

THE NATION'S BEGINNINGS

Biography

Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, is most well known for authoring the Declaration of Independence. The Second Continental Congress, which revised Jefferson's initial draft, left unchanged the following key passage:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed . . .

Those words became a defining statement of the United States' political identity. ♦ *As you read the following biography, consider what Jefferson wanted to accomplish. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

Thomas Jefferson had little skill as a public speaker, yet he was renowned as a gifted writer. A lawyer by training, the shy young Jefferson gained a reputation as a fearsome legal scholar.

Jefferson entered political life when he served in the Virginia House of Burgesses, the first legislative body in the American colonies, from 1769 to 1776. Despite his shyness, he led the Patriot lawmakers in the House. In 1774, he wrote *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, which enhanced his reputation as a supporter of independence. At the Second Continental Congress, Jefferson's talents earned him the honor of drafting a formal statement of the reasons that the American colonies should reject Great Britain's rule. Within days, Jefferson had completed a draft of the Declaration of Independence.

After the American Revolution, Jefferson continued to write about matters of law and politics. In 1776, he returned to Virginia, where he served in the General Assembly. He

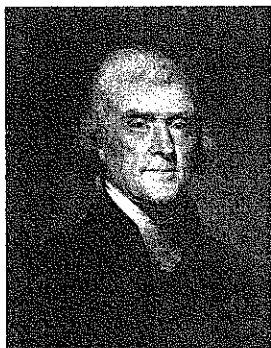
reformed property laws to give more people a chance to become voting landowners and wrote a landmark bill establishing the separation of church and state.

In 1789, President George Washington appointed Jefferson as the first Secretary of State, and Jefferson spent several years focusing on foreign policy. Later, as Vice President and President, Jefferson continued to defend citizens' and states' rights.

In retirement, Jefferson dedicated himself to scholarly pursuits. In 1819, he founded the University of Virginia, the first college in the United States with no religious affiliation. Jefferson wanted his

students to direct their studies and conduct according to the principle of self-governance.

At the end of his life, Jefferson explained that he most wanted to be remembered as the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and as the father of the University of Virginia.



Thomas Jefferson,
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Questions to Think About

1. What laws did Jefferson propose in the Virginia General Assembly?
2. What ideas did Jefferson most value?
3. **Draw Inferences** What about Jefferson's personality might have led him to become a skilled writer?