating the western territory, which would have banned slavery in the new states after 1800. In 1784, Jefferson sailed for France to assist Benjamin Franklin and John Adams in negotiating treaties of commerce. As American minister, he witnessed the twilight years of the *ancien régime* and the outbreak of the French Revolution and cultivated many personal and intellectual friendships in the progressive circles of Paris (resulting, for instance, in his *Thoughts on English Prosody* addressed to the Marquis de Chastellux, or his anonymous collaboration with Jean Nicolas Dêmeunier on the *Encyclopédie méthodique*). He traveled widely, indulging in his penchant for minute record keeping in his travel journals, noting details from the quality of the soil to the shape of vinegar cruets. His more sentimental approach to traveling, modeled on Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, was condensed in several letters he wrote in these years, especially to European ladies. Among these compositions, the flirtatious “Head and Heart”-letter which he wrote with his left hand to the Anglo-Italian painter Maria Cosway has become the most famous. Jefferson also claimed to have fallen in love with European architecture, particularly with the *Maison quarrée* in Nîmes, which he recommended as a model for the literary classicism of the

Virginia capitol in Richmond. Approached for advice by the Marquis de Lafayette in 1789, Jefferson is reputed to have secretly contributed to the drafting of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. Shortly before leaving for America in the fall of that year, he explored one of his most cherished political ideas, the principle of generational sovereignty, in a long letter to his friend James Madison.

Upon his return from France, Jefferson accepted George Washington's offer to become secretary of state in 1790. After a second retirement from 1794 to 1796, Jefferson was candidate for the presidency and, second in the electoral ballot, became John Adams's vice president in 1797. Personally as well as politically, he experienced his work in Washington's and Adams's administrations as a particularly difficult challenge. To be sure, these offices allowed him occasional retreats into the world of scholarly investigation, whether to prepare his *Plan for Establishing Uniformity in the Coinage, Weights, and Measures* in 1790, to present his study of the megalonyx as president of the American Philosophical Society in 1797, or to compile his *Manual of Parliamentary Practice* (published in 1801) based on his experience as vice president. On the whole, however, his experience of the 1790s was overshadowed by the tensions of an emerging party politics, beginning with his conflicts with Washington's secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton, over questions concerning the Constitution, American finance, foreign policy and the interpretation of the French Revolution. Vilified in the Federalist press as a Jacobin (for his initial support of the French republic) and an infidel, Jefferson became a highly controversial public figure. In a political culture in which the very existence of parties tended to be regarded as a sign of decline, it was complicated for him to embrace his developing role as Republican party leader. Jefferson secretly drafted the *Kentucky Resolutions* in concert with Madison's *Virginia Resolutions* in 1798/99, influentially stressing states' rights to attack the Alien and Sedition Acts of the Adams administration as unconstitutional.

After an election campaign characterized by bitter personal attacks on both sides, Jefferson regarded his narrow election to the presidency in 1801 (as he preferred to see it, the “Revolution of 1800”) as a turning point in American and universal history. The first president to be inaugurated in the new capital of Washington, DC (whose planning he had supervised), he sought to introduce the simple republican manners, which he had badly missed at the Federalist “courts” of George Washington and John Adams, into his presidential routine. In a consensual style of politics, he usually tried to avoid forms of overt power display. From the beginning of his presidency, he developed an exceptionalist vision of American progress, as in the key statement of his presidential principles, his *First Inaugural Address*, or in a famous letter to Joseph Priestley from March, 1801. During his first term in office, he could see his presidential optimism corroborated by the Louisiana Purchase or the success of the Tripolitan War. By comparison, his second term from 1805 to 1809 proved more difficult, especially due to ongoing threats to American neutrality and increasing tensions with Britain, tensions which he tried to tame with an unpopular and eventually futile embargo policy.

Jefferson's presidency left him comparatively little time for his literary and scientific interests – his organization of the Lewis and Clark Expedition beginning in 1804 and his first compilation of extracts from the gospels (later supplemented by *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*) were exceptions. The years of his third and final retirement from 1809 till 1826, which he spent exclusively in his “country” Virginia, saw him again engaged in the diversified pursuits of a Ciceronian farmer-statesman-philosopher. His correspondence made up the largest bulk of his writing and connected him to many well-known thinkers of his time, including Madame de Staël, Alexander von Humboldt, P. S. Dupont de Nemours, A. L. C. Destutt de Tracy, Benjamin Rush, Dugald Stewart, and many others. In 1812, he resumed his friendship with his former adversary John Adams and his wife Abigail, in a wide-ranging epistolary exchange that lasted the rest of their lives. Jefferson directed the English translation of Destutt de Tracy's works, his *Commentary and Review of Montesquieu's Spirit of Laws* in 1811 and *A Treatise on Political Economy* in 1818. Apart from thus trying to combat what he saw as Montesquieu's lingering spirit in America, it became an important task of Jefferson's retirement to refute the Federalist interpretation of the American Revolution, as presented in John Marshall's influential *The Life of George Washington*. Having failed to enlist his friend Joel Barlow in this endeavor, he sought to help

contemporary historians and biographers in composing a Republican “antidote” to Marshall. He also tried his own hand, briefly in biography (in his “Life of Captain Lewis” from 1813) and autobiography: in his introduction to the autobiographical *Anas* from 1818, (memoranda covering his political career since the 1790s), and in his *Autobiography* from 1821 (describing his life until his return from France).

In 1814, Jefferson offered his library for sale to the United States, and it became the foundation of the Library of Congress. The most important legacy of Jefferson's retirement years involved his life-long interest in education. He was instrumental in founding the University of Virginia, which received its charter from the Virginia legislature in 1819 and opened its doors in 1825. Jefferson planned the curriculum of this university dedicated to the principle of religious freedom, recruited its faculty, and drew architectural plans for its “academical village” – a unique neoclassical campus which has largely remained intact from the first generation of University of Virginia students (including Edgar Allan Poe) until today. Jefferson's final years were overshadowed by political and financial crisis. He privately denounced the Missouri Compromise as a dangerous threat to the American union, now arguing defensively (in contrast to his earlier position) that the “diffusion” of slavery into the west would actually weaken the institution, at least in the long run. Questions of timing had been a central concern of Jefferson's life. He died, like his rival and friend John Adams, precisely on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of American independence.

Works Cited

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