

Week Three Handout: Thomas Jefferson's Friends and Disciples

In Jefferson's philosophy of life, friendship with like-minded souls was the summum bonum. Throughout his life he cultivated a wide network of social relationships which filled various emotional, intellectual, and very practical needs. In today's discussion we will examine several of these attachments and see how Jefferson absorbed these friendships into his political life. Since this lecture concentrates on the affective dimension of Jefferson's personality, we will also consider his filial and romantic connections. Jefferson was a highly sensitive, caring individual—but he was also capable of a deep-seated animus toward those who he felt had wronged him. Consequently, some of his closest friendships went into long and icy eclipse.

Jefferson established long and productive—if sometimes strained—professional and personal friendships with two very different Founding Fathers: John Adams and James Madison. We will delve into the roots and review the results of their collaborative efforts. The relationships were unlikely in some ways: the hedonistic Southerner Jefferson seemed an odd match for the astringent New Englander who opposed slavery. Jefferson trusted that “the people” could successfully run their own affairs with a minimum of government interference, while Adams eyed the masses with suspicion. Yet both were ardent patriots who believed wholeheartedly in the revolutionary experiment and were willing to hazard their lives on the outcome. While their friendship suffered a total breakdown over the bitterly fought issues of the 1790s, they eventually reconciled and wrote lengthy, amicable letters to one another during their retirements. We will see that Jefferson and Madison, as Virginia-centric slaveholders, were closer philosophically than Jefferson and Adams. They worked closely to safeguard civil liberties and defend the states from Federalist encroachments. While most historians have assumed that the older Jefferson was the mentor and Madison the student, we will look at newer interpretations that grant a greater role to the latter and regard Madison as a moderating, steadying influence on the fiery Sage of Monticello.

Ties of kinship played an equally important role in Jefferson's ongoing struggle to establish a measure of peace of mind. We will therefore look at the touching record of his extremely affectionate bonds with his wife Martha and his daughters Patsy and Polly. We will also examine the darker side of these relationships, and see how Jefferson could never extricate himself from the traditional male-dominated world view of his times. (By way of contrast, we will compare Jefferson's attitudes toward the women in his family with those of the hated Aaron Burr, who for all his shortcomings had a surprisingly modern view of women, and practiced an enlightened “liberated” strategy in raising his daughter.)

People to Know in Week Three:

Dabney Carr-Boyhood friend who eventually married Jefferson's sister Martha. Dabney died at a young age, and was buried in the Monticello cemetery. Carr's death was one of many early emotional blows suffered by Jefferson, which combined to produce an anxious and melancholy corner to his otherwise (generally) optimistic personality.

Maria [and Richard] Cosway-The Cosways were well-established English artists who befriended Jefferson in Paris during 1787. Jefferson and Maria quickly became very close and likely had a brief romantic affair. Others question whether the fling amounted to anything other than highly stylized, courtly (and largely epistolary) fantasy. In any case, Maria was a married woman, Jefferson could scarcely afford a scandal, and the liaison cooled as quickly as it began. Jefferson could, as they say, "cut his losses" somewhat ruthlessly—although not without regrets. (It is interesting to note that most of the significant women in Jefferson's life were—for one reason or another—"unavailable." Perhaps this was a deliberate strategy on the part of Jefferson's "Head," as he referred to that rational, objective side of his psyche.)

William Branch Giles-Fellow Virginian and faithful republican "hit man" for Jefferson. Jefferson made every effort to appear above the nasty, undignified tumult of politics. When he wanted to initiate an attack on enemies like Hamilton and Supreme Court Chief Justice Marshall, he generally worked through aggressive, combative men like Giles.

John Page- Another of Jefferson's Virginia surrogate warriors in the political conflict of the 1790s. Page and young Thomas were childhood friends who remained close throughout their lives. Page was prominent among those who called for a congressional investigation of Hamilton's Treasury Department, and he further proved his commitment to the Jeffersonians in opposing Jay's Treaty. When Page was turned out of office by a Federalist upsurge in the Tidewater region in 1797 and had financial difficulties as well, Jefferson had his friend appointed collector of customs in Petersburg—with a substantial salary. Though he doubted that Page was the best candidate for the job, he wanted to reward his oldest friend.

John Trumbull-Connecticut painter and close companion of Jefferson during his Paris years. Trumbull also served as the courier for the letters between Jefferson and Maria Cosway. But Trumbull was a Federalist and an opponent of the French Revolution, and as the party battles of the 1790s sharpened, their friendship inevitable cooled. They finally broke altogether when Jefferson's friend Giles publicly mocked Trumbull over matters of religion, (Giles was an arch skeptic, while Trumbull was a devout Congregationalist) as an amused Jefferson looked on with approval .

Jefferson Quotes of the Week

“I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend.” From Jefferson letter to Page. Of course, this is not true—Jefferson in fact broke with several friends over matters of politics or religion. But it was part of the Fantasy of the Enlightenment to consider oneself so open-minded and tolerant that no difference of opinion could possibly drive true friends apart.

President Jefferson on the loss of his daughter Maria in 1804: “Others may lose of their abundance, but I have lost even the half of what I had. My evening prospects now hang on the slender thread of a single life [referring to his remaining daughter Martha/Patsy]. Perhaps I may be destined to see even this last cord of parental affection broken! When I look out on the country over which I have passed, what a field of slaughter does it exhibit. Where are all the friends who entered it with me, under all the inspiring energies of health and hope? As if pursued by the havoc of war, they are strewed by the way, some earlier, some later, and scarce a few stragglers remain to count the fallen...” An example of Jefferson’s dark foreboding, which qualifies the cheerful, sunny view of Jefferson held by most biographers and historians.

Upon the death of his wife Martha/Patty, Jefferson wrote his sister-in-law: “If there be beyond the grave any concern for the things of this world, there is one angel who views these attentions with pleasure and wishes continuance of them, while she must pity the miseries to which they confine me. This miserable kind of existence is really too burthensome to be borne, and were it not for the infidelity of deserting the sacred charge left me, (referring to the care of his three daughters) I could not wish its continuance a moment longer.” Was Jefferson hinting at the temptation of suicide here? Or indulging in the dramatic hyperbole which characterized so much of his writing? We don’t know.

Daughter Patsy on her father’s reaction to Martha’s death: “The scene that followed I did not witness but the violence of his emotion, of his grief when almost by stealth I entered his room at night to this day I dare not trust myself to describe. He kept to his room for three weeks and I was never a moment from his side. He walked almost incessantly night and day during his long fainting fit, only lying down occasionally when nature was completely exhausted. My Aunts remained constantly with him for some weeks. I do not remember how many. When at last he left his room he rode out and from that time he was incessantly on horseback rambling about the mountain in the least frequented roads and just as often through the woods; in those melancholy rambles I was his constant companion, a solitary witness to many a violent burst of grief, the remembrance of which has consecrated particular scenes of that lost home beyond the power of time to obliterate.”

Friend and relative Edmund Randolph on Jefferson's reaction to Patty's death: "Mrs. Jefferson has at last shaken off her tormenting pains, by yielding to them, and has left our friend inconsolable. I ever thought him to rank domestic happiness in the first class of the chief good; but scarcely supposed that his grief would be so violent as to justify the circulating report of his swooning away whenever he sees his children." Jefferson suffered from insomnia and a complete incapacity for work for months after his beloved wife's death.