

Introducing Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was born in 1743 to Peter and Jane Jefferson at Shadwell Plantation in Abemarle County in Virginia. His father was a well-to-do farmer and his mother belonged to the Randolphs, an old Virginia family. Thomas grew up on a near-by plantation when his father took charge of some young orphans. He was educated in the one-room plantation school house where he was privately tutored. At age 9 Jefferson entered a Latin school where he studied the classics. His father died when he was 14 and all of his life he spoke of his father and of his admiration for him.

In 1760 he entered the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg where he studied mathematics and science. Even at a young age he wrote many letters and essays complaining that college students were not serious about their studies and spent their time drinking in the taverns, gambling, and playing cards.

Jefferson was extremely serious about his studies and had a program for himself where he studied certain subjects for certain amounts of time each day. He believed in reading as an education in itself and set himself courses of study. After two years, Thomas left college and studied law under George Wythe. Wythe taught him law but also encouraged him in other areas because he believed that a truly educated person was interested in many things. Jefferson also developed a belief in exercise that would stay with him all of his life. He believed that an educated mind was not worth anything without a life filled with exercise. He walked miles every day and was an expert horseman.

As part of the wealthy Virginia planter class Jefferson was expected to take a place in the Virginia House of Burgesses. In 1769 he took his seat and served until 1776. During this time, people in the American colonies were not happy with the laws England was enacting. The colonists in Massachusetts and Virginia felt that it was not fair of the English Parliament to make laws and levy taxes for the colonies when there was no colonial representation in the English government. In response to these laws and taxes, some colonists began to not only speak out against the English government and King George but to commit open acts of rebellion. English troops clashed with citizens in Massachusetts in several incidents. A

Continental Congress was held in Philadelphia in 1774 to discuss these issues. During this time Jefferson writes some instructions to the Virginia delegates to the congress and these are published in Philadelphia and in England. Jefferson's talent with the written word became evident with this publication. On April 19, 1775 shots were exchanged between colonials and British troops in the Massachusetts town of Lexington and the war was on.

A second congress of colonial leaders met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 to draft some legislation about the wants and needs of the colonial citizens. The delegates agreed that to declare independence from England was the only way to achieve their goals. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams were on the committee to draft this document. Franklin and Adams were gifted public speakers but Jefferson hated speaking in public. His gift was with the written word and he retired to his rented rooms for several days to draft a document outlining the reasons for independence. The delegates made many changes to the document and many discussions were held about the changes but finally the document reflected what the delegates considered to be the best intentions of the convention. The Declaration of Independence was adopted by the committee on July 4th 1776. At the time, no one could have imagined the importance the Declaration of Independence would attain and that Thomas Jefferson would forever be known as the "Father of the Declaration."

During these years Thomas Jefferson had married and begun a family. He built a large house on top of a hill on some land he inherited from his father. He named the plantation Monticello and served as his own architect as architecture was one of his many interests. He left the woods and fields around the house as natural as he could and designed the working parts of the plantation to be hidden from view. Jefferson was a slaveholder as many landowners were in Virginia and other parts of the south. He wrote quite extensively on the evils of slavery but felt that he was tied to it economically. He married Martha Wayles Skelton in 1772 and they had six children but only two lived to adulthood. Martha died in 1782 after the birth of her last child and Jefferson was inconsolable. He threw himself into his work for the new government.

The war known as the American Revolution raged for years until the American victory at Yorktown in 1781. Jefferson was sent by the government to France in 1785 to replace Benjamin Franklin in securing French support for the American cause. France and England had been enemies for years and the Americans hoped that France would help support the war effort financially. Thomas Jefferson became good friends with a French aristocrat named the Marquis de Lafayette who introduced him to many people in French society. Jefferson, who loved the country and the natural world enjoyed Paris and took advantage of all its cultural offerings. He bought many works of art and household items for his home in America but later wrote that Europe was a corrupting influence.

Jefferson returned to America in 1789 to learn that President Washington had nominated him to be the nation's first Secretary of State. He served in Washington's cabinet for three years then came home to Monticello to take care of his plantation. In 1796 he was elected Vice-President and served under President John Adams. Thomas Jefferson disagreed with many of the political beliefs of Washington, Adams, and Alexander Hamilton who had served as the nation's first Secretary of the Treasury. There were many people who agreed with Jefferson's ideas and the differing political ideas turned into two distinct political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans. Jefferson was considered to be the nation's leading Republican.

In 1800 Thomas Jefferson was elected President of the United States after a very bitter campaign and due to a tie vote, the election went to the House of Representatives to be decided. Jefferson won that vote and took office in March 1801. During his presidency he handled many national crises such as a war with the Barbary Coast pirates who were capturing ships then holding the crew members for ransom. In 1803 France, under the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte, needed money to fight its wars in Europe. President Jefferson had given instructions to purchase New Orleans and the Florida area but instead came away with what is known now as the Louisiana Purchase which more than doubled the size of the United States. He was reelected president in 1804 but in his second term experienced much difficulty. In was with great relief that he ended his presidency in March 1809 and returned home to his beloved Monticello.

Thomas Jefferson spent the remainder of his life happily ensconced on his plantation. He attended to a vast correspondence and spent hours every day writing letters to family, friends, and political colleagues. He especially delighted in his grandchildren and wrote letters of instruction and encouragement trying to instill in them the values he had believed in all of his life. Jefferson entertained a constant stream of visitors and spent hours each day out in the woods and fields of his plantation enjoying the natural world he loved so much. He had so many visitors that he created a second home, Poplar Forest, some miles away from Monticello. Here he could read, write, and walk his fields in relative peace and isolation. His retirement years were not all happy however. He and John Adams renewed their friendship which had become strained during their presidencies. They carried on a tremendous correspondence where they discussed everything from religion to their views of the war and struggle for independence. He struggled with a monstrous debt and in 1814, after the United States defeated England in the War of 1812, offered his vast library for sale to Congress to replace the library burned by the British during the war. He began to write his autobiography but the activity which gave him the most satisfaction was his role in creating the University of Virginia in nearby Charlottesville. Jefferson designed all of the buildings, laid out the curriculum, and even hired professors. The university opened to students in 1825 and was the first American university that was not affiliated with a church.

Thomas Jefferson died at his home on July 4, 1836, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Ironically, John Adams died a few hours later at his home in Quincy, Massachusetts.