

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86731-3 - The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson

Edited by Frank Shuffelton

Excerpt

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FRANK SHUFFELTON

Introduction

Thomas Jefferson was born in 1743 at Shadwell, his father's plantation near present-day Charlottesville, Virginia. At the time of Jefferson's birth Shadwell was near the western limit of white settlement, but by the time he practiced as a lawyer twenty-five years later the frontier had moved over 100 miles further west. By the time of his death, fifty years to the day after the Declaration of Independence, Virginia was a part of a new nation, the United States, whose limits had moved over 2,000 miles farther west. Jefferson, as the author of the Declaration and as the president who acquired the Louisiana Purchase, played a key role in each of these transformations.

He was educated in local schools and at the College of William and Mary before reading law with George Wythe, who had been mentoring the young Jefferson since his arrival in Williamsburg. One of the most learned lawyers in the colonies, Wythe would go on to be a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the first Professor of Law at the College of William and Mary. Subsequently Jefferson practiced as a lawyer and also entered the Virginia legislature, where he aligned himself with the more radical members who were already questioning the authority of Parliament over the colonies. In 1774 he proposed instructions for the Virginia delegates to the first Continental Congress, which had called for representatives of the thirteen North American colonies to meet in Philadelphia in order to discuss responses to supposed British restrictions on the colonies. Subsequently published as *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* and reprinted in Philadelphia and London, this pamphlet informed King George III that "kings are the servants, not the proprietors of the people" and established Jefferson's reputation as an effective writer on behalf of the colonial cause. When he himself joined Congress, he was appointed to the committee to prepare a Declaration of Independence, along with fellow members John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman. The others delegated the main responsibility for writing the Declaration to him, and, with a few mostly minor changes, the final version as approved by Congress followed his draft.

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One major change involved the deletion of a passage condemning the king for supporting and maintaining the slave trade, calling it “a cruel war against human nature.” The second paragraph of the Declaration, however, with its assertion of human equality and the natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness struck a chord in later years and in countries around the world. Opponents of slavery frequently cited these phrases from the Declaration, the women at the Seneca Falls Convention relied on it, and other nations have modeled their own declarations of independence and human rights after Jefferson’s text.

Back in Virginia, Jefferson participated in a revision of Virginia’s laws and was most proud of his reform of property and inheritance law that worked against the amassing of large estates, and of a law for the freedom of religion. His two terms as governor of Virginia ended ignominiously when he was unable to mount an effective resistance to the British invasion of the state. He retired briefly to private life and began writing his one published book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Shaped as an answer to a questionnaire he had received from a French diplomat, *Notes* offered an extensive view of Virginia’s geography, its natural resources, fauna and flora, laws and customs, and its history. *Notes* participated in important scientific debates of the time, but it is also largely responsible for the ambivalent nature of Jefferson’s reputation: while it condemned slavery in no uncertain terms, it also put forward an argument for black inferiority in mind and body that is difficult to see in any other light than as racist. Subsequent critics have frequently noted Jefferson’s failure to do anything to promote the end of slavery, in spite of his strong language in *Notes* condemning it.

Jefferson was subsequently appointed as minister to France from 1784 to 1789. There he saw to the publication of *Notes*, first in Paris in 1785 and in London in a revised form in 1787. He also pursued his interests in architecture and worked with the French architect Charles Louis Clérisseau when he designed the Virginia Capitol after the model of a Greco-Roman temple in Nîmes. Returning to America, he accepted an appointment as the United States’ first secretary of state. Opposition to the policies of Alexander Hamilton, which sought to strengthen the powers of the central government at the expense of those of the states and which Jefferson thought privileged a narrow group of wealthy cronies, soon led him to be regarded as the leader of an emerging republican faction in Congress. By the time he retired at the end of 1793, the so-called first party system in American politics had begun to take shape, with Jefferson as putative leader of the Republicans in opposition to the Federalists who supported Hamilton’s policies. In 1796 when the Republican caucus put him forward as a presidential candidate, he became vice president by virtue of finishing second to John Adams in the number of electoral ballots.

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Jefferson wrote the Kentucky Resolutions in 1798 in opposition to the Federalists' passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts aimed at critics of the government, but had to preserve his anonymity in regard to the document.

In 1800 he was again nominated for president, with Aaron Burr as his running mate. When the election resulted in a tie between Jefferson and Burr – there was no provision at the time for designating candidates for the presidency and the vice presidency, a condition subsequently rectified by the twelfth amendment – the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, which elected Jefferson on the thirty-sixth ballot. The major achievement of his presidency was the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory, more by luck than by design as it turned out, but his planning for the Lewis and Clark expedition that explored its western limits was a result of his extensive reading and his deep interests in science. Re-elected overwhelmingly in 1804, his second term had to deal with the worsening conditions in Europe; war between Great Britain and Napoleonic France put the United States in an uncomfortable vise. Jefferson responded to this by calling for an embargo of all American trade, reminiscent of the non-importation acts of the pre-revolutionary years, but even less successful. His decision not to seek a third term, however, confirmed the similar choice made by George Washington and established a traditional limit for presidential office holders until Franklin D. Roosevelt broke with it in 1940.

In the years of his retirement Jefferson turned to an unrealized project he had first touched upon in his revisionary drafts of laws for Virginia. His Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge had proposed a system of public education that had not been acted upon – and in its largest terms would not be until after the Civil War – but Jefferson took up the cause of creating a public university that would be free of the clerical hand that lay over the William and Mary that he had attended. His modern curriculum at the University of Virginia became an important model for later great American public universities, culminating in the founding of the land grant universities in the later nineteenth century. At the same time his architectural plan for the university created a site that would be recognized in 1976 by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) as one of the ten most significant architectural works in the United States. Jefferson was able to observe the building of his university from Monticello, his other building that made the AIA list, tying him with Frank Lloyd Wright for the most works to be recognized there. In the later years of his life he continued to carry on an extensive correspondence, of which he carefully kept copies and records. Jefferson's letters are among his most significant and powerful writings, revealing him as a man of widespread interests, extensive reading and scholarship, and challenging ideas, challenging even when seemingly mistaken or cranky.

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In the years after his death on July 4, 1826, fifty years after the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's reputation was contested by partisans of all sorts. Supporters of slavery cited his comments on the natural inferiority of blacks in *Notes*, and abolitionists quoted his condemnation of slavery. Abraham Lincoln could announce "All honor to Jefferson ... who ... had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times," even as Andrew Dixon White, president of Cornell University, could blame the Civil War on Jefferson's enunciation of states' rights doctrine in the Kentucky Resolutions.¹ The twentieth century saw a turn in a more straightforwardly positive direction, as evidenced by the subtitle of Gilbert Chinard's popular 1929 biography, "Apostle of Americanism." This reputation was enhanced by the New Dealers who took Jefferson for their patron saint, putting his face on the five-cent piece and providing a handsome memorial in Washington, DC, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of his birth.

In the last three decades the reputation of Thomas Jefferson has undergone radical revision.² The Apostle of Democracy apotheosized during the New Deal era has, by some scholars, been accused of being a slave-owner whose deepest instincts had a racial bias, an architect of America's genocidal policy towards Native Americans, a merely lukewarm friend of civil liberties, and even an early advocate of terrorism and civil violence.³ These attacks have certainly been based on obvious flaws in Jefferson's character and record, but they are, in their extreme versions, often merely reflections of the much more nuanced and sophisticated scholarship that has emerged in these years on Jefferson and the period of the early American republic. Jefferson continues to be a figure of major, widespread interest because, at some fundamental level, he does continue to speak for the values of equality, tolerance, and individual liberty, but also because his contradictions and ambivalences seem to reflect the contradictions of America itself. Since the mid-1990s each year has seen the publication of more than 100 books and essays on Jefferson, typically considerably more. These publications are both scholarly and popular, indicating a continuing interest in Jefferson as a person and as a bellwether of American self-reflection. The recent DNA report that offers fairly convincing evidence that Jefferson fathered a child by Sally Hemings (and quite probably fathered all those whom Hemings family tradition claims) provoked widespread discussion about the complex racial relations that are still embedded in American society. Jefferson's writings about freedom of religion and the separation of church and state are more vigorously examined and debated than ever, at a moment when religious voices clamor for a more central role in public life.

The scholarship supporting this work has been grounded in new strategies of interpretation in some cases, and new recognitions of the larger intellectual

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and ideological contexts in which Jefferson wrote. Scholarship in the last thirty years has by turns addressed the significance of the republican synthesis, the role of classical liberalism, the importance of moral sentiment and sentimentality, the prevailing code of honor among gentlemen, and the discourse of sociability and the public sphere. Jefferson's texts have been deconstructed, psychoanalyzed, and examined for participation in various hegemonic strategies; they have been read closely in order to unpack metaphors and tropes that might give insight into the mind of Jefferson and the mind of his time. Interpretation has also been supported by increasingly sophisticated scholarship in material culture. Archaeological investigations at Monticello, for instance, have underwritten more subtle and complex understandings of the intertwined lives of the white and black residents there and moved beyond simplistic representations of slavery, either apologetic or condemning. More exacting scholarship about the objects with which Jefferson filled Monticello has considered him as a consumer, a pioneer in a consumer revolution that would energize America in later years. Jefferson's architectural work is increasingly being understood as a human-centered creation of spaces that is intended to make possible republican forms of civic and public life as well as the rational comforts of an ideal private life. Jefferson the letter writer, the author of the Declaration of Independence, and of *Notes on the State of Virginia* increasingly draws the attention of scholars of American literature, who feel the need to fit him into any satisfactory account of their subject. In the supposed death bed words of John Adams, who died on the same day as Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson still survives," if not as the icon he once was then as a touchstone able to generate continuing interest, debate, and inquiry. This volume addresses major topics of Jeffersonian concern that may well reflect the concerns of Americans in the twenty-first century.

The Declaration of Independence was a defining text for an American nationality, although it was not necessarily recognized as such at the time. It was simultaneously an assertion of independence, a legal document signifying that assertion, an appeal to the international community for recognition, and an attempt to appeal to the citizens of the individual states to support the cause of the whig/patriot side of an insurrection. In later years the Declaration became increasingly significant as a ceremonial text to be celebrated on its anniversary and also as an inscription of basic individual rights. Eric Slauter's chapter on the Declaration explores the implications of that document's claims and promises for a wider segment of Americans than Jefferson may have had in mind. Slauter places the Declaration in its historic context as he describes its evolution from Jefferson's draft through the debates in Congress that led to its final form, but he also presents the Declaration as a living

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document whose meanings were not confined to those of its mere historical moment. If not intended by Jefferson or his colleagues in Congress as a charter of rights, African American readers from the beginning read the Declaration in ways that made it a modern document by asserting that it should be so.

At the heart of Jefferson's political ideology was faith in republicanism, an idea with a long history going back to the Greeks, but one which he understood at its heart as the right of the people to choose their own government. Many of his contemporaries would have agreed with this basic notion, but they would have different notions of what was meant by "the people" and what constituted "choice," and they would have had very different notions of what the consequences of this belief in republicanism might be. Ari Helo's chapter discusses Jefferson's understanding of republicanism and how it affected his notions of government. Helo connects Jefferson's belief in popular sovereignty both with its radical dimension of empowering ordinary citizens and with its more parochial aspects, which sought to preserve individual rights by grounding them in local government and in a doctrine of states' rights. Jefferson's naturalistic theory of rights, based on human behavior and human intelligence, saw constitutions as historically contingent and in need of change and evolution as the human mind developed. For Jefferson each generation should write its own constitution, but the writing should be left to the "talented and virtuous," perhaps limiting the extent of his belief in popular sovereignty.

Notes on the State of Virginia was Jefferson's one published book and was a significant nationalistic document. Among its other intentions it meant to dispute the negative picture of climate and nature disseminated by Buffon and other European thinkers, but the *Notes* also located Virginia in the context of the confederated states and explained, or fantasized about, American culture and American prospects. Thomas Hallock explores Jefferson's thinking, or perhaps fantasizing, by thinking about *Notes* in the context of Jefferson's longstanding interest in the West and in the American Indian. For Hallock, *Notes* "may be read as the product of and blueprint for an expanding republic," but one in which the Indians will disappear, at least as Indians. Jefferson's fantasy of the future of European-American and Indian relations saw two possibilities: a nearly seamless Indian assimilation into white culture, which would erase differences, or their eventual disappearance from the American scene. Hallock shows how Jefferson's fantasy was implicitly endorsed by the blindness towards Indian knowledge and culture of Lewis and Clark, who failed to understand the skills of their Nez Perce guides. Gordon M. Sayre also addresses the problematic issues that permeate Jefferson's thinking about Indians in "Jefferson and Native Americans: policy and archive." As secretary of state, Jefferson laid the foundations for

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American Indian policy for years to come. His interest in Indians, however, seems to have come from his youth; he vividly expresses his memories of Indian oratory he heard sometime before his father died in 1757. His passages in *Notes on the State of Virginia* on American Indians, including the transmission of Logan's speech, are an important part of his argument with Buffon, but he was interested in acquiring information about Indian languages and customs throughout his life. Sayre examines Jefferson's Indian archive and pays special attention to his use of Logan's speech in *Notes*, but also to how it was used by his political opponents. His examination of the speech's origins finally opens insights into the complex interplay of racial and cultural difference on the frontier that resonate with other discussions of race found here.

Jefferson's position vis-à-vis slavery was ambiguous to say the least; he professed opposition to slavery but failed to take any significant steps to deal with it. Douglas R. Egerton's "Race and slavery in the era of Jefferson" explores Jefferson's racial thinking as expressed in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and other writings. Egerton portrays Jefferson as at heart a racist, whose actions are ultimately motivated by his attitudes about race. He contends that Jefferson's supposedly scientific analysis of racial difference in the *Notes* was fundamentally a charade, bad science "out of step with the prevailing scientific trends of the late eighteenth century." Egerton explodes the coherence of Jefferson's theorizing about slavery and race as a way to explain his failure to do anything to end the "peculiar institution." Lucia Stanton's chapter, "Jefferson's people: slavery at Monticello," on the other hand offers in fascinating detail Jefferson's interaction with his slaves at Monticello and his other plantations. For Stanton, the system of slavery, and by implication perhaps the racial attitudes that justified it, was something Jefferson was born into. It was seemingly a system so entwined with every aspect of his life that he was never able to extricate himself from it. Stanton examines the actual relations of blacks and whites on Jefferson's plantations, with special attention to the members of the Hemings family but also to the teenage workers in his nailery and trusted figures like George Granger ("Great George" is George Granger). Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, now accepted by serious historians since the DNA tests of 1998, is contextualized within a rich network of family and community ties at Monticello, offering a more nuanced view of Jefferson's thinking about race and slavery.

Science is the subject of Timothy Sweet's "Jefferson, science, and the Enlightenment," and he concentrates on Jefferson's argument with Buffon in *Notes*. If this was ultimately a nationalistic argument, it was carried on in scientific terms. Jefferson's scientific interests figured in his writings on paleontology, his presidency of the American Philosophical Society, his mathematical proclivities, and his interest in gardening and agriculture.

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Jefferson's engagement with the scientific world of his time, as Sweet shows, exposes a fundamental belief in the rational structure of the natural world that underwrites his faith in human rational behavior. Yet at the same time Jefferson's attempt to think about "the races of black and red men ... as subjects of natural history" failed for a number of reasons, not least that Jefferson was unable to imagine himself as a "subject of natural history." If his practice of science seems curiously constricted, it might be that, as Sweet concludes, the disciplines of the sciences were changing – "biology moving inward, from structure to function; geology moving outward, to the conceptualization of deep time" – and amateur scientists like Jefferson found it increasingly difficult to engage the disciplines. Jefferson, suggests Sweet, was perhaps less interested in science itself than in its shared discursive conventions with the communicability of reason they exemplified.

The arts were an important interest of Jefferson's. He was an ardent musician until he broke his wrist and could no longer easily play his violin; he collected paintings and statuary for Monticello, and, as a lover of poetry from the classics to Ossian, he even wrote an essay on prosody for a French friend. Of all the arts, however, he may have been most interested in architecture; his life-long effort to create the perfect residence for himself led him to tear down the first Monticello and tinker endlessly to complete and improve the second. Yet for Jefferson architecture was another exploration, like his interest in science, of the communicability of reason. Richard Guy Wilson's "Thomas Jefferson and the creation of the American architectural image" thematically considers Jefferson's architectural career as a designer of public spaces. Wilson demonstrates how Jefferson intended his design for the pavilions on the Lawn at the University of Virginia as, in effect, a set of architectural lessons for aspiring students "of natural taste." As Wilson shows, Jefferson combined an intention to locate his buildings in the context of classical and Palladian precedents while also paying attention to the limits or opportunities of the site and the presence of a Virginian vernacular that offered specific materials. Jefferson's neoclassicism was not, argues Wilson, a matter of offering symbols of Roman republicanism but of their perfecting of form and proportion. His design for the Capitol of Virginia was less important for him as a symbol than as an almost mathematically perfect structural exposition of the golden mean. The communicability of Jefferson's reason seems validated by the national architecture that his building inaugurated. If we are inclined to think first about Jefferson as a political thinker, we should not neglect the buildings he designed to house political leaders of his time and beyond.

In "The politics of pedagogy: Thomas Jefferson and the education of a democratic citizenry," Darren Staloff examines Jefferson's scheme to educate

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the political leaders of Virginia in his university and shows that this was somewhat less than the generously democratic project it has been taken to be. One of the three items Jefferson wished to be remembered for on his grave marker was the University of Virginia, and he campaigned for improved schools in Virginia as early as 1777. The University as he conceived of it has been called the model for many subsequent state universities, particularly the land grant universities, where the whole range of (secular!) human inquiry could be pursued. He thought of the university, however, particularly as a mechanism to ensure the reproduction of republican principles in the future leaders of Virginia and the nation, or so he hoped. Staloff shows how Jefferson's plans for the university were shaped by his perceptions of a sectional threat to the slave-holding South. Staloff also provides a corrective critique of Jefferson's earlier plans for educational reform in Virginia, showing how it was not nearly so likely to rake "diamonds from the dunghill" as many have assumed it might. Jefferson's plans for educating the aristocracy of the talented and virtuous who had the misfortune to be born into poverty would not have provided for many; his plans for the university seem to turn away from his earlier proposal to educate the mass of common people. More damning in 1825 Virginia, crucial parts of the curriculum on politics and law "no longer consisted in a broad exposure to modern learning but instead took on the forms of a narrow political indoctrination."

Jefferson was proud of his authorship of Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom, even though his comments on religious freedom in *Notes* provoked vicious attacks from Federalist clergy who considered him an atheist. Jefferson called for a "wall of separation" between church and state in a memorable letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, a phrase that in the twentieth century entered into the language of Supreme Court decisions. Yet he assured his friends in private that he was no atheist and showed a select few his personal edit of the Gospels, one that preserved the morality of Jesus and left out the "priestcraft." Richard Samuelson discusses Jefferson's evolving religious ideas and relates them to his defense of religious freedom, showing one to be a private matter of belief, the other to be more complicated because of the public dimensions of religious practice.

Jefferson's major literary output occurs in the form of the thousands of letters he wrote to friends, colleagues, constituents, and others. The letters he wrote to his friends are particularly revealing of his investment in the sentimental culture of the eighteenth-century moral sense philosophers as well as of Shaftesburean sociability. Andrew Burstein's "Jefferson and the language of friendship" examines this phenomenon with specific attention to particular friendships and exchanges. Burstein looks closely at the famous "Head and Heart" letter that Jefferson wrote to Maria Cosway, an artist he

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met during his stay in Paris. Here Jefferson articulates a serious moral dialogue but in language reminiscent of Laurence Sterne's discourse filled with "flirtation and sexual tease." Nowhere does Jefferson's investment in the discourse of sentiment and sentimentalism appear more clearly than in this letter and in his abiding affection for the works of Sterne. As Burstein observes, however, friendship had gendered dimensions, and Jefferson's political friendships developed in different ways and required a different language. Age differences mattered as well, and Burstein shows how Jefferson wrote differently to James Madison, his near contemporary, and to the younger James Monroe.

The next two chapters continue the theme of political and epistolary friendship as Joanne B. Freeman examines Jefferson's correspondence with John Adams, and Annette Gordon-Reed looks at Jefferson's political friendship with Madison. Jefferson and Adams exchanged their most interesting and entertaining letters in the last decade and a half of their lives, after the political differences that had divided them in the late 1790s had become less important to them than the much older friendship that had begun with their meeting in Philadelphia in 1776. These letters snap and bubble with the numerous topics that interested both men and the genuinely playful ways in which they responded to each other. Shadowed by health problems, the deaths of loved ones, their concerns about how they would be regarded by posterity, they preserved their bonds with each other, as Freeman observes, in the letters they exchanged. Gordon-Reed discusses a friendship that was much more narrowly political than the one between Adams and Jefferson. She notes that Jefferson and Madison, if not always in perfect agreement, were always on the same page with each other. The more moderate and emotionally restrained Madison checked occasional Jeffersonian rhetorical excesses, as in his proposal to write a new constitution every nineteen years. Their correspondence also reveals a shared "Virginianness," for example in their lack of any serious discussion about slavery and the attitudes they implicitly shared about race. Their letters also differ from those exchanged between Adams and Jefferson because they were supplemented by far more frequent and extensive face-to-face meetings.

Douglas Anderson's concluding chapter, "Jefferson and the democratic future," speculates about Jefferson's concerns for what the future might hold for the democratic project in America. On the occasion of Jefferson's 250th anniversary in 1993, a conference in Virginia and a subsequent publication of the papers addressed *Jeffersonian Legacies*.⁴ Jefferson was himself concerned about his legacy, designing his own tombstone, which inscribed the achievements by which he especially wished to be remembered. Ambivalent to the last, he also included verses in Greek that translated as