

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson is one of those almost mythic figures from early American history that stand tall as one of the great heroes of the revolution and the early definition of what this country was going to become. Sometimes it's easy to look at a figure that stands so tall in history and think, perhaps some of that is myth. But when you look at the history of the times, he was every bit as great as our adoration of him suggests he was.

Thomas Jefferson's service to the new American union lasted over fifty years. He not only contributed to the core philosophical underpinnings upon which our democracy is based, he served in a variety of offices and made some phenomenal contributions to the developing country including...

- * 1775 - Served in the Continental Congress
- * 1776 - Wrote the Declaration of Independence
- * 1779-1781 - Governor of Virginia
- * 1783 - Elected to Congress
- * 1784-1789 - Commissioner and minister to France
- * 1790-1793 - America's first Secretary of State under George Washington
- * 1797-1801 - Served as Vice President of the United States
- * 1801-1809 - Third President of the United States
- * 1803 - Approved of and helped launch the Lewis and Clark Expedition
- * 1803 - Purchased the Louisiana Territory for the United States
- * 1815 - Launched the Library of Congress
- * 1825 - founded the University of Virginia

This phenomenal record of achievement is virtually unmatched in any public service record of comparable public servants. But Jefferson's contributions were more than just offices served, he was one or two or three key philosophical thinkers of his time that laid the ideological foundations of America.

It is impossible to overemphasize the accomplishment of writing the Declaration of Independence. This document has taken on such a central position in American history that it is viewed with the reverence usually reserved for religious documents. It so eloquently communicates the beliefs and the values of the American system of government that Jefferson can be seen as a true minister and prophet of those ideals.

Thomas Jefferson also believed strongly in Manifest Destiny and the westward expansion of the country as far as the Pacific Ocean. He provided the inspiration, the funding and the political muscle to launch the famed Lewis and Clark Expedition that was responsible for discovering vast new lands and

treasures in the heartland of America and providing inspiration to a country to "go west young man" and to achieve that dream of becoming a nation that stretched "for sea to shining sea".

Jefferson had a thirst for knowledge that was virtually unquenchable. He passed that passion for learning on in the building of the University of Virginia. But his contribution to education that has made such a huge mark on American society was the building of the American library system by which citizens of any community can have access to large volumes of information at no cost. It was an amazing experiment in public education. But today few of us can imagine a world where we cannot at any time just "go check it out at the library". Libraries have become that central to the American way of life.

It seems that Thomas Jefferson made an impact on every aspect of society from the educational systems of the growing country to government and even making his viewpoints on religious freedom an important part of how America approached this crucial topic. The entire concept of "separation of church and state" was one that Jefferson championed.

It should be noted that in his writings it was clear that the separation of church and state works because it is there to restrict government from illegally restricting the religious rights of citizens. Sometimes we misinterpret Jefferson's concepts that this governmental restriction is there to limit religious freedom when in fact, it is there to encourage all the religious freedom that the citizens of America need to honor and worship with complete openness and to never fear that the government will hinder who, what, when, where or how they go about expressing their religious ideas.

It's important to look back at the genius of this man, Thomas Jefferson and be grateful that he was the man of the hour for such an important time in the development of the great nation of the United States of America.