

The Education of Young Thomas Jefferson

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Many students at The College of William and Mary can recite the name of its most famous alumnus: Thomas Jefferson. There is little doubt that the College had a remarkable influence on him. In 1934, Chandler wrote in the *William and Mary Quarterly* that Jefferson owed his greatness primarily to the fundamental training he received in Williamsburg (p. 307). Although there is little doubt that his attendance at William and Mary, combined with his work habits and intellect, made him a successful and privileged Virginian, one wonders if Jefferson's greatness could just as likely have been achieved by attending Harvard or the College of New Jersey. In other words, was there something unique about his college experience at William and Mary?

Like the son of many wealthy and privileged landowners in Colonial Virginia, Jefferson was first educated at home and then sent to live and study with clergy who served as teachers of the classics and French. His father, Peter, exerted a powerful influence on the young Jefferson, fostering a desire in him to excel in his studies. Jefferson described his father as self-taught in that "he read much and improved himself" (Ford, 1914, p. 4). Jefferson's father died when he was 14. Jefferson later wrote, "At 14 years of age, the whole care and direction of myself was thrown on

myself entirely, without a relative or friend qualified to advise or guide me" (Meacham, 2012, p. 10).

Although historians debate Jefferson's relationship with his mother, it was her cousin, Peter Randolph, a wealthy landowner, who encouraged Jefferson to apply to William and Mary. As biographer Jon Meacham (2012) noted in *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*, the standards for admission were not "onerous" (p. 15). Meacham (2012) continues: "According to the college, the test for potential students was 'whether they have made due progress in their Latin and Greek...And let no blockhead or lazy fellow in his studies be elected'" (p. 15). In 1760, at the age of 17, Jefferson entered the College.

For Jefferson, his trip to Williamsburg, the colonial capital, was the first time he had traveled more than 20 miles from home. Jefferson would later call Williamsburg "Devilsburg" due to its many diversions. He described Williamsburg in the following way: "The meticulously balanced Georgian architecture of the town presented a face of imperturbable propriety, but the community had its Hogarthian haunts envisioned by lusty wenches and flowing spirits" (Mapp, 2007, p. 22). While Jefferson was known to study for long periods, he was neither without friends nor outside pursuits, especially during his first year at the College.

Unlike the sprawling campus that the College is today, in Jefferson's time, it was a single building combining classrooms, dining, dorms, and a chapel. Living and studying in the Wren Building, the future president

worked hard—according to some accounts for as long as 15 hours at a stretch—only broken by his unique habit of jogging two miles through the streets of Williamsburg. A creature of habit, Jefferson read many books found in a classical education of the day, in an hourly cycle that included physical studies, politics, history, literature, and rhetoric. He formally studied Greek, Latin, and French, and privately studied Spanish and Italian.

The handful of faculty at the College had distinguished academic records from Oxford and Cambridge and conducted lectures in the morning and seminars in the afternoon. Although the academics were rigorous, they alone do not alone explain Jefferson's rise to greatness. As Jefferson himself would explain, it was the good company provided by a faculty member and several other distinguished individuals that made him the person and enlightened intellectual he became. Jefferson wrote:

It was my great good fortune, and what probably fixed the destinies of my life, that Dr. William Small of Scotland was then professor of mathematics, a man profound in most of the useful branches of science with a happy and an enlarged and liberal mind. (Mapp, 2007, p. 18)

Small, a 26-year-old faculty member originally from Scotland, embraced the spirit of the enlightenment and introduced Jefferson to his intellectual heroes: Newton, Bacon, and Locke. With Small's help, Jefferson was introduced to another lifelong mentor, George Wythe. Wythe, who also studied at William and Mary, was one of the best

lawyers in Virginia, and Jefferson's friendship would have a profound effect on him. Wythe introduced Jefferson to Governor Fauquier, the colonial administrator, resulting in his addition to a small group of repetitive diners at the Governor's Palace. As Jefferson later reflected, "At these dinners I have heard more good sense, more rational, and philosophical conversation, than in all my life besides" (Mapp, 2007, p. 22).

At the age of 19, and after two years at the College, Jefferson finished his studies. Unlike today, the College did not award degrees of completion. Jefferson would begin his five-year study of law under Wythe's tutelage. Jefferson later wrote, "Mr. Wythe continued to be my faithful and beloved Mentor in youth and my most affectionate friend through life" (Chandler, 1934, p. 305).

Throughout his life, Jefferson continued to value his education and would initiate various proposals to make William and Mary a better institution. In 1779 as Governor of Virginia, he approved the reorganization of the College into five schools, creating the first School of Law and School of Modern Languages in the United States, and dropping the School of Divinity. The honor code was introduced, and students were permitted to select electives (Chandler, 1934). His attempt to change the name of the College to the University of Virginia was refused by the General Assembly, given it had been established by the Church of England. Jefferson would eventually fulfill his own vision for an institution of higher education with the creation of the University of Virginia in 1819.

Educators have long known the power and influence of parents, teachers, and other mentors to help guide and accompany young adults to what some educational theorists have called self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2002). Baxter Magolda (2002) highlighted the importance of young adults being able to create their own beliefs, values, and sense of self, or in other words, to “self author” by learning to think critically and independently, developing the ability to work with others, and creating and living their own values in pursuit of their dreams (Baxter Magolda, 2002, p. 2). This transformative process can be facilitated by a college faculty member, an administrator, or other adults within the student’s community by serving as “good company” for the student traveler along the way to self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2002, p. 8). Baxter Magolda (2002) noted that this partnership between educator and learner should be based on mutual respect and an active exchange of perspectives to invite learning.

Critical to Jefferson’s self-authorship were the mentors and good company he found at William and Mary. Years later, in writings to his grandson, Jefferson reflected on the dangers and bad company that might attract his grandson’s interests:

I had the good fortune to become acquainted very early with some characters of very high standing, and to feel the incessant wish that I could ever become what they were. Under temptations and difficulties, I would ask myself – what would Dr. Small, Mr. Wythe, Peyton Randolph do in this situation. (Mapp, 2007, p. 22)

There is little doubt that Mr. Jefferson valued his education at the College of William and Mary, but I suspect that if we were to ask him what advice he would give to current and future educators, he might say, Be a mentor and a guide—it can make all of the difference.

References

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