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## A FORTUNATE SON

*It is the strong in body who are both the strong and free in mind.*

—PETER JEFFERSON, the father of Thomas Jefferson

HE WAS THE KIND OF MAN people noticed. An imposing, prosperous, well-liked farmer known for his feats of strength and his capacity for endurance in the wilderness, Peter Jefferson had amassed large tracts of land and scores of slaves in and around what became Albemarle County, Virginia. There, along the Rivanna, he built Shadwell, named after the London parish where his wife, Jane, had been baptized.

The first half of the eighteenth century was a thrilling time to be young, white, male, wealthy, and Virginian. Money was to be made, property to be claimed, tobacco to be planted and sold. There were plenty of ambitious men about—men with the boldness and the drive to create farms, build houses, and accumulate fortunes in land and slaves in the wilderness of the mid-Atlantic.

As a surveyor and a planter, Peter Jefferson thrived there, and his eldest son, Thomas, born on April 13, 1743, understood his father was a man other men admired.

Celebrated for his courage, Peter Jefferson excelled at riding and hunting. His son recalled that the father once single-handedly pulled down a wooden shed that had stood impervious to the exertions of three slaves who had been ordered to destroy the building. On another occasion, Peter was said to have uprighted two huge hogsheads of tobacco that weighed a thousand pounds each—a remarkable, if mythical, achievement.

The father's standing mattered greatly to the son, who remembered him in a superlative and sentimental light. "The tradition in my father's family was that their ancestor came to this country from Wales, and from near the mountain of Snowden, the highest in Great Britain," Jefferson wrote. The connection to Snowden (the modern spelling) was the only detail of the Jeffersons' old-world origins known to pass from generation to generation. Everything else about the ancient roots of the paternal clan slipped into the mists, save for this: that they came from a place of height and of distinction—if not of birth, then of strength.

Thomas Jefferson was his father's son. He was raised to wield power. By example and perhaps explicitly he was taught that to be great—to be heeded—one had to grow comfortable with authority and with responsibility. An able student and eager reader, Jefferson was practical as well as scholarly, resourceful as well as analytical.

Jefferson learned the importance of endurance and improvisation early, and he learned it the way his father wanted him to: through action, not theory. At age ten, Thomas was sent into the woods alone, with a gun. The assignment—the *expectation*—was that he was to come home with evidence that he could survive on his own in the wild.

The test did not begin well. He killed nothing, had nothing to show for himself. The woods were forbidding. Everything around the boy—the trees and the thickets and the rocks and the river—was frightening and frustrating.

He refused to give up or give in. He soldiered on until his luck finally changed. "Finding a wild turkey caught in a pen," the family story went, "he tied it with his garter to a tree, shot it, and carried it home in triumph."

The trial in the forest foreshadowed much in Jefferson's life. When stymied, he learned to press forward. Presented with an unexpected opening, he figured out how to take full advantage. Victorious, he enjoyed his success.

Jefferson was taught by his father and mother, and later by his teachers and mentors, that a gentleman owed service to his family, to his neighborhood, to his county, to his colony, and to his king. An eldest

son in the Virginia of his time grew up expecting to lead—and to be followed. Thomas Jefferson came of age with the confidence that controlling the destinies of others was the most natural thing in the world. He was born for command. He never knew anything else.

The family had immigrated to Virginia from England in 1612, and in the New World they had moved quickly toward prosperity and respectability. A Jefferson was listed among the delegates of an assembly convened at Jamestown in 1619. The future president's great-grandfather was a planter who married the daughter of a justice in Charles City County and speculated in land at Yorktown. He died about 1698, leaving an estate of land, slaves, furniture, and livestock. His son, the future president's grandfather, rose further in colonial society, owning a racehorse and serving as sheriff and justice of the peace in Henrico County. He kept a good house, in turn leaving his son, Peter Jefferson, silver spoons and a substantial amount of furniture. As a captain of the militia, Thomas Jefferson's grandfather once hosted Colonel William Byrd II, one of Virginia's greatest men, for a dinner of roast beef and persico wine.

Born in Chesterfield County in 1708, Peter Jefferson built on the work of his fathers. Peter, with Joshua Fry, professor of mathematics at the College of William and Mary, drew the first authoritative map of Virginia and ran the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina, an achievement all the more remarkable given Peter Jefferson's intellectual background. "My father's education had been quite neglected; but being of a strong mind, sound judgment and eager after information," Thomas Jefferson wrote, "he read much and improved himself." Self taught, Peter Jefferson became a colonel of the militia, vestryman, and member of the Virginia House of Burgesses.

On that expedition to fix the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina, the father proved himself a hero of the frontier. Working their way across the Blue Ridge, Peter Jefferson and his colleagues fought off "the attacks of wild beasts during the day, and at night found but a broken rest, sleeping—as they were obliged to do for safety—in trees," as a family chronicler wrote.

Low on food, exhausted, and faint, the band faltered—save for Jefferson, who subsisted on the raw flesh of animals (“or whatever could be found to sustain life,” as the family story had it) until the job was done.

Thomas Jefferson grew up with an image—and, until Peter Jefferson’s death when his son was fourteen, the reality—of a father who was powerful, who could do things other men could not, and who, through the force of his will or of his muscles or of both at once, could tangibly transform the world around him. Surveyors defined new worlds; explorers conquered the unknown; mapmakers brought form to the formless. Peter Jefferson was all three and claimed a central place in the imagination of his son, who admired his father’s strength and spent a lifetime recounting tales of the older man’s daring. Thomas Jefferson, a great-granddaughter said, “never wearied of dwelling with all the pride of filial devotion and admiration on the noble traits” of his father’s character. The father had shaped the ways other men lived. The son did all he could to play the same role in the lives of others.

Peter Jefferson had married very well, taking a bride from Virginia’s leading family. In 1739, he wed Jane Randolph, a daughter of Isham Randolph, a planter and sea captain. Born in London in 1721, Jane Randolph was part of her father’s household at Dungeness in Goochland County, a large establishment with walled gardens.

The Randolph family traced its colonial origins to Henry Randolph, who emigrated from England in 1642. Marrying a daughter of the Speaker of the House of Burgesses, Henry Randolph thrived in Virginia, holding office in Henrico County and serving as clerk of the House of Burgesses. Returning home to England in 1669, he apparently prevailed on a young nephew, William, to make the journey to Virginia.

William Randolph, Thomas Jefferson’s great-grandfather, thus came to the New World at some point between 1669 and 1674; accounts differ. He, too, rose in Virginia with little delay, taking his uncle’s place as Henrico clerk and steadily acquiring vast acreage. An ally of Sir William Berkeley, the British governor, William Randolph soon prospered in shipping, raising tobacco, and slave trading.

William became known for his family seat on Turkey Island in the James River, which was described as “a splendid mansion.” With his wife, Mary Isham Randolph, the daughter of the master of a plantation called Bermuda Hundred, William had ten children, nine of whom survived. The Randolphs “are so numerous that they are obliged, like the clans of Scotland, to be distinguished by their places of residence,” noted Thomas Anburey, an English visitor to Virginia in 1779–80. As the Randolph historian Josephus Daniels noted, there was William of Chatsworth; Thomas of Tuckahoe; Sir John of Tazewell Hall, Williamsburg; Richard of Curles Neck; Henry of Longfield; Edward of Bremono. And there was Isham of Dungeness, who was Jefferson’s maternal grandfather.

As a captain and a merchant, Jefferson’s grandfather moved between the New and Old Worlds. About 1717, he married an Englishwoman, Jane Rogers, who was thought to be a “pretty sort of woman.” They lived in London and at their Goochland County estate in Virginia.

In 1737, a merchant described Thomas Jefferson’s grandfather’s family as “a very gentle, well-dressed people.” Jefferson’s mother, Jane, was a daughter of this house and had an apparent sense of pride in her British ancestry. She was said to have descended from “the powerful Scotch Earls of Murray, connected by blood or alliance with many of the most distinguished families in the English and Scotch peerage, and with royalty itself.”

The family of William Byrd II—he was to build Westover, a beautiful Georgian plantation mansion on the James River south of Richmond—had greater means than the Jeffersons, but the description of a typical day for Byrd in February 1711 gives a sense of what life was like for the Virginia elite in the decades before the birth of Thomas Jefferson.

I rose at 6 o’clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Lucian. I said my prayers and ate boiled milk for breakfast. I danced my dance [exercised] and then went to the brick house to see my people pile the planks and found them all idle for which I threatened them soundly but did not whip them. The weather was cold and the wind at northeast. I wrote a letter to England. Then I read some English till 12 o’clock when Mr.

Dunn and his wife came. I ate boiled beef for dinner. In the afternoon Mr. Dunn and I played at billiards. Then we took a long walk about the plantation and looked over all my business. . . . At night I ate some bread and cheese.

Whether in the Tidewater regions closer to the Atlantic or in the forested hills of the Blue Ridge, the Virginia into which Jefferson was born offered lives of privilege to its most fortunate sons.

Visiting Virginia and Maryland, an English traveler observed “the youth of these more indulgent settlements . . . are pampered much more in softness and ease than their neighbors more northward.” Children were instructed in music and taught to dance, including minuets and what were called “country-dances.” One tutor described such lessons at Nomini Hall, the Carter family estate roughly one hundred miles east of Albemarle. The scene of young Virginians dancing, he said, “was indeed beautiful to admiration, to see such a number of young persons, set off by dress to the best advantage, moving easily, to the sound of well-performed music, and with perfect regularity.”

Thomas Jefferson was such a youth, and he grew up as the eldest son of a prosperous, cultured, and sophisticated family. They dined with silver, danced with grace, entertained constantly.

His father worked in his study on the first floor of the house—it was one of four rooms on that level—at a cherry desk. Peter Jefferson’s library included Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison, and Paul de Rapin-Thoyras’s *History of England*. “When young, I was passionately fond of reading books of history, and travels,” Thomas Jefferson wrote. Of note were George Anson’s *Voyage Round the World* and John Ogilby’s *America*, both books that offered the young Jefferson literary passage to larger worlds. A grandson recalled Jefferson’s saying that “from the time when, as a boy, he had turned off wearied from play and first found pleasure in books, he had never sat down in idleness.”

It was a world of leisure for well-off white Virginians. “My father had a devoted friend to whose house he would go, dine, spend the night,

dine with him again on the second day, and return to Shadwell in the evening,” Jefferson recalled. “His friend, in the course of a day or two, returned the visit, and spent the same length of time at his house. This occurred once every week; and thus, you see, they were together four days out of the seven.” The food was good and plentiful, the drink strong and bracing, the company cheerful and familiar.

Jefferson believed his first memory was of being handed up to a slave on horseback and carried, carefully, on a pillow for a long journey: an infant white master being cared for by someone whose freedom was not his own. Jefferson was two or three at the time. On that trip the family was bound for Tuckahoe, a Randolph estate about fifty miles east of Shadwell. Tuckahoe’s master, Jane Randolph Jefferson’s cousin William Randolph, had just died. A widower, William Randolph had asked Peter Jefferson, his “dear and loving friend,” to come to Tuckahoe in the event of his death and raise Randolph’s three children there, and Peter Jefferson did so. (William Randolph and Peter Jefferson had been so close that Peter Jefferson had once purchased four hundred acres of land—the ultimate site of Shadwell—from Randolph. The price: “Henry Weatherbourne’s biggest bowl of arrack [rum] punch!”)

The Jeffersons would stay on the Randolph place for seven years, from the time William Randolph died, when Thomas was two or three, until Thomas was nine or ten.

Peter Jefferson, who apparently received his and his family’s living expenses from the Randolph estate (which he managed well), used the years at Tuckahoe to discharge his duty to his dead friend while his own Albemarle fields were being cleared. This was the era of many of Peter Jefferson’s expeditions, which meant he was away from home for periods of time, leaving his wife and the combined Randolph and Jefferson families at Tuckahoe.

The roots of the adult Jefferson’s dislike of personal confrontation may lie partly in the years he spent at Tuckahoe as a member of a large combined family. Though the eldest son of Peter and Jane Jefferson, Thomas was spending some formative years in a house not his own. Thomas Mann Randolph was two years older than he was, and this

Thomas Randolph was the heir of the Tuckahoe property. Whether such distinctions manifested themselves when the children were so young is unknowable, but Jefferson emerged from his childhood devoted to avoiding conflict at just about any cost. It is possible his years at Tuckahoe set him on a path toward favoring comity over controversy in face-to-face relations.

It was also at Tuckahoe that Thomas Jefferson, as he grew into childhood, first consciously encountered the complexities of life in slave-owning Virginia. Decades later, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he wrote: “The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. . . . The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities.”

Tuckahoe was the scene of another small childhood moment. Anxious for school to be over, Thomas slipped away, hid, and repeated the Lord’s Prayer in hopes of hastening the end of school. His prayer went unanswered. He would come to believe that orthodox Christianity was not all it was said to be.

In 1752, the Jeffersons moved back to Shadwell. Five years later, in 1757, Peter Jefferson died. The father was 49, and Thomas, fourteen, was propelled into the role, if not the reality, of man of the house. He did not recall the sudden transition fondly. “At 14 years of age the whole care and direction of myself was thrown on my self entirely, without a relative or friend qualified to advise or guide me,” he later wrote to a grandson.

There would be no more evenings spent in the first-floor study, looking over maps, listening to tales of brave expeditions, tinkering with the tools of surveying, discussing Shakespeare or *The Spectator*. Those hours with his father were now to live only in memory, with the image of Peter Jefferson before him, inspiring and daunting.

Shadwell was to be dominated by Thomas's mother, Jane Randolph Jefferson, who almost certainly exerted as great an influence on her eldest son as the legend of Peter Jefferson did—but in subtler ways.

To all appearances, Jane ran things as she saw fit. Literate, social, fond of cultivated things—from fancy plate and crockery to well-made furniture to fine clothing—she was to endure the death of a husband, cope with the deaths of children, and remain in control to the end, immersed in the universe around her and in the lives of those she loved.

That her eldest son grew to become just such an unflinching, resilient aristocrat is no surprise. Thomas Jefferson's bravery in the face of domestic tragedy and his determination to have his own way on his own land among his own people could owe something to the example of a mother from whom he learned much about negotiating the storms of life.

On the death of her husband Jane Jefferson became both mistress and master at Shadwell. At the age of thirty-seven she was the mother of eight surviving children—the oldest, Jane, was seventeen; Thomas was fourteen; the youngest were two-year-old twins. Her great-great-granddaughter later reported a family tradition that Mrs. Jefferson was “a woman of a clear and strong understanding.” She would have to have been in order to manage her children and the complexities of Shadwell, with its sixty-six slaves and at least 2,750 acres (which included the thousand-acre tract that became Monticello). From the family Bible that has survived from Shadwell, Jane Jefferson emerges as a meticulous record keeper (a habit her son inherited).

There was death and fire and family tragedy. One of Jane's eight children—Thomas's sister Elizabeth—appears to have been disabled. “The most fortunate of us all in our journey through life frequently meet with calamities and misfortunes which may greatly afflict us,” Jefferson once wrote, and “to fortify our minds against the attacks of these calamities and misfortunes should be one of the principal studies and endeavors of our lives.”

As a woman wielding authority over her family, her hired laborers, and her slaves, Mrs. Jefferson probably developed a fine tactical sense. “She was an agreeable, intelligent woman, as well educated as the other Virginia ladies of the day, of her own elevated rank in society . . .

and . . . she was a notable housekeeper,” wrote a great-granddaughter. “She possessed a most amiable and affectionate disposition, a lively, cheerful temper, and a great fund of humor. She was fond of writing, particularly letters, and wrote readily and well.”

Jane Jefferson came from a family that did not doubt its place, and her husband had often been away when he was alive, leaving her to run things in his absence at both Tuckahoe and Shadwell. That Jane Jefferson was a determined woman can be further deduced from the fact that she rebuilt Shadwell after it burned in 1770 rather than moving. It was her world in the way Monticello became her son’s, and she sought to arrange reality as she wanted it to be.

In an autobiographical sketch he began when he was seventy-seven, Jefferson talked of his mother only in relation to his father. Of Peter Jefferson, Thomas wrote: “He was born February 29th, 1708, and intermarried 1739 with Jane Randolph, of the age of 19, daughter of Isham Randolph, one of the seven sons of that name and family settled at Dungeness in Goochland.” After describing his father’s surveying and mapmaking, Thomas wrote: “He died August 17th, 1757, leaving my mother a widow who lived till 1776, with six daughters and two sons, myself the elder.”

Except for a brief mention in a letter to a Randolph relative in England several months after her death and for a notation of his paying a clergyman for conducting her funeral, Mrs. Jefferson is absent from the surviving written record of her son’s life.

Letters between the two burned in the Shadwell fire of 1770, and Jefferson apparently destroyed any subsequent correspondence. Generations of biographers have speculated that Jefferson and his mother were somehow estranged. Yet Jefferson chose to live in proximity to her for many of the nineteen years that she survived her husband—long into Jefferson’s adulthood. Mrs. Jefferson did not die until 1776, the year her son, at age thirty-three, authored the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson made his home at Shadwell while he was away at school and during his early years of law practice. The first was to be expected, but to have headquartered himself after college, as a young lawyer, in what he called “my mother’s house,” is a sign that things between them were not hopelessly hostile, and may not have been hostile

at all. He did not move to Monticello, his “little mountain,” until November 1770, when the Shadwell fire upended the family’s domestic arrangements. The rebuilt house at Shadwell would be much smaller than the original.

Jefferson, in any event, always enjoyed the company of women. His most intimate friend among his siblings was his elder sister, also named Jane. Born in 1740, the first child of Peter and Jane, the younger Jane was reported to have been her younger brother’s “constant companion when at home, and the confidant of all his youthful feelings.”

They indulged common passions for the woods and for music. Jane sang hymns for her brother, and together they would sing psalms, and “many a winter evening, round the family fireside, and many a soft summer twilight, on the wooded banks of the Rivanna, heard their voices, accompanied by the notes of his violin, thus ascending together.” He paid her the highest of compliments: “He ever regarded her as fully his own equal in understanding.”

At nine years old, Thomas was sent to study classics and French with the Reverend William Douglas, rector of St. James Northam Parish near Tuckahoe in Goochland County. For five years, excepting only the summers, Thomas lived with Douglas. The mature Jefferson later thought Douglas “but a superficial Latinist, less instructed in Greek, but with the rudiments of these languages he taught me French.”

Later Jefferson boarded with the Reverend James Maury, whom he described as “a correct classical scholar.” Maury did splendidly by Jefferson, grounding him in the classics and giving him a sense of order. Jefferson warmly recalled his years with Maury, both at study and at play. Much later in life, in a letter to Maury’s son, Jefferson said that should they meet again they “would beguile our lingering hours with talking over our youthful exploits, our hunts . . . and feel, by recollection at least, a momentary flash of youth.”

One source of his happiness at Maury’s school was Dabney Carr, a fellow student who became the central friend of Jefferson’s youth. Born in 1743—the same year as Jefferson—Carr came from Louisa County. The two young men shared a love of literature, learning, and

the landscape of their Virginia neighborhood. When at Shadwell, they took the books they happened to be reading and climbed through the woods of the mountain Jefferson later called Monticello, talking and thinking together, coming to rest at the base of an oak near the summit. There, Jefferson and Carr read their books and spoke of many things. To Jefferson, Dabney Carr was the best of friends, and their minds took flight with each other. No man, Jefferson recalled later, had “more of the milk of human kindness, of indulgence, of softness, of pleasantry of conversation and conduct.” In the way of young friendships, there was an intensity and a seriousness—a sense that their lives were linked, their shared hours sacred. They made a pact. Whoever survived the other was to bury the one to die first beneath the favored oak.

At school James Maury cultivated Jefferson’s engagement with the literature, history, and philosophy of the ancients. In a *Dissertation on Education* written in 1762, Maury explained that the classics were not for everyone—but they were for a young man like Jefferson. “An acquaintance with the languages, anciently spoken in Greece and Italy, is necessary, absolutely necessary, for those who wish to make any reputable figure in divinity, medicine, or law,” Maury wrote. Greek and Latin were also critical for men who might take places in society “to which the privilege of birth, the voice of their country, or the choice of their prince may call them.”

Jefferson valued his education—and education in general—above all things, remarking that, given the choice, he would take the classical training his father arranged for him over the estate his father left him.

Thomas Jefferson was nearly seventeen when he arrived for the 1759–60 holidays at Chatsworth, his mother’s cousin Peter Randolph’s house on the James near the ancestral Turkey Island plantation. During the visit, Peter Randolph advised Jefferson to enroll at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, the wisest step beyond the Reverend Maury’s tutelage in classical studies. “By going to the College,” Jefferson wrote, “I shall get a more universal acquaintance which may hereafter be serviceable to me. . . . [and] I can pursue

my studies in the Greek and Latin as well there as here, and likewise learn something of the mathematics.”

The standards for admission to William and Mary were not onerous. 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.”

Jefferson was neither, and so he left Albemarle County in 1760, bound for Williamsburg. The capital of Virginia, it was home to the House of Burgesses, to theaters, to taverns—and to a circle of men who would change Jefferson’s life forever.