

# Thomas Jefferson and Slavery

## Part 1: Information

Thomas Jefferson was a slave owner. This means he owned other human beings and made them work for him for no money. He had them live in little 1 room houses at Monticello. He gave them some food, but it was often not enough and the slaves grew vegetables in a garden as well. Slaves had to work 6 days a week from sunrise to sunset. They started working at age 10. Some slaves learned a skill, like making nails or furniture. Other slaves served Jefferson and his family in his house as cooks or maids. Other slaves worked in the fields growing wheat for Jefferson to sell.

Sometimes Jefferson sold slaves, though not very often. He sold slaves who tried to run away, who wanted to be sold to another place, or to pay his debts. He also gave slaves to people as gifts.

When Jefferson died he owed a lot of money to a lot of people. This was very common for Virginia planters. In order to pay his debts, the family had to sell Monticello and all the slaves Jefferson did not say would become free when he died. The only slaves he made free in his will were 5 members of the Hemings family. (At least 3 more slaves were made free by being "allowed" to run away without being chased. They were women in the Hemings family.)

Many people criticize Thomas Jefferson because he wrote "all men are created equal" and believed in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but he still owned slaves and even enslaved the children he had with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings.

## Part 2: Jefferson's Words about Slavery

*Directions:* Read the quote your group is given. Figure out what it means using dictionaries and each other's help. You can write synonyms for words you don't know on the quote. Draw a picture that shows what Jefferson is saying and then write the idea in your own words. When all the groups are done, share the information and write down what all the quotes mean.

"There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submission on the other."

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1782

**Draw what it means**

**Write what it means in your own words**

"What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible machine is man! Who can endure toil, famine, stripes, imprisonment or death itself in vindication of his own liberty, and the next moment be deaf to all those motives whose power supported him through his trial, and inflict on his fellow men a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose."

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in a letter to Jean Nicolas Demeunier in 1786

**Draw what it means**

**Write what it means in your own words**

"But we must await with patience the workings of an overruling providence, and hope that that is preparing the deliverance of these our suffering brethren."

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in a letter to Jean Nicolas Demeunier in 1786

**Draw what it means**

**Write what it means in your own words**

"My opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed and clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as it is performed voluntarily by freemen, and be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them and our duties to them."

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in a letter to Edward Coles in 1814

**Draw what it means**

**Write what it means in your own words**

"I can say with conscious truth that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way."

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in a letter to John Holmes in 1820

**Draw what it means**

**Write what it means in your own words**

"Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people re to be free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government."

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in his autobiography in 1821

**Draw what it means**

**Write what it means in your own words**

### Part 3: Jefferson's Farm Book

*Directions:* Look at the handouts from Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book that shows the records of food and bread he gave his slaves, the list of slaves he sold or gave away, and the list of slaves who joined the British or died during the Revolutionary War. Then answer the questions about them in the table below.

1. What do you see?

2. What does it mean?

3. Are you surprised that Thomas Jefferson kept these records? Why or why not?

4. Are you surprised by how Jefferson talks about his slaves in these records? Why or why not?

**Part 4: Thinking about Jefferson and Slavery**

*Directions:* Answer the following questions by yourself first in the column that is labeled "Think." Then find a partner and share your thoughts with him or her. Write down your partner's thoughts in the column labeled "Share." Lastly, we will share all our thoughts as a class. When you hear a new idea or a big theme we talk about, write it down in the column labeled "Share."

Question	Think	Pair	Share
<p>How would you describe Jefferson's thoughts about slavery? Do his actions and his words go together or not?</p>			
<p>Do you think Thomas Jefferson was a good person? Why or why not?</p>			
<p>Do the good things that Jefferson did for America make up for the fact that he owned slaves? Why or why not?</p>			
<p>Can we judge Thomas Jefferson by our thoughts and views today or should we only think about him in the way that society was back then? Why or why not?</p>			

# Thomas Jefferson and Slavery – A Note to Teachers

About the lesson: This lesson can be amended as needed for time by excluding any of the parts with the exception of the introduction. Also, please prepare students for this lesson by using the Thomas Jefferson and Slavery section of the biography for second language learners – either as homework for intermediate ELD students or as guided reading for beginning ELD students.

Handouts for part 3 can be found on the Monticello classroom website and by following a link to the Massachusetts Historical Society:

Image only: [http://masshist.org/thomasjeffersonpapers/cfm/doc.cfm?id=farm\\_29&mode=lg](http://masshist.org/thomasjeffersonpapers/cfm/doc.cfm?id=farm_29&mode=lg)

Image with transcription: [http://masshist.org/thomasjeffersonpapers/cfm/doc.cfm?id=farm\\_29](http://masshist.org/thomasjeffersonpapers/cfm/doc.cfm?id=farm_29)

“There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submission on the other.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1782

**Meaning (not written in sheltered language):**

Slavery damages white society as well as African-Americans because it creates a situation where whites become despotic and imprudent while degrading African-Americans and forcing them to submit.

“What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible machine is man! Who can endure toil, famine, stripes, imprisonment or death itself in vindication of his own liberty, and the next moment be deaf to all those motives whose power supported him through his trial, and inflict on his fellow men a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in a letter to Jean Nicolas Demeunier in 1786

**Meaning (not written in sheltered language):**

People are so hard to figure out! Nobody but them can suffer so much for their own liberty and at the same time enslave others in a manner that was much worse than their own oppression without realizing the hypocrisy in it.

“But we must await with patience the workings of an overruling providence, and hope that that is preparing the deliverance of these our suffering brethren.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in a letter to Jean Nicolas Demeunier in 1786

**Meaning (not written in sheltered language):**

I hope God will get rid of slavery in time, and until then we must wait patiently for Him to do so.

“My opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed and clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as it is performed voluntarily by freemen, and be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them and our duties to them.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in a letter to Edward Coles in 1814

**Meaning (not written in sheltered language):**

I believe that, while we have slavery here because fate has made it so, we should feed and clothe them, treat them well, not work them too hard, and not forget that we have a duty to do this for them. (The subtext being that African-Americans could not provide for themselves and needed a white person to care for them. It is the paternalistic view of slavery.)

“I can say with conscious truth that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in a letter to John Holmes in 1820

**Meaning (not written in sheltered language):**

I can say truly that I would sacrifice everything in order to get rid of slavery in a practical way. (Of course, he did not sacrifice everything because he maintained his own plantation and lifestyle using enslaved labor and would not jeopardize his family’s economic future by manumitting all his slaves upon his death.)

“Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government.”

Thomas Jefferson wrote this in his autobiography in 1821

**Meaning (not written in sheltered language):**

African-Americans will be free eventually. That is certain. And when they are free, white and black people will not be able to live together in the same country.