



## Thomas Jefferson

1743–1826

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743, in Shadwell, Albemarle County, Virginia. His father was Peter Jefferson, a well-to-do landowner; and his mother was Jane Randolph Jefferson, whose family was one of the original settlers of Virginia. Jefferson was very tall and lanky with freckles and reddish, sandy hair. He attended the College of William and Mary and studied law.

After his father's death, Jefferson inherited 5,000 acres of land. At the age of 26, Jefferson began building his Monticello estate. The mansion took several years to complete, but a section of it was livable by the time he married Martha Wayles Skelton when he was 29. They had six children but only two, Martha and Mary, lived to adulthood. Jefferson owned approximately two hundred slaves he divided among three homes: Monticello, Albemarle County Plantation, and the Poplar Forest estate. Some of the slaves he inherited from his father and father-in-law. At one point, two of his slaves escaped, and Jefferson did not attempt to recover them. By the time of his death, Jefferson freed seven slaves, all of whom were members of the Hemings family.

Jefferson was not only a lawyer and plantation owner, but also a scientist and inventor. His daily life revolved around the ideal of "Whether I retire to bed late or early, I rise with the sun." No matter where his travels took him, each morning, Jefferson rose from sleep and followed a daily routine. He would measure the temperature, direction and speed of the wind, amount of rain, migration of birds, and the appearance of the flowers. He noted these things in a small notebook, and the notes later would be transferred into a larger tablet. He always carried his notebook, a compass, thermometer, drawing instruments, scale, level, and a small globe.

He designed his Monticello estate for comfort and convenience. He installed space-saving beds that recessed into the walls. His closets sometimes were built over the beds and required a ladder to reach them. In other closets, he designed a turning mechanism that had several extending arms from top to bottom to hang clothes. He utilized several skylights throughout the house and hung mirrors to reflect natural and candlelight to brighten rooms. His dining room had a

dumbwaiter that allowed access to the wine cellar and revolving doors leading to the kitchen. In his study were many inventions, including a swivel chair, a wheel cipher for interpreting codes, and a copy machine. Although his estate may portray an elaborate picture, Jefferson dressed simply. Instead of wearing the latest fashion of the 1700s or 1800s, Jefferson mixed various styles in order to be comfortable. He even was known sometimes to receive visitors in his bathrobe and nightshirt.

In the thirteen colonies Jefferson was known as an eloquent writer, not a strong public speaker. His character portrayed the ideal of “Never abandon a plan, principle, or a friend.” In 1769, Jefferson was elected to his first political post. He served six years in the Virginia House of Burgesses. Soon after, he was elected as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On June 11, 1776, Jefferson, at the age of 33, was requested to draft the *Declaration of Independence* with the support of John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. Jefferson then published an article stating that colonial loyalty toward the King of England should be voluntary.

Upon his return to Virginia in 1776, Jefferson served four years in the Virginia House of Delegates. In 1779, he was elected Governor of Virginia. His time in office was spent supporting the Revolutionary War efforts. He provided supplies to the Virginia militia and defense for the cities and coast of Virginia. At this time there was controversy concerning whether Jefferson enabled the defeat at Richmond by failing to provide the defense necessary to protect the city. After reviewing the charges of misconduct against Governor Jefferson, the Virginia Assembly not only dismissed the charges but praised Jefferson for his efforts during the war. In spite of the cleared charges, a bitter Jefferson resigned as governor in 1781 and returned home to Monticello. This trying event was followed by more heartache for Jefferson when his wife died in 1782.

Jefferson experienced a year of change in 1784. He served in Congress and was appointed Trade Commissioner. He designed a proposal for the establishment of a Money Unit and Coinage as well as a decimal system. The idea for a new unit of money would establish an identity for the newly formed United States and help to guarantee financial independence for the United States. His proposal for the United States dollar was not adopted until 1792. As Chairman of the Western Land Committee, Jefferson proposed an ordinance for the Western Territory to be self-governing until the time the area was large enough to join the Union. This ordinance also recommended slavery not extend into the Western Territory. Although a slave owner himself, Jefferson declared, “... slavery was evil and should not be allowed to spread into new Territories”. As a member of Congress,

Jefferson was one of five delegates requested to attend the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which attempted to settle differences between Britain and the colonies, end the Revolutionary War, and allow the colonies to be self-governing.

Jefferson returned to France in 1785 in order to replace his ailing friend, Benjamin Franklin, as ambassador. Although he served in France until 1789, he remained involved in the events in the United States. Jefferson witnessed the beginning of the French Revolution and became very supportive of France.

When Jefferson returned to the United States in 1789, he was appointed Secretary of State under President George Washington. As Secretary of State, Jefferson was in conflict with Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, over several issues. The strong leadership of Jefferson and Hamilton caused political divisions to develop around their personal differences. Soon these political differences evolved into the first political party system. Jefferson's political party was Republican. Hamilton headed the Federalist Party. The two debated political, international, and monetary affairs. Also Hamilton favored the British, and Jefferson favored the French. As time went on, Jefferson realized President Washington favored many of Hamilton's ideas. This discouraged Jefferson, and he resigned as Secretary of State on December 31, 1793.

In the 1796 election, Jefferson was nominated as the presidential candidate for the Democrat-Republican Party. Jefferson lost by three electoral votes to John Adams, a Federalist. Jefferson had hoped that he and Adams would be able to work well together since they both were opposed to Hamilton's ideas.

The election of 1800 brought the first change of political power in the office of president. This was the first peaceful turnover of government from one political party to another in modern Western history. Jefferson became the third President of the United States. He served two terms. Jefferson's first term was highlighted by the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Jefferson doubled the size of the United States by purchasing 827,000 square miles of land from Napoleon Bonaparte for \$15 million. During Jefferson's second term, he organized the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1805 to explore the new territory and to find a way to transport goods from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. He sent his childhood friend, Meriwether Lewis, who later became his private secretary; and William Clark, an experienced hunter and tracker. This expedition strengthened the United States' interest in the Oregon Territory, since the Pacific could be reached by crossing Oregon.

Jefferson's second term was marked by foreign and domestic difficulties. He struggled to keep the United States neutral during the conflict between France and Britain. His efforts in this cause did not change the course of the War of 1812. Jefferson imposed the Embargo Act of 1807, which prohibited all exports and most imports in an effort to gain recognition of American rights from Britain and France. Most people, especially those who struggled for goods they could not acquire in the United States, saw this as a failure. Jefferson repealed the Embargo Act before he retired from the presidency.

Jefferson spent the last seventeen years of his life at his Monticello estate but continued to find ways to better the lives of Americans. He sold his book collection to the United States government. This collection was the beginning of what is today the Library of Congress. At age 76 in 1819, Jefferson established the University of Virginia of Charlottesville. He chose the location, designed and supervised the construction of the buildings, developed the curriculum, aided in the hiring of the teachers, and secured its charter.

On July 4, 1826, the author of the *Declaration of Independence* died on the fiftieth anniversary of its signing. Thomas Jefferson was 83 years old and died only hours before John Adams. Jefferson and Adams had remained lifelong friends despite several political disagreements.

According to Jefferson, his greatest accomplishments were freedom from Britain, freedom of conscience, and freedom maintained through education.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Discussion Questions:

1. How have Jefferson's inventions affected today's society?
2. Why was Jefferson a slave owner if he opposed slavery?
3. Jefferson was Vice President of the United States under President John Adams. What role did Jefferson play in Adam's administration?
4. What did Jefferson mean when he said, "Never abandon a plan, principle, or friend"?
5. For what major accomplishment is Jefferson most remembered?

