

Brief Biography of Thomas Jefferson

Reading Level: Middle School

“The boisterous sea of liberty is never without a wave.”

Planter. Lawyer. Father. Scientist. Author. Governor. Vice-president. President. Philosopher. Architect.

Many words describe Thomas Jefferson's talents and accomplishments. He is best remembered as the author of the Declaration of Independence, the third president of the United States, and an advocate of the rights and liberty of men.

“My father’s education had been quite neglected; but being of sound mind, sound judgment and eager after information, he read much and improved himself . . .”

Jefferson's early life helped shape his career and accomplishments. He was born April 13, 1743 at Shadwell, a slave plantation in central Virginia. He was the third child of Peter Jefferson, a planter and surveyor, and Jane Randolph Jefferson, the daughter of a well-known Virginia family. His father died when Thomas was fourteen but he left Jefferson with a love of books, mathematics and the outdoors.

Jefferson studied Latin, Greek and French. In 1760, he entered the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. He liked to study for fifteen hours a day. After graduating, he studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1767. He practiced law for a number of years. He was described as “tall, loose-jointed, sandy-haired and freckled,” and a skilled horseman and gifted musician.



“I know of no condition happier than that of a Virginia Farmer”

When his father died, Jefferson inherited about three thousand acres of land and about thirty slaves. When he was twenty-six years old, he began building Monticello (which means little mountain in Italian). The house, gardens, working farms and workshops were designed by Jefferson. Skilled white and enslaved workmen carried out the



Archaeologists excavate the site of the Shadwell house, Jefferson's boyhood home.

construction.

For fifty years the care and building of the plantation occupied Jefferson's attention and imagination. He recorded everything that went on at Monticello, writing notes about his slaves, costs, horses and cattle. He was described as the "father of weather observers", noting daily rainfall and temperatures, and he kept a gardening diary. These records are valuable information about Jefferson's life at Monticello.

"ten years of unchequered happiness."

New Year's Day in 1772, Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton, a widow. Martha was a "very agreeable sensible and accomplished lady." She brought to the marriage land, slaves, and her father's debts. In the ten years they were married, the Jefferson's had six children. Two daughters and a son died as infants. Two year-old Lucy died from whooping cough. Two daughters, Martha and Mary survived to adulthood.

". . . life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

In 1775, Jefferson was elected to the Continental Congress. While a member, he was picked to write the [Declaration of Independence](#). The document stated the importance of individual rights and liberties, and the equality of man. It declared the reasons the colonists wanted to be free of the King of England's rule.

Jefferson believed in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. Hoping to make the words a reality in Virginia, he drafted the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, which established religious freedom in Virginia. In 1786, twenty-five years later, the bill passed.

"A single event wiped away all my plans and left me a blank . . ."

Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia from 1779-1781. When he was elected, the American people had been fighting the Revolutionary War for four years. After being governor, he went back to Monticello and tended his plantation. In 1782, his wife Martha died, leaving 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.

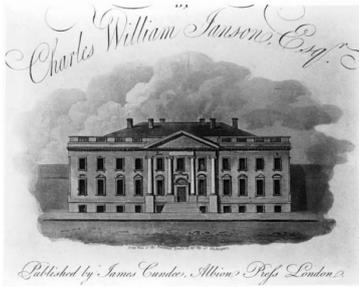
In 1785, Jefferson was appointed minister to France. In the five years he lived in France, which was ruled by a king, he observed the poverty of the lower class. This strengthened his democratic beliefs.



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

However, he loved French culture and sent books, seeds, art and scientific instruments back to Monticello.

Jefferson left France in 1789. President George Washington appointed him as the first Secretary of State under the new government. In the presidential election of 1796, Jefferson lost to John Adams. Jefferson, with the second highest amount of votes, became vice president.



Prior to the War of 1812, the White House was known as the President's House, here depicted in an engraving from the book *Stranger in America* by Charles Jansen.

“Let us, then, fellow-citizens, unite with one heart and mind.”

Four years later, Jefferson became the [President](#) of the United States. In 1801, he ran against John Adams, a Federalist. At the time, the Federalists leaned toward “kingly over republican government.” Jefferson’s election proved that Americans wanted a leader who believed that all men could govern themselves.

Jefferson served two terms. During his presidency, he engineered the Louisiana Purchase, which added 883,000 square miles to the United States. He sent Lewis and Clark to explore the new wilderness.

In 1804, while Jefferson was in Washington, his youngest daughter Mary died. Jefferson wrote to a friend that he had “lost even the half of what I had.”

During Jefferson’s presidency, conflicts grew between Britain and France. Jefferson tried to keep the United States neutral, but relationships with Britain grew worse . In response, Jefferson enacted the Embargo Act of 1807.

“though an old man, I am but a young gardener.”

Jefferson remained busy after his presidency. He designed and founded the University of Virginia, serving as its first rector (president). He spent his days at Monticello where his daughter Martha and her eleven children often joined him. There he was free to pursue his interests in astronomy, reading, gardening, designing and landscaping.

“.. all my wishes end where I hope my days will end, at Monticello.”

Jefferson died July 4th 1826 at his beloved home at the age of eighty-three. The date was also the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the

Declaration of Independence. On his tomb stone Jefferson wished to be remembered for the things he had given the American people:

HERE WAS BURIED

THOMAS JEFFERSON

AUTHOR OF THE

DECLARATION

OF AMERICAN

INDEPENDENCE

OF THE

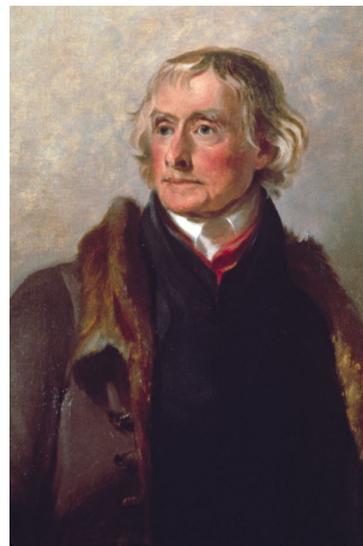
STATUTE OF VIRGINIA

FOR

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

AND FATHER OF THE

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



Painting of Thomas
Jefferson by Thomas Sully

Th. Jefferson
MONTICELLO