



## THOMAS JEFFERSON

1743 - 1826

“Jefferson will live in the memory and gratitude of the wise & good, as a luminary of Science, as a votary of liberty, as a model of patriotism, and as a benefactor of human kind.”

James Madison, letter to Nicholas P. Trist  
*July 6, 1826*

THOMAS JEFFERSON

*Born*

April 13, 1743, Shadwell, Albemarle County, Virginia; the son of Peter Jefferson (a planter who died when Jefferson was 14) and Jane Randolph [Jefferson] (a first generation immigrant from England).

*Childhood*

Attended a preparatory school and was graduated from William and Mary College (1762); studied law and was admitted to the Virginia bar (1767).

*Religion*

Known but to God.

*Family*

At the age of 28 married Martha Wayles Skelton on January 1, 1772; they had six children: Martha Washington Jefferson (1772), Jane Randolph Jefferson (1774), an unnamed son, who died soon after childbirth (1777), Mary Jefferson (1778), an unnamed daughter who died soon after childbirth (1780), and Lucy Elizabeth Jefferson (1782).

*Accomplishments*

Virginia House of Burgesses (1769-74)  
Second Continental Congress (1775-76)  
Primary Author of Declaration of Independence (1776)  
Virginia House of Delegates (1776-1779)  
Governor of Virginia (1779-81)  
Confederation Congress (1783-1784)  
Minister to France (1785-88)  
Secretary of State (1789-1793)  
Vice President of the United States (1797-1801)  
President of the United States (1801-09)  
Founded the University of Virginia (1819)

*Died*

July 4, 1826 at his home, Monticello, Virginia, where he is buried.

*Last Words*

"Is it the Fourth?"

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## APOSTLE OF DEMOCRACY



**F**rom the beginning, Americans have looked with special favor on Thomas Jefferson, who penned the immortal words of our Declaration of Independence. With great eloquence, he dedicated our nation to the proposition that all men are created equal, endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In doing so, he transformed what would have been a mere political document to a proclamation of America's highest ideals. "The principles of Jefferson," Abraham Lincoln reminds us, "are the definitions and axioms of free society." Indeed, few words have been as influential in spreading the growth of freedom throughout the world as those of Jefferson. Alexis de Tocqueville pronounced him "the most powerful apostle of democracy there has ever been."

Jefferson once wrote that in drafting the Declaration of Independence, he meant simply to furnish an "expression of the American mind." Yet, Jefferson did more than just articulate the moment. This nation was founded not on blood or ethnicity, but on an idea. The writings and deeds of Jefferson gave life to that idea and shaped the American mind. His legacy is our dedication to individual rights, religious liberty, and the importance of education.

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## The Life of Jefferson

BORN ON APRIL 13, 1743, in Albermarle County, Virginia, Jefferson was to become many things: a great visionary, a radical reformer, a farmer, a philosopher, a writer, a scientist, an educator, an architect, a musician, and a statesman. His father, Peter Jefferson, was a land surveyor, and his mother, Jane Randolph, came from a well-established Virginia family. When he was sixteen, he began his studies at William and Mary College. After two years, Jefferson entered the law office of his professor, George Wyeth, where he remained for five years, attending not only to his legal studies but also a rigorous program of self-education that ranged from ethics and politics to mathematics and rhetoric. Jefferson was known for being an assiduous student — family legend was that during college he followed a strict regimen of studying fifteen hours a day.

In 1769, the same year he began building Monticello, Jefferson was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses, where he served for five years. He soon became caught up in the anti-British sentiments sweeping the colonies, playing a central role in the Virginia Committee of Correspondence and supporting measures urging resistance to British authority. Among his more important writings was a set of proposed instructions to the Virginia delegates to the First Continental Congress, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, which called for the king to recognize the colonists' natural rights.

In June of 1775, Jefferson arrived in Philadelphia to serve as a delegate in the Second Continental Congress, bringing with him “a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent of composition.” Never much of a public speaker (John Adams claimed that he never heard Jefferson “utter three sentences together” while they both sat in Congress), Jefferson made his mark behind the scenes. His most important appointment was in June of 1776 to serve on a committee along with John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman to write the Declaration of Independence. Only 33 years old, Jefferson was selected to draft what

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he later called “the declaratory charter of our rights.” (See Introduction to the Declaration of Independence, p. 215)

When Jefferson returned to Virginia and re-entered the House of Delegates (where he first met James Madison), he turned his attention to revising the laws of the state of Virginia to make them more democratic. Jefferson proposed legislation to abolish primogeniture (a law giving the first-born son exclusive right of inheritance) and entail (a law limiting inheritance to a lineal descent of heirs), and to establish religious liberty and a means for the general diffusion of knowledge. The first two bills became law in 1777 and the third passed in 1786, but his plan for establishing a broader educational system was defeated. Madison called Jefferson’s efforts “a mine of legislative wealth.”

Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia in 1779 and spent the bulk of his two-year term dealing with the various exigencies arising from the Revolutionary War. He resigned after one term and happily returned “to my farm, my family and books.” He declined a seat in the House of Delegates as well as a diplomatic post to negotiate peace with Great Britain, resuming work instead on *Notes on the State of Virginia*. It was a book that he had never intended to publish, probably because it contained a severe condemnation of slavery.

## The Statesman

IN NOVEMBER 1782, shortly after the untimely death of his wife Martha, Jefferson was again appointed to the peace commission to Great Britain, and this time he accepted. But before he set sail for England, he received word that the peace treaty had already been concluded. In 1783, he served as a Virginian delegate to Congress, drafting the resolves that served as a model for the famous Northwest Ordinance of 1787. In 1785, he was appointed by Congress to succeed Benjamin Franklin as minister to France. Although Jefferson’s achievements overseas were limited by the Articles of Confederation (which gave individual states the power to

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authorize treaties with foreign powers), his diplomatic responsibilities kept him from attending the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

Jefferson played a decisive role, albeit from afar, in persuading Madison of the need to add a bill of rights. While in France, Jefferson received a copy of the new Constitution and, in a famous letter to Madison, gave his general approval to it. But Jefferson had an important objection: "Let me add that a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, and what no just government should refuse, or rest on inference." Madison, who had been against a bill of rights, became a firm advocate, and made it the first order of business to pass a bill of rights when he served in the First Congress.

When Jefferson returned to America in 1789, he had every intention of returning to France, but President Washington appointed him as the first secretary of state, a position that Jefferson reluctantly accepted. In Washington's administration, Jefferson came into conflict with the brash and brilliant secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Jefferson believed that Hamilton harbored aristocratic sentiments and desired to put America on a course toward monarchy. Hamilton wanted a strong national government, whereas Jefferson favored strong state authority; Hamilton was pro-British, while Jefferson was pro-French. Jefferson envisioned America as a land of small landholders, the "chosen people of God ... whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." Hamilton, on the other hand, favored an economy based on manufacturing, viewing America as a land of limitless commercial possibilities. The antagonism between Hamilton and Jefferson became increasingly fierce and partisan, and Jefferson left the administration at the end of 1793.

The rivalry between Hamilton and Jefferson ultimately led to the development of America's first political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans. In fact, Jefferson's defeat of John Adams for the presidency in 1800 was the first national election in which two organized political

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parties vied for office. In his inaugural address, Jefferson laid out his vision of limited government, dedicated to religious toleration and “equal and exact justice to all men” no matter their religious or political background.

The highlight of Jefferson’s two terms as President was undoubtedly the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France, which nearly doubled the size of the United States and gave it control of the Mississippi River. However, Jefferson was reluctant to trumpet this great accomplishment in part because he feared it violated the Constitution. A strict constructionist, Jefferson knew that the Constitution did not give the federal government the power to purchase territory. He supported passing a constitutional amendment to render the purchase legitimate, but was advised that any delay might jeopardize the agreement. Jefferson ultimately found the constitutional authority for purchasing Louisiana under the presidential power to make treaties.

After the presidency, Jefferson eagerly left the world of politics and returned to Monticello, where he gave “up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier.” Jefferson’s retirement was a time for reflection on matters of philosophy and theology, letter writing (his broken correspondence with John Adams was renewed), farming experiments, and most important, establishing the University of Virginia.

## Individual Rights

THOMAS JEFFERSON WAS a child of the Enlightenment, and considered three English philosophers of the 17th century — Isaac Newton, John Locke, and Francis Bacon — to be “the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception. . . .” He took the ideas of equality and liberty — ideas that had merely been abstractions in aristocratic times — and put them into practice, enshrining them in our Declaration of Independence.

Today, many Americans take their rights for granted. We fail to

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## Jefferson's Wall of Separation

The “wall of separation” metaphor of the relationship between church and state is taken from an 1802 letter President Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut. Jefferson wrote:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.

The metaphor had previously been used by Puritan clergyman Roger Williams and the Whig writer James Burgh. Jefferson’s purpose was to explain why he opposed proclaiming national days of public fasts and thanksgivings, as had Washington and Adams. He thought the policy suggested a uniform religious exercise by the nation. Jefferson did not intend the letter to mean that the government should be completely secular or antireligious. So to demonstrate his symbolic friendliness to religion,

Jefferson attended church services in the House of Representatives two days after he wrote the letter — a practice he regularly continued throughout his presidency. It is important to note that Jefferson was writing the letter — which he first ran by key New England political advisors — to a group of his own party supporters living under the Congregationalist establishment of Connecticut (which had opposed him in the election of 1800).

Although the letter was highly political, and continues to spark controversy about what precisely Jefferson meant by the metaphor, most scholars generally argue that it should be read from the perspective of federalism, illuminating the meaning of the First Amendment, which Jefferson understood to apply only to — and thus limit — the national government. It was the Supreme Court that later transformed the letter into a doctrine of religious jurisprudence. In *Reynolds v. United States* (1876) the Supreme Court said the letter may be seen as “an authoritative declaration of the scope and effect” of the First Amendment, and in *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) went further to declare that the wall “must be high and impregnable. We could not approve the slightest breach.”

—MS

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realize that when Jefferson was propounding the self-evident truth of human equality (and hence the equal rights and dignity of individuals), the rest of the world believed that the “favored few” — monarchs, aristocrats, despots — should have dominion over the many. But Jefferson, writing fifty years after the Declaration, in the last letter he ever wrote, was convinced that the world was beginning to embrace the idea that all people had a right to liberty: “All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.”

Of course, the question must be raised: How could a man so dedicated to safeguarding individual rights be a slave owner? A look at Jefferson’s public statements and legislative proposals on the issue of slavery reveals a man dedicated to the abolition of slavery. During his first term in the Virginia House of Burgesses, a young Jefferson advocated legislation to make it easier for Virginians to free individual slaves. In *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* Jefferson called for an end to the slave trade: “The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state.”

Two years later, in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson used the strongest language to condemn George III for promoting an untrammelled slave trade in the colonies: “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 & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither... Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.” (See Note on Slavery, p. 281)

In revising the laws of Virginia in the late 1770s, Jefferson took up the cause of emancipation. He submitted a proposal urging his fellow legisla-

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tors to end slavery gradually in Virginia and to return the freed slaves to their native lands. As Jefferson recounted in his *Autobiography*, his reform would have granted “freedom to all [slaves] born after a certain day, and deportation at a proper age.... Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free.”

Nevertheless, Jefferson was a slave owner, and never freed more than a few of his slaves. He struggled throughout his life with the glaring contradiction between the principles of equality and the existence of slavery: “The love of justice and the love of country plead equally the cause of these people, and it is a moral reproach to us that they should have pleaded it so long in vain.” “We have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go,” Jefferson lamented in 1820. “Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.” He had hoped that “the younger generation” moved by “the generous temperament of youth” and shaped by the “flame of liberty” that his generation had kindled would end slavery.

Yet it was Jefferson’s words and ideas that led to the abolition of slavery. Abraham Lincoln would constantly refer back to the principles of Jefferson — to his “abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times” — in his effort to end slavery. And a century later, Martin Luther King Jr. understood Jefferson’s words in the Declaration to be a “promissory note” that would inspire the struggle for civil rights. By enshrining the idea “that all men are created equal” and the primacy of individual rights in the Declaration of Independence (and also by playing an important role in adding a Bill of Rights to the Constitution), Jefferson committed America to upholding its first principles.

Indeed, in this task, Jefferson might have been too successful. Today we are saturated with what some have called “rights-talk.” Few Americans pay any attention to the Constitution except for the Bill of Rights. As a result, some have argued that Americans have become too zealous in defending their individual rights and have lost a national sense of community. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the closing lines of the Declaration of Independence, where the signers pledged “our lives, our

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fortunes and our sacred honor” to the cause of liberty. For Jefferson, rights were to be secured by individuals who were animated by a sense of patriotism, duty, and honor. In a letter of advice to a young boy, Jefferson told him: “Love your neighbor as yourself and your country more than yourself.” To be sure, Jefferson’s first principle was that governments were formed, based on the consent of the governed, to protect the individual rights of their citizens. At the same time, Jefferson was well aware that the principles of liberty and equality would best flourish among a citizenry dedicated not only to maintaining their rights, but also to appreciating the nation instituted to secure those rights.

## Religious Liberty

THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD IS REplete with examples of religious persecution. Our earliest settlers came to America to escape the religious intolerance that was then prevalent in England and Europe. Even today, in most parts of the world, from Ireland, to China, to Africa, there are still religious hostilities and persecution. America is a wonderful exception to these trends. So committed were Americans to the idea of religious liberty that during the Constitutional Convention there was simply no debate on the issue of the right of conscience.

Nevertheless, our Founders were not willing to take our religious liberty for granted. They were all too aware of the danger of mixing political power with religious authority. The First Amendment, of course, recognizes the right to the free exercise of religion and prohibits the national government from making laws respecting an establishment of religion. Jefferson and Madison were perhaps the most vigilant of the Founders when it came to safeguarding religious liberty.

Jefferson’s warnings on the danger of church establishments were often blistering and always provocative. He didn’t mince words when it came to attacking would-be tyrants. In the “Preamble to his Bill for Religious Freedom,” Jefferson singled out “the impious presumption of

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legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time.” In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson extended the widest scope of toleration to atheists and pagans: “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

For Jefferson, religious belief was a matter of individual conscience and thus “a matter which lies solely between man and his God.” In his famous and often quoted letter to the Danbury Baptist Association (see sidebar, p. 84), Jefferson used this now-familiar analogy to discuss the First Amendment: “I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.” He considered religious liberty to be the cornerstone of every other liberty, and its defense crucial to the maintenance of free government. As he wrote to his friend Benjamin Rush, “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”

Many Americans have taken those statements to mean that there should be a strict divide between the state and religion generally. Yet Jefferson’s stance on religious liberty is more nuanced than that. At the same time that he drafted his “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” in the late 1770s, he also proposed a “Bill for Punishing Disturbers of Religious Worship and Sabbath Breakers” and a “Bill for Appointing Days of Public Fasting and Thanksgiving.” As governor of Virginia he issued a proclamation of “solemn thanksgiving and prayer to Almighty God.”

As president, Jefferson did not proclaim national days of fasting and

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thanksgiving because he feared that such proclamations had the effect of imposing uniform religious practices on all citizens. Yet (beginning two days after issuing the Danbury letter) Jefferson regularly attended church services held in Congress during his presidency, well aware that the symbolic gesture of his attendance would likely offset any perception of his hostility toward religion. He also gave generously to several churches and ministers while in office, and allowed religious services in public facilities of the executive branch. And although he seems untroubled in *Notes on the State of Virginia* if his neighbor believes in many or no gods, in that same work Jefferson also implores: “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just...”

Thus, while it might seem that Jefferson advocates a radical separation between church and state, he considers liberty a gift of God and posits a firm reliance on God for protecting our natural rights — with which all men “are endowed by their Creator.” Jefferson believed in unrestrained religious expression in an open marketplace of ideas, and thought that religious establishments threatened religious liberty. At the same time, he had little problem with government supporting voluntary, non-sectarian religious activity, including the use of public property for religious purposes, if that cooperation was necessary for the cause of religious expression and the flourishing of the good effects of religion generally.

## Education

JEFFERSON’S LOVE OF LEARNING was boundless, and it informed his priorities as legislator, reformer, president, and later as a retired statesman. His vigilance against political tyranny and religious fanaticism was matched by what he foresaw as a more formidable enemy of self-government: ignorance. Part and parcel of his trenchant defense of individual

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rights and religious liberty was his understanding that free citizens, in order to remain free, must be educated.

Of all the bills Jefferson submitted to the revisal committee when he was a legislator in Virginia, Jefferson wrote “by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and of happiness.” For Jefferson, education protected “individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and . . . against degeneracy.” So vital was the role of education to “guard the sacred deposit of [our] rights and liberties” that Jefferson proposed what was at the time a very radical plan to extend a free education to all children of elementary school age in the state of Virginia. Jefferson believed that gifted children come from all walks of life. As he put it, “talents are sown as liberally among the poor as the rich.” It was in the public interest for the state to seek out and educate all children “whom nature hath fitly formed and disposed to become useful instruments of the public” rather than confine education “to the weak or wicked.” Jefferson’s scheme provided a free education to all at the elementary level, and encouraged the best students, whom Jefferson called the “natural aristocracy,” to pursue higher education.

The importance of education to Jefferson can also be seen in one of the central policies of his presidential administration. In 1803, Jefferson persuaded Congress to appropriate \$2,500 for the first scientific expedition of the United States, which sent Meriwether Lewis, his private secretary, and William Clark on one of America’s most famous exploratory missions. Jefferson instructed Lewis that his “observations are to be taken with great pains and accuracy, to be entered distinctly, and intelligibly for others as well as yourself.” He was especially interested in what they might observe of the American Indians (“the names of the nations and their numbers; the extent and limits of their possessions; their language, traditions, monuments, the state of morality, religion and information among them”) and singled out a few other “objects worthy of notice” such as “the soil, vegetation, animals, mineral productions, climate.” Jefferson’s love of natural history was in part

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fueled by his patriotism. He wanted to show the world that America was geographically the equal of, if not the superior to, Europe.

Jefferson spent the bulk of his retirement years working on the ambitious project of establishing what would become the University of Virginia. The Virginia Assembly appropriated funds to charter the university in 1819, and Jefferson set about at once to attract the best faculty from abroad and to amass a vast catalogue of books for the library. He designed not only a curriculum but also the architecture of the entire campus, which the American Institute of Architects has praised as “the proudest achievement of American architecture in the past 200 years.”

The University of Virginia was perhaps Jefferson’s proudest accomplishment. As much as Jefferson admired our political institutions, he put his greatest faith in the virtue of a free people, educated to uphold self-government: “Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.”

Jefferson’s educational aims were three-fold. One was simply to provide all children with the skills — reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history — necessary to live free and independently as adults. Second, all children must be given a civic education that instructs them in “their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens.” Jefferson stressed the importance of educating Americans in the science of politics — in the axioms of free government. Finally, and perhaps most important for Jefferson, education was meant to cultivate virtue. Jefferson believed educators should “cultivate [children’s] morals and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order.” He optimistically believed that education “engrafts a new man on the native stock, and improves what in his nature is vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth.” Perhaps this is Jefferson’s greatest lesson to us, that rights and democracy are nothing without an education in virtue.

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## Is it the Fourth?

JEFFERSON'S DEATH IS AN EXTRAORDINARY, almost mythical ending to a patriotic life. In February of 1826, Jefferson became ill and, by the spring of that year, he knew he was dying. He wrote a new will, and in mid-June he called for his physician to stay with him at Monticello as he slowly began slipping away. By July 2, Jefferson began falling in and out of consciousness, and on July 3 he fitfully awoke to speak his last words: "Is it the Fourth?" Jefferson held onto life until the afternoon of July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. His great friend and fellow revolutionary John Adams passed away a few hours later.

This extraordinary life would furnish the most impressive of epitaphs. But Jefferson left behind explicit instructions to his grandson to note only three achievements on the obelisk at his Monticello grave, which reads: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia; because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered." And it is precisely Thomas Jefferson's achievements in the areas of individual rights, religious liberty, and education that explain to a large extent the success of our American democracy and that still define our national character.

—DOROTHEA WOLFSON