

Featured Letter: Quashing a Rumor

([https://www.monticello.org/sites/default/files/](https://www.monticello.org/sites/default/files/TJtoJoseCorreadeSerra18190302.pdf)

[TJtoJoseCorreadeSerra18190302.pdf](#)) Named to the University of Virginia Board of Visitors on 13 February 1819, Thomas Jefferson oversaw numerous facets of the infant institution. He worked closely with the successive proctors Nelson Barksdale and Arthur S. Brockenbrough to hire and oversee builders and craftsmen. Jefferson also responded to unsolicited applications for professorships, often repeating the



board's decision to devote all of the university's funds initially on construction rather than hiring a faculty. In the meantime, he orchestrated the establishment of a classical school in Charlottesville to prepare students for entry into the university when it should finally open.

Jefferson's long-time friend and correspondent Thomas Cooper had been elected to professorships in science and law at Central College in 1817 and, two years later, at its successor, the University of Virginia. Cooper's religious views, however, made his appointment controversial, and by 1819 he had not yet moved from Philadelphia to Charlottesville. Jefferson had hoped to place Cooper in charge of the recently established classical academy until the university was ready for faculty and students, but rumors of his intemperate behavior and Unitarian and materialist beliefs persisted.

In the letter below, Jefferson calls on another close friend to help combat the reports. The Portuguese botanist and diplomat José Corrêa da Serra, had been living in Philadelphia and, Jefferson was aware, knew Cooper well. In his 22 March response, Corrêa da Serra wrote that, in Cooper, Jefferson “could find no equal in America, in point of science and zeal to spread it, and in point of sound and manly morals too.” He added that in the four years he had known Cooper, Corrêa da Serra had “found him only a bitter enemy of hypocrites, no violent man, but by no means an enduring one, and have not seen a single solitary instance of intemperance.”

Still, some continued to raise concerns about Cooper's unorthodox religious views. Jefferson might well have continued to champion him, but the delays in opening the university forced Cooper to accept the chair of chemistry at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina at Columbia) in 1820. He served as the college's president, 1821–33, and remained in Columbia until his death in 1839.

To José Corrêa da Serra

DEAR SIR

Monticello Mar. 2. 19.

You have heard long ago that our legislature has passed the act for establishing their University at the Central college. we had hoped they would have accompanied it with an additional donation for erecting the necessary buildings. in this we are disappointed; and therefore are obliged to apply our funds generally to the erection of buildings for the accomodation of the Professors & Students, before we engage the Professors themselves. this, if we recieve no other aid from the legislature will take 2. or 3. years, and will so long delay the opening of the University. but it has been proposed in the mean time to commence a classical school, as a nursery to prepare subjects for the scientific branches; and with this view to accept D^r Cooper's offer to take charge of the higher classes pro tem. while for the lower ones we engage an Usher to set up a grammar school in Charlottesville on his own account; himself however to be of our selection, & under our controul & patronage. this proposition lies over to our next meeting.

I must now mention to you a subject so confidential that I must not only pray it may never be repeated to any mortal, but that this letter may be burnt as soon as read. at a meeting of our visitors called the other day, I proposed to invite D^r Cooper to come on immediately for the purpose of opening our classical school, and was mortified to find one or two of our members in doubt about employing him; alledging that they had heard he was in habits of drinking. I unhesitatingly repelled the imputation, and, besides other presumptive¹ evidence, stated my own observation of his abstemiousness during his short visit to Monticello, not venturing to take a glass of wine nor to drink of the common beverages of beer or cyder; and added that the state of his health threatened to render this abstinence necessarily permanent.

M^r Madison was equally urgent as myself, but we found it prudent to let the matter lie until the 1st meeting of the new board of visitors, on the 29th inst. but, in this, three new members are added to four of the old ones, and we know not therefore whether the majority of the new

board may entertain the same views as that of the old one. some testimony may therefore be necessary to rebut this suggestion with them, & none would be more satisfactory than yours; and the more so as your intercourse with D^r Cooper enables you to speak on your own knolege, and not on rumor. will you then write me a letter, as in answer to enquiry from me, stating what you know of our friend's habits of temperance, and write it so that you can permit me to read it to the visitors. I would not have D^r Cooper know any thing of this enquiry because the very doubt is an injury. and if you wish to trust what you say no further than to myself alone, say so, and using your information for my own government only, I will bur[n your?] letter as I have requested you to do this.

Ever and affectionately your's

TH:JEFFERSON

PoC (DLC); on reused address cover of Charles Willson Peale to TJ, 1 Jan. 1819; damaged at seal; at foot of first page: "Mr Correa"; endorsed by TJ. Enclosed in TJ to James Madison, 8 Mar. 1819, and Madison to TJ, 11 Mar. 1819.

the ACT for the Establishment of an University was passed by the Virginia General Assembly on 25 Jan. 1819. The usher of the grammar school was to be Gerard E. Stack. The Central College Board of Visitors became the University of Virginia Board of Visitors, with new members Chapman Johnson, James Breckenridge, and Robert Taylor, added to OLd ones Thomas Jefferson, John H. Cocke, Joseph C. Cabell, and James Madison, on 29 Jan. 1819.

¹Manuscript: "presumptitive."

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