

Who was Thomas Jefferson?

Including an account of Jefferson's personal life at Monticello
by the Overseer of his estate and plantation – Captain Edmund Bacon
(Rare Book Collection, Library of Congress)

Jefferson's Background

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), third president of the United States, is credited with being the father of architecture in America, a musician, an inventor and a gentleman farmer. He is remembered as a great Virginia gentleman, founding father and author of the nation's founding document – the *Declaration of Independence*.

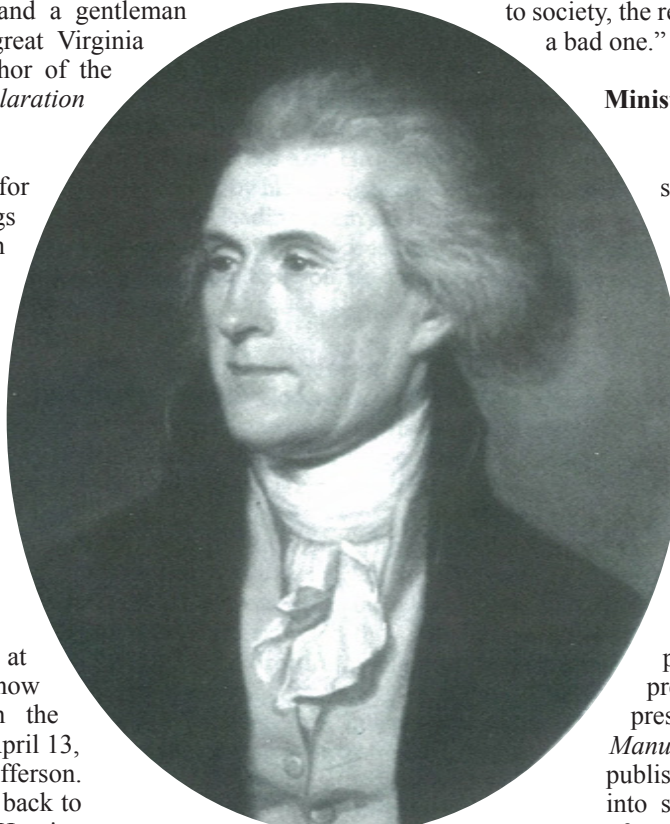
No man has been responsible for so many of the fundamental things that have gone into American governmental theory and practice; for example, the decimal system, the basic money system, and the theory for the admission of new States into the Union. In a sense, he is the father of the public school system in the United States, and is the man who worked out the land measurement principles on which public land has been divided and private individuals have been made owners of these lands.

Thomas Jefferson was born at "Shadwell" in Goochland (now Albemarle) County, Virginia, then the outskirts of the western frontier, on April 13, 1743, to Jane Randolph and Peter Jefferson. The genealogy of Jefferson is traced back to a Thomas Jefferson, who lived in Henrico County in 1677. Peter Jefferson was deputy surveyor in Albemarle and assisted in continuing the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina and made the first correct map of Virginia. Thomas Jefferson had great regard for his father's map; he inherited his father's mathematical mind and his love for exploring the unknown. Coming from the aristocracy of the lowland countries, the background of his mother, Jane Randolph, is contrasted with the frontier life of his father. Eight of the ten children born to Peter Jefferson survived his death in 1757, Thomas, the elder of his two sons, was left 2,750 acres of land and a family reputation of high repute in the community.

His Education

The education of Thomas Jefferson was started at "Tuckahoe," on the James River, near Richmond. When nine years old, the family returned to Albemarle County. Here he continued the study of Latin and Greek. Jefferson mastered classical languages and literature. He entered the College of William and Mary in 1760, graduating two years later. George Wythe, first Professor of Law in the United States at the College of William and Mary, taught Jefferson law. He was admitted to the bar in 1767, and was successful until he abandoned his profession for the cause of the American Revolution.

Jefferson hesitated to discuss his religion freely and publicly, repeatedly telling his friends, "Say nothing of my religion. It is known to my God and myself alone. Its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life; if that has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one."



Thomas Jefferson – portrait of the founding father by Charles Willson Peale. Independence National Historical Park Collection. From, *The Rewriting of America's History* © 1991 and 2011 by Catherine Millard.

Minister to France

He was appointed Minister to France to succeed Franklin in 1785 and remained in France until October, 1789. Soon after his return to his home, Monticello, from France, Washington offered Jefferson the appointment of Secretary of State, being temporarily administered by John Jay. He was reluctant to enter politics again, but for patriotic reasons he accepted and became the first Secretary of State under the Constitution, on March 22, 1790.

Vice-President and President

In 1796 John Adams was elected president, Jefferson being elected vice-president. Out of his experiences as presiding officer of the Senate came his *Manual of Parliamentary Practice*, later published in many editions and translated into several languages; it is still the basis of parliamentary procedure in the Senate. Jefferson was chosen president in 1800, being re-elected in 1804, at which time John Adams voted for him as a Republican elector from Massachusetts. The two great achievements of his Administration were the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the Lewis and Clark

Expedition in 1804.

When one realizes that he was a living witness of both the American and French Revolutions, watched from day to day the growth of his own United States, one appreciates that he can probably be considered the greatest constructive statesman of his time, a statesman who never lost faith in his own country's Republican freedoms. Late in life, he was able to write to his friend, John Adams, "You and I will yet look down from heaven with joy at the fulfillment of our great dreams."

His Personal Life at Monticello

But what about Thomas Jefferson's personal life at Monticello? Little has heretofore been made public of his family life, relationship with his daughters and grandchildren, his dealings with his friends and neighbors, revealing the *true* Thomas Jefferson. Housed in the Rare Book Collection of the Library of Congress, a priceless original

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account written by Captain Edmund Bacon, overseer of Monticello for 20 years, discloses Jefferson's character and intimate life:

Prelude to Jefferson's Personal Life

'Thomas Jefferson still survives! Independence forever!' were the dying words of John Adams. At that moment the devoted family and friends at Monticello and at Quincy, were moving with the same noiseless tread, and watching with the same breathless interest, the closing scenes in the lives of those illustrious men. 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,' were Jefferson's last words, taken from Luke's gospel, chapter 2, verse 29. Jefferson and Adams breathed their last, July 4th, 1826; and the waves of grief from Quincy and Monticello soon intermingled and overspread the land. The nation was in tears. Adams and Jefferson were no more. The one by his tongue, the other by his pen, had done more than any others, by these means to secure the liberty and independence of their country. That country had lavished upon each her highest honors; and, as if in approval of their life-work, Heaven had kindly ordained that both should die upon the 50th anniversary of that day that they had done so much to make immortal.

The dying utterance of the sage of Quincy was not less the statement of a fact, than a prophecy. Thomas Jefferson still survives. He will survive so long as our country or its history endures. But it will doubtless be new to most that Thomas Jefferson still survives in all the minutest details of his every-day home life at Monticello; as a farmer, manufacturer, and master; as a lover of fine horses, and sheep; as the enthusiastic cultivator of fruits and flowers; as the kind neighbor, the liberal benefactor of the poor, the participator in the childish sports of his grandchildren, the hospitable entertainer of swarms of visitors that well-nigh ate up all his substance and consumed his life — in all these, and numerous other relations, Thomas Jefferson still survives in the testimony of one who had a most devoted admiration and veneration for him — a man who was for twenty years his chief overseer and manager of his estate, Monticello.

Captain Edmund Bacon — Overseer of Monticello's Account

"His Personal Appearance and Habits:

Mr. Jefferson was six feet two and a half inches high, well proportioned, and straight as a gun-barrel. He was like a fine horse — he had no surplus flesh. He had an iron constitution, and was very strong. He always enjoyed the best of health. I don't think he was ever really sick, until his last sickness. His skin was very clear and pure — just like he was in principle. His countenance was always mild and pleasant. You never saw it ruffled. No odds what happened, it always maintained the same expression. When I was sometimes very much fretted and disturbed, his countenance was perfectly unmoved...

Mr. Jefferson was always an early riser — arose at daybreak, or before. The sun never found him in bed. I used sometimes to think, when I went up there *very* early in the morning, that I would find him in bed; but there he would be before me, walking on the terrace. He did not use tobacco in any form. He never used a profane word or anything like it. He never played cards. I never saw a card in the house at Monticello, and I had particular orders from him to suppress card-playing among the servants, who, you know, are generally very fond of it. I never saw any dancing in his house, and if there had been any there during the twenty years I was with him I

should certainly have known it. He was never a great eater, but what he did eat he wanted to be very choice. He often told me, as I was giving out meat for the servants, that what I gave one of them for a week would be more than he would use in six months.

Every day, just as regularly as the day came, unless the weather was very bad, he would have his horse brought out and take his ride. He was an uncommonly fine rider — sat easily upon his horse, and always had him in the most perfect control... He was always very neat in dress, wore short breeches and bright shoe buckles. When he rode on horseback he had a pair of overalls that he always put on.

His Attendance on Preaching

Mr. Jefferson never debarred himself from hearing any preacher that came along. There was a Mr. Hiter, a Baptist preacher, that used to preach occasionally at the Charlottesville Court House. He had no regular church, but was a kind of missionary — rode all over the country and preached. He wasn't much of a preacher, was uneducated, but he was a good man. Everybody had confidence in him, and they went to hear him on that account. Mr. Jefferson's nephews Peter Carr, Sam Carr, and Dabney Carr thought a great deal of him. I have often heard them talk about him. Mr. Jefferson nearly always went to hear him when he came around. I remember his being there one day in particular. His servant came with him and brought a seat — a kind of camp stool, upon which he sat. After the sermon there was a proposition to pass round the hat and raise money to buy the preacher a horse. Mr. Jefferson did not wait for the hat. I saw him unbutton his overalls, and get his hand into his pocket, and take out a handful of silver, I don't know how much. He then walked across the Court House to Mr. Hiter, and gave it into his hand. He bowed very politely to Mr. Jefferson, and seemed to be very much pleased.

His Kindness to the Poor

Mr. Jefferson was very liberal and kind to the poor. When he would come from Washington, the poor people all about the country would find it out immediately, and would come in crowds to Monticello to beg him. He would give them notes to me, directing me what to give them. I knew them all a great deal better than he did. Many of them I knew were not worthy — were just lazy, good-for-nothing people, and I would not give them anything. When I saw Mr. Jefferson, I told him who they were, and that he ought not to encourage them in their laziness. He told me that when they came to him and told him their pitiful tales, he could not refuse them, and he did not know what to do. I told him to send them to me...

In, I think, the year 1816, there was a very severe frost, and the corn was almost destroyed. It was so badly injured that it would hardly make bread, and it was thought that the stock was injured by eating it. There was a neighborhood at the base of the Blue Ridge where the frost did not injure the corn. They had a good crop, and the people were obliged to give them just what they were disposed to ask for it. I went up there and bought thirty barrels for Mr. Jefferson of a Mr. Massey — gave him ten dollars a barrel for it. That Spring the poor trifling people came in crowds for corn. I sent the wagon after what I had bought, and by the time it would get back, Mr. Jefferson had given out so many of his little orders that it would pretty much take the load. I could hardly get it hauled as fast as he would give it away. I went to Mr. Jefferson and told him it never would do; we could not give ten dollars a barrel for corn, and haul it

thirty miles, and give it way after that fashion. He said, 'What can I do? These people tell me they have no corn, and it will not do to let them suffer.' I told him again, I could tell him what to do. Just send them all to me. I knew them all a great deal better than he did, and would give to all that were really deserving.

There was an old woman who used to trouble us a great deal. One day she went to Mr. Jefferson in a mean old dress, and told him some pitiful story, and he gave her a note to me directing me to give her two bushels of meal. I did so. The same day she went to Mrs. Randolph (Martha, Jefferson's daughter) and got three sides of bacon – middling meat. There was more than she could carry, and she had two of her daughters' children to help her carry it home. When she got to the river, the old Negro who attended the ferry was so mad to see her carrying off the meat that he would not ferry her over. So she laid the meat on the edge of the boat, and they ferried themselves across. When the boat struck the bank it jarred the meat off, and it went to the bottom of the river, and she had a great deal of trouble to get it. Afterwards she went to Mr. Jefferson and told him the meal I gave her was not good – would not make bread, and he sent her to me again. I told her the meal in the mill was all alike...

His Business Habits – A Written Account of Everything

Mr. Jefferson was very particular in the transaction of all his business. He kept an account of everything. Nothing was too small for him to keep an account of. He knew exactly how much of everything was raised at each plantation, and what became of it; how much was sold, and how much fed out... In all his business transactions with people, he had everything put down in writing, so that there was no chance for any misunderstanding...

His Family

Mr. Jefferson had four children. Mrs. Jefferson (Martha Wayles Skelton) died in 1782. She died before I went to live with him, and left four little children. He never married again. The servants have often told my wife, that when Mrs. Jefferson died, they stood around the bed. Mr. Jefferson sat by her, and she gave him directions about a good many things that she wanted done. When she came to the children, she wept, and could not speak for some time. Finally she held up her hand, and spreading out her four fingers, she told him she could not die happy if she thought her four children were ever to have a step-mother brought in over them. Holding her other hand in his, Mr. Jefferson promised her solemnly that he would never marry again. And he never did. He was then quite a young man, and very handsome, and I suppose he could have married well; but he always kept that promise. Two of his children died very young. The other two, Martha and Mary, were in France with him while he was Minister. They were in school there. Martha married Col. Thomas Mann Randolph, afterwards Governor of Virginia. Mary married John W. Eppes. He afterwards went to Congress. He was a very fine-looking man, and a great favorite with everybody. Mrs. Eppes died very young, and was buried at Monticello. She had one boy, Frank Eppes, a fine little fellow. He used to stay at Monticello a good deal.

Mrs. Martha Randolph – Jefferson's Daughter

I knew Mrs. Randolph as well as I ever knew any person out of my own family. Few such women ever lived. I never saw her equal. I was with Mr. Jefferson twenty years and saw her frequently

every week. I never saw her at all out of temper. I can truly say that I never saw two such persons in this respect as she and her father. Sometimes he would refer me to her, or she would refer me to him, a half dozen times in a day. Mrs. Randolph was more like her father than any lady I ever saw. She was nearly as tall as he, and had the same clear, bright complexion, and blue eyes. I have rode over the plantation, I reckon, a thousand times with Mr. Jefferson, and when he was not talking he was nearly always humming some tune, or singing in a low tone to himself. And it was just so with Mrs. Randolph. As she was attending to her duties about the house, she seemed to be always in a happy mood. She had always her father's pleasant smile, and was nearly always humming some tune. I have never seen her at all disturbed by any amount of care and trouble.

His Industry

Mr. Jefferson was the most industrious person I ever saw in my life. All the time I was with him I had full permission to visit his room whenever I thought it necessary to see him on any business. I knew how to get into his room at any time of day or night. I have sometimes gone into his room when he was in bed, but aside from that I never went into it but twice in the whole twenty years I was with him, that I did not find him employed. I never saw him sitting idle in his room but twice. Once he was suffering with the toothache; and once, the wind had blown upon him and given him a kind of neuralgia. At all other times he was either reading, writing, talking, working upon some model, or doing something else.

Martha Jefferson Randolph's Industry

Mrs. Randolph was just like her father in this respect. She was always busy. If she wasn't reading or writing, she was always doing something. She used to sit in Mr. Jefferson's room a great deal, and sew, or read, or talk, as he would be busy about something else. As her daughters grew up, she taught them to be industrious like herself. They used to take turns each day in giving out to the servants, and superintending the housekeeping. I knew all her children just as well as I did my own. There were six daughters and five sons. Let me see if I can remember their names. The boys were Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Merriweather Lewis, and George Wythe. The daughters were Anne, Ellen, Virginia, Cornelia, and a little thing that could just run about when I came away. Her name was Septimia. Only two of them were married when I came away...

His Devotion to his Grandchildren

Mr. Jefferson was perfectly devoted to his grandchildren, and they to him. They delighted to follow him about over the grounds and garden, and he took great pleasure in talking with them, and giving them advice, and directing their sports. I have heard him tell them enough of times that nobody should live without some useful employment. I always raised my boys to work. Mr. Jefferson knew this, and it pleased him. On Saturdays, when they were not in school, they often cut coal wood for the nailery. They could cut a cord a day and earn fifty cents. Governor Randolph once told them that if they would cut off the bushes from a certain field, he would give them twenty dollars. His boys would often go and work with them on Saturdays. After a while they finished their job and got their pay. Mr. Jefferson heard of it. One evening I heard him talking with his grandchildren about it. He told them my boys had got twenty dollars – more money than any of them had got; and they

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had earned it themselves, and said a great deal in their praise, and in regard to the importance of industrious habits.

Merriweather Lewis was a very bright little fellow. I always thought him the most sprightly of all the Randolph children. He spoke up and said, 'Why, grandpa, if we should work like Fielding and Thomas, our hands would get so rough and sore that we could not hold our books. And we need not work so. We shall be rich, and all we want is a good education, so that we shall be prepared to associate with wealthy and intelligent people.' 'Ah!' said Mr. Jefferson, 'and I have thought of the remark a thousand times since, 'those that expect to get through the world without industry, because they are rich, will be greatly mistaken. The people that *do* work will soon get possession of all their property.' I have heard him give those children a great deal of good advice. I remember, once, hearing him tell them that they should never laugh in a loud, boisterous manner in company, or in the presence of strangers. That was his own habit.

He took great pleasure in the sports and plays of his grandchildren. I have often seen him direct them and enjoy them greatly. The large lawn back of the house was a fine place for their plays. They very often ran races, and he would give the word for them to start, and decide who was the winner... I have seen Mr. Jefferson laugh heartily to see this play go on. The children about the country used to enjoy coming there. It was a fine place for them to play, and in the fruit season there was always the greatest quantities of good fruit. Jeff. Randolph used very often to bring his schoolmates there.

His Servants – The case of the Stolen Nails

Mr. Jefferson was always very kind and indulgent to his servants. He would not allow them to be at all overworked, and he would hardly ever allow one of them to be whipped. His orders to me were constant, that if there was any servant that could not be got along with without the chastising that was customary, to dispose of him. He could not bear to have a servant whipped, no odds how much he deserved it. I remember one case in particular. Mr. Jefferson gave written instructions that I should always sell the nails that were made in his nailery. We made from sixpenny to twenty-penny nails, and always kept a supply of each kind on hand. I went one day to supply an order, and the eight-penny nails were all gone, and there was a full supply of all the other sizes. Of course they had been stolen. I soon became satisfied that Jim Hubbard, one of the servants that worked in the nailery, had stolen them, and charged him with it. He denied it powerfully. I talked with Grady, the overseer of the nailery about it, and finally I said, 'Let us drop it. He has hid them somewhere, and if we say no more about it, we shall find them.' I examined his house, and every place I could think of, but for some time I could find nothing of the nails. One day after a rain, as I was following a path through the woods, I saw muddy tracks on the leaves leading off from the path. I followed them until I came to a tree-top, where I found the nails buried in a large box. There were several hundred pounds of them. From circumstances, I knew that Jim had stolen them.

Mr. Jefferson was at home at the time, and when I went up to Monticello, I told him of it. He was very much surprised, and felt very badly about it. Jim had always been a favorite servant. He told me to be at my house next morning when he took his ride, and he would see Jim there. When he came, I sent for Him, and I never saw any person, white or black, feel as badly as he did when he saw his master. He was mortified and distressed beyond measure. He had been brought up in the shop, and we all had confidence in him.

Now his character was gone. The tears streamed down his face, and he begged pardon over and over again. I felt very badly myself. Mr. Jefferson turned to me, and said, 'Ah, sir, we can't punish him. He has suffered enough already.' He then talked to him, gave him a heap of good advice, and sent him to the shop. Grady had waited, expecting to be sent for to whip him, and he was astonished to him come back and go to work after such a crime. When he came to dinner – he boarded with me then – he told me, that when Jim came back to the shop, he said, "Well, I'se been a-seeking religion a long time, but I never heard anything before that sounded so, or made me feel so, as I did when master said, 'Go, and don't do so any more;' and now I'se determined to seek religion till I find it;" and sure enough, he afterwards came to me for a permit to go and be baptized. I gave him one, and never knew of his doing anything of the sort again. He was always a good servant afterwards...

No servants ever had a kinder master than Mr. Jefferson's. He did not like slavery. I have heard him talk a great deal about it. He thought it a bad system. I have heard him prophesy that we should have just such trouble with it as we are having now.

Jefferson at Washington – His Library

Mr. Jefferson had a very large library. When the British burnt Washington, the library that belonged to Congress was destroyed, and Mr. Jefferson sold them his. He directed me to have it packed in boxes and sent to Washington. There was an immense quantity of them. There were sixteen wagon loads. I engaged the teams. Each wagon was to carry three thousand pounds for a load, and to have four dollars a day for delivering them in Washington. If they carried more than three thousand pounds, they were to have extra pay. There were all kinds of books – books in a great many languages that I knew nothing about. There were a great many religious books among them – more than I have ever seen anywhere else. All the time Mr. Jefferson was President I had the keys to his library, and I could go in the look over the books, and take out any one that I wished, and read and return it. I have written a good many letters from that library of Mr. Jefferson in Washington.

His Bible-reading

Mr. Jefferson had a sofa or lounge upon which he could sit or recline, and a small table on rollers, upon which he could write, or lay his books. Sometimes he would draw this table up before the sofa, and sit and read or write; and other times he would recline on his sofa, with his table rolled up to the sofa, astride it. He had a large Bible, which nearly always lay at the head of his sofa. Many and many a time I have gone into his room and found him reading that Bible. You remember I told you about riding all night from Richmond, after selling that flour, and going into his room very early in the morning, and paying over to him the new United States Bank money. *That* was one of the times that I found him with the big Bible open before him on his little table, and he busy reading it. And I have seen him reading it in that way many a time. Some people, you know, say he was an atheist. Now, if he was an atheist, what did he want with all those religious books, and why did he spend so much of his time reading his Bible?

When Chancellor George Wythe died, he willed to Mr. Jefferson his library. It was very large, and nearly filled up the room of the one he sold to Congress. Mr. Jefferson studied law with Chancellor Wythe. They thought a great deal of each other.

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His Hospitality

Mr. Jefferson always had a great deal of company. He enjoyed seeing his friends very much. Mr. Madison was very often at Monticello. He generally stayed there when he attended Court at Charlottesville. He was a fine man. He had a very solid look. I always thought he looked like a Methodist preacher; he wore his hair as they did then. Mr. Monroe, too, was at Monticello a great deal. I have seen him hundreds of times, and done a great deal of business with him. I sold him the nails from Mr. Jefferson's nailery for his house. I have had a great many letters from him...

After Mr. Jefferson returned from Washington, he was for years crowded with visitors, and they almost ate him out of house and home. They were there all times of the year...I have killed a fine beef, and it would all be eaten in a day or two. There was no tavern in all that country that had so much company. Mrs. Randolph, who always lived with Mr. Jefferson after his return from Washington, and kept house for him, was very often greatly perplexed to entertain them. I have known her many and many a time to have every bed in the house full – to accommodate her visitors. I finally told the servant who had charge of the stable, to only give the visitors' horses half allowance. Somehow or other Mr. Jefferson heard of this; I never could tell how, unless it was through some of the visitors' servants. He countermanded my orders.

One great reason why Mr. Jefferson built his house at Poplar Forest, in Bedford County, was that he might go there in the summer to get rid of entertaining so much company. He knew that it more than used up all his income from the plantation and everything else, but he was so kind and polite that he received all his visitors with a smile, and made them welcome...

When we parted, it was a trying time to me. I don't know whether he shed any tears or not, but I know that I shed a good many. He was sitting in his room, on his sofa, where I had seen him so often, and keeping hold of my hand some time, he said, 'Now let us hear from each other occasionally;' and as long as he lived I heard from him once or twice a year. The last letter I ever had from him was when I wrote him of the death of my wife, soon after I got to this country. He expressed a great deal of sympathy for me; said he did not wonder that I felt completely broken up, and was disposed to move back; and he had passed through the same himself; and only time and silence would relieve me.

I am now (1862) in my seventy-seventh year. I have seen a great many men in my day, but I have never seen the equal of Mr. Jefferson. He may have had the faults that he has been charged with, but if he had, I could never find it out. I don't believe that, from his arrival to maturity to the present time, the country has ever had another such a man."

And let it be so...