

Famous Virginians: Thomas Jefferson



"I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Thomas Jefferson of Virginia wrote two of the most important documents in the history of the United States:

- ***The Declaration of Independence* and**
- ***The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.***

The first led to the creation of the United States of America and the second was the basis for the first amendment to the *Constitution of the United States* which guarantees freedom of religion.

Of all our forefathers, Virginia's Thomas Jefferson of is considered the most eloquent writer, but he was no public speaker. Jefferson was a man who contributed with his pen rather than his voice. He was called the "silent member" of the Continental Congress, because he rarely spoke. However, the words he wrote carried a strong voice.

Because he was such a skilled writer, Thomas Jefferson was chosen to author the *Declaration of Independence*. This document tells why the colonies wanted to be free from English rule. In it Jefferson states that the right to make rules and to govern belongs to the people, not to kings. The *Declaration* also says that all people are created equal and have rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Soon after Jefferson wrote the *Declaration of Independence*, the thirteen colonies went to war against England, one of the most powerful countries in the world. After a long and bloody war, the Continental Army of the thirteen colonies defeated the mighty British military. After their victory, the thirteen separate colonies joined together to create one country, the United States of America. It was Thomas Jefferson of Virginia who provided political leadership by writing the document that led to war, to freedom, and to the establishment of the United States.

During the 1700s, the King of England reigned over Great Britain. He also ruled all British colonies including the thirteen in America.

The thirteen colonies in America joined together to fight against the King of England who had one of the most powerful military forces in the world. It seemed that the Continental Army was no match for the powerful British military. What factors helped the colonies win?

When our new country, the United States of America, was formed, the forefathers had to decide how it should be governed. What kind of leader

should the country have? What laws should be written? There was much arguing, but in the end, they finally came to an agreement. In order to make it official, all their ideas were written in an important document called a constitution. The *Constitution of the United States of America* begins with these words: "We the people of the United States . . ." These words show that the people of the new country would govern themselves. No longer would they be ruled by a king in a country far away.

In it, the *Constitution* tells just how the government will work. It also says what the government can and cannot do. Because of the way it was written, the people of the United States have the right to make changes. After the *Constitution* was finished and approved, the leaders began to worry that they had left out some very important ideas. They wanted to guarantee that certain rights could never be taken away from the citizens. In order to make these important changes, the leaders had to add amendments to the *Constitution*. These first changes became known as *The Bill of Rights*. The first amendment in the Bill of Rights provides us with important freedoms. It is based on a document written by Thomas Jefferson, *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, which states that all people should be free to worship as they please. The government cannot tell people what religion to follow or what church to join.

In addition to writing important documents, Thomas Jefferson was a man of numerous talents. For forty years he served his state and country in many ways:

- Magistrate and county lieutenant of Albemarle County.
- Representative in the House of Burgesses;
- Virginia legislator;
- Governor of Virginia;
- Secretary of State under President George Washington;
- Vice President of the United States under John Adams;
- President of the United States;
- Minister to France;
- Founder of the University of Virginia.

Thomas Jefferson was an inventor, a lawyer, a planter, and a lover of books. Well known for his many accomplishments, interesting facts about Thomas Jefferson include these:

- Jefferson was the first president to be inaugurated in Washington, D.C.
- Approximately 6,000 books from Jefferson's private library were purchased for \$23,950 to help start the Library of Congress. For this reason he is often called the "Father of the Library of Congress."
- Bears Lewis and Clark brought back from their famous expedition during Jefferson's presidency were displayed in cages on the White House lawn.

For years the White House was sometimes referred to as the "president's bear garden."

- The only presidents to sign the Declaration of Independence, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on its 50th anniversary, July 4, 1826. Adams' dying words were "Thomas Jefferson survives". Jefferson, however, had passed away a few hours earlier.
- Jefferson is credited with several inventions, including the swivel chair, a pedometer, a machine to make fiber from hemp, a letter-copying machine, and the lazy Susan.
- Jefferson wrote his own epitaph without mentioning that he served as president of the United States.

Name: _____

1. What does Thomas Jefferson's tombstone say? Who wrote the lines? Use resource materials to find out and write the epitaph on the lines below.

2. An inscription on a tombstone in memory of the one buried there is called an epitaph. In the question above, you copied Thomas Jefferson's epitaph. If you were writing Thomas Jefferson's epitaph, what three accomplishments would you include? Write an epitaph for Jefferson on the lines below.

3. The Virginia Standards of Learning state that fourth graders should know these three things about Thomas Jefferson:

- Thomas Jefferson provided political leadership by expressing the reasons for colonial independence from England in the Declaration of Independence.
- The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson, states that all people should be free to worship as they please. This document was the basis for the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, the amendment that protects religious freedom.

