A Founding Father: Honoring Thomas Jefferson

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As the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson oversaw the Louisiana Purchase, authorized the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and wrote the Declaration of Independence.

Explore the life and contributions of Thomas Jefferson, and celebrate the birthday of this extraordinary historic figure with activities that teach his biography, and look at his tenure as President.

Grades 3-5

Exploring Thomas Jefferson's Timeline

Introduce your students to Thomas Jefferson by reading the book "Who was Thomas Jefferson?" by Dennis Brindell Fradin and Nancy Harrison. Discuss how Jefferson grew up on his family's plantation in Virginia, and how he was from a family of ten children. Talk about why people called him "Mr. Mammoth" and the death of his wife. Highlight important events like how he wrote the Declaration of Independence, and how he is portrayed on the U.S. nickel and Mount Rushmore. Once students have a firm grasp of Jefferson's backstory, have them draw a portrait of Jefferson and write two important facts about him under his picture.

A Day in the Life of Thomas Jefferson

Have students get a glimpse of what a typical day was like for Thomas Jefferson by visiting the Monticello website. Here, they can read about how Jefferson recorded the daily temperature, toured his beautiful gardens, and dined on rice soup and fried eggs. They can also view photographs of his house, farm, and sanctum sanctorum (suite of rooms). The best way to accomplish this task is to group students into pairs, and have each group explore the website to answer specific questions. Here are a few questions you can ask:

1. What was the first thing Thomas Jefferson did when he awoke?
2. What is a "turning machine"?
3. What did Jefferson use to write his letters?
4. What meals did Jefferson eat? Where were they served?
5. Where did Jefferson's slaves live and work?

You can also assign each group a different time of day, and ask them to research what Jefferson did at that particular time, and report it to the class.

Create a Jefferson Biography Cube

A great way for students to learn (and remember facts) about an important historical figure is to create a biography cube. ReadWriteThink.org makes it easy to create a bio cube because all
you have to do is type in the information right on the website, and then you can print it out. Before you start, have students plan what they are going to write on their cube. You can print out a planning sheet right from the website which prompts students to provide brief information, such as the person's name, time period, place, background, personality traits, significance, obstacles, and important quotes. This guide will help them organize their thoughts and be prepared to type in the final information. Students can then use their cube to help them study for a test, or as a reference for another activity.

**Cracking the Code**

Thomas Jefferson was more than just a President; he was an innovator and an inventor. According to the [library of Congress](https://www.loc.gov), Thomas Jefferson was fascinated by secret codes. During the American Revolution Jefferson created the wheel cipher to write secret messages. To begin this lesson, share a [photograph](https://www.loc.gov) of a real coded message. Group students together and have them try and figure out the pattern. While some groups are working on deciphering the pattern, direct the students who think they may have cracked the code, to the [Monticello website](https://www.mount vernon .org) where they can send and decipher a message right online.

**Thomas Jefferson's Ice Cream Recipe**

Thomas Jefferson had a love for food. Among his favorites was vanilla ice cream. His recipe called for only four ingredients: heavy cream, eggs, vanilla bean, and sugar. While it sounds like it may be an easy recipe to make, its actual preparation is much more detailed. For this activity, you are going to challenge your students to try and re-create Jefferson's ice cream recipe. To begin you must first give your students the history. List the following bullet points on the front board:

- Ice cream was harvested from the Rivanna River and taken to the Monticello ice house.
- The ice house held sixty two wagon loads.
- The ice house was used to preserve milk, butter, chill wine, and make ice cream.
- The first American ice cream recipe recorded was written from Thomas Jefferson.

Next, place students into small groups and provide them with a printout of the recipe (which can be found on the [Monticello website](https://www.mount vernon .org)). Then, provide them with the materials and supplies to begin making the ice cream. (Tip: Use the modern version of the recipe)

*Do you have a great idea or activity that will help other teachers explore the achievements of Thomas Jefferson? Share it with us!*