

2013

# Is Jefferson a Founding Father of Democratic Education?

Johann N. Neem

*Western Washington University*, [johann.neem@wwu.edu](mailto:johann.neem@wwu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/history\\_facpubs](https://cedar.wwu.edu/history_facpubs)

Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Neem, Johann N., "Is Jefferson a Founding Father of Democratic Education?" (2013). *History Faculty and Staff Publications*. 26.  
[https://cedar.wwu.edu/history\\_facpubs/26](https://cedar.wwu.edu/history_facpubs/26)

This Response or Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

# Is Jefferson a Founding Father of Democratic Education?

Johann Neem

---

## Abstract

This response argues that it is reasonable to consider Thomas Jefferson a proponent of democratic education. It suggests that Jefferson's education proposals sought to ensure the wide distribution of knowledge and that Jefferson's legacy remains important to us today.

## This article is a response to:

James Carpenter. (2013). Jefferson and the Ideology of Democratic Schooling. *Democracy & Education*, 21(2). Article 5. Available online at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/Iss2/5>.

CARPENTER (2013) HAS written a provocative, important essay on the person whom many Americans invoke as the founding father of democratic education. By placing Jefferson in his time, Carpenter argues, we see him as a *republican* rather than a *democrat*. By this, Carpenter means, Jefferson's focus was on public things—the importance of education for citizens and leaders—rather than on educating for individual liberation in an egalitarian context. Thus, Carpenter concludes, Jefferson's goals for education and our own are in fact further apart in theory than many Americans recognize.

It is interesting to note that in his own time, Jefferson was accused of being a democrat by his Federalist opponents. He was seen as promoting a vision of radical equality that threatened the social order. He was the figurehead of a political party—the Democratic-Republicans—that helped to legitimize the idea of *democracy* as an American aspiration. Putting Jefferson back into his context, then, may require seeing him, at least from the perspective of his enemies, as siding with democracy.

Carpenter distinguishes democratic education from republican education in part on the assumption that a democracy favors active, participatory citizens in contrast to a republic's desire for good citizens. This is a problematic distinction for two reasons. First, it is unclear why a democracy would seek active citizens that were not good or—in 18th-century terms—motivated by virtue. To Carpenter, however, the issue seems to be that republicans favor citizens molded in society's image. Yet the republican tradition was much more robust than what Carpenter portrays. Republicans hold dear the idea of independent citizens capable of acting according to their own understanding of the common good rather than deferring to others. Moreover, the country's founders believed that

education would provide young people the knowledge, capacities, and ethics required to protect liberty from arbitrary power. In other words, the republican tradition has much to offer contemporary democrats (Brown, 1997; Pettit, 1997).

There is some truth to Carpenter's claim that many Founder Fathers worried that ordinary people were not capable of governing themselves. Previous republics had faltered. The Founders' classical training and their knowledge of English history convinced them that the success of their new republican experiment would depend on the willingness of citizens to promote the common good. Yet when Carpenter looks for evidence for this fear, he refers largely to Founding Fathers other than Jefferson, most notably Pennsylvanian Benjamin Rush. When he does turn to Jefferson, Carpenter admits that Jefferson's commitment to locally controlled education in the "ward republic" demonstrated his commitment to an active, participatory citizenry.

Rush did fear the people and seek to make them "good." An advocate of male and female education, Rush famously argued in his essay *Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic* (1798/1987) that "the business of education has acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country" (para. 1). Unlike in a monarchy,

---

JOHANN N. NEEM is associate professor of history at Western Washington University. He is author of *Creating a Nation of Joiners* (2008). He has written several essays on Jefferson's thought, including "'To Diffuse Knowledge More Generally Through the Mass of the People': Thomas Jefferson on Individual Freedom and the Distribution of Knowledge," which appeared in *Light and Liberty: Thomas Jefferson and the Power of Knowledge* (2012).

a republic required all citizens to be educated since they now had a say in governance. Yet Rush worried that the people were not truly capable of living up to society's new expectations. He believed that people needed to be convinced to put the common good ahead of their own. This required an education grounded in the basic tenets of Christianity, which would teach students not only about "the original and natural equality of all mankind" (para. 6) but also to care for others and "in all things to do to others what he would wish, in like circumstances, they should do to him" (para. 6). A good education would correct for the people's flaws by converting them into "republican machines" (para. 7) who, through education, would learn to favor the common good over their own. Rush's ideas were grounded ultimately in his fear that the people, unless educated properly, were not good enough to govern the new republic.

Jefferson did not share Rush's fears. Rush and Jefferson should not be lumped together simply because they both supported public education. Jefferson's starting point was very different from Rush's. Whereas Rush feared mobocracy, Jefferson believed that human corruption—selfishness—was a product of socialization, not nature. To Jefferson, God endowed each human being with reason and the moral sense, and thus the ability to think and to care. Human beings were therefore naturally inclined to live harmoniously in society. "The Creator would indeed have been a bungling artist, had he intended man for a social animal, without planting in him social dispositions," Jefferson wrote in 1814 (Peterson, 1984, p. 1337).

Whereas Carpenter treats Jefferson's education plan as designed for a hierarchical society, Jefferson believed it was a corrupt hierarchical society that had alienated ordinary people from their natural dispositions. Kings, aristocrats, and priests who served their own interests taught people to distrust themselves and to rely instead on those in power (Appleby, 2002). To Jefferson, the primary purpose of education was to put the power of knowledge back into popular hands since knowledge, Jefferson believed, was connected to power. Jefferson distrusted elites much more than he did the people.

Jefferson's education plan for Virginia did, as Carpenter argues, create a pyramid in which the vast majority of Virginian boys and girls would receive a basic education, after which the most meritorious would continue on to higher levels at public expense. Jefferson recognized that more wealthy children would receive a higher education regardless of merit because their parents could afford it. Jefferson's goal was to replace an "artificial aristocracy" of inherited wealth and privilege with a "natural aristocracy" in which society's leaders received their positions based on their own capabilities and commitment to public service and not the financial standing of their parents. This was no small claim then or, unfortunately, today.

Despite the pyramid, Jefferson's primary commitment was to the elementary schools that all White Virginians would attend. For the elementary school level, Jefferson proposed a curriculum that would serve the various needs of all students. Carpenter is correct that Jefferson was deeply concerned with the civic purposes of education, but his proposed curriculum was designed to aid Virginians in their private as well as their public

pursuits. Thus, it was vital to Jefferson that each student had "the information he needs for the transaction of his own business" (Peterson, 1984, p. 459). To Jefferson, the pursuit of private happiness may have been the highest good, but to achieve it required citizens willing to sacrifice their immediate interests for the public good. Citizenship involved protecting liberty from those who would threaten it. Unlike Rush, Jefferson believed that those threats came from above—from rich elites and ministers of the established church.

Carpenter takes from Jefferson's education plan its hierarchical nature but, in doing so, he misses its essence: a radical redistribution of knowledge from the top to the bottom, from the elite few to all the people. Jefferson argued in his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that public education's goal was "to diffuse knowledge more generally through the mass of the people" (Peterson, 1984, p. 271-72). It is helpful here to think of education as a form of capital. Like traditional economic capital—money—cultural capital gives people power in society by allowing them to participate in society in different ways (Bourdieu, 1986). When cultural capital is concentrated among the few, and the majority is kept in ignorance, then the majority lacks the tools necessary to challenge the elites. By ensuring cultural capital was distributed widely within and between generations, Jefferson sought to equip citizens with the knowledge—and thus the power—to protect their liberties from those who threatened them.

It is for this reason that Jefferson was adamantly in favor of local control for public schools. He feared what would happen when control over knowledge was centralized. In 1824, in anticipation of a state constitutional convention, Jefferson urged Virginians to "adopt the subdivision of our counties into wards" of "an average of six miles each" (Peterson, 1984, p. 1492). Each ward would be responsible for its own elementary school, militia company, people in need, roads, police, and jurors. The ward would ideally be "a small republic within itself" (Peterson, 1984, p. 1492). Jefferson sought to increase the capacity of ordinary citizens to govern themselves—and in doing so, to retain control over their lives. He believed so deeply in ward elementary schools that when faced with a proposal that might not include them, he responded with hostility. If ordinary Americans could not be trusted to oversee their schools, what could they be trusted to do? Would the state next take over "the management of our farms, our mills, and merchants' stores?" (Peterson, 1984, p. 1380) To Jefferson, access to education had to be widespread, and to ensure that all citizens had access, he also wanted to ensure that power over knowledge was not concentrated among an elite few.

Carpenter is right that Jefferson's plan did not imagine equal education outcomes and that Jefferson anticipated that only a few meritorious individuals would rise up the education ladder. He is also correct that this assumption reflected the "the world of deferential relationships in which Jefferson grew up" (Rozbicki, 2011; Wood, 1991, Part 1). Jefferson believed in human equality, in the wide distribution of power, and he trusted ordinary people to be the best protectors of their own liberties. He did not imagine that all people were likely to be equally successful in school, and he assumed that those who were

particularly worthy ought to go on to college and become the state's next generation of civic leaders.

Carpenter is incorrect, however, to suggest that this vision was part and parcel of a larger antidemocratic vision. For his time, Jefferson's vision of the wide distribution of access to knowledge was radical—and it remains so. It challenges the claims of those who seek to limit access to high-quality education to those who can afford it. It challenges those who believe that for-profit companies serving Wall Street interests ought to run schools. It also challenges those who argue that education must be controlled by qualified experts rather than by ordinary people.

Carpenter argues that Jefferson did not recognize the importance of social and economic mobility. This is not true. Jefferson designed his policies to ensure social and economic mobility. In the case of education, his elementary schools sought to develop basic economic literacy in addition to civic literacy or, in Jefferson's words, to offer each citizen what "he needs for the transaction of his own business" and to "to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts, in writing" (Peterson, 1984, p. 459). In the case of the natural aristocracy, he would educate them through college at public expense but recognized that they would need additional professional education to be able to earn an adequate income and to have the financial independence to engage in public life. Richer students could retire to their plantations and inherited wealth and would not need to learn a profession (Peterson, 1984, p. 1350).

More important, Jefferson designed his economic policies to offer opportunities for poorer people. In his draft constitution for Virginia, he sought to ensure each Virginian fifty acres of land upon marriage in order to give those couples economic independence. He condemned entails and primogeniture because both allowed an elite few to inherit wealth over generations. He believed instead that "the earth belongs in usufruct to the living" and that the right to property did not extend so far as to justify gross inequalities of wealth. Jefferson also recognized that access to land and education was not enough. To be successful, people needed to be able to make the most of their economic opportunities. He thus encouraged American trade abroad and advocated public investment in "internal improvements" (Peterson, 1984, p. 959–964)—canals and turnpikes—to aid farmers in selling their goods to domestic and foreign markets (Neem, 2013).

For us, Jefferson's democratic credentials break down when they intersect issues of race and gender. Here, Carpenter is right: Jefferson did not embrace what we today would consider the most progressive tendencies of his time. Regarding Black Americans, Jefferson simply refused to believe that they had intellectual abilities equal to White Americans. In fact, he went out of his way to prove that Black Americans were inferior to Whites. In *Notes on the States of Virginia*, Jefferson offered "the conjecture" that Black Americans, while equal in moral capabilities, were "in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid" (Peterson, 1984, p. 266, 268). He never budged from this position (Oakes, 1999).

Jefferson considered Native Americans to be equal to Whites but culturally backward. He believed that White Americans and

Native Americans could be "of the same family" and live in harmony so long as Native Americans would embrace American culture and "become disposed to cultivate the earth, to raise herds of the useful animals, and to spin and weave, for their food and clothing" (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1905, volume 16, pp. 390–391). Native Americans could choose to join the American nation or face having their land taken from them.

In the case of women, Jefferson believed that while women were equal to men, they were designed by nature for the private sphere. A woman's pursuit of happiness would therefore lead to a different life than a man's. He did not speak specifically about female education, but he supported the public education of girls in his proposed elementary schools. He was also deeply involved in educating his daughter Martha. Thomas believed that Martha's education should prepare her to serve the home, including educating her own children. He thus sought to offer Martha a serious education. Nonetheless, Jefferson's proposed public education program would not educate girls beyond the elementary level at public expense, leaving more advanced female education to those who could afford it (Lewis, 1993; Steele, 2008).

While Jefferson thus poses a problem for a multicultural democracy that believes in equal rights for all, we can also see him as one of the first Americans to advocate a publicly funded education that would ensure ordinary people access to the cultural capital once held only by elites. He thought education would prepare Americans both for their public duties and for their private pursuits of happiness. Ultimately, Carpenter is right that Jefferson was a man of his time, but that is exactly why Jefferson remains one of democratic education's founding fathers.

On the one hand, Jefferson is not and could not have been a democrat according to Carpenter's definition. On the other hand, conversations across generations sustain a nation. Jefferson put forth a set of claims that others have invoked and reinterpreted for their own times. There is a reason that we keep returning to him. His contradictions and failings remind us of our own, while his aspirations call us to be the people we hope to be. Perhaps that is why the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted Jefferson in 1963. Housed in both the American and the Christian traditions, King recognized that we are products of and heirs to conversations that precede us and that should continue to inform us. Thus, he argued that the ideal of human equality was "deeply rooted in the American dream" and that he looked forward to the day when America would "live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"

## References

- Appleby, J. (2002). Thomas Jefferson and the psychology of democracy. In J. Horn, J. Lewis, & P. Onuf (Eds.), *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic* (pp. 155–172). Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). New York, NY: Greenwood Press.
- Brown, R. (1997). *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650–1870*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Carpenter, J. (2013). Thomas Jefferson and the ideology of democratic schooling. *Democracy & Education*, 21(2), Article 5.
- Lewis, J. (1993). 'The blessings of domestic society': Thomas Jefferson's family and the transformation of American politics." In P. S. Onuf (Ed.), *Jeffersonian Legacies* (pp. 109–146). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Lipscomb, A., & Bergh, A. E. (1905). *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association.
- Neem, J. (2013). Developing freedom: Thomas Jefferson, the state, and human capability. *Studies in American Political Development*, 27(1), 36–50.
- Oakes, J. (1999). Why slaves can't read: The political significance of Jefferson's Racism. In J. Gilreath (Ed.), *Thomas Jefferson and the Education of a Citizen*. Washington, DC: Library of Congress.
- Peterson, M. (1984). *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*. New York, NY: Library of America.
- Pettit, P. (1997). *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rozbicki, M. J. (2011). *Culture and Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Rush, B. (1798/1987). *Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*. In P. Kurland & R. Lerner (Eds.) *The Founders' Constitution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Retrieved from <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s3o.html>
- Steele, B. (2008). Thomas Jefferson's gender frontier. *Journal of American History*, 95, 17–42.
- Wood, G. S. (1991). *Radicalism of the American Revolution*. New York, NY: Knopf.