**Thomas Jefferson’s fascinating story and Bible** **(**Observations by John C Vaughan 111, December 8, 2023)

In American History, one man stands out. His accomplishments have significant ongoing impact, his personal life was complicated, and his religious beliefs continue to mystify. His home is a beautiful showplace now, but only after it survived by a thin thread for nearly 100 years thanks to one Jewish family, the Levys. His personal Christian beliefs were highly criticized and yet primarily unknown. He finally twice put something together in words cut out from pages of the bible. These “books” – *Philosophy* (1804) disappeared, followed by *Life and Morals* (1819) which remained unpublished for 85 years. Thomas Jefferson (TJ) was born April 13, 1743 and died at age 83 on July 4, 1828 – the 50th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

TJ was a surveyor, archeologist, philosopher, revolutionary, president, connoisseur, gardener, epicure, diplomat, scientist, educator, innovator, and farmer. Thomas Jefferson was, is, the essential architect of American life. He was the most complex and fascinating of the Founders. His home Monticello is a touchstone for all who seek to explore the enduring meaning of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

He directed that his tombstone only mention three things that he valued most: (1) author of Declaration of Independence, (2) author of Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and (3) father of the University of Virginia. He left out many things, such as: Governor of Virginia, US ambassador to France, US Secretary of State, Vice President in 1796, and then the third U.S. President - for two terms, 1801 to 1809 (and turned down requests that he run for a third term). He initiated the Barbray War (1801-1805) leading to the defeat of the Barbray pirates by the US Navy and Marine Corps. In 1803 he nearly doubled the size of the United States thru the Louisiana Purchase from France. He then launched in 1804 the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the American west. Besides Monticello, he also designed the Virginia State Capital in Richmond and the Academic Village at University of Virginia. Monticello is the only private home in US designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. TJ also was a skilled violinist, innovative farmer with livestock, bred multiple breeds of dogs, and built his own ice cream stand at his estate at a time when ice cream was not yet popular. Some called him “The Sage of Monticello.”

He started out privileged. His father was a successful tobacco planter and surveyor and willed to TJ the land where he built Monticello. His mother, Jane Randolph, belonged to one of Virginia’s most prominent families. TJ was 6 ft 2 ½ inches tall with sandy red hair. Red hair is rare in Unites States (only 2%), yet four of our first eight Presidents had red hair - Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, and Van Buren. Jefferson was formally educated at College of William and Mary. After graduation, he practiced law and served in the House of Burgesses, where he heard orators like Patrick Henry speak. TJ spoke 4 languages and lived in France for 5 years. When the British burned down the Library of Congress in 1814, he sold his library of 6,487 books to the U.S. Government to restart a library.

John Wayles (1715-1773) emigrated early from England. He married 3 times, but all 3 wives died between 1748 and 1761, and several children also died early. His only surviving child from his first wife was Martha, who herself was widowed before marrying TJ when she was 23. After the death of his third wife, Wayles took his slave Elizabeth Hemings as his concubine and was the father of her 6 children, including Sally. Jefferson inherited 175 enslaved people, 40 from his father in 1764 and 135 from his father-in-law John Wayles in 1773.

Jefferson married Martha Wayles, had 2 daughters, and then became a widower after just 10 years. Martha died in 1782. French general Beauvoir had just helped the Americans in 1781 defeat the British at Yorktown. The Jefferson’s eldest daughter, Patsy, became her father’s constant companion in his grief, establishing a lifelong closeness. Following two terms as Virginia’s governor, TJ was posted in France in 1784 to improve trade, and a year later took over for 4 years as Minister (US Ambassador) from Benjamin Franklin. Jefferson brought Patsy, at age 11, with him and also 19 year old slave James Hemings to learn French cooking. Patsy’s 8 year old sister later came to Paris and was accompanied by slave Sally Hemings (age 14). Jefferson experienced all the world had to offer in Paris, an expanded world view education for the bright Virginian. Patsy received a fine education for a female at that time in history when she attended an elite French school. Patsy later married and had 12 children. She also lived in the White House to act as a stand-in First Lady for her widower father.

Patsy’s husband, Thomas Randolph, later also became Governor of Virginia; but, like her father TJ, left her with unmanageable debts forcing her to sell the magnificent home, Monticello, that her father had built up to much-acclaimed, rare-in-the United States, European architecture. It was already run down by 1824. It sold first for $7,500, then again in 1834 for only $2,500 to Navy Commodore Uriah Levy, a Jefferson admirer, who started renovations. Uriah later sold it to his nephew in 1879 for just $10,500. The nephew continued renovations, and in 1923 Monticello was sold for $500,000 to the Jefferson Foundation, a private non-profit organization where it is now used as a house museum and an educational institution. Each year more than 430,000 visitors travel to Jefferson’s mountain outside of Charlottesville and millions more experience Monticello through the website and digital platform.

Then there was Sally Hemings. She was ¾ white, of light skin, but still one of his 175 slaves that lived at Monticello. She became pregnant in France at age 15 and returned to Monticello to have the baby. Her Monticello bedroom ended up next to Jefferson’s. They had 4 children reach adulthood, the 2 older daughters he freed and their younger two sons he freed in his will. He never freed Sally; she moved after TJ’s death to live with her daughter. In later life TJ advocated for the abolishment of slavery. One could speculate that the lifestyle and dreams built at Monticello would not have been possible without slaves, and even then it was not enough.

More than 70 members of the Hemings family lived in slavery at Monticello over five generations. Hemings family members eventually occupied the most important positions in Monticello’s labor force. They helped build the Monticello house, made furniture, cooked Jefferson’s meals, cared for his children and grandchildren, attended him in his final moments, and dug his grave.

When you take the highly recommended tour of privately funded Monticello today, the main subject at the visitor center display rooms and theater is his authored Declaration of Independence. His basic words and beliefs have been adopted into dozens of Constitutions of other countries! Wow, such an everlasting effect. The idea was that it is a “self-evident” concept that all men have equal rights, regardless of birth, wealth, or status, and that the government is the servant of the people. As Abraham Lincoln later wrote, Jefferson’s words “gave hope to all future mankind.”

TJ was proud of what he was able to accomplish when he was in the House of Delegates in Virginia’s capital of Williamsburg. He led the effort to separate Church and State. No more dictates or publicly supported religion and church elders. He started this work in 1777 and it was passed into law in1786, while TJ was in France. This was the first such law in the US. In 1790 he returned to the US and joined Washington’s cabinet as secretary of state.

He strongly believed that someone’s personal religious beliefs were strictly between that person and his God. He rarely discussed nor ever promoted his beliefs to his children or grandchildren. His College of William & Mary at that time in history required that students be devout Anglicans and that monopoly religion’s priests received funding and privilege from the government. Obviously, TJ was unpopular with most everyone when he wrote: “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg”. When he ran (and prevailed) to unseat John Adams from President, the campaign was bitter over this one religion subject, which Adams roiled on and to which TJ never responded to (turn the other cheek). It was the most contentious battle of Jefferson’s life.

Some clergymen warned their parishioners that they should hide their bibles if Jefferson became president, and that such an electoral outcome might bring down God’s wrath on the new republic. One preacher warned that under Jefferson, “Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced, the air will be rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil will be soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes.” These attacks had hardly died down following the election, when President Jefferson came under a new wave of public criticism (again, no reply) for his association with revolutionary and the author of *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine – who stayed several weeks at the White House.

Education was also highly important to Jefferson. He founded the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in 1819. He promoted tax payer funded public education where someone with capabilities, but no family income could receive a fine education.

TJ developed an extraordinary circle of colleagues and friends over the span of several decades. Over 1,200 letters were exchanged between Jefferson and James Madison during their nearly 50 years as friends and political allies. James and Dolley visited Monticello frequently from their home Montpelier 35 miles away. Madison is considered the Father of the Constitution and Architect of the Bill of Rights. Dolley sometimes served as widower Jefferson’s hostess at the White House during his first presidential term. TJ helped Madison win election as the fourth president of the United States; and Madison later succeeded Jefferson again, this time as rector of the University of Virginia.

Jefferson made a promise in 1798/9 to his close friend Dr Benjamin Rush to document his Christian faith. Among other things, Rush was deeply religious and an active force in humanitarian efforts to end African American Slavery. Jefferson tried to have his prominent and wise friend, minister Joseph Priestly, do the task of removing all the miracles from the bible and focusing on what Jesus said to do. Both he and Priestly felt the bible was too confusingly written for most people to understand and that it was written by 15 or 16 “unlettered” men from 50 to 120 years after Jesus died on the cross. The Gospels were written anonymously. They felt the writers embellished some of the stories to where it was hard to believe, and unnecessary to believe to follow the teachings on how to live. But Priestly died immediately after TJ’s request to extract the basic teachings. They felt believing in the virgin birth, changing water to wine, feeding multitudes with 5 loafs and 2 fish, etc. was not required. They disagreed on the importance of believing in the Resurrection. So, in 2 or 3 evenings, while President in 1804, TJ extracted the words of what Jesus said to do and put them into what was eventually called the *Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*. He told many that he had finished this project quickly, but no copy was ever found after TJ’s death. He said he read it nightly. He extracted from the four Gospels. He did not involve the Acts of the Apostles by Luke on spread of church from Jesus to Paul’s time, nor the 21 Epistles, nor John’s Apocalypse.

He decided, after he left the Presidency and returned to Monticello, to do an expanded extraction to his *Philosophy* to include the story of Jesus’s life as written in the bible. He entitled these pages: *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth extracted textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English*. This was a far greater effort than *Philosophy* (months not 3 or 4 nights), and the “book” survived. He bought two copies each of three Bibles, cutting primarily from one. These bibles survived and are also in the Smithsonian today. Since one Bible had both Greek and Latin text side by side, he decided to add French and put 4 languages side by side for comparison. The pages he glued the clippings on were sent to Richmond to be bound with an elaborate red leather cover. He told his friends that this was for his personal nightly reading. The book quietly stayed in the family after his death, was found to exist decades later and bought in 1895 from Jefferson’s great-great-granddaughter by a Smithsonian researcher, devout Jew historian Dr Cyrus Adler. Adler immediately put it in a one-time show of 18 different bibles (where it was a hit), and then quietly stored the book again for five years.

Finally, Jefferson’s “Bible” found great publicity 85 years after it was assembled. The U.S. Congress in 1904, with much controversy, printed 9,000 copies for distribution to important people of the day and to future Senators and Congressman. For the next 50 years, Senators and Congressman received a copy when they took their oath of office. In the 1950’s the original supply ran out, but now there are dozens of other TJ “Bible” books printed with their own style of Introduction. In 1934 when President Franklin Roosevelt laid the cornerstone for the Jefferson Memorial in Washington he included two things: a copy of the Declaration of Independence and Jefferson’s “bible”.

From such a huge, historical life, it is most interesting that Thomas Jefferson was so greatly impacted by his only two known promises. First one to his wife Martha on her deathbed when she requested that he never marry again (he was 39 at the time of his promise to her and she was 33). Martha did not want her daughters to ever be influenced by another woman. The second promise was to Dr Rush that Jefferson would write a letter explaining his beliefs on Christianity.

TJ’s promise to never marry again led to a complicated life with Sally Hemmings. Later, when fulfilling his promise to write his religious beliefs, he wrote nothing. Instead, he cut out words from the bible. He was retired from the presidency then and enjoying life at his Monticello. One might imagine that his first promise influenced over the years how he met his second promise.

Thomas Jefferson generally espoused a Unitarian philosophy, but in 1819 he was quoted as saying: “I am a Sect by myself, as far as I know”. He felt he was a Christian because he believed and followed what he thought to be “The most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man”.

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Footnotes to Manseau’s book.

Peter Manseau is at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American Religious History, where he began in 2016 as the Curator of American Religious History. In the last chapter of his *The* *Jefferson Bible* book, he wrote: *No* is indeed the only correct answer to the question if Jefferson “wrote his own Bible.” He did not “write” one and the book he created is of course by no means truly a Bible.

Manseau then referred to journalist Tobias Huch’s belief that the essence of Christianity could be stated much more purely and simply than history has usually allowed. In 2018 Huch wrote: “Especially young people are looking for clear, catchy, convincing messages, often with a spiritual orientation. Adolescents and young people are looking for a value system. This value system must be attractive and above all understandable. And unfortunately the Bible rarely offers that today; it is too extensive, too complex, too incomprehensible… In the Jefferson Bible, I recognize the opportunity to give Christian values to young people.”

Manseau’s concluding paragraph of his 2020 book:

Jefferson could not have imagined the many purposes to which his private collection of New Testament verses would be put, but the spirit of the original book remains in every successive iteration. Today more readers than ever before are able to take up Jefferson’s heretical text. They are variously enraged that he dared to take a scalpel to scripture, or comforted that he was successful in this delicate operation. Yet no matter their interpretation of the book itself, Jefferson would have been gratified to know that, 200 years later, all are free to debate the meaning of his work, choosing for themselves what to believe.”

Personal footnotes to Manseau’s book..

In 1963 Chief Justice Warner and his colleagues decided that it was unlawful to pray and read the Bible in public schools. By then I had finished all my public education, through college, in Virginia – where we occasionally prayed and more rarely read the Bible. We never realized we were enjoying a freedom that could one day disappear, especially without legislative act or constitutional amendment. Maybe my children and grandchildren are missing something they don’t even realize they are missing. Where are they exposed to a set of values they can believe in? In Jefferson’s plan for public education for his State of Virginia, both prayer and bible-reading were mandatory. And not his “book”.

No amount of human logic and reason can comprehend the vastness and creation of the universe. Therefore my logic and reason conclude there is a God. There are things about life and death we will never understand.

There are 2 levels of living and America has done well generally believing in God. Without God, it still feels good to be virtuous, but with your belief in God you are much more motivated to be virtuous and do good because of God’s acceptance, love, and possible assistance.

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These observations of Thomas Jefferson’s life are posted at Dr Vaughan’s personal family website, [www.pvbv.com](http://www.pvbv.com) > Commentary > Book Reports.