

A Brief Biographical Sketch of Thomas Jefferson

Written by Patrick Lee

Peter Jefferson, an enterprising farmer and surveyor, and Jane Randolph Jefferson, a Virginia blue-blood, brought forth their third child and first son, Thomas, on April 13, 1743. He was born on the family plantation, named Shadwell, after a site in England associated with Jane Jefferson's ancestors.

His earliest memory was being lifted on a pillow and carried on horseback a long distance. He was two years old. His family was moving from Shadwell to Tuckahoe, a Randolph family plantation on the James River outside Richmond.

[Tuckahoe stands yet today. It is an unusual home, two parallel two-story dwellings with a connecting passage, forming an H-shape if viewed from above. Far more unusual are the slave cabins, which remain preserved from the mid-1700s. They may be the only original slave cabins remaining in America.]

A small building near that plantation house bears a sign that reads today, "In this building, Thomas Jefferson went to school 1748-1752." He also boarded away from home for schooling and later attended the College of William and Mary for two years. He did not graduate but followed this with a five year study of law.

Jefferson had a successful and diversified law practice for seven years. His fees were respectable, but his collections were not, sometimes averaging only 50% of the amount billed. King George closed the colonial courts in 1774, effectively ending the practice of law in Virginia.

His active role in colonial government led to an appointment to the Continental Congress. As the country moved toward independence, Jefferson was appointed one of five members of a committee to draft the reasons for that dramatic step. Since his writings on American vs. English rights were already well-known, he prepared a draft declaration. The committee made a few revisions. The Congress made more. The result, adopted July 4, 1776, came to be known as the Declaration of American Independence. Jefferson's primary authorship was not well known at the time.

During the War for Independence, Jefferson helped re-write Virginia's colonial laws and provided leadership for two years as the State's governor. He might have retired from public life if his wife had lived. Her death in 1782, after 10 years of marriage and six children, helped propel him back on to the public stage. He became a member of Congress in 1783 and was appointed ambassador to France the following year.

After five years in France, George Washington asked him to serve as Secretary of State, a position he held for four and a half years, before retiring to Monticello. Once again, he might have preferred private life but political differences with the ruling Federalists led to his championing the anti-Federalist (later called Republican) cause. He served four years as Vice-President under John Adams. He defeated Adams in his bid for re-election and provided new leadership for a divided country for the next eight years.

- Key accomplishments during his Presidential leadership include:
- Reducing taxes, especially "internal" ones, those on merchants and farmers
 - Reducing the federal debt in seven of his eight years
 - Limiting the federal government's role strictly to that authorized by the Constitution
 - Acquiring from France the land known as Louisiana, roughly the watershed of the Missouri River, more than doubling the size of the nation
 - Sending Meriwether Lewis to lead the Corps of Discovery (aka the Lewis & Clark Expedition) and explore Louisiana

Upon retirement from the Presidency in 1809, Jefferson never again left Virginia and rarely left his mountaintop home, Monticello. He spent a dozen years raising the political and financial support to establish the University of Virginia, which opened for classes in 1824. His leadership was resulted his being named its first rector. He was 81.

In addition to being a lawyer, statesman and leader, Thomas Jefferson was a farmer, inventor, writer, explorer, architect, astronomer, archeologist, scientist and more.

On July 4, 1826, 50 years to the day after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson breathed his last. He was 83.

He wrote the epitaph that was to appear on his tombstone. He wanted recorded there the three things for which he wished to be remembered. That epitaph reads:

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.
BORN APRIL 2d
1743 O. S.
DIED [July 4]
[1826]

[Nav bar to get someone back?]