

THOMAS JEFFERSON:

“All Men Are Created Equal”

Th Jefferson

A YOUNG REDHEAD FROM VIRGINIA wrote the paper that is sometimes referred to as the birth certificate of the United States.

Thomas Jefferson was born at Shadwell, a plantation in Virginia's Albemarle County, in 1743. His youth was divided between Shadwell, which was at the edge of the wilderness, and a large estate that his father managed in eastern Virginia.



Thomas had the best of two worlds. On the frontier, where his neighbors were poor farmers, he swam, fished, hunted, and rode through the countryside. While living near the coast, he learned to dance, play the violin, and conduct himself like an English gentleman. Wherever he was, he spent many hours curled up with a book.

His father died when Thomas was fourteen and he inherited about 2,500 acres (about four square miles) of land and about thirty slaves. Two years later he entered the College of William and Mary, astonishing his professors with his keen interest in *everything*. After graduating at the age of nineteen, he studied law with George Wythe. On New Year's Day of 1772 the young lawyer married Martha Skelton, with whom he had six children, only two of whom lived to adulthood.

At twenty-six, Jefferson was elected to Virginia's House of Burgesses. He spoke out about the colonists' right to self-rule, leading to his selection as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in 1775. His gift for writing won him the honor of creating the Declaration of Independence. In his apartment at Market and Seventh Streets in Philadelphia he began writing, "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . ." He used no reference books while writing the Declaration in two weeks of late June. Instead, Jefferson mixed his own ideas and phrases with ones he recalled from his extensive reading.

Like all writers, Jefferson had to submit his work for editing. In his case he had approximately fifty editors—the members of Congress. Their editorial changes stung Jefferson. Nevertheless, most historians believe that the changes in wording made by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and others improved the Declaration.

One of Jefferson's favorite sayings was, "It is wonderful how much may be done if we are always doing." He lived by that motto, achieving much in an incredible number of fields. A brilliant architect, he designed his famous home, Monticello, as well as the state capitol building in Richmond (which replaced Williamsburg as the Virginia capital in 1780). A strong believer in education, he founded the University of Virginia. He was nicknamed "Mr. Mammoth" because he collected prehistoric bones. He has been called America's "first serious gardener" and the "father of American forestry" because of his passion



for planting flowers and trees. He was one of America's best violinists of his time. His inventions included a new kind of plow, an improved sundial, and a cipher wheel, a device that helped him send coded messages while he was a diplomat in France. In addition, his library became the basis for the nation's Library of Congress.

Besides all this, he served his country in many ways. He was governor of Virginia, U.S. minister to France, and the country's first secretary of state under President George Washington. Thomas Jefferson was the nation's vice president from 1797 to 1801 under President John Adams. Then, from 1801 to 1809 he held the nation's highest office, serving as the third president of the United States. He was one of eight presidents who were born in Virginia, which became known as the Mother of Presidents.

Thomas Jefferson felt guilty about one aspect of his life. He had asserted in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and are entitled to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Yet he was a big slaveholder, owning a total of approximately 400 African-Americans at one time or another at Monticello. Jefferson seems to have been tormented by the fact that he professed one thing about everyone's right to liberty while practicing another. He also kept secret the fact that he fathered children by one of his slaves. In addition to his six children by his wife, Martha, Jefferson had several children with Sally Hemings, a slave at Monticello. As a result, there is an African-American branch of Jefferson's family to this day.

The author of the Declaration of Independence lived to the age of eighty-three, dying, like John Adams, on the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the famous document. Jefferson is pictured on the front of the United States's five-cent piece, or nickel, and his home, Monticello, is shown on the back of the coin.