

# HISTORIC ROOTS

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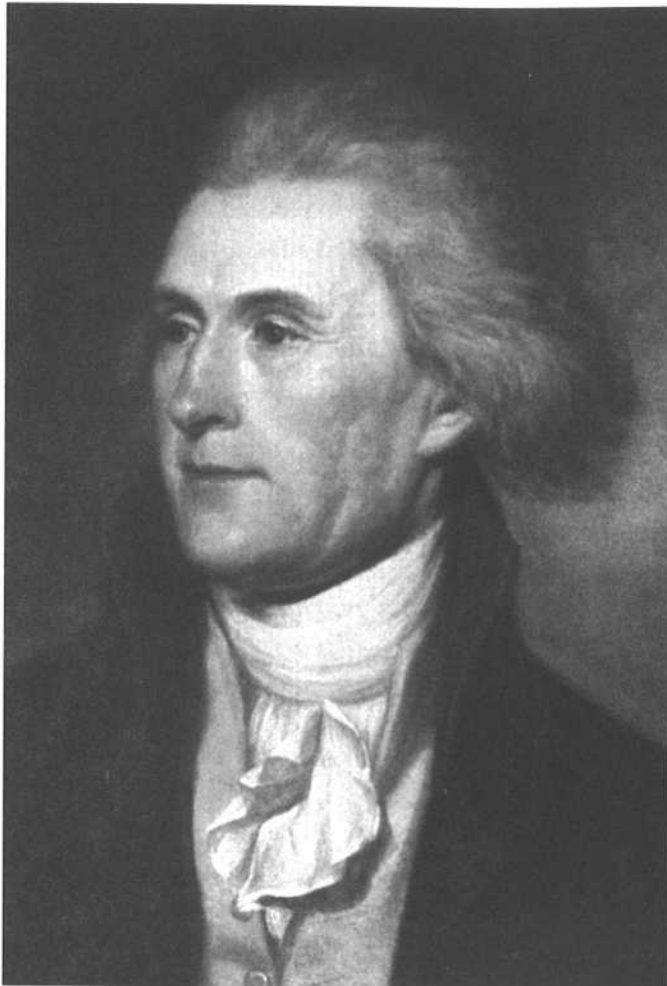
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# A VISIT TO VERMONT

By SYDNEY N. STOKES, JR.



Independence Historical National Park

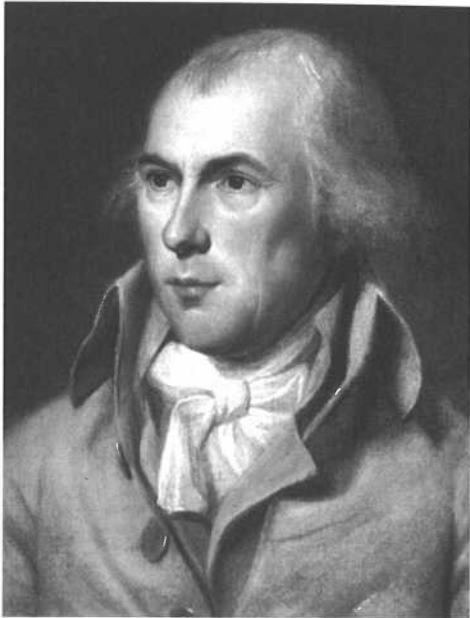
*Thomas Jefferson in 1791.*

In 1791, the United States was a new country. The battle for independence was over. A constitution had been drafted and adopted. A new government was at work in the nation's capital, Philadelphia. George Washington was president.

It was not easy, running the new country. In Congress, members from individual states and from the north and the south disagreed fiercely. They disagreed about how the new government should work. They differed on how to admit new states and on trade policies. Members of the president's cabinet<sup>1</sup> argued about whether there should be a strong, centralized government or a looser organization of states. They debated whether business or farming should be the focus of economic life. The new government also had to develop ways of dealing with foreign countries, especially Britain and France.

As Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson was

<sup>1</sup> A cabinet is a group of people who serve as advisors to a country's leader.



Gilcrease Museum

*James Madison around 1792.*

in the middle of all these discussions.<sup>2</sup> So was James Madison, a member of Congress from Virginia.<sup>3</sup> By the spring of 1791, Jefferson was suffering from migraine headaches. Madison was having stomach problems. They decided to

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson had been Governor of Virginia and wrote the Declaration of Independence. The Secretary of State is the cabinet member in charge of foreign affairs. In the cabinet, Jefferson's views often differed from those of Alexander Hamilton, who was Secretary of the Treasury. Their arguments became famous. Their differences became the basis for two opposing political parties.

<sup>3</sup> James Madison had drafted much of the United States Constitution. With Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, he wrote *The Federalist Papers*, which helped win approval of the new constitution.

take a trip to find out what people were thinking away from the capital city. They wanted to visit battlefields, farms, and the new state of Vermont.

On May 8, Jefferson wrote to his daughter,

*I set out [next week] to join Mr. Madison at New York, from whence we shall go up to Albany and Lake George, then cross over to Bennington, and so through Vermont to the Connecticut River....[I] expect to be back in Philadelphia about the middle of June.*

Their trip was to last 33 days and cover 920 miles. We know about it from diaries both Madison and Jefferson kept and from letters Jefferson wrote to his daughters and son-in-law. Some of the letters were written on birch bark.

Vermont had been kept out of the union because of its quarrels with New Hampshire and New York over who controlled the land. Since 1777, it had been a separate country, the Republic of Vermont. But on March 4, 1791, it became the 14th state.<sup>4</sup>

When Jefferson arrived in New York City, on May 19, he sent his slave, James Hemings,

<sup>4</sup> The next year, in a deal made in Congress to keep the balance between northern and southern states, Kentucky was admitted as the 15th state.

on ahead to Poughkeepsie with his horses and carriage.<sup>5</sup> Madison traveled with a slave named Matthew. Madison and Jefferson left New York City two days later, heading up the Hudson River by boat.

## NEW-YORK.

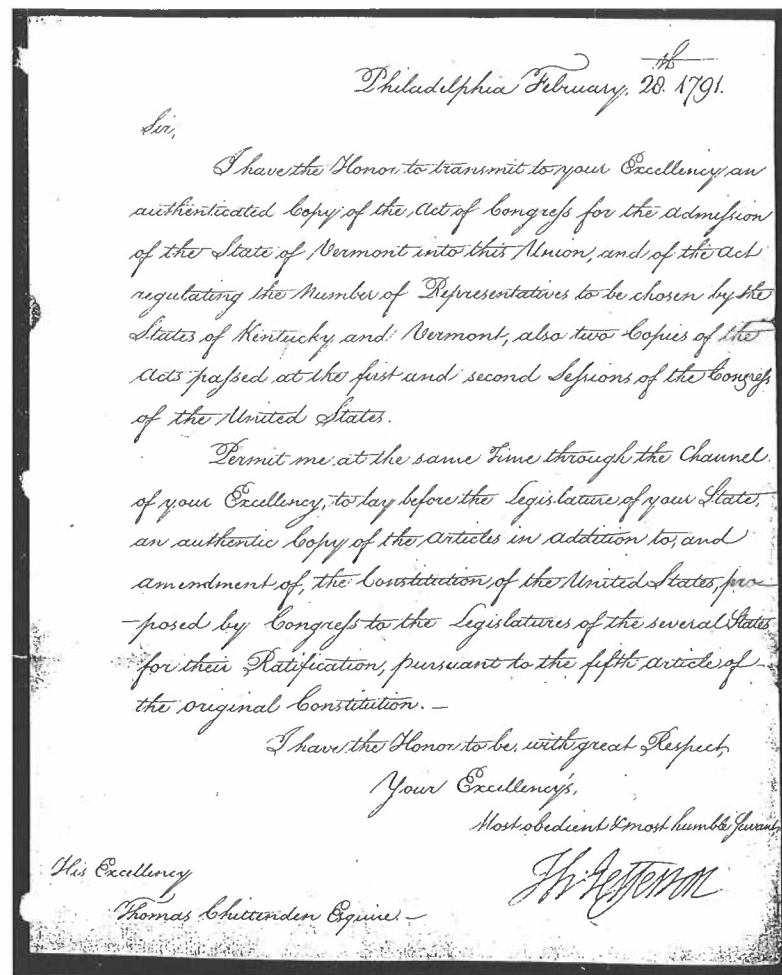
ALBANY, MAY 30. ON Thursday last, this city was honoured with the presence of Mr. Jefferson, Secretary of state, accompanied by the Charles Fox of America, the celebrated Madison. We are informed they intend going north, as far as Lake Champlain, and from thence across the fifteenth Constellation, east to Connecticut River.

It is to be regretted that their short stay in this city deprived our principal characters from paying that respectful attention, due to their distinguished merit.

*The beginning of an article in the Columbian Centinel of June 11, 1791. It tells of Jefferson's and Madison's arrival in Albany and of their planned trip.*

Their diaries include records of the trees, plants, and crops grown in the places they visited. Jefferson also studied Indian languages. He commented on trade and manufacturing. He bought 60 sugar maple seedlings to grow in Virginia and took home 100 pounds of maple sugar for gifts. (The trees did not survive.) He made notes for a report on the "Hessian fly," an insect that was destroying wheat crops. He scolded Vermonters for causing "disagreeable" disturbances with British soldiers along the Canadian border.

<sup>5</sup> James Hemings was freed in 1796, but his life was not a happy one. He committed suicide in 1802.



A letter from Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson to Vermont governor Thomas Chittenden, February 28, 1791. It contains the formal announcement of Vermont's statehood.

From Lake George, Madison wrote about a farmer named Prince Taylor, who was a “free negro.”

*Taylor possesses a good farm of about 250 acres which he cultivates with 6 white hirelings ... and by his industry and good management turns to good account. He is intelligent; reads, writes and understands accounts, and is dext[er]ous in his affairs.<sup>6</sup>*

Madison and Jefferson sailed north on Lake Champlain from Fort Ticonderoga, in New York. For a day and a half they fought headwinds and high seas. Finally they turned around near Basin Harbor and landed at Chimney Point. Jefferson wrote that while

*Lake George is without comparison the most beautiful water I ever saw, [Lake Champlain] is a far less pleasant water. It is muddy, turbulent, and yields little game.*

He didn’t like the climate here much, either.

*On the whole I find nothing any where else in point of climate which Virginia need envy to any part of the world. Here they are locked up in ice and snow for six*

<sup>6</sup> Dexterous means skillful. It is not clear whether Madison actually met Taylor or simply heard about him.

*months. Spring and autumn, which make a paradise of our country, are rigorous winter with them, and a Tropical summer breaks on them all at once.*

The travelers spent the night of May 31 at Chimney Point in Vermont. Sally Markham, of Shoreham, remembered seeing them there. “Jefferson,” she told Philip Battell more than 50 years later, “was a tall long jointed man, stooping; Madison [was] small and erect.”

From there the men recrossed the lake. They visited the battlefields of Saratoga on June 1 and arrived in Bennington on June 4. In



State of Vermont, Division for Historic Preservation, painting by Philippa Diagle.

*The Chimney Point Historic Site. The oldest part of the building dates from the late 1700s. Jefferson and Madison stayed there on May 31, 1791.*



Bennington Museum

*This detail of a 1798 painting by Ralph Earl shows Dewey's Tavern in Old Bennington. Jefferson and Madison had a meal there in early June 1791. The tavern still stands on Monument Avenue in Old Bennington. It is now called the Walloomsac Inn.*

Bennington, and everywhere else they visited, they also met local leaders. *The Vermont Gazette* of June 13, 1791 reports that in Bennington, Jefferson and Madison had “obtained the sentiments of the people and secured to themselves a fund of political knowledge.”

The travelers arrived back in New York on June 16. They had seen much, met many people, and learned a lot on their trip to the North Country. Jefferson went on to become the third President of United States. Madison became the fourth. Because they were intelligent and thoughtful men, it is clear that the knowledge and insights they gained from their trip broadened their understanding and helped them serve better the country they had helped to create and would later govern.

## Rooting Around

An exhibit about Jefferson and Madison's trip to Vermont is on display at the State House in Montpelier through October 16, 1999. For information, please call 800-322-5616.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison are among the founders of our country. Their works and beliefs still influence both political debate and political actions today. Your library undoubtedly has many books written about them and their times.