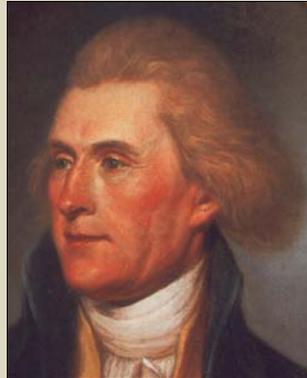


# Thomas Jefferson



Thomas Jefferson was born in 1743 in Albemarle County in Virginia. He achieved his wealth from an inheritance from his father who was an early plantation planter and a surveyor. His inheritance was 5,000 acres of some of the best land in the state. In addition to his wealth, Jefferson had a high social status which came from his mother being a member of the famous Randolph family.

Jefferson went to the College of William and Mary and then continued his education at law school. He married Martha Wayles Skelton in 1772 and they resided at Monticello in Virginia. Because of his societal ranking, Jefferson soon became involved in politics. He was a silent member of the Virginia House of Burgesses and an active member of the Continental Congress. In 1774 he wrote the political pamphlet “A Summary View of the Rights of British America.” Thomas Jefferson was eloquent as a correspondent but he was not a public speaker.

Jefferson was 33 when he wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776. During the American Revolution, from 1776 to 1779 he served in the General Assembly of Virginia. He continually advocated for States Rights.

Below are some of the bills submitted in the General Assembly, credited to Thomas Jefferson:

- Abolishment of entail (the rule by which the descent is fixed) - Passed
- Abolishment of primogeniture (the right of the first born) - Passed
- Revision of the criminal code - Passed (though not enacted until 1796)
- Creation of a free-system of tax-supported elementary education for every student in the state, except slaves –Defeated
- Creation of a public library and modification of the curriculum of the College of William and Mary – Defeated
- Creation of the Virginia Bill (1779) establishing religious freedom in the state – Passed but took eight years to pass

In June of 1779, he was elected as Governor of Virginia. His role as state leader was not a success. During the Revolutionary War, the city of Richmond, Virginia, the state capital, was attacked and burnt by the British. Jefferson was criticized by other members of the state government and by the people of Virginia for fleeing Richmond pending the British occupation. In June of 1781, Jefferson formerly retired as governor of Virginia. In 1782, his wife died from a long illness. Jefferson went into a mild depression. In 1783, after much persuading, he ran for election and took a seat in Congress. It was here that his political leadership began to show.

In congress he submitted the following bills:

*Notes on the Establishment of a Money Unit and of a Coinage for the United States* (1784)

- This bill advised the use of the decimal system and the adoption of the dollar (not the British Pound).

*Land Ordinance of 1784*

- Jefferson believed that the new Western territories should be self-governing
- Once they reached a certain size they should be admitted to the Union as full partners of the Thirteen Original States
- All Slavery should be banned that year (1784) in the Thirteen Colony States – even though Jefferson owned slaves.
- The bill also proposed that all slavery be excluded from all of the American Western territories after 1800

The bill was narrowly defeated but showed that changes in slavery would be forthcoming.

*Land Ordinance of 1787*

- Establishing the Northwest Territory, prohibiting slavery in this region

Jefferson's political mind (and his knowledge of the French language) led to his appointment as Minister to France in 1785. Jefferson was pro-French and was the logical candidate to replace Benjamin Franklin.

In 1789, while on his way home from France, he was elected Secretary of State by George Washington. Unfortunately for Jefferson his appointment did not last long. Being an anti-federalist, Jefferson had sympathized with the French Revolution and his stance made him an enemy of the pro-British Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was Washington's financial expert. Jefferson believed that Hamilton's financial programs were both unwise and unconstitutional. Jefferson still advocated for States Rights while Hamilton believed in a strong, federal government.

Thomas Jefferson, on several occasions, tried to convince George Washington to veto Hamilton's bills for the Bank of the United States. His attempts failed. The more Washington sided with Hamilton, the more Jefferson became dissatisfied with his minority position. On December 31, 1793 Jefferson resigned as Secretary of State.

While in brief retirement, Jefferson still made his sentiments well known. He openly spoke up about certain political actions within the nation:-

- Believed Washington used excessive force to put down the Whiskey Rebellion (1794)
- He considered Jay's Treaty with Britain in 1794 heinous (unforgiving)
- He gradually began to assume leadership of the Democratic-Republicans
- He always attacked Federalist policies
- He opposed a strong central government and promoted the rights of states

Forced by his peers, he reluctantly ran for President in 1796. He came within three votes of winning (71 to 68). Due to a loophole in the *Constitution*, Thomas Jefferson became Vice-President, even though he strongly opposed the new president, John Adams.

Jefferson did not hesitate to accept his party's nomination for president in the next national election. During the Presidential Election of 1800 the same loophole caused a more serious problem – Republican Party electors tried to name both President and Vice-President from their own party.

The final vote was a tie between Jefferson and Aaron Burr. The law stated that the House of Representatives settle the tie. Popular opinion within the House of Representatives disliked both candidates but, in the end, Jefferson was duly elected as the President of the United States.

### **Thomas Jefferson as President of the United States**

Even though Thomas Jefferson was a shy and thoughtful man, as President he was capable and practical. In theory, the supporters of his Jeffersonian Democracy advocated for liberty and equality. However, in practice, they still lived in a society that fully accepted slavery and removed the Native Americans so that the white settlers could expand further westward.

In theory his supporters insisted on a strict adherence of the *Constitution*, peaceful foreign relations and a reduction in the size and power of the federal government. However, as President, Jefferson had to broadly interpret the *Constitution*. Perhaps the best example of this was his accommodations to acquire the Louisiana Territory from the French in the Louisiana Purchase.

During the presidency of Jefferson the nation was seen as a New Republic. His term saw a substantial population growth which was accompanied by improved transportation links within the various sections of the country. Unfortunately the nation was not united. It suffered from a lack of national unity due to the institution of slavery. Beliefs systems surrounding slavery created powerful sectional loyalties.

As President, Thomas Jefferson successfully accomplished his goals of reducing federal bureaucracy, taxes and military spending. He believed that a large, federal deficit was dangerous to Republican institutions and any American government that had a large military presence would easily provoke future hostilities.

One of the greatest achievements of Thomas Jefferson was the **Louisiana Purchase** in 1803. He doubled the size of the nation for only \$ 15 million. However, in order to act quickly on such a good deal he used the “*elastic clause*” of the *Constitution* and made a treaty with France. If he had asked for Senate appropriation of the money and their subsequent ratification of the bill, the deal would have never transpired.

During the midst of the Louisiana controversy he also authorized the expedition of **Lewis and Clark (1804-1806)** who were to map and chart the new Oregon frontier lands.

Even though Jefferson reduced his military spending he achieved success in the senate with the military action against the **Barbary Pirates** in North Africa. For years pirates had been plundering and blackmailing merchant ships in the Mediterranean. Jefferson, using his power as commander-in-chief, dispatched the United States Navy to confront the pirates rather than submit to their demands for tributes.

After his first term as president, Thomas Jefferson enjoyed great popularity within the nation. Therefore it was not surprising that he enjoyed an overwhelming re-election in 1804.

### **The Downfall of Thomas Jefferson**

Though Jefferson was the popular choice of the people he still had many federalist enemies within the capital. Prior to the election of 1800 both George Washington and John Adams had made several Federalist appointments to the courts. Jefferson had tried to remove them from office but the appointments were not subject to recall and impeachment was impossible.

Jefferson’s first opponent was **Chief Justice John Marshall**. Marshall’s decisions in many landmark cases had the effect of strengthening the central government, often at the expense of the states’ rights. This often angered Jefferson. The case of *Marbury v. Madison* in 1803 was the first confrontation between the two cousins.

[Marshall ruled that Marbury had a right to his commission according to the Judiciary Act but then Marshall said that the same Judiciary Act of 1789 was unconstitutional. By ruling a law of Congress to be unconstitutional, Marshall established the doctrine of judicial review. The Supreme Court could now exercise the power to decide whether an act of Congress or of the president was or was not allowed by the Constitution].

Jefferson tried impeachment (Samuel Chase – Supreme Court Justice) but failed and federalist judges remained in office.

In 1804 a Republican caucus decided not to nominate **Aaron Burr** for a second term as vice-president. Burr then created a federalist conspiracy when he formed a secret political pact with some radical New England Federalists. He planned to win the governorship of New York and unite the state with New England. He then planned to secede from the Union. Most Federalists voted for Alexander Hamilton, Burr lost the election.

Hamilton and Burr continued to argue and these altercations led to a duel between the two. **Burr killed Hamilton in 1804.** He then planned to take Mexico from Spanish rule, unite it with Louisiana and run his own country. Jefferson ordered Burr's arrest and trial for treason. Presiding at the trial was Chief Justice John Marshall. The jury acquitted Burr, basing its decision on Marshall's narrow definition of treason and the lack of witnesses to any "overt act" by Burr. Once again Jefferson was at the mercy of the Federalists. The action of the court ensured that in the future, treason could not be charged lightly or for purely political purposes. A tool Jefferson once used had now been removed from his arsenal.

The actions of Jefferson against the Barbary Pirates, which at first seemed a great act of nationalism took much longer than anticipated. Sporadic fighting took place for four years (1801-1805). The American navy did not achieve a decisive victory but did offer some protection to U.S. vessels trading in the Mediterranean Sea. Back home the people saw this as a failure for the Jefferson administration and soon Congress was requesting more money for naval forces to ensure future victories.

The Napoleonic Wars changed the nation's opinions regarding Jefferson. Both France and Britain attempted naval blockades of enemy ports. They regularly seized ships of foreign nations and confiscated their cargoes. In addition Jefferson faced several cases of **impressment** by the British navy (the practice of capturing U.S. Sailors and forcing them to serve in the British navy).

One particular incident at sea nearly caused a war between the United States and Britain. In 1807, the British warship *Leopard* fired on the U.S. warship *Chesapeake*. Three Americans were killed and four others taken prisoner and impressed into the British navy. Anti-British sentiment ran high, the nation called for war but Jefferson called for diplomacy and economic sanctions against the British.

As an alternative to war Jefferson convinced the Republican majority in Congress to pass the **Embargo Act of 1807**. The act prohibited American merchant ships from sailing to any foreign port. Jefferson believed that as the United States was Britain's largest trading partner, the British would stop violating the rights of neutral nations and keep their largest trading partner. The embargo backfired and caused economic hardship to the United States. The British kept in control of the high seas and began purchasing supplies from South America.

Seeing that the Embargo Act had failed, Jefferson called for its repeal in 1809, during the final days of the presidency. Even after the repeal, U.S. ships could legally trade with any country except Britain and France.

Jefferson believed in the tradition established by Washington of voluntarily retiring after a second term. For his party's nomination for president he supported his close friend, his Secretary of State James Madison.

During Jefferson's presidency the trans-Appalachian West began to be developed. Thanks to the rich soil and the developing system of roads and water transportation (canals), the area saw substantial growth after 1790. New settlers were now families and no longer single men. Native Americans resisted these advances, especially Tenskawatawa and his brother **Tecumseh**. However, the settlers defeated, with aid of the United States military, any major resistances.

Prior to 1820 any economic growth came from agriculture and trading. Under Jefferson the practice of "carrying trade" was developed. Less investment took place in risky manufacturing ventures, although some innovations, especially in the textile industry did appear. American workers reacted to new machinery with ambivalence (hesitancy). The workers feared reduced wages, a loss of independence and job status. American cities were still small; housing about 7% of the total population. Cities were still small shipping and receiving areas for international trade. Jefferson was still pro-agriculture and did not want these cities to grow any larger than necessary.

In his first term Thomas Jefferson served as a role model for democracy but as he was to find, being President of the United States has two faces. His strict devotion and adherence to the Constitution had to change when he left his role as state representative and became President. The disputes between Anti-Federalists and Federalists and the power of the Supreme Court were causes of great concern to Jefferson. His failures during his second term clearly outweighed his successes during his first term.

Thanks to a tradition that started with George Washington, Thomas Jefferson was allowed to bow out gracefully from the presidency rather than face an anticipated defeat during the next presidential election. Today the legacy of Thomas Jefferson remains as that of a hero, a founding father of the nation but during his second term his economic actions brought disaster to the nation. His purchase of the Louisiana Territory is one of the greatest deals known in American history but as a strict follower of the Constitution he had to "stretch" the rules, the rules of the Constitution that he held in highest regard.

Thomas Jefferson the politician from Virginia and Thomas Jefferson the President of the United States were, at many times, two totally different people.