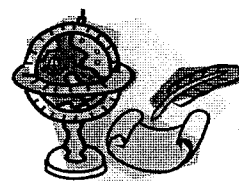


# Thomas Jefferson and John Locke: America's Co-Founders

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Third Place



July 4, 1776 is the defining moment in American history. It marks the acceptance and adoption of the *Declaration of Independence*, the document announcing America's separation from the British Empire to form a new government and nation. As its own entity, America is distinguished by those who shaped and signed the *Declaration*, particularly by its author, Thomas Jefferson. The government's role and the responsibilities and rights of its citizens were crucial concepts to formalize since they were the underlying reasons for the colonies' revolt. Thomas Jefferson devoted much of his life to underlining the necessities of America and its government in order to establish a true republic for the people.

Like many of his fellow Founding Fathers, Jefferson solidified his beliefs through personal intellectual effort and acute examination of European history. Historians have argued over the contributing factors that may have most influenced Jefferson's ideas on America's identity, linking his thoughts to many European movements, including the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Scottish Enlightenment, the British Country party.<sup>1</sup> However, none of these institutions have appeared in Jefferson's political and private writings as often as British Enlightenment philosopher John Locke. In important documents like the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Notes on the State of Virginia* and the *Summary View of the Rights of British America* Jefferson repeatedly references Locke, both in general concept, and sometimes even in exact phrasing. America was forming its own identity, one separate from Britain, but ironically the beliefs that shaped that identity were coming from a British source. John Locke's influence over Thomas Jefferson's opinions on nationhood and government is obvious. It is fundamental to the understanding of early American identity to not overlook Locke's important role in American history.<sup>2</sup>

The Enlightenment in Europe emphasized the use of reason and rationale, an approach that Thomas Jefferson also embraced. Joyce Appleby's article highlights Thomas Jefferson's personal enjoyment of Enlightenment principles and philosophers: "Science and education pulled his carriage of hopes, as he revealed when he ordered a composite portrait of the life-sized busts of Bacon, Locke and Newton."<sup>3</sup> Jefferson's private investigation of the beliefs of many Enlightenment figures included, most imposingly, the British philosopher, John Locke. His personal opinions of this movement and these men are significant due to the strong relationship, at this time, between private

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel W. Howe, "European Sources of Political Ideas in Jeffersonian America," *Reviews in American History*, 10(4) (1982), 29. Louis Hartz states that the only political theorist for American was John Locke in *The Liberal Tradition of America*. Alternative European sources for Jeffersonian America are provided by Meyer *The Democratic Enlightenment*, May's *The Enlightenment in America*, Riley's *American Philosophy*, and Pocock *The Machiavellian Moment*.

<sup>2</sup> Lance Banning, "Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 43(1), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce Appleby, "What is Still American in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 39(2) (1982), 294.

interests and public and political action. There existed a "...close connection between political and intellectual history, especially during the early period of the republic's history when so many of our statesmen were themselves readers and thinkers."<sup>4</sup> This "close connection" allowed for many of Thomas Jefferson's personal beliefs on various matters to appear in political and public writings. His ideas on race, religion, and the rights of citizens, especially the right to property, all reflect opinions in Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, which Thomas Jefferson was known to have read and analyzed. The personal reading and enjoyment of Locke is not unusual, considering many of the Founding Fathers were interested in various Enlightenment philosophers. However, what is remarkable is Thomas Jefferson's use of specific Lockean concepts, and in some cases, his exact wording in the documents that Jefferson is most famous for today.

Race and slavery were key issues to address during the formation of America's republic. Thomas Jefferson's beliefs on slavery, as seen in his writings, have a strong resemblance to many of Locke's opinions that were expressed in Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. Jefferson's ideas on "equal creation" as seen in the *Declaration of Independence*, and "natural philosophy" are both theories of racial science that Locke had presented nearly a century prior.<sup>5</sup> Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* also demonstrates Jefferson's desire to incorporate Enlightenment principles, specifically Lockean principles, into "central issues concerning his state and new nation."<sup>6</sup> However, the Jeffersonian document that best exemplifies Locke's influence on Jefferson's beliefs on race and slavery is the *Summary View of the Rights of British America*.

Written in 1774, a *Summary View of the Rights of British America* "used slavery as the central metaphor to express the colonists' grievances."<sup>7</sup> Jefferson's wording and references to Britain being tyrannous and to the British having a continuous plan, which lasts despite the changing of rulers, is essentially the same sentiments Locke was expressing in the "Of Usurpation" section of the *Second Treatise of Government*. Jefferson wrote:

Single acts of tyranny may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of the day; but a series of oppressions, begun at a distinguished period, and pursued unalterably thro' every change of ministers, too plainly prove a deliberate, systematic plan of reducing us to slavery.<sup>8</sup>

Locke wrote in the *Second Treatise of Government*:

As conquest may be called a foreign usurpation, so usurpation is a kind of domestic conquest, with this difference, that an usurper can never have right on his side, it being no usurpation, but where one is got into the possession of what another has right to. This, so far as it is usurpation, is a change only of persons, but not of the forms and rules of the government: for if the usurper extend his power beyond what of right belonged to the lawful princes, or governors of the commonwealth, it is tyranny added to usurpation.<sup>9</sup>

Jefferson's reference to Locke's beliefs on usurpation is abundantly clear when placing these two documents beside one another.

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel W. Howe, "European Sources of Political Ideas in Jeffersonian America," *Reviews in American History*, 10(4) (1982), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander O. Boulton, "The American Paradox: Jefferson Equality and Racial Science," *American Quarterly*, 47(3) (1995), 471-484.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Summary View of the Rights of British America," in Boyd, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:121-37, 125.

<sup>9</sup> John Locke, "Second Treatise of Government," in Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, XVII (197), 415.

Thomas Jefferson's strong ideas on the inalienable rights of man, especially the right to property, are yet another example of Locke's powerful influence over Jefferson's opinions. Locke believed that there were "insuperable hereditary rights [of land] for subjects but not for the government."<sup>10</sup> Jefferson had similar attitudes and "consistently [he] defended private property rights."<sup>11</sup> Historian Stanley Katz successfully elaborates on Jefferson's similarities to Locke through use of a personal letter:

As Jefferson wrote to John Jay in 1785: 'Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to it's liberty and interest by the most lasting bands. As long therefore as they can find employment in this line, I would not convert them into mariners, artisans or any thing else.' Jefferson is here operating in the context of John Locke's theory of private property, according to which the earth and its fruits were given to mankind in common but a man's person and labor were his alone, and his property was whatever he produced by dint of his personal labor.<sup>12</sup>

Katz goes on to describe that not only did Jefferson agree with Locke's theories on property, but he also believed the United States to be the perfect place to implement those theories due to the abundance of uncultivated land.<sup>13</sup> The natural right to property was essentially a Lockean principle, adapted by Jefferson to implement in the new nation.

Locke and Jefferson not only agreed on the rights to property, but they also shared similar, if not identical beliefs, on the right of citizens to stand up to their government's wrongdoings. Locke's passage is from his *Second Treatise of Government* regarding the "Dissolution of Government":

Secondly: I answer, such revolutions happen not upon every little mismanagement in public affairs. Great mistakes in the ruling part, many wrong and inconvenient laws, and all the slips of human frailty will be borne by the people without mutiny or murmur. But if a long train of abuses, prevarications, and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the people, and they cannot but feel what they lie under, and see whither they are going, it is not to be wondered that they should then rouse themselves, and endeavour to put the rule into such hands which may secure to them the ends for which government was at first erected...<sup>14</sup>

*The Declaration of Independence*, written by Thomas Jefferson, included these words on the subject of citizens' right against unfair governments:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley N. Katz, "Thomas Jefferson and the Right to Property in Revolutionary America," *Journal of Law and Economics*, 19(3) (1976), 469.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>14</sup> John Locke, "Second Treatise of Government," in Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, XIX (225), 433.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*, (<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.htm>)

These two selections from Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, written in 1693, and Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, written in 1776, make it impossible to deny Locke's influence on Thomas Jefferson. The overall principle is exactly the same, but more importantly Jefferson even uses Locke's phrasing when he states "long train of abuses." The most important document in the establishment of America, and the words and ideas derive directly from John Locke.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Jefferson not only incorporated Locke's convictions about race, slavery, and citizens' right into his own belief structure, he also integrated Locke's ideas on freedom of religion. Historians have argued that Jefferson's *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom* shares and occasionally steals from Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. "This bill [*Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*], presented to the House of Delegates for Virginia in 1779, contains not only a Jeffersonian interpretation of Locke's theory of religious toleration, but also a discernible paraphrasing of several passages from Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration*."<sup>17</sup> S. Gerard Sandler investigates five aspects of Locke's beliefs on religious freedom specifically and relates those aspects to Jefferson's own ideas on the same subject. One facet of Locke's view on religious toleration coined by Sandler is "True belief is inspired by reason, not force."<sup>18</sup> In regards to that sentiment, Locke writes in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*.

All the life and power of true religion consists in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing. Whatever profession we make, to whatever outward worship we conform, if we are not fully satisfied in our own mind...we add unto the number of our other sins, those also of hypocrisy, and contempt of his Divine Majesty.<sup>19</sup>

Jefferson, after taking extensive notes on Locke's *Letter*, included many of Locke's ideas in his own *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*:

Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depart not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds...that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness...<sup>20</sup>

Jefferson's use of the word "hypocrisy" and belief that true religion exists internally is a concept Jefferson obviously adapted from Locke's *Letter*. Religious toleration, and separation of church and state, would become one of Jefferson's strongest political platforms and his convictions on the matter stem directly from John Locke.

Thomas Jefferson, like many of the other Founding Fathers of America, often referred to Enlightenment principles during the creation of their new nation. Jefferson goes so far as to state, in a letter to Henry Lee that they needed to look back on past philosophers to create the unique American identity:

Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it [*Declaration of Independence*] was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests, then, on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether

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<sup>16</sup> John Locke, "Second Treatise of Government," in Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, XIX (225), 433.

<sup>17</sup> S. Gerald Sandler, "Lockean Ideas in Thomas Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 21(1) (Jan.-Mar., 1960), 110.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in Locke, *Works*, II (1714), 234-5.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," in Boyd, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 545.

expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke...

Thomas Jefferson acknowledges in this personal letter his use of Locke in the formation of many of his "principles and sentiments"; however he neglects to admit to the occasional outright appropriation of Locke's ideas. It is curiously ironic that Thomas Jefferson established a new government and a new nation, using the philosophies of John Locke, a philosopher from America's old oppressor, Britain. John Locke was the originator, the Founding Father in a certain sense, of the many liberal ideas that Jefferson championed in the arena of this nation's founding. Without Locke, many of Jefferson's concepts of American identity may not have found their unique prominence.

## Annotated Bibliography

Appleby, J. (1982). What is still American in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson? *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 39(2), 287-309.

Appleby's work provides an argument on Thomas Jefferson's personal and political influences. She focuses her attention on the roles of Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy and his challenging of Montesquieu in the formation of Jefferson's political beliefs. Appleby also argues against Jefferson as a civic humanist and follower of the British Country party.

Banning, L. (1986). Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 43(1), 3-19.

Banning's article discusses civic humanism, classical republicanism and the Country party in Jeffersonian America. He argues that Jeffersonians were not the British opposition that was seen in the eighteenth century. Also provides a brief overview of Jefferson's goal for the new nation.

Boulton, A.O. (1995). The American Paradox: Jefferson Equality and Racial Science. *American Quarterly*, 47(3), 467-492.

Boulton offers an in-depth look at Jefferson's ideas on the subjects of race and equality, a very controversial and difficult matter during the early American period and Jefferson's life. *The American Paradox* also demonstrated the linkage between Jefferson's beliefs and prior arguments made by Enlightenment figures, such as Buffon and Locke.

Boyd, J.P. (1950). *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boyd's collection is an extensive compilation of many of the documents that Thomas Jefferson wrote during his lifetime. Jefferson's *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom* and *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, included in Boyd's *Papers*, were especially helpful in discerning the roles that Thomas Jefferson thought religion and race should have in politics.

Howe, D.W. (1982). European Sources of Political Ideas in Jeffersonian America. *Reviews in American History*, 10(4), 28-44.

Howe's article is a thorough examination of all the European sources argued to have influenced Thomas Jefferson. The Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scottish Enlightenment and John Locke are just some of the contributors to Jeffersonian America, according to Howe and other historians. Howe provides an argument as to which historians, and which past people and establishments, truly did affect Jefferson and his political opinions.

Jefferson, T. (1776). *The Declaration of Independence*. Retrieved March 30, 2006, from <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.htm>

*The Declaration of Independence* is quite possibly the most well-known historical document in the United States of America. It encapsulates Jefferson's personal desires and political aspirations for the new nation. It is the framework for the American government.

Jefferson, T. (1825). Letter to Henry Lee. Retrieved March 30, 2006, from <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=3>

Thomas Jefferson's letter to Henry Lee is a primary source document that states that he did incorporate the beliefs and writings of John Locke and other intellectuals into his own, especially when creating the Declaration of Independence. This letter enhances the argument that Lockean ideas influenced Jeffersonian America.

Locke, J. (1689). *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Retrieved March 30, 2006, from <http://www.constitution.org/jl/tolerati.htm>

Locke's *Letter* is a document which describes Locke's personal beliefs on religion and its need for toleration within a society. It encompasses Locke's definition of religion, the role of religion in government, and the function of religion within a free nation.

Locke, J. (1960). *Two Treatises on Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Two Treatises on Government* is the collection of Locke's first and second treatises on government. This volume provides, in detail, Locke's ideas on the relationship between government and the people. It depicts his beliefs on many issues including race, slavery, tyranny, and property, with its greatest focus being on the government's responsibilities.

Katz, S.N. (1976). Thomas Jefferson and the Right to Property in Revolutionary America. *Journal of Law and Economics*, 19(3), 467-488.

In Katz's work, he provides a wealth of information about Jefferson's personal and political opinions on the right to private property. This article also demonstrates how Jefferson's beliefs on this matter resembled those of other revolutionaries and John Locke.

Sandler, S.G. (1960). Lockean Ideas in Thomas Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 21(1), 110-116.

Sandler's article presents a compelling comparison between Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* and Jefferson's *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*. It draws many parallels between Locke's work and Thomas Jefferson's own writings, which sometimes even consisted of the same phrasing. Sandler's article accentuates the relationship between Enlightenment figure Locke and Jefferson's vision for the new nation.