

# BEFORE YOU READ

## FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

### Reading Focus

#### The Burden of Freedom

Without a doubt, the cornerstone of the “American dream” is the ideal of freedom. The words of the Declaration of Independence are a ringing affirmation of freedom. Yet Jefferson knew well that freedom’s twin is responsibility—every kind of liberty we enjoy has to be balanced by an equal amount of personal responsibility.

### \* Quickwrite

Write the word *freedom* at the top of a page. Beneath it, draw a set of scales in balance. On one side of the scales, write all the benefits of freedom you can think of. On the other side of the scales, write the costs of such freedom—the responsibilities or sacrifices that these benefits demand from us.



### Elements of Literature

#### Parallelism

**Parallelism** is the repeated use of sentences, clauses, or phrases with identical or similar structures. For example, when Jefferson cites the truths that are “self-evident,” he begins each clause with *that*. He also begins a long series of paragraphs with the words “He has....” Jefferson’s use of parallelism emphasizes his view that all the truths he presents are of equal importance. The parallel

structure also creates a stately **rhythm** or cadence in the Declaration. Listen for this cadence as you read passages aloud.

**Parallelism** or parallel structure is the repetition of grammatically similar words, phrases, clauses, or sentences to emphasize a point or stir the emotions of a reader or listener.

For more on Parallelism, see the *Handbook of Literary Terms*.

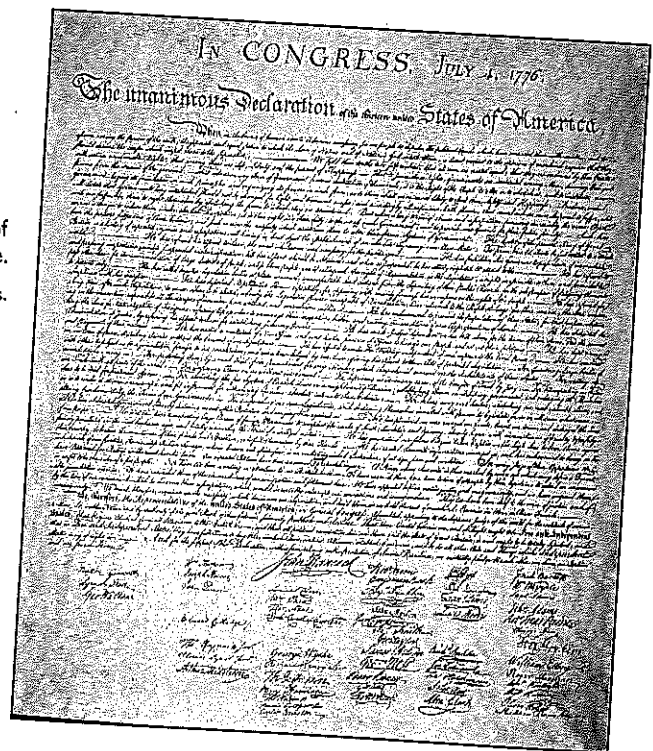
### Background

Four other writers worked with Jefferson on the draft of the Declaration that was submitted to Congress: John Adams of

Massachusetts, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Robert Livingston of New York, and Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania (page 84). Few changes were made by these other writers, but Congress insisted on several major alterations. Jefferson was upset by what he called “mutilations” of his document.

In this excerpt from his *Autobiography*, Jefferson offers a fascinating glimpse of how the most celebrated document in American history was put together. The underlined passages in the Declaration show the parts omitted by Congress. The words added by Congress appear in the margins. Think about why Congress may have made the changes it did to the original draft.

Declaration of Independence.  
National Archives.



Congress proceeded the same day to consider the Declaration of Independence, which had been reported and lain on the table the Friday preceding, and on Monday referred to a committee of the whole. The pusillanimous<sup>1</sup> idea that we had friends in England worth keeping terms with, still haunted the minds of many. For this reason, those passages which conveyed censures on the people of England were struck out, lest they should give them offense. The clause too, reprobating the enslaving the inhabitants of Africa, was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina and Georgia, who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves, and who, on the contrary, still wished to continue it. Our northern brethren also, I believe, felt a little tender under those censures; for though their people had very few slaves themselves, yet they had been pretty considerable carriers of them

1. **pusillanimous** (pyōō'si-lan'ə-məs): cowardly; lacking courage.

to others. The debates, having taken up the greater parts of the 2d, 3d, and 4th days of July, were, on the evening of the last, closed; the Declaration was reported by the committee, agreed to by the House, and signed by every member present, except Mr. Dickinson.<sup>2</sup> As the sentiments of men are known not only by what they receive, but what they reject also, I will state the form of the Declaration as originally reported. The parts struck out by Congress shall be distinguished by a black line drawn under them; and those inserted by them shall be placed in the margin, or in a concurrent column.

2. **Mr. Dickinson:** John Dickinson (1732-1808), one of Pennsylvania's representatives to the Second Continental Congress, led the conservative opposition to the Declaration and refused to sign the document.

### WORDS TO OWN

**censures** (sen'shərz) *n. pl.:* strong, disapproving criticisms.

## A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights;<sup>3</sup> that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be

3. **inalienable** (in-āl'yən-ə-bəl) **rights:** rights that cannot be taken away.



certain

Thomas Jefferson (date and artist unknown). Fragment of white marble.

Maryland Historical Society.

changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations,<sup>4</sup> begun at a distinguished<sup>5</sup> period and pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to expunge their former systems of government. The history of the present king of Great Britain is a history of unremitting injuries and usurpations, among which appears no solitary fact to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, but all have in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world for the truth of which we pledge a faith yet unsullied by falsehood.

alter

repeated

all having

stop

He has refused his assent to laws the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; and, when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to tyrants only.<sup>6</sup>

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly and continually for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time after such dissolutions to cause others to be elected, whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise, the state remaining, in the meantime, exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without and convulsions within.

4. **usurpations** (yoo'zər·pā'shənz): acts of unlawful or forceful seizure of property, power, rights, and the like.

5. **distinguished** (di·stin'gwisht): clearly defined.

6. **formidable . . . only**: causing fear only to tyrants.

---

### WORDS TO OWN

**transient** (tran'shənt) *adj.*: temporary; passing.

**constrains** (kən·strānz') *v.*: forces.

**expunge** (ek·spunj') *v.*: to erase; remove.

**candid** (kan'did) *adj.*: unbiased; fair.

---

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners, refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

He has suffered the administration of justice totally to cease in some of these states refusing his assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

obstructed / by

He has made our judges dependent on his will alone for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of new offices, by a self-assumed power and sent hither swarms of new officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us in times of peace standing armies and ships of war without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the military independent of, and superior to, the civil power.

He has combined with others<sup>7</sup> to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitutions and unacknowledged by our laws, giving

7. **others:** members of British Parliament and their supporters and agents.



Yale University Art Gallery, Trumbull Collection.

*The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776 (1787–1820) by John Trumbull. Oil on canvas.*

## LITERATURE AND POLITICS

### Legacy of Peace and Unity: The Iroquois Constitution

Before Revolutionary patriots put pen to paper to draft the U.S. Constitution in 1787, Colonial leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin studied examples of government from Greek and Roman times, examples from the Bible, and an example flourishing closer to home: the Iroquois Confederacy.

The Iroquois Confederacy, also known as the League of Five Nations, was a union of the Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Oneidas, and Mohawks (the Tuscaroras joined later). Around 1500, so the legend goes, a Mohawk visionary named Dekanawidah convinced the nations to unite in order to establish peace and to protect "life, property and liberty." Thanks to the constitution they created, called the Law of the Great Peace, the confederacy became a formidable power; by 1750, it numbered about fifteen thousand people, and Iroquois hunters and warriors ranged over one million square miles.

**The oldest living constitution.** The Iroquois Constitution, which still governs the Iroquois today, is regarded as the world's oldest living constitution. It gives member tribes equal voice in the nation's affairs, spells out a system of checks and balances, and guarantees political and religious freedom. Most amazing by European standards, the Iroquois Constitution grants extensive political power to women, who hold the right to nominate and impeach chiefs. The constitution specifies that "Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of the mother."

The Iroquois Confederacy had what Jefferson and Franklin were searching for: a constitution infused with basic principles of democracy and federalism. Franklin

his assent to their acts of pretended legislation for quartering large bodies of armed troops among us; for protecting them by a mock trial from punishment for any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these states; for cutting off our trade with all parts of the world; for imposing taxes on us without our consent; for depriving us [ ] of the benefits of trial by jury; for transporting us beyond seas to be tried for pretended offenses; for abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province,<sup>8</sup> establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these states; for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments; for suspending our own legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

in many cases

colonies

8. neighboring province: Quebec in Canada.

championed the Iroquois example after meeting confederacy representatives at the Albany Congress in 1754, which was held to recruit the Iroquois as allies against the French. The result was Franklin's Albany Plan of Union between the Colonies, and, though the plan failed, it helped shape the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution.

**The strength of five arrows.** The Iroquois Constitution survives as a brilliant American political and literary work, filled with rich symbolism. Dekanawidah had envisioned a huge evergreen "Tree of Peace" whose spreading roots represented the five nations of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois). After unification, a symbolic tree was planted. According to the constitution, "We place at the top of the Tree of the Long Leaves an Eagle who is able to see afar. If he sees in the distance any evil approaching or any danger threatening, he will at once warn the people of the Confederacy." An eagle atop the tree of peace, clutching five arrows bound together by a deer sinew (much harder to break than one arrow alone), symbolizes the Iroquois Confederacy—and it is this image we see pictured on the back of the U.S. quarter.

In 1988, to mark the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, Congress passed a joint resolution stating that "the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy, as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself." Like the five arrows bound together, the Iroquois political and literary legacy is entwined forever with ideals that continue to shape American life.

He has abdicated government here withdrawing his governors, and declaring us out of his allegiance and protection.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy [ ] unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow citizens taken captive on the high seas, to bear arms against their country, to become the executioners of their friends and brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands.

He has [ ] endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is

by declaring us out of his protection, and waging war against us.

scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally

excited domestic insurrection among us, and has

#### WORDS TO OWN

**abdicated** (ab'di-kāt'id) v.: given up responsibility for.

an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions of existence.

He has incited treasonable insurrections of our fellow citizens, with the allurements of forfeiture and confiscation of our property.

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium<sup>9</sup> of INFIDEL powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> 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 on 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 the LIVES of another.

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injuries.

A prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a [ ] people who mean to be free. Future ages will scarcely believe that the hardiness of one man adventured, within the short compass of twelve years only, to lay a foundation so broad and so undisguised for tyranny over a people fostered and fixed in principles of freedom.

Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend a jurisdiction over these our states. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here, no one of which could warrant so strange a pretension: that these were effected at the expense of our own blood and treasure, unassisted by the wealth or the strength of Great Britain: that in constituting indeed our several forms of government, we had adopted one common king, thereby laying a foundation for perpetual league and amity with them: but that submission to their parliament was no part of our constitution, nor ever in idea, if history may be credited: And, we [ ] appealed to their native justice and magnanimity as well as to the ties of our

9. **opprobrium** (ə·prō'brē·əm): shameful conduct.

10. **negative**: veto.

11. **fact of distinguished die**: clear stamp or mark of distinction. Jefferson is being sarcastic here.

12. **conjured** (kən·jōrd'): solemnly called upon.

#### WORDS TO OWN

**confiscation** (kən'fis·kā'shən) *n.*: seizure of property by authority.

**magnanimity** (mag'nə·nim'ə·tē) *n.*: nobility of spirit.

free

an unwarrantable / us

have

and we have conjured<sup>12</sup> them by

(Background) The Great Seal of the United States, original version; present seal reverse.

The Bettmann Archive.



common kindred to disavow these usurpations which were likely to interrupt our connection and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity,<sup>13</sup> and when occasions have been given them, by the regular course of their laws, of removing from their councils the disturbers of our harmony, they have, by their free election, re-established them in power. At this very time too, they are permitting their chief magistrate to send over not only soldiers of our common blood, but Scotch and foreign mercenaries to invade and destroy us. These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce forever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends. We might have been a free and a great people together; but a communication of grandeur and of freedom, it seems, is below their dignity. Be it so, since they will have it. The road to happiness and to glory is open to us too. We will tread it apart from them and acquiesce in the necessity which denounces<sup>14</sup> our eternal separation [ ]!

We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled, [ ] do in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these states reject and renounce all allegiance and subjection to the kings of Great Britain and all others who may hereafter claim by, through or under them; we utterly dissolve all political connection which may heretofore have subsisted between us and the people or parliament of Great Britain: And finally we do assert and declare these colonies to be free and independent states, and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do.

And for the support of this declaration, [ ] we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

The Declaration thus signed on the 4th, on paper, was engrossed on parchment, and signed again on the 2d of August.

13. **consanguinity** (kän'saŋ·gwin'ə·tē): kinship; family relationship.

14. **denounces** (dē·nouns'iz): archaic for "announces, proclaims."

---

### WORDS TO OWN

**renounce** (ri·nouns') v.: to give up.

**acquiesce** (ak'wē·es') v.: agree or accept quietly.

---

Syng silver used at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Joe Viesti/Viesti Associates.

would inevitably

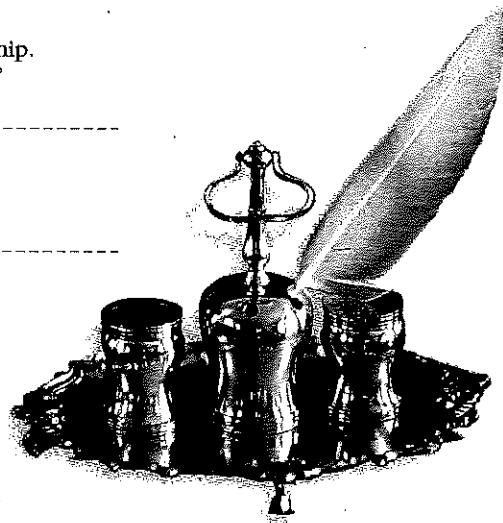
We must therefore

and hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.

appealing to the supreme judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions,

colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved;

with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence,





# MAKING MEANINGS

## First Thoughts

1. What word, phrase, or **image** struck you as most important? Why?

## Shaping Interpretations

2. What changes show a desire not to make an absolute break with the English people? Why do you think it would be important that the new nation maintain its "consanguinity," or close kinship, with the English people?
3. Which changes seem to have been adopted primarily for stylistic reasons, such as clarity or greater impact, and which for political reasons?
4. Find at least two passages in the Declaration that use **parallelism**. What is the effect of the parallel structure on the *idea* of the passage?

## Reviewing the Text

- a. Explain why the Continental Congress wanted to publish its reasons for separating itself from Britain.
- b. The word *self-evident* refers to the truths that are accessible to our common sense. List the truths that Jefferson cites in particular.
- c. List the offenses charged to the king of England.
- d. Identify the specific clause struck out by Congress that Jefferson refers to in his opening paragraph. What does it accuse the king of doing?

## CHOICES: Building Your Portfolio

### Writer's Notebook

#### 1. Collecting Ideas for an Autobiographical Incident

Americans are fond of saying, "It's a free country." But freedom has its costs. After



reviewing your Reader's Log, freewrite about an experience you've had when you realized that freedom can bring both benefits and burdens, gains and losses. Keep your notes; you may use them later in the Writer's Workshop on page 130.

## Critical Writing

### 2. I Am Woman

On March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams (1744–1818) wrote to her husband John Adams, who was on the committee preparing the Declaration of Independence. In a brief essay, respond to this excerpt from her letter.

... in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.

—Abigail Adams

## Speaking and Listening

### 3. Equal Signs

In "Harrison Bergeron," a famous short story by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922– ), Vonnegut imagines a future America in which "everybody was finally equal": "Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better-looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else." In a panel discussion, explore what you and your classmates think the framers of the Declaration meant by the word *equal*.

## Thomas Jefferson

(1743–1826)

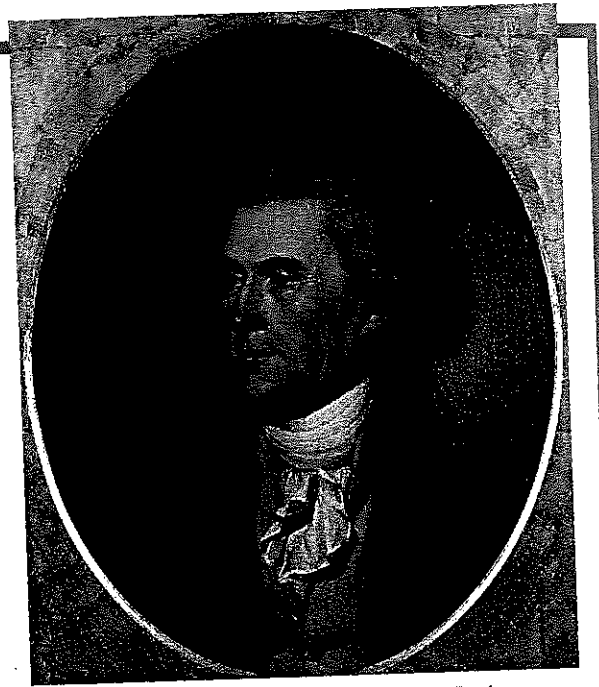
At a White House dinner in 1962 honoring forty-nine Nobel Prize winners, President John F. Kennedy hailed his guests as “the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.” President Kennedy was exaggerating only slightly.

Thomas Jefferson, the brilliant and versatile third president of the United States, was an accomplished statesman, architect, botanist, paleontologist, linguist, and musician. He displayed the range of interests that we associate with the eighteenth-century mind at its best.

Jefferson was born in the red-clay country of what is now Albemarle County, Virginia. Jefferson’s father, a surveyor and magistrate, died when Thomas was fourteen, but he had provided his son with an excellent classical education and a 5,000-acre estate. After attending the College of William and Mary, Jefferson became a lawyer, a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, and a spokesperson for the rights of personal liberty and religious freedom. In 1774, he wrote a pamphlet called *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, a call for the rejection of parliamentary authority. This pamphlet established his reputation, and two years later, Congress chose him to help draft the Declaration of Independence.

During the Revolution, Jefferson served for a time as governor of Virginia. When the British invaded Virginia, he retired to Monticello, the home he had designed, and devoted himself to his family and to scientific research. During this time he also composed most of his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Shortly after Jefferson’s beloved wife Martha died in 1782, he returned to public life, in part as an escape from his private grief. He served as minister to France, secretary of state, vice president, and president from 1801–1809.

A determined opponent of federal power, Jefferson embodied the principles of what would



Thomas Jefferson (1791) by Charles Willson Peale.  
Oil on canvas.

Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

come to be called Jeffersonian democracy. He believed in the rights of individuals and states to govern themselves as much as possible. Politically and personally, he strove to keep power vested in the agrarian backbone of the country. He also expanded the country enormously in 1803: The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States, adding land that would later be divided into part or all of fifteen states. And as for Jefferson’s presidential style, he avoided public displays and wore simple clothes: A president, he thought, should neither act nor look like a king. At state dinners, he eliminated seating by rank.

After his presidency, Jefferson retired once again to Monticello. He devoted his energy to establishing the University of Virginia, planning its courses of study and designing many of its buildings. In 1826, both Jefferson (at eighty-three) and the former president John Adams (at ninety) became gravely ill. Both hoped to live to see the fiftieth anniversary of the independence they had done so much to ensure. Jefferson died on the morning of July 4, several hours before Adams, whose last words were “Thomas Jefferson still survives.”