

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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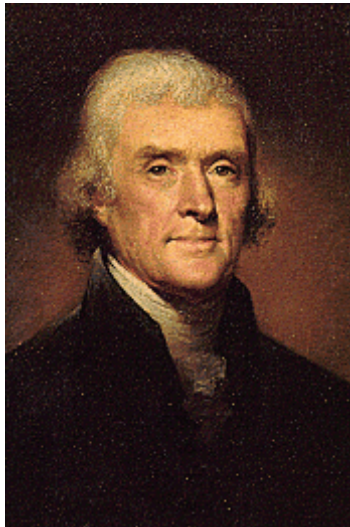
Chapter 2: Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

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Primary Works

A Summary View of the Rights of British America 1774; *The Declaration of Independence* 1776; *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*, 1777; *Report of a Plan of Government for the Western Territory*, 1784; *Notes on Virginia*, 1785; *Response to the Citizens of Albemarle*, 1790; *Opinion on the Constitutionality of a National Bank*, 1791; *Opinion on the French Treaties*, 1793; *The Kentucky Resolutions*, 1798; *First Inaugural Address*, 1801; *To Elias Shipman and Others, A Committee of the Merchants of New Haven*, 1801; *First Annual Message to Congress*, 1801; *To Nehemiah Dodge and Others, A Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association in the State of Connecticut*, 1802; *To Brother Handsome Lake*, 1802; *Instructions to Captain Lewis*, 1803; *Second Inaugural Address*, 1805; *Fifth Annual Message to Congress*, 1805; *Sixth Annual Message to Congress*, 1806; *To the Society of Tammany...*, 1808; *To the Inhabitants of Albemarle County, in Virginia*, 1809; *Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia*, 1808.

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| [Top](#) | Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Virginia Barr

Thomas Jefferson was born on an estate called Shadwell in Albemarle County, Virginia on April 13, 1743 (Bottorff 15). Jefferson's father Peter, who was a farmer and surveyor, was his son's first teacher and although he himself possessed little education was able to instill in his young son the importance of gaining the status of a gentleman. At the age of five young Jefferson started his formal education at an English school in Tuckahoe. Thomas Jefferson was fourteen when his father died in 1757(Bottorff 15).

At that time Jefferson had been under the tutelage of Scottish clergyman, Mr. Douglas and the Reverend Maury both of which taught Jefferson French, Latin and the Greek languages. Jefferson spent a total of six years studying from the age of ten to sixteen (Lehmann 37). Jefferson would spend only two years in college from 1760-1762. After graduating from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Jefferson acquired his first position at the law office of George Wythe in 1762 and, in 1767 Jefferson was admitted to the Virginia Bar (Bottorff 15-16). Two years later he would start his political career after being elected into the Virginia House of Burgesses (Lehmann 47).

On January 1, 1772 Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton later that year his first daughter also named Martha would be born. Mrs. Jefferson would bare six children but only two; her first and third daughters would live to see adulthood (Bottorff 17). Two years after his marriage Jefferson would write *A Summery View of the Rights of British America* which chronicled the "rights of the colonies in relation to mother country" (Lehmann 47). The document would bring him much notoriety in the fledgling Continental Congress which he would be elected to in 1775 (Bottorff 17). Seventeen seventy-six would be a defining year for the British Colonies and Jefferson, the colonies would break from Britain and Jefferson would be the man to express their wish to do so in *The Declaration of Independence*. Jefferson inserted a clause in his original draft of *The Declaration of Independence* that abolished slavery; this clause would be deleted by the congress (Bottorff 19). The finalized version of the *Declaration of Independence* would be approved on July 4, 1776.

Jefferson was elected Governor of Virginia and served from 1779 to 1781 when he resigned after a scandal involving his role in the British occupation of Richmond, Virginia (Onuf 27). Before his resignation Jefferson wrote the Act for Religious Freedom (1779) that would put an end to government support to different religious sects. This measure is often seen as a precursor to the separation of church and state found in the Constitution (Bottorff 19).

| [Top](#) | Jefferson would leave his state government and be elected to congress in 1783 but in 1784 Jefferson would travel to France as United States Minister. While in France Jefferson would publish *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1785. Jefferson would move his two remaining daughters to France and set up house keeping in the same year. Later that year Jefferson would assume Benjamin Franklin's position as Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of France, the aging Franklin retired returning to the United States (Bottorff 22). While traveling Jefferson studied the cultures and customs of Western Europe one thing in particular that did not strike his fancy was how structured the gardens of the English were. Jefferson saw the strictly ordered gardens to be to far removed from nature (Bottorff 23). It was also at this time in France that Jefferson would start his affair with a fourteen year old slave by the name of Sally Hemings. Hemings would be Jefferson's companion over for decades (Bottorff 23). While their exact relationship has been a point of debate among historians it is a known fact that she would bare several of his children. Jefferson would leave France in October of 1789, he would return to Virginia to take his position as the first Secretary of State in George Washington's cabinet (Bottorff 23).

Jefferson would not stay in his new position for long; in 1793 he would return to the estate Monticello (Bottorff 23). It would be another three years until Jefferson would be elected Vice President under John Adams (PR-6). During his time as Vice President Jefferson took on many new pursuits such as writing *Kentucky Resolution* (1798), compiling a parliamentary manual for the Senate, and plan the University of Virginia. In 1800 Jefferson accepted his party's nomination for the Presidency (Bottorff 26).

Jefferson would tie with Aaron Burr in the election and the House of Representatives would break the tie in Jefferson's favor on February 18, 1801 (Pr-6). President Jefferson would serve two terms in office. His presidency would see some of the countries greatest moments, the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and the Louis-Clark Expedition. As the Napoleonic wars in Europe raged on Jefferson tried to keep the Untied States out of the fighting by signing the Embargo Act of 1807 which prohibited the selling and trading of good with European countries. American's saw Jefferson's signing of this act as going against his often stated belief that the government should not use excessive power. The New England ports were unable to engage in their main trade of shipping and talked of succeeding from the union. Many turned to smuggling to sell their goods, this shocked Jefferson who never thought that "his policies would cause

criminal acts," (Bottorff 26). Jefferson eventually repealed the Embargo before leaving office in March 1809.

Jefferson returned to his beloved Monticello to live out his life. Jefferson wrote extensively to John Adams, in years to come these letters would later be published as *The Adams-Jefferson letters; the complete correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*. Through out his life Jefferson worked to build his library it took nearly fifty years to create a library that filled eighteen wagons. In desperate need of money and after hearing the destruction of the Congressional Library Jefferson offered to sell his collection to the nation. In 1815 congress bought his private library (Bottorff 26). In 1825 Jefferson saw the University of Virginia opened (Pr-6). A year later Jefferson would die in his home on July 4, 1826 fifty years to the day after the *Declaration of Independence* had been signed (Bottorff 32).

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Study Questions

1. Discuss the ways in which Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson alter the content of Puritan thinking without changing its form. how do their writings reflect earlier forms?
2. Analyze specific ways in which The Declaration of Independence demonstrates the influence of eighteenth-century thought.
3. Discuss the ways The Declaration of Independence uses literary devices to achieve its power.

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