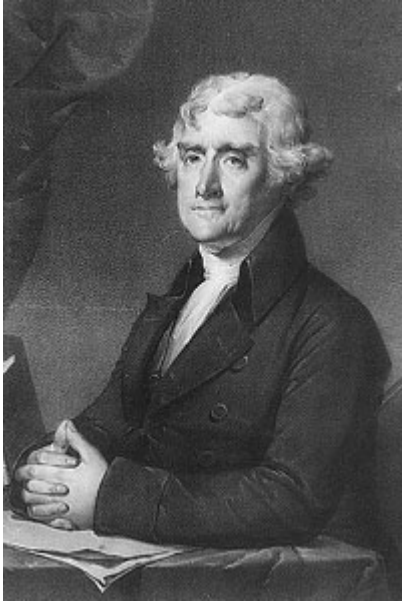


Click Print on your browser to print the article.
Close this window to return to the ANB Online.



Thomas Jefferson. After a painting by Gilbert Stuart, artist.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-117117 DLC).

Jefferson, Thomas (13 Apr. 1743-4 July 1826), philosopher, author of the Declaration of Independence, and president of the United States, was born at Shadwell, in what became Albemarle County, Virginia, the son of Peter Jefferson, a pioneer farmer and surveyor, and Jane Randolph. He always valued the enterprising example of his father, who set him in the path of education; he became "a hard student," indeed remained one throughout his life. Peter Jefferson died in 1757, leaving to his son a fair estate--5,000 acres and the slaves to work them. Less than three years later, Jefferson, already a proficient classical scholar, enrolled at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg.

In the brief autobiography Jefferson wrote near the end of his life, he recalled in particular the influence of a trio of philosophers who admitted him, a tall, lanky, red-haired lad, to their circle. The first of these, Dr. William Small of Scotland, the only nonclergyman on the faculty of the Anglican college, became his constant teacher. From him, Jefferson said, "I got my first views of the expansion of science & of the system of things in which we are placed," and this "probably fixed the destinies

of my life" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 4). George Wythe, a leader of the provincial bar, and a man of exemplary learning and character, would become Jefferson's mentor in the law, his chosen career. The circle was completed by the urbane royal governor, Francis Fauquier, who set before the youth an example of cultivated manners, taste, and sensibility. The spirited conversation of this circle lingered in Jefferson's memory for mingling more wit, learning, and philosophy than he encountered in all his life besides.

The Movement for American Independence

Admitted to the bar after prolonged study in 1767, Jefferson entered upon a successful practice. It was overtaken seven years later, however, by the onrush of the American Revolution, and he never resumed the profession. His political career fairly commenced in 1769, when the freeholders of Albemarle elected him to the House of Burgesses. Here during the next seven years he learned the craft of a legislator and became a leader in the movement for American independence. At each successive crisis Jefferson stood with the radicals around Patrick Henry in opposition to Parliament's persistent attempts to impose its will upon the colonies.

In 1774, after passage of the Coercive Acts, Jefferson drafted resolutions adopted by the Albemarle freeholders that were unique, first, in declaring Parliament void of lawful authority not alone to tax but to legislate in any manner for the colonies and, second, for introducing the language of "natural rights" into an argument heretofore conducted in terms of legal and constitutional rights. Jefferson then developed his position in a paper of some 7,000 words, which he proposed for adoption by the convention of "the late members of the House of Burgesses"--an incipient revolutionary body--called to meet at Williamsburg on 1 August. Falling ill on the road, he forwarded this work intended as instructions to the Virginia delegates elected to the expected continental congress. But

the leap he proposed was thought too bold; the convention held to the old ground that conceded Parliament's authority to regulate the trade of the empire even if revenue was incident to the regulation. Jefferson's friends at Williamsburg saw to publication of his paper without ascription of authorship, and without his consent, under the title *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. His first published work, it was at once reprinted in Philadelphia and soon in England. Although he drew his argument from the venerable tradition of the English constitution, Jefferson reached the radical conclusion that the Americans possessed the natural right to govern themselves. This mingling of legalism and rationalism was thoroughly characteristic of the young revolutionary. The logic of the argument pointed to independence. Neither Jefferson nor anyone else was yet ready for that leap, however, and having repudiated Parliament's authority he left allegiance to a common king the only bond of empire. The *Summary View* thus opened the final chapter in the polemics of the Revolution.

Meanwhile, Jefferson learned the craft of an architect by building his home, "Monticello," on a densely wooded summit adjoining Shadwell. He learned architecture as he learned most things from books, and he early discovered his master in the Renaissance Italian Andrea Palladio, who had turned to Roman antiquity for his models. Monticello was a modified Palladian villa, and all of Jefferson's later architectural masterpieces--the Virginia Capitol, "Poplar Forest," the University of Virginia--were in the Palladian manner. Early in 1772, long before the mansion was finished, he brought his bride, a young widow from the low country, Martha Wayles Skelton (Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson), to Monticello. The first of their six children was born there in September.

The death of Martha's father the following year doubled Jefferson's estate. Two valuable plantations, "Elk Hill," on the James River, and "Poplar Forest," in Bedford County, came to him. The management of so large an estate--over 10,000 acres and about 180 slaves--was a heavy responsibility. As the Revolution advanced, and public responsibilities crowded upon him, Jefferson found less and less time for it. Unfortunately, too, the Wayles estate came to him burdened with debts to English merchants. Jefferson waged a losing battle all his life to get free of them.

The Declaration of Independence

In June 1775 Jefferson assumed a seat in the Second Continental Congress at Philadelphia. His reputation had gone before him. He brought into Congress, John Adams said, "a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent for composition" (Malone, vol. 1, p. 204). He was at once set to work drafting revolutionary state papers. In June 1776, as last hopes of reconciliation with Britain faded, Jefferson found himself appointed the head of a five-man committee to draft a united declaration of independence. Although two of the committee members, Benjamin Franklin and Adams, were decidedly senior and better known, the task of drafting the document fell to him for political reasons and because he possessed that "peculiar felicity of expression" wanted in a work of this kind. He showed a preliminary draft to Franklin and Adams, who suggested only minor changes, revised it to his own satisfaction, and reported it to the committee. From there it went unaltered to Congress. After adopting the Virginia resolution for independence on 2 July, Congress debated the proposed declaration line by line for two and one-half days. The author squirmed under this ordeal. The philosophical preamble was speedily approved, but the delegates made many changes in the body of the work, the long indictment of George III. Jefferson thought the declaration lost more than it gained in the process, and some modern interpreters have sharply differentiated "Jefferson's Declaration of Independence" from the document adopted by Congress.

Be that as it may, the Declaration of Independence bore unmistakably the stamp of Jefferson's genius. Its language was bold yet elevated, plain and direct yet touched with philosophy, as befitted

a solemn appeal to the reason of mankind. Its argument, though founded in English law, suppressed the recondite legalism of tradition to the revolutionary principles born of the Enlightenment. Jefferson encapsulated a cosmology, a political philosophy, and a national creed--for so it would become--in the celebrated second paragraph.

The truths there declared to be "self-evident" were not new; indeed, as Jefferson later said, his purpose was "not to find out new principles, or new arguments . . . , but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1501). For the first time in history these truths were laid at the foundation of a nation. Human equality, the natural rights of man, the sovereignty of the people--these principles endowed the American Revolution with high moral purpose and heralded the democratic future not only in America but in the world. Some years passed before Jefferson's authorship was generally known, but in due time the Declaration of Independence became his first title to fame.

The Fight to Reform Virginia's Constitution

Returning to Virginia in the fall, Jefferson immediately entered the newly constituted House of Delegates with plans to reform the old order there. While he was in Philadelphia a constitution had been adopted for the new commonwealth, but it was not at all to Jefferson's liking. It left the old elite entrenched in power, excluded one-half of the white male citizenry from the political process, and was silent on feudal land tenures, the religious establishment, and other aristocratic abuses. Moreover, the constitution had been adopted without the "consent of the governed," laid down as a first principle in the Declaration, and without provision for periodic adjustment and revision. Jefferson had drafted a more democratic instrument and sent it to Williamsburg, but it was said to have arrived too late for consideration. Now he postponed the objective of a new constitution for the duration of the war and, from his seat in the House of Delegates, sought far-reaching reforms by ordinary legislation. Repeatedly in years to come Jefferson mounted his charger to overturn the first Virginia constitution, always without success.

Most of Jefferson's reforms were part of a comprehensive revision of the laws, reported in 1779, of which he was the principal author. The rational aim of a revised code miscarried, but the general assembly eventually adopted or rejected 126 bills of the revisal one by one. The abolition of entail and primogeniture--vestiges of feudalism--worked in the direction, already manifest, of a uniformly individualistic system of land tenure. Jefferson took special pride in the Statute of Religious Freedom, drafted in 1777 and finally enacted in 1786. Religious freedom, being wholly a matter of private conscience in Jefferson's philosophy, admitted neither protection nor support from the state. The celebrated statute became a powerful directive for the unique relationship of church and state in America and, by its bold assertion that the opinions of men are beyond the reach of civil authority, one of the great charters of the free mind as well.

But the Virginia oligarchs defeated his other major reforms. His Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge (1778) offered a complete plan of public education from elementary schools through to a state university, with a state library and museum as well. Jefferson's "quixotism" on the subject of education was rooted in political principles. Education being essential to the making of republican citizens, it became a paramount responsibility of government. The opposition's objections rang down the years. It was "impractical." It was "godless." It unfairly taxed the rich to educate the poor. By creating new units of local government called "wards" it undercut the authority of the oligarchical county courts. The plan was defeated in 1785. Jefferson, then in France, was crushed by the news. "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people," he wrote to Wythe. "Let our countrymen know . . . that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of

what will be paid to kings, priests, and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance" (*Jefferson Writings*, pp. 859-60).

Slavery, like ignorance, was another obstacle to the hopes of republicanism. In retrospect, the fact that Jefferson was a Virginia slaveholder all his adult life has placed him at odds with his moral and political principles. Yet there can be no question of his genuine hatred of slavery or, indeed, of the efforts he made to curb and eliminate it. In his draft of the Declaration of Independence he denounced the African slave trade imposed by Britain as a "cruel war against human nature itself," but Congress struck this passage. Partly through his efforts, Virginia became the first state to close its doors to this infernal traffic. A plan of gradual emancipation was part of Jefferson's reform system, but it was held back on the plea of expediency. His draft of a new Virginia constitution in 1783 mandated gradual emancipation of the slaves by declaring all persons born after the year 1800 free. The plan of emancipation to which he adhered all his life included provision for colonization of freed blacks in Africa or elsewhere, for he assumed this was a necessary condition for the citizenry's adoption of emancipation and because Jefferson himself had no faith in the feasibility of an equal biracial society. Of course, no convention materialized in 1783, and Jefferson became convinced that, at least in Virginia and the other southern states, emancipation was a political impossibility. Unwilling to martyr himself uselessly, he looked to the younger generation to turn the fate of this question.

Governor of Virginia

On 1 June 1779 Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia. The republican convictions, benevolent temperament, and philosophical turn of mind that had given him eminence in the legislative forums of the Revolution proved less serviceable to executive leadership in a situation pregnant with disaster. The executive office was weak, and Jefferson, with his aversion to anything bordering on arbitrary rule, was not the governor to strengthen it. As the British attempted to defeat the rebellion from the southward, Virginia became a battleground. Early in January 1781, the traitor-general Benedict Arnold invaded the state from the coast, sped through the low country to Richmond, now the capital, and scattered government. Jefferson met the crisis bravely, though not without censure, and upon his return to the capital acted with greater vigor, still to no avail. When General Charles Cornwallis marched his southern army into Virginia in the spring, the government moved to safer quarters in Charlottesville, near Jefferson's home. The redcoats followed, and on 4 June, after his term of office had expired but before a successor could be elected, he was chased from Monticello. At this crescendo of humiliation and defeat, the House of Delegates voted an inquiry into the conduct of the executive during Arnold's invasion. In December, several months after the British surrender at Yorktown, Jefferson attended the legislature on this business; but no inquiry was held, and the assembly instead voted him a resolution of thanks for his services, which if not a vindication lifted the cloud of censure.

Exhausted by his ordeal, stung by criticism, and disgusted that his exertions had been of so little account, Jefferson resolved to quit the public stage. Every effort to draw him back, by Congress, by the general assembly, by his Albemarle constituents, was rebuffed. A series of personal misfortunes, culminating in his wife's death in September 1782, plunged him into darkest gloom. Yet it was Martha Jefferson's death that finally led him back into the path of destiny. "Before that event my scheme in life had been determined," he wrote to a friend in November. "I had folded myself into the arms of retirement, and rested all prospects of future happiness on domestic and literary objects. A single event wiped away all my plans and left me a blank which I had not the spirit to fill up" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 780). Fortunately, Congress threw him a lifeline, renewal of the commission, earlier declined, to negotiate peace in Paris. Peace came before he could sail, however, and Jefferson wound up in Congress instead.

During his retirement Jefferson wrote, in large part, his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Actually it did not begin as a book or with any view to publication, but as a response to a series of questions about Virginia posed by the secretary of the French legation in Philadelphia. Becoming fascinated with the questions, Jefferson converted the task--one of instructing America's revolutionary ally--into an intellectual self-discovery of his native land, the greater Virginia of that day. The manuscript grew as he worked at it, and he was finally induced to publish it, originally in a private edition, in Paris in 1785. A digest of information and opinion on many subjects, *Notes on Virginia* is uniquely interesting as a guide to Jefferson's mind as well as to his country. It exhibits his insatiable curiosity, his manifold interests, painstaking detail, and speculative bent. It reveals the man of science disciplined to empirical fact and eager to possess nature for the mind, yet also the man of almost romantic sensibility enraptured by the wonders of the American continent even as he quested for useful knowledge. Of special importance was Jefferson's vindication of American nature against current European theories of biological impotence and decay in the New World. The book was a virtual manual of Jefferson's political opinions, and some of its passages--on slavery, on the virtues of husbandry, on religious freedom, on the errors of the Virginia constitution--became so well known that they were said to be "stereotyped in the public voice." The book whetted the appetite of the tiny community of American philosophers and won Jefferson a scientific and literary reputation on both sides of the Atlantic.

Seeking a Stronger National Government

Jefferson's service in Congress, while brief, from November 1783 to the following May, was highly productive. Legislation he proposed laid the foundations of national policy in important areas, for instance the decimal system of coinage on the dollar unit. (Later, as secretary of state, he also proposed a decimal system of weights and measures, but without success.) After Virginia, with several other states, ceded to Congress its claims to western lands, Jefferson authored the first plan of government for the vast trans-Appalachian domain. The Ordinance of 1784 established the principle of creating new, free and equal self-governing states as Americans moved west. To Jefferson's great regret his provision to bar slavery from the West was defeated, though Congress later rectified the error, in part, in the Northwest Ordinance. The Land Ordinance of 1785 embodied Jefferson's rectilinear plan of survey and revealed, once again, his passion for rational order and precision. Throughout his life he showed remarkable vision toward the West. As early as 1780 he spoke of the American experiment as an "empire of liberty" (*Jefferson Papers*, vol. 4, p. 237). Unlike Old World empires, he believed it rested not on colonial subservience to a supreme power but on the expansion of liberty and self-government over a continent.

In May Congress appointed Jefferson to a commission, whose other members were Franklin and Adams, to negotiate treaties of commerce with European states. The commission, which met in Paris, experienced indifferent success, but Jefferson continued his efforts in commercial diplomacy when, ten months later, he succeeded Franklin as minister to France. So often portrayed as a narrow "agrarian" in his economic outlook, he was, in fact, an ardent commercial expansionist. He believed that if the country was to remain agricultural, thereby avoiding the vices of cities and manufactures, it had to find foreign markets for its surpluses. The conditions for the development of a large "home market" did not then exist. Cut adrift from the British trading empire, anxious to secure economic as well as political independence from the mother country, the United States was obliged to widen its foreign markets along the avenues of free trade. Jefferson regarded France, already an ally and Britain's habitual rival, as the key to the free commercial system so important to the country's future. In negotiations at Versailles, where he was assisted by the Marquis de Lafayette, Jefferson won valuable concessions for American commerce and navigation, yet he could not shake British hegemony. Without abandoning the aim of throwing American commerce into a new orbit, he looked increasingly to the progress of reform in Europe and a stronger national government in the

United States to attain it.

A Five Year Residence in France (1784-1789)

Jefferson was probably never happier than during his five-year residence in France. Paris showered him with the infinitely varied pleasures of the mind and spirit. He read French like a native and soon became proficient in speaking the language. He haunted the bookstores. He frequented the fashionable salons. He indulged his appetite for art and music and theater. He was excited by ingenious inventions--phosphorous matches, the copying press, the screw propeller--smitten by the architecture, and captivated by the cuisine. For one brief season he was swept up in winsome romance with an English visitor, Maria Cosway, the talented wife of an English painter and the bemused recipient after her departure of Jefferson's "Dialogue between My Head and My Heart." He toured in the south of France, briefly in Italy, in England, the Netherlands, and the Rhineland, not alone for business or pleasure but to learn things useful to his own country. He interpreted the New World to the Old and presided over the intercourse of the arts and sciences. Some of this had profound effects, as in his design for the Virginia Capitol, which inaugurated the Roman style in American civic architecture, and in his transmission of American republicanism to the French.

Toward France, and Europe generally, Jefferson expressed ambivalent feelings. All he coveted--enlightenment, civility, artistic splendor--was offset by luxury and debauchery, ignorance and oppression. On balance, the more he saw of Europe the dearer his own country became. "My God!" he exclaimed. "How little do my own country men know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy. I confess I had no idea of it myself" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 808).

Despite the restraints of his official position, Jefferson was an open friend of the French Revolution of 1789. He advocated liberal reform of the Bourbon monarchy, including the establishment of representative assemblies, guarantees of individual liberties, and abolition of feudal privileges. He doubted the French people were ready for democratic revolution on the American plan and cautioned his friends in Paris against pushing things too fast and too far lest they provoke a counterrevolution. Nevertheless, as the movement grew more radical so, too, did Jefferson. He went with the Revolution, and at each critical juncture realigned his thinking with a swiftness that would put a closet philosopher to shame. By the time he returned to the United States in the fall of 1789, he could look upon the French Revolution as an extension of the American, and he was convinced that his own country had a vital stake in its future. "Here," he declared, "is but the first chapter in the history of European liberty" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 956).

Secretary of State under Washington's Administration

Jefferson went home on leave, fully expecting to return to Paris, but President George Washington prevailed upon him to become secretary of state in the new government under the Constitution. The United States had undergone a kind of revolution of its own. Jefferson was cordial to the new experiment. He had, after all, seen the feeble confederation kicked and scoffed abroad and had gone begging to Dutch bankers to keep it afloat. Still, pondering the new frame of government in Paris, where tyranny not anarchy was the problem, he felt the "demigods" at Philadelphia had been too much influenced by disorders like Shays's Rebellion and disenchantment with the democracy released in 1776. He objected, in particular, to perpetual reeligibility of the chief executive, fearing that the office would degenerate into a corrupt monarchy, and to the omission of a bill of rights. While he set aside the former, he pressed the latter; and his influence, especially as it fell upon his

friend James Madison, contributed to the addition of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution.

The tall, soft-spoken, and accomplished Virginian took up his duties in New York, the temporary capital, on 21 March 1790. He brought impressive qualifications to the conduct of the nation's foreign affairs, the chief business of the State Department. His main objectives during a tenure of almost four years were, first, settlement of Anglo-American issues left over from the treaty of peace and regularization of relations with Britain; second, the further expansion of American commerce, which he associated with a strengthened French alliance; third, the redemption of the West from European colonialism, the Spanish to the south, the British to the north, along with pacification of the Indians; finally, the manipulation of American neutrality in any European war to advance American national interests. In each case the problems proved intractable. Jefferson succeeded in bringing Britain to the bargaining table in 1791. Removal of His Majesty's troops from below the Great Lakes and resolution of other nagging issues was a prerequisite to improved relations. In diplomacy with Britain Jefferson believed the United States had a potent yet pacific weapon at its disposal, commercial discrimination. Britain could be made to pay for its virtual monopoly of the American market; and if this was not enough to force concessions, then Britain's dependence in war on American provisions, both at home and in the West Indies, would be. But in negotiations with Britain Jefferson was thwarted by the secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton, whose fiscal system turned on British trade, credit, and power. Jefferson's system, on the other hand, looked to commercial liberation, alliance with France, and progress of democratic revolution in Europe. His commitment to the French Revolution was more than philosophical. He believed its success was "necessary to stay up our own [revolution], and to prevent it from falling back into that kind of Half-way house, the English constitution" (*Jefferson Writings*, pp. 971-72).

But the conflict between Jefferson and Hamilton--the archetypal conflict of American politics--transcended foreign policy. In Jefferson's opinion, the New Yorker's measures to fund the debt, establish a national bank, and subsidize infant manufactures was a system of privilege. It enriched the few at the expense of the many, excited speculation and fraud, corrupted the Congress, and broke down the restraints of the Constitution. It went hand in hand with the counterrevolutionary opinions the Virginian heard from Hamilton and his friends and even from Vice President Adams. To combat these tendencies, which he labeled "Anglican" and "monarchical," Jefferson cooperated with the emerging opposition in Congress led by Madison. As the party division between Federalists and Republicans deepened, becoming a conflict in public opinion and in the newspapers, Jefferson was denounced by Hamilton and his followers as the "generalissimo" of the Republicans and the real enemy of the administration he pretended to serve. His role was not an easy one, but he endeavored to separate loyalty to President Washington from opposition to the ruling party.

When war erupted between France and Britain in 1793, the contrary disposition of the parties toward the belligerents threatened American peace. Jefferson acquiesced in the neutrality declared by the president, yet attempted to employ it to lever concessions from Britain and sustain the French alliance. Again checked by Hamilton, he was embarrassed by the firebrand minister of the new French Republic, Edmond Genet, whose warlike antics spoiled everything. To preserve peace, and to preserve the Republican party from the threatened explosion, Jefferson was forced to get rid of Genet. The operation was successful. Indeed, Jefferson deftly restored Britain as the principal enemy of American peace and prosperity before he left office at the year's end.

A Short Retirement before Returning to Politics as Vice President

Return to the orange-red highlands of his native Albemarle--"the Eden of the United States"--was a return to the paradise of Jefferson's soul. From his little mountain he portrayed himself as a plain

farmer, a patriarch among his children, reading not a single newspaper, and while still capable of ejaculations against the enemies of liberty, "preferring infinitely to contemplate the tranquil growth of my lucerne and potatoes" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1014). He made agricultural improvements, such as his mouldboard of least resistance for the plow. In practical farming, however, he showed more science than skill. He engaged in simple manufactures, a nailery for instance. He rebuilt Monticello--no small expense for the next fifteen years--the better to accommodate his family and the better to express his personal ideal.

As before, the pastoral idyll he imagined at Monticello eluded his grasp, and in 1796 he yielded to pressures drawing him back into the politics he professed to hate. "Wasn't it wonderful," John Adams cynically remarked, "how political plants grew in the shade!" (letter to Abigail Adams, 14 Jan. 1797, Adams Papers Microfilm, Letterbooks). The Republicans made Jefferson their presidential candidate against Adams, who prevailed in a close contest. Jefferson succeeded his old friend as vice president, the post he preferred at this critical juncture in the nation's affairs. Jay's Treaty with Britain, signed in 1794, had inflamed partisan passions as never before and angered America's foreign ally. Adams's administration revolved around peace or war with France. Things came to a head in the XYZ affair of 1798. This clumsy attempt by French agents to extort concessions from American envoys sent to negotiate peace drove the administration toward war. In the enveloping hysteria, Jefferson clung to the hope of peace and rallied the battered Republicans against the Federalist "war system." Enactment of the repressive Alien and Sedition laws convinced him that the Federalists aimed, under the smokescreen of war, to destroy the Republican party. Because the Federalists controlled all branches of the national government, Jefferson chose to invoke the authority of the state governments to arouse opposition to these laws. Thus he secretly drafted the Kentucky Resolutions of 1798. Madison, meanwhile, drew up similar, if milder, resolutions for the Virginia legislature. Jefferson's resolutions pronounced these laws unconstitutional usurpations and set forth the remedy of "nullification" to defeat them. The Virginia and Kentucky resolutions would later be mixed up with the constitutional issue upon which the Civil War was fought, but they originated in a struggle for political survival and addressed the fundamental issue of freedom and self-government descending from the American Revolution.

Election to Presidency (1800)

In 1800 Jefferson was elected president over Adams after a bitter contest in which he was vilified as a Jacobin incendiary, infidel, visionary, demagogue, and enemy of Washington, the Constitution, and the Union. Actually, he was not finally elected until 17 February 1801, and not by the people or their electors but by the House of Representatives. A tie between Jefferson and Aaron Burr, his running mate, threw the choice to that body where the Federalists, defiant to the end, supported Burr. (Before another election the Twelfth Amendment of the Constitution corrected the problem that produced the tie.)

Inaugurated in Washington, the infant capital on the Potomac River he had himself helped to plan, Jefferson was anxious to quiet the political storms of the past decade and to introduce into government that serene and noiseless course that, in his opinion, was the mark of society going forward in happiness. His inaugural address--a political touchstone for a century to come--contained a lofty appeal for the restoration of harmony and affection. "We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all republicans--we are all federalists." Conciliation did not exclude reform, however. He offered a brilliant summation of the Republican creed. He pledged to preserve "the whole constitutional vigor" of government, yet at the same time, in a memorable passage, called for "a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has

earned" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 494). In retrospect, Jefferson called the Republican ascendancy "the revolution of 1800" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1425), for through the processes of democratic election it accomplished as real a revolution in the principles of government as that of 1776 had in its form.

Eminent Philosopher-Statesman and Administrator

Jefferson dominated his administration more completely than had either of his predecessors. To the authority of his office he added the authority of party leader. His eminence as a philosopher-statesman was unchallenged; and by some personal magnetism he drew men to him, persuaded them to follow, and inspired their loyalty. His style of leadership was averse to dissension and confrontation. The harmony and stability of his cabinet, composed of moderate Republicans like Madison and Albert Gallatin, was unprecedented. With a painstaking capacity for detail, Jefferson was a good administrator. He also provided effective leadership of Congress. In Republican theory, got from the Whig tradition, Congress was superior to the president and he should not interfere in its business. Jefferson bowed to the theory but in practice employed the arts of persuasion together with the network of party leadership outside constitutional channels to control Congress. This system, so successful during Jefferson's first term, began to break down during his second as the Republicans quarreled among themselves and Federalist intransigence hardened.

Jefferson had hoped to appease the Federalists, in part, by a fair and equitable policy toward officeholders. In 1801 the offices from judges to postmasters were monopolized by Federalists; Republicans craved them, of course, but Jefferson was repelled by the politics of spoils and proscription. He preferred to convert the incumbents to Republicanism and to achieve a proper balance gradually. In the end, however, he was compelled to introduce the partisan standard. By 1804 he had appointed Republicans to one-half of the major offices. In doing so he broadened the heretofore elitist base of the civil establishment, taking in more westerners and more men of talent without wealth or privilege.

Growing Republican domination embittered the shrinking Federalist remnant. Thomas Paine's return to the United States at the president's invitation in 1802 inflamed the old slanders of Jacobinism and infidelity. At the same time Jefferson faced a new charge got up by the grubstreet journalist and disappointed officeseeker James T. Callender, and adopted by the rancorous Federalists, that he had for many years kept an "African concubine," Sally Hemings, at Monticello and was the father of several slave children. Thus began the prolific career of a story that would on occasion figure prominently in accounts of Jefferson's personal life, which were necessarily speculative because of his care in guarding his privacy. As he did with regard to other claims against him, he never replied to the charge concerning Hemings, doubtless on the theory that any reply would stimulate rather than arrest it. Almost two centuries later, in the fall of 1998, the results of DNA testing of Jefferson and Hemings descendants provided support for the hypothesis that Jefferson was the father of at least one of Sally Hemings's children, Eston. But, in the absence of direct documentary evidence, either refuting or acknowledging the charge, nothing conclusive can be said about Jefferson's relations with Sally Hemings.

Reform was bottomed on fiscal policy. Hamilton's system had rested on a large funded debt, taxes to service it, and a national bank, all anathema to the Republicans. Jefferson proposed a plan devised by Secretary of the Treasury Gallatin to extinguish the debt in sixteen years yet, amazingly, abolish the hated internal taxes at the same time. The plan required a reduction of the army and navy and some other services, and it assumed peace and rising revenues from foreign trade. After seven years, before the interruption of foreign commerce, the debt was actually reduced about 40 percent. The president agonized a good deal over Hamilton's fiscal system. "We can pay off his debt in fifteen years," he wrote in 1802, "but we can never get rid of his financial system. It

mortifies me to be strengthening principles which I deem radically vicious, but the vice is entailed on us by the first error. . . . What is practicable must often control pure theory" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1101). A case in point was the Bank of the United States. Its charter ran to 1811; moreover, Gallatin found the institution serviceable, and in a thriving economy a banking interest grew up in the Republican party.

The Federalist judiciary became the principal political battleground of Jefferson's first term. The opening battle of the so-called war on the judiciary was fought over the partisan Judiciary Act of 1801. The eleventh-hour act of a dying administration, it created a whole new tier of courts and judgeships and in other ways augmented the power of a judiciary monopolized by Federalists. In Jefferson's view, the defeated party had retired to the judiciary as a stronghold. The Repeal Act of 1802 returned the judiciary to its prior footing. Another conflict centered on the case of *Marbury v. Madison* (1803). Marbury and others sued the secretary of state for the execution of commissions--"midnight appointments" of the outgoing administration--as justices of the peace in the District of Columbia. In a landmark decision Chief Justice John Marshall ruled for the plaintiffs. He avoided a showdown with Jefferson, however, by declaring unconstitutional the authority of the court to issue writs of mandamus to enforce valid contracts, as given by the Judiciary Act of 1789. The decision laid the basis for what became the imposing edifice of judicial review. But in 1803 Jefferson opposed the decision less because of theoretical claims to a judicial power he distrusted than because the chief justice traveled outside the case, pretending to a jurisdiction he then disclaimed, in order to take a gratuitous stab at the president. Another phase of the Republican campaign was the impeachment of federal judges who had violated the public trust. Its high point was the trial of Supreme Court justice Samuel Chase. After his acquittal by the Senate in 1805, Jefferson turned away from impeachment in disgust. Yet he remained anxious about the unchecked power of the judiciary. He would face other encounters with Marshall, as in the acquittal of Burr on the charge of treason in 1807; but the "war on the judiciary" ended without serious disturbance to the foundations of judicial power.

The Louisiana Purchase (1803)

The president's greatest triumph, and greatest defeat, came in foreign affairs. In 1801 peace was on the horizon in Europe, and Jefferson dared to hope that the United States, securely anchored on its Atlantic shore, "a chosen country," as he said in his inaugural address, "with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 494), need no longer meddle in European politics. The French Revolution was dead, assassinated by "the beast" Napoleon, and so was the old alliance. Jefferson looked to a foreign policy characterized by peace and commerce only. Immediately, however, he faced a burgeoning crisis on the Mississippi River. Spain's retrocession of Louisiana with the great port of New Orleans to France threatened American peace and the future prosperity of the American West. For two years Jefferson and Madison skillfully negotiated the crisis. The president waved the thunderbolt of "marry[ing] ourselves to the British fleet and nation," if necessary, to secure American interests on the Mississippi (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1105). But the crisis was resolved when the American ministers in Paris signed a treaty to purchase Louisiana on 2 April 1803. It included more than Jefferson had sought: the whole of Louisiana with New Orleans, some 800,000 square miles, westward to the Rocky Mountains and beyond, doubling the size of the American union, for a price of under \$15 million. The acquisition undergirded Jefferson's vision of an expanding agricultural nation for decades to come.

For several months Jefferson had been planning a voyage of discovery across the continent. Now, by happy coincidence, the expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark became a reconnaissance of the distant domain. Unfortunately, the luster of the Louisiana Purchase was

dimmed for Jefferson by the conviction it breached the limits of the Constitution. He drafted an amendment to sanction the acquisition retroactively. When it found no support in Congress, he buried his fears of making the Constitution "a blank paper by construction" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1140) and proceeded with the treaty. Jefferson also proposed to confine settlement for an uncertain term to lower Louisiana, locking up the rest and turning it into a vast Indian reserve to which eastern tribes, pressed for their lands, might remove. This policy met with indifferent success.

A Troubled Second Term

Flush with the triumph of the Louisiana Purchase the president easily won reelection in 1804. Yet Jefferson's second term proved to be an ordeal. His method of working with Congress lost its charms, especially after it became known he would not seek a third term. His relentless pursuit of the Floridas vitiated his diplomacy abroad and exposed him to attack at home. The Burr conspiracy in the southwest angered Jefferson, and he almost turned the ensuing trial at Richmond into a personal vendetta against Burr and the presiding judge, Marshall. With the formation of the Third Coalition against Napoleonic France in 1805, all Europe was ablaze. The United States became the last neutral of consequence. The neutral trade was highly profitable. Unfortunately, of the chief belligerents, the French and the British, each demanded that trade on its own terms, and neither feared war with the country whose president declared peace his passion.

Britain loomed as the chief aggressor in Jefferson's eyes. It impressed thousands of American seamen into its service, thereby assaulting the very existence of American nationality. British ships infested American waters and plundered American carriers. Diplomatic initiatives to settle these issues of neutral trade and seamen's rights failed. The inflammatory *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair followed. The brutality of HMS *Leopard's* attack on the U.S. frigate aroused the whole country against Great Britain. War awaited only the president's signal. But he cooled the crisis and attempted to make it a lever in further negotiations, alas without success.

The upshot of these events--the denouement of Jefferson's administration--was the embargo of American commerce and navigation from the oceans, enacted by Congress on the president's recommendation on 22 December 1807. More than an alternative to war, or preparation for it, the Embargo Act was an experiment to test the effectiveness of "peaceable coercion" in international disputes. The United States possessed in its commerce, Jefferson had long believed, "another umpire than arms" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1007) to secure justice from European powers together with its own peace. To enforce the embargo, he and Gallatin stretched the capacities of government to the limit--in time beyond the constitutional limits Jefferson advocated. Although not without mounting effect abroad, the embargo produced more compelling privations and discontents at home. Finally, in the waning hours of the administration, it was repealed. The sequel three years later was the War of 1812. Jefferson always believed that this inglorious outcome might have been avoided had the nation shown the unity and the courage to persevere with the embargo. He probably erred in this judgment; if so, it was because he had become the captive of his own idealism.

Retirement at Monticello

Jefferson's popularity, though shaken, remained high when he retired to Monticello in 1809. Monticello was more than a home; it was already a monument and a shrine. Visitors, the great and the ordinary, came from far and near to see the Sage of Monticello. His daughter Martha (Martha Jefferson Randolph) managed a household filled with adoring grandchildren. One of them

described him as in excellent health, light complexioned, with hazel eyes, his reddish hair now turned sandy, six feet two and one-half inches tall, carriage erect, step firm and elastic, with a temper strong but under perfect control. "My mornings are devoted to correspondence," Jefferson wrote to a friend in 1810. "From breakfast to dinner [mid-afternoon], I am in my shops, my garden, or on horseback among my farms; from dinner to dark, I give to society and recreation with neighbors and friends; and from candle light to early bed-time, I read" (Peterson, *Jefferson and the New Nation*, p. 927). His favorite reading was in the ancient classics. But his intellectual pursuits spanned a wide front. For eighteen years, until 1815, he was president of the American Philosophical Society, the nation's premier scientific institution. He sold his great library of some 6,000 volumes to Congress in 1815, and it became the nucleus of the Library of Congress. He carried on a large correspondence, ranging over such subjects as Indian languages, constitutions, Plato and the Bible, horizontal plowing, conveyor belts and hopper-boys. Its best fruit was the correspondence with John Adams, the revolutionary comrade with whom he was reunited in friendship in 1812.

Although Jefferson wrote no books in retirement, he penned a memoir of his life before 1790, translated two works from the French, collected documents, compiled political notes and memoranda, essayed brief characterizations or lives of contemporaries, and in other ways contributed to the writing of American history. Some years before his death he completed a task begun in 1803 that is now known as the Jefferson Bible. Through a rough sort of New Testament criticism, he attempted to identify the real teachings of Jesus amid the Platonizing corruptions of priests and theologians. In his youth he had gone to the ancients for moral instruction; he still did, but now, in the ripeness of years, he concluded that the plain, unsophisticated teachings of Jesus made the best of all moral systems. He called his bible distilled from the four gospels "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" and thought it proof that he whom the priests and pharisees called infidel was "a true Christian" in the only sense that mattered, the love of man taught by Jesus. Of course, believing religion wholly a matter of the private conscience, Jefferson disdained public profession. Even his family knew nothing of the red morocco-bound volume. And it had to be rediscovered some seventy years after his death. Clearly Jefferson was on the track of a unifying religion of humanity, enlightened, morally earnest but stripped of supernaturalism, of which he saw anticipations in Unitarianism.

The "holy cause" to which Jefferson gave himself in old age was public education. In 1814 he revived his plan for a state system. Again the legislature rejected it. However, shamed, cajoled, and outwitted by Jefferson and a little band of "Monticello men" in the assembly, it approved one part of the plan, the state university. Jefferson wondered at the folly of raising the apex of the pyramid without laying the foundations in primary and secondary schools. He rejoiced in the university, nonetheless. Chartered by the state in 1819, located in Charlottesville, he could legitimately call himself its father. His architectural design of an "academical village" was strikingly original, perfectly attuned to his purpose, and cleanly executed in brick and mortar and wood under his watchful eye. He sent abroad for a faculty, formed the curriculum, acquired the library, and attended to countless details. Secular and modern in conception, raised against massive obstacles--legislative parsimony, sectarian fanaticism, and public indifference--the University of Virginia opened its doors to students only sixteen months before Jefferson's death.

Jefferson's last years were etched with sadness and disappointment. His health began to fail in 1818. At the same time, his personal fortune was doomed. Years of embargo, nonintercourse, and war had injured all Virginia agriculture, and recovery had only begun when the panic of 1819 struck. New debts piled upon old, some descending from the Revolution, and sank Jefferson into bankruptcy. In the end not even Monticello could be saved from the wreckage. He was deeply troubled, too, by the course of national affairs. The Missouri Compromise "fanaticized" politics on a sectional line dividing free and slave states; the Supreme Court, fulfilling his worst fears, became "a subtle corps of sappers and miners" of the Constitution (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1446); and the

drift toward consolidation in the national head threatened both individual liberty and the federal balance upon which the Union depended. Under these blows Jefferson retreated to the safety of old Republican dogmas and gave aid and comfort to the revival of states' rights politics in Virginia.

Through all this Jefferson preserved his serene faith in freedom, enlightenment, and the progress of humanity. He died at Monticello on the fiftieth anniversary of American independence. A methodical man to the end, he penned his own epitaph--designed his tombstone as well--in which he chose to be remembered as the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and as Father of the University of Virginia. In a celebrated last letter he wrote an inspiring testament to posterity: "All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their back, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God" (*Jefferson Writings*, p. 1547). It almost seemed that he had appointed the hour of his death to embellish his legend. The reported last words of John Adams, who also died on that day of jubilee, were "Thomas Jefferson still survives." The course of American democracy testified to the truth of the utterance.

Bibliography

The major collection of Jefferson's papers is in the Library of Congress; other important collections are in the Massachusetts Historical Society and the University of Virginia. The definitive edition, far from completion, is *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd et al. (25 vols. to date, 1950-1992). Of older editions of Jefferson's writings only, the most useful are *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul L. Ford (10 vols., 1892-1899), and *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. A. A. Lipscomb and A. E. Bergh (20 vols., 1903). *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (1984), is a comprehensive one-volume edition. Of many collections on particular subjects, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 1766-1824*, ed. Edwin M. Betts (1944), is especially notable.

Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (6 vols., 1948-1981), is the authoritative biography. Among biographies in one volume are Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (1970), and Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (1987). Peterson is the editor of the composite *Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Biography* (1987). Peter S. Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies* (1993), is a contemporary reassessment by sixteen scholars. The best guide to the literature is Frank Shuffelton, *Thomas Jefferson: A Comprehensive, Annotated Bibliography of Writings about Him, 1826-1980* (1983), with a supplement (1992).

Specialized studies may be conveniently divided between political and cultural, the latter encompassing "the renaissance man." For political thought, see Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (1922), a classic; Garry Wills, *The Inventing of America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (1978); and Garrett Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (1991). Adrienne Koch, *Jefferson and Madison: The Great Collaboration* (1951), and Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (1976), are studies of associates. See also John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (1977); Leonard W. Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (1963); and Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (1990), which focuses on foreign affairs. For the presidency, the first half of Henry Adams, *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (9 vols., 1891-1893), is still important. See also Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson*

(1976); Robert Johnstone, Jr., *Jefferson and the Presidency: Leadership in the Young Republic* (1978); and Cunningham, *The Process of Government under Jefferson* (1978).

Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (1948), and Karl Lehman, *Thomas Jefferson, American Humanist* (1947), offer contrasting views of Jefferson's intellectual outlook. See also Charles A. Miller, *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* (1988). Special studies include Silvio A. Bedini, *Thomas Jefferson, Statesman of Science* (1990); Roy J. Honeywell, *The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson* (1931); and Bernard Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (1973). Fiske Kimball, *Thomas Jefferson, Architect* (1916), is fundamental. See also William Howard Adams, ed., *The Eye of Thomas Jefferson* (1976); Jack McLaughlin, *Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder* (1989); and Susan R. Stein, *The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello* (1993). Merrill D. Peterson and Robert C. Vaughan, eds., *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History* (1988), collects conference papers. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (1960), pursues the Jefferson theme and symbol in American thought and imagination.

Merrill D. Peterson

Online Resources

- The Bill of Rights
<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/billrights/billmain.html>
From the National Archives and Records Administration. Includes images of the original document and a transcription.
- The Constitution of the United States
<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/constitution/conmain.html>
From the National Archives and Records Administration. Includes images of the original document and a complete transcription.
- The Declaration of Independence of the United States
<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/declaration/decmain.html>
From the National Archives and Records Administration. Includes images of the original document and a complete transcription.
- Monticello: The Home of Thomas Jefferson
<http://www.monticello.org/>
Maintained by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation.
- Thomas Jefferson Online Resources at the University of Virginia
<http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/>
From the Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.
- The Thomas Jefferson Papers.
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mtjhtml/mtjhome.html>
From the Library of Congress's American Memory website.

Back to the top

American National Biography Online Revised Feb. 2000.

Access Date: Wed Jan 9 09:50:31 CST 2008

Copyright © 2000 American Council of Learned Societies. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. Privacy Policy.