

Isaac Jefferson, an enslaved blacksmith

Reading Level: Elementary School

Isaac Jefferson was born at Monticello in 1775. His parents were slaves owned by Thomas Jefferson. When he was about fifteen, Thomas Jefferson took Isaac to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There Isaac learned how to be a tinsmith. He made tin pepper boxes and tin cups.

When Isaac returned to Monticello, he worked in the tinsmith shop. He also made nails. In a fourteen hour workday, he “cut and headed one thousand nails.” In six months, he could make “one thousand pounds of nails in six sizes.” He earned about eighty cents a day.

Isaac and his family were sold to Jefferson’s son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph. Isaac worked as a blacksmith for Randolph for “twenty-six or seven years.”

Isaac loved to talk about life at Monticello. In 1847, when Isaac was seventy-one years old, Reverend Charles Campbell wrote down Isaac’s memories. The memories provided valuable information about Thomas Jefferson. Isaac remembers Jefferson making “keys and locks and small chains, iron and brass.”

Isaac Jefferson died in 1850 as a free man.

Related Materials:

- The [Memoirs of Isaac Jefferson](#) as dictated to Rev. Charles Campbell



Daguerrotype of Isaac Jefferson taken by John Plumbe, Jr. c. 1845. Image courtesy the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia.