

# Thomas Jefferson: The Fight Against Slavery

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## Abstract

*Thomas Jefferson's views on slavery were controversial in his time, and often misunderstood in the world today. Jefferson was clear however; he opposed the institution of slavery. Through political documents, decrees, laws, and personal correspondence, he made his opposition to slavery clear.*

In 1776, a nation unlike any other was created. At the center of the creation of the United States of America was the man who “voiced aspirations of a new America as no other individual of his era,”<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson. He lived in an era of change, where unique, revolutionary ideas were formed. The men that led the colonists to independence from Britain, publicly and privately expressed new ideas, concepts, principles and values that took not only the colonists, but the world, by storm. The common patriots often took action to defend their beliefs of freedom and justice through protests and riots. The elite leaders and Founding Fathers, however, let their voices be heard in different ways. They wrote laws, decrees, and declarations and proclaimed them in America and their motherland, England. Thomas Jefferson was the man who authored most of those revolutionary documents.

Born on April 13, 1743 in Shadwell, Virginia, Thomas Jefferson was the son of Peter Jefferson, an accomplished planter and surveyor, and Jane Randolph, the daughter of a well-known, affluent family.<sup>2</sup> At the age of twenty-six, Jefferson inherited a large estate from his father where he built Monticello.<sup>3</sup> It was the place where he raised a family and spent most of his life until his death on July 4, 1826 on the fifty-year anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. During his lifetime, Jefferson tirelessly served his country. His efforts never went unnoticed, in fact, most of his political actions were criticized by those who did not agree him, both in his time and today. One of the most controversial issues Jefferson was involved with, both personally and politically, was slavery.

Throughout the course of human history, slavery had a central role in societies and economies around the world. From remote villages in Africa to countries like Portugal, slavery was commonly practiced; the institution rarely questioned prior to the 1750s. Westward expansion to North America was no exception. The first slaves were documented in British North America as early as 1619.<sup>4</sup> Twenty men and women arrived in Jamestown, Virginia.<sup>5</sup> They were most likely captives from Ndonga, a kingdom in what is known today as Angola.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that “Privateers had seized them from a slave ship bound for Mexico and traded them in Virginia. The Africans

<sup>1</sup> “Thomas Jefferson, A Brief Biography,” *TH Jefferson Monticello*, accessed March 28, 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/thomas-jefferson-brief-biography>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Africans in British North America,” *TH Jefferson: Monticello*, accessed April 3, 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/slavery-at-monticello/african-slavery-british-north-america/africans-british-north-america>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

worked the tobacco fields in Jamestown alongside white indentured servants.”<sup>7</sup> The original number of only twenty slaves in the population was the smallest number of slaves that would be in North America for centuries. By 1700, there were “27,817 enslaved Africans in British North America. In 1740, there were 150,024. By 1770, the number of slaves had grown to 462,000, about one-fifth of the total colonial population.”<sup>8</sup> Most of those slaves were captured and brought to North America through support of the British Crown. Colonists in Virginia and other southern American colonies lived in a society and economy that was completely dependent on slaves. Slavery was not a new institution, however, “what was unprecedented by the 1760’s and early 1770’s, was the emergence of a widespread conviction that New World slavery symbolized all the forces that threatened the true destiny of man.”<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jefferson, one of the most prominent figures in society at the time, had an emergence of convictions regarding slavery that changed the world forever.

Much has been said about Jefferson’s thoughts and beliefs on slavery. It is important to note, Jefferson separated his views on race from his views on the institution of slavery. His views on race did not directly affect his thoughts and beliefs on the institution slavery. The difference between the two issues, race and slavery, and Thomas Jefferson’s beliefs about them is often misunderstood. Some modern teachers and historians teach the rising generations that he excluded slaves from the Declaration of Independence. In a particularly famous line from the Declaration, Jefferson wrote “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>10</sup> In reference to this, one textbook, written by a leading historian, John Garraty<sup>11</sup> and distributed to middle schools across the country, stated that “Jefferson certainly meant that only free men were created equal. Jefferson believed that for free men there were certain inalienable rights, God-given rights that no just government could take away for any reason.”<sup>12</sup> However, Garraty’s assumption is false; Jefferson’s own words in his letters, declarations, and laws prove otherwise.

Jefferson was born into a life dependent on slavery. His home state of Virginia was the first place British slaves settled in the New World, and by the time Jefferson was born, one in five people were slaves.<sup>13</sup> One historian declared:

Slavery made the world Thomas Jefferson knew. The colonial society into which he was born...would not have existed without it. Enslaved people tilled his father’s tobacco fields, cured the tobacco and packed it for shipment, cooked and served the family’s meals, cared for Thomas Jefferson and his siblings, and accompanied him to the College of William and Mary. The profits from slave-based agriculture made his parents’ household and lifestyle, and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution: 1770-1823*, (United Kingdom: Cornell University Press, 1975), 41.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: July 2, 1776), in *50 Core American Documents: Required Reading for Students, Teachers, and Citizens*, ed. Christopher Burkett (Ashland, Ohio: Ashbrook Press, 2015), 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Margalit Fox, “John A. Garraty, Historian and Trailblazing Biographer, Dies at 87,” December 26, 2007, *The New York Times*, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/26/nyregion/26garraty.html>.

<sup>12</sup> John A. Garraty, *The Story of America: Beginnings to 1877*, (Austin, Texas: Holt, Rinehart & Harcourt Brace, 1992), 163.

<sup>13</sup> “Africans in British North America,” *TH Jefferson: Monticello*, accessed April 3, 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/slavery-at-monticello/african-slavery-british-north-america/africans-british-north-america>.

his education and exposure to the colonial capital of Williamsburg, possible. Though Jefferson came to abhor slavery, his livelihood depended on it.<sup>14</sup> Jefferson had revolutionary ideas, though, that were not hindered by his fateful dependence on the institution of slavery.

Thomas Jefferson was a man who did not conform to the ideas common to societies around the world during the late eighteenth century. Instead, he passionately fought for and defended all that he believed was right, despite opposition. He did not mince words. Everything he wrote and said was carefully worded and well thought out, particularly in regards to slavery. When he wrote “all men were created equal,” he used the words “all” and “equal” deliberately. Not only did his political actions, such as public policies, laws, ordinances, and decrees, fight against the institution of slavery during his political career, but his personal correspondences proved Jefferson to be a man who was against the institution of slavery in principle.

### **Did he really mean “all men?”**

The Declaration of Independence set the standard for the rights of American citizens then, and for generations to come. Although by today’s standards, the truths that were clearly, concisely, and eloquently outlined are no longer “self-evident;”<sup>15</sup> they are crucial to understanding what it means to be an American. The first self-evident truth written in the Declaration of Independence is that “all men are created equal.” This means that every person, regardless of race, social status, slave or free, is equal. Jefferson’s understanding of all men being equal came from John Locke, a man who had important influence on him.<sup>16</sup> The ideas developed from Locke’s philosophies were crucial to Jefferson’s opposition to slavery. Locke argued that mankind is born into a state of equality, “no one having more than another, there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature.”<sup>17</sup> Nature’s laws are what gave people their equality, strictly because they are all humans. Mankind does not have a choice to their nature. Instead it is innate, making them all equal.

The principle itself of equality proved slavery to be wrong. If all people were equal, it was not possible for someone to be a master and another to be their servant. When Jefferson wrote “all men were created equal,” he used deliberate language. Jefferson’s explanation of equality was best voiced by his close friend and co-author of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin. Franklin wrote a petition for the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, where he argued, “Mankind are all formed by the same Almighty being, alike objects of his care and equally designed for the enjoyment of happiness the Christian Religion teaches us to believe and the political creed of America fully coincides with the position.”<sup>18</sup> Franklin’s statement made it clear, that everyone, including slaves and masters alike, were equal. Equality among mankind was not just their moral beliefs, but rather the basis of the political principles for the creation of America as clearly stated by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. Franklin encouraged congress to promote the welfare

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<sup>14</sup> “A Society Dependent on Slavery,” *TH Jefferson: Monticello*, accessed April 3, 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/slavery-at-monticello/liberty-slavery/society-dependent-slavery>.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: July 2, 1776), in *50 Core American Documents: Required Reading for Students, Teachers, and Citizens*, ed. Christopher Burkett (Ashland, Ohio: Ashbrook Press, 2015), 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism*, (Clarendon Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>17</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, (December, 1689), in *PSC 2450*, ed. Joseph Postell, (Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2017), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “Petition for the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery,” (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: February 3, 1790), in *PSC 2450*, ed. Joseph Postell, (Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2017), 21.

and secure the “blessings of liberty to the people of the United States. And as they conceive, that these blessings ought rightfully to be administered, without distinction of Colour, to all descriptions of people.”<sup>19</sup> Franklin did not discriminate who could have those rights. Any America, free or slave, was given those rights by God and no one should have those rights taken away from them, no matter who they are.

The words Franklin used in regards to creation of all men equally, were words that Jefferson would have supported and agreed with. On one occasion, “Jefferson submitted his ‘rough draught’ of the Declaration on June 28. Congress eventually accepted the document, but not without debating the draft for two days and making extensive changes. Jefferson was unhappy with many of the revisions—particularly the removal of the passage on the slave trade and the insertion of language less offensive to Britons. Benjamin Franklin tried to reassure Jefferson by telling him the now-famous tale of John Thompson, whose storefront sign bore the words: ‘John Thompson, Hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money.’ After a circle of critical friends offered their critiques, the sign merely read, ‘John Thompson’ above a picture of a hat.”<sup>20</sup> Franklin agreed with Jefferson and was against the removal of anti-slavery rhetoric in the declaration. However, when Jefferson’s efforts were in vain, Franklin attempted to console Jefferson through the short story. Such interactions proved that the two men agreed with each other in principle. Jefferson agreed wholeheartedly with Franklin’s stance. The men had mutual respect for each other. In fact, Jefferson thought of Benjamin Franklin with the utmost respect and fondness. In a letter to his grandson, Jefferson wrote about ways to be more like Franklin, saying, “Doctor Franklin the most amiable of men in society.”<sup>21</sup> Eventually, Franklin died, but Jefferson was asked to write a eulogy for his funeral. In it, he wrote, “there appeared to me more respect and veneration attached to the character of Doctor Franklin in France, than to that of any other person in the same country, foreign or native.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, Jefferson thought highly of Franklin’s character, but that is not all. After Franklin’s death, on one occasion, Jefferson was asked if he would be the one replacing Doctor Franklin as the Minister of America. He responded “no one can replace him, Sir: I am only his successor.”<sup>23</sup> This testifies that in especially in matters of politics, Jefferson could only hope to follow in Franklin’s footsteps. The two men agreed with each other and worked together in matters of principle in regards to slavery. Franklin supported the first self-evident truth in the Declaration of Independence in his proclamation. Both Franklin and Jefferson understood the fundamental truth that “all men” were created equal. This principle defended the black people that were slaves, and it opposed the institution of slavery.

Another self-evident truth that Jefferson proclaimed was that all men were endowed with “certain inalienable rights.”<sup>24</sup> The rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were freely given.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “Jefferson and the Declaration,” *TH Jefferson: Monticello*, accessed April 21 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/jefferson-and-declaration#fn%205>.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, “Giving Some Rules of Conduct,” November 28, 1808, in *A Library of American Literature: Literature of the revolutionary period, 1765-1787* ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson, (University of California: 1888), 279.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Rev. William Smith (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: February 19, 1791) in *Nation Historical Publications and Records Commission*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-19-02-0005-0009>.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Rev. William Smith (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: February 19, 1791) in *Nation Historical Publications and Records Commission*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-19-02-0005-0009>.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: July 2, 1776), in *50 Core American Documents: Required Reading for Students, Teachers, and Citizens*, ed. Christopher Burkett (Ashland, Ohio: Ashbrook Press, 2015), 1-2.

At the time, there was no question about whom those rights belonged to. The rights were inalienable. In other words, they were rights possessed by everyone, whether or not the law acknowledged it.<sup>25</sup> Modern day misinterpretation of the words of Jefferson comes through confusion of inalienable rights with legal rights. Slaves were not free at the time to do anything they wanted to; they were ruled by masters under strict laws. However, the laws they had to abide by made them no less entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness than any other human being.

Nathaniel Chipman, a prominent politician during the Revolution, wrote that the nature of equality among men consisted of “a free and equal enjoyment of the primary rights.”<sup>26</sup> He went on to argue that “the equality necessary in a republic, requires nothing more, than this equality of primary rights.” If those rights were a necessary part of equality, then when Jefferson wrote all men had those rights, he truly meant all of mankind. No one was excluded regardless of their place in society.

However, throughout his lifetime, Jefferson often saw black people as inferior. This perception was commonplace worldwide in the eighteenth century. To think differently, was revolutionary. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he wrote, “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications.”<sup>27</sup> Jefferson made the point to declare that his opinion was based on “suspicion” only not scientific evidence.

Jefferson discussed black people, particularly slaves and his beliefs about them. He was concerned with their lack of intelligence and talents. However, he soon realized it was the institution of slavery that had limited and impaired their growth by not providing the proper education or social experiences. Over time, Jefferson realized that even if there was a racial hierarchy in society, they were still people who were entitled to God given rights outlined in the Declaration. He understood that “the blacks right to liberty does not depend on whether people believe them to be inferior to whites, or even whether they actually are inferior as a group.”<sup>28</sup>

Years later, Jefferson wrote a letter to Henri Gregoire, a religious leader for the French Catholic Church and an avid advocate for the abolition of slavery worldwide.<sup>29</sup> In reference to the inferiority of the slaves in the racial hierarchy, Jefferson wrote:

Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves... but whatever may be the degree of talent it is no measure of their rights.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Nathaniel Chipman, “Of the Nature of Equality in Republics,” (1793) in *PSC 2450*, ed. Joseph Postell, (Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2017), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” Virginia, 1781, in *Jefferson: Autobiography, Notes on the State of Virginia, Public and Private Papers, Addresses, Letters* ed. The Library of America, (1984).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas G. West, “Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America,” (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 8.

<sup>29</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., “Henri Grégoire: French prelate,” June 27, 2007, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henri-Gregoire>.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Henri Gregoire, “The Negro Race,” Washington, (February 25, 1809), in *Jefferson: Autobiography, Notes on the State of Virginia, Public and Private Papers, Addresses, Letters* ed. The Library of America, (1984), 1202.

He came to understand that despite what the world around him had believed for centuries, all people, blacks included, had rights and that slavery hindered those rights. Particular groups of people being excluded from equality and rights because of their race was not something he supported. Jefferson understood people's rights, so despite any thoughts he had about the inferiority of black people, he wholeheartedly argued that the institution of slavery was wrong.

### **Did he act on his beliefs? Personally versus Politically**

The question often arises concerning Jefferson's hypocrisy to his anti-slavery ideals based on his ownership of slaves. Slavery was crucial to the economy and society, but the dependence on slavery for survival did not mean Jefferson treated his slaves poorly or that he looked down on them. Most of Jefferson's slaves were inherited from his family when they passed away. Forty slaves came from his father in 1764, and one hundred thirty five slaves were inherited from his father-in-law in 1774.<sup>31</sup> However, "unlike his father-in-law, Jefferson never engaged in the commercial buying and selling of humans. His infrequent purchases were usually made to fulfill needs of the moment, and selling was primarily a reluctant reaction to financial demands. As Jefferson wrote in 1820, he had "scruples about selling negroes but for delinquency, or on their own request." Several known transactions were intended to unite families."<sup>32</sup> Yes, Jefferson sold slaves, but mainly out of necessity; sometimes the necessity was the happiness of the slave. For example, in 1805, Jefferson "reluctantly" sold Brown Colbert, a twenty year-old nailer, to unite him with his wife, the slave of a brick mason about to leave Monticello."<sup>33</sup> Jefferson did not sell him for the money, but rather, because he was "always willing to indulge connections seriously formed by those people, where it can be done reasonably."<sup>34</sup> When he sold slaves he did not always do it to make money, but rather, to keep those who labored for him happy. However, there were times in his life he sold slaves to pay off debt. He did not do that as a means of making a high profit, but rather, to pay off debt he owed.

Throughout his entire life, Jefferson purchased less than twenty slaves.<sup>35</sup> Most of the slaves he did buy were often to unite spouses that were already enslaved on his property through his inheritance.<sup>36</sup> He intentionally set a total of seven slaves free; two of them were legally made free when Jefferson was alive, and the other five were made free in his will.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, at least three of his slaves ran away and were not pursued.<sup>38</sup> Many black slaves chose to stay enslaved because they had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do; they were far from home, often without any family nearby for support.<sup>39</sup>

Jefferson treated the slaves kept on Monticello with respect. An esteemed French social reformer described Jefferson's slaves as "nourished, clothed, and treated as well as white servants could be. As he cannot expect any assistance from the two small neighboring towns, every article is

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<sup>31</sup> "Property," *TH Jefferson Monticello*, accessed March 28, 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/property>.

<sup>32</sup> Lucia Stanton, *Those Who Labor for My Happiness: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Jordan, December 21, 1805, from Lucia Stanton, *Those Who Labor for My Happiness: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>35</sup> "Property," *TH Jefferson Monticello*, accessed March 28, 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/property>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

made on his farm; his negroes are cabinet-makers, carpenters, masons, bricklayers, smiths, &c. The children he employs in a nail-manufactory, which yields already a considerable profit. The young and old negroes spin for the clothing of the rest. He animates them by rewards and distinctions.”<sup>40</sup> It was well known that Jefferson treated his slaves well. Jefferson wrote, “My first wish is that the labourers may be well treated.”<sup>41</sup> He truly fulfilled his wish.

Slavery was a necessary evil given the time period, and the economic and social dependence on slavery, however, did not affect how Jefferson treated slaves. Often, “Jefferson attempted to motivate slaves to perform tasks with incentives such as ‘gratuities’ (tips) or other rewards.”<sup>42</sup> Thomas Jefferson knew slaves were humans and that they were entitled to certain God-given rights. Respectable treatment of slaves was of utmost importance to Jefferson. He wrote, “I have my house to build, my fields to form, and to watch for the happiness of those who labor for mine.”<sup>43</sup> Those who labored for his happiness were not objects he took advantage of. He cared for them and for their happiness. In fact, he often referred to them as his family. For example in 1776, Jefferson made a census of the “[n]umber of souls in my family.’ His Albemarle County ‘family’ numbered 117, including, besides his wife and daughter, sixteen free men (his overseers and hired workmen), their wives and children, and eighty-three slaves.”<sup>44</sup> Additionally, “[i]n 1801 he vaccinated ‘70 or 80 of my own family’ against smallpox; in 1819 he spoke of the voracious appetite for pork of ‘our enormously large family.’”<sup>45</sup> He cared about his slaves and most of them cared about him. In 1824, some of Jefferson’s slaves reported that they were “perfectly happy, that they were subject to no ill-treatment, that their tasks were very easy, and that they cultivated the lands of Monticello with the greater pleasure, because they were almost sure of not being torn away from them, to be transported elsewhere, so long as Mr. Jefferson lived.”<sup>46</sup> Although he had slaves, they were almost always treated well, cared for, and respected.

Thomas Jefferson did not “passively accept that slaves would remain slaves in Virginia forever, or even that there would be slavery in America.”<sup>47</sup> Instead, he tried many times to pass laws for the gradual emancipation of slavery and to fight to defend slaves’ rights, particularly in his home state of Virginia. Often though, he faced great opposition by those who did not agree with emancipation. Jefferson was friends with a Welsh minister and philosopher,<sup>48</sup> Richard Price. Price “condemned slavery and advocated its gradual abolition.”<sup>49</sup> He wrote a pamphlet titled

<sup>40</sup> Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, (June 22-29, 1796), From *TH Jefferson Monticello: Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters*, “Extract about Thomas Jefferson, by the Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt,” March 20, 2017, <http://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/2023>.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph Jr., (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 19, 1792), *National Archives: Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-23-02-0389>.

<sup>42</sup> “Property,” *TH Jefferson Monticello*, accessed March 28, 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/property>.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Angelica Schuyler Church, (November 27, 1793), *National Archives: Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-27-02-0416>.

<sup>44</sup> Lucia Stanton, *Those Who Labor for My Happiness: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson*, ed. by Frank Shuffelton, (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Kevin R. C. Gutzman, *Thomas Jefferson Revolutionary: A Radical’s Struggle to Remake America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, January 2017), 128.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Fowler, “Richard Price: 1723- 1791,” 1896, in *History Home: A Web of English History*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.historyhome.co.uk/people/price.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> Jefferson Quotes and Family Letters, The Jefferson Monticello, scholarly annotation to letter from Thomas Jefferson to Richard Price, March 16, 2017, <http://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/1632>.

“Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making it a Benefit to the World.” In regards to slavery in the pamphlet, Price wrote, “It is shocking to humanity, cruel, wicked, and diabolical. I am happy to find that the united States are entering into measures for discountenancing it, and for abolishing the odious slavery which it has introduced.”<sup>50</sup> Jefferson had deep respect and agreeance with Price, so he distributed the pamphlet to Americans. After noting the American response to the pamphlet, Jefferson wrote Price a letter. In the letter, Jefferson observed, “the bulk of the people will approve it in theory, and it will find a respectable minority ready to adopt it in practice, a minority which for weight and worth of character preponderates against the greater number, who have not the courage to divest their families of a property which however keeps their consciences inquiet.”<sup>51</sup> It is clear that Jefferson saw those who did not support the emancipation of slavery or Price’s thoughts on it in a negative light. Masters of slaves did not have the courage to deprive themselves, their homes, and their families of slaves, despite the disruption of peace it brought their consciences. He signed the letter “I pray you to be assured of the sincerity of the esteem & respect with which I have the honour to be Sir Your most obedient, humble servant,”<sup>52</sup> to make it clear he agreed with Price’s stance and would continue to battle the anti-slavery fight.

Despite some Americans disagreements to his anti-slavery perspective, Jefferson saw the harmful effects of slavery on society. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson noted, “There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.”<sup>53</sup> Both the slaves and the masters suffered from the tyrannical act of slavery. He went on to proclaim, “And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriae of the other.”<sup>54</sup> Slavery affected the morals of the masters, and trampled on the rights of the slaves, which destroyed their patriotism for their country, America. If slaves did not have the same rights as any other American, they would not take pride in the country or love it the way the masters could.

The grievous effects of slavery did not just impact Americans at the time either. Instead, Jefferson saw their impact on future generations as the American republic developed. He warned Americans about the institution of slavery and argued:

Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Price, “Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making it a Benefit to the World,” 1784, in *Online Library of Liberty: A collection of scholarly works about individual liberty and free markets*, March 16, 2017, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/price-observations-on-the-importance-of-the-american-revolution>.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Richard Price, August, 7, 1785, *National Archives: Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-08-02-0280>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia: Query XVII,” Virginia, 1781, in *Jefferson: Autobiography, Notes on the State of Virginia, Public and Private Papers, Addresses, Letters* ed. The Library of America, (1984), 288.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities.<sup>55</sup>

Slavery was not just a principle Thomas Jefferson opposed for the benefit of the slave, but rather for the benefit of every American, free or enslaved. If slavery continued, future generations would grow up and run the country in the same way, trampling the rights of one people while destroying their own character as masters.

Jefferson noted that the entire nation would suffer if slavery existed. The God given rights outlined in the Declaration of Independence were taken away from certain people who were forced into slavery. Jefferson passionately discouraged the institution of slavery when he asked Americans:

Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest. -- But it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, of history natural and civil. We must be contented to hope they will force their way into every one's mind. I think a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation, and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.<sup>56</sup>

The foundation of America was based on the principles of equality and liberty for all. If those rights were denied to certain people, the foundation of the country would crumble. God gave those rights to every man, woman, and child, regardless of their status in society. If the people continued to disregard God's gift to mankind, God would intervene, and Jefferson feared that the people and the country would be destroyed. Slavery was a grievous act towards all of mankind and could not go unpunished, unnoticed, or disregarded. Jefferson knew that action had to be taken and that action had to begin in the hearts and minds of every American. He pleaded with the American people to realize the atrocity of slavery and to change. There was a definite possibility for emancipation based on the fact there had been a revolution in America because of the people's will power and beliefs. Jefferson hoped the masters would consent and support a revolution of slavery through emancipation. He pleaded with them to consent to the end of slavery rather than to be forced to comply with it. Jefferson hoped the negative, hostile, threatening, cruel spirit of the master might subside as the slaves became free. He knew emancipation would benefit every American, slave and master alike.

In fact, in some specific instances, Jefferson acknowledged that freed slaves could have incredible, positive impacts on society given the chance. He wrote to a prominent French revolutionist and said:

I am happy to be able to inform you that we have now in the United States a negro, the son of a black man born in Africa, and of a black woman born in the United States, who is a very respectable Mathematician. I procured him to be employed under one of our chief directors

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Condorcet, August 30, 1791, *Founders Online*. National Archives. Accessed April 7, 2017, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-22-02-0092>.

in laying out the new federal city on the Patowmac, and in the intervals of his leisure, while on that work, he made an Almanac for the next year, which he sent me in his own handwriting, and which I inclose to you. I have seen very elegant solutions of Geometrical problems by him. Add to this that he is a very worthy and respectable member of society. He is a free man. I shall be delighted to see these instances of moral eminence so multiplied as to prove that the want of talents observed in them is merely the effect of their degraded condition, and not proceeding from any difference in the structure of the parts on which intellect depends.<sup>57</sup>

In this particular instance, Jefferson acknowledged that slaves had to potential to positively contribute to society if they were made free.

### Action

Jefferson did his best to act politically to defend his opposition to slavery. In 1769, Jefferson became a member of the House of Burgesses,<sup>58</sup> “the first popularly elected legislature in the world.”<sup>59</sup> It was here that he acted as a lawyer in Virginia. In 1770, he represented a man named Samuel Howell who was being held as a slave because his grandmother was white but his grandfather was black.<sup>60</sup> In this case, Thomas Jefferson fought for the freedom of Howell stating, “Under the law of nature, all men are born free, everyone comes into the world with a right to his own person, which includes the liberty of moving and using it at his own will. This is what is called personal liberty, and is given him by the author of nature, because necessary for his own sustenance.”<sup>61</sup> Despite his efforts, Jefferson lost the case, and Howell did not become a free man. However, this was just the beginning of Jefferson’s fight against slavery.

In 1774, Thomas Jefferson wrote a pamphlet called “A Summary View of the Rights of British America” for the Virginia Delegates of the First Continental Congress.<sup>62</sup> The pamphlet described grievances that Jefferson felt had been brought upon the colonists by the King and Parliament from England. It also addressed desires he, and other politicians, had in mind for America. In one paragraph of the pamphlet, Jefferson addressed slavery and the malice of it, stating:

The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa. Yet our repeated attempts to effect this by prohibitions, and by imposing duties which might amount to a prohibition, have been hitherto defeated by his majesty negative: thus preferring the

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Condorcet, August 30, 1791, *Founders Online*. National Archives. Accessed April 7, 2017, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-22-02-0092>.

<sup>58</sup> Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, “Thomas Jefferson: Life Before the Presidency,” <http://millercenter.org/president/biography/jefferson-life-before-the-presidency>.

<sup>59</sup> “The House of Burgesses,” Ushistory.org, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/2f.asp>.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Transcription from Original.” Thomas Jefferson’s Argument in Howell v. Netherland (1770). [http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Thomas\\_Jefferson\\_s\\_Argument\\_in\\_Howell\\_v\\_Netherland\\_1770](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Thomas_Jefferson_s_Argument_in_Howell_v_Netherland_1770).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> “A Summary View of the Rights of British America: Set Forth in Some Resolutions Intended for the Inspection of the Present Delegates of the People of Virginia, Now in Convention / by a Native, and Member of the House of Burgesses,” WDL RSS, September 18, 2015, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/117/>.

immediate advantages of a few British corsairs to the lasting interests of the American states, and to the rights of human nature deeply wounded by this infamous practice.<sup>63</sup> This was not the only time Jefferson addressed the issue of slavery with King George III. In 1776, Jefferson wrote a rough draft of the Declaration of Independence where he accused the King of waging:

Cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This practical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against lives of another.<sup>64</sup>

In the decree to the King, Jefferson acknowledged “sacred” human rights were violated through the institution of slavery. Slaves innocently suffered in the institution. The atrocity slavery brought to America was cruel in Jefferson’s eyes.

Despite Jefferson’s efforts to fight the institution of slavery through an address to King, he was unsuccessful; the continental congress decided to remove the passage. Jefferson discussed the Declaration of Independence being edited, and he said, “As to myself, I thought it a duty to be, on that occasion, a passive auditor of the opinions of others.”<sup>65</sup> He wrote that while he listened to other men edit the Declaration and take sentences out, he was “writhing a little under the acrimonious criticisms of some of its parts.”<sup>66</sup> The section on slavery being removed was against Jefferson’s wishes, but because he acknowledged the importance of a republic, he allowed others to assist in writing the Declaration of Independence. However, the passage still voiced Jefferson’s opposition to slavery.

Slavery was a critical issue that Jefferson continued to address in an effort to abolish it before it became woven into a new society and country. In fact, he continued to press King George to end slavery in the New World but remained unsuccessful. For example, King George, “on three occasions prevented Virginia from implementing legislation taxing slave imports so much as to render further importation of slaves economically unviable. This, Jefferson said, would have been a first step toward ending slavery.”<sup>67</sup> His attempts were unsuccessful with the King, but he was not defeated as an American revolutionist.

Throughout his political career, he tried to pass several laws and ordinances to abolish slavery in America forever. In 1777, Jefferson drafted a bill to prevent slaves from being imported to

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” (Virginia, 1774). From *Creating the United States* in The Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/creating-the-united-states/interactives/declaration-of-independence/slavery/enlarge2.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Original Rough Draught of the Declaration of Independence,” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Volume 1, (1760-1776), from Princeton University Press, 1950.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Jefferson, from *Sketches of the life, writings, and opinions of Thomas Jefferson. With selections of the most valuable portions of his voluminous and unrivaled private correspondence*, compiled by B.L. Rayner, (New York, 1832), 126.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Kevin R. C. Gutzman, *Thomas Jefferson Revolutionary: A Radical’s Struggle to Remake America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, January 2017), 20.

America. In the bill he stated, “all persons who shall be hereafter imported into this Commonwealth by Sea or by Land whether they were bond or free in their native Country upon their taking the Oath of Fidelity to this Commonwealth shall from thenceforth become free and absolutely exempted from all Slavery or Bondage to which they had been subjected in any other State or Country whatsoever.”<sup>68</sup> This bill was an effort to stop slavery from infiltrating the newly formed United States of America. Jefferson tried to stop the problem at the borders of the country so he could then work on slavery issue that already dominated America because of the hundreds of slaves brought by England.

Jefferson grieved over politicians decisions to not approve his anti-slavery actions. He wrote:

But there wanted not in that assembly men of virtue enough to propose, & talents to vindicate this clause. But they saw that the moment of doing it with success was not yet arrived, and that an unsuccessful effort, as too often happens, would only rivet still closer the chains of bondage, and retard the moment of delivery to this oppressed description of men. What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible machine is man! who can endure toil, famine, stripes, imprisonment, & death itself in vindication of his own liberty, and the next moment be deaf to all those motives whose power supported him through his trial, and inflict on his fellow men a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose. But we must await with patience the workings of an overruling providence, & hope that that is preparing the deliverance of these, our suffering brethren. When the measure of their tears shall be full, when their groans shall have involved heaven itself in darkness, doubtless a god of justice will awaken to their distress, and by diffusing light & liberality among their oppressors, or at length by his exterminating thunder, manifest his attention to the things of this world, and that they are not left to the guidance of a blind fatality.<sup>69</sup>

Jefferson firmly believed in his legislation that would alleviate America of the atrocities of slavery; however, he also recognized that he had to be patient. Immediate abolition was clearly not possible in the new found republic, but he could draft legislation that would eventually lead to emancipation. Although that proposed bill did not pass, Jefferson was relentless. He never gave up, he tried again to pass anti-slavery legislation.

Jefferson wanted to ensure that the American values described in the Declaration of Independence were guaranteed to new territories as the United States expanded westward. On July 13, 1787, Congress approved the Northwest Ordinance, it's principles outlined by Thomas Jefferson. The “immediate purpose of the Northwest Ordinance was to provide for government in the largely unsettled lands west of the Appalachian Mountains and north of the Ohio River.”<sup>70</sup> One of the crucial elements of the ordinance dealt with the issue of slavery. Since slaves had been part of America from the time the first colonists had settled on the land, the abolition of it was extremely difficult. However, banning it from the beginning for the new lands that the government of the United States of America obtained was an effective and far reaching anti-slavery action.

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Bill to Prevent the Importation of Slaves, &c.,” (June 16, 1777), *National Archives: Founders Online*, March 27, 2017, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0019#TSJN-01-02-0019-fn-0002>.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Jean Nicolas Demeunier, June 26, 1786, *Founders Online*, (National Archives), accessed April 7, 2017, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-10-02-0001-0006>.

<sup>70</sup> James H. Madison, “Extending Liberty Westward: The Northwest Ordinance of 1787,” (1987), *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 2, No. 4, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uccs.edu/stable/pdf/25162562.pdf>.

In article six, Jefferson's anti-slavery principles were put into practice. The article directly states, "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory."<sup>71</sup> This article encompassed Jefferson's lifelong fight against the principles of slavery. The Northwest Ordinance "proved to be of crucial importance to the end of slavery in America."<sup>72</sup> The ordinance guaranteed that as the United States expanded, slavery would not. Jefferson could not control slaves being sent by the King to America prior to the revolution. However, the bold decree that the institution of slavery would end where it began is evidence of Jefferson's opposition to it.

In fact, years later, President Abraham Lincoln gave a speech where he praised the ordinance and Jefferson when he announced to all of America:

Mr. Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, and otherwise a chief actor in the revolution; then a delegate in Congress; afterwards twice President; who was, is, and perhaps will continue to be, the most distinguished politician of our history; a Virginian by birth and continued residence, and withal, a slave-holder; conceived the idea of taking that occasion, to prevent slavery ever going into the north-western territory. He prevailed on the Virginia Legislature to adopt his views, and to cede the territory, making the prohibition of slavery therein, a condition of the deed. Congress accepted the cession, with the condition; and in the first Ordinance (which the acts of Congress were then called) for the government of the territory, provided that slavery should never be permitted therein. This is the famed ordinance of '87 so often spoken of. Thenceforward, for sixty-one years, and until in 1848, the last scrap of this territory came into the Union as the State of Wisconsin, all parties acted in quiet obedience to this ordinance. It is now what Jefferson foresaw and intended---the happy home of teeming millions of free, white, prosperous people, and no slave amongst them. Thus, with the author of the Declaration of Independence, the policy of prohibiting slavery in new territory originated.<sup>73</sup>

Lincoln declared to Americans and to the world that Jefferson was successful in beginning the emancipation of slavery in the United States by his establishment of land that would remain free from the evils of slavery. Lincoln acknowledged Jefferson's tenacious efforts despite opposition. While Jefferson might not have been able to reap the benefits of what he sowed in his lifetime, the ordinance made Jefferson's efforts to abolish slavery timeless.

In 1800, Thomas Jefferson was elected as president of the United States of America. Throughout his presidency he faced great opposition in his fight for emancipation and the abolition of slavery in America. For example, the Constitution of the United States, ratified in 1789, declared, "The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person."<sup>74</sup> This clause prevented any president, or congressman from being allowed to stop slavery importation or tax slaves too high. However, as president, one his greatest accomplishments for the fight against slavery was the law he signed in 1807 called "The Act to Prohibit the Importation of

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<sup>71</sup> "An Ordinance for the government of the Territory of the United States northwest of the River Ohio," Sec. 14, Art. 6., (1787), *100 Milestone Documents*, Accessed March 28, 2017, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=8&page=transcript>.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas G. West, "Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America," (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 12.

<sup>73</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Peoria Speech," (Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854), *National Park Service: Lincoln Home: National Historic Site Illinois*, <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/peoriaspeech.htm>.

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Constitution, article I, section 9, clause I.

Slavery.”<sup>75</sup> The U.S. Congress “passed this piece of landmark legislation to end the profitable international slave trade on March 2, 1807, and President Thomas Jefferson promptly signed the act, making it law. The act went into effect on January 1, 1808, prohibiting from that time on the importation of African slaves to the United States.”<sup>76</sup> This law being passed was greatly significant to Jefferson’s fight for the gradual emancipation of slavery. Prior to 1808, he was not legally able to end the importation of slaves. However, the very first day he was permitted to end the slave trade, he did. His prompt action spoke to his opposition of slavery.

Although it was not signed into law until 1807 because the constitution prevented it, he took great pride in the effort that was put into the act eventually being signed into law. As a result, in his annual message to congress in 1806, he declared:

I congratulate you, fellow-citizens, on the approach of the period at which you may interpose your authority constitutionally, to withdraw the citizens of the United States from all further participation in those violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa, and which the morality, the reputation, and the best interests of our country, have long been eager to proscribe. Although no law you may pass can take prohibitory effect till the first day of the year one thousand eight hundred and eight, yet the intervening period is not too long to prevent, by timely notice, expeditions which cannot be completed before that day.<sup>77</sup>

Jefferson signed into law an act that would change slavery in America forever. Slaves were no longer able to be used as a method and means of international trade. As president, Jefferson took action to defend his beliefs against the principle of the institution of slavery.

Thomas Jefferson strongly desired to put an end to the evil act of slavery. In a letter to a prominent French Revolutionist, Brissot De Warville, Jefferson declared, “You know that nobody wishes more ardently to see an abolition not only of the trade but of the condition of slavery: and certainly nobody will be more willing to encounter every sacrifice for that object.”<sup>78</sup> He envied those who were able to abolish slavery. In a letter to the former governor of South Carolina, Jefferson wrote, “I congratulate you, my dear friend, on the law of your state for suspending the importation of slaves, and for the glory you have justly acquired by endeavoring to prevent it forever. This abomination must have an end, and there is a superior bench reserved in heaven for those who hasten it.”<sup>79</sup> Jefferson manifested his belief that slavery was an abomination and that the fight to end it was important. The prevention of slavery was a significant step towards emancipation. He admired fellow abolitionist, and praised their efforts as they fought slavery in the United States of America.

Jefferson did not just publicly and politically denounce slavery though. In personal correspondences to his friends, foes, and fellow politicians, Jefferson discussed his opposition to slavery. For example, a week before he died, he was invited to a celebration for the fifty-year anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, but due to ill health, he was unable to attend. To reject the invitation, Jefferson wrote to Roger Weightman and reminded him of the principles this country was founded on such as liberty and equality. Jefferson wrote, “The mass of mankind has not

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<sup>75</sup> “Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves,” 1807, from *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/act-to-prohibit-the-importation-of-slaves/>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Sixth Annual Message to Congress,” December 2, 1806, from *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy*, accessed April 21, 2017, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/jeffmes6.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jeffmes6.asp).

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Brissot De Warville, (February 11, 1788), *National Archives: Founders Online*, March 27, 2017, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-12-02-0612>.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Edward Rutledge, (July 14, 1787), *National Archives: Founders Online*, March 27, 2017, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-11-02-0506>.

been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately.”<sup>80</sup> Here Jefferson once again refers to the Declaration of Independence where he boldly stated that “All men were created equal.”<sup>81</sup> No one was born for the purpose of being a slave, and no one was born with the rights to be a master over someone else. Everyone was created equal with the same natural rights endowed to them.

Before his death on the fourth of July, 1826, Jefferson expressed his deep remorse for slavery in the country he helped found and wrote,

I regret that I am now to die in the belief, that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of 1776, to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be, that I live not to weep over it. If they would but dispassionately weigh the blessings they will throw away, against an abstract principle more likely to be effected by union than by scission, they would pause before they would perpetrate this act of suicide on themselves, and of treason against the hopes of the world.<sup>82</sup>

After his death, Jefferson’s influence regarding the institution of slavery lived on.

The institution of slavery continued to be a cross cutting issue. Beginning in the 1830’s, instead of fighting against it, many distinguished southern elites fought to promote and condone slavery by discrediting Thomas Jefferson. Well-known southern politicians and philosophers took a heroic Jefferson and turned him into an enemy in the south because of his opposition to slavery. Advocates for slavery intensely spoke out against Jefferson because he wrote the Declaration of Independence that outlined principles that were against slavery. One of the most outspoken critics of Jefferson’s anti-slavery views was John C. Calhoun, a senator for South Carolina. In 1837, in a speech in the Senate, Calhoun “described the institution of Southern slavery as a ‘positive good’ for slaves.”<sup>83</sup> In the speech he said:

We now begin to experience the danger of admitting so great an error to have a place in the declaration of our independence. For a long time it lay dormant; but in the process of time it began to germinate, and produce its poisonous fruits. It had strong hold on the mind of Mr. Jefferson, the author of that document, which caused him to take an utterly false view of the subordinate relation of the black to the white race in the South; and to hold, in consequence, that the former, though utterly unqualified to possess liberty, were as fully entitled to both liberty and equality as the latter; and that to deprive them of it was unjust and immoral. To this error, his proposition to exclude slavery from the territory northwest of the Ohio may be traced, and to that the ordinance of ’87, and through it the deep and dangerous agitation which now threatens to engulf, and will certainly engulf, if not speedily settled, our political institutions, and involve the country in countless woes.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826, in *50 Core American Documents: Required Reading for Students, Teachers, and Citizens*, ed. Christopher Burkett (Ashland, Ohio: Ashbrook Press, 2015), 136-137.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” (July 4, 1776), in *50 Core American Documents: Required Reading for Students, Teachers, and Citizens*, ed. Christopher Burkett (Ashland, Ohio: Ashbrook Press, 2015), 1-2.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820, in *PSC 2450*, edited by Joseph Postell, (University of Colorado Colorado Springs, 2017), 31.

<sup>83</sup> Christopher Burkett, *50 Core American Documents: Required Reading for Students, Teachers, and Citizens*, (Ashland, Ohio: Ashbrook Press, 2015), 196.

<sup>84</sup> John. C. Calhoun, “Speech on the Oregon Bill,” June 27, 1848, in *50 Core American Documents: Required Reading for Students, Teachers, and Citizens*, ed. Christopher Burkett (Ashland, Ohio: Ashbrook Press, 2015), 201.

The criticism came as means of despising abolitionists and their leader, Thomas Jefferson. The speech gave credit to Jefferson for the gradual emancipation of slavery in the United States from the founding of the country, outlined in the Declaration of Independence and continued through measures like the Northwest Ordinance.

Another advocate for slavery, William Harper, spoke out against Jefferson when he wrote: No scheme of emancipation could be carried into effect without the most intolerable mischiefs and calamities to both master and slave, or without probably throwing a large and fertile portion of the earth's surface out of the pale of civilization—and you have done nothing. They reply, that whatever may be the consequence, you are bound to do *right*; that man has a right to himself, and man cannot have property in man ; that if the negro race be naturally inferior in mind and character, they are not less entitled to the rights of humanity; that if they are happy in their condition, it affords but the stronger evidence of their degradation, and renders them still more objects of commiseration. They repeat, as the fundamental maxim of our civil policy, that all men are born free and equal, and quote from our Declaration of Independence, 'that men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable *rights*, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' It is not the first time that I have had occasion to observe that men may repeat with the utmost confidence, some maxim or sentimental phrase, as self-evident or admitted truth, which is either palpably false, or to which, upon examination, it will be found that they attach no definite idea. Notwithstanding our respect for the important document which declared our independence, yet if anything be found in it, and especially in what may be regarded rather as its ornament than its substance—false, sophistical or unmeaning, that respect should not screen it from the freest examination.<sup>85</sup>

Again, the credit of anti-slavery ideals was given to Jefferson. The founding principles of liberty and equality as God given rights did not support the institution of slavery. The men who used Jefferson as an example of man who spoke out against slavery vindicated him. Pro-slavery southern elites like William Harper and John Calhoun supported the claim that Thomas Jefferson was against slavery from the time the country was created.

## Conclusion

In the eighteenth century, people came from across the globe, from a variety of different cultures and norms into the New World. But for the men and women born in America, slavery was the norm. In fact, the institution seemed necessary in order to keep their societies and economies running well. However, for Thomas Jefferson, slavery was wrong. In the most influential and significant American document, the Declaration of Independence, he boldly proclaimed, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."<sup>86</sup> He truly meant that all people, whether they were recognized by the law or not, were human beings and as a result, they had God given rights that could not be taken away. Slavery, however, infringed upon those rights.

In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson outlined principles he fought for through his entire life. The principles defended the abolition of slavery. Through hundreds of personal

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<sup>85</sup> William Harper, "Slavery in Light of Social Ethics," 1837, in in *PSC 2450*, ed. Joseph Postell, (Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2017), 87.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence," (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: July 2, 1776), in *50 Core American Documents: Required Reading for Students, Teachers, and Citizens*, ed. Christopher Burkett (Ashland, Ohio: Ashbrook Press, 2015), 1-2.

correspondences and public statements, Jefferson made it clear he was against the principle of slavery, despite its prevalence in society and the world. Jefferson was “entangled in an unjust legal and economic system that he was unable to escape or abolish.”<sup>87</sup> His slaves were inherited, and this was something he could not change. Although it did not make the institution of slavery right, the slaves he did have, by no fault of his own, were treated well and cared for.

Although Thomas Jefferson had slaves, he fought to end the institution and defend the slaves. From the moment America was created in 1776, Jefferson declared their entitlement to basic human rights. Throughout his political career, he struggled to protect their liberties through court cases, bills, and ordinances. While he was never able to fully pass abolition or emancipation for slaves, his efforts became a legacy that lived on forever after his death.

For many, including a large number of slaves, Jefferson was viewed as a hero for his anti-slavery arguments. However, for many pro-slavery masters and for those that supported the institution of slavery, he often became an enemy. Despite the controversy, Thomas Jefferson was one of America’s most revolutionary founding fathers in matters of principle and practice regarding slavery. Jefferson was “more complex than his detractors would insist, a man who moved beyond the drafting of the Declaration of Independence to think deeply and radically about the young United States.”<sup>88</sup> He never backed down from his stance against slavery. He created a nation based on principles he hoped would be timeless. “Jefferson stood for the principles with which the American Revolution was synonymous: the equality of man, liberty of conscience, and republican self-government,”<sup>89</sup> that all people, including slaves, were endowed with by their Creator.

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<sup>87</sup> Lucia Stanton, *Those Who Labor for My Happiness: Slavery at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 56.

<sup>88</sup> Kevin R. C. Gutzman, *Thomas Jefferson Revolutionary: A Radical’s Struggle to Remake America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, January 2017).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

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