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History 751 Research Seminar

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Research Paper

### A Product of His Age: The Early Intellectual Development of Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson is one of the most influential and intelligent people in American history. At the age of 33, he penned one of the most-quoted documents in the modern world: the Declaration of Independence. In this work, not only did Jefferson propose the official separation of the American colonies from their mother country, he solidified an American philosophical tradition with ideas ranging from the role and purpose of government to natural laws of equality and individual liberty. Despite his influence, scholars tend to shy away from fully analyzing Jefferson's earliest years. Hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of texts have been written examining Jefferson's philosophical thoughts, and many historians posit theories about the roots of his ideas. Most scholars accept the traditional historiography that Jefferson was introduced to the ideas of the Enlightenment in college, and it is here that they typically begin their examination of his intellectual pursuits.<sup>1</sup>

What is lacking in the scholarship on Jefferson, however, is a history that examines Thomas as a child and his early intellectual development. As opposed to the thousands of public documents Jefferson wrote while serving in political positions, a very limited amount of material exists on his private life and, particularly, his childhood. Sources about any person's childhood are naturally limited simply because children do not write about themselves. Occasionally stories are written later in life; unfortunately,

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<sup>1</sup> Darren Staloff, for instance, argues that "Jefferson first began to discern the lineaments of the enlightened worldview" under the tutelage of William Small at William and Mary. See Darren Staloff, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 250.

Jefferson rarely mentioned his youth in his own writings. This may be due to his shy disposition or perhaps his desire to maintain some degree of privacy. Despite the dearth of sources, biographers have not shied away from making claims about his childhood and its impacts on his later life. This article will examine Thomas during his years of intellectual development, distinguishing reality from the legend surrounding the origins of this near-legendary statesman. As our present intellectual interest centers in Thomas' childhood and intellectual development, this study considers the period from Jefferson's birth to sixteen years of age; the years which encompass all four stages of intellectual development according to Jean Piaget.<sup>2</sup> The first section will address methods in studying childhood history. This will be followed by a section on Thomas' relations with his family, particularly his parents, to lay the groundwork for the social environment in which he grew. We will then follow Thomas' life chronologically from being a toddler to a student. By researching the early years of Thomas Jefferson's life, this study demonstrates the importance of childhood in historical research; we find that Thomas' childhood and early intellectual development played a crucial role both in his political and economic policies as well as his Enlightenment beliefs.

### **Methods in Childhood History**

Thomas Jefferson's childhood is often discussed in biographies and histories about his life, but usually only in a cursory manner. The challenge we have in considering Jefferson's youth is separating myth from reality. In addition, it remains difficult to concretely map the connection from childhood experiences to mature intellectual beliefs. Given that ideas and practices are often formed over time, uncovering influential childhood experiences on a person's intellectual development is largely based on speculation and extrapolation. When connections are made between childhood and adulthood, they are usually of a social nature. Jefferson's social and character traits will also be included in this work.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Piaget's stages of intellectual development, see John Santrock, *Child Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 209.

Additionally, however, I hope to uncover connections between a child's intellectual development and an adult's intellectual pursuits. In this way, this study demonstrates how childhood scholarship can contribute to larger studies of cultural, social, and political history.

The historian faces two challenges when undertaking the history of childhood. First, finding sources about a person's childhood can be difficult. Even more importantly, most writings about a person's childhood should be recognized only as secondary sources and subject to the same caveats that must always be considered with such sources. Throughout this article, we will quote from Thomas Jefferson, himself, in his autobiography, which was written (or at least published) when he was 77 years old. Given the problems of memory, looking at the past from a future perspective, and even personal biases about what to record and what not to share, autobiographies, especially excerpts on a person's childhood, may still be best viewed as secondary literature. As with any research dealing with Jefferson's youth, this study also considers oral history. Henry S. Randall, one of the first scholars on Jefferson, was privy not only to unpublished material but to family stories he recorded when researching for his publication, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson*. Sarah N. Randolph, Jefferson's great-granddaughter, also wrote stories passed down to her in *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*. However, given the discrepancies commonly found in family remembrances, as will be shown in Randall's and Randolph's works, it is imperative to view any such oral traditions, at least potentially, as subject to the limitations of secondary sources.

While these potential limitations must be attended to, a person's autobiography or the stories told to their children are not entirely secondary to uncovering their lives. Still, as historians we must consider the methods we utilize in separating myth from reality, so as to minimize subjectivity. Every individual has an objective childhood story to uncover, made up either of real events or an individual's interpretations of those events. Both stories tell us something about a person's childhood, though

making connections between childhood learning and adult beliefs and practices remains difficult. Nevertheless, how one views his or her childhood can have a significant impact on observations about the present. Consequently, the stories an individual shares, however altered by generations and time, still give us clues regarding their ideas and interpretations of the past. So, understanding the difficulties in childhood research, let us continue our study of Thomas.

### **Family Relations**

An understanding of Thomas' familial relationships will provide one foundation for understanding his life, whereupon we can analyze the events and ideas we encounter of his youth. A logical beginning for this examination is his relationship with his parents, and particularly his mother. Thomas' mother, Jane Randolph was born in 1720 to an affluent, aristocratic family in England. Traditional historiography of Thomas' relationship with his mother largely accepts the view that they were not close. According to Dumas Malone, "the only remark he is known to have made about her influence was negative, and he probably did not value her counsel very highly."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Thomas personally writes very little about his mother (at least, very little has survived), so it is difficult to reconstruct their relationship. Some historians point to Thomas' sarcasm in his autobiography when he referred to Jane's lineage, writing "they trace their pedigree far back in England and Scotland, to which let every one ascribe the merit he chooses."<sup>4</sup> This statement is less a disclosure of ill feeling toward his mother than it is a depiction of Thomas' indifference toward aristocratic lineage. When Thomas wrote a letter to his daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph, he extolled motherhood as "undoubtedly the

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<sup>3</sup> Dumas Malone, *Jefferson, the Virginian* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 3.

keystone of the arch of matrimonial happiness.”<sup>5</sup> If this statement tells us anything, it is that Thomas respected and admired motherhood and, perhaps, his own mother.

Some historians speculate that the reason Thomas records little about his mother is because she opposed his participation in the American Revolution. Fawn Brodie argues that Thomas’ mother most likely “looked instead back across the sea to England and to perpetual dependency,” though Brodie acknowledges that “the evidence is scanty.”<sup>6</sup> Let us consider Thomas’ writings about his mother just after her death. Jane passed away on the eve of the American Revolution on March 31, 1776. In his journal, Thomas wrote, “My mother died about eight o’clock this morning, in the fifty-seventh year of her age.”<sup>7</sup> Although this small excerpt may seem emotionless to some historians, it is a precise statement written by a man known to record facts more than his feelings. Had his mother opposed the Revolution, it could be asked why Thomas says nothing in his journal to that effect. In June, the month before signing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas wrote to his mother’s brother (his uncle in England), William Randolph. In addition to informing his uncle about his mother’s death, Thomas sends his “affectionate wishes to Mrs. Randolph and my unknown cousins.” He also writes, “I hope no dissensions between the bodies politic of which we happen to be members will ever interfere with the ties of relation. Tho’ most heartily engaged in the quarrel on my part from a sense of the most unprovoked injuries, I retain the same affection for individuals which nature or knowledge of their merit calls for.”<sup>8</sup> It seems incongruous that a man who expresses affection for his mother’s brother as prescribed, in his opinion, by nature would lack affection (at least of a comparable level) for his mother.

In a Revolution that separated brothers, sisters, parents, children, and friends, Thomas’ letter to

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, Feb. 9, 1791, in *The Wisdom of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Kees De Mooy (New York: Citadel Press Books, 2003), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Fawn McKay Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974), 46.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Jefferson, quoted in *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*, by Sarah N. Randolph (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), 49-50.

<sup>8</sup> Julian P. Boyd, et al, eds. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 36 Volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950- ), 1:409-410.

his uncle shows that the man who wrote the document declaring American independence also wrote words affirming the impenetrable bonds of family. His letter to his uncle virtually discredits any theories regarding Thomas' poor feelings toward his mother or any of his relatives on the British side. Perhaps he resents his uncle's choice in favor of England, William having left his land in America, but the "ties of relation" clearly mean something important to Thomas. He never elaborates further, but perhaps that is simply the result of a man who keeps intimacies to himself. In a recent publication, Virginia Scharff challenges the traditional historiography of Thomas' relationship with his mother, arguing against any inferences that Thomas was not affectionate toward his mother. Boldly, Scharff presents her own conjecture, linking Thomas' invocation of family relations in his letter to William to the passages in the Declaration of Independence that draw on familial terms.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, it is possible that, with the American Revolution, Thomas interpreted his feelings toward the British according to his experiences with his own extended family. Nothing we have examined thus far, however, gives any indication as to Jane's feelings about the Revolution or her son's part in it. Her brother, William Randolph, was a Tory who left his land in Virginia and returned to England prior to the Revolution. Attributing William's political leanings to his sister, however, is an unfounded presumption, especially in a society where women were largely excluded from politics. In addition, the extended Randolph family did not all oppose the Patriot cause of the Revolution. Jane's cousin, Peyton Randolph, not only supported the colonies but became the first President of the Continental Congress. If anything, Jane witnessed the disintegration of her extended family as political loyalties took root. Thomas found himself in a similar predicament years later when friends who had once worked together in forming the nation were separated by political partisanship. Thomas led the Democratic-Republicans to victory over John Adams and the Federalists. Despite this disintegration of political loyalties, Thomas argued in his

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<sup>9</sup> See Virginia Scharff, *The Women Jefferson Loved* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 53-55.

First Inaugural Address that “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle.”<sup>10</sup>

When discussing Thomas’ first Inaugural Address, historians often focus on the next two lines. Attempting to mend the partisan divide, Thomas proclaims, “We are all Federalists. We are all Republicans.”<sup>11</sup> Let us consider, however, that the phrase just previous to this assertion uses the term “brethren,” presenting a familial-type of union. This was not the first or last time Thomas would use this term, though it was not his regular designation when referring to his fellow citizens. Intriguingly, “brethren” is used twice in the Declaration of Independence when referring to the colonists’ relationship to the British. This supports Scharff’s claim mentioned above, posing the possibility that Thomas interpreted political disputes throughout his life through the lens of his own family’s division. The fact remains that his own mother’s political feelings with regard to the American Revolution are unknown, and any assertions about them remain, at this point, unsubstantiated.

In the end, there are a number of reasons why Thomas might have remained silent regarding his mother. He was indoctrinated in the value of status in social relations; keeping his family from public concerns and gossip could have been a measure of maintaining that social status. Perhaps his lack of attention to his mother in his writing has nothing to do with any indifference or resentment, but simply on her gender. Eighteenth-century Virginia was, in many respects, a patriarchal society. Fellow Virginian, and one of Thomas’ later friends, James Madison also wrote rarely about his mother; most of his references deal with her health. Indeed, much of the information we have about Eleanor “Nelly” Madison was written by visitors and other women.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address,” in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, 493.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See Richard N. Côté, *Strength and Honor: The Life of Dolley Madison* (Mt. Pleasant, SC: Corinthian Books, 2005), 330.

Despite the paucity of sources related to Thomas' mother, scholars continue to view their relationship as cold or indifferent. It is legitimate to ask why there is only a brief mention of his mother in Thomas' autobiography, and why the rest of his relationship with her is silenced. However, we must be careful in our deductions. According to Merrill Peterson, "by his own reckoning she was a zero quantity in his life." This argument is based on Thomas' rare mentions of his mother, and perhaps Peterson is correct in his use of the term "quantity," but this does not translate into an understanding of the *quality* she added to his life. Peterson attributes most, if not all, of Thomas' greatest qualities to his father: "Indeed, except for the strong example and guidance provided by his father, his life course would not have been very different had all the members of his family been erased from the picture." Peterson continues, "He owed his father a great deal, not in companionship, for they were frequently apart, perhaps not even in affection, but in the tone and direction given to his life. Habits of industry, system, and responsibility are acquired early, and in Jefferson's case they were learned first from his father."<sup>13</sup> We should not dismiss the possibility that even his mother conveyed certain attributes to young Thomas. It is intriguing that Peterson proposes that Thomas may not have received or experienced affection from his father. Perhaps any affection he inherited came from his mother. Given what we know about psychology and family sociology, it is likely that he acquired many habits from both his mother and father.

If Thomas obtained habits from his father with regard to industry and responsibility, there is reason to believe he also inherited Peter's feelings toward Jane. The responsibilities placed upon Thomas by the "ties of relation" mentioned in his letter to his uncle may very well have come from his father. In addition, there is no reason to believe Peter was not affectionate toward his wife. In his last will and testament, Peter included various line items regarding Jane, bestowing "unto my dear wife, the

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<sup>13</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 9.

sixth part of my slaves during her natural life.” Peter’s care for his wife after his death indicates more than just spousal responsibility. It is evident from his last will and testament that he truly cared about his wife and her happiness. “My will,” he wrote, “is that my wife shall have and enjoy all my household stuff (my cherry tree desk and Bookcase only excepted) during her Natural Life or Widdowhood with full power and liberty to Dispose of the same amongst my children according to her discretion.”<sup>14</sup> Not only does Peter bequeath all of his household material goods to his wife, he wants her to enjoy it and relies on her discretion. There is no reason to believe from the record that Peter and Jane had a difficult marriage, and if Thomas inherited anything from his father in terms of character, perhaps this included his father’s love and respect for Jane.

When examining Thomas’ relationship with his parents, we should take into consideration the time he spent individually with his father and mother. Allegedly, Thomas related to his grandchildren a particular memory of his father’s regular habit of spending the evenings with his friends. Given that his father was often away with his work, whether it was surveying land or conducting his duties in the office of magistrate, how he spent his time at home, not with his family but with certain friends, is reason to consider any negative effects this might have had on young Thomas. “My father had a devoted friend,” Thomas explained to his grandchildren, “to whose house he would go, dine, spend the night, dine with him again on the second day, and return to Shadwell in the evening. His friend, in the course of a day or two, returned the visit, and spent the same length of time at his house. This occurred once every week; and thus, you see, they were together four days out of the seven.” This memory is recorded in Sarah Randolph’s history, and she argues that it illustrates the “ease and leisure of the life of an old Virginian,” fostering the development of “the characters of the men who rose to such eminence in the struggles of the Revolution.” According to Randolph, “the leisure of their lives gave them time to devote to study

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Jefferson, *Last Will and Testament of Peter Jefferson*, Albermarle County, Court Records, Will Book No. 2, pgs. 31, 32, & 34 (Facsimile at University of Virginia Small Special Collections).

and reflection.”<sup>15</sup> Then again, perhaps Peter’s example encouraged young Thomas to favor public life over private life. It is also possible that his perpetual absence from the family socialized young Thomas in ways that made him less affectionate in his own feelings toward his parents.

Peter’s absence in Thomas’ life may also have led him to rely on affection from other sources. Some of this affection he received from his siblings. He shared his love of music with his sister Jane, for instance, and they played incessantly together, “he on the violin, she on a spinet,” as Virginia Scharff points out. “Much later,” Scharff writes, “Jefferson recalled that ‘I suppose that during at least a dozen years of my life, I played no less than three hours a day.’ ” Aside from music, Thomas also found respite in reading books, which also was the result of time spent with his mother. As Scharff explains, “their literate mother likely took it upon herself to show her children their ABCs.”<sup>16</sup> Before examining Thomas’ schooling, however, let us consider some of the earliest recorded recollections we have of Thomas as a toddler.

### **Thomas the Toddler**

On April 2, 1743, Peter Jefferson and Jane Randolph welcomed their third child, and first son, in their fourth year of marriage.<sup>17</sup> Young Jane was just shy of three years old and Mary was only one and a half years of age, so Thomas’ birth continued the parents’ pattern of having a child every year and a half. The births of the two children that followed Thomas were also spaced in the same intervals, and they were also daughters. So, for the first few years of his life, young Thomas was Peter and Jane’s only son,

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah N. Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Virginia Scharff, *The Women Jefferson Loved* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Jefferson was born on April 2, 1743 according to the Julian Calendar. In 1752, when Thomas was only nine years old, Britain adopted the Gregorian Calendar, which shifted the dates making his actual birthday, according to our current calendar, April 13, 1743. For this reason, when April 2<sup>nd</sup> is given as his birth, it is usually followed by an O.S., which stands for Old Style. On the marker for Jefferson’s grave, it lists his date of birth “April 2, 1742, O.S.,” which is according to his own design and inscription for his tombstone. In this paper, I have chosen to use his original date of birth, omitting the standard “O.S.” reference, given his own emphasis on April 2<sup>nd</sup> as his date of birth, and in an attempt to limit our own viewing of the past through modern eyes.

sandwiched between four girls. Thomas did not live completely secluded from other young boys, however. There were certainly a number of boys among the slaves Peter owned, like Sall's son Jupiter who attended to Thomas. Also, when Thomas was only two years old his family changed dramatically with a move to a new home.

Peter Jefferson moved with his family to Tuckahoe in 1745 to fulfill his promise to his good friend and his wife's cousin, William Randolph, that he would there raise his children in the event of Randolph's death. This included two daughters and a son. At the time, Peter and Jane had just given birth to their fourth child, Elizabeth, who was born in November 1744. So, taking guardianship of three additional children almost doubled the size of their dependents. There is some debate over whether Peter lived at Tuckahoe with his family during the seven years of his guardianship over the Randolph children. According to Edgar Hickisch, Peter's "wife and children – the latter under the care of those trusted Negroes, Myrtilla, Phil, Jupiter, Cate, and Rachel – continued to reside at Fine Creek, during the period he was executor of the Randolph estates. It is not likely," Hickisch argues, "Peter's family ever lived at Tuckahoe."<sup>18</sup> Other historians maintain the traditional assertion that they did live at Tuckahoe. Either way, Peter's guardianship over the Randolph children most assuredly brought both families' children together on a regular basis.

One important question is how this seven-year move influenced Thomas. What was life like for Thomas between the ages of two and nine while living at or near the Tuckahoe Plantation? We might even consider how his life would have been different for him had he been raised in a home with only his parents and siblings. Unfortunately, Thomas spoke little in later years of his life at Tuckahoe, though he allegedly remembered the journey there. In 1858, when Henry Stephens Randall set out to write a full biography of Thomas Jefferson, he consulted the Jefferson family. Randall was given significant

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<sup>18</sup> Edgar C. Hickisch, *Peter Jefferson, Gentleman* (Unpublished Manuscript, Facsimile at University of Virginia Small Special Collections), 127.

assistance from Thomas' descendants, who provided not only private manuscripts never before published but also shared personal stories that Thomas allegedly passed down to his children and grandchildren. According to Randall, "he used to mention as his first recollection, his being handed up and carried on a pillow by a mounted slave, as the train set off down the river towards Tuckahoe."<sup>19</sup> How is this memory significant? First, there is no other recorded information about this statement beyond the oral history recorded by Thomas' descendants. A little over a decade after Randall's published work, Thomas' great-granddaughter, Sarah Randolph, published another biography, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*. A direct descendant of Thomas, Sarah was privy to those family traditions and stories passed down through generations. She verified the same story of Thomas' earliest recollection in her account of her great-grandfather's life, also adding nothing to Randall's version.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the context in which Thomas shared this memory with his descendants is unknown. We also cannot verify if this particular memory was of Thomas' journey to Tuckahoe at the age of two, or if he simply remembered at some point being lifted up to a slave on horseback prior to a long journey. If it is an accurate memory Thomas maintained since he was two years old, it manifests a precocious child with already a mature enough development and mental capacity to maintain such a memory.

The second earliest recollection Thomas allegedly shared with his children and grandchildren is also of an early age, though there are inconsistencies in the stories we have about the same incident. In Randall's account, Thomas recalled "going out on one occasion when his dinner had been unusually delayed, and repeating the Lord's Prayer, in the hope that he might thereby obtain relief to his hunger."<sup>21</sup> Randolph's description of this account, however, is slightly different. She records of young Thomas, "when five years old, he one day became impatient for his school to be out, and, going out, knelt behind the house, and there repeated the Lord's Prayer, hoping thereby to hurry up the desired

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Stephens Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 3 Vols. (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858), 1:11.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah N. Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Stephens Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:17.

hour.”<sup>22</sup> Whether or not hunger played a role in Thomas’ motivations, as depicted in Randall’s account, is unclear.

There are differences and similarities in this particular recollection of Thomas’ childhood. Time factors strongly in each, as a young boy yearns for a quick resolution to a restless situation. In each situation, the end result is the same: Thomas offers up the Lord’s Prayer in hope of securing a specific end. One of the most important differences between the two stories is young Thomas’ age. Is this a memory that a young boy retained since he was three, four, or five years of age? These ages are significantly distant from each other in terms of a child’s intellectual development. In addition, did Thomas initially remember his Lord’s Prayer endeavor, or did his family retell this story while Thomas was growing up, eventually creating the memory for him? These are questions historians should ask before perpetuating what could be myths about Thomas’ memory. Nevertheless, Thomas shared this story with his children and grandchildren, which presents the question, why? What was Thomas hoping to convey to his posterity? Also, how was this story received by his descendants? Unfortunately, Randolph does not record any reflections beyond the event itself.

Whether or not Thomas remembered this particular event with or without help, and regardless of the discrepancies of the two accounts, the likelihood that such an event did occur is raised by the fact that we have two separate oral accounts. In each scenario, we find a boy capable of setting out individually in search of a solution to a problem. This solution came by remembering what he had been taught, the Lord’s Prayer, and connecting it to a meaning that allowed for putting this teaching into practice. It is important to know at what age this young boy initiated his own problem-solving skills, because it gives us an idea of his maturity and mental aptitude. Naturally, exhibiting this type of behavior at the age of three is extremely impressive, and it would be more significant if it came from a

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah N. Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 23.

three- as opposed to a five-year old. On the other hand, we cannot dismiss the fact that, even for a child at the age of a modern kindergartener, we still have a subject of extraordinary intellectual talent.

Thomas' two earliest alleged memories, one at two years of age and the other somewhere between three and five, might tell us something valuable regarding Thomas' intellectual development. We already discussed Thomas' problem-solving skills in saying the Lord's Prayer with hopes of attaining some end, but let us return to the most basic observation. Thomas shared stories about his childhood, and apparently had an exceptional memory. This highlights not only his mental aptitude, but the silences he leaves us in the records of his youth. Why does Thomas record so little about his childhood? With all the material he presented in the public sphere, his silence in regard to his family serves as a significant primary source in analyzing Thomas' childhood, as well as his private life in general. Thomas was a public figure, but most agree that he kept his private life, especially his feelings and emotions, to himself. We may speculate as to why Thomas was silent on private matters in his own public presentation of self. Many scholars suggest Thomas kept his life private to hide certain indiscretions, or that he harbored resentment toward some, like his mother. Is it possible that this young boy, who would later enter politics, sought to have some privacy with hopes of protecting his family, and particularly his mother? We may never know, but seeing that Thomas shared childhood recollections with his family without ever writing these stories down tells us that Thomas used his skill with letters with prudence and discretion.

### **Thomas the Student**

While living at Tuckahoe, Thomas received his first education in English at the age of five, which continued until he was nine years old when his family returned to Shadwell. We know very little about these earliest years of schooling, but that does not mean that we cannot examine how Thomas' first years of education influenced his life. Merrill Peterson notes of this period, "Thomas' earliest memories

accordingly, were not of the simple farm house at Shadwell but of the airy and commodious frame and brick mansion on the James.”<sup>23</sup> While it might have been difficult to forget such a place as the Tuckahoe mansion, some of Thomas’ earliest recorded memories are not of the mansion but of the little one-room schoolhouse on the plantation’s east side. We already discussed Thomas’ alleged recollection of stepping out of school to say the Lord’s Prayer. Regardless of the accuracy of this memory, it was here, as Jessie Thompson Krusen explains, “where he and his second cousin Thomas Mann Randolph, along with the three Jefferson and two Randolph girls, were privately tutored.”<sup>24</sup> Beginning at the age of five and for the next few years, Thomas would learn reading, writing, and arithmetic alongside his sisters and cousins.

Thomas’ instruction in English and arithmetic produced important skills he would rely on for the rest of his life. We do not need to spend much time discussing the importance of English on the man who wrote one of the most revered English pieces in American history, but what about arithmetic? While writing notes on establishing a monetary unit for the United States, Thomas revealed an important memory he had of learning arithmetic in school:

The most *easy ratio* of multiplication and division, is that by ten. Every one knows the facility of Decimal Arithmetic. Every one remembers, that, when learning Money-Arithmetic, he used to be puzzled with adding the farthings, taking out the fours and carrying them on; adding the pence, taking out the twelves and carrying them on; adding the shillings, taking out the twenties and carrying them on; but when he came to the pounds, where he had only tens to carry forward, it was easy and free from error. The bulk of mankind are school-boys through life.

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<sup>23</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Jessie Thompson Krusen, “Tuckahoe Plantation,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 11 (1976), 104.

These little perplexities are always great to them. And even mathematical heads feel the relief of an easier, substituted for a more difficult process.<sup>25</sup>

This is an important memory of Thomas' youth and, yet, it does not appear in any scholar's discussion of Thomas' childhood. Not only does this excerpt show the confusion young Thomas experienced while learning arithmetic with money, it demonstrates how this youthful experience affected who he was as a policy-maker. Because of his experience with a complicated monetary system when learning his numbers, Thomas would later draw upon that memory when advocating a more simplistic system for the nation.

Thomas' search for simplicity is not only found in arithmetic but also in his religious beliefs. In addition to learning his letters and numbers, Thomas was raised in the instruction of his family's Anglican beliefs. It is difficult to trace the development of his religious ideas, but toward the end of his life, in a letter dated February 27, 1821 to Timothy Pickering, Thomas shared the following:

No one sees with greater pleasure than myself the progress of reason in its advances towards rational Christianity. When we shall have done away the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial scaffolding, reared to mask from view the simple structure of Jesus; when, in short, we shall have unlearned everything which has been taught since his day, and got back to the pure and simple doctrines he inculcated, we shall then be truly and worthily his disciples; and my opinion is that if nothing had ever been added to what flowed purely from his lips, the whole world would at this day have been Christian.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the Establishment of a Money Unit, and of a Coinage for the United States," reprinted in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H.A. Washington (Washington, DC: Taylor & Maury, 1853), 1:163.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Timothy Pickering, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H.A. Washington (New York: H.W. Derby, 1861), 7:210.

We do not know when Thomas began doubting the doctrines of his family's Anglican faith, but his desire for simplicity coupled with his individuality surely played significantly in his intellectual development. This particular excerpt reveals not only how his early education influenced Thomas, but also how he sought to deconstruct certain ideas he had been taught in his youth.<sup>27</sup>

While the above-mentioned beliefs are linked more to Thomas' religious ideas, which could have developed at any point in his life, they speak volumes regarding his individuality. This individuality can, in large measure, be attributed to the kind of childhood Thomas experienced. In *The Transformation of Virginia*, Rhys Isaac explains the impact of education on children in the eighteenth-century Virginia gentry's families: "The children of the gentry would have had their skills and sensibilities informed by a divided experience," he argues. "They were confronted by books and the more literate speech of parents, neighboring gentlefolk, and teachers on the one hand, and by the altogether orally conditioned language usages of slaves, some servants, and other humbler Anglo-Virginians on the other."<sup>28</sup> This picture depicts Thomas' social environment well. Thomas and his siblings were taught their letters early in their youth, but they were also raised in large part by slaves in the Jefferson household.

While they may have heard stories told by the slaves that helped raise them, Thomas and his siblings, like any who had access to extensive reading, were not limited by nominal ideas or skills passed down by oral culture. As Isaac argues, "With this expansive realm 'individualistic' personalities could come into existence free from the direct pressures of the immediate presence of others."<sup>29</sup> Can it be argued that Thomas was gifted an individualistic personality because of his early education and reading?

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<sup>27</sup> See Jean Piaget, *Sociological Studies*, ed. Leslie Smith (New York: Routledge, 1995 [originally published 1965]), 217. In this work, Piaget explains how "the internal relations that constitute individuality and the correlative relations that constitute social life are constructed gradually and one must cut into this construction in order to grasp its mechanism and direction." It seems in his letter to Timothy Pickering, Thomas Jefferson himself was deconstructing his youthful religious instruction while even presenting a theory regarding the direction in which the world would have gone had certain doctrines not been introduced.

<sup>28</sup> Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 123.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

It may seem a sweeping statement but, considering the importance of books to Thomas as he grew older, it is clear that this early instruction proved to have a lasting influence on him. Thomas would later lament the loss of his books in a letter to John Adams on June 10, 1815, because of the “British Vandalism at Washington” during the War of 1812. He was saddened knowing the fate of the “literary treasures which I ceded to Congress,” affirming to Adams, “I cannot live without books.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, his entire life reflected that love. Most of his reading, however, at least in extensive literature and philosophy, came with his education post-Tuckahoe.

After seven years of living on the Randolph’s Tuckahoe Plantation, the Jefferson family moved back to Shadwell in 1752. It was here, when Thomas was nine years old, that he began instruction in Greek, Latin, and French under the tutelage of Reverend William Douglas. There are conflicting reports as to the quality of education he received during this time. According to Randall, Thomas’ “after-recollections of this place ... were of mouldy pies and excellent instruction.”<sup>31</sup> In his autobiography, however, Thomas records that Douglas “was but a superficial Latinist, less instructed in Greek, but with the rudiments of these languages he taught me French.”<sup>32</sup> Of this statement, Marie Kimball argues that “the picture is not that of a stimulating or inspiring teacher; the young scholar probably learned in spite of, rather than because of, his efforts.”<sup>33</sup> This interpretation continued for much of the historiography of Thomas’ childhood. Recently, in *The Road to Monticello*, Kevin Hayes argues that “the animosity Jefferson expressed toward his teacher seems unduly harsh. It is important to note that his critique is directed only toward Douglas’s linguistic abilities, not his overall scholarly accomplishments.”<sup>34</sup> Surprisingly, Hayes does not recognize that Thomas’ critique is not directed toward all of Douglas’

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, June 10, 1815, reprinted in *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies, From the Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 4 Volumes, ed. Thomas Jefferson Randolph (Charlottesville: F. Carr, and Co., 1829), 4:263.

<sup>31</sup> Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:17-18.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Autobiography,” in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Marie Kimball, *Jefferson: The Road to Glory, 1743-1776* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1943), 31.

<sup>34</sup> Kevin J. Hayes, *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 22.

linguistic abilities. Thomas' statement seems less a critique when we focus on his last phrase. It may be that Thomas' education in Latin and Greek was not as excellent as Randall's statement suggests, but as far as we can tell based on Thomas' statement, he still received a sound education in French.

Thomas' education in French, itself, had a significant impact not only on his intellectual thought but perhaps even his political alliances. There are a number of instances throughout his life that Thomas extols the French language; his background in French also enabled him to study the ideas of the Enlightenment. He certainly valued his own instruction in French, encouraging his extended family members to be diligent in their French studies. In a letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, Thomas wrote, "you are now, I expect, learning French. You must push this; because the books which will be put into your hands when you advance into Mathematics, Natural philosophy, Natural history, &c., will be mostly French, these sciences being better treated by the French than the English writers."<sup>35</sup> Thomas' education in French might be one reason why he was sent to Paris where he served as the new Republic's ambassador to France from 1784 to 1789. With so many experiences reading French authors, in addition to living in France, Thomas would later defend France's "preeminence of character among the nations of the earth. A more benevolent people, I have never known," he explained, arguing further that "their eminence too in science, the communicative dispositions of their scientific men, the politeness of the general manners, the ease and vivacity of their conversation, give a charm to their society to be found nowhere else."<sup>36</sup> While his admiration of France was cultivated over years of his life, it is remarkable to reflect on Thomas' childhood and, more particularly, that one of America's most famous Francophile's was placed on that road of admiration with his first instructions in French.

In addition to Thomas' education providing knowledge of the French language, the last couple of years with Reverend Douglas were conducted while the first conflicts of the Seven Years' War were being fought. As Thomas was perfecting his French grammar, his fellow Virginians were fighting the

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H.A. Washington, 1:399.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, 98.

French with Lieutenant Colonel George Washington at the Battle of Jumonville's Glen in 1754.<sup>37</sup> Is it a coincidence that George Washington's cabinet had respectable relations with England while Thomas, who never fought the French, later maintained strong relations with France while in office? Perhaps it is less significant than we may assume here, but Thomas' education with Reverend Douglas was important enough for him to maintain correspondence with him until his death in 1798.<sup>38</sup> Clearly Thomas' youthful instruction proved important to him throughout his life.

When he was fifteen years old, Thomas' life dramatically changed after his father passed away on August 17, 1757. According to his will, Peter left his son Thomas his Shadwell Plantation with slaves to work the land, but Thomas was unable to take full guardianship of the property until he was twenty-one years of age. Fortunately, under the guardianship of Peter's friends, Thomas was able to continue his studies. From 1758 to 1760, Thomas was sent about twelve miles away to the borders of Albemarle and Louisa counties where he boarded with and attended the school of Reverend James Maury of Fredericksville Parish at Peter's Mountain. Under the tutelage of Reverend Maury, who Thomas called "a correct classical scholar," he studied the Greek and Latin classics along with English literature, copying excerpts in his commonplace book.<sup>39</sup> He also received instruction in history, natural science, geography, and religion.

The records we have of this period in his life indicate that Thomas was studious but also enjoyed recreational activities with his friends. Often, scholars dealing with Thomas' childhood discuss the memory shared by Francis Walker Gilmer, one of his classmates, where he recalled seeing Thomas "with his Greek Grammar in his hand while his comrades were enjoying relaxation in the interval of school

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<sup>37</sup> For more on this battle, see *The Encyclopedia of North American Indian Wars, 1607-1890: A Political, Social and Military History*, 3 Volumes, ed. Spencer C. Tucker (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 1:10, 500, & 780-781.

<sup>38</sup> See Julian P. Boyd, et al, eds, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 36 Volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950-Present), 28:167. "I had proposed ere this to have visited my ancient tutor and friend Mr. Douglas: but I have been attacked by a rheumatism. ... You are so near Mr. Douglas that I will trouble you with my affectionate respects to him, with an assurance that there is nothing I desire more than to see him once again."

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, 4.

hours.”<sup>40</sup> This recollection indicates an exceptionally diligent student. James Parton records that an additional classmate, Reverend Maury’s son James, recalled Thomas as being “noted ... for scholarship, industry, and shyness. If a holiday was desired,” he continued, “it was not he who could be induced to ask it, though he urged others to ask; and, if the request was granted, he would, first of all, withdraw from the noisy crowd of his schoolfellows, learn next day’s lesson, and then, rejoining them, begin the day’s pleasure.”<sup>41</sup> Often, scholars use this quote to show, as Merrill Peterson writes, “he studied first and played later.”<sup>42</sup> While it is clear from these excerpts that Thomas placed his schoolwork first, it also indicates his desire to escape the classroom. In addition, just as Thomas took the initiative to seek respite allegedly using the Lord’s Prayer when younger, in his teenage years he convinced other students to ask the instructor for breaks.

Although Thomas was interested in fun and games, he continued to be concerned about the kind of company he kept and the influence his friends had on his studies. In a letter to his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, the now elder Thomas recollected that, with “the various sorts of bad company with which I associated from time to time, I am astonished that I did not turn off with some of them, and become as worthless to society as they were.” He continued, “under temptations and difficulties, I would ask myself—What would Dr. Small, Mr. Wythe, Peyton Randolph, do in this situation? What course in it will insure me their approbation? I am certain that this mode of deciding on my conduct tended more to correctness than any reasoning powers I possessed.”<sup>43</sup> Thomas was clearly concerned about some of his associations, though we have to wonder what he means regarding worthless individuals in society.

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<sup>40</sup> Francis Walker Gilmer, quoted in *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson*, by Kevin J. Hayes, 34.

<sup>41</sup> James Parton, *Life of Thomas Jefferson: Third President of the United States* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1874), 18.

<sup>42</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Nov. 24, 1808, in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, 1194.

The principal way of preventing this future of insignificance in Thomas' mind was in furthering his education. Upon finishing his schooling with Reverend Maury at the age of sixteen, Thomas wrote to John Harvie, his family's principle executor following Peter's death, inquiring about the possibility of attending college: "As long as I stay at the Mountain, the loss of one fourth of my Time is inevitable, by Company's coming here and detaining me from School. And likewise my Absence will in a great measure, put a Stop to so much Company, and by that Means lessen the Expenses of the Estate in House-keeping. And on the other Hand by going to the College, I shall get a more universal Acquaintance, which may hereafter be serviceable to me."<sup>44</sup> How bad was this company at Shadwell that it created significant housekeeping expenses for the estate beyond regular maintenance? Regardless of his activities, at the age of sixteen Thomas was already thinking about his future and trying to make logical decisions regarding his time and associations. He reasoned his actions with a future in mind where he would contribute some worth to society, and history tells of his success.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

Following Reverend Maury's school, and just before his seventeenth birthday in 1760, Thomas left for the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. At this time, he left his childhood behind, continuing his studies in mathematics and philosophy and eventually graduating with honors in 1762, only to begin reading law with his former professor George Wythe. Chronologically, this is where we end our study of Thomas' childhood, though it is interesting to note that it is at college, under the instruction of Professor William Small, that Thomas purportedly inherited his Enlightenment ideals, accepting the philosophy that saw private virtue as the foundation of public virtue.<sup>46</sup> It is likely that these philosophies were developed in Thomas' mind during his college training. However, considering his concerns before

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Harvie, Jan. 14, 1760, in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, 733.

<sup>45</sup> This fits within Jean Piaget's fourth stage (Formal Operational Stage) in a child's intellectual development, where children from the ages of 11 to 16 begin thinking logically and reasoning abstractly.

<sup>46</sup> See James L. Golden and Alan L. Golden, *Thomas Jefferson and the Rhetoric of Virtue* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 4-6.

college regarding the associates with whom he spent his time, Thomas was clearly interested in how his private life translated into the public sphere. In writing to John Harvie about the prospect of going to college, Thomas sought guidance even though he had already formulated in his youth opinions regarding education. Perhaps even more intriguing, his letter to Harvie, along with his later correspondence with his grandson, indicates that Thomas may have already espoused certain ideals of the Enlightenment before even entering college. His concern for restraining certain passions in private life, his interest in sociability and meeting worthwhile associates, and his desire to have a life worth something to society all point to a young man whose childhood helped him become one of America's most influential leaders, politically, economically, and philosophically.

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