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THOMAS JEFFERSON: *Friend of Alexandria*

by Thomas B. Worsley

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This year's countless commemorations of Thomas Jefferson have included many speeches by more famous persons than the one to whom you're listening. On Jefferson's 250th birthday, April 13, however, I spoke at a breakfast meeting of the Alexandria Sunrise Optimist Club at Belle Haven when I emphasized his living legacies to America and mankind.

Speaking to that group also gave me an opening to say that Jefferson, too, was a sunrise optimist all his life. He arose at daybreak and was such an unsinkable optimist that his top biographer, Dumas Malone, thought him unrealistic.

Tonight the focus of my talk will be on Mr. Jefferson's relationships with our town and with very prominent citizens who

also called this their home town, relationships generally friendly but with strong exceptions and fluctuations. First, I will discuss his dealings with our area during successive phases of his career and then will cover his relations with individuals.

As Governor of Virginia during the American Revolution, an executive of very limited authority, the industrious Jefferson was concerned about the safety of shipping at the port of Alexandria. In November 1780 he wrote a member of the General Assembly that he had in mind placing two or four cannon at such principal ports. Soon afterward a British privateer tried to capture a Baltimore ship moored at Alexandria but was itself captured. This incident induced Fairfax County Clerk

Peter Wagener to borrow two nine pounders and two barrels of gunpowder from the Governor of Maryland and to inform Governor Jefferson thereof.

Alexandria Mayor James Hendricks spearheaded additional defensive measures in collaboration with Governor Jefferson. These were concluded in May 1781, when a fort and blockhouse were constructed, probably at Jones Point.

One nine-pounder and three twelve-pounders were mounted on carriages at the expense of private citizens who apparently were reimbursed by the state. The Governor also dispatched a Colonel Senf, said to be a skilled engineer, to oversee the work.

Mayor Hendricks was also a Quartermaster Colonel. As such he had great difficulty procuring supplies in the Alexandria area. One reason was that hyperinflation had made paper money worthless and unacceptable to merchants and farmers, whereas such suppliers could obtain hard currency from the French Commissary Department. The American forces under General Lafayette had to confiscate supplies from the local populace; Lafayette complained to Jefferson that "not a single wagon could be procured in Alexandria."

In March 1784, when Jefferson was a member of the Confederation Congress, another of his actions was intended to benefit our area. He wrote George Washington, who had resigned his military commission and retired to Mount Vernon (his "Vine and Fig Tree") only three months before, to urge him to renew the Potomac Canal and Navigation Project.

Before the Revolution had interrupted his plans, Washington's dream was to unify America's East and West -- both politically and economically--through improved navigation of the Potomac. Alexandria -- near the fall line -- would become The metropolis of America, as New York actually did with the opening of the Erie Canal.

Jefferson's letter described the rivalry between the Hudson and the Potomac for commerce from the west, and Alexandria's great advantage over New York in mileage from the Ohio area. He said "Nature has declared in favor of the Potomac...but unfortunately the channel for the Hudson is already open...ours is still to be opened. You are retired from public life...but would the Superintendence of this work break in too much on the sweets of retirement? What a monument to your retirement it would become!"

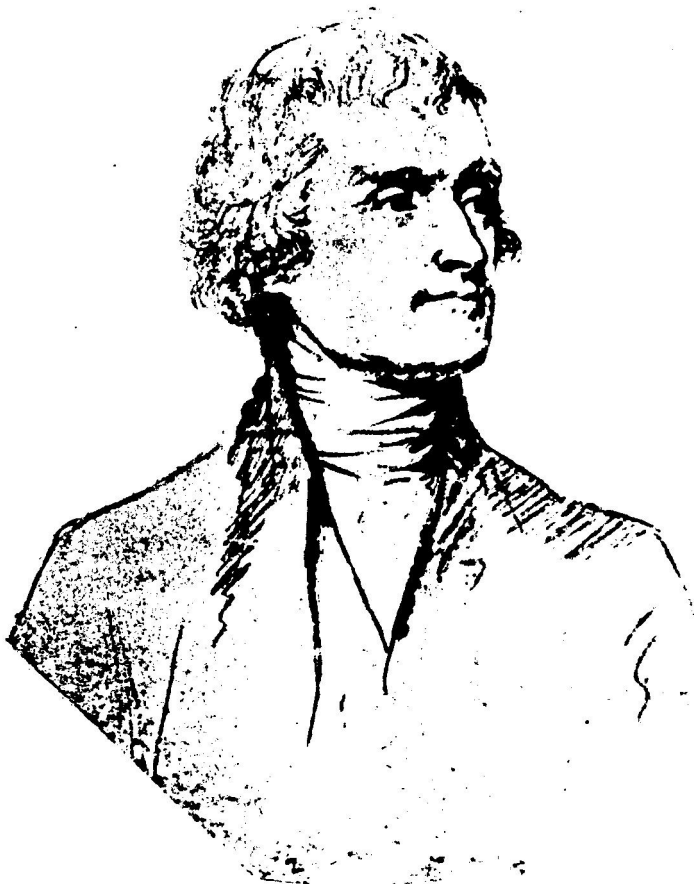
In May 1785, the following year, Washington chaired the organizational meeting of the Patomack Company at Lomax Tavern in Alexandria. He became its first president and remained so until he became President of the United State four years later.

In May 1784 Jefferson was named Minister Plenipotentiary to join Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, already in Paris, on a commission to negotiate the treaties of amity and commerce with European nations. Later he became sole minister to the Court of Louis XVI of France, and did not a return to America until November 1789. During his service overseas he had worked to remove European barriers to imports from America.

In correspondence with James Madison from Paris, he had also applauded the Virginia General Assembly's establishment of Alexandria as one of the state's four international ports of entry, Norfolk being the principal competitor. To James Monroe he wrote, "It is not amiss to encourage Alexandria, because it is a rival in the very bosom of Baltimore." To Gilles de La Vallee, a Frenchman who planned to emigrate to America, he wrote, "General Washington being at the head of the great works carrying on towards clearing the Potomac, I have no doubt but that work will be completed... Alexandria on the Potomac will probably become a very great place."

In March 1790, Jefferson proceeded to Alexandria from Monticello while enroute to New York to begin his new duties as America's first Secretary of State. Alexandria's Mayor, William Hunter, welcomed him to the area and congratulated him on his return; thanked him for what he had done in France for American

commerce; took note of what Jefferson had already done for freedom; and expressed high hopes for Jefferson's influence in deciding the fate of republican forms of government under the recently adopted U.S. Constitution. In thanking the Mayor and "worthy citizens of Alexandria" Jefferson said that thanks for his services should really go to the friendly French nation.



President Thomas Jefferson

While Secretary of State, Jefferson's greatest service specific to the Alexandria and Potomac area occurred in 1790, when he presided over the great log-rolling compromise with Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, which decided the permanent location of the national capital. If you remember, Hamilton promoted assumption of state Revolutionary War debts by the new central government, but there was strong sectional disagreement on the issue. Virginia, the largest southern state, had already paid most of its war

debts. Its people were outraged at the idea of paying federal taxes to bail out delinquent northern states like Massachusetts. Furthermore, northern speculators had already bought up much state and Federal war debt at deep discounts from impecunious war veterans and suppliers such as farmers, largely in the South.

In those days of poor communication and slow transportation, however, each region wanted the permanent national capital to be as close to home as possible. Jefferson and other Virginians, including many prominent citizens of Alexandria and Georgetown, aggressively promoted the advantages of location on the Potomac River. Jefferson arranged a swap. In exchange for enough votes to put the capital in the South, enough southern votes would be recruited to pass Hamilton's Assumption bill. George Washington was overjoyed at the opportunity to create near Mount Vernon the great city he had long envisaged, whether the Potomac Canal succeeded or not. While Secretary of State, Jefferson also supervised much of the planning and construction in the District of Columbia, of which Alexandria was a part for half a century.

After the bitter presidential campaign of 1800 between the Federalist party represented by John Adams and Jefferson's own Republican party, Jefferson's Inaugural Address on March 4, 1801, was deliberately conciliatory, reassuring and unifying. He said, "We are all Republicans...we are all Federalists."

That was before the day of inaugural parades, and there was no

inaugural ball. Ten days after the inauguration, however, on March 14, 1801, a Saturday, the major local inaugural celebration was held in heavily Federalist Alexandria at Gadsby's Tavern. President Jefferson, Vice President Aaron Burr, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, Attorney General Levi Lincoln, Major General James Wilkinson (the ranking Army officer) and other notables dined there with the local inhabitants.

They had been escorted from the north end of town by local Cavalry units, and treated to salvos of artillery and musketry from other military units, when they arrived about 2 o'clock. The Columbia Mirror and Alexandria Gazette reported that "The company who partook of the entertainment was the largest ever known at a public dinner prepared at any tavern in this town; and the style and elegance with which it was furnished at so short a notice reflect the highest credit on the taste and industry of Mr. Gadsby...in the evening the hotel was elegantly illuminated; its appearance, there being 23 windows fronting on Royal and Cameron Streets, was truly brilliant.

"It is with infinite satisfaction we observe that a unanimity of sentiment and harmony of feeling, unusually experienced, prevailed upon this occasion. We indulge the hope that it is the precursor of those happy effects expected to result from the new administration. We anticipate with pleasure a union of parties for the public good." That sounds to me a lot like words heard in 1993.

After dinner sixteen toasts were given. The President's toast was "Prosperity to the town of Alexandria."

Vice President Burr's toast was to "the memory of our departed chief, George Washington." After the presidential party had departed there was another toast: "The President of the United States, 16 cheers."



Charles Simms

A prominent local attorney who probably attended the dinner at Gadsby's, and with more than casual interest, was Federalist Charles Simms, Collector of Customs at Alexandria. Colonel Simms, a Revolutionary War veteran, had been appointed as Collector by President John Adams in 1799. He had lived at 229 S. Pitt Street, and the Customs House was next door at 501 Duke. At that time, the position of Collector at major ports, financed by fees, was the most lucrative in the government except for that of President.

With a Republican in the White House, who was being urged by members of his own party to remove Federalist incumbents, Colonel Simms feared that he'd be replaced in his cushy job. Not only was he a Federalist but, in 1796, he had run (although unsuccessfully) for Presidential Elector in favor of Adams. He had accused Jefferson in print of having twice abandoned his trust -- once as governor and again as Secretary of State. Jefferson had been exonerated of the charges against his governorship by a General Assembly investigation.

Simms wrote to his friend James Madison, then Secretary of State, to express his concern about losing his job. They had both served in the Virginia General Assembly and again, in 1788, as fellow delegates to Virginia's Convention on the United States Constitution. Simms

and Dr. David Stuart, Martha Washington's son-in-law, were Fairfax County's two delegates, both Federalists, to that conclave in Richmond. Simms had worked and voted there to help Madison win Virginia's ratification of the Federal Constitution, by a narrow margin, after Madison agreed to its later amendment.

Madison replied to Simms' letter the very next day with assurances that Simms need not worry. Madison knew that Jefferson preferred to follow the rule that no able incumbent should be disturbed for mere difference of political opinion.

Benjamin Ogle Tayloe, in his delightful memoir about his neighbors on Lafayette Square, writes that the Collector of Customs saved his job by a witticism at Mr. Jefferson's table. He appeared at the White House to ascertain his fate while the President and his Cabinet were sipping wine after dinner. Madison politely vacated his chair next to the President and gave it to Colonel Simms. When the President inquired the news, Simms said "There has been a recent event that, when

known, will astonish the whole nation." "What is it?" asked Mr. Jefferson. "That Mr. Madison has vacated his place and that I occupy it." He amused the President and retained his office under three Republican presidents until he died in 1819.

Once, in responding to a note from President Jefferson inquiring about a wine shipment through Alexandria, Collector Simms took advantage of the opportunity to thank the President for "your conduct to me."

Unfortunately, Simms' years as Collector included 1814 (during the War of 1812), when as Mayor of Alexandria he surrendered our town to that British Fleet, which aimed 128 guns at this defenseless place and gave the Mayor and Common Council one hour to accept stiff terms. They felt they had no rational alternative but were unmercifully censured by much of Virginia. From Monticello Jefferson blasted Simms and the town. He wrote his son-in-law that Congress should punish Alexandria "By repealing the law which made it a town, by discontinuing it as a port of entry...and perhaps by suppressing its banks." His fire was really aimed at Simms and Light-Horse Harry Lee, his two political tormentors from Alexandria who had long accused him of deserting his public trust and of cowardice when governor.

Nevertheless, Charles Simms was one of our town's most accomplished citizens. He was closely associated with George Washington in many endeavors. He was a leader in Washington's Masonic Lodge. He was president of the Patomack Co. and of the Little River Turnpike Co.; trustee of the Alexandria Academy, which

was close to the General's heart; a founder of the Society of the Cincinnati in Virginia; Commander of the Silver Greys, a ceremonial military group; president of the Washington Society formed one month after the general's death; his lawyer, executor and honorary pallbearer; and a vestryman at Christ church, where his name is listed both on a plaque among the general's pallbearers and on a gravestone.

George Mason of Gunston Hall, for whom this was also home town, was more than a friend of Thomas Jefferson. They were soul mates. They saw eye-to eye on public issues from the pre-Revolutionary 1760s until Mason died in 1792. In 1774, Mason's Fairfax Resolves, approved in Alexandria by a committee under Washington's chairmanship, were extremely similar to Jefferson's Albermarle Resolves in asserting America's constitutional rights as Englishmen and in their anti-British, non-importation provisions.

In 1776, the basic philosophy and even some phrases from Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights were reflected almost immediately in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. At that time, Mason's draft of the Virginia Constitution included a preamble written by Jefferson.

In 1781, Mason's respect for Jefferson was shown when he urged him not to retire from the war governorship despite his very strong wish to do so.

In September 1787, Mason's refusal to sign the proposed U.S. Constitution at Philadelphia was based largely -- though far from entirely -- on its omission of a Bill of Rights. In 1788, at the Virginia

Convention on the U.S. Constitution, the Antifederalist Mason teamed up with Patrick Henry in opposition to an unamended constitution. His own Fairfax County was so heavily Federalist that Mason had been elected as an Antifederalist delegate from Stafford County.

During that period, Jefferson carried on an active correspondence with both Mason and Madison from his ministry at Paris. Late in 1787, Jefferson wrote Madison that "A Bill of Rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth." Today Madison is credited with authorship of the Federal Bill of Rights introduced in 1789 and ratified in 1791 but was much influenced by Mason and Jefferson; he drew much on the former's Virginia Declaration of Rights and the latter's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. It is ironic that today Fairfax County calls itself "Home of the Bill of Rights" even though it was opposed to Mason in 1788.

As Secretary of State, Jefferson wrote Mason, "Whenever I pass your road I shall do myself the honor of turning into it." On Sunday, September 30, 1792, the north bound Secretary turned into the road to Gunston Hall for the last time. He found Mason weak and hobbling about from attacks of gout. The two old friends reviewed the crowded years since 1776, and especially recent events.

Mason was very clear in his opposition to Alexander Hamilton's war debt proposals. He said the Secretary of the Treasury had done America more injury than Great Britain and all her fleets and armies. He had very definite ideas as to

how the relatively poor original holders of the war debt certificates -- such as veterans and farmers -- could have been the main beneficiaries of their repayment, rather than the speculators therein, who cleaned up.

Jefferson finally headed back to the main road for an overnight stay at Mount Vernon. Before breakfast there the next morning he worked hard to persuade his host, who strongly wanted to retire from the presidency after one term, that his continuance in office was indispensable.

One week later, on Sunday, October 7, 1792, George Mason died. Of the four of Mason's Virginia contemporaries who became presidents of the United States, his closest and most sustained relationship was with Jefferson. In his autobiography Jefferson called Mason "A man of the first order of wisdom."

It remains to sketch Jefferson's relations with three other prominent citizens of this area: George and Martha Washington and General Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee. Several instances have already been mentioned regarding Jefferson's cordial dealings with George Washington.

From 1769 until the Revolution, the two men were fellow members of the Virginia House of Burgesses, and they dealt with each other in other official capacities until late 1793 (almost exactly 200 years ago), when Jefferson resigned as Secretary of State during Washington's second term. During most of that long period they enjoyed great mutual admiration and respect. Jefferson revered and was somewhat in awe of his famous

older friend and father figure. Washington admired Jefferson as a talented and eloquent patriot, and Jefferson admired Washington's level-headed intelligence, firmness, fairness, public spirit, sterling character and personality.

During the period of Jefferson's governorship of Virginia, 1779 to 1781, he and the Commanding General agreed completely on a strategy that kept the actual fighting outside the state as long as possible, while furnishing men and material to the military engaged elsewhere. When in 1780 and 1781 Generals Benedict Arnold and Lord Cornwallis invaded the state, Washington showed great tolerance and understanding of Jefferson's much-questioned actions; even though the General had sent warning that Arnold might soon invade, the governor seemed surprised and unprepared.

During the more than five years between Washington's resignation as commander and his presidency, he and Jefferson had corresponded cordially on the two topics then of most concern to Washington: The Potomac Canal and agriculture, as well as on education for self-government. I have already described their thoughts and actions on the river project.

It was not until March 1790, however, when Jefferson appeared in New York to assume his duties as the first Secretary of State that he and Washington worked really closely together. Jefferson began his nearly four years in that relationship with total devotion to Washington, but eventually his rivalry with Alexander Hamilton with regard to economic doctrine and political power (and

their competition for Washington's admiration) poisoned the atmosphere. Washington was neither a Jeffersonian nor a Hamiltonian but combined the attitudes of both men. He visualized a mixed economy in which Jefferson's agrarianism and Hamilton's business activity would move together, within a republican governmental framework.

As Hamilton won Washington's approval of his financial proposals, Jefferson began to look on Washington as a sort of Sorcerer's apprentice under the spell of Hamilton. He wasn't, but while still in Washington's cabinet Jefferson began promoting a Republican party in opposition to Hamiltonian policies of the Administration. He wanted to resign as Secretary of State in 1792, before Washington's first term ended, but the President persuaded him to remain longer. When Jefferson did resign, in December 1793, he and the president exchanged very courteous letters. Washington expressed his "sincere regret" and said that "the opinion that I had formed of your integrity and talents has been confirmed by the fullest experience."

Thereafter Jefferson was politically active in the Republican party, notably in 1796, when he was elected Vice President and Federalist John Adams President. Jefferson's last exchange of correspondence with Washington was in June 1796. Besides discussion of agricultural matters, Jefferson assured Washington that, contrary to accusations by Light-Horse Harry Lee, he had not said that the President was under excessive pro-British influence. The President replied to both Jefferson and Lee to the effect that he had never had reason to doubt Jefferson's

sincerity. In 1814, fifteen years after Washington died, Jefferson wrote in a letter that "Nature and fortune had never combined more perfectly to make a man great than in the case of Washington."

Jefferson's friendship with Martha Washington reflected the status of his relations with her husband and Jefferson's political activity. This was most apparent when Jefferson was Secretary of State and later when he led the Republican Party. On Jefferson's arrival in New York, in March 1790, she and the President hosted a welcoming party at the Executive Mansion for the new Secretary and were socially hospitable toward him thereafter.

In September 1791, on a return trip from Monticello to Philadelphia, Jefferson brought his beautiful daughter Maria with him. She actually traveled with Mrs. Washington from Mount Vernon onwards, since her father was detained by an auction of lots in the new Federal City. In Philadelphia, daughter Maria was not only given every attention by Martha Washington and Abigail Adams, but was especially happy with Martha's granddaughter, Nellie Custis, then 12 and a few months Maria's junior. During that period Jefferson's relations with both Washingtons left nothing to be desired.

In December 1799, when Washington died at Mount Vernon, Jefferson was Vice President. In view of all that had been said in the recent past about his relations with his old chief, he felt that he would find the solemn memorial ceremonies for Washington embarrassing. For the same reason he did not write Martha his condolences. He also got back from Monticello to Philadelphia during the

Christmas season too late to hear Virginia Congressman Light-Horse Harry Lee declare George Washington to be "First in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen." For a full month thereafter, however, as presiding officer of the Senate, Jefferson sat in a chair draped in black.

During the bitter political campaign of 1800, Federalists attacked presidential candidate Jefferson with even more charges and denigrations than in 1796. The election propaganda poisoned the already somewhat hostile widow, Martha Washington, to such a degree that she confided to a visiting clergyman her opinion that Jefferson was "one of the most detestable of mankind."

A year after George Washington's death, however, when circumstances brought then-President-elect Jefferson near Martha Washington, he paid her a visit at Mount Vernon. She asked particularly about his daughter Maria, and the President-elect relayed that information to Maria.

And now I bring you Jefferson's bitter political enemy, General Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee. Lee and his family became Alexandria residents in 1810, when they moved here from Stratford Hall Plantation, following his release from debtor's prison. They lived awhile at 611 Cameron and after at 607 Oronoco Street, now called "Robert E. Lee's Boyhood Home."

Henry Lee's attacks against Jefferson extended over many years beginning the 1790s. I've already mentioned Lee's accusations of Jefferson



Light Horse Harry Lee

addressed to President Washington. No other person in public or private life excited in Lee a comparable sustained and deep hostility, which grew as his own career declined. During the earlier years of this manifestation, Jefferson was far less preoccupied with Lee than Lee was with Jefferson. Jefferson's presidential candidacies in 1796 and 1800 raised the level of Lee's hostility.

Although in 1801 the majority of the Virginia Delegation in the House of Representatives voted for Jefferson, to break his electoral vote tie with Aaron Burr, Congressman Lee voted for Burr. Jefferson's real bitterness toward Lee, however, began when Lee became a go-between in an affair in which Jefferson

was accused of having repeatedly propositioned the wife of one of his oldest friends, John Walker, both before and after Jefferson himself was married. Jefferson admitted only to having "offered love" to the lady while young, before he was married; he agreed that he was wrong but the story would not die for years.

Lee's main argument against Jefferson (like that of Charles Simms) was that he had bungled the defense of Virginia, was unprepared for Arnold and Tarleton in 1780-1781, lacked firmness, and had fled ignominiously from hill to hill before the enemy at that time. Lee spurned such counter-arguments that Virginia lacked sufficient war resources at that time. He did agree that she had generously supplied men and material to other areas and that the Governor lacked enough emergency authority for wartime. He contended, however, that Jefferson's record as Governor, in contrast to that of a Continental Army warrior like himself, made Jefferson unfit for the presidency.

After Jefferson's election as President, in 1800, Lee's conviction that experience during the Revolution proved the necessity to train and maintain a professional military service in peacetime, contrasted with Jefferson's preference for state militia. The President, however, did recognize the usefulness of Army engineers in peace or war. In 1802, pursuant to Act of Congress, he set up a Corps of Engineers to constitute a military academy at West Point. It is more than somewhat ironic that anyone with his views became founder of a military institution destined to become famous, and from which Lee's own son Robert became such a famous graduate.

In 1808, the persistent General Henry Lee wrote a 38-page pamphlet against Jefferson. During the next two years, while in jail for debt, he wrote his "Memoirs of the War in The Southern Department", published in 1812, which elaborated further on his arguments against Jefferson. Alexandria's Col. Charles Simms was one of Lee's most active helpers in finding materials and in planning publication. Thereafter, Jefferson became concerned that Lee's version of history would be accepted uncritically. He, therefore spent much time with historians, including Lee's oldest son, Henry, Jr. to make them aware of his side of the story.

The younger Henry Lee was one of Jefferson's last guests at Monticello. One June 29, 1826, only five days before Jefferson's death, the weakened host was "able to converse" with Lee about his record as war governor. As everyone knows, the sage of Monticello died on the Fourth of July, fiftieth anniversary of his Declaration of Independence. He was "free at last, free at last, from the man who many years before he had called a "miserable tergiversator."

Jefferson's Response to the Address of Welcome at Alexandria, Va. -- March 11, 1790

Accept my sincere thanks for yourself and the worthy citizens of Alexandria, for their kind congratulations on my return to my native country. I am happy to learn that they have felt benefit from the encouragements to our commerce which

have been given by an allied nation. [France] But truth and candor oblige me at the same time to declare you are indebted for those encouragements solely to the friendly dispositions of that nation which has shown itself ready on every occasion to adopt all arrangements which might strengthen our ties of mutual interest and friendship...

Accept, Sir, for yourself and the citizens of Alexandria the homage of my thanks for their civilities, & the assurance of those sentiments of respect and attachment with which I have the honor to be, Sir, your most obedient and humble servant, Thomas Jefferson. Source: Julian Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), Vol. XVI, p. 225.

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