

# Thomas Jefferson and the Ideology of Democratic Schooling

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## Abstract

I challenge the traditional argument that Jefferson's educational plans for Virginia were built on modern democratic understandings. While containing some democratic features, especially for the founding decades, Jefferson's concern was narrowly political, designed to ensure the survival of the new republic. The significance of this piece is to add to the more accurate portrayal of Jefferson's impact on American institutions.

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**F**EW HISTORICAL FIGURES have undergone as much scrutiny in the last two decades as has Thomas Jefferson. His relationship with Sally Hemings, his views on Native Americans, his expansionist ideology and his suppression of individual liberties are just some of the areas of Jefferson's life and thinking that historians and others have reexamined (Finkelman, 1995; Gordon-Reed, 1997; Kaplan, 1998).

But his views on education have been unchallenged. While his reputation as a founding father of the American republic has been subject to revision, his reputation as a founding father of public education has not. He is still remembered uncritically for his ardent support for an educated public as a bastion against the encroachment of an overzealous government. He is still praised universally for his dedication to the creation and success of the University of Virginia. His inclusion of the founding of this university as one of the three achievements listed in his tombstone epitaph is well known, as is his admonition that "not a word more" be added (Peterson, 1984, p. 706). He continues to be recognized for being as adamant about the value of educating citizens near the end of his life in 1825 as he was in 1779 when he first proposed to create a system of publicly-supported schools for the children in Virginia. This emphasis he placed on public education has contributed to no less an intellectual figure than John Dewey (1940) to call Jefferson "our first great democrat" (pp. 2-3). Dumas Malone (1948), in his exhaustive biography of Jefferson, called him "the foremost

advocate of public education in the early United States" (p. 280). Heslep (1969) has suggested that Jefferson provided "a general statement on education in republican, or democratic society" (p. 113), without distinguishing between the two. Others have opted specifically to connect his ideas to being democratic. Williams (1967) argued that Jefferson's impact on our schools is pronounced because "democracy and education are interdependent" and therefore with "education being necessary to its [democracy's] success, a successful democracy *must* provide it" (p. 266, 286). James B. Conant (1940) wrote that Jefferson believed that universal educational opportunities would create "a more equitable distribution of opportunity for all the children of the land" (p. 598). And a more recent biographer posits that "the law [Jefferson] considered the most important to the success of all others" was that "to establish a democratic system of education" (Randall, 1993, p. 306).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: My thanks to professor Adam Laats for his helpful comments and suggestions for improving this paper. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their important recommendations.

The purpose of this article is to test this faith that Dewey and so many other Americans have had regarding Jefferson's vision of the role of education in a republic. My goal is not to intentionally debunk a popularly held belief but rather to subject Jefferson's views on education to a more critical examination in order to see to what extent this faith is warranted. While it is true that many Americans of the Revolutionary War generation believed in the need for educating citizens for their role in the new republican experiment, few have been referenced as often as Thomas Jefferson. Due to his prolific writing, especially his personal correspondence, we know a great deal of Jefferson's thinking on most issues from architecture to race, from politics to music. In his works there are numerous references to education and the appropriate role for schools in a republic. More than most of his contemporaries, Jefferson clearly articulated a theory of education as it related to the new role for the citizen in a democratic republic. In this piece I argue that Jefferson's educational views did not reflect an embrace of democracy but in reality demonstrated his vision of American republicanism in its infancy, consistent with others in the founding generation who "were not necessarily the progenitors of America's democratic future" (Beeman, 2009, p. 295). Jefferson understood the role education could play in the transformation of the political populace from subjects to that of citizens. My contention is that his views on education need to be understood in this narrower context.

Contemporary understandings of terminology such as *democratic schooling* and *republican education* complicate coming to grips with Jefferson's own philosophy. Let me make explicit the distinction between democratic schooling and republican education. For most educators and democratic theorists in the late 20th and 21st centuries, *democratic schooling* refers to pedagogical practices that prepare students to be active citizens. For example, strategies that afford firsthand experience in critical thinking and decision-making are part of a democratic curriculum. Empowering students in meaningful ways to help determine curricular content and assignments help to establish democratic learning communities. Ideally such democratic practice extends to create an entire school atmosphere that empowers students and creates equal opportunities for all to serve in leadership positions and to influence educational decisions.

As used today, *republican education* generally refers to efforts to prepare students to be good citizens. Republican education hopes to help students know their rights and responsibilities, understand the political and historical legacy of important documents and government actions, and meet the expectations of citizenship. This is characterized by stressing the value of voting, serving on a jury, being a productive member of society, and participating in other ways such as staying informed on current issues and expressing opinions to elected representatives.

However, these modern notions do not directly impact the goal of this paper as I am reexamining the application of presentist understandings of democracy to Jefferson's educational philosophy. Since *democratic* and *republican* meant very different things in Jefferson's time than they do now, it is not within the purview of

this paper to pursue that distinction in historical context. It is, in fact, the misapplication of modern understandings of democracy to Jefferson's eighteenth-century thinking that I am exploring.

## Jefferson, the Enlightenment and Republican Citizenship

Like all of us, Jefferson was a product of both his times and of his environment. He grew up in a household that valued and profited from reading, self-improvement, and learning. In his *Autobiography*, Jefferson remembered his father as "being of a strong mind, sound judgment and eager after information, he read much and improved himself" (Peterson, 1984, p. 3). This emphasis on reading, self-improvement, and learning would, in today's jargon, exemplify the characteristics of a lifelong learner. Jefferson would early on be offered educational opportunities that had been denied to his father. He would proceed through the normal channels of educational opportunities open to young gentlemen in eighteenth-century Virginia, eventually advancing to the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, the capital of the colony. Jefferson attended William & Mary for two years and then studied the law with George Wythe, one of the top legal minds of the day. While in Williamsburg and during his studies with Wythe, Jefferson entered an inner circle of learning, "a *partie quarree*" (Peterson, 1984, p. 4) he called it, that included Wythe, Dr. William Small from the college, and Francis Fauquier, the royal governor of the colony. Not only was Jefferson influenced by the academic climate of this group, but he also was exposed to the culture of the Virginia elite. No doubt his appreciation of music, wine, fine dining, art, and architecture was awakened at this time.

One of the personal benefits of this experience was the reinforcement of his love for reading and learning. The pleasure Jefferson found in reading would merge with a belief that maximizing one's educational opportunities was a civic responsibility. A product of the Enlightenment, he wrote to John Trumbull in 1788 that he considered "Bacon, Locke and Newton . . . as the three greatest men that ever lived, without any exception and as having laid the foundation of those superstructures which have been raised in the Physical and Moral sciences" (Boyd, 1950–2008, Vol. V, p. 561).

Through reading Scottish, English, and French philosophers, Jefferson culled the components of his own philosophy and then synthesized them in the American context. Education in America was a liberating experience that could not be equaled elsewhere. Even after living in France during the 1780s, Jefferson would continue to see life in the United States as offering distinct advantages over that of European nations. The fundamental principle of American republicanism would offer social, economic, and moral advantages that no other system could. In a letter to John Bannister, Jr., in 1785, Jefferson discussed what he saw as the disadvantages of sending children to Europe to be educated. There were innumerable vices to tempt young men, not the least of which were a fondness for "drinking, horse racing and boxing," "a partiality for aristocracy or monarch," "a spirit for female intrigue" which led to "a passion for whores" and "to consider fidelity to the marriage bed as an ungentlemanly practice and inconsistent with happiness"

(Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. V, pp. 186–187). The benefits of a proper education were readily available on this side of the Atlantic. Almost all elements “of an useful American education” could be “as well acquired at William and Mary College, as at any place in Europe” (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. V, p. 186). Even the schools in England did not produce “the free minded people we suppose them in America . . . Nobility, wealth, and pomp are the objects of their admiration” Jefferson wrote to George Wythe in 1786 (Peterson, 1984, p. 860).

Central to Jefferson’s philosophy of education was his political commitment to republicanism. Wagoner (2004) argued that “to Jefferson, educational theory was inseparable from political theory” (p. 27). Unlike many of his European aristocratic contemporaries, he believed republicanism to be the antidote for political corruption. Convinced that European political woes were the result of the inbred problems of monarchies and rigid aristocracies, Jefferson came to see the people as the guardians of liberty. To ensure that the people were the best safeguard against an overzealous government, Jefferson’s political vision required an informed citizenry. Citizenship, therefore, was no nebulous concept for Jefferson. It was integrally linked to power, responsibility, and freedom. It was axiomatic for Jefferson to connect freedom and responsibility, with republican citizenship.

This political context is central to Jefferson’s understanding of education in the new United States. Many of the founders believed it was impossible for a republic as large as the United States to succeed; they feared anarchy would be the likely result. As Pangle and Pangle (1993) have noted, the early leaders were “keenly aware of the vices that had always haunted republicanism and especially democratic republicanism” (p. 1). These fears were clearly articulated at the convention held in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina believed popular elections were “totally impracticable” (Farrand, 1911/1966, p. 137). Similarly, William Paterson of New Jersey favored representatives being “drawn immediately from the States, not from the people” (Farrand 1911/1966, p. 251), and Roger Sherman of Connecticut felt that the people were not to be trusted, even in the election of their own representatives. They “should have as little to do as may be about the Government. They want information and are constantly liable to be misled” (Farrand, 1911/1966, p. 48). Of course Jefferson’s solution for this want of information was to educate the citizenry to be able to discern fact from fiction. However, he still was contextualized in the post-Revolutionary period and with it the fears and suspicions of anything British. Jon Meacham (2012) has argued that Jefferson’s Anglophobia was, in fact, “real to him” (p. xxviii). For Meacham, Jefferson was engaged in “a Fifty Year’s War” (p. xxvii) regarding monarchical tendencies within American life and government.” From this perspective, Jefferson “knew—he *felt*—that America’s enemies were everywhere. The greatest of these was Britain” (p. xxvii). For Jefferson, education was not only instrumental in preparing citizens for their role in the new republic, but it also would serve to safeguard the United States and its citizens from the dangers posed by the British and their way of life. As I demonstrate, this sense of threats ever looming in perceived monarchical or aristocratic tendencies

explains his commitment to an appropriate education for republican citizens.

Accepting James Madison’s rationale for the Constitution adopting a republican form of government<sup>1</sup>, Jefferson explained to Francois D’Invernois in 1795

*that to obtain a just republic (and it is to secure our just rights that we resort to government at all) it must be so extensive as that local egoisms may never reach it’s greater part; that on every particular question, a majority may be found in it’s councils free from particular interests, and giving, therefore, an uniform prevalence to the principles of justice. (Peterson, 1984, p. 1024)*

Later, in his First Inaugural Address in 1801, Jefferson specified that even a republican government need be limited. For though majority rule must be the norm, Jefferson pointed out that “that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal law must protect and to violate would be oppression” (Peterson, 1984, p. 493). Jefferson’s exact understanding of a republic, as he explained it to John Taylor in 1816, was “a government by its citizens in mass, acting directly and personally according to rules established by the majority” (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XV, p. 19). To promote justice effectively and protect the rights of all citizens meant that people must be encouraged, morally obligated in Jefferson’s opinion, to discuss issues and to make judgments “at the bar of the public reason” (Peterson, 1984, p. 495). It was their republican duty to be prepared to engage in such public debate. This necessitated the education of all citizens, not just the ruling classes. This education, Jefferson wrote to Madison, would facilitate the people’s “good sense” on which “we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty” (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XV, p. 918). By being informed, citizens could act freely in ways that would allow them to exercise their own rights while being mindful of the rights of others. In 1817 Jefferson wrote to George Ticknor, the Boston educator and author, that “knolege is power, that knolege is safety, and that knolege is happiness” (Lee, 1967, p. 114). In other words, knowledge would enable a citizen to fulfill the ideals Jefferson stated in the Declaration of Independence in 1776: to protect their “inalienable rights” of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In a republican government there could be no other role for citizens, since they were responsible for the government that made the laws by which all were to abide. As Jefferson would maintain persistently, it was the duty of citizens to provide the security against abuse that governments, even elected governments, might succumb. A citizen’s responsibility was to protect his own freedom and that of his neighbor as well. (I use the masculine pronouns to conform to Jefferson’s narrow definition of participatory citizens.) This responsibility was common to all citizens, be they wealthy or poor, tradesman or farmer. This was the job primary schools, both public and private, were to do. In 1818 he wrote that one of the objectives of education was “to instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens” (Peterson, 1984, p. 459). This would be the common bond uniting all citizens regard-

less of class, occupation, geography or other divisive characteristics.

But how did Jefferson conceive of citizenship in the early republic? In a report written to the Virginia State Legislature in 1818, he clearly stated the connection between education and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The objectives of primary schooling were:

- To give every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his business;
- To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts, in writing;
- To improve, by reading, his morals and faculties;
- To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either;
- To know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment;
- And, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed. (Peterson, 1984, p. 459)

This appears to be no minimalist understanding of citizenship. Every citizen needed an education that prepared him (for Jefferson citizenship was exclusively male) for politics, for economics, and for personal improvement.

The citizen would be able to run his own business and to maintain his own affairs. He would know necessary arithmetic, reasoning, and geometric skills. He would know how to write and how to exercise his political rights. He could enter into contracts, protect his property and that of others. He would understand his responsibilities to himself and to his fellow citizens. And he would be able to continually improve himself. The ideal republican was a work in progress. Educated citizens face the prospect “of rendering ourselves wiser, happier or better than our forefathers were” (Peterson, 1984, p. 119).

Jefferson’s republican citizen was meant to participate in all the social realms that existed in the United States: business, politics, religion, and recreation. In Jefferson’s world, citizens were meant to participate. This was especially so if Jefferson’s ideal of a ward system were enacted. The ward was the fundamental unit of republicanism. Originally Jefferson’s concept was to divide each county into hundreds, a traditional English subdivision of land. Each hundred would be the political arena in which Jefferson’s republican citizens would participate. Each hundred would be responsible for its own political affairs. Citizens would participate directly in making these political decisions. This included responsibility for schools. Each hundred was to “contain a convenient number of children to make up a school, and be of such convenient size that all the children within each hundred may daily attend the school to be established therein” (Peterson, 1984, p. 119). In his bill of 1817, Jefferson called for the counties to be divided into wards instead of hundreds, but the principle was the same. All decisions

regarding the building and operating of the schools would rest with the people in the ward. Always mistrustful of political powers concentrated far from home, Jefferson saw the ward system filled with active citizens as the best defense against possible encroachment of the inalienable rights he so valued. In an 1816 letter written to his trusted lieutenant in the Virginia legislature, Joseph C. Cabell, Jefferson urged that his plan was necessary “to fortify us against the degeneracy of our government, and the concentration of all its powers in the hands of the one, the few, the well-born, or but the many” (Peterson, 1984, p. 1381). Thus, every citizen had the responsibility to be, in Jefferson’s words, “a participator in the government of affairs” (Peterson, 1984, p. 1380).

However, as I argue later in this piece, Jefferson did not see this as a means to educate all equally nor to ensure equal participation by all citizens. Nor did his goals for education include any reference to social or economic mobility. Rather, in his view, the purposes for citizenship education were narrowly defined for a political agenda grounded in the context of an established social and political hierarchy in Virginia at that time. Other than improving “his morals and faculties” (Peterson, 1984, p. 459), Jefferson’s objectives underscored the need to maintain stability in the new republic. Indeed, his objectives reinforced the notion of the good citizen faithfully and intelligently maintaining “all the social relations under which he shall be placed” (p. 459). His goals for education were to empower citizens to guard against anti-republican forces in government and to increase the pool of talent, albeit slightly, from which his natural aristocracy would be drawn.

### Jefferson’s Plans for ‘The More General Diffusion of Knowledge’

Jefferson first proposed a comprehensive plan for educating citizens according to his vision in 1779. For this purpose he specifically introduced three pieces of legislation for consideration by the Virginia legislature: *A Bill for Establishing a Public Library*, *A Bill for the Amending of the Constitution of the College of William and Mary*, and *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*. As a package they would provide a literate citizenry able to make informed decisions, the opportunity for the most gifted students even among the poor to advance to a college education, the liberation of the center of higher learning in Virginia from the restrictions of religious dogma thus freeing individuals to pursue their own courses of knowledge, and the creation of opportunities for all men to keep abreast of developments in national and international affairs, politics, philosophy, and other important subjects.

*A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* would remain a favorite of Jefferson’s. The bill was intended to create a pyramid system of education in Virginia. This plan would remain essentially the same according to another bill submitted in 1817 entitled *A Bill for Establishing a System of Public Education*. As noted earlier, the basic units responsible for maintaining this system were the hundreds or, as he called them later, the wards that would fall within each county. Each of these units would be responsible for building an appropriately sized school for the children living there. Jefferson describes in great detail how an

overseer, or administrator in today's terms, would be responsible for the supervision of the construction and maintenance of the school, the curriculum, testing students, hiring and firing teachers, and visitations of schools. These primary or elementary schools were the foundation of the pyramid. These schools would be at no cost to all free children—boys and girls—for three years.

His second level on the pyramid would be for male students culled from these primary schools. Grammar schools, or district colleges according to the later plan, were to be situated to serve groups of usually three or four counties. These schools were open to all boys who could afford to pay their own tuition but the overseers were empowered to appoint poor students to them as well. Having undergone "the most diligent and impartial examinations and enquiry," the students accepted would have demonstrated "the best and most promising genius and disposition" (Peterson, 1984, p. 372). From this point on, the competition among the students would be fierce. Annual probation to terminate "the least promising" (Peterson, 1984, p. 373) of the student body would result in one-third of the first year students being, in effect, weeded out. All of these "poor" students would end their academic careers after two years except for one, "the best in genius and disposition" who could remain for four years at public expense (p. 373). Such a narrowly defined meritocratic system does not align well with modern democratic understandings of the goals of education in our society.

The peak of both plans was the university level. According to the plan of 1779 this would be the College of William and Mary (which would have been re-formed as a result of the earlier mentioned bill to amend its charter) in Williamsburg. The plan of 1817 called for the apex to be a new capstone institution, what would become the University of Virginia. This was due in part to Jefferson's frustration with William and Mary for maintaining two chairs of divinity though he believed the university should also be more centrally located in the state. One outstanding student from among the grammar schools or district colleges would be chosen for a three-year state scholarship. This student demonstrating "the most sound and promising understanding and character" would benefit from attending this university "wherein all the branches of useful science may be taught" (Honeywell, 1931, p. 243, 239)

This system, if imposed, would equip all Virginians with the necessary knowledge to be participatory citizens. They would possess the needed literacy for their own political and economic purposes. Two items are of particular interest. First was Jefferson's intention to educate all girls, at least all White girls, at the initial level. Girls were restricted from advancing, however, because they would have received the necessary education to carry out household functions by the time they finished these primary or elementary schools. Second was the role to be played by the state in paying for this system. State monies entirely paid for primary schools, as was the one "best in genius and disposition" (Peterson, 1984, p. 373) who would emerge from the second level. Additionally the state could pay for those students who could not afford to pay for the second level. This system was designed to produce Jefferson's aristocracy of intelligence and if passed would be, as he told his old friend and mentor George Wythe, "by far the most important bill in our whole code" (p. 859). Of course, what

Jefferson failed to realize was that not everyone would embrace his plan to educate some of the poor at the expense of others. Madison wrote him to explain the state legislature's failure to act on his first proposal in 1786 was based on "the objection from the inability of the County to bear the expense" (Boyd, 1950–2008, Vol. X, p. 576). Madison had to perform a similar task the following year. By the nineteenth century Jefferson was accustomed to the various opponents to his plan joining forces to defeat the measure. In an 1818 letter to Albert Gallatin, he exploded about the repeated difficulties his bill met, specifically "ignorance, malice, egoism, fanaticism, religious, political and local perversities" (Boyd, 1950–2008, Vol. X, p. 576). Jefferson's plan for a public educational system in Virginia was, as Joseph Ellis (1997) described it, "pure Jefferson: magisterial in conception, admirable in intention, unworkable in practice" (p. 281).

### Jefferson as Democrat

It is difficult to find a civics curriculum or citizenship education text that does not cite Jefferson as an apostle of democracy in general and democratic education in particular. National curricular documents reference Jefferson if not in the preface, certainly shortly into the first chapter (Center for Civic Education, 1991, p. 11; 1994, p. v; National Council for the Social Studies, 1994, p. vii). His urging to George Wythe to "preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people" (Peterson, 1984, p. 859) as the only manner by which our liberties would be protected is well known. For Jefferson, there was "no other foundation" that would better serve "for the preservation of freedom, and happiness" (p. 859). His educational plan would ensure the protection of these fundamental rights from an overzealous government.

Certainly for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Jefferson's ideas regarding education can be seen as democratic if not radical. Publicly funded schooling for all children, at least all White children, at the primary or elementary level was designed to promote a level of basic civic competence that was required by a democratic republic. The promotion of gifted or deserving students to intermediate or even university educations at state expense would break the barriers of tradition and privilege that had existed prior to the American Revolution. Jefferson was clearly conscious of this tension. In his *Autobiography*, he noted his intent behind *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* was to create "a system by which every fibre [sic] would be eradicated of antient or future aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican" (Peterson, 1984, p. 44). Jefferson was indeed a man of the 18th century. As noted earlier, while growing up he had enjoyed the benefits of White privilege. As a member of the Virginia gentry and a slaveholder, Jefferson's lived experiences ensured that his understanding of egalitarianism would differ from that of today. In addition to racial and gender limits to citizenship, he also believed "that people should have no more rights than they were equipped to handle" (May, 1986, p. 55). In a letter to Peter Carr in 1814, he categorized the citizenry into two groups: "the laboring and the learned" (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XIX, p. 213). Rather than write them off as many in his class might, Jefferson wanted to

educate them to “pursue their pursuits and duties,” including those of citizenship, and thus prepare them to “engage in the business of agriculture, or enter into apprenticeships to such handicraft art as may be their choice” (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XIX, p. 214). Still, Jefferson found his ideas on public education to be unpopular with many of his aristocratic peers. Jefferson recognized the radical nature of his plans when in 1818 he expressed his frustration over the continued legislative resistance to the bills. In a letter to Albert Gallatin, Jefferson blamed this on “ignorance, malice, egoism, fanaticism, religious, political and local perversities” (Lipscomb & Bergh, Vol. XIX, 1903, p. 258). Gordon Wood (1992) has indicated that the radicalism of the revolution touched much more than the world of politics. He argued the Revolution was a transformative event. The social relationships—the way people were connected one to another—were changed, and decisively so. By the early years of the nineteenth century the Revolution had created a society fundamentally different from the colonial society of the eighteenth century” (p. 6). Republicanism, Wood (1992) argued, caused the “blurring of the distinction between gentlemen and plain people in America” (p. 349). This blurring effect did not extend to embracing equality as we understand it today. Setting aside issues of racial and gender equality, Jefferson continued to see “men as equal in some ways and unequal in others” (Sheldon, 1991, p. 145). Furthermore, in terms of understanding his political beliefs, “he believed that in a just society the inequalities among individuals were neither necessarily degrading nor injurious” (p. 145). And as Ellis (2007) pointed out, democracy was more of a slur, “used to tar an opponent of a charge of demagoguery or popular pandering” (pp. 241–242). The issue for Jefferson and the other founders “was not whether the United States should become a democracy, but whether it should become a viable nation-state” (p. 242). That is, the concern was the survival of the republic. Ellis asserted that for this generation the democratic inroads being made in the 19th century represented a corruptive force on “their hard-won republic” (p. 242).

Jefferson and many others, including Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster, saw education as the vehicle to provide the information and skills necessary in the proper training to produce equal citizens, good republican citizens. John Adams noted that the American Revolution cannot be defined as simply a military or political event.

But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American War? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations. (Adams, 1856, p. 282)

If the Revolution was one that occurred in the minds of Americans, then it must proceed to shape their minds to become effective republican citizens. In this sense education would have a leveling effect. Republicanism not only destroyed political elites it also broke down intellectual and social ones as well:

*Many members of the revolutionary elite . . . had even attacked the study of the “dead language” of Greek and Latin as time-consuming, useless, and un-republican. Such study . . . Rush had said, was “improper . . . in the United States” because it tended to confine*

*education only to a few, when in fact republicanism required everyone to be educated. (Wood, 1992, p. 349)*

Jefferson’s vision for a system of public schools in Virginia reflected this thinking. Indeed, paying for the education of those of the lower socioeconomic classes with state monies seems emblematic of this leveling effect. Jefferson’s plan for educating citizens can be seen in this light as belonging in the same category as his attacks on primogeniture and other relics of aristocracy in the United States. Again, from this perspective, he was seeking to build a new aristocracy of talent to replace that of the privilege of birth. In this sense it is understandable how many indeed most have credited Jefferson as being an early proponent of what we would view today as an appropriate function of public schools.

Jefferson can be seen as a founding father of democratic education in the United States. Schools paid for out of public treasuries, open to the children of all citizens (with gender-biased limitations and racial discriminations characteristic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries duly noted), merit-based incentives to afford higher educational opportunities for talented students, and a politically liberating curriculum are certainly traits of what we would call a democratic system today. But is this an accurate picture? Was Jefferson’s educational philosophy as democratic as many attribute it to be? To better answer these questions, it is best to situate Jefferson’s plans for education in Virginia in the context of the social and political realities of the founding era.

### Jefferson as Republican

Jefferson, like many of the Revolutionary War generation, also saw education as serving a traditional role, namely the promotion of a civic ideology to perpetuate the social order. The Revolution created a new political and social climate in the United States, and it would be the role of schools to turn out the citizenry needed to ensure the survival of this new climate. To use the words of Benjamin Rush, schools would produce “good republican machines” because they would serve to lay “the foundations for nurseries of wise and good men, to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our new government” (Runes, 1947, p. 87). To this republican generation, education was the key to the success of the new American experiment. Cremin (1980) described “a proper republican education” as one which “consisted of the diffusion of knowledge, the nurturance of virtue (including patriotic civility), and the cultivation of learning” (p. 148). And as Onuf (1993) has noted, “no one was more conscious of the fragility of the American experiment than Jefferson” (p. 698). If we couple Jefferson’s fear or mistrust of anything that smacked of monarchy, aristocracy, or Great Britain with this sense of the fragile nature of the new government, then we contextualize his repeated expressions of the need to educate future citizens. For Jefferson, the major distinguishing characteristic of a republic was the protection of individual liberty. The ultimate line of defense in the preservation of this liberty against governmental encroachment was the individual citizen. To be properly armed to perform this duty, citizens must be educated. Education was necessary to promote republican virtue

and “for sustaining the republic” (Onuf, 2007, p. 173). Without it, citizens could be misled by scheming politicians and the end result would be the loss of individual liberty and the death of the republic.

Late in his life, Jefferson responded to an inquiry about the origins of the first political parties in the United States. In this 1823 letter to judge William Johnson, Jefferson defended the formation of his Republican party because they “were an opposition party, not on principle,” but rather they were “merely seeking office . . . to maintain the will of the majority of the convention, and of the people themselves” (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XV, p. 440). Their simple objective was to thwart the Federalists who had tried to “recover . . . in practice the powers which the nation had refused and to warp to their own wishes those actually given” (p. 440). In other words, Jefferson believed the Federalist party was committed to antirepublican ideas that were monarchical or aristocratic. Similarly, education was necessary to protect the republic against those he feared were bent on destroying it. In a letter to William Short in 1825, Jefferson articulated his lack of concern with democracy when he wrote that he was not much concerned with what the label for the system was, so long as those who abused their power were no longer in positions of authority:

*Men, according to their constitutions, and the circumstances in which they are placed, differ honestly in opinion. Some are Whigs, Liberals, Democrats, call them what you please [emphasis added]. Others are Tories, Serviles, Aristocrats, etc. The latter fear the people, and wish to transfer all power to the higher classes of society; the former consider the people the safest depository of power in the last resort; they cherish them therefore, and wish to leave in them all the powers to the exercise of which they are competent. (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XVI, p. 96)*

And as we have seen, Jefferson believed an appropriate republican education was the best way to ensure that the people would be empowered to serve as this safeguard of both republicanism and therefore their personal liberty.

Furthermore, if we look more closely at Jefferson’s letters, public documents and actions, we can see that modern understandings of democracy are incongruent with his educational vision for Virginia. I bring this up because often *democracy* is a term used as if it had a static meaning across the centuries. Dewey (1946) is explicit in this regard.

*The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered and rediscovered, remade and reorganized; while the political and economic and social institutions in which it is embodied have to be remade and reorganized to meet the changes that are going on in the development of new needs on the part of human beings and new resources for satisfying these needs. (p. 47)*

When scholars and authors for the past century or more cite Jefferson as an architect for democratic education, they often fail to acknowledge this fact.

Let’s begin by reexamining his plans for educating the children of Virginia as represented in his 1779 *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* and his 1817 *Bill for Establishing a System of Public Education*. Each of these reflected not only the undemocratic characteristics of life at that time in the United States in general and Virginia in particular but each also includes clues as to Jefferson’s own reluctance to embrace democracy as understood today. And while the forces unleashed by Jefferson and the other founders unquestionably had a democratizing effect, it is also true that “Jefferson undoubtedly would have found many of the results of this great transformation disturbing and distasteful” (Onuf, 2007, p. 176).

## Jefferson and Public Education

As we have seen, Jefferson’s vision for public education in Virginia contained elements that today we associate with education for a democracy: universality (at least for White boys and girls in the primary grades), funding from state tax monies, a publically supported university, and rewards for meritorious students. However, if we examine his plans and writings more closely, some contradictory ideas also emerge.

First, while valuing the people as guardians of personal liberty, Jefferson also saw a social hierarchy that precluded equality of status. Obviously his opinion of Blacks is evidence of this fact but so too is his opinion of women. While his plans for public education included White girls attending primary school, they did not allow for their attending any of the higher levels of education. Their need for education was much more confined. Admitting that the proper education for girls “has never been a subject of systematic contemplation for me,” Jefferson did concede that his own daughters needed enough education “to educate their own daughters, and even to direct the course for sons, should their fathers be lost, or incapable, or inattentive” (Peterson, 1984, p. 1411). Jefferson was being consistent with the mainstream thinking in post-Revolutionary War America. As Linda Kerber (1980) has noted, “Even the most radical American men had not intended to make a revolution in the status of their wives and sisters” (p. 9). Their role within the family expanded to the extent that they were expected “to raise the virtuous male citizens on whom the health of the Republic depended” (p. 10; see also, Norton, 1980, pp. 243–250). Good republican mothers would be able to guide the development of good republican children. Also, Jefferson clearly felt most women incapable, or at least unworthy, of political participation:

*But our good ladies, I trust, have been too wise to wrinkle their foreheads with politics. They are contented to soothe & calm the minds of their husbands returning ruffled from political debate. They have the good sense to value domestic happiness above all other, and the art to cultivate it beyond all others. (Peterson, 1984, pp. 922–23)*

One must wonder how Jefferson, when alone and deep in thought, rationalized this belief with his experiences with Abigail Adams. Was she an anomaly or was she representative of the intellectual potential of all women? She was, after all, the only woman in his “entire life who confronted him with a direct

challenge to his general disregard for women” (Kukla, 2007, p. 143). Jefferson could not dismiss her obvious intelligence and rationality as he had Phyllis Wheatley’s—he regarded her poetry as a religious byproduct and not that of a poet, since her work was “below the dignity of criticism” (Jefferson, 1787/1982, p. 140). Adams “was too close a friend” and “her arguments . . . were too thoroughly grounded in the rhetoric of the Revolution to be dismissed out of hand” (Kukla, 2007, p. 143). As he considered the proper role for women in the new republic, however, he must have had a very difficult time categorizing Abigail Adams as a good republican mother whose function would be to develop “domestic virtues” and to nurture “future republican citizens” (Howe, 1986, p. 69). Whether Jefferson was simply chauvinistic, unsympathetic, or more seriously misogynistic is beyond the scope of this paper. What is clear is that his view of women as being at least unfit for citizenship and therefore not needing an equal education to boys is evidence that Jefferson was not as democratic as twentieth century theorists might claim<sup>2</sup>.

A second potential issue for Jefferson was revealed in some comments suggesting mistrust of, or perhaps even contempt for, some of the public in whom he entrusted the preservation of the republic. He described those who would be selected to attend the regional grammar schools at public expense as “twenty of the best geniuses [to] be raked from the rubbish annually” (Jefferson, 1787/1982, p. 146). These talented individuals would come from families that could not afford the costs associated with an education at that time. For someone who is generally regarded as one of the best wordsmiths of the founding generation, using a term such as *rubbish* to describe the mass of students is surprising. This lapse suggests that Jefferson continued to hold prejudices based on class or other socioeconomic factors. Furthermore, in detailing the levels of education to be made available to Virginia youths, Jefferson distinguished between education designed for leadership and that which served the masses of students. This thinking clearly represented the world of deferential relationships in which Jefferson grew up. The sons of Virginia aristocracy were those being educated to assume leadership roles. Jefferson explicitly explained this in a letter to his nephew, Peter Carr. After describing the goals of the elementary schools, Jefferson noted that those students advancing to the general school level would be separated into two classes: “those destined for labor” and those “destined to the pursuits of science” (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XIX (Peterson, 1984, p. 1348). The former would essentially receive vocational training “in the business of agriculture, or enter into apprenticeships to such handicraft art as may be their choice” while the latter class would advance to either “general schools” or “professional schools” (p. 1348) and further divided into two groups of students: “1, Those who are destined for learned professions, as a means of livelihood; and, 2, The wealthy, who, possessing independent fortunes, may aspire to share in conducting the affairs of the nation” (p. 1348). This distinction sounds more like the “artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth” than the “natural aristocracy” he advocated to John Adams in 1813 (p. 1306). There was no goal of education serving as an equalizing agent or as a vehicle with the promise of social mobility for a

limited few. Jefferson seemed to prefer the winnowing effect of his competitive system to simply identify and promote a few talented students who might otherwise slip through the cracks. He was not concerned with educating all to their fullest potential. Political and social mobility were not part of his thinking. Wagoner (2004) added that despite “his concern for the equalization of opportunity, his proposal still left the children of the wealthy with a clear advantage over those of less fortunate circumstances” (p. 42). Though greatly influenced by the Enlightenment, it seems Jefferson was too embedded in the hierarchical thinking of the eighteenth century to fully embrace the democratic ideals for which some have credited him.

A third factor that emerges is Jefferson’s failure to see equality in terms other than a very narrow political sense. In terms of defining the citizenry, Jefferson wrote in 1779 that it was limited to “free white inhabitants of every of the states, parties to the American confederation” (Peterson, 1984, p. 375). This is hardly a modern understanding of democracy. Jefferson maintained a view of society that was stratified with clearly defined, or at least understood, rules for leaders and led, men and women, Whites and Blacks. As a result of this stratification, Jefferson saw citizenship as being demarcated. Citizens were either first-class citizens or second-class citizens (and in some cases noncitizens). The education to which they were entitled was determined by the strata of citizenship in which they fell. His meritocratic ideas reinforced much of the existing social and political hierarchy rather than leveling it, as modern democratic theory asserts. Sanchez (1973) has argued that in education, “the Jeffersonian tradition has been an elitist one” designed to maintain “the political and economic status quo” (p. 45). However, Sanchez was looking to identify an authentic source for American democratic ideology. In doing so he contended that Jefferson (and also Horace Mann, John Dewey, and James Conant) “believed that class conflict could be ameliorated through education” (p. 45). My position is that Jefferson did not see the classes in conflict, nor did he recognize any sense of class consciousness as understood by Marxists. In Jefferson’s understanding, the hierarchy that existed was the natural order of things and served to make society and social relations more easily understood. His educational goal was to marginally increase the pool from which those at the top would be drawn.

And there is evidence to suggest that Jefferson, perhaps unconsciously, did agree with the accepted traditions of his day. In addition to his accepting that the vast majority of leaders were destined to come from the propertied class, his words offer other clues. For example, in a letter to Isaac Tiffany in 1816, he wrote “A democracy [is] the only pure republic, but impracticable beyond the limits of a town” (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XV, p. 65). This belief, of course, is why Jefferson always saw his educational plans for Virginia as wedded to the ward system. Democracy was a slippery slope to anarchy beyond the protective limits of the ward or town. Writing to Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours, also in 1816, Jefferson argued for the value of local, direct control. Republicanism, he said, with representatives “chosen immediately, and removable by [the people] themselves” was the key to protecting individual liberty. This “constitutes the essence of a republic”

(Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XIV, p. 490). Earlier he told John Tyler that “these little republics would be the main strength of the great one” (Peterson, 1984, p. 1227). By protecting individual liberty, republicanism served as the antidote to monarchy and protected the United States against Jefferson’s fear of an “energetic” central government. This became his essential understanding of the purpose of citizenship education<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, Jefferson encouraged the indoctrination of republican principles as a proper civic education for students. His formal recommendations for citizenship training as written in his minutes to the Board of Visitors for the University of Virginia included reading *The Federalist Papers*, *The Declaration of Independence*, “The valedictory Address of President Washington,” and works written by John Locke and Algernon Sidney (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. XIX, p. 461). There is a decided partisan bias to these readings in line with Benjamin Rush’s belief that there was a need to produce “good republican machines.” John Dewey, one of the foremost democratic theorists in American history, wrote that indoctrination, even when done in the name of democracy, was inherently undemocratic and unacceptable. Dewey (1937/1987) believed education in a democracy required “the active participation of students in reaching conclusions and forming attitudes” (pp. 415–416). In practice, therefore, democratic education was “the contrary of the idea of indoctrination” (pp. 415–416). Jefferson’s politically skewed reading list, therefore, contradicted one of the key tenets of modern democratic ideology. Additionally, Jefferson contradicts his emphasis on good republicanism in an incident that occurred at the University of Virginia in 1825. Writing in *The Anas* in 1792, Jefferson asserted “that every people may establish what form of government they please and change it as they please” (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, Vol. I, p. 330). However, the need to maintain order at his beloved University of Virginia became paramount in the fall of 1825 when several students engaged in what Jefferson called a “riot” (Peterson, 1984, p. 1506) on campus. Wills (2002) alleged this breakdown in discipline was fueled by nativist impulses targeting faculty members from foreign countries (pp. 125–128). In a letter to his granddaughter, Jefferson lamented this “licentious transaction” that “appeared at first to threaten [the university’s] foundation” (Peterson, 1984, p. 1506). Shocked by this lack of self-discipline, Jefferson endorsed exercising swift and severe punishment, including the expulsion of “four of the most guilty” (p. 1506), one of whom was a great nephew. Rather than seeing this as an exaggerated exercise of free expression, Jefferson seemed pleased with “severer laws [being] enacted, and a rigorous execution of them declared in the future” (p. 1506). This willingness to use administrative power to restore “a perfect subordination . . . and industry, order, and quiet the most exemplary” (Wills, 2002, pp. 127–130) seems incongruous with the fiery leader who advocated fertilizing the tree of liberty with the blood of tyrants every twenty years.

What do we make of this reexamination of Jefferson’s views on education? As we have seen, both the 1779 and 1817 plans for public education in Virginia called for free public education for children at the primary level followed by a meritocratic rewarding of talented students with a secondary education and ultimately

providing one student with a college education. Many have lauded the proposed public funding of this system as evidence of Jefferson’s democratic commitment. However, we must be careful in not applying modern understandings of democracy to a time in the United States when women were deprived most legal rights and the majority of Blacks were enslaved. In both these areas, Jefferson was not terribly out of step with his contemporaries. While he did believe White girls should be educated at the primary level, he did not support or encourage their education beyond that. As for Black children, he was painfully silent. At the higher levels of schooling, he clearly envisioned at least two, if not more, classes of citizenship based on a person’s occupation and socioeconomic standing. Still, Jefferson staunchly believed education of the masses was the key to preserving individual liberty and therefore republican government. This faith led to Jefferson standing apart from many of his contemporaries who, like Roger Sherman of Connecticut, distrusted the common people and felt they “should have as little to do as may be about Government” since he believed “they want information and are constantly liable to be misled” (Farrand, 1966, Vol. I, p. 48). Jefferson’s solution to this problem was to instead provide more information through schooling and access to print media and public libraries.

## Conclusion

Barber (1999) has written that for “democratic theorists, education has defined not merely citizenship but democracy itself” (p. 134). Without properly educating its citizens, a democracy might only represent “the tyranny of opinion over wisdom.” Barber acknowledges Jefferson’s “appeals to elective aristocracy” (p. 134) as noted earlier. However, he concludes that “Jefferson preferred education to representation as democracy’s guarantor” (p. 136). In this regard, Barber seems to agree with Dewey and others that Jefferson was a believer in and perhaps the originator of “democratic foundationalism” (Barber, 1999, p. 140). In the argument I make above, I believe Jefferson showed himself to see education as the guarantor of republicanism with limited democracy as the vehicle to ensure the republic’s survival—and with it the personal liberty of its citizens.

As I have tried to demonstrate, this is not to criticize Jefferson, nor is it meant additionally to tarnish his reputation. By more accurately situating his beliefs within the context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this may in fact enhance his reputation since this still places him as a prophetic force for the direction education would need to move and indeed did so over the course of the century and a half after his death.

Jefferson’s ideas on democracy as expressed in his letters and plans for public education in Virginia did not define democracy as we understand it. To make such a claim is to apply 20th century understandings to eighteenth-century ideology. Jefferson’s educational philosophy was rooted in his faith in republicanism as a political ideology, and the former was designed to ensure the success of the latter. Certainly elements of his plan for education in Virginia did include democratic elements but to uncritically label him a democrat is at best inaccurate and at worst misleading. As a product of the eighteenth century, Jefferson could not completely escape contemporary notions of race, gender, and class. Typical of

many of his writings, in describing his views about education, Jefferson tended to use hyperbolic rhetoric that often conflicted with the realities of his life or that of Virginia at that time. Merrill Peterson (1998), the distinguished biographer of Jefferson, acknowledged as much when he argued that most who have interpreted Jefferson's writings have ignored some of the "anti-quoted features" in his plans such as "the limitation for all but a chosen few of *free* public education to three years of grammar school" as well as "the assumption throughout that the mass of people are not truly educable" (p. 240).

What I am arguing is that to apply modern democratic understandings to Jefferson's views on education is to fall guilty to presentist interpretation. While his plans may have had elements of what we today would label democratic and for his time were radical (e.g., educating all children in the primary grades or paying for such schooling out of public monies), his goal was strictly a political one; namely, he saw education as the best means to preserve the infant republican system that had replaced the former monarchical one. Like others of the founding generation, Jefferson saw the need to address the paradigm shift from subject to citizen as a critical one. Republicanism was not inbred but rather required learning new skills, new responsibilities, and new roles. For example, the republican notion of virtue, both for the leaders and the led, needed to be instilled. According to Wood (1967), this meant citizens obeying the law "for conscience sake, not for wrath's" (p. 66). From this perspective, education had a narrow purpose: utility. "To fail to shape education to the existing political and economic framework of society might imperil republicanism itself" (Boorstin, 1993, p. 223). Thus, the usefulness of educating the citizenry was political; it was to protect the experiment in republicanism that Jefferson helped to create.

This is not to portray Jefferson as being antidemocratic. It is an attempt to more accurately contextualize his views on educating citizens in a republic. Freeing Jefferson from presentist views of his being a twentieth-century liberal democrat enable us to see him more accurately. By presenting his views in the context of his republicanism, we do not diminish his radicalism for his time as identified by people like Arendt (1963) and Mathews (1984). In the context of the eighteenth century, democracy was seen by most as a slippery slope that resulted in anarchy. Jefferson and a few others did embrace a limited amount of democracy as the best means to preserve the republic. Trusting the masses with political power was radical for that time. The magic potion to temper the potential intoxicating effects of that power was education. Education would enable Americans to assume their roles as republican citizens. They would be able to see through the propaganda espoused by politicians, and they would be able to exercise and defend their rights should their elected governments encroach upon them. However, the social and economic understandings of modern democratic theory that posits an egalitarian society were absent from Jefferson's thinking. Modern scholars who use the term *democratic* in describing Jefferson's educational plans have done a disservice to our ability to understand him. By reexamining his ideas, we are able to get a clearer and more accurate picture of Jefferson's contributions to education and citizenship

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## Notes

1. Madison's Argument in Federalist 10 was that, contrary to the accepted belief at the time, the size of the United States would enable republicanism to succeed because the number of factions present would prevent the tyranny of the majority.
2. On Jefferson's indifference to the education of women, see Kukla (2007); for Jefferson as a misogynist, see Lockridge (1992); for a more general discussion of women as republican mothers, see Kerber (1980), pp. 185 – 231 and Norton (1980), pp. 243 – 250.
3. Jefferson's admission that he was “not a friend to a very energetic government” is found in his letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787, in Peterson (1984), p. 917.