



Jefferson's Vision  
*for* Education  
1760–1845

CAMERON ADDIS



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*for* Education,  
1760–1845



PETER LANG

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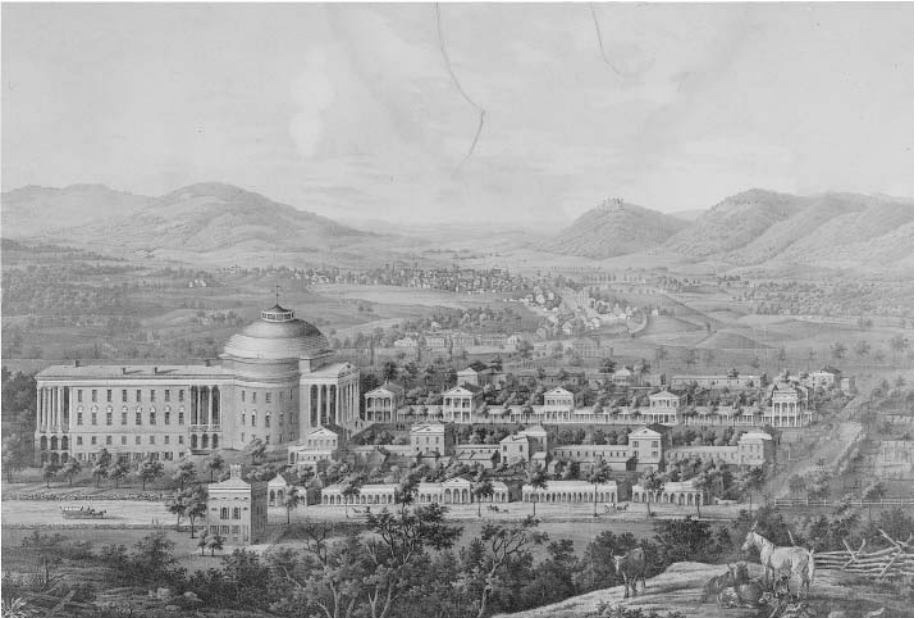
*For my mother, Georgi (Johansen) Addis*

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Your abuse of Jefferson is a trifle crude and wants delicacy of touch, but it is always safe to abuse Jefferson and much easier than to defend him.

Henry Adams to Henry Cabot Lodge

June 7, 1876



Edward Sachse, *View of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville and Monticello, Taken from Lewis Mountain*, 1856. Lithograph published by Casimer Bohn.

The annex was not rebuilt after an 1895 fire destroyed the Rotunda.

*Courtesy of University Virginia Library Special Collections.*

# Contents



Acknowledgments	xii
Introduction	i
1. The Evolution of Jefferson's Vision, 1760–1814	7
2. The Politics of Virginia's Literary Fund, 1814–1819	33
3. The Philosophy of the Rockfish Gap Report	54
4. Christian Opposition to UVA	68
5. Jefferson's "Hot Potato," 1820–1825	88
6. Early History of the University of Virginia, 1825–1845	112
Conclusion: The Impact of Jefferson's Vision	141
Postscript: <i>Rosenberger v. University of Virginia</i>	151
Bibliographic Essay	153
Notes	163
Bibliography	219
Index	239



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# Introduction



This book shows why Thomas Jefferson promoted publicly funded education and why he wanted it free of organized religion. Though he failed to bring about a public school system in Virginia during his lifetime, his vision partially materialized at the University of Virginia, and his broader goals presaged modern education. In 1880 the editor of the *Chicago Tribune* referred to Jefferson's educational plans when he wrote that "now and then a man lives who seems to have in his head every important idea that all his countrymen together get into theirs for a century after he is dead . . . almost any new project of human welfare was anticipated, and likely enough the whole identical plan worked out in detail, somewhere in Jefferson's writings."<sup>1</sup>

Today over 90 percent of children in the U.S. attend public schools, where formal religious indoctrination is prohibited. The state systems which they are educated in are similar to Jefferson's 1779 plan for Virginia, which called for secular, free, and compulsory schooling, but was not passed into law. When Southern states reinvigorated their school systems after the Civil War, Jefferson became a national symbol of public education, and remains so today.<sup>2</sup> His story is illuminating because the obstacles that precluded a fuller realization of Jefferson's dream, including resistance to government prescriptions and disagreements over instructional content, are lasting features of democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Southern sectionalism and a commitment to humanism are what distinguished Jefferson's vision for education from those of other revolutionary leaders.<sup>4</sup> His commitment to states' rights republicanism helped Jefferson's cause in his home state because most of his fellow Virginians concurred with him. He met more resistance with his emphasis on science over revealed religion as the basis for learning.

The Bill of Rights originally checked the power of only the national, not state, governments. Before the 1940s the First Amendment did not restrict religious

establishments within the states. Rather than smothering debate on church-state relations (words not even mentioned in the Constitution), the Bill of Rights opened a dialogue within each state.<sup>5</sup> State governments misconstrued Isaiah 49:23 to argue that government should be “nursing fathers of the church.” As president, even Jefferson conceded that the power to “discipline religion” lay with the states.<sup>6</sup> Religious tolerance was a trademark of most state constitutions, but full rights of citizenship and access to education for non-Protestants were not. Legal incorporation of non-Christian churches was disallowed in state constitutions and plural, or nondenominational, taxes were levied to support Protestant churches all over the country.<sup>7</sup> No one was tortured or burned, but everyone had to support Protestants, and non-Protestants were ineligible for public office.

In most New England states as well as in Virginia, moderates advocated a compromise, such as the multi-denominational church establishment of Massachusetts. In John Adams's Massachusetts the public supported education more than in Virginia, but through their state-sponsored multi-denominationalism they also maintained a tie with the Congregational Church until 1833.<sup>8</sup> Support for education and religion were linked, as they had been in colonial America. Still, in 1817 Adams shared Jefferson's optimism that the “multitudes and diversity” of [religious denominations] “is our security against them all. . . . What a mercy it is that these people cannot whip and crop, and pillory and roast, as yet in the U.S.! If they could they would.”<sup>9</sup>

Adams came to believe in separation of church and state and campaigned against state-sanctioned religion in Connecticut and Massachusetts. When the church establishment in Connecticut was barely defeated in 1818, clergymen feared an attempt to dismantle religion generally, but Jefferson sent his congratulations to Adams. “I join you in sincere congratulations that this den of priesthood is at length broken up and that a Protestant popedom is no longer to disgrace the American history and character.”<sup>10</sup> In 1820 Adams tried but failed to get his 1780 Massachusetts constitution rewritten in keeping with Mason's, Madison's, and Jefferson's strict defense of religious liberty in Virginia.<sup>11</sup>

Virginia, the most populous state in the South, was a key battleground in the controversy over church-state relations. There Protestants supported education, but were determined to control the process. A general (multi-denominational) assessment bill advocated by Patrick Henry was thwarted by Jefferson and James Madison in the 1780s. Jefferson and Madison played the establishment Anglicans off against dissenting Protestants (Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists), driving a deeper wedge between church and state than elsewhere. The wedge was guaranteed by their Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom (1786).<sup>12</sup> The statute forbade the use of any taxes for Christian instruction. Nonetheless, the Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches in Virginia were strong institutions that considered it their rightful role in society to shape the young. For them, the statute precluded a

monopoly on the part of a single denomination, but did not prohibit Protestant colleges from competing for public funds through the democratic process. Before Jefferson's establishment of the University of Virginia, there was no reason for them to think otherwise.

In the educational sphere, the American Revolution failed to wrest control away from Christian churches in any of the states, including Virginia, just as the French Revolution failed to in Europe. University College of London, the first college in England independent of the Anglican Church, did not open until 1828.<sup>13</sup> Many American schools were private seminaries, and those that were public were subject only to their own state constitutions. By the early nineteenth century, more so than the late eighteenth, colleges were organs of denominational influence.

Jefferson's idea of using colleges for purposes other than religious seminaries was not new. Christians so dominated higher education that they assumed responsibility for teaching a variety of classes.<sup>14</sup> Harvard and Yale, for instance, were begun as Puritan/Congregational seminaries, but provided education to non-ministerial elites such as lawyers and merchants. The Calvinism of seventeenth-century New England was also transformed. At Harvard, Congregationalism grew into liberal Unitarianism in the early nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Reverend Ezra Stiles, a man of science, presided over Yale during the early republic. By 1800 only 9 percent of college graduates were entering the ministry and 50 percent were becoming lawyers.<sup>16</sup>

But branching out into secular training did not mean the Protestant denominations gave up control of their colleges' curriculums. Throughout the upper South, even public schools such as the University of North Carolina and Transylvania University in Kentucky fell under denominational control.<sup>17</sup> Their challenges were similar to that experienced at Presbyterian Princeton: how to balance a combustible mixture of Christianity, republican politics, moderate Enlightenment philosophy, and mandatory attendance at chapel among students who prized the rebelliousness of their patriot fathers.<sup>18</sup>

Jefferson's divisions of study for the University of Virginia, which stressed the natural sciences and professional training for law and medicine, were similar to those drawn up by William Davie for the University of North Carolina in 1795.<sup>19</sup> That plan caused a clash between "infidels" and Christians in Chapel Hill that led to rifts and resignations among the administration and faculty. Eventually North Carolina followed the pattern typical of the era's public colleges when its administration was taken over by Presbyterians.<sup>20</sup>

Given the spirit of the times and the precedents of controversy set in North Carolina and Transylvania, Kentucky, Jefferson was hard-pressed to set up an institution openly hostile to denominational control. "Rational religion," as Jefferson's faith in the god of nature was sometimes called, was mostly overrun by

the explosion of evangelical Christianity that mushroomed in the United States around the turn of the nineteenth century. When rational religion reemerged among intellectuals in the late 1810s under the guises of Christian Unitarianism or natural religion, clerics at America's colleges were anxious to stamp it out quickly, as were most of their students.

Anti-intellectualism in America was stronger by the 1820s, when the University of Virginia opened, than during the 1760s, when Jefferson attended the College of William and Mary. Christian fidelity triumphed over the liberal religious sensibilities of the Enlightenment *philosophes* and Anglican clergy. John Quincy Adams, the last eighteenth-century man to occupy the White House, was ridiculed in the election of 1828 by Andrew Jackson's supporters because he advocated a national university in Washington and wanted to build celestial observatories.<sup>21</sup> Jefferson, who boldly advocated white male suffrage, was distraught at the coarseness of characters like Jackson, who dominated state legislatures by the 1810s and 20s.<sup>22</sup> He hoped the University of Virginia would encourage more sophistication in future rulers than what he saw around him in politics.

The proposal Jefferson introduced as governor of Virginia during the Revolutionary War was the most radical idea for education in America. His basic concern for educating the populace was not unique among the revolutionary generation. Many Americans hoped to emulate the example set by Frederick William I and Frederick the Great in Prussia, where a statewide system was set up earlier in the century. John Adams's Massachusetts constitution of 1780 included a provision for an educational system.<sup>23</sup> The American Philosophical Society awarded prizes for the best essays on education in 1797.<sup>24</sup> There was a consensus among leaders such as Adams, Madison, Benjamin Rush, and Alexander Hamilton that public education was necessary for representative government to succeed.<sup>25</sup> But they also feared that representative government precluded such systems because the public was unwilling to finance them.<sup>26</sup> Monarchies and dictatorships may have depended partly on the ignorance of their subjects to survive, but they also had the power to enforce unpopular initiatives such as compulsory education. The political ideology that revolutionary leaders encouraged to fight off British tyranny was naturally hostile toward any form of domestic taxation, including that earmarked for learning.

The question in the 1780s and 90s was whether or not republican governments had enough power to mandate school attendance and taxation on an unwilling population. The elite were able to afford private education, and they ran the state governments of the early republic. They had no need for public subsidies themselves, but some argued for public education as a means of controlling the working classes. What forms should education take? Who should be instructed and who should be in charge of dispensing it? Whatever consensus

existed on education among the revolutionary leaders broke down over the question of education's ultimate purpose: to control or empower.

Noah Webster, of dictionary fame, hoped to use education to inculcate subordination to authority.<sup>27</sup> Those more strenuously opposed to monarchies or power from above, such as Jefferson, thought just the opposite. They believed a basic knowledge of liberties and natural rights was necessary to guard against tyrannical infringements. Jefferson wrote, "No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom."<sup>28</sup> Rush and other Christians, such as Reverend Stiles of Rhode Island, thought the primary purpose of literacy should be to read Scripture, just as it had been in colonial times.<sup>29</sup> Stiles, like most Enlightenment theologians, also saw science as revelatory.

Jefferson's challenge in Virginia was exacerbated by two factors. First, like Congregational New England, but unlike the middle colonies and farther south, Virginia had a strong tradition of church establishment, in their case Anglican. This made it harder for Virginia than other states like Georgia (1785), North Carolina (1789), South Carolina (1805), and Maryland (1807) to charter a public university.<sup>30</sup> Second, Virginia's rural and dispersed population made it difficult to assemble primary and secondary students efficiently. The poor were oftentimes too proud to attend public schools because they viewed them as charity, or had no interest in reading, writing, and math.

Most important, the aristocracy of central and eastern Virginia (Jefferson's own social class) resisted paying taxes for middle- and lower-class whites when they could afford to send their own sons to private academies and British or Northern universities. They had no stake in encouraging upward mobility among those who could not afford education. These obstacles frustrated Jefferson during and shortly after the American Revolution, blocking the passage of his 1779 Education Bill and preventing him from making educational reform the key to his assault on aristocratic privilege.

As president, Jefferson could not use the central government to coerce education without completely compromising his states' rights Constitutional principles. He did manage to establish the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1802 in an effort to purge military leadership of Federalist influence. After his retirement from the presidency in 1809, Jefferson's priorities began to change. He began to lose interest in lower levels of education because he thought the capstone to his original plan, a state university, would better counter the Northern trend toward nationalist politics. Only by instituting a bastion of Southern ideology could Jefferson combat the threat to states' rights posed by the U.S. Supreme Court. He hoped to inhibit the flow of antislavery sentiment, which he viewed as an insincere plot on the part of Northerners to gain political power.



Jefferson also hoped to curb the trend toward denominational control of higher education by advocating religious pluralism. Jefferson thought nature, not Scriptural revelation, was the proper moral and religious framework for education. One of Jefferson's most famous phrases concerning education, carved into the walls of the Jefferson Memorial in 1943 at the height of World War II, captures his concerns: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."<sup>31</sup> Those words take on more significance when one looks at the entire letter from which they are drawn. The letter was a request for a donation to the University of Virginia, written around the time Jefferson abandoned hope for using primary and secondary education to offset aristocratic privilege. He argued that a successful university would rescue Southerners from the "Toryism" (national, or Federalist politics) and "fanaticism" (orthodox Protestantism) which their young men were then imbibing and importing from Princeton (then the College of New Jersey), or New England Congregationalist colleges such as Harvard and Yale.<sup>32</sup> Jefferson went on to essentially define ignorance as believing in strong central government, which is ironic given that the memorial was built by the expanding federal government of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Struggles over religion, politics, privilege, and the meaning of the American Revolution were the contexts of Jefferson's educational initiatives. Jefferson's work on education during retirement was more than just an epilogue tacked onto his more famous accomplishments. His ideas on education began as the vision of one man, but were transformed as he grew older, the country changed, and the execution of his university was implemented by those around him. The important story is how Jefferson and his allies negotiated their vision with the world around them, including opponents such as Federalist politician Charles Fenton Mercer and Presbyterian minister/administrator/publisher John Holt Rice. These negotiations, not the pure ideas of one man, reveal the contested culture of early national Virginia.

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Evolution of Jefferson's Vision, 1760–1814



When Thomas Jefferson was seventy-four years old, he claimed that education was his “single anxiety in the world . . . a bantling of forty years’ birth and nursing.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, Jefferson’s ideas on the subject formed over fifty years earlier, when he was a teenager at the College of William and Mary. The decades that followed his 1760 move to Williamsburg included his 1778–1779 education bill that failed, his proposal for dividing counties into smaller self-governing units, and a bill for religious freedom in Virginia that was passed into law in 1786. These initiatives were radically democratic for their time and buttressed the education plans of Jefferson’s retirement.

Those fifty years also included Jefferson’s travels in Europe and his presidency (1801–1809), the election to which embroiled him in a bitter fight with clerical opponents. The slanderous politics of 1800 stimulated his thinking on religion and confirmed his interest in education. While president, he established the academy at West Point in 1802. Jefferson’s own schooling, revolutionary political experience, and presidency shaped the philosophy he arrived at by 1814, the year he initiated his campaign for the University of Virginia. The centerpiece of his thinking was that education should reinforce republican politics by teaching citizens and leaders their rights and responsibilities. Second, education should be rooted in humanism, emphasizing scientific revelation over Scriptural.

### **Jefferson’s Education**

Most Virginians never attended school, but for planters the South was an outpost of the Enlightenment. It provided them with moral justifications for slavery and

frontier expansion, but also kept them plugged into more progressive aspects of European politics and science.<sup>2</sup> Jefferson enjoyed the intellectual and economic privileges of the squirearchy. He learned English and the classics with Parson James Maury for two years as a teenager. Then, rather than studying abroad, he chose to stay near home and attend the College of William and Mary.

Virginia's capital of Williamsburg was the biggest town Jefferson had been in. It was where the sons of tobacco gentry attended the best school in the South. There they gathered to acquaint themselves with one another and take stock of current politics. Many of Virginia's luminaries attended William and Mary, including John Marshall, Peyton Randolph, James Monroe, and John Tyler. Jefferson trained himself there as a lawyer and affirmed connections with powerful families. He graduated at age nineteen in 1762 after two years of study, then turned his attention to law and politics.

Jefferson was already forming opinions on how education should be implemented. His irreverence for degrees, expressed in his original plans for the University of Virginia, reflected his earlier environment at William and Mary. There he studied subjects for their own sake, including science, Greek and Roman classics, and Euclidean geometry. In college he also took part in the sort of town riots he hoped to avoid at his own university.<sup>3</sup>

American colleges did not merely reflect republicanism after the break with England; they were agents of rebellion during the Revolutionary War.<sup>4</sup> Williamsburg was no exception, and Jefferson's study of law under George Wythe after 1762 coincided with the initial falling out between Britain and her colonies. Jefferson had to examine fundamental political questions at a young age. The politics that motivated his initial plans for public schools grew out of these years in the taverns, dining rooms, and classrooms of revolutionary Williamsburg. The fundamentals that girded Jefferson's ideas on religion, science, and politics, including the way those topics should be addressed within education, took shape then. Jefferson encountered the Enlightenment philosophy that laid the basis for his lifelong assault on orthodox Christianity.

The College of William and Mary taught Jefferson a mix of Newtonian science, liberal Christianity, and classics—all future elements of his educational plans. Most of his professors at William and Mary were Anglicans, and Jefferson attended mass regularly at Bruton Church.<sup>5</sup> There Jefferson developed his love for the Anglican liturgy and interest in the Bible. He turned to both the rest of his life for sustenance.<sup>6</sup> The Anglicans at William and Mary were latitudinarians, meaning that they held broad and liberal beliefs by orthodox Christian standards. His professors' temperaments conflicted with the strictness of New England Calvinism and the emotionalism of evangelical Christianity.

Jefferson was influenced by European thinkers, but the immediate connection to their books came from his teachers and their friends. During his first year,

the professor of moral philosophy, Jacob Rowe, was fired for getting drunk and leading students into a fight with townspeople. William Small, a natural philosopher (scientist) hired to replace Rowe, encouraged a latitudinarian and humanist approach on Jefferson's part.<sup>7</sup>

Through Small, the only member of the faculty who was not an Anglican clergyman, Jefferson met Wythe, under whom he studied law. He was invited to dinner at the mansion of Governor Francis Fauquier.<sup>8</sup> The precocious teenager discussed politics and science with leaders and was introduced to writer Henry St. John (Viscount) Bolingbroke (1678–1751).<sup>9</sup> Jefferson's *Literary commonplace Book* (personal journal) reveals the influence of Bolingbroke on his religion.<sup>10</sup> Bolingbroke introduced Jefferson to biblical criticism and the rejection of Scripture. Bolingbroke saw natural, rather than Scriptural, revelation as the genuine path to religious enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> He argued that Christianity rested on miracles and superstition, not reason or experience.

In his *Philosophical Works* (1754), Bolingbroke asked how it was that the God of the universe revealed himself only to a small group of people on the eastern Mediterranean. Why did the designer of the entire cosmos send a son to the same small group to be sacrificed? He criticized the Christian tradition of persecution, an idea echoed by another Jefferson favorite, Lord Shaftesbury, in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1776).<sup>12</sup> These writers described the Christian tradition in terms of the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Thirty Years' War, and French wars of religion, all negative examples of fanaticism and bigotry. Their work gave Jefferson no appreciation of how faith bolstered the spirituality and sanity of everyday believers. They did not entertain the notion that religion may have lessened, rather than increased, warfare. For these writers, science was a more trustworthy path to spiritual enlightenment than the violent and checkered past of organized religion.

William and Mary was typical of colonial colleges in that its philosophy was grounded in Scottish Common Sense Realism. Realism employed Englishman John Locke (1632–1704) to demonstrate the empirical and rational powers of humankind. It rejected the skepticism of critics like David Hume and Bishop Berkeley, who argued that ultimately humans could know nothing.<sup>13</sup> The pragmatic Common Sense philosophy was popularized in Scotland by Frances Hutchinson, Thomas Reid, and Reid's successor at the University of Edinburgh, Dugald Stewart, all lifelong influences on Jefferson.

Common Sense was the philosophy of moderate Presbyterians and Anglicans. It was how college administrators, intent on curbing radicalism while maintaining a healthy sense of educability, adopted the Enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> Jefferson was taught by the Scotsman Small, a follower of Hutchinson, and later advocated it in his educational plans. Meanwhile, Scotch-Irish Presbyterians spread Common Sense all along the frontier. William Tenant's log college at Neshaminy, Pennsylvania,

which grew into the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1746, was grounded in Scottish Common Sense. Like most administrators, Princeton president John Witherspoon, used Common Sense as a two-edged sword against evangelical enthusiasm and intellectual skepticism.<sup>15</sup>

Another linchpin in Jefferson's evolution was Henry Home (Lord) Kames, a jurist and Common Sense philosopher who anticipated some of Immanuel Kant's more elaborate theories of inborn sensibilities. Kames was a defender of reason against skepticism, but argued that knowledge alone was insufficient as a basis for morality. In *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751), Kames argued that God intended humans to be social creatures and imbued them with an internal sense of morality.<sup>16</sup> For Jefferson, Kames helped bridge the gap between ethics and the religious criticisms of Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury. In his future educational schemes, students would be guided by this natural moral sense, rather than coerced by external religious orthodoxy. In turn, their studies of nature through science would help foster their moral development, especially in conjunction with the study of history.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1760s and 1770s, Jefferson feared that religious power threatened the kind of education he supported, an idea echoed in Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). American rebels believed that monarchies depended on the ignorance of their subjects to stay in power.<sup>18</sup> Jefferson shared the views expressed by future William and Mary president James Madison (the second cousin of James Madison, the U.S. president) in his 1772 "Oration in Commemoration of the Founders of William and Mary College." Speaking to the Virginia gentry, the man who would later become bishop of the Episcopal Church discussed Locke's contractual theory of government, stressed individualism and said the church was enslaving minds and coercing absurdities: "Fellow Students . . . we were born to be free . . . crouch not to the Sons of Bigot-Rage."<sup>19</sup>

Jefferson learned from classical authors that, aside from informing republican citizens of their rights against spiritual and political tyranny, education was also important for training future leaders. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Xenophon, Seneca, Plutarch, and Marcus Aurelius all argued that successful governments were directly contingent upon the training and wisdom of their rulers. Jefferson probably encountered Erasmus's *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), which was written to guide Charles V (future emperor of the Hapsburgs) and argued for the necessity of educating future rulers.<sup>20</sup> In his *Commonplace Book*, Jefferson noted the French theorist Montesquieu's consideration in *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) that "every government should provide that its energetic principle should be the object of the education of its youth."<sup>21</sup>

The result of Jefferson's grounding in Williamsburg was that he believed in education that stressed reason, natural religion, and political acumen. Organized religion threatened the genuine development of morality by discouraging students

to seek religious meaning in nature, and threatened the educational process because of its ties to oppressive government. Education was the cornerstone for building a successful republic, because leaders required the wisdom of education to go along with real-world experience, and their subjects needed education to understand their rights and ascend the social ladder.

Williamsburg judge St. George Tucker (1752–1827) either planted the notion of a state-subsidized university in Jefferson's mind, or was influenced himself by Jefferson. In 1797 Tucker drew up plans for a national university and, by 1805, formalized a plan for a state school in Virginia.<sup>22</sup> Tucker thought William and Mary was inadequate and wanted to build a university in Virginia's Piedmont where religions could worship side by side, scholarships would fund deserving poor, and discipline would be meted out by an internal court system independent of the county courts.<sup>23</sup> Jefferson later proposed all three ideas.

During the American Revolution Jefferson saw education used as a tool of rebel propaganda—as critical to the long-term revolutionary effort as muskets and political manifestos. For Jefferson to succeed in his avowed goal of eradicating aristocratic privilege, education would have to serve as the primary avenue of upward social mobility. Consequently, Jefferson brought a sense of urgency concerning education when he became governor of Virginia during the Revolutionary War. The war provided the backdrop for Jefferson's initial attempts at creating a statewide education system, his struggle (in cooperation with James Madison) to separate church and state in Virginia, and his advocacy of schools in the new western territories beyond Virginia.

### **Jefferson's Education Bill of 1778–1779**

In the late eighteenth century Enlightenment ideals transcended the coffeehouses and pamphlets of Europe, inspiring concrete social and political reforms.<sup>24</sup> During the Revolutionary War, delegates Jefferson, Wythe, and Edmund Pendleton set about overhauling the Virginia constitution, curtailing aristocratic privileges and disestablishing the Anglican Church.<sup>25</sup> At the heart of their reforms was the Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, item No. 79 in the "Catalogue of Bills Prepared by the Committee of Revisers."<sup>26</sup> Jefferson drafted the bill late in 1778 and introduced it in the Virginia Legislature in June 1779, shortly before his election as governor.

Jefferson liked to take talented youths under his wing and open his library to them, just as his mentors at William and Mary had, but the kind of statewide project he envisioned by 1778 entailed something much more.<sup>27</sup> Jefferson's goal was to lay the "axe to the root of pseudo-aristocracy." Had the education bill been successful, he wrote John Adams thirty-five years later, "our work would have

been complete.” Jefferson believed that an aristocracy was necessary for the “instruction, the trusts, and government of society,” but that status should be earned rather than inherited, in order to separate the “wheat from the chaff.”<sup>28</sup>

Jefferson called the Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge the most important of the 126 he submitted in 1779.<sup>29</sup> The bill advocated a pyramid-shaped system of public education, with many elementary schools feeding into a more select level of grammar schools, and a single university at the top. The primary level was intended to teach the basic literacy necessary for everyday business transactions and familiarize young republican boys and girls with their political rights and obligations. Tuition rates were based on a sliding scale: poor students would be subsidized, but those who could pay would. The university was intended to train future leaders and professionals in law and medicine.<sup>30</sup>

Excluded from the plan were girls at the advanced levels, and African Americans altogether. Jefferson wrote little about these exclusions, perhaps because his racist and patriarchal outlook made their omission self-evident.<sup>31</sup> When he did address the topic of education for black people, Jefferson fell into his familiar pattern of circuitous logic—their inferiority was environmentally based, but he did not suggest changing the environment.

Writing to black astronomer and surveyor Benjamin Banneker in 1791, Jefferson said that Banneker's almanac “proved the equal talent of our black brethren, when separated from the degraded condition of their existence.”<sup>32</sup> Jefferson sent the almanac to Monsieur de Condorcet, Secretary of the Academy of Sciences at Paris, to “quell doubts which have been entertained” against the black race. But Jefferson privately suspected that Banneker's genius was due to help he had received from his friend, Quaker Andrew Ellicott. Years later he sent an appraisal to Joel Barlow that contradicted the ones he had sent Banneker and Condorcet: “I have a long letter from Banneker, which shows him to have had a mind of very common stature indeed.”<sup>33</sup> In a letter to James Pleasants in 1796, Jefferson wrote that for those in bondage, “ignorance and despotism seem made for each other.”<sup>34</sup> Jefferson did write that his education bill could easily be altered to include free blacks and those destined for freedom, but he made no motion in that direction.<sup>35</sup>

The bottom line for African Americans and education in Virginia was that white politicians feared education would encourage knowledge, ambition, and independence among the slave population. In 1818 the Virginia Legislature passed a law denying readmission to any black who left the state to attain an education.<sup>36</sup> One of the primary purposes of education for Jefferson was to develop the skill of reasoning. By the early 1780s, he convinced himself that Africans did not have the capacity for reason.<sup>37</sup>

Jefferson thought white females needed a modest amount of learning to hold their own in civilized society, and included them in the first three years of his 1779 plan. Jefferson saw no reason for girls to attain higher education because he did

not envision them in positions of leadership.<sup>38</sup> His view on female education was captured best in a letter to his daughter, Martha, where he draws up a schedule for her day. The schedule included two hours of practicing music; four hours of dancing, drawing, and letter-writing; one hour of French; another hour of music; and the reading and writing of English in the evening.<sup>39</sup> This style of education, though worthy in its own right, was intended as social ornamentation and discouraged empowerment.

One of Jefferson's collaborators on the University of Virginia, John Hartwell Cocke, proposed an academy for females in 1820. Jefferson replied that he had not thought much on the subject and offered no encouragement. In his letter to Cocke he echoed the sentiments he expressed to Martha in 1783, minus the suggestion to read English. He complained that one great obstacle to educating girls is their passion for novels, poisons that "infect the mind" and distract it from "wholesome reading" and "the real business of life." Females, instead, should concentrate on dancing, drawing, and music while learning a little French.<sup>40</sup>

For white males the plan was rigorously meritocratic by modern standards, with only a handful of students picked to advance after the elementary level. Still, only a tiny percentage of white males (around 1 percent) attended college in the United States prior to the Civil War.<sup>41</sup> The 1779 bill was progressive for its time because it included opportunities for advancement and leadership for a small number of poor whites. Most other leaders disregarded the poor altogether.

Promising youths who would otherwise be unable to pay their way were granted three years of education at the state's expense. After those three years, the going got tougher. One poor boy a year was chosen from each of the elementary schools and allowed to attend one of twenty grammar (secondary) schools, the next tier up, to join all the sons of gentry. Half of the scholarship recipients were pruned away after one year, and all but one in each grammar school were sent home after two years. The remaining student would then attend the grammar school for four more years. Jefferson calculated that after the "residue was dismissed," twenty geniuses (from twenty grammar schools) would be "raked from the rubbish" annually by these means.<sup>42</sup> Each year half the remaining poor boys from all of the grammar schools would be chosen to attend William and Mary for three years, free of charge.<sup>43</sup> The administrative structure was very decentralized, with no state board to oversee the process. This basic pyramidal, locally initiated scheme characterized all of Jefferson's educational plans thereafter.

The geographical unit of organization for each elementary school was based on the English *hundred*, an idea Jefferson referred to during retirement as the *ward*.<sup>44</sup> Jefferson's ward idea, inspired by the tight-knit efficiency of Yankee townships, originated in his education plans of the 1770s. It was intended to educate children while simultaneously involving their fathers in direct political participation.<sup>45</sup> His aim was to divide counties up into small republics (five or six



square miles) that would administer many of the everyday functions of government, each one big enough for around one hundred people (hence the name hundreds). He hoped that self-government within the wards would take care of the basic workings of government: roads, police, elections, militia training, small court cases and, most critically, education.<sup>46</sup> The plan was similar to the small *polis* of classical Athens, and the school plan was similar to the one Lycurgus drew up for the Greek Spartans.<sup>47</sup>

Wards were one of Jefferson's most democratic ideas because they demanded so much local initiative.<sup>48</sup> Jefferson later wrote, "These wards, called townships in New England, are the vital principle of their governments, and have proved themselves the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government, and for its preservation."<sup>49</sup> He hoped the local taxes would "throw on wealth the education of the poor."<sup>50</sup> Jefferson's aversion to big national governments was not due to an inherent dislike for either active government or wealth redistribution. He did want that power federalized down to local units and restricted to white men.

With his education bill of 1779, Jefferson hoped to use schools to jump-start the implementation of wards. After retirement he wrote that public education and the subdivision of counties into wards were the two subjects he would push "as long as I breathe," and considered "the continuance of republican government as absolutely hanging on these two hooks."<sup>51</sup> Jefferson wrote, "It is by dividing and subdividing these republics from the great national one down through all its subordinations, until it ends in the administration of every man's farm by himself; that all will be done for the best."<sup>52</sup> "These little republics would be the main strength of the great one."<sup>53</sup>

The Bill for the General Diffusion of Knowledge met resistance and was defeated again when it was reintroduced in June 1780.<sup>54</sup> Neither wards nor a school system came about in Virginia in Jefferson's lifetime. The public's dislike of the bill was threefold. First, many voters were opposed to taxation generally. Discontent over high taxes was a primary cause of the conflict in which Virginians were then engaged against the British. Second, Virginia was rural and thinly dispersed. Though it may seem counterintuitive to some, its scattered population did not lend itself to localism in politics. Unlike New England, where it was easier to assemble in central townships, great distances often separated families on the Virginia frontier.<sup>55</sup> In 1780 Virginia included Kentucky, western Pennsylvania, land beyond the Ohio Valley, and present-day West Virginia. The ward scheme was thus impractical.

Finally, Christians were offended that Jefferson's curriculum did not promote their faith. The rector of Hampden-Sydney Academy, Samuel Stanhope Smith (later president of Princeton University), reviewed the bill and wrote Jefferson that its biggest obstacle in the state would arise from religious denominations.<sup>56</sup>

Christians questioned the lack of religious instruction in Jefferson's plan. The curriculum he proposed reflected the humanist values he had formed as a student at William and Mary. Jefferson's plan did not utilize the clergy, even though they traditionally had worked as teachers because of their high rate of literacy and familiarity with low pay.

Given the fact that Jefferson was simultaneously working to disestablish the Anglican Church in Virginia, many Christians supposed that Jefferson was basically "replacing parishes and pulpits with wards and teachers' desks."<sup>57</sup> Smith, who admired Jefferson and his devotion to science, wrote to him concerning the possibility of using Episcopalians and Presbyterians to run the university that capped the system. Jefferson replied cordially, but said he saw any clerical involvement as a step on the path toward church establishment.<sup>58</sup>

Jefferson planned to drop the Bible in favor of the secular histories of Greece, Rome, England, and America. While reading, writing, and arithmetic would be taught in each school, special attention would be given to books of historical content. Jefferson hoped that exposure to history would alert students to various forms of tyranny (monarchical and spiritual) and encourage their resistance to it. Like Bolingbroke, Shaftesbury, and other eighteenth-century *philosophes*, Jefferson felt that criticizing Christianity through reason alone was not enough. He underlined his point by criticizing Christianity's long history of senseless conflicts, hoping to demonstrate organized religion's absurdity by attacking it from an elevated, historical position. Jefferson wrote about other purposes of studying history and its power to deter immorality, but mainly advocated its use as a weapon wielded against Christianity and monarchy.<sup>59</sup>

For Jefferson literacy was not only important for everyday transactions and studying history, it was necessary to read newspapers and stay up to date on politics. Jefferson agreed with John Adams, whose *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States* (1787–1788) argues the same point.<sup>60</sup> Jefferson wrote on numerous occasions of the importance of newspapers. To Edward Carrington he wrote, "Were it left to me to decide whether we have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."<sup>61</sup>

Jefferson hoped that newspapers and history would provide individuals with enough moral sense and reason to make responsible political decisions.<sup>62</sup> The specific decisions Jefferson hoped students would make were to resist tyranny and concentrations of aristocratic privilege, be they monarchical or ecclesiastical. Jefferson was not bothered by the ideal of objectivity in journalism, having pioneered the use of politically partisan newspapers in the 1790s on behalf of his Democratic-Republicans.

Virginians of the late eighteenth century resisted tyranny, but not because they learned to resist it in schools or because they read newspapers. Instead,

Jefferson's bill represented a tyranny of its own in their minds. It was voted down again in 1783, and the basic parameters of the bill were not passed into law until 1796, when the county courts were empowered to levy taxes for ward schools.<sup>63</sup> Without centralized control or coercion, and no wards, Bill No. 79 never materialized among the widely scattered population, even after 1796. Norfolk was the only county where the schools were started.<sup>64</sup> Other counties chose not to raise the necessary taxes, and Jefferson's idea foundered.<sup>65</sup>

The 1779 education bill embodied Jefferson's views on politics and religion. It was a vehicle intended to create a natural, rather than an artificial, white male aristocracy. At the same time, its success hinged on local, participatory democracy, because it was neither administered nor initiated from a central office. The prescribed curriculum encouraged republican values and was based on history and science, rather than on Scriptural revelation.

In the early 1780s, Governor Jefferson affirmed these emphases in his only published writing, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, an explanation of his views to Europeans on education, race, religion, commerce, and the natural history of Virginia. Jefferson's short piece on primary education follows his infamous seven pages on race and eugenics, in "Law" (*Notes*, Query 14). The passage in *Notes* is a rehash of the 1779 bill. In the wards, the "principal foundations of future order will be laid." In the curriculum of elementary students, only history would "enable them to judge the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views." The study of history would serve as an early instiller of morality. "Instead of putting the Bible into the hands of the children at an age when their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious inquiries, their memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European and American history."<sup>66</sup>

As for organized religion, Jefferson wrote in *Notes* that it only retained power by suppressing thought: "It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself." Religion, he wrote, caused "millions of innocent men, women, and children" to be "burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned," and made "one half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites."<sup>67</sup> Science, religion's replacement, would not be taught until the university level, when students were ready for its mental rigor. Language training at the earlier levels would serve as a precursor, "an instrument for the attainment of science."<sup>68</sup>

Jefferson's advocacy of education and Anglican disestablishment occurred in tandem as part of the reformation of Virginia's revolutionary government. The humanist education Jefferson envisioned in *Notes on the State of Virginia* would not be politically viable in Virginia over the long term unless he and others acted to destroy the religious establishment. This created a conundrum because religious

establishments were the historical friends of education. Nonetheless, Jefferson got his chance to ensconce religious freedom as a fundamental political right because the plurality of dissenting Protestant denominations in Virginia feared the Anglican establishment, and each other.

### **Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1776–1786**

Virginia was fertile ground for debates over church and state because of its denominational pluralism.<sup>69</sup> Virginians held a variety of beliefs, including religious indifference. Many of the Protestants practiced evangelical Christianity, which democratically preached salvation to all willing people. Evangelicals were more emotional than New England Puritans or the drier, more intellectual, Anglicans. Evangelicals and other dissenters had bristled under the control of the established Anglican Church for decades prior to the Revolution.<sup>70</sup> Anglicans looked down on “dissenters” as low class and ridiculed their emotional enthusiasm. Dissenters, in turn, helped catalyze revolutionary sentiment.<sup>71</sup> In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson wrote that “two-thirds of the people had become dissenters at the commencement of the present revolution.”<sup>72</sup>

The evangelicals found a receptive audience among rural whites and slaves, and later among upper-class planters and urban professionals. Small revivals occurred in Virginia during the mid-eighteenth century among Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist churches. Virginia experienced interdenominational revivals throughout the mid-1780s. The Baptists and Methodists were the most demonstrative and egalitarian, and planters valued Anglicanism as a bulwark against their democratic pretensions. The persecution of evangelicals at the hands of Anglicans caused preachers to flee into the backcountry of Tennessee and Kentucky.<sup>73</sup>

Presbyterians in Virginia were unpretentious and shared an evangelical spirit with the Baptists and Methodists. Scotch-Irish Presbyterians came from the lowland of Scotland and Ulster, in present-day Northern Ireland. In the eighteenth century they migrated to the Piedmont, in central Virginia, and the western Shenandoah Valley, which separates the Alleghenies and Blue Ridge Mountains and runs from Harper’s Ferry to Lexington, Virginia. (The valley was a commercial route to the west from New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.) Presbyterians were mainly middle-class farmers, many of whom supported Jefferson. The Frenchman Ferdinand Bayard, traveling in the Shenandoah Valley in 1791, recorded sympathetically a Sunday he spent with them. He and other travelers “worshipped with the inhabitants in a plain wooden building, its gallery filled with Negro men and women, the white mothers below nursing their infants publicly without shame. They sang Psalms and then had plain-hearted speeches.”<sup>74</sup>

Despite their egalitarianism, Presbyterians coveted conversions among the upper, influential classes, which they attained during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. They advocated religious liberty from the established church, but also challenged Jefferson for control of education. Presbyterians required a college education of all their ministers and involved themselves in politics. They set up log colleges and worked for educational reform. Neither the Baptist nor the Methodist churches gave Jefferson problems at any point during his crusade for humanist education in Virginia, partly because they appreciated his support for religious freedom. Importantly, neither of those denominations required a college education of its ministers, which Presbyterians did. Conversely, Presbyterian influence on education in the South was so profound it influenced Jefferson's own educational ideas.

Jefferson's plan for public education arguably came from Scotland. Scottish thinkers advocated the subordination of theological training to more general instruction, the dividing up of schools into various grade levels, and the funding of education through public, rather than private, donations.<sup>75</sup> Jefferson's educational ideas may even have been influenced by a Scottish Presbyterian. The blueprint for Jefferson's 1779 education bill was similar to that proposed by the founder of Scottish Presbyterianism, John Knox, in *Book of Discipline* (1561). Jefferson owned a copy and he was familiar with the book through Knox's fellow Scotsman William Small, his professor at William and Mary.<sup>76</sup> Knox's book also instructed that "everie severall churches have a school maister" and that each father in a congregation be compelled, no matter what his "estait or condition," to bring up his children in "learnying and virtue."<sup>77</sup>

Jefferson shared Knox's notion that education was a rightful mechanism for the state, but had the opposite intention for the state's role: to prevent the sort of spiritual tyranny he thought Knox advocated. Years later, when Jefferson was fighting the Presbyterians for control of higher education in Virginia, he lamented the impact of Knox: "They [Presbyterian clergy] are violent, ambitious of power, and intolerant in politics as in religion and want nothing but license from the laws to kindle again the fires of their leader John Knox and to give us a 2nd blast from his trumpet."<sup>78</sup> In Knox's unrealized scheme, the Presbyterian Church financed the school system by confiscating property from the established churches, anticipating what happened in Virginia to the Anglicans on the part of the legislature.<sup>79</sup>

The confiscation of the Church of England's lands (or glebes) did not occur in Virginia with independence in 1776, but after a protracted struggle. The initial incorporation of the Episcopalians (the former Anglicans) after the Revolution roused the fury of both Baptists and Presbyterians, because they feared a return to the abuses of Anglican power.<sup>80</sup> In theory the role of colonial governments under the English Act of Toleration (1689) was to tolerate dissent, but promote estab-

lished religion financially.<sup>81</sup> The act supposedly held sway in colonial Virginia, but judges were imprisoning dissenting preachers, and the House of Burgesses never resolved the problem. In the Piedmont and Tidewater, Baptist ministers were dragged from the pulpit and horsewhipped.<sup>82</sup> Unitarians and deists were outside the protection of the Toleration Act altogether, and Quakers were prevented from landing in Virginia's harbors by a seventeenth-century law.<sup>83</sup> Presbyterians believed in the superiority of Calvinist Protestantism, but backed religious freedom whenever and wherever they were in the minority.

Presbyterians were divided on church establishment when they were not being harassed, but their policy shifted in 1776 when they began to favor an open market of denominational competition.<sup>84</sup> Jefferson and the Protestant dissenters thus made for uneasy allies as they worked to reform Virginia's constitution in 1776. Jefferson was a religious activist allied with the Presbyterians, but the Presbyterians wanted tolerance and rights only for everyone who was a Protestant Christian. Jefferson wanted to push it further, giving full rights of citizenship to all white males, regardless of their religious beliefs.

Jefferson was busy in 1776, shuffling back and forth between Virginia and the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. George Mason assumed leadership in drafting a new Bill of Rights for Virginia.<sup>85</sup> Jefferson refused an appointment to France so he could return to Williamsburg in October.<sup>86</sup> He chose to focus mainly on abolishing slavery and defending religious liberty.<sup>87</sup> Jefferson was a member of the Committee on Religion in the Virginia House of Burgesses, which intended to extend toleration to all Protestant subjects in Virginia. He wanted to insure religious liberty without allowing that liberty to be used as a cover for seditious political attacks. Jefferson finally settled on the policy advocated by Reverend Philip Furneaux: that religion should not concern the state unless it results in overt acts of disorder.<sup>88</sup> The balancing act was left to Mason, whose 1776 proposals for the Virginia Bill of Rights declared religious tolerance, but vaguely stipulated that everyone "had to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity, towards each other."<sup>89</sup>

Initially, Jefferson was unsure how the Presbyterians would react to Mason's Declarations. While preparing for Virginia's first assembly as a state, he spelled out his position in "Notes on Religion" (1776).<sup>90</sup> The Presbyterian spirit was "congenial to liberty," but he understood the limitations of their generosity. In red-colored ink Jefferson explained their qualified definition of freedom:

Presbyterian wd. open just wide enough for hms. [himself]

others wd. open it to infidelity, bt. keep out fanaticism True mode only for all to concur,  
& throw open to all. ye prest. chch. too strong for any 1 sect, bt. too weak agt. all.<sup>91</sup>

Jefferson was behind in his assessment of the Presbyterians, at least as far as their formal strategy. In 1776 the Presbytery at Hanover, Virginia wanted more than

^ Phillips Russell, Jefferson, Champion of the Free Mind, p. 335. ^ Circular of Information, State Board of Education, United States Bureau of Education.Â Addis, Cameron (2003). Jefferson's Vision for Education, 1760â€“1845. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. ISBN 0-8204-5755-8. Jefferson's Vision for Education, 1760-1845 (History of Schools and Schooling, V. 29). Cameron Addis. Download (pdf, 1.71 Mb) Donate Read.