

## A Brief Biography of Thomas Jefferson

*Born April 13, 1743 at Shadwell, Virginia; died July 4, 1826 at Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia.*

Thomas Jefferson is best remembered as the author of the *Declaration of Independence* and the third president of the United States. He was also the author of the *Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom*, governor of Virginia, minister to France, secretary of state of the United States, vice president of the United States, founder and architect of the University of Virginia, and a plantation owner.

Jefferson was born and grew up in the Piedmont region of Virginia. His father Peter Jefferson, a planter and surveyor, married his mother Jane Randolph, a member of one of Virginia's most prominent families. After inheriting a large estate from his father, Jefferson began building his plantation home Monticello when he was twenty-six years old. Three years later on January 1, 1772 he married Martha Wayles Skelton. Their marriage produced six children, but only two daughters

(Martha and Mary) lived to adulthood. Thomas Jefferson became a widower in 1782.

He never remarried and maintained his home at Monticello throughout his life.

The Monticello plantation was made up of the home farm and three separate farms, Shadwell, Lego and Tufton. Enslaved African Americans labored on the farms, made furniture, and worked as blacksmiths, gardeners, and weavers. Most of the 115-135 blacks held in bondage at Monticello were first the property of

Jefferson's father and father-in-law. Jefferson did not actively take part in slave trading. More than one-half of the enslaved population were children under the age of sixteen. Approximately eighty of the slaves lived on the Monticello home farm, most of them at or near



*Thomas Jefferson's grandchildren playing on the West Lawn of Monticello; a detail from the Jane Bradick watercolor, circa 1825.*

the top of the mountain. The rest lived in the farm quarters at Shadwell, Lego and Tufton. There were also 75-95 enslaved African Americans living and working at Jefferson's Poplar Forest plantation about 90 miles from Monticello in Bedford County. Thomas Jefferson had very mixed feelings when it came to slavery. On the one hand he realized that slave labor was necessary to the running of his large plantation and the economy of the South in general. On the other hand he called slavery an abominable crime.

Most historians now believe that following the death of his wife, Jefferson probably had a relationship with an enslaved woman, Sally Hemings. Jefferson's records list six children



*Engraving of Jefferson by the French artist Charles Fevret de Saint-Mémin.*

# A Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

*Thomas Jefferson's actual handwriting used on an early draft of the Declaration of Independence.*

born to Hemings. Of these six children, three boys and one girl (Beverly, Harriet, Madison and Eston) lived to adulthood and were given their freedom. Beverly and Harriet left Monticello and were not pursued, and Madison and Eston were freed in Jefferson's will. Sally Hemings' children were the only enslaved family who lived their entire adult lives as freed people.

Thomas Jefferson attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, studied law and later practiced law for a number of years. While he was a young man he served in local government as a magistrate, county lieutenant and as a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses (after 1776 called the House of Delegates). As a member of the Continental Congress he wrote the *Declaration of Independence* which established the independence of the United States. It declared the universal importance of individual rights and liberties and said that all men are equal in rights, regardless of birth, wealth or status.

After Jefferson left Congress in 1776, he returned to Virginia and served in the state legislature. He was governor of Virginia during part of the Revolutionary War from 1779 to 1781. Following a brief retirement Jefferson served as the minister to France. In France he studied European culture and collected books, seeds and plants and scientific instruments.

When Jefferson returned to the United States in 1790, he became secretary of state under President George Washington. He had a difficult time politically in this position and often found himself at odds with the secretary of the treasury Alexander Hamilton. It was at this time in history that political parties first developed with followers of Thomas Jefferson being called the Democratic Republicans and the followers of Alexander Hamilton being called the Federalists. In the election of 1796 Thomas Jefferson lost his bid for the presi-

dency by three electoral votes. Under the laws of that day, Jefferson, who received the second highest amount of votes, became the vice president of the United States. John Adams, the candidate with the most votes, became president.

Four years later he defeated John Adams to become the third president of the United States. This was a very important election because it marked the first time in history that a peaceful transfer of power had occurred from one political party to another without bloodshed. Thomas Jefferson's first term of office (from 1801 to 1804) was an eventful one. Perhaps the most notable achievement in his first term was the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803. Jefferson was also responsible for sending Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore this new territory. Jefferson's second term of office was more difficult than his first. His second term (from 1804 to 1809) is most remembered for his embargo against Britain and its attempt to maintain the United States' neutrality in the war between Britain and France. (An embargo is an order from the government prohibiting ships from leaving or coming into a port.) The embargo was very unpopular with the American people and in the end did not stop the United States from eventually being drawn into the War of 1812 with Britain.

Thomas Jefferson retired from public office in 1809 but remained very active in his retirement years founding the University of Virginia in 1824. He designed the buildings, planned the curriculum, hired the professors and served as the first rector (president). Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, at the age of eighty-three. His close friend John Adams also died on this day. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the *Declaration of Independence*.



*Jefferson's design for the library at the University of Virginia.*