

## The Making of a Nation – Program No. 35

### Thomas Jefferson, Part Six:

#### Thomas Jefferson Has a Lasting Influence on the United States

From VOA Learning English, welcome to The Making of a Nation, our weekly program of American history for people learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

We have been talking about Thomas Jefferson's second term as president. Historian Joseph Ellis calls it "a disaster," defined by the trade embargo and the looming War of 1812.

"He leaves office in 1808, 1809. He really wants to get out of town and sort of lick his wounds."



In the months before he left office, Jefferson had signed a bill banning all trade with Europe. No ships could enter the United States, and no ships could leave. The purpose of the trade embargo was to keep America out of the war between Britain and France.

But the embargo slowed the American economy. Many Americans opposed the trade ban.

Jefferson's political opponents, the Federalists, used the issue to increase their strength in northeastern states. The year 1808 was, after all, a presidential election year.

Thomas Jefferson had served two four-year terms as president. No law prevented him from running again. But Jefferson had decided years before that a president should be limited to two terms.

Without such a limit, Jefferson believed, a powerful man might be able to keep the position for as long as he wished. George Washington had served two terms, and then retired. Jefferson would do the same.

Jefferson's Republican Party chose James Madison as its candidate for president. James Madison was Jefferson's secretary of state. The party chose George Clinton as its candidate for vice president.

The Federalist Party named the same candidates it had chosen four years earlier: Charles Cotesworth Pinckney for president, and Rufus King for vice president.

The Federalists felt sure they would win the election. They thought that Jefferson's embargo on trade had angered the people and turned them away from the Republican Party. Even some Republicans felt the election could go very badly for their party.

But Jefferson remained calm. He believed that most Americans understood what he was trying to do with the embargo. And he believed they would vote for his party's candidate. Jefferson was right. Madison was elected.

Thomas Jefferson left the White House in March of 1809. He believed the nation was in good hands with James Madison. He returned to Monticello, his country home in Virginia, and never went back to Washington again.



*The grounds of the colonial estate of Thomas Jefferson at Charlottesville, Virginia look out across a broad valley toward the Blue Ridge Mountains. The atmospheric haze, which gives the mountains their name, rises from the valley in the late afternoon sunshine of this early autumn day. Photo: Steve Ember*

Jefferson -- who died in 1826 -- spent his retirement years following many of his interests. One was architecture.

Jefferson continued building and remodeling his home, Monticello, throughout his presidency and retirement. The design was influenced by buildings he had seen in France and Britain.

Monticello appears on one side of the American five cent coin, the nickel. Jefferson's face is on the other side.

Jefferson also spent a good deal of his retirement writing letters. Historian Andrew O'Shaughnessy says Jefferson was one of the great letter writers of his time.

One of his famous correspondences was with John Adams. Adams was the second president of the United States. Adams and Jefferson had been friends during the first years of the United States. But politics had made them enemies. Their friendship ended after the election of 1800.

Yet in retirement, the two men became friends again. Jefferson and Adams had what Andrew O'Shaughnessy calls a "remarkable correspondence."

"They discuss the memory of the American revolution, the history of it, and how it should be written. But they also range over scientific and philosophical subjects."

Jefferson wrote about 19,000 letters in his lifetime. A project to publish the entire collection started in 1943 and is not expected to be completed until 2026.

Jefferson also used his retirement to improve education in his home state of Virginia. Jefferson believed firmly in the value of education. His whole idea of government depended on the ability of citizens to make intelligent decisions.

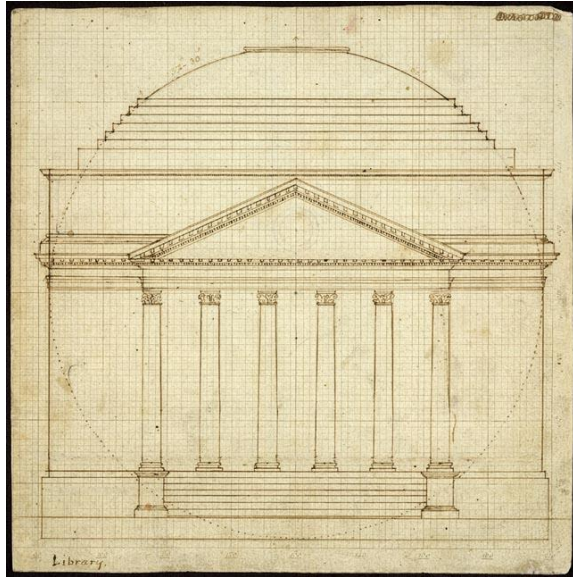
He proposed a school system of three steps.

The first would be elementary schools, where all children could learn reading, writing, arithmetic and geography. These schools would be built in all areas of the state and would be paid for by the people living in each area.

The second step would be colleges — equivalent to the high schools of today. He proposed that nine of these schools be built in the state. Students would begin the study of science, or would study agriculture, or how to make things by hand. These schools would be paid for by the state.

The third step would be a state university, the University of Virginia, where students of great ability could get the best education possible. The university would produce the lawyers, doctors, professors, scientists and government leaders. Young men whose families had money would pay for their own educations. The state would pay the costs of a small number of bright students from poor families.

Jefferson also proposed that the University of Virginia be built at Charlottesville, a town near his home. Many of Jefferson's ideas for the university buildings came from the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome.



Jefferson drew plans for the buildings. The buildings were very well designed. Work began on the university immediately. But it was six years before the school was open to students.

*Jefferson's plan for Library at the University Of Virginia (Courtesy Library of Congress)*

Jefferson was there almost every day, watching the workers. He was quick to criticize any mistake or work that was not well done. When he was sick and not able to go down to the university, he would watch the work through a telescope from a window of his home.

The cost of the university kept growing. And Jefferson had to struggle to get the legislature to pay for it. He also worked hard to get the best possible professors to teach at the university. He sent men throughout the United States, and even someone to Europe, to find good teachers.

Finally, in March 1825, the University of Virginia opened.

Jefferson's health had suffered during his years of work on the university. He was 82-years-old and feeling his age. He suffered from rheumatism and diabetes, and was so weak he could walk only short distances.

He knew he did not have much longer to live. He told a friend one day: "When I look back over the ranks of those with whom I have lived and loved, it is like looking over a field of battle. All fallen."

As his health grew worse, Jefferson turned his thoughts to death. He wrote how he wished to be buried. He wanted a simple grave on the mountainside below his house. He drew a picture of the kind of memorial he wanted put at his grave.

On this stone he wanted the statement: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson — author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Virginia Law for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia."

Jefferson had been governor of Virginia, secretary of state and president. But historian Joseph Ellis says it makes sense that Jefferson would emphasize his contribution to the Declaration of Independence.

“Those are the magic words of American history. There’s 55 of them and they begin, ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident.’ At the time that he wrote them he didn’t fully understand how important they were going to be. But they end up becoming the creed, the American creed. And that’s his ticket to fame, the basis for his illustrious reputation.”

But Joseph Ellis points out that Thomas Jefferson’s reputation has suffered, especially among many historians. The reason, he says, is slavery. Jefferson owned over 150 slaves at Monticello.

“He wanted to take a high moral ground and say that he knew slavery was at odds with the values of the American Revolution and the American republic. A lot of people said that who were slave owners. But in the end, he says the federal government has no power whatsoever to do anything about it.”

Joseph Ellis says Jefferson was against mixing of the races in society because he thought it would threaten the American union. But he is believed to have had a relationship with a slave named Sally Hemings who lived at Monticello. In 1998 genetic evidence supported the idea that Jefferson fathered children with her many years after his wife died.

The historian says one reason people still find Jefferson interesting is the contradiction between his words in the Declaration of Independence and his personal actions.



“He is the most resonant figure in American history because he simultaneously wrote the magic words about freedom and individual rights and equality, and at the same time was embedded in the great sin of American history — slavery and racism. So that he stands astride the great paradox that is the history of America.”

On July 4th, 1826, Americans began celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. But then, from Boston, came news that former president John Adams had died. His last words were: "Thomas Jefferson still lives."

But Adams was wrong. At 10 minutes before 10 in the morning, on that same Fourth of July, his friend, Thomas Jefferson, had died. Jefferson died at Monticello, in his bed, surrounded by his family.

As the news of the deaths of the two great men spread across the country, the celebrations turned to mourning and sorrow. Jefferson was buried the next day, as he had ordered, in a simple grave on the quiet mountainside.

Thomas Jefferson continues to influence the United States – especially his words about freedom and democracy. And Jefferson’s influence remained especially strong for James Madison. The fourth president had to deal with the problems with Britain that Jefferson was not able to solve. James Madison’s presidency and the war of 1812 will be our story next time.



I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us each week for The Making of a Nation — our American history series from VOA Learning English.