

Station 1:

Is Thomas Jefferson any less great because the understanding we have of him now is three-dimensional?

"Most human beings I know are quite capable of denial and hypocrisy," said Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jon Meacham. "I think Jefferson's virtues were enormous, and his vices were equally enormous."

Meacham has just published a best-selling biography of our third president: "Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power" (Random House).

"Looked at in full, you find a man whose life was made possible by slavery, who had misgivings, who as a young man attempted, however feebly, to reform the institution," said Meacham. But in the end, Jefferson "allowed himself to be trapped by the economic, political and cultural circumstances into which he was born."

Taken from "Jefferson's irony: Voice of liberty, slaveowner"

CBS News, December 2012

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/jeffersons-irony-voice-of-liberty-slave-owner/>

Station 2:

Jefferson's defenders assert that Jefferson should be judged by the standards of his own time rather than ours, and that by the standards of his time, Jefferson was a pioneering critic of slavery and a relatively benign** slave owner.

It is true that Jefferson was a pioneering critic of slavery and deserves credit for his protest of the institution. He also had a hand in prohibiting slavery in the Northwest Territory and ending the slave trade to the United States. But he must also be held to account for adding insult to injury through his equally pioneering articulation of racist ideas and policies. If we truly believe that slavery is wrong, then the only truly benign slave owners were the ones who freed their slaves, and not just the ones they had fathered.

Jefferson's critics often dismiss him as a mere hypocrite, a man who said one thing and did another. Jefferson's actions speak louder than his words; indeed they draw out his words in a deafening crash of bad faith, broken promises, and racism. Although there is no disputing Jefferson's hypocrisy, this criticism does not take us very far toward understanding the man, nor the trap that he and his fellow slave owners had fallen into, nor the specific measures that he advocated to get out of it.

Taken from:
Seeing Jefferson Anew, In His Time and Ours
edited by John B. Boles and Randal L. Hall

Station 3:

By the time Martha had agreed to marry him the construction of Monticello was well under way, and Jefferson's determination to become a successful planter was presumably irrevocable. This meant, regrettably, that Thomas Jefferson was doomed to be a slaveholder—for slave labor was the backbone of this enterprise. It was the only readily available source of cheap and controllable labor for raising tobacco and cotton the huge plantations of Virginia and the Deep South, and these were the principal products of this region. Thus the lavish lifestyle of the white elite was inseparably dependent on black muscle and sweat.

Some people wonder how a man who professes freedom and liberty could adapt to a position of slaveownership. The answer in part is that he didn't have to adapt: he had been born into the culture of slavery, and knew from earliest memory how it all worked; it was as familiar to him as blue sky and green grass. Once it had become necessary to his livelihood, moreover, he practiced it with a great deal of composure and few outward signs of guilt, regardless of the inner doubts and turmoil that it caused him.

Burdened with a huge debt by the time of his death in 1826, he could not, as George Washington did, arrange that they should all go free; as we have seen, only a few of the privileged Hemings family were granted that boon. Less than a year later, his grandson Thomas Jefferson Randolph put all the rest—130 men, women, and children—up for auction. They brought good prices.

Looking at Thomas Jefferson in action as a plantation operator at least offers some consolation to a person disturbed by the fact of his having been a slaveholder: it becomes clear why, if he was going to be the one, he had to be the other.

Through all of this, Jefferson never gave up his conviction that slavery was an evil that must eventually be wiped out. On the personal level, however, he seems to have accepted complacently that he was destined to live out his days as a slaveholder. The slaves, he pointed out to a correspondent in 1814, in addition to being well fed and given decent shelter, "have the comfort of numerous families in the midst of whom they live without want or fear of it, a solace which few laborers of England possess." It sounded almost enviable.

Taken from:
Understanding Thomas Jefferson, E.M. Halliday

Station 4:

Jefferson's attitude toward slavery and his lack of any serious commitment to emancipation reflects his upbringing, class origins, and lifelong status as a wealthy landowner, slave owner, and southern aristocrat.

We must compare him to his peers—the intellectual, political, and cultural leaders of his generation—and not to his Virginia neighbors. After the revolution many Europeans and Americans turned to Jefferson for answers, encouragement, and moral support in the struggle against human bondage. They were usually disappointed. Jefferson told his correspondents to look to the future, wait for the next generation to take control, or hope that diffusion, population growth, or some other natural process would solve the problem.

Delay and avoidance were the hallmarks of Jefferson's proposals to end slavery. He often spoke of the need for abolition, but asserted the time was not right. Always a colonization-ist, Jefferson could not conceive of emancipation without expatriation, which he conceded was impossible on any significant scale.

Truly, Jefferson missed the point. He had proclaimed the natural rights of all people included life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. In half the nation, a growing number of white people were coming to believe that “all” included nonwhites. Since the Revolution, the world had been looking to Jefferson to take the lead on the issue. All his life he had lived in personal and political denial: the problem wasn't there, the problem would go away, the next generation would deal with it, the inferiority of blacks made the problem insoluble. By 1820 some Americans, who had read Jefferson only too well, were beginning to confront the contradiction of slavery in the land of the free.

Yes, there had been “treason against the hopes of the world”—treason by that generation that failed to place the nation on the road to liberty for all. No one bore a greater responsibility for that failure than the author of the Declaration of Independence—the Master of Monticello.

Taken from:
Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson, Third Edition,
Paul Finkelman

Station 5:

Next to land, slaves constituted the largest property interest in the country, far larger than manufacturing and shipping combined. Truly, one of the main pillars of the world of Thomas Jefferson was black slavery

Compared with many of his fellow patriots, Jefferson was a radical revolutionary: revolutions, he said were not made with rose water, and the purpose of a revolution was not to dispense sweetness and light but to effect needed changes in the existing social, political, and economic structure. Especially in the privileged circles of society in which Jefferson moved, it was difficult to find anyone who did not own slaves.

Jefferson's perception of slavery was determined by several ambivalent circumstances: he was a planter slaveowner, a Virginia whose strongest allegiance, when the test came, was to his state and section. He was never able to cast aside the prejudices and the fears which he had absorbed from his surroundings toward people of color; he did not free himself from dependence of slave labor; and in the end, he made the expansion of slavery into the territories a constitutional right.

The Declaration of Independence, in sum, while it asserts the right of white Americans to rebel against attempts to reduce them to "slavery," denies inferentially, in the context of the events of 1775-1776, the right of black slaves to rebel against their masters in order to attain freedom. It is accounted a major crime against American freedom for the king to have incited an insurrection among a people whose experience of the tyranny of slavery was real and palpable against those whites who, in the words of Edmund Burke, merely "snuffed tyranny in every tainted breeze" and who rebelled even before they actually felt the lash.

Taken from:
The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery,
John Chester Miller

