

Isaac Jefferson, an enslaved blacksmith

Reading Level: Middle School

Isaac was born at Monticello in 1775 to enslaved African Americans owned by Thomas Jefferson. When he was about fifteen, Jefferson took him to Philadelphia to learn to be a tinsmith, or tinner. In a shop owned by Quakers, Isaac learned to forge pepper boxes and tin cups, making about four dozen a day.

When Isaac returned to Monticello, he operated the plantation's tinsmithing shop. He also worked in the blacksmith and the nail making shops. 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." For his work, he earned about eighty cents a day.

Isaac and his wife Iris had two sons, Squire and Joyce, and a daughter named Maria. The family was given to Thomas Jefferson's youngest daughter Mary as a marriage settlement. However, before Mary and her husband left the area, 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 remembered that Randolph, "Treated him mighty well—one of the finest masters in Virginia."

Around 1820, Isaac Jefferson traveled to Richmond and then Petersburg, Virginia as a free man. There are no records to explain when or how he obtained his freedom.

In his old age, Isaac Jefferson loved to talk about life at Monticello. In 1847, when Isaac was seventy-one years old, Reverend Charles Campbell recorded these memories. They were published around 1950, and today provide valuable details about Thomas Jefferson. Isaac spoke of Jefferson's skills at making "keys and locks and small chains, iron and brass." And he observed Jefferson "reading, hunting, gardening and tinkering." The memories also provide information about life at Monticello from a slave's perspective.

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.

