Thomas Jefferson and the Boisterous Sea of Ideas

Jefferson's life and work spanned the American Revolution and the early Republic, during which he was a leader in creating a free and democratic society in America. His words "—all men are created equal"—which continue to inspire people from around the world, established the foundations of self-government and individual freedom in America.

After writing the Declaration, Jefferson spent the next 33 years in public life, serving as delegate to the Virginia General Assembly and to Congress, governor of Virginia, minister to France, secretary of state, vice president, and president from 1801 to 1809. Notable achievements of Jefferson's presidency include the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

He believed that human reason and knowledge could improve the condition of mankind. Jefferson studied science and was a pioneer in botany, meteorology, and astronomy, to name but a few. In retirement, he founded and designed the University of Virginia.

Jefferson designed every aspect of Monticello, an icon of architecture and a World Heritage site, constructing and modifying its buildings and landscape over a period of 40 years. Monticello was also a working plantation, where the paradox of slavery contrasted with the ideals of liberty expressed by Jefferson in the Declaration.

As a result of Jefferson's meticulous record keeping and more than 50 years of scholarly research, Monticello is among the best-documented, best-preserved, and best-studied plantations in North America. Monticello was the center of Jefferson's world to understand him, you must experience Monticello, his autobiographical statement. On a little mountain in Charlottesville, the power of place merges with the power of Jefferson’s timeless ideas. His home and masterpiece, Monticello, is a touchstone for all who seek to explore the enduring meaning of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), theorist of the American Revolution, drafted the Declaration of Independence. His words—“all men are created equal”—which continue to inspire people from around the world, established the foundations of self-government and individual freedom in America.
Jefferson divided his plantation into separate farms run by resident overseers who directed the labor of enslaved men, women, and children. Most of Jefferson's slaves came to the Monticello plantation community over the course of his lifetime. By 1815, he had acquired a total of 598 slaves. In his will, Jefferson freed all but eight of his slaves and established a fund to provide for the education and maintenance of the freedmen's children.

Monticello’s head enslaved African American woman was Sally Hemings, who was the mother of Jefferson’s children by his concubine, Harriet Ivy Hemings. Sally Hemings was born into slavery in 1793 and lived until 1836. She was a skilled weaver and seamstress, and her children were educated in the Jefferson household. Sally Hemings’s children included many of Jefferson’s grandchildren.

Monticello was a working plantation, and Jefferson was actively involved in its management and operations. He supervised the cultivation of tobacco, rice, and corn, and he was an accomplished farmer. Jefferson was also a voracious reader and collected thousands of books, which he used to inform his agricultural practices. His library was one of the largest in the country and included works on science, literature, and politics.

Jefferson was a strong supporter of the American Revolution and a key figure in the founding of the United States. He served as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress and helped draft the Declaration of Independence. He was a member of the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1779 and served as the first United States minister to France. Jefferson also served as the second governor of Virginia and as a U.S. senator.

Jefferson was a prolific writer, and his works include the Notes on the State of Virginia, the Declaration of Independence, and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. He was also a keen observer of nature and wrote extensively on the geography, flora, and fauna of the United States. His botanical studies and observations of local wildlife and plants were part of a broader interest in the natural world.

Jefferson died in the Monticello parlor on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of American independence. The house was left to his children, and it has since been owned by the Monticello Foundation, which preserves and interprets the site as a living reminder of the ideas and ideals of the American Revolution.