



Thomas Jefferson

(1743-1826)

Planter. Lawyer. Father. Scientist. Author. Governor. Vice-president.
President. Philosopher. Architect. Musician. Diplomat.

Early Life

"My father's education had been quite neglected; but being of sound mind, sound judgment and eager after information, he read much and improved himself . . ."

Thomas Jefferson was born the third child of planter/surveyor Peter Jefferson, and Jane Randolph Jefferson, the daughter of the well-known Virginia family. Jefferson's father died when Thomas was only 14 years of age, but he left Jefferson with the love of books, mathematics, and the outdoors. He was described as "tall, loose-jointed, sandy-haired and freckled," as a skilled horseman and gifted musician. He played the violin. Jefferson was very studious; he studied Latin, Greek, and French. He entered the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1760. He studied for up to 15 hours a day. When he graduated college he went on to study law and was admitted to the bar in 1767. He then practiced law for a number of years.¹

Monticello

"I know of no condition happier than that of a Virginia Farmer"

At the death of Jefferson's father he inherited about 3,000 acres of land and about 30 slaves. At 26 he began building Monticello (which means little mountain in Italian). The house, gardens, working farms, and workshops were all designed by Jefferson. It was left to skilled workman both slave and white to carry out the construction. Jefferson was in love with his plantation which occupied much of his attention and imagination. He was meticulous in the records of the plantation. He also noted daily rainfall, temperatures, and kept a gardening diary. It pained him that he would spend so much time away from his beloved Monticello throughout his lifetime.

Marriage

"ten years of unchequered happiness."

Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton on New Year's Day in 1772. Martha was a widow. He described her as a "very agreeable sensible and accomplished lady." She brought land, slaves and her father's debts to the marriage. In the 10 years they were married they had 6 children. Two daughters and one son died as infants. Two year-old Lucy died from whooping cough. Two daughters, Martha and Mary survived to adulthood. Martha died in September 1782, due to complications after the birth of Lucy in May of the same year. Jefferson was overwhelmed with grief and sadness of Martha's death. He then took on the duties of a devoted father to his surviving daughters. He never remarried.

Continental Congress/Declaration of Independence

". . . life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Jefferson was elected from Virginia to the Continental Congress in 1775. While in congress he was very quiet and didn't have much to do with the proceedings. By early summer of 1776 he was chosen to be on a committee to write a Declaration of Independence from Great Britain. John Adams wanted him on the committee because he had "a happy talent of composition [and a] peculiar felicity of expression." (*The works of John Adams*, vol. 2:513-514) The beautifully written words in the Declaration today are attributed to him. Although Jefferson said himself that they were not his original ideas. The purpose of the document was in Jefferson's mind, "but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their Assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take."² Jefferson believed strongly in the ideals espoused in the Declaration of Independence.

(TO CHARLES YANCEY 1/6/1816) "IF A NATION EXPECTS TO BE IGNORANT & FREE, IN A STATE OF CIVILISATION, IT EXPECTS WHAT NEVER WAS & NEVER WILL BE." (PAPERS OF T.J.9:33.)

¹ The general text unless otherwise noted was adapted from Monticello.org; Classroom page on learning resources. URL: <http://classroom.monticello.org/kids/resources/profile/81/Middle/Brief-Biography-of-Thomas-Jefferson>. Accessed June, 2014.

² Gordon Wood, *Revolutionary Characters* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 101.

Governor of Virginia

Jefferson served as the governor of Virginia from 1779-1781. He served during the latter part of the American Revolution. After his term of office was up he returned to Monticello but it was to be a sad period where he loses his wife Martha in 1782 and daughter Lucy in 1784.

Minister to France/Secretary of State

In 1785, Jefferson was appointed by Congress as a minister to France. He found that he enjoyed the French people and saw the poverty of the lower class and was a champion of their cause for freedom from their oppression. This experience strengthened his belief in democratic government. He loved French culture, and while there he sent many books, seeds, art, and scientific instruments back to Monticello.

In 1789, after the ratification of the Constitution, George Washington chose Jefferson to serve as his first Secretary of State in the new national government. Jefferson began to be dissatisfied with some of the policies of those in the cabinet, especially those of Alexander Hamilton, which eventually led to Jefferson's resignation. This divide in the cabinet members during Washington's presidency would give rise to political parties. Jefferson and his supporters would come to be known as Democratic-Republicans or Republicans.

Election of 1800/Jeffersonian Democracy

"Let us, then, fellow-citizens, unite with one heart and mind."

Jefferson ran against John Adams in the election of 1796 and lost; becoming Adams V.P. which he detested. Four years later he challenged Adams again and won in 1801. Jefferson wanted to rid the new republic of the "kingly" leanings of the Federalists and embrace the more democratic, smaller government, stance of the Republicans. This event was remarkable in history because it was the first transfer of power from one party to another and it was done peacefully. Jefferson's return to republican principles began an era in American politics now known as Jeffersonian Democracy. Jefferson served two terms in office. His first term's successes were the Louisiana Purchase which doubled the size of the United States and the sending of the Corp of Discovery. His second term was less successful due to problems with France and Great Britain. This led to a failed policy attempt to stay neutral; the Embargo Act of 1807. This policy backfired and led to further problems at home and abroad which were blamed on Jefferson.

Return to Monticello

"... all my wishes end where I hope my days will end, at Monticello."

By the end of his years as president he was ready to retreat to the safety and serenity of Monticello. As a man who possessed a boundless intellectual curiosity he was not bored in his retirement from public life. Here he was free to pursue his multitude of interests away from the political storms raging in the new capital city on the Potomac. He was glad to be home. One of his most important accomplishments in this period was he designed and founded the University of Virginia.

Jefferson's renewed friendship with Adams

"He is an old friend with whom I have often had occasion to labour at many a knotty problem, and in whose abilities and steadiness I always found great cause to confide." (J. Adams to J. Warren) Papers of T.J. 7:303

In his retirement Jefferson and Adams renewed their friendship that had been badly damaged by the politics of the 1790's and the events leading up to the election of 1801. Both were men that wanted to be able to reminisce with someone that understood the other and the events that they had helped to shape. Both were not sure what the future would hold. In 1816 Jefferson told Adams he liked, "the dreams of the future better than the history of the past (Wood, 115)." They wrote letters faithfully back and forth with one another until they both died, serendipitously, on July 4, 1826. Fifty years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson Monument/Legacy

Jefferson designed his own tombstone and composed the words to be transcribed on it. It reveals what he thought were his three most important accomplishments. "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson Author of the Declaration of American independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia." "No one of the revolutionary leaders believed more strongly in progress and in the capacity of the American people for self-government than did Jefferson (Wood, 114)

(T.J. to J. Madison)"Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to ; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty." (Papers of T.J. 12:442)

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