

Brief Biography of Thomas Jefferson

Reading Level: Elementary School

Thomas Jefferson was an incredible man. He is famous for writing the Declaration of Independence and for being the third president of the United States. Jefferson was also a gardener, father, designer and thinker, who believed in the rights of men.

Early Years

Jefferson's early years helped shape his life. He was born April 13, 1743 at Shadwell, a slave plantation in central Virginia. His father was Peter Jefferson, a planter and surveyor. His mother was Jane Randolph Jefferson, the daughter of a well-known Virginia family. In school, Jefferson studied Latin, Greek and French. In 1760, he went to the College of William and Mary. He studied and practiced law for a number of years. He was described as "tall, sandy-haired and freckled". He was a skilled horseman and violin player.



Jefferson by Trumbull



Monticello Mountain

When Thomas was fourteen, Peter Jefferson died. In his will, he left Thomas about 3,000 acres of land and about thirty slaves. When Jefferson was twenty-six years old, he began building Monticello. The name means "little mountain" in Italian. Jefferson designed the house, gardens and workshops. Skilled white and enslaved workers built and tended them.

Jefferson loved Monticello. He made notes on everything. He wrote about the rainfall and daily weather. He wrote about his trees, slaves and crops. He even kept a gardening diary. These records tell us valuable information about life at Monticello.

Marriage

New Year's Day 1772, Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton. She was a widow. Jefferson described

his marriage to Martha as being ten years of happiness. They had six children. Two girls, Martha and Mary, lived to be adults.



Declaration of Independence

In 1775, Jefferson was elected to the Continental Congress. He was picked to write the [Declaration of Independence](#). It states the importance of rights and freedoms. It states that “all men are created equal.” It also stated the reasons the colonists wanted to separate from England. Jefferson believed in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence.

Engraving of the Declaration of Independence. Image courtesy the National Archive and Records Administration

1779-1782

Jefferson was governor of Virginia from 1779-1781. When he was elected, the American people were fighting the Revolutionary War. After he was governor, he returned to Monticello to tend his plantation. In 1782, his wife Martha died. She left three daughters, Martha, Mary and Lucy. Jefferson was overcome with sadness by the death of his wife. He became a devoted father to his daughters and never remarried. His daughter Lucy died two years after her mother.

France

In 1785, Jefferson was sent to France. He represented the United States government. At the time, France was ruled by a king. Jefferson saw many poor people in the “lower class”. Jefferson’s time in France made his belief in “freedom for all” stronger. Martha and Mary spent time with him in France and attended school there. They enjoyed French sights, cooking and art.

1789-1796

Jefferson and his two daughters left France in 1789. President George Washington picked him to be the first Secretary of State. In 1796, Jefferson ran for president. He lost to John Adams. Because Jefferson had the second highest amount of votes, he became the vice president.

President

Four years later, Jefferson became the [President of the United States](#). He ran against John Adams. Adams leaned toward a government run by the wealthy. Jefferson wanted a government run by all men. Jefferson's election showed that Americans wanted a leader who believed that all men were equal.

Jefferson was president from 1801-1809. He guided the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France. The United States paid France \$15 million for the land. It added 883,000 square miles to the United States. Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore the new wilderness. Sadly in 1804, while Jefferson was president, his youngest daughter Mary died.



This copyprint of a watercolor by William Birch shows the completed north wing of the U.S. Capitol in 1801.



Painting of Thomas
Jefferson by Thomas Sully

Later Life

After he was president, Jefferson remained busy. He returned to Monticello. His daughter Martha and her family joined him. At Monticello he was free to do the things he loved. He read his books and wrote letters. He designed gardens, rode horses and played with his twelve grandchildren. He also started the University of Virginia. He designed the buildings and served as its first president.

On July 4, 1826 Jefferson died at his beloved home. He was eighty-three years old. The day was also the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Th. Jefferson
MONTICELLO