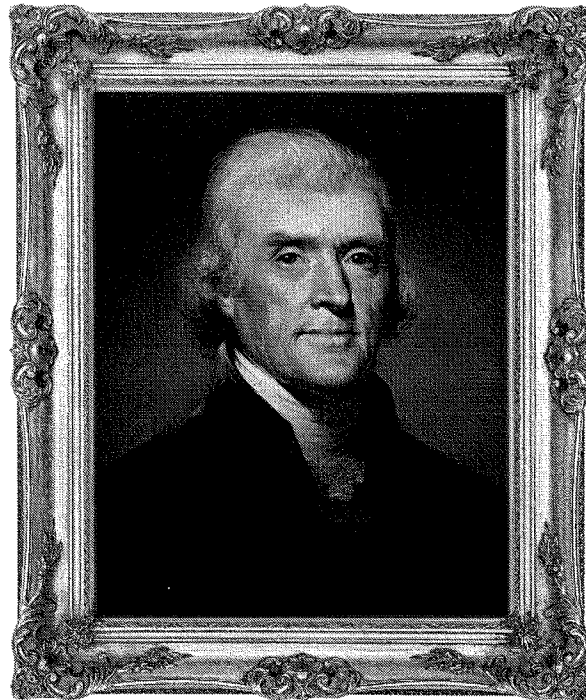


Lawyers Who Shaped America

Thomas Jefferson



The Genius of Monticello

BY MICHAEL S. HOOKER

*Here was buried Thomas Jefferson
Author of the Declaration of American Independence
of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom
and Father of the University of Virginia*

—INSCRIPTION ON THOMAS JEFFERSON'S TOMBSTONE

There is perhaps no more felicitous an epitaph for a man whose life exemplified robust achievement, yet quiet dignity and genuine humility. Although he had served as Governor of the State of Virginia, Minister to France, Secretary of State, and President of the United States, these astounding accomplishments merited not so much as a mention on Thomas Jefferson's self-inscribed tombstone. Jefferson wished to be remembered most for his unique contributions to

the new "American experiment" and to the enrichment of the "mind of man." ("... I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.")

A product of the "Age of Reason," Jefferson believed that humankind stood at the threshold of an apocalyptic new age emphasizing social progress and scientific rationalism. Building upon the teachings of "Enlightenment" thinkers such as John Locke and Francis Bacon, Jefferson devised a new

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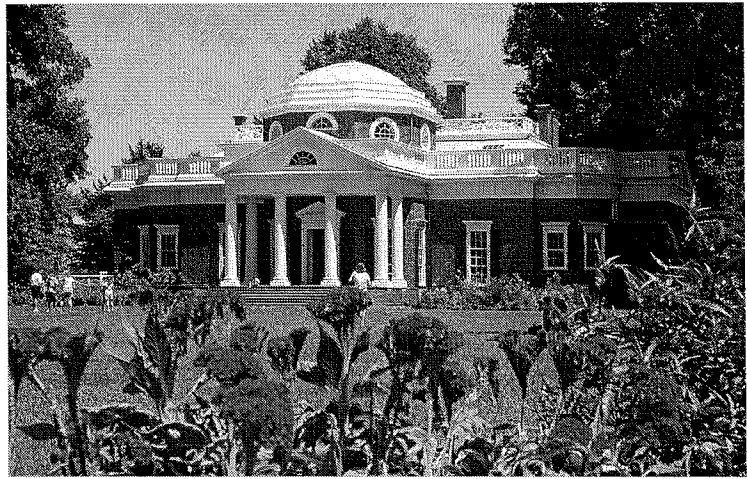
democratic construct whose central tenet was that citizens enjoy the inalienable right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Although these words are now part of our national lexicon, they were novel and, indeed, radical, 235 years ago.

Thomas Jefferson was a “Renaissance Man” in the truest sense of the term. His roles as a statesman, politician, legislator, and revolutionary are well known and documented. But he was also a botanist, meteorologist, musician, inventor, agriculturist, philosopher, philanthropist, gourmet, author, wine connoisseur, archeologist, and, oh yes, lawyer. He was considered one of the premier architects (entirely self-taught) in the country during his time, designing the Virginia State Capitol building, the University of Virginia Rotunda and surrounding “academical village,” and, of course, his beloved Monticello. (“All my wishes end where I hope my days will end, at Monticello.”)

Throughout his life, Jefferson displayed an insatiable appetite for knowledge. He was a voracious reader, once commenting “I cannot live without books.” Indeed, when much of the Library of Congress’ original collection was destroyed by fire during the War of 1812, Jefferson offered as a replacement his own personal library consisting of 6,487 volumes. It was the largest private collection in the country at that time.

Jefferson’s love affair with books was probably fueled by what can only be described as an extraordinary intellect. Examples of his mental acuity and agility are legion. He was proficient in five languages, and reportedly taught himself Spanish in merely 19 days during his only voyage to France. He personally designed the turret clock for the University of Virginia Rotunda and then commissioned its construction by Simon Willard, the preeminent American clockmaker of that era. Willard later observed that Jefferson’s plans were the only ones he ever received while in business that were properly prepared, with measurements so precise and accurately calculated that everything fit within one-sixteenth of an inch when finally installed. Feats such as these prompted John F. Kennedy, almost a century and a half later, to welcome 49 Nobel Laureates to the White House with these remarks, “This is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has even been gathered together at the White House—with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.”

Jefferson’s ascension to the White House in 1800 was not without controversy. Jefferson and Aaron Burr deadlocked in the electoral college voting, thrusting the election before the outgoing House of Representatives, which proceeded to reach tie



Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia.

votes through 35 successive ballots. Finally, on the 36th ballot, the tie was broken with Jefferson declared the winner. Jefferson and incumbent John Adams then established the precedent in this country of a peaceful transfer of power between two presidents of opposing political parties, something Jefferson would later describe as the “second American Revolution.” In his first inaugural address, Jefferson sought a tone of reconciliation between the warring factions, famously proclaiming, “We have been called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.”

Jefferson’s contributions to our nation are numerous and profound. Although best remembered as chief draftsman of the Declaration of Independence, he also pressed James Madison, his protégé, to augment the new Constitution with a Bill of Rights ensuring, among other things, freedom of the press and the separation of church and state. As president, Jefferson almost single-handedly doubled the geographic area of the United States by pushing through Congress in 1803 the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France, at that time the largest recorded real estate transaction in history. He then commissioned the famous Lewis and Clark Expedition to explore the newly acquired territory. In one of our country’s earliest wars against terror, Jefferson launched a naval squadron to North Africa to stop the pirating of U.S. vessels in international waters, an action later commemorated in the U.S. Marine Corps Hymn (“From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli ...”).

But what modern Americans find so enigmatic about Jefferson is that, for all his strengths, for all his prodigious gifts, he also displayed surprising weaknesses. Easily the most salient of these was Jefferson’s failure to free his personal slaves, whom

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William Howard Taft *continued from page 23.*

society. The complex role of the Supreme Court in our system of government derives from its authority to invalidate legislation or executive actions that, in the court's judgment, conflict with the U.S. Constitution. This power of judicial review has given the court a crucial responsibility in assuring individual rights, as well as in maintaining a "living Constitution" whose broad provisions are continually applied to complicated new situations.

Early in his tenure as chief justice, Taft recognized that the real work of the Supreme Court is not merely for the litigants before it in a particular case. The court's main purpose, he said in 1922, is "to lay down principles of law and thus to help the public at large to a knowledge of their rights and duties and to make the law clearer." But until Taft—and the Judges' Bill he conceived and pushed through Congress—freed

the court from the shackles of its years-old backlog of mundane appeals, it was severely hampered in carrying out that crucial responsibility.

Taft is rightly called "the first 'modern' chief justice" because of his expansion and redefinition of the duties of his office, taking on lobbying and administrative efforts far beyond the traditional role of chief justice. By securing for our highest court the power to shape its own docket and to carry out its important role in American life, William Howard Taft has earned our recognition as a lawyer who shaped America. ♦

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he called his "family." Jefferson professed to abhor slavery, observing that, "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free." Commenting on the inevitability of the emancipation of slaves in this country, Jefferson wrote, "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever." Yet the fact remains that the drafter of the American Declaration of Independence maintained under his own roof a constant reminder that, in his 18th Century America, all men were not created equal. Despite his singular ability to inspire, to lead, and to shape the future course of human history, Jefferson ultimately could not transcend the petty parochialism and prejudice that characterized the times in which he lived.

During his final years, Jefferson rekindled a warm relationship with estranged friend and revolutionary, John Adams. There ensued between the two former presidents one of the most celebrated correspondences in the history of letters. Over the next decade and a half, Jefferson and Adams engaged in all manner of discourse, ranging from politics to religion to philosophy. In one letter of note, Adams asked the 73-year old Jefferson, whether, if he had the choice to live life over again, he would willingly partake. Ever the optimist, Jefferson replied, "Yea. I think with you that it is a good world on the whole, that it has been framed on a principle of benevolence, and more pleasure than pain dealt out to us.... I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern."

Jefferson's and Adams' correspondence continued through 1826, our country's semi-centennial. Although Jefferson was invited to attend the celebration planned in Washington, D.C., he was forced to decline due to failing health. A few days later, on July 4, 1826, the precise day of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson passed away quietly in his bed at Monticello. In one of the eeriest coincidences in American history, Jefferson's long-time colleague and confidant, Adams, died later that same fateful day. Not realizing that Jefferson had expired a few hours earlier, Adams' last words were "Thomas Jefferson survives."

Probably more than any other person, Jefferson embodies those traits that we cherish as uniquely American. Whatever his human foibles, he will always be remembered for helping to embolden an emerging nation by stating in plain language certain "truths" that all Americans now hold to be "self-evident." Although our country today faces new challenges and obstacles that could not have been foreseen during Jefferson's time, Jefferson's words remain the cornerstone of our national identity and our collective core values. A hundred and eighty-five years after his death, Thomas Jefferson still survives. ♦

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