

# The Founding of the University

## Chronology

**1803, March:** Albemarle Academy is founded

**1814:** Jefferson joined the Board of Albemarle Academy

**1816:** Central College is founded

**1817, October 6:** The cornerstone of Central College's Pavilion VII is laid

**1818:** Rockfish Gap Report recommends Charlottesville as the location for UVa

**1819, January:** Central College is re-chartered as the University of Virginia

**1825, March 7:** Doors of UVa open to students

## Why did Jefferson strive to spread public education throughout Virginia?

While Jefferson referred to the University as “the hobby of my old age”, advancing public education was one of his lifelong pursuits. Much of his belief in public education stemmed from a belief that it was the only way to prevent tyranny from destroying the American Republic. For Jefferson, a public education system and the University of Virginia were more than just intellectual pursuits, but instead education was a patriotic cause.

## What was “The Collegiate Way” and why did Jefferson dislike it?

“The Collegiate Way” frames how America society characterized higher education in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The Collegiate Way promoted “correct” habits and manners through collegiate curricula and mores. Such habit-instilling colleges were modeled after small residential colleges in the British tradition. Under strict supervision, students would learn how to be polite citizens.

Importantly, Jefferson essentially dismissed the Collegiate Way as an educational philosophy, because he saw education as a vehicle towards an enlightened citizenry to serve as the future leaders of the new American republic, not as a place to instill manners.

## What is Albemarle Academy?

Albemarle Academy was basically a planned preparatory school for boys, located in Charlottesville. In 1814, Jefferson was named a trustee of Albemarle Academy, but at that time it existed only on paper. The school had been chartered in 1803, but nothing of substance transpired in the following years before the Board of Trustees met in March of 1814 to revive the plan for an educational institution. Jefferson's aspirations while serving on the Academy Board were much higher than just a prep school, and he used this foundation to build upon his dream of a first-rank institution near Monticello. It “*would probably absorb the functions of Wm & Mary college, and transfer them to a*

*healthier and more central position. perhaps to the neighborhood of this place.”* Jefferson was soon involved with creating plans for the governance of the proposed institution, as well as petitioning the VA General Assembly to appropriate funds for the support of the Academy.

### **How did Albemarle Academy provide the foundation for UVa?**

In several different letters in 1814, Jefferson pens his most important statement to date, offering a comprehensive statement of his views on education, while making it clear that his mind was now focused on converting the projected academy into the university which he had so long contemplated. He described his plan for public education from elementary schools through general schools to professional schools, with detailed notes on the subjects to be taught at each level and the duties of professors. The plan represented a somewhat revised version of his ideas for a system of public education which he submitted to the Virginia General Assembly more than thirty years earlier.

Later in the fall of that same year, Jefferson recommends that the title of Albemarle Academy be changed to “Central College.” The historian Neil Shawen summarizes Jefferson’s strategy: “By working the concept of centrality into the school’s title, Jefferson sought to plant in the minds of Richmond legislators and Virginians at large the notion that Charlottesville was in fact geographically and demographically convenient to the state. As this notion became accepted and interest in a state university increased, the adoption of Central College [into UVa] would become the next logical step.”

### **Why might Jefferson have wanted to create a university?**

There is no one answer when it comes to why Jefferson decided to create a new university; there is simply historical interpretation. Jefferson may have felt that the state of Virginia needed an alternative to the set up of William and Mary. Furthermore, Jefferson distrusted northern colleges because he feared that the youth of Virginia would be “poisoned” with Federalist doctrines.

Jefferson also believed that freedom could only be preserved by an enlightened populace; in 1805, while initially planning a university, he wrote: “I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree.” Jefferson believed the success of the newly formed American republic depended on access to early and higher education.

Toward the end of his life, sensing the impending sea change that would soon transform the political climate of the United States, Jefferson wrote Madison to disparage the scores of young lawyers who “no longer know what whigism or republicanism means.” How to correct the imbalance? It is in our new university, where “the vestal flame is to be kept alive; it is thence to be spread anew over our own and the sister States.” For his part, Madison, who succeeded Jefferson as the university’s rector, would later laud the institution as a “temple dedicated to science and liberty” and “a nursery of republican patriots, as well as genuine scholars.” Overall, both presidents believed that the general instruction of the people is the “bulwark” of democracy.

In a September 7, 1814 letter to Peter Carr, one of Jefferson's nephews, Jefferson sketched out his plan for a "Central College" where education would reach new realms in agriculture, law, and other disciplines. The board of Central College wanted to name the institution after Jefferson, but he flatly refused. To Jefferson, Central College represented Virginia and should be named to reflect that service.

Therefore Jefferson sincerely believed in the power of the enlightened citizen to impact politics and spread democracy, loved Southern institutions because of their values, and felt that the state could use more alternatives, and he has left it up to contemporary scholars to interpret which of these explanations might have been paramount.

### **How did Cabell and Jefferson get involved in education together?**

During Jefferson's presidency, he offered a governmental position to Joseph Carrington Cabell, but Cabell declined the offer to focus on education. Cabell had seen many different educational systems in Europe and had also studied various areas in his native Virginia, and he was determined to put his knowledge to good use. He began working on the establishment of a natural history museum at his alma mater, the College of William and Mary. However, he received a letter from Jefferson's private secretary, which said: *"The old college is declining and perhaps the sooner it falls entirely the better, if it might be the means of pointing out to our legislative body the necessity of founding an institution on an extended and liberal scale... Instead of wasting your time in attempting to patch up a decaying institution... Found a new one, which will be worthy of the First State in the Union"*

### **How did they work together?**

Cabell became a member of the Virginia House of Delegates and then the Virginia Senate. In 1815, Jefferson wrote to Cabell, seeking aid in passing a bill for the endowment of Central College, the precursor to the University of Virginia. The bill passed on February 14, 1816.

Jefferson and Cabell became political partners in the mission to put UVa in Charlottesville, with the retired Jefferson providing the ideological backbone and prestige for the plan, while Cabell did the political maneuvering within the Virginia legislature. While Cabell gathered political allies from the various regions of the state, Governor Preston named a committee (Madison, Jefferson, and 22 others) to pick an area for this state university. The appointed committee met in the summer of 1818 at Afton Mountain. The University Guide Service knows this committee as the **Rockfish Gap Commission**.

### **What happened at the Rockfish Gap Commission?**

Jefferson had to fight tooth and nail to get Charlottesville chosen as the site for what became known as the University of Virginia. Interests in Staunton, Loudon County, and Richmond all hoped to bring U.Va. to their locality, with economic and religious concerns factoring into their decision. For example, Washington College (now Washington and Lee), in Lexington, wanted the money to bolster their already budding school.

Despite numerous competing agendas, Jefferson's logic to place the university in Charlottesville was indisputable. Jefferson calculated that Charlottesville was exactly 3 miles from the center of the state (recall that, at the time, West Virginia was still part of Virginia). He had conducted surveys about roads, proximity to Richmond, etc. which also supported the selection of Charlottesville. Jefferson went as far as to count the number of elderly in Albemarle to show that it was a healthy place to live. His efforts wrapped up the Rockfish Gap Commission in 4 days.

On August 4, 1818, the committee completed their report and sent it to Richmond.

### **According to the Rockfish Gap, what were Jefferson's goals for UVA?**

1. To **form the statesmen, legislators, and judges**, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness so much do depend;
2. To expound the principles and structure of government, laws which regulate the intercourse of nations, those formed municipally for our own government, and a sound spirit of restraint on individual action, shall **leave us free to do whatever does not violate the equal rights of another**;
3. To harmonize and **promote the interests of agriculture**, manufactures, and commerce, and by well-informed views of political economy to give a free scope to the public industry;
4. To **develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals**, and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order;
5. To **enlighten them with mathematical and physical science**, which advance the arts, and administer to the health, subsistence, and comforts of human life;
6. And, generally, to **form them to habits of reflection and correct action**, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves."

### **How do these reflect Jefferson's greater political tendencies?**

Jefferson believed that in educating the youth at the University of Virginia, he would be creating the next leaders of the American republic (1). In an era when most universities sought to create the next crop of clergymen, Jefferson wanted to cultivate *citizens*. He also thought that northern universities were spreading Federalist "poison," and indoctrinating students to believe in an overbearing central government. Instead, Jefferson wanted to teach a version of John Stuart Mill's "harm principle," meaning that people should be free to do what they want unless it violates the rights of others (2). As a Democratic Republican, he also believed that agriculture and the yeomanry was the backbone of the American economy (3). Jefferson's view of knowledge had always been based upon universality; in order to truly be enlightened students should study as many subjects as they can in history, the sciences, and the arts (4/5). Finally, even though

Jefferson rejected “The Collegiate Way” as the primary reason a student should attend University, southern etiquette at the time and his own beliefs about the proper American citizen demanded that schools of higher education teach virtuous behavior to its student body (6).

### **During all these plans, did Jefferson write on educating women?**

In 1818: “A plan of female education has never been a subject of systematic contemplation with me. It has occupied my attention so far only as the education of my own daughters occasionally required.” Jefferson largely believed women should be educated in matters of the home, and that a father would decide what his daughters learned, as he did with his daughters.

### **Was the Commission’s report the end of the story?**

Even though the Commission had turned over its report to the legislature, the fight was just beginning. Schools such as William and Mary and Washington College (later Washington and Lee) were still vying for the state’s attention. After a brief struggle culminating in a defeated motion to remove Central College as the proposed sit, the bill was given to the legislature with Central College’s name intact as the recommendation. Cabell’s health, however, was failing. Determined to see the fight through, he wrote, “I will not stir from the seat of government until this business is settled. Even if the dangers to my life existed, I could not risk it for a better cause.” By the time the bill went to the Senate for approval, he could not speak on its behalf. Despite the setback, the bill became law on January 25, 1819, and Central College became the University of Virginia.

### **How did the University of Virginia secure the funding?**

After this victory, Cabell wrote to Jefferson, “The contest is not over.” Indeed, it was not, for the problem of funding still remained. The opposition sought to undermine the new institution by also giving funds to other institutions, and the procuring of funds for UVa was difficult. At the same time, Cabell’s health was worse than ever. Jefferson and Cabell were finally able to receive all of the state’s funds for education when a bill to move William and Mary to Richmond was defeated.

### **Did Cabell stay involved after the founding?**

Cabell continued his involvement even after the University opened its doors, and he would eventually become the Rector of the Board of Visitors. However, his most important contribution to the University—its establishment—was already complete.

Usually we associate only Thomas Jefferson with the founding of the University of Virginia; however, just as today’s Cabell Hall houses the daily manifestation of the ideals which the Rotunda professes, so, too, did Joseph Carrington Cabell take the vision of Thomas Jefferson, and, through extraordinary effort, make that vision into reality. UVa may be Mr. Jefferson’s University, but we owe a large part of its existence to Mr. Cabell.

### **How did UVa reflect Jeffersonian ideals?**

Jefferson was very intentional about his design for the University, even outside of architecture. He selected all the books for the library, defined the curriculum, picked the

faculty, and chaired the Board of Visitors. Unlike every other American college at the time, “Mr. Jefferson’s university” had no religious affiliation and imposed no religious requirement on its students. As befitted an institution shaped by a believer in wholly voluntary and consensual networks of governance, there were no curricular requirements, no mandatory code of conduct except the self-enforced honor system, no president or administration. Every aspect of life at the University of Virginia reflected Jefferson’s belief that the only legitimate form of governance was self-governance.

### **How did Jefferson’s design of UVa influence other universities?**

The state of Tennessee sought Jefferson’s expertise in both curriculum and architecture. Hearing of this educational maverick, East Tennessee College (now the University of Tennessee) wrote Jefferson for ideas in starting a school. Jefferson promptly responded to East Tennessee administrators with his academical village plans—the philosophy, design, and aims. East Tennessee officials judged his plans silly and absolutely ineffective. Instead, they decided to build the traditional college design of detached and imposing buildings.

Another Tennessee institution, Vanderbilt University, embraced Jefferson’s ideals. Bruce Payne, UVa’s first education professor, became Dean of Education at Vanderbilt’s George Peabody School of Education. Payne’s UVa experience so influenced the Peabody School that during his tenure Peabody remodeled itself exactly after the Lawn. The structure of Vanderbilt’s Peabody School features a Pantheon-like building, departmental pavilions, and a terraced, grassy expanse.

Other examples of UVa’s architectural influence on other universities include the old women’s campus at Duke University and the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.

UVa also impacted higher education on a national level. As the country’s first secular school, UVa solidified an indisputable separation between church and state in public institutions. UVa was also the first institution to grant professors academic freedom in teaching, choosing books, etc. These fundamental tenets of modern education—freedom to believe and freedom to learn—began here in Charlottesville.