



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

Thomas Jefferson, Part II: From the Revolution to the Presidency

At the close of the Revolutionary War, 40-year old Thomas Jefferson had already had an incredible career. He had been a delegate to the Continental Congress and Governor of Virginia. Most importantly, he had authored the Declaration of Independence, a document that defined the hopes and aspirations of the infant United States as it broke its ties with Great Britain. What was next? Recently widowed, Jefferson looked to the systematic education of his three daughters, obsessively working out daily schedules which rigorously instructed them in the classics, history and the arts. Visitors to Monticello found the shy Jefferson to be casual with them to the point of rudeness, but when his conversational appetite was whetted he became “irresistibly animated,” lively and enthusiastic. It was obvious that Jefferson needed new projects to occupy his time, and he was not long in finding them.

Jefferson began work on his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which he tried to address specific questions posed by the Frenchman Francois Barbe Marbois, who claimed that Europe surpassed America in intellect, physical beauty, abundance of flora and fauna, and all other matters. Jefferson answered not only by refuting Marbois’ statements, but by saying that Virginia (which then claimed all the land westward to the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River), and thus America, was not only equal to but surpassed Europe. One of the first scholarly works produced in America, *Notes on the State of Virginia* reviewed the state’s geography, flora, fauna, climate, American Indian people,

constitution, laws, religion, manners and commerce. An extremely important section on slavery was also included, in which Jefferson set forth his ambivalent ideas regarding that institution. Jefferson criticized slavery and remarked, “indeed I tremble for my countrymen when I reflect that God is just.” But he also concluded that it was his “suspicion” that African Americans were “inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.” This unfortunate attitude remains one of the most difficult things for modern Americans to reconcile. Jefferson’s statement that “All men are created equal” seems to ring hollow in the face of his ownership of slaves and his stated beliefs about their abilities.

Some Americans also have problems with Jefferson’s views on religion. At the same time that he was writing his book, Jefferson drafted a “Statute for Religious Freedom” for the State of Virginia’s new constitution. Jefferson reacted strongly against the laws of the former Virginia Colony, which allowed only Anglicans to hold public office. Realizing that America was a polyglot community with a diversity of beliefs, he felt that something as personal as one’s religion should not dictate a person’s ability to participate in politics. Jefferson’s ideas were later incorporated into the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution, and led to religious freedom in America and the separation of church and state.

Jefferson returned to Philadelphia as a Congressman in 1783, accompanied by his

daughter Martha, who became his constant companion until his death in 1826. Jefferson's stay was short-lived, however, for early in 1784 Congress decided to send him to France to join Benjamin Franklin and John Adams in negotiating commercial treaties with various European powers. Jefferson's visit to Europe changed his life forever, for he was able to encounter things he had only read about in books. The great architecture, art, and culture of the ancient Romans and the Renaissance were now his to admire in person. While in France Jefferson lived in style and bought the latest clothes, finest wines, best books, glass, china, and silverware.

Jefferson soon met and fell in love with a British artist named Maria Cosway. She was beautiful, intelligent, spoke several languages - and was married. Her husband, Richard Cosway, was also an artist - a small, foppish dandy who treated Maria badly. Jefferson was 43, Maria 27. They toured Paris together for six wonderful weeks. Jefferson somehow dislocated his right wrist during this period, perhaps by boyishly jumping over a fence. Characteristically, Jefferson taught himself to write with his left hand. Jefferson's idyll with Maria was cut short when her husband insisted that she return to England. With Maria's departure, Jefferson's world fell apart. Writing with his left hand, he composed his famous essay, *The Dialogue of the Head vs. the Heart*, which summed up his feelings regarding the practical and the romantic aspects of love. Although they continued to correspond, Jefferson's head seemed to take control over his heart after Maria left for England. While Maria fell more deeply in love with him, he was distant and removed. Whatever Jefferson felt for Maria Cosway was masked, but they continued to correspond until very late in his life. In later years, Maria left her husband, received an annulment, and founded a convent in Lodi, Italy. Richard Cosway was declared to be insane and institutionalized.

In 1785, Jefferson's daughter Lucy died of whooping cough in the United States. This prompted him to send for his youngest surviving child, Polly, to join him in Paris. Then aged nine, Polly was accompanied on her ocean voyage by several household slaves, including Sally Hemings,

a 14-year-old slave girl. Many historians believe that Hemings was the daughter of Jefferson's father-in-law, John Wayles, and a slave woman. It was said that Sally Hemings bore a strong resemblance to Jefferson's late wife Martha, (who may have been her half-sister). It was with this slave girl that Jefferson was alleged to have carried on a life-long affair, and with whom he fathered several children. When Jefferson's daughter Polly arrived in France in 1785, she did not recognize her father or her older sister Martha, from whom she had been separated for four years. Jefferson witnessed the beginnings of the French Revolution in 1789, before his departure for America.

Jefferson returned to the United States different in many ways - wiser, and more worldly from his European travels (he visited England, Germany and Italy as well as France). The United States had changed as well. The Constitution had been written, and a new government formed. George Washington had been elected the nation's first President, and John Adams its Vice President. Washington felt that a cabinet of advisors to the President was necessary, and so appointed Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury, Edmund Randolph as Attorney General and Henry Knox as Secretary of War. In addition, he asked Thomas Jefferson to serve as the first Secretary of State. Jefferson accepted the appointment, and after attending the wedding of his daughter Martha to Thomas Mann Randolph, traveled to New York, the temporary capitol of the United States.

An intense philosophical and personal rivalry soon developed between Jefferson and Hamilton. Hamilton favored a future United States which would be urban, oriented toward Great Britain as our closest cultural and military ally, and centered around a sound banking system. Hamilton's United States would be controlled from a strong central government. Jefferson, on the other hand, advocated a rural, agrarian ideal and championed the yeoman farmer as the best type of uncorrupted, true American. He also favored France as our best European ally, and a weaker central government, with the individual states being supreme in most matters. Both men were

strong-willed and stubborn, and their clashes became more and more bitter as the years wore on.

When the nation was first created, it was thought that there would be no political factions, since the victorious Americans, Whigs (or patriots) all, had defeated the hated Tories. But this was not to be. The party of Hamilton and Adams came to be called the Federalists, while the party of Jefferson and Madison was known as the Democratic-Republicans, or Republicans (even though they were the forerunner of the modern Democratic Party). As the clashes between Jefferson and Hamilton became more personal and bitter, Jefferson's interest in serving President Washington waned. He resigned from the cabinet in 1793, but did not surrender his aspirations for the United States. Jefferson ran for President in 1796, but lost to Federalist John Adams. However, under the terms of the Constitution at that time, the man with the second largest number of electoral votes served as Vice President, no matter what political party he represented. As a result, Thomas Jefferson found himself presiding over the Senate at age 53, covertly heading the opposition party to the policies of President Adams.

During these years of opposition, Jefferson authored, with James Madison, the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions. These statements, released in 1798, declared the ability of a state legislature to render a Federal law with which they did not agree to be null and void. The statements were a reaction to the Alien and Sedition Acts, passed by the Adams administration to suppress dissent within the United States, a clear violation of rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Although the life span of the Alien and Sedition Acts was brief, the philosophy espoused by Jefferson in the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions, which included the principle of nullification and the supremacy of states rights, echoed down to the time of the American Civil War and even to the present day.

Jefferson bided his time as Vice President, waiting for the election of 1800. It was understood that he was to be the presidential candidate of the Democratic-Republican Party. A caucus met in

secret at a Philadelphia coffee house on May 11, 1800, attended by 43 Republican congressmen, who completed the ticket by nominating Aaron Burr unanimously for the vice presidency. This was the first congressional nominating caucus.

During the campaign of 1800 Jefferson did not campaign but worked behind the scenes to insure a Republican victory. In vicious personal attacks, the Federalists accused Jefferson of a "weakness of nerves," pointing out that he had to resign from all of the important posts he had heretofore held. It was also said that the election of Jefferson would bring the same revolutionary disorders experienced by France. Jefferson was also branded as an atheist in the Federalist press. Jefferson and Burr ran against President Adams and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. Alexander Hamilton, who hated Adams as well as Jefferson and Burr, began to see Jefferson as the lesser evil. "If we must have an enemy at the head of government," Hamilton wrote, "let it be one we can oppose, and for whom we are not responsible, who will not involve our party in the disgrace of his foolish and bad measures."

Election results throughout the country were favorable for the Republicans, and by December 1800, it looked likely that they had captured both the Presidency and the Vice Presidency. But the election did not end so simply. The key state was South Carolina; the Federalists received none of the state's electoral votes, while the Republicans won eight for Jefferson and eight for Burr. When the nation-wide votes were tallied, Jefferson had not been elected President, for the equal vote in South Carolina gave both men 73 potential electoral votes when the electoral college convened on February 11, 1801. As a result, the election would be forced into the House of Representatives. "The federalists in Congress mean to take advantage of this [the tie]," wrote Jefferson, "either to prevent an election altogether, or reverse what has been understood to have been the wishes of the people." In fact, the Federalists were planning to stack their votes to ensure that Aaron Burr and not Jefferson would be elected President. Alexander Hamilton wrote that the plan to elect Burr was tantamount to the country "signing their own death warrant."

The official count of electoral ballots on February 11 produced the expected tie and opened six days of nearly continuous voting in the House of Representatives to decide upon a President. On February 17, on the 36th ballot, the deadlock was broken as the Federalists finally caved in. Congressman Lewis R. Morris of Vermont absented himself from the House chamber, and his Republican colleague, Matthew Lyon, cast the state's vote for Jefferson, giving him the ninth state needed for victory. Delaware and Maryland's Federalist congressmen cast blanks, and South Carolina followed suit, thus ending the tie without a single Federalist changing his vote, yet giving Jefferson a total of eleven states.

Jefferson was pleased that the crisis was past, and prepared for his administration by forming a cabinet. "On the whole I hope we shall make up an administration which will unite a great mass of confidence, and bid defiance to the plans of opposition meditated by leaders who are now almost destitute of followers." Jefferson hoped that the Federalists would eventually become Republicans, leaving only an extremist sect of monarchists and a restored sense of harmony in the country. "I was always satisfied that the great body of those called Federalists were real Republicans as well as Federalists" he wrote. The election of Thomas Jefferson as President in 1801 was hailed as the triumph of the "common man," in reaction to the Federalist administration of John Adams. In his inaugural address, Jefferson welcomed a reconciliation between the opposing forces, saying, "We are all federalists, we are all republicans." If Jefferson's presidency were to be successful, it would be up to him to use all of his political and personal skills to bring this reconciliation about.