



Thomas Jefferson: A Biography

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Thomas Jefferson was an American Founding Father who was principal author of the Declaration of Independence (1776). He was elected the second Vice President of the United States (1797–1801), serving under John Adams and in 1800 was elected third President (1801–09). Jefferson was a proponent of democracy, republicanism, and individual rights, which motivated American colonists to break from Great Britain and form a new nation. He produced formative documents and decisions at both the state and national level.

Primarily of English ancestry, he was born and educated in Virginia. He graduated from the College of William & Mary and practiced law. During the American Revolution, he represented Virginia in the Continental Congress that adopted the Declaration, drafted the law for religious freedom as a Virginia legislator, and served as a wartime governor (1779–1781). He became the United States Minister to France in May 1785, and subsequently the nation's first Secretary of State in 1790–1793 under President George Washington. Jefferson and James Madison organized the Democratic-Republican Party to oppose the Federalist Party during the formation of the First Party System. With Madison, he anonymously wrote the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions in 1798–1799, which sought to embolden states' rights in opposition to the national government by nullifying the Alien and Sedition Acts.

While president Jefferson pursued the nation's shipping and trade interests against Barbary pirates and aggressive British trade policies respectively and also organized the Louisiana Purchase almost doubling the country's territory. As a result of peace negotiations with France, his administration reduced military forces. He was reelected in 1804. Jefferson's second term was beset with difficulties at home, including the trial of former Vice President Aaron Burr. American foreign trade was diminished when Jefferson implemented the Embargo Act of 1807, responding to British threats to U.S. shipping. In 1803, Jefferson began a controversial process of Indian tribe removal to the newly organized Louisiana Territory, and, in 1807, signed the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves. Historians generally rank Jefferson as one of the greatest U.S. Presidents.

Jefferson mastered many disciplines which ranged from surveying and mathematics to horticulture and inventions. He was a proven architect in the classical tradition. Jefferson's keen interest in religion and philosophy earned him the presidency of the American Philosophical Society. He shunned organized religion, but was influenced by both Christianity and deism. Besides English, he was well versed in Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and Spanish. He founded the University of Virginia after retiring from public office. He was a skilled writer and correspondent. His only full-length book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), is considered the most important American book published before 1800.

Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton whose marriage produced six children, but only two daughters survived to adulthood. He owned several plantations and owned many slaves. Most historians believe that after the death of his wife in 1782, he had a relationship with his slave Sally Hemings and fathered at least some of her children. Jefferson died at his home in Charlottesville, Virginia, on July 4, the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence.

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