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U.S. Experience to 1877

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Podcast Script: The Jefferson Paradox

Hello, I'm Olivia Bolek and today I'll be discussing the paradoxical life of Thomas Jefferson. One of America's most famous men, the founding father who wrote our Declaration of Independence, was a man of many contradictions. Thomas Jefferson was a vocal anti-slavery activist yet he owned slaves his entire life. Also, while he held that all men were created equal in nature and therefore considered blacks to be part of mankind, he still believed them to be inferior to whites. Jefferson helped to establish many of our American liberties and had a great impact upon our nation but was a mysterious man in his beliefs on human rights. It is difficult to understand Thomas Jefferson's sincere views on Africans in America because of his conflicting statements and contradictory lifestyle.

Thomas Jefferson included blacks in the Declaration of Independence which established many American liberties. In the preamble of the Declaration, Jefferson states that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."¹ Contrary to popular belief, he did mean this to include blacks. In his original draft, Jefferson wrote a slave grievance. Not many people are aware of this because it was removed from the document by the persuasion of powerful men who benefitted from the slave trade.² Jefferson was absolutely against

¹ The Charters of Freedom, "The Declaration of Independence." (accessed December 1, 2013). <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html>.

² Edwin Gittleman, "Jefferson's 'Slave Narrative': The Declaration of Independence as a Literary Text," *Early American Literature*, 8, no. 3 (1974): 252, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost> (accessed December 1, 2013).

slavery and believed it to be a cruel institution, calling it an “absolute political evil.”³ He blamed the establishment of slavery in the United States on the king because of the British slave trade.⁴ Jefferson promoted education hoping that in time it would produce enlightened antislavery American men.⁵ In this grievance, Jefferson refers to blacks as MEN in all capital letters, indicating them to be part of mankind.⁶ Because all men were created in nature, Jefferson understood this to mean that blacks also possess rights to liberty. He thought that the inability to practice one’s rights doesn’t affect one’s entitlement to those rights.⁷

Despite his feelings on slavery and his defense of blacks in the Declaration, Jefferson still considered blacks to be inferior to whites. In the slave grievance, Jefferson says that blacks deserve life and liberty as well; however, he writes nothing about the pursuit of happiness. This is because he did not consider them to be identical to white Americans.⁸ In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson states, “...the blacks...are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.”⁹ He found black skin to be ugly and believed they had less reason and imagination than whites.¹⁰ Jefferson was appalled by the idea of interracial relations and therefore proposed laws would make marriages between blacks and whites and mulattos and whites null. He also proposed that if a white woman should have a

³ Ibid, 242.

⁴ Ibid, 253.

⁵ William D. Richardson, "Thomas Jefferson & Race: The Declaration and Notes on the State of Virginia," *Polity*, 16, no. 3 (1984): 464, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3234559> (accessed December 1, 2013).

⁶ Ibid, 452.

⁷ Ibid, 450.

⁸ Gittleman, 'Jefferson's "Slave Narrative,"' 253.

⁹ University of Virginia Library, "Jefferson, Thomas: Notes on the State of Virginia." (accessed December 1, 2013).

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080914030942/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.htm>

¹⁰ Richardson, "Thomas Jefferson & Race," 461-462.

black man's baby, the woman would have to leave the states.¹¹ Jefferson's ideal plan was to emancipate the slaves, train them with special skills and how to live on their own, and then expatriate them.¹² He did not want any people of color to live in the United States; he had a fear of their culture being integrated with white American culture.¹³

Thomas Jefferson lived in a way that conflicted with his views on blacks. Throughout his entire life he owned slaves despite his statements against the institution. Even after the revolution, Jefferson didn't free his slaves although he stated that slavery would not exist in the colonies if it weren't for Britain.¹⁴ He also had a relationship with one of his female slaves, Sally Hemings. This is intriguing because it was known that he abhorred the idea of interracial relations. It started when he took a trip to Paris and Sally, along with several others, accompanied him. During the course of events, they came to know each other and by the end of the trip she was pregnant. Realizing she could be free in France she tried to stay but Jefferson promised to free her children upon age twenty-one if Sally came home. Their relationship lasted almost forty years. DNA tests have proved that Jefferson fathered her children. He did emancipate them as he had promised but he never freed Sally.¹⁵ Some historians have referred to the nature of their relationship as love, while others such as Joseph Ellis have called it "a long-term sexual liaison."¹⁶ Although this situation conflicted with Jefferson's views, some have suggested he was drawn to her because she was a "forbidden" woman. The fact that he owned

¹¹ Ibid, 462.

¹² Ibid, 459.

¹³ Ibid, 457-458.

¹⁴ Jeremy J. Tewell, "Assuring Freedom to the Free," *Civil War History*, 58, no. 1 (2012): 75-96, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/civil_war_history/ (accessed December 1, 2013).

¹⁵ Fred Lee, "Reconsidering the Jefferson-Hemings Relationship: Nationalist Historiography without Nationalist Heroes, Racial Sexuality without Racial Significance," *Political Research Quarterly*, 66, no. 3 (2013): <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost> (accessed December 1, 2013).

¹⁶ Ibid, 502.

slaves was also a contradiction. Fred Lee understands this complex as, “he knows that he is an oppressive slave owner but he believes that he is a benevolent patriarch.”¹⁷

We may never know Thomas Jefferson’s reasoning behind his actions or the feelings behind his views. Just as our nation’s history contains many paradoxes, so does the life of this founding father. However, we can learn much about how we came to be the nation we are and have the rights that we do today by examining these sources. Thank you for choosing to listen to this podcast on the paradoxical life of Thomas Jefferson.

¹⁷ Ibid, 503.