

Thomas Jefferson
Personality, Character and Public Life
NEH Summer Institute

**The character of Thomas Jefferson based on his epitaph –
lessons for an 8th grade Social Studies class**

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Overview

Thomas Jefferson was a man who made a great impact on American society. He is remembered today for many different things. His accomplishments range from achievements in politics, government and architecture to education and science. Throughout the world, the ideas of Jefferson are used in support of one cause or another. As Joseph J. Ellis wrote in his book, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, “He was America’s Everyman.”

How would Jefferson himself liked to be remember? He left us clues in the epitaph on his tombstone. By examining the accomplishments he was most proud of, we can get a glimpse into the character of this great man.

Lesson Sequence

Day 1

Give each student a piece of paper and ask them to write one thing for which they would like to be remembered. Collect the papers, mix them up and, without revealing names, read them aloud one at a time. After each, have the students try to guess who the author was. Discuss why we want to be remembered and who from history they remember as having done something worthy of remembrance.

Show the students examples of epitaphs that display accomplishments or achievements. (Appendix 1) Discuss each example with the students. If it is not obvious what each person’s occupation was, discuss that and how aptly the epitaph fits the achievements of the person being discussed.

If Thomas Jefferson has not been mentioned, ask the students about him. Tell them that Jefferson had three accomplishments carved on his tombstone of which he was most proud. Have the students speculate on what these accomplishments would be and create a list.

Next, show the students a picture of Jefferson's grave (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=544>) and have them read the epitaph. Discuss with the students the achievements listed on the stone. Have students speculate as to why they are listed.

Day 2

Review from yesterday the list generated by the students and Jefferson's epitaph. Give each student a copy of the Declaration of Independence.

(<http://www.ushistory.org/Declaration/document/>)

Review why the document was written and by whom. Tell them the story of the committee and how John Adams insisted on Jefferson writing the declaration because of his exceptional flair for writing. (see John Adams' autobiography, http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=A1_24) You may also want to compare Jefferson's original draft to the one accepted by the Continental Congress.

Read the document aloud, giving the students the opportunity to read the language of the time and get a feel for the writing style of Jefferson. Discuss the meaning of the different sections and any unfamiliar words.

Have the students write the answers to the following questions individually.

1. What is the purpose of each of the sections of the Declaration of Independence?
2. Which part do you think has the most relevance for our world today?
3. When Jefferson wrote "...all men are created equal" of whom was he speaking? Who did he consider to be "men"?
4. Why do you think Thomas Jefferson wanted to be remembered as the author of the Declaration of Independence?
5. Why do you think people around the world admire Jefferson's words?

It will be during the discussion of these questions that the issue of Jefferson as a slaveholder will be addressed. If the students do not bring it up themselves, I will broach the topic and ask them to consider why a man who wrote such inspiring words could also own slaves. Depending on how knowledgeable they are, the issue of Sally Hemings will be addressed as well. This section of the lesson could conceivably take several class periods.

Day 3

Review from previous lessons what has been discussed so far in relation to Thomas Jefferson's accomplishments and character. Refer to the epitaph again and read the second part of the inscription.

Give each student a copy of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.
(http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/jefferson_vsrf.html)

Assign sections of the Statute to pairs of students and have them read it together and summarize what is being said. Refer them to dictionaries and other resources for unfamiliar words. Instruct them to be ready to read their original part and then paraphrase their part into modern language.

When everyone has finished, call on the students in order and have them read their original part of the statute and then give their modern interpretation. Create a list on the board or overhead of what is contained in the document. Have the students answer the following questions on their own.

1. What is the purpose of this document?
2. Why did Jefferson object to government interference in religion?
3. Why did Jefferson object to religious interference in government?
4. What is meant by separation of church and state?
5. Why do you think Jefferson was proud of this bill being passed by the Virginia legislature?

Day 4

Review questions from yesterday and answer new questions regarding Jefferson and the two documents reviewed thus far. Give each student a copy of the history of the University of Virginia. (appendix 2) Read the history together. You may also want to show students early pictures of the university or Jefferson's drawings and plans. Discuss Jefferson's vision for the university and what he wanted to accomplish with its founding. Have the students answer the following questions on their own.

1. Did Thomas Jefferson think education was important? Explain your answer.
2. What made the University of Virginia different from the other universities of the same time period?
3. Why do you think Jefferson insisted on this difference?

4. In your opinion, why did Jefferson want to be remembered for founding the University of Virginia?

Have each student research and find 3 quotations by Thomas Jefferson; one on education or the University of Virginia, one on independence or liberty and one on religious freedom to be presented in class tomorrow.

Day 5

Review questions from yesterday. Have the students take turns reading their quotes from Thomas Jefferson assigned yesterday.

Essay assignment – Based on your study of the three items in Jefferson’s epitaph, what did Jefferson value? Do you believe that based on his values and these accomplishments, Thomas Jefferson should be remembered as an important American? In answering these two questions, be sure that you use specific examples from the documents studied.

Day 6

Read aloud as many of the essays as you can. Does everyone agree on what Jefferson valued? Does everyone agree on whether he is worthy to be remembered? Remind students of the influence Jefferson has had in American society. There is still much disagreement among leading scholars as to the answer to these questions. I feel that if his words can unite us as a nation and give us a standard by which to live, then his accomplishments merit remembrance.

Appendix 1

Epitaphs

SUSAN BROWNELL ANTHONY, U.S. social reformer, 1820-1906

Epitaph: "Liberty, Humanity, Justice, Equality."

AARON BURR, U.S. political leader, 1756-1836

Epitaph: "A Colonel in the Army of the Revolution. Vice-President of the United States, from 1801 to 1805."

JEFFERSON DAVIS, president of the Southern Confederacy, 1808-1889

Epitaph: "An American Soldier and Defender of the Constitution. Faithful to all trusts, a martyr to principle. He lived and died the most consistent of American Soldiers and Statesmen."

GEORGE SMITH PATTON, JR., U.S. soldier, 1885-1945

Epitaph: "General Third Army. California. Dec. 21, 1945."

EDGAR ALLAN POE, U.S. author, 1809-1849

Epitaph: "Quoth the Raven nevermore."

DRED SCOTT, U.S. slave, 1795?-1858

Epitaph: On front: "Freed from slavery by his friend Taylor Blow." On back: "Subject of the Decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in 1857 Which Denied Citizenship to the Negro, Voided the Missouri Compromise Act. Became One of the Events that Resulted in the Civil War."

JOSEPH RAYMOND McCARTHY, American politician, 1908-1957

Epitaph: "United States Senator."

The mortal remains of Ethan Allen,
fighter, writer, statesman, and philosopher,
lie in this cemetery beneath the marble statue.
His spirit is in Vermont now.

"That's All Folks!"

The Man of a Thousand Voices

Mel Blanc

The Body of
B. Franklin, Printer
Like the Cover of an old Book
Its Contents turn out
And Stript of its Lettering & Guilding
Lies here. Food for Worms
For, it will as he believed
appear once more
In a new and more elegant Edition
corrected and improved
By the Author
Benjamin Franklin

In testimony of their Respect
For
The Patriot of incorruptible Integrity,
The Soldier of approved Valour
The Statesman of consummate Wisdom;
Whose Talents and Virtues will be admired
By
Grateful Posterity
Long after this Marble shall have mouldered into Dust
Alexander Hamilton

A genius of comedy
His talent brought joy and
Laughter to all the world.
Oliver Hardy

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:
God said, 'Let Newton be!' and all was light.
written by Alexander Pope
Sir Isaac Newton

A friend to honesty and a foe to crime
Allan Pinkerton

Appendix 2

History of the University of Virginia

(from Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Virginia)

On [January 18, 1800](#), plans for a new college were alluded to by Thomas Jefferson, then [Vice President of the United States](#), in a letter written to [Joseph Priestley](#): "We wish to establish in the upper country of Virginia, and more centrally for the State, a University on a plan so broad and liberal and modern, as to be worth patronizing with the public support, and be a temptation to the youth of other States to come and drink of the cup of knowledge and fraternize with us."^[1] In [1802](#), then serving as [President of the United States](#), Jefferson wrote to artist [Charles Willson Peale](#) that his concept of the new university would be "on the most extensive and liberal scale that our circumstances would call for and our faculties meet."^[2] Although Virginia was already home to one university, the [College of William and Mary](#), Jefferson had lost confidence in his alma mater, in part because of its religious biases and lack of education in the sciences.^[3]

The University of Virginia stands on land purchased in [1788](#) by an [American Revolutionary War](#) veteran, [James Monroe](#). The farmland just outside [Charlottesville](#) was purchased from Monroe by the Board of Visitors of what was then *Central College* in [1817](#), while Monroe was beginning the first of his own two terms in the [White House](#). Guided by Jefferson, the school would lay its first building's cornerstone later in 1817 and the Commonwealth of Virginia would charter the new university on [January 25, 1819](#).

In the presence of [James Madison](#), the [Marquis de Lafayette](#) toasted Jefferson as "father" of the *University of Virginia* at the school's inaugural banquet in [1824](#). The University's first classes met in March [1825](#), when it became the first institution to offer students a full choice of elective courses, instead of the then-standard fare of fixed schedules determined by school administrators. Other universities of the day allowed only three choices of specialization: Medicine, Law, and Religion, but under Jefferson's guidance, the University of Virginia became the first in the United States to allow specializations in such diverse fields as [Astronomy](#), [Architecture](#), [Botany](#), [Philosophy](#), and [Political Science](#). Jefferson explained, "This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."^[4]



An even more controversial direction was taken for the new university based on a daring vision of higher education, completely separated from religious doctrine. One of the largest construction projects in North America up to that time, the new Grounds were centered upon a library (then housed in [The Rotunda](#)) rather than a church — further

distinguishing it from peer universities of the [United States](#), virtually all of which were still primarily functioning as seminaries for one particular religion or another.^[5] Jefferson even went so far as to ban the teaching of Theology altogether. In a letter to [Thomas Cooper](#) in October [1814](#), Jefferson stated, "a professorship of theology should have no place in our institution" and, true to form, the University had, nor has, no Divinity school or department, and was established independent of any religious sect. Replacing the then-standard specialization in Religion, the University undertook groundbreaking specializations in more "scientific" subjects such as Astronomy and Botany. (A non-denominational University chapel, notably absent from Jefferson's original plans, was constructed in [1890](#).)

Jefferson was intimately involved in the University, hosting Sunday dinners at his [Monticello](#) home for faculty and students, until his death. So taken with the import of what he viewed the University's foundations and potential to be and counting it amongst his greatest accomplishments, Jefferson eschewed mention of his political posts, and instead insisted his grave mention only his status as author of the [Declaration of Independence](#) and [Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom](#), and father of the University of Virginia.