

Thomas Jefferson

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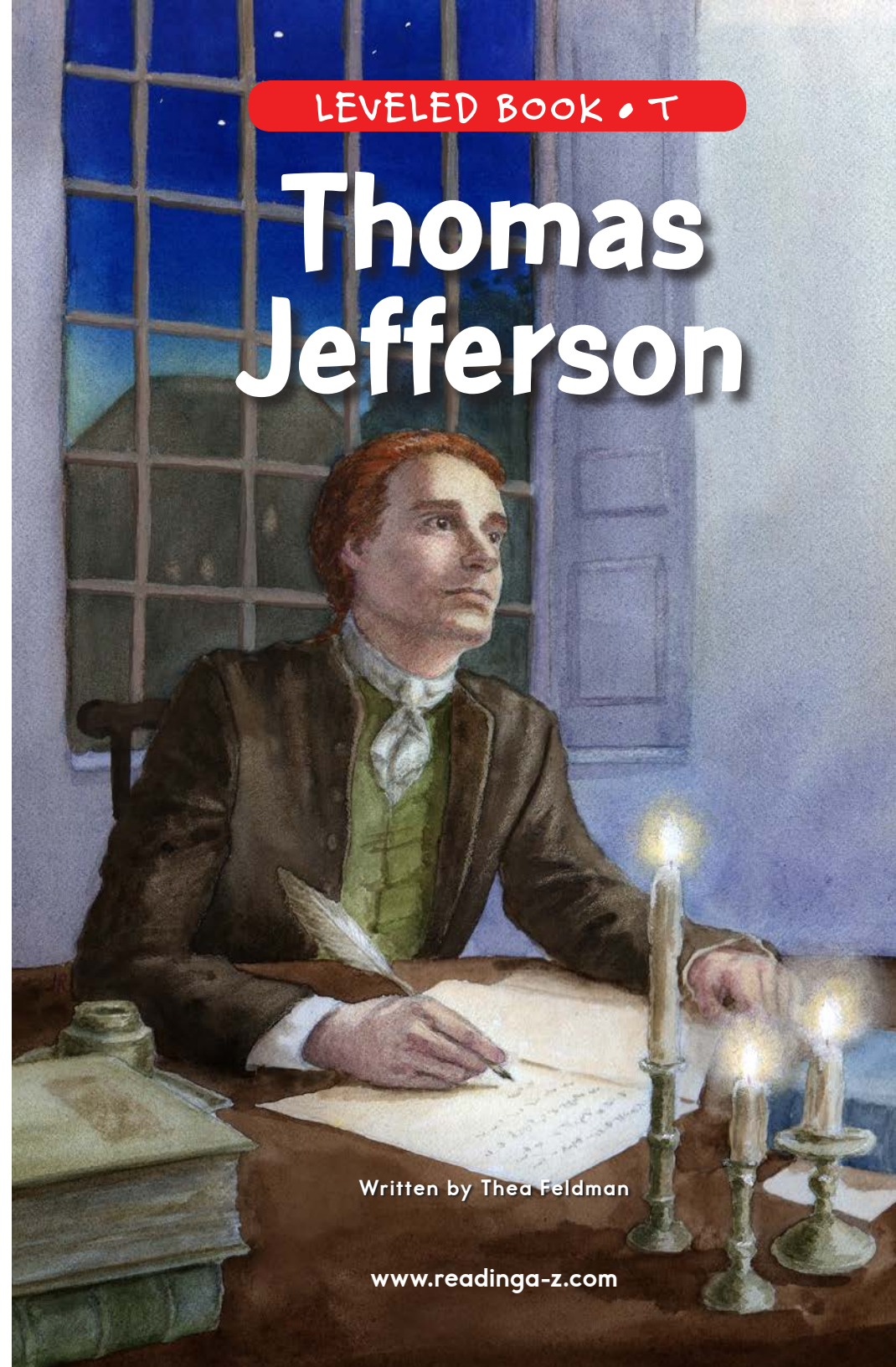


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Written by Thea Feldman

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Title page: The Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Page 3: Jefferson played a key role in keeping alive the Library of Congress. In fact, the Main Reading Room, pictured here, is contained inside a building that bears his name.

Back cover: Jefferson appears on the rare two-dollar bill but also the nickel.

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Correlation

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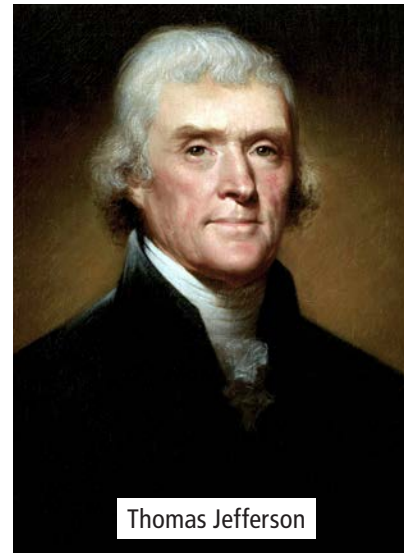
The Library of Congress

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And the Winner Is . . .

December 3, 1800, was Election Day in the United States of America. Four candidates



Thomas Jefferson

were running for president, but when the votes were counted, there was no winner! It took more than two months and thirty-six votes by the House of **Representatives** to declare one. In the end, the winner was Thomas Jefferson.

As president of the United States, Jefferson would help the young country thrive. Yet long before he was elected, Jefferson had already served his country. He was one of its **Founding Fathers** who led the American colonies to **independence** from Great Britain. He wrote the **Declaration of Independence**—one of the most important documents in American history. Jefferson's thoughts and words would shape the United States forever.

A Lover of Words

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743, at Shadwell, his family's **plantation** in Virginia. He was the third of six children born to Jane and Peter Jefferson. At the time, Virginia was one of the thirteen colonies in North America under the rule of Great Britain.

Peter Jefferson was a member of the House of Burgesses. This was the first assembly in North America elected to make local laws. He was also a successful farmer, land surveyor, and mapmaker. Peter owned a large amount of land and kept slaves.

The Jefferson home included a library with twenty-nine books. That was a large number for a personal library at the time. By Thomas's sixth birthday, he had read them all.

Jefferson and Slaves

Plantation owners used slaves to work their land. Jefferson's father had forty slaves. Jefferson inherited those slaves when his father died. He eventually would own several hundred. Jefferson believed that slavery was wrong, but he never freed his slaves. Slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865, thirty-nine years after Jefferson died.



Thomas was a shy redheaded boy who loved the outdoors and music, but he loved to read more than anything else. He was always reading and thinking, even before he started school at age nine. He also liked to write down his thoughts rather than speak them.

In 1757, when Thomas was fourteen, his father died. Thomas was heartbroken, but he continued his schooling. Three years later, he went to William and Mary College. After that, he studied law.

A Taxing Time

In 1767, Jefferson began to practice law. The next year, he became a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses. Jefferson did an excellent job of thinking through and preparing his law cases. He was not a great speaker, though. In the House of Burgesses, Jefferson was very quiet, but he became known for writing important documents.

Jefferson's career began at a time when tensions were growing between Great Britain and her colonies. British lawmakers were imposing many rules on the colonies and making the colonists pay high taxes. The colonists were angry that people who lived so far away were making decisions about their lives. The colonists wanted to have representatives in the British **government**. They believed there should be "no taxation without representation." The British government refused to give the colonists a voice in making laws. The colonists held many protests, and Great Britain sent troops to the colonies to keep the peace.

Jefferson was among those who thought the British government was being unfair. He thought government had a responsibility to take care of and help its citizens. In 1769, Jefferson voted to stop buying British goods as a way to protest the British government's high taxes.

Great Britain, however, continued to impose rules and high taxes on the colonists. The colonists grew so frustrated that they decided to meet to discuss the situation.



Monticello: The Jefferson Family Home

In 1769, Jefferson started building his dream home on a mountaintop in Virginia. He designed the home himself and called it *Monticello*. On New Year's Day in 1772, Jefferson married Martha Skelton and brought her to live at Monticello, which was still being built. The house was a labor of love for Jefferson. He kept redesigning it and adding to it for forty years.

In 1774, representatives from almost every colony went to Philadelphia to take part in the First Continental Congress. The Congress declared that the colonies were loyal to Great Britain. At the same time, they argued that Parliament should not be allowed to tax them.

Great Britain did not stop the taxes, and tensions continued to grow. On April 19, 1775, armed citizens of Massachusetts fought the British Army. This was the start of the Revolutionary War. A Second Continental Congress was called.



The painting *The Shot Heard 'Round the World* depicts the first shots fired as British soldiers marched toward Concord, Massachusetts.

Writings That Shaped the United States

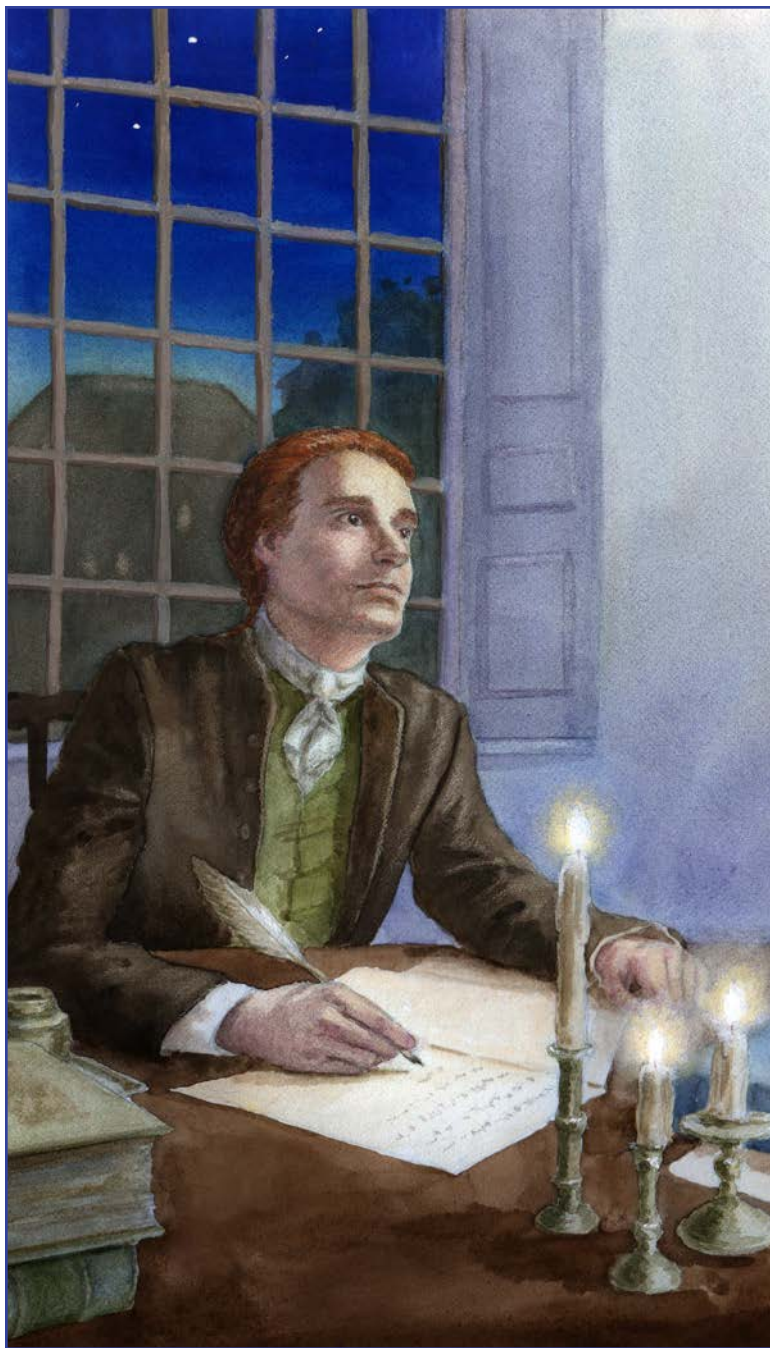
Thomas Jefferson attended the Second Continental Congress as the representative from Virginia. At the Congress, Jefferson met leading thinkers from the other colonies, including John Adams from Boston. The two became close friends.

The Congress decided that the colonies had to declare their independence from Great Britain. A brilliantly written document was needed to inspire the colonists. Adams knew that Jefferson was an exceptional writer and insisted he write the document. Jefferson went to work in his small rented room in Philadelphia. Within seventeen days, he had a draft of the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence

Many of Jefferson's own beliefs went into the Declaration of Independence. One of the parts most quoted today reads:

"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."



The Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration on July 4, 1776. It was America's Independence Day! The Revolutionary War, however, would not end until 1783.

Jefferson returned to Virginia after the Declaration of Independence was approved. He was elected to Virginia's House of Delegates (formerly the House of Burgesses), where he served until 1779. He ended the unfair law in which the oldest son received all of a family's wealth when his father died. He argued that all white males had the **right** to an education, no matter their background, and wrote laws setting up free public schools. He also wrote the **Statute** of Virginia for Religious Freedom.

Jefferson put many of his personal beliefs about religion into the Statute. He believed that people should be free to practice whatever religion they wanted. He also believed in a "separation of church and state." According to Jefferson, religion and government were two very separate things. He did not think either one should have power over the other. These were fairly new ideas at the time.

First, Second, Third

In 1789, George Washington was elected the first U.S. president. Jefferson became the country's first secretary of state. In 1797, his friend John Adams became the second president, and Jefferson became the vice president. However, the two argued about the nature of government.

Adams believed that a strong central government was important. Jefferson believed that the individual states should have the strongest powers. With a strong central government, the president and Congress have the most power. A strong central government felt too much like having a king and parliament, Jefferson argued. Wasn't that what the colonists had fought against? Jefferson and Adams wound up not speaking to each other for more than ten years.



Jefferson (standing) with Ben Franklin (left) and John Adams as they review a draft of the Declaration of Independence

In 1801, Jefferson became America's third president. He served two terms for a total of eight years. During that time, he cut the country's debt in half. He also doubled the country's size by making the Louisiana Purchase from France in 1803.

The Louisiana Purchase extended the western border of the United States all the way to the Rocky Mountains. The Louisiana Purchase turned the young United States into a large country. It helped the nation become an important world power. It was also the first time in history that so much land had been exchanged by two countries without war.



The United States government bought 820,000 square miles (2,123,790 km²) of land from France for \$15 million. That's \$18.29 per square mile. The purchase included all or part of fifteen present-day states.

The Library of Congress

During the War of 1812, the British Army set fire to the Library of Congress, the country's library in Washington, D.C. The collection of about 3,000 books was destroyed. In 1815, Thomas Jefferson, the man who loved books, sold his own collection to the library. With Jefferson's 6,487 books, the library was able to reopen. Today the library has more than 35 million books!

Returning to His Roots

After his second term as president, Jefferson returned to Virginia. He spent his days reading, writing, and tending to his fruit and vegetable gardens. He also helped start Virginia's first public university.

Thomas Jefferson died on July 4, 1826. John Adams died the same day. It was the United States' fiftieth birthday.

Today, Jefferson is remembered for his thoughts on freedom, rights, and **democracy**. His words and actions helped create and define a free United States.



The Jefferson Memorial statue

Glossary

Declaration of Independence (*n.*)

the document that announced the separation of the thirteen colonies from Great Britain (p. 4)

democracy (*n.*)

a form of government that is run by the people through free and frequent elections (p. 15)

Founding Fathers (*n.*)

the group of men who helped to establish the United States and its system of government (p. 4)

government (*n.*)

a group of people who have the power to make and enforce laws for a country or area (p. 7)

independence (*n.*)

freedom from the control, influence, support, or help of others (p. 4)

plantation (*n.*)

a large farm with many workers (p. 5)

representatives (*n.*)

people chosen to speak, vote, or otherwise act on behalf of an individual or group (p. 4)

right (*n.*)

a freedom or power that a person can justly claim (p. 12)

statute (*n.*)

a law created by the legislative branch of a government (p. 12)