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Thomas Jefferson: America's Philosopher Statesman *Dorothea Wolfson, PhD*



Jefferson will live in the memory and gratitude of the wise & good, as a luminary of Science, as a votary of liberty, as a model of patriotism, and as a benefactor of human kind.

—James Madison, letter to Nicholas P. Trist,
July 6, 1826

From the beginning, Americans have looked with special favor on Thomas Jefferson, who penned the immortal words of our Declaration of Independence. With great eloquence, he dedicated our nation to the proposition that all men are created equal, endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In doing so, Jefferson transformed what would have been a mere political document into a proclamation of America's highest ideals. "The principles of Jefferson," Abraham Lincoln reminds us, "are the definitions and axioms of free society."¹ Indeed, few words have been as influential in spreading the growth of freedom throughout the world as those of Jefferson. Alexis de Tocqueville pronounced him

"the most powerful apostle that democracy has ever had."²

Jefferson once wrote that in drafting the Declaration of Independence, he meant simply to furnish an "expression of the American mind."³ Yet Jefferson did more than just articulate the moment. This nation was founded not on blood or ethnicity, but on an idea: that of natural human equality. The writings and deeds of Jefferson gave life to that idea and shaped the American mind. His legacy is our dedication to individual rights, religious liberty, and the importance of education.

Life

Born on April 13, 1743, in Albemarle County, Virginia, Jefferson was to become many things: a great visionary, a radical reformer, a farmer, a philosopher, a writer, a scientist, an educator, an architect, a musician, a statesman, and a Founder. His father, Peter Jefferson, was a land surveyor, and his mother, Jane Randolph, came from a well-established Virginia family.

When he was 16, Jefferson began his studies at William and Mary College. After two years, he entered the law office of his professor, George Wythe, where he remained for five years, attending not only to his legal studies, but also to a rigorous program of self-education that ranged from ethics and politics to mathematics and rhetoric. Jefferson was known for being an assiduous student; family legend was that during college he followed a strict regimen of studying 15 hours a day.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/MAPT-17>

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Thomas Jefferson

Born

April 13, 1743, Shadwell, Albemarle County, Virginia, to Peter Jefferson, a planter who died when Jefferson was 14, and Jane Randolph Jefferson, a first-generation immigrant from England.

Education

- Attended a preparatory school and graduated from William and Mary College (1762).
- Studied law and was admitted to the Virginia Bar (1767).

Religion

Known but to God.

Family

At the age of 28, married Martha Wayles Skelton on January 1, 1772. They had six children: Martha Washington Jefferson (1772); Jane Randolph Jefferson (1774); an unnamed son who died soon after childbirth (1777); Mary Jefferson (1778); an unnamed daughter who died soon after childbirth (1780); and Lucy Elizabeth Jefferson (1782).

Highlights

- Member, Virginia House of Burgesses (1769-1774).
- Delegate, Second Continental Congress (1775-1776).
- Primary Author of Declaration of Independence (1776).
- Member, Virginia House of Delegates (1776-1779).
- Governor of Virginia (1779-1781).
- Member, Confederation Congress (1783-1784).
- Minister to France (1785-1789).
- Secretary of State (1789-1793).
- Vice President of the United States (1797-1801).
- President of the United States (1801-1809).
- Founder, University of Virginia (1819).

Died

July 4, 1826, at his home, Monticello, Virginia, where he is buried.

Last Words

"Is it the Fourth?"

In 1769, the same year he began building Monticello, Jefferson was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses, where he served for five years. He soon became caught up in the anti-British sentiments sweeping the colonies, playing a central role in the Virginia Committee of Correspondence and supporting measures urging resistance to British authority. Among his more important writings was a set of proposed instructions to the Virginia delegates to the First Continental Congress, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, which called for the king to recognize the colonists' natural rights.

This nation was founded not on blood or ethnicity, but on an idea: that of natural human equality. The writings and deeds of Jefferson gave life to that idea and shaped the American mind.

In June 1775, Jefferson arrived in Philadelphia to serve as a delegate in the Second Continental Congress, bringing with him “a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent of composition.”⁴ Never much of a public speaker (John Adams claimed that he never heard Jefferson “utter three sentences together” while they both sat in Congress), Jefferson made his mark behind the scenes. His most important appointment was in June 1776 to serve on a committee along with John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman to write the Declaration of Independence. Only 33 years old, Jefferson was selected to draft what he later called “the declaratory charter of our rights.”⁵

When Jefferson returned to Virginia in 1776 and reentered the House of Delegates (where he first met James Madison), he turned his attention to revising the laws of the State of Virginia to make them more democratic. Jefferson proposed legislation to abolish primogeniture (a law giving the first-born son exclusive right of inheritance) and entail (a law limiting inheritance to a lineal descent of heirs) and to establish religious liberty and a means for the general diffusion of knowledge. The first two bills became law in 1777, and the third passed in 1786, but his plan for establishing a broader educational system was defeated. Madison called Jefferson's efforts “a mine of legislative wealth.”⁶

Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia in 1779 and spent the bulk of his two-year term dealing with the various exigencies arising from the Revolutionary War. He resigned after one term and happily returned “to my family, my farm, and my books.”⁷ He declined a seat in the House of Delegates as well as a diplomatic post to negotiate peace with Great Britain, resuming work instead on *Notes on the State of Virginia*. It was a book that he had never intended to publish, probably because it contained a severe condemnation of slavery.

The Statesman

In November 1782, shortly after the untimely death of his wife Martha, Jefferson was again appointed to the peace commission to Great Britain, and this time he accepted. But before he set sail for England, he received word that the peace treaty had already been concluded. In 1783, he served as one of Virginia's delegates to Congress, drafting the resolves that served as a model for the famous Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

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1. Abraham Lincoln, “To Henry L. Pierce and Others,” April 6, 1859, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), Vol. 3, pp. 375–376.
 2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), Vol. 1, Part 2, Chapter 7, p. 249.
 3. Thomas Jefferson, “To Henry Lee,” May 8, 1825, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1501.
 4. John Adams, “From John Adams to Timothy Pickering, 6 August 1822,” National Archives, Founders Online, last modified March 30, 2017, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7674> (accessed April 8, 2017).
 5. Thomas Jefferson, “To Samuel Adams Wells,” May 12, 1819, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1421.
 6. James Madison, “James Madison to Samuel H. Smith, November 4, 1826,” Library of Congress, https://cdn.loc.gov/service/mss/mjm/21/21_0708_0710.pdf (accessed April 8, 2017).
 7. Thomas Jefferson, “To Mrs. Church,” November 27, 1793, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1013.
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In 1785, Congress appointed Jefferson to succeed Benjamin Franklin as minister to France. Although his achievements overseas were limited by the Articles of Confederation, which gave individual states the power to authorize treaties with foreign powers, Jefferson's diplomatic responsibilities kept him from attending the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

Jefferson played a decisive role, albeit from afar, in persuading Madison of the need to add a bill of rights. While in France, Jefferson received a copy of the new Constitution and in a famous letter to Madison gave his general approval to it. But Jefferson had an important objection: "Let me add that a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, and what no just government should refuse, or rest on inference."⁸ Madison, who had been against a bill of rights, became a firm advocate and made it the first order of business to pass a bill of rights when he served in the First Congress.

When Jefferson returned to America in 1789, he had every intention of returning to France, but President Washington appointed him as the first Secretary of State, a position that Jefferson reluctantly accepted. In Washington's Administration, Jefferson came into conflict with the brash and brilliant Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton.

- Jefferson believed that Hamilton harbored aristocratic sentiments and desired to put America on a course toward monarchy.
- Hamilton wanted a strong national government, whereas Jefferson favored strong state authority.
- Hamilton was pro-British, while Jefferson was pro-French.
- Jefferson envisioned America as a land of small landholders, the "chosen people of God...whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."⁹ Hamilton favored an economy based on manufacturing, viewing America as a land of limitless commercial possibilities.

The antagonism between Hamilton and Jefferson became increasingly fierce and partisan, and Jefferson left the Administration at the end of 1793.

The rivalry between Hamilton and Jefferson ultimately led to the development of America's first political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans. In fact, Jefferson's defeat of John Adams for the presidency in 1800 was the first national election in which two organized political parties vied for office. In his inaugural address, Jefferson laid out his vision of limited government, dedicated to religious toleration and "equal and exact justice to all men" no matter their religious or political background.¹⁰

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The highlight of Jefferson's two terms as President was undoubtedly the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France, which nearly doubled the size of the United States and gave it control of the Mississippi River. However, Jefferson was reluctant to trumpet this great accomplishment, in part because he feared it violated the Constitution. A strict constructionist, Jefferson believed that the Constitution did not give the federal government the power to purchase territory. He supported passing a constitutional amendment to render the purchase legitimate but was advised that any delay might jeopardize the agreement. Jefferson ultimately found the constitutional authority for purchasing Louisiana under the presidential power to make treaties.

After the presidency, Jefferson eagerly left the world of politics and returned to Monticello, where he gave "up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier."¹¹ Jefferson's retirement

8. Thomas Jefferson, "To James Madison," December 20, 1787, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 916.

9. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 290.

10. Thomas Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address," in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 494.

11. Thomas Jefferson, "To John Adams," January 21, 1812, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1260.

was a time for reflection on matters of philosophy and theology; letter writing (his broken correspondence with John Adams was renewed); farming experiments; and—most important—establishing the University of Virginia.

Individual Rights and Slavery

Thomas Jefferson was a child of the Enlightenment and considered three English philosophers of the 17th century—Isaac Newton, John Locke, and Francis Bacon—to be “the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception...”¹² He took the ideas of equality and liberty, which had merely been abstractions in aristocratic times, and put them into practice, enshrining them in our Declaration of Independence.

Today, many Americans take their rights for granted. We fail to realize that when Jefferson was propounding the self-evident truth of human equality, and hence the equal rights and dignity of individuals, the rest of the world believed that the “favored few”—monarchs, aristocrats, despots—should have dominion over the many. But Jefferson, writing 50 years after the Declaration in the last letter he ever wrote, was convinced that the world was beginning to embrace the idea that all people had a right to liberty:

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 backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.¹³

Of course, the question must be raised: How could a man so dedicated to safeguarding individual rights be a slaveowner? A look at Jefferson’s public statements and legislative proposals on the issue of slavery reveals a man dedicated to the abolition of slavery. During his first term in the Virginia House

of Burgesses, a young Jefferson advocated legislation to make it easier for Virginians to free individual slaves. In *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, Jefferson called for an end to the slave trade: “The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state.”¹⁴

Two years later, in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson used the strongest language to condemn George III for promoting an untrammled slave trade in the colonies:

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.... Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.¹⁵

In revising the laws of Virginia in the late 1770s, Jefferson took up the cause of emancipation. He submitted a proposal urging his fellow legislators to end slavery gradually in Virginia and to return the freed slaves to their native lands. As Jefferson recounted in his autobiography, his reform would have granted “freedom to all [slaves] born after a certain day, and deportation at a proper age.... Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, Jefferson was a slaveowner and never freed more than a few of his slaves. He struggled throughout his life with the glaring contradiction between the principles of equality and the existence of slavery: “The love of justice and the love of country plead equally the cause of these people, and it is a moral reproach to us that they should have pleaded it so long in vain.”¹⁷ “We have the wolf by the ears, and

12. Thomas Jefferson, “To John Trumbull,” February 15, 1789, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 939.

13. Thomas Jefferson, “To Roger C. Weightman,” June 24, 1826, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1517.

14. Thomas Jefferson, “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 115.

15. Thomas Jefferson, “The Autobiography,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 22.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

17. Thomas Jefferson, “To Edward Coles,” August 25, 1814, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1344.

we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go,” Jefferson lamented in 1820. “Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”¹⁸ He had hoped that “the younger generation,” moved by “the generous temperament of youth” and shaped by the “flame of liberty” that his generation had kindled, would end slavery.

Yet it was Jefferson’s words and ideas that led to the abolition of slavery. Abraham Lincoln would constantly refer back to the principles of Jefferson—to his “abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times”¹⁹—in his effort to end slavery. And a century later, Martin Luther King Jr. understood Jefferson’s words in the Declaration to be a “promissory note” that would inspire the struggle for civil rights. By enshrining the idea “that all men are created equal” and the primacy of individual rights in the Declaration of Independence, and also by playing an important role in adding a Bill of Rights to the Constitution, Jefferson committed America to upholding its first principles.

In fact, in this task, Jefferson might have been too successful. Today, we are saturated with what some have called “rights talk.” Few Americans pay any attention to the Constitution except for the Bill of Rights. As a result, some have argued that Americans have become too zealous in defending their individual rights and have lost a national sense of community. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the closing lines of the Declaration of Independence, where the signers pledged “our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor” to the cause of liberty.

For Jefferson, rights were to be secured by individuals who were animated by a sense of patriotism, duty, and honor.

For Jefferson, rights were to be secured by individuals who were animated by a sense of patriotism, duty, and honor. In a letter of advice to a young boy, Jefferson told him: “Love your neighbor as yourself and your country more than yourself.”²⁰ To be sure, Jefferson’s first principle was that governments were formed, based on the consent of the governed,

to protect the individual rights of their citizens. At the same time, Jefferson was well aware that the principles of liberty and equality would flourish best among a citizenry dedicated not only to maintaining their rights, but also to appreciating the nation instituted to secure those rights.

Religious Liberty

The history of the world is replete with examples of religious persecution. Our earliest settlers came to America to escape the religious intolerance that was then prevalent in England and Europe. Even today, in most parts of the world, from Ireland to China to Africa, there still are religious hostilities and persecution. America is a wonderful exception to these trends. So committed were Americans to the idea of religious liberty that during the Constitutional Convention, there simply was no debate on the issue of the right of conscience.

Nevertheless, our Founders were not willing to take our religious liberty for granted. They were all too aware of the danger of mixing political power with religious authority. The First Amendment, of course, recognizes the right to the free exercise of religion and prohibits the national government from making laws respecting an establishment of religion. Jefferson and Madison were perhaps the most vigilant of the Founders when it came to safeguarding religious liberty.

Jefferson’s warnings on the danger of church establishment were often blistering and always provocative. He did not mince words when it came to attacking would-be tyrants. In the “Preamble to his Bill for Religious Freedom,” he singled out:

the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time.²¹

18. Thomas Jefferson, “To John Holmes,” April 22, 1820, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1434.

19. Lincoln, “To Henry L. Pierce and Others,” April 6, 1859.

20. Thomas Jefferson, “To Thomas Jefferson Smith,” February 21, 1825, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1499.

21. Thomas Jefferson, “A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 346.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson extended the widest scope of toleration to atheists and pagans: “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”²²

For Jefferson, religious belief was a matter of individual conscience and thus “a matter which lies solely between Man and his God.”²³ In his famous and often quoted letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, Jefferson used this now-familiar analogy to discuss the First Amendment:

I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.²⁴

Jefferson considered religious liberty to be the cornerstone of every other liberty and its defense crucial to the maintenance of free government. As he wrote to his friend Benjamin Rush, “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”²⁵

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Many Americans have taken those statements to mean that there should be a strict divide between the state and religion generally, but Jefferson’s stance on religious liberty is more nuanced than that. At

the same time that he drafted his “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” in the late 1770s, he also proposed a “Bill for Punishing Disturbers of Religious Worship and Sabbath Breakers” and a “Bill for Appointing Days of Public Fasting and Thanksgiving.” As governor of Virginia, he issued a proclamation of “solemn thanksgiving and prayer to Almighty God.”²⁶

As President, Jefferson did not proclaim national days of fasting and thanksgiving, because he feared that such proclamations had the effect of imposing uniform religious practices on all citizens. Yet Jefferson regularly attended church services held in Congress during his presidency, well aware that the symbolic gesture of his attendance would likely offset any perception of his hostility toward religion. He also gave generously to several churches and ministers while in office and allowed religious services in public facilities of the executive branch.

Moreover, although he seems untroubled in *Notes on the State of Virginia* if his neighbor believes in many or no gods, in that same work, Jefferson also implores:

And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.²⁷

Thus, while it might seem that Jefferson advocated a radical separation between church and state, he considered liberty a gift of God and posited a firm reliance on God for protecting our natural rights—with which all men “are endowed by their Creator.”

22. Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 285.

23. Thomas Jefferson, “To Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge and Others, a Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut,” January 1, 1802, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 510.

24. Ibid.

25. Thomas Jefferson, “To Dr. Benjamin Rush,” September 23, 1800, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1080.

26. Thomas Jefferson, “Proclamation Appointing a Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer,” November 11, 1779, National Archives, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-03-02-0187> (accessed April 20, 2017).

27. Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 289.

Jefferson believed in unrestrained religious expression in an open marketplace of ideas and thought that religious establishments threatened religious liberty. At the same time, he had little problem with government supporting voluntary, nonsectarian religious activity, including the use of public property for religious purposes, if that cooperation was necessary for the cause of religious expression and the flourishing of the good effects of religion generally.

Education

Jefferson's love of learning was boundless, and it informed his priorities as legislator, reformer, and President and later as a retired statesman. His vigilance against political tyranny and religious fanaticism was matched by vigilance against what he foresaw as a more formidable enemy of self-government: ignorance. Part and parcel of his trenchant defense of individual rights and religious liberty was his understanding that free citizens, in order to remain free, must be educated.

Of all the bills he submitted to the revisal committee when he was a legislator in Virginia, Jefferson wrote, "by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness."²⁸ For Jefferson, education protected "individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and... against degeneracy."²⁹

So vital was the role of education to "guard the sacred deposit of [our] rights and liberties" that Jefferson proposed what was at the time a very radical plan to extend a free education to all children of elementary school age in the state of Virginia. Jefferson believed that gifted children come from all walks of life. As he put it, "talents are sown as liberally among the poor as the rich." It was in the public interest for the state to seek out and educate all children "whom nature hath fitly formed and disposed to become useful instruments of the public" rather than to confine education "to the weak or wicked."³⁰ Jefferson's scheme provided a free education to all at the

elementary level and encouraged the best students, whom Jefferson called the "natural aristocracy," to pursue higher education.

The importance of education to Jefferson can also be seen in one of the central policies of his presidential Administration. In 1803, Jefferson persuaded Congress to appropriate \$2,500 for the first scientific expedition of the United States, which sent Meriwether Lewis, his private secretary, and William Clark on one of America's most famous exploratory missions. Jefferson instructed Lewis that his "observations are to be taken with great pains and accuracy, to be entered distinctly, and intelligibly for others as well as yourself." He was especially interested in what they might observe of the American Indians ("the names of the nations and their numbers; the extent and limits of their possessions; their language, traditions, monuments, the state of morality, religion and information among them") and singled out a few other "objects worthy of notice" such as "the soil, vegetation, animals, mineral productions, climate."³¹ Jefferson's love of natural history was fueled in part by his patriotism. He wanted to show the world that America was geographically the equal of, if not superior to, Europe.

Jefferson's love of natural history was fueled in part by his patriotism. He wanted to show the world that America was geographically the equal of, if not superior to, Europe.

Jefferson spent the bulk of his retirement years working on the ambitious project of establishing what would become the University of Virginia. The Virginia Assembly appropriated funds to charter the university in 1819, and Jefferson at once set about attracting the best faculty from abroad and amassing a vast catalogue of books for the library. He designed not only a curriculum, but also the architecture of the entire campus, which the American

28. Thomas Jefferson, "To George Wythe," August 13, 1786, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 859.

29. Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 365.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Thomas Jefferson, "Instructions to Captain Lewis," June 20, 1803, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 1127.

Institute of Architects has praised as “the proudest achievement of American architecture in the past 200 years.”³²

The University of Virginia was perhaps Jefferson’s proudest accomplishment. As much as Jefferson admired our political institutions, he put his greatest faith in the virtue of a free people educated to uphold self-government: “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.”³³

Jefferson’s educational aims were threefold:

- Provide all children with the skills—reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history—necessary to live freely and independently as adults.
- Give all children a civic education that instructs them in “their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens.” Jefferson stressed the importance of educating Americans in the science of politics—in the axioms of free government.
- Finally, and perhaps most important for Jefferson, cultivate virtue. Jefferson believed that educators should “cultivate [children’s] morals and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order.” He optimistically believed that education “engrafts a new man on the native stock, and improves what in his nature is vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth.”³⁴

Perhaps this is Jefferson’s greatest lesson to us: that rights and democracy are nothing without an education in virtue.

Is it the Fourth?

Jefferson’s death is an extraordinary, almost mythical ending to a patriotic life. In February 1826, Jefferson became ill, and by the spring of that year, he knew he was dying. He wrote a new will and in mid-June called for his physician to stay with him at Monticello as he slowly began to slip away.

By July 2, Jefferson began to fall in and out of consciousness, and on July 3, he fitfully awoke to speak his last words: “Is it the Fourth?” Jefferson held onto life until the afternoon of July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. His great friend and fellow revolutionary John Adams passed away a few hours later.

This extraordinary life would furnish the most impressive of epitaphs, but Jefferson left explicit instructions to his grandson to note only three achievements on the obelisk at his Monticello grave, which reads: “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; because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered.”

Today, it is precisely Thomas Jefferson’s achievements in these three areas—individual rights, religious liberty, and education—that explain to a large extent the success of our American democracy and still define our national character.

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32. “Accolades: UVA Again Ranked on ‘Beautiful College’ List,” University of Virginia, University News, November 18, 2015, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/accolades-uva-again-ranked-beautiful-college-list> (accessed April 20, 2017).

33. Jefferson, “To James Madison,” December 20, 1787, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 918.

34. Thomas Jefferson, “Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, p. 461.