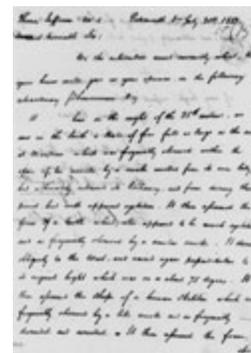


Featured Letter: An Atmospheric Phenomenon

([https://monticello-www.s3.amazonaws.com/files/old/inline-pdfs/](https://monticello-www.s3.amazonaws.com/files/old/inline-pdfs/HansfordandClarketoTJ.pdf)

[HansfordandClarketoTJ.pdf](#)) A tavern keeper and a visitor from Baltimore send Thomas Jefferson what is perhaps the earliest recorded observation of a UFO in Virginia. They describe a fireball they had recently observed in the sky above Portsmouth, with its successive transformations into the shape of a turtle, a human skeleton, and a Scottish Highlander. Jefferson did not respond.



From Edward Hansford and John L. Clarke

MOST HONORABLE SIR

Portsmouth V^a July 31st 1813.

We the subscribers most earnestly solicit, that your honor will give us your opinion, on the following extraordinary Phenomenon Viz:

At hour on the night of the 25th instant, we saw in the South a Ball of fire full as large as the sun at Maridian which was frequently obscured within the space of ten minutes by a smoke emitted from its own body, but ultimately retained its brilliancy, and form^l during that period, but with apparent agitation. It then assumed the form of a Turtle which also appeared to be much agitated and as frequently obscured by a similar smoke. It descended obliquely to the West, and raised again perpendicular to its original height which was on or about 75 degrees. It then assumed the shape of a human skeleton which was frequently obscured by a like smoke and as frequently descended and ascended—It then assumed the form of a Scotch Highlander arrayed for battle and extremely agitated, and ultimately passed to the West and disappeared² in its own smoke. we are honorable

Sir with Sentiments of very high respect & esteem Your most Obedient very humble Serv^{ts}

RC (DLC); in an unidentified hand, signed by Hansford and Clarke; at head of text: “Thomas Jefferson M.A.”; addressed: “Thomas Jefferson Esq^r Monticello Virginia”; franked; postmarked Portsmouth, 1 Aug., and Charlottesville, 26 Aug.; endorsed by TJ as received 14 Sept. 1813 and so recorded in SJL.

Edward Hansford, tavern keeper, carpenter, and joiner, was harbormaster for the Norfolk and Portsmouth district by 1805 (Norfolk Co. Deed Book, 27:48–9; *JHD*, 1805 sess. [19 Dec. 1805], 36; DNA: RG 29, CS, Norfolk Co., Portsmouth, 1810).

John L. Clarke (ca. 1777–1816), a native of Newport, Rhode Island, had recently been discharged as a master or midshipman in the United States Navy. He was a sea captain residing in Baltimore at the time of his death (Callahan, *U.S. Navy*, 116; *The United States Kalendar, and Army and Navy Register, for 1813* [New York, 1813], 44; *The Baltimore Directory and Register for the Year 1816* [Baltimore, 1816], 42; *Newport Mercury*, 3 Feb. 1816).

¹Manuscript: “from.”

²Reworked from “disappointed.”

Posted February 2010. Reprinted from *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, 6:340–1.

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