



Thomas Jefferson

279 Years ago, on 13 April 1743, Thomas Jefferson was born in Virginia. He went on to become the Governor of Virginia (1779-1781), followed by becoming

- The US Minister to France (1785-1789), Benjamin Franklin's successor
- The 1st Secretary of State (1790-1793), appointed by George Washington
- The 2nd Vice-President (1797-1801), his good friend John Adams' VP after losing the Presidential election by 3 electoral votes to Adams
- And the 3rd President of the United States (1801-1809). As US President he concluded the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, a transaction in which he purchased land from Napoleon, which doubled the land area of the US.

He is generally regarded as one of the Founding Fathers of the US. [1] [2] [3]

His Rise

Jefferson studied Law at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg from 1762 to 1767, then practiced Law for short time until he was elected to the Virginia State Legislature in 1769, where he became known as a strong supporter of independence from Great Britain. Virginia nominated him as a delegate to the 2nd Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1775.

He did not play a major role in the debates of the 2nd Congress, but took on the role of draftsman of the resolutions. He was consequently elected to a committee of 5 to draft a document outlining the reasons for independence, along with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. He wrote a draft of the document on behalf of the committee. Congress debated and edited his draft document, and officially adopted the final the "Declaration of Independence" on 4 July 1776. Over time Jefferson became known as the principal author of this historic document.



Thomas Jefferson [Image: Wikimedia Commons]

Apart from his strong stance on independence, he was also known for two other strong positions:

- The rights of the States (an issue on which he clashed with Alexander Hamilton, which some argue was the origin of political parties in the US)
- Separation of Church and State.

The 1st Amendment to the US Constitution and the Separation of Church and State

Like several other Founding Fathers, Jefferson was a deist, which means that he accepted the existence of some sort of a creator god, but not a personal god who interacts with his creation. He rejected the Christian dogmas, like the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection etc, and he regarded Biblical miracles as mythology. In the heat of political campaigns the Federalist Press called him a pagan and an atheist. He called himself a “Christian” only in the sense that he followed the moral teachings of Jesus. He took the teachings of Jesus from the New Testament and rearranged them (without miracles and the resurrection story) in a book he called “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth”. It became known as the Jefferson Bible.

To complicate matters, Jefferson held many ambiguous and even contradictory views (and not only in relation to religion), his position changed over the years, and there are differences of opinion about what he really believed.

In the end labels do not matter much. What is important is the major contribution he made to secularism, and especially the separation of Church and State.

The 1st Amendment was fully ratified on 15 Dec 1791, when Virginia (Jefferson's home state) became the 11th one to ratify it. It reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." [4]

Jefferson played an important role in the 1st Amendment:

- He drafted and introduced the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1779, which was eventually passed in 1786. The US Supreme Court concluded in 1947, that the 1st Amendment was based on this statute
- Jefferson was a strong supporter of the 1st Amendment and all 5 freedoms it contains, including freedom of religion
- He had a significant impact on the application of the 1st amendment and the debate about Church and State with a metaphor he used in correspondence with the Baptists of Danbury in Connecticut. On 1 Jan 1802 he sent them a letter as President of the US, which included this paragraph:

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State." [5]

From the Public Broadcast Service website: "Jefferson's metaphor lay largely ignored until 1947, when Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black invoked the phrase in *Everson v. Board of Education* and argued that the "wall of separation" must be kept "high and impregnable." Since then, no phrase has exerted a more profound influence on debates about the proper relation between church and state in America." [5]

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His Later Years

In 1809 Jefferson retired to Monticello, the estate he built near Shadwell in Virginia. In 1819 he founded and designed the university of Virginia, which was visible from Monticello. In 1812 he reconciled with his old friend, Johan Adams, who became a political adversary over the years. They conducted a famous political correspondence until their death, which fell, strangely enough, hours apart on the 4th of July 1826 (the 50th anniversary of the signing of the "Declaration of Independence").

After his Death

The Jefferson Memorial was dedicated to him in Washington on 13 April 1943, 200 years after he was born.

During his 1st term as US President widespread rumours surfaced about him fathering the 6 children of one of his female slaves (Sally Hemings), who also accompanied him on his assignment to France as US Minister. These rumours raged for 2 centuries. In January 2000 the Thomas Jefferson Foundation published a comprehensive analysis and report on the matter, including the DNA evidence of the 1998 DNA tests of the male descendants of

Jefferson and Hemings. The foundation accepted that Jefferson fathered at least one of her children and most likely, all 6. [6] [7]

This also highlights one of the contradictions of the complex character that was Thomas Jefferson:

- The strong, passionate advocate of freedom and individual liberties
- Who also owned large numbers of slaves his entire adult life
 - Since the age of 14 when he inherited about 40 slaves from his late father, and then later 175 from his father-in-law
 - He is known to have purchased about 20 additional slaves
 - Using one of his slaves (Sally Hemings) as a concubine, without ever setting her free
 - As a matter of fact, he did not free any of his slaves, except for Sally Hemings' light-skinned children
 - On accession he called slavery an anomaly, but in 1819 he also supported the expansion of slavery into the Western territories and he expressed a preference for secession if the federal government should enact mandatory abolition.

Regarding the Sally Hemings saga and the contradiction outlined above, from Britannica: "Jefferson's admirers preferred to consider it a love affair and to see Jefferson and Hemings as America's preeminent biracial couple. His critics, on the other hand, considered Jefferson a sexual predator whose eloquent statements about human freedom and equality were hypocritical." [8]

Final Comments

Although the "Secular Thinkers" category typically does not contain much in terms of commentary, a few brief ones:

- With the US Constitution, and especially the First Amendment, Thomas Jefferson and the Founding Fathers of the US, were responsible for one of those significant historic events - separating Church and State
- This had an enormous, and highly positive, impact on the Western World
- In a way this was the reversal of the fusion of Church and State by Theodosius I on 27 Feb 380. See our "Historic Moments" article here:
<https://theCSF.xyz/christianity-becomes-the-official-religion-of-the-roman-empire/>
- It is a tragedy that it took more than 1,400 years before a better direction was taken, and people like Thomas Jefferson's contribution to diminish the political power of religion cannot be over-emphasized, despite his personal flaws.

The Next "Secular Thinkers" article

E.O. Wilson (scheduled for 3 June 2022)

Sources

Three good general sources on Thomas Jefferson's life:

[1] Britannica

Link: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Jefferson>

[2] Monticello.org

Link: <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/brief-biography-of-jefferson/>

[3] Wikipedia

Link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jefferson

[4] Constitution Annotated

Link:

<https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/#:~:text=Congress%20shall%20make%20no%20law,for%20a%20redress%20of%20grievances.>

[5] Public Broadcasting Service website

Link: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/godinamerica/people/wall-of-separation.html>

[6] Monticello.org

Link:

<https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings-a-brief-account/>

[7] Report of the Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, by the THOMAS JEFFERSON FOUNDATION, JANUARY 2000

Link:

<https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings-a-brief-account/research-report-on-jefferson-and-hemings/>

[8] Britannica

Link: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Jefferson/Slavery-and-racism> (last paragraph)

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