

# Thomas Jefferson and the samurai spirit

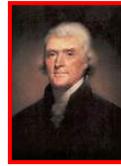
Tokugawa Ieyasu won the battle of Sekigahara in 1601, and he ushered into Japan several centuries of feudal rule. Tokugawa took the title of to decapitate his rival and and regulations that lasted nearly after Sekigahara, Japan that set the character of the attendant with this tale would by Thomas Jefferson.



Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the shogunate in 1603 in present-day Tokyo.

**Tokugawa Ieyasu**

To celebrate Shogun, established a 300 years. experienced



nation ever after. <sup>1</sup> The sacrifices have been understood and appreciated

his victory, invited peasants rigid set of laws One century an epic event

Approximately four decades before Jefferson's birth, in 1701 in Edo (Tokyo) an important imperial protocol officer, Kira Kozuke-no-Suke Yoshinaka, was charged with teaching court Kami accounts was probably insulting. enduring this Asano Although Kira drawing a palace was a Accordingly commit family lands in Western Honshu were forfeit. the family's retainers were dispersed landless an economic burden they could not repay and a of honor which custom demanded they avenge.



**Kira Yoshinaka**

etiquette to young nobles including Asano Takumi-no-Naganori. irascible and corrupt and Then after pedagogical attacked Kira was only blade inside capital Asano was *seppuku*.<sup>3</sup>



**Goaded by Kira, Lord Asano attacks with a katana leaving a slight wound and a scar.**

Kira by all demanding, undisputedly stoically abuse for months, with a weapon.<sup>2</sup> slightly injured, the imperial crime. ordered to The Asano clan's His family and having acquired murderous debt

That payback fell to 47 Asano samurai now called "*ronin*" or masterless warriors. Under the leadership of Oishi Kuranosuke, the clan knew full well the dilemma it faced.<sup>4</sup> Legally the punishment for murder extended to relatives; entire families could be

<sup>1</sup> Ishida Mistunari was the losing general at Sekigahara. Tokugawa captured Ishida and buried his rival up to his neck. Peasants were invited to hacksaw the neck little by little until Ishida died. Thereafter Tokugawa established the *bakufu* or tent government that lasted until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> The word for this weapon in Japanese is "*katana*" which can be anything from a dagger to a sword. Translations vary about the size of the weapon. While the nature of the weapon is disputed, most accounts agree that Kira publicly called Asano a country boor without manners "*innaka-no*" in Japanese.

<sup>3</sup> "Seppuku" is a formalized and honorable death by suicide. Males stab themselves with a special sword under the breastbone, draw the sword down and drag the blade along the stomach and then pull it upwards. At the point when the stomach cascades, a "second" uses a large sword to decapitate the person. Women commit seppuku by holding a dagger beneath their chins and then simultaneously thrusting the blade upward while violently lowering their heads.

<sup>4</sup> Again accounts vary. There may have been as many as 350 male retainers attached to the Asano clan. The estimate of samurai varies and there may have been more than 60 samurai – 48 joined the plot.

executed for the crimes of individual relatives. Yet the stigma of ignoring the social obligation to settle this debt of honor may have transcended the criminal punishment.

The price for resolving this quandary was steep, and it would have been appreciated by the third president of a nation that would be born later that century. Thomas Jefferson is variously described as enigmatic, complex, conflicted, inconsistent, hypocritical, and polarizing. Among other terms. For example, Richard Bernstein writes in his Jefferson biography, “. . . the contradictions of [Jefferson’s] life . . . bedevil all who study him. . . . writers have veered between the poles of these contradictions, praising Jefferson for his aspirations or damning him for his failures”. Oishi did not know Jefferson, and neither knew Bernstein. Yet each would have understood well the conflicts which these contemporary writers chronicle. These conditions cost Jefferson and Oishi dearly in all senses of the word, subjected each to ridicule and unspeakable scorn and left their controversial legacies discussed ever after. Still, to this day their monuments have been visited by millions of idolizing tourists.

Strikingly parallel histories draw these visitors to Monticello and sengaku-ji, the memorial to the 47 *ronin*. Perhaps the most compelling similarity features both Jefferson and Oishi risking their lives for the universal principles of honor and duty. Jefferson, born to landed privilege surely knew his revolutionary activities could easily lead to a noose. At one point during the Revolutionary War, for instance, Governor Jefferson fled down one side of a mountain while the British Army charged up the adjacent side. Had the timing been slightly different, the hilltop escape could easily have become an escalator to the gallows.<sup>5</sup> Oishi, for his part marched resolutely to his grave of honor.

That death road was indirect. Just as Jefferson interrupted his public duties after serving the first administration, so too Oishi retreated from public duty in the aftermath of Lord Asano’s death. The clan leader felt that events demanded patience before the *ronin* could avenge themselves upon the despicable Kira. Patience and deceit. Knowing that a fearful Kira had fortified his compound and dispatched spies, Oishi moved to the pleasure quarters of Kyoto and began a deliberate life of debauchery in taverns and brothels. A Japanese historian chronicles one famous anecdote.

“One day, as Ōishi returned drunk from some haunt, he fell down in the street and went to sleep, and all the passers-by laughed at him. A Satsuma man, passing by, was infuriated by this behavior on the part of a samurai - both by his lack of courage to avenge his master, as well as his current debauched behavior. The Satsuma man abused and insulted him, and kicked him in the face (to even touch the face of a samurai was a great insult, let alone strike it), and spat on him.”<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult for contemporary people to gauge the degree of contempt and scorn such behavior would purchase this samurai.

Not necessarily mystifying for Jefferson, however, given the vituperation he received from his contemporaries and future historians alike. Jefferson sowed fertile fields for criticism, and those seeds bore bitter results. He was arguably the foremost

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<sup>5</sup> Franklin summed up the founders’ potential fates succinctly: We shall hang together or we shall hang separately.

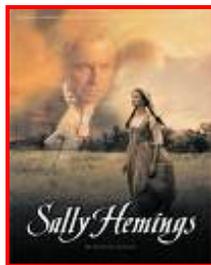
<sup>6</sup> See the discussion on The Samurai Achieves ([www.samurai-archives.com/ronin.html](http://www.samurai-archives.com/ronin.html)) for an easy-to-read translation of the events surrounding this anecdote.

republican when such beliefs suggested mob rule (a position rendered more passionate by his support of the French Revolution). He was a critic of religion (or at the very least religiosity) in a time of rampant Calvinism. He was a profligate spender who died deeply indebted. He was a slave owner and alleged miscegenist and misogynist as well. Critics have duly noted these traits, and Jefferson surely chafed under this personal criticism. Jefferson's dealings with slaves and slavery are particularly illustrative.

For instance, in 1801, after his election to the Presidency, Boston newspaper *The New England Palladium* said Jefferson had made his "ride into the temple of Liberty on the shoulders of slaves." Samuel Johnson weighed in by asking, "How is it, that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" Speaking of his vast slave holdings contemporary scholars Peter Gibbon and Richard Bernstein cite critics who argue that as a visionary, Jefferson had a duty to "transcend" the beliefs of his era and follow the lead of his neighbor, Edward Carter and release his slaves.<sup>7</sup> Jefferson's alleged relationship with Sally Hemmings caused particularly caustic contemporary criticism. Federalist papers lambasted Jefferson for his relationship with "Sally the sable" and penned this provocative verse:

Of all the damsels on the green  
On mountain on in valley  
A lass so luscious ne'er was seen  
As Monticellan Sally.

Thick pouting lips! how sweet their grace!  
When passion fires to kiss them!  
Wide spreading over half the face,  
Impossible to miss them.



**Jefferson's alleged relationship with Sally Hemmings caused particularly caustic contemporary criticism.**

Still we measure our heroes and icons not anecdotally, but rather as the legacy of an entire life of deeds as well as misdeeds. Straight to the point, University of Virginia scholar Peter Onuf said of Jefferson, "What remains of Jefferson is that he wrote the

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<sup>7</sup> Yale historian Annette Gordon-Reed writes, "Jefferson [was] firmly within the Southern plantation society where rules of the game featured public denunciation of "amalgamation" but private practice of it at all levels of white society."

American creed.” Onuf went on to quote Julian Bond, “Let’s not worry about the small stuff (the Heming’s Liaison) and rather teach the civic ideals that should inspire us.” Here lies a significant link between Jefferson and his samurai traits of idealism and stoicism and the final act of the drama of the 47 ronin.

Nearly a year and a half to the day after Lord Asano was ordered to commit *seppuku*, Oishi Kuranosuke left the bars and bordellos and entered the history books. Oishi gathered his fellow samurai in Edo where they finally avenged themselves on Kira. In a fierce fight on Dec. 14, 1702, Kira’s retainers were defeated.<sup>8</sup> While the enemy samurai were dead or captured, Kira was neither. The victorious samurai searched Kira’s compound and eventually found one unarmed cowering man, and two guards hiding among crying women servants in an underground chamber. The guards resisted and were killed. The man remained mute, and Oishi was summonsed.

The Asano’s deference to fulfilling his Thereupon volunteered to



cringing man was soon identified by the scar that *katana* had inflicted. Oishi fell to his knees in Kira’s rank and announced his intention of samurai’s obligation to avenge his master.

Oishi offered to let Kira commit *seppuku* and serve as his foe’s second. Kira wept and begged

for his life. In disgust Oishi ordered his men to down Kira whereupon Oishi beheaded Kira. then washed the decapitated head, and he and his marched across Edo where they laid the trophy along Asano’s *katana* on their master’s grave.



pin Oishi men head

The revenge was complete, but the story Oishi and his 47 followers surrendered to local authorities who faced a political dilemma. The penalty for murder was death, and yet the conquering samurai had attracted a significant popular following. An accommodation was reached. The samurai were allowed to commit *seppuku* rather than the death of common criminals. In a poignant footnote, the youngest of the 47 ronin (14 years old), was spared. He survived to 78 and was subsequently buried along with his comrades. Oishi’s 16-year-old son, Chikara, however was ordered to commit *seppuku* along side his father.<sup>9</sup>

was not. civic

<sup>8</sup> The battle lasted one and a half hours and pitted spies, archers, swordsmen and hand-to-hand fighting. Although outnumbered nearly five to one, none of the 47 attackers was killed. Kira’s forces suffered 38 fatalities.

<sup>9</sup> Common criminals were crucified and impaled with pikes, but these warriors were spared that humiliation. One version of this event is provided by texts distributed at Sengaku-ji: On February 4, 1703, the 46 ronin were divided into four groups and handed over to four different daimyo, who were ordered to supervise and witness their deaths. Oishi and the other 45 ronin all committed *seppuku* simultaneously, dignifying themselves in their valiant sacrifice. Upon their deaths, the 46 ronin were buried side by side next to their master at Sengaku-ji Temple.

In another interesting note, Oishi’s wife reportedly begged her husband not to include Chikara in the attack, but Oishi argued that his inclusion would secure his son’s place in historical honor. Furthermore legend says that the Satsuma man who had disparaged Oishi in front of the Kyoto brothel later traveled to Sengaku-ji, begged forgiveness in front of Oishi’s monument and committed *seppuku* on the grave. See Page 2 footnote 6.

I am uncertain as to whether Jefferson knew this tale, but he knew well the sacrifices expected and fulfilled by these samurai. Jefferson's letters resound with longing to retreat from the burdens of public life to the comfort and luxury of Monticello.

Yet Jefferson repeatedly served the public's demands in Paris, London, Philadelphia and Washington. Deeply in love with his wife and children, he spent significant time apart from them, buried his wife and ultimately survived all but one daughter. Committed to bettering the American people, he was criticized and even reviled by some of the nation's finest heroes including Hamilton, Burr, and Washington. He was estranged for years from his close friend and mentor John Adams. Perhaps the transcendent comparison between the Japanese samurai and Jefferson as American samurai lies in their legacy. Controversy notwithstanding, Jefferson's visage is carved in stone in the Rockies and millions of visitors have traveled to Monticello out of curiosity and honor. Books and movies about his life abound. So, too, Sengaku-ji, the burial shrine of 47 *ronin*, is a leading tourist location in Tokyo. Their story is immortalized in kabuki, and in movies and books. Incense burns continually on the stone *haka* for each of the 47. Each of those graves has its own story.

So, too, contemporary scholar Peter Gibbon argues that there are so many Jeffersons that his legacy is assured and endless. It is though the many strands of the third president form a rope that at once binds much of American thought and letters while simultaneously forming a noose that Jefferson's critics, past and present would slip over his lengthy neck. Meanwhile Jefferson's roughly contemporary 18<sup>th</sup> century Japanese heroes, the 47 *ronin*, honed their sacrificial steel to a sharpness that has defined Japanese values, like Jefferson's for friends and critics alike ever after. These are equally pointed legacies.