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*A Transatlantic Spark: The French Enlightenment
and the Spirit of Monticello*



Dear United States of America,

It would be easy to say, that the American Revolution was a distinctly homegrown affair, born entirely in the meeting halls of Philadelphia and the taverns of Boston. However, the intellectual framework that justified the break from the British Crown was not forged in isolation. The spark of American liberty was deeply fueled by a transatlantic exchange of ideas, drawing heavily from the vibrant, radical salons of the French Enlightenment. Nowhere is this union of French philosophy and American political reality more apparent than in the life of Thomas Jefferson, his drafting of the Declaration, and the architectural masterpiece he built in the hills of Virginia.

Long before he ever set foot in Europe, Thomas Jefferson was profoundly shaped by French thought. The agrarians of Virginia, despite deriving their wealth from the slave-reliant economy of the American South, considered themselves cosmopolitan intellectuals. From his earliest days at the College of William & Mary, Jefferson devoured the works of European thinkers. Alongside the English philosopher John Locke, Jefferson studied French giants like Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These philosophes were actively challenging the divine right of kings, arguing instead for the "social contract", the idea that governments only derive their power from the consent of the governed.

When Jefferson sat down in the summer of 1776 to draft the Declaration of Independence, he was not inventing new concepts. He was brilliantly synthesizing these Enlightenment ideals. The Declaration was a practical application of French and English philosophical theory, translating the abstract concepts of natural rights into a bold, treasonous political reality. While French ideas steered Jefferson's pen in 1776, French culture would completely reshape his life a few years later. In 1784, Jefferson sailed to Paris to serve as a diplomat, eventually succeeding Benjamin Franklin as the American Minister to France. During his five years in Paris, Jefferson was captivated by the city. He mingled with French intellectuals, witnessed the brewing storms of the French Revolution, even helping the Marquis de Lafayette draft the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, and fell deeply in love with French architecture, cuisine, and wine. France expanded his vision of what a republic could look and feel like.

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When Jefferson returned to Virginia in 1789, he brought crates of books, artwork, and furniture, but more importantly, he brought a radically altered aesthetic vision. He immediately began tearing down and redesigning his plantation home, Monticello, to reflect the Neoclassical principles he had absorbed in Europe. The French influence on Monticello is woven into its very foundation. The most famous feature of Monticello is the octagonal dome, which was directly inspired by the Hôtel de Salm, a building Jefferson would often sit and admire for hours while in Paris. In Paris, Jefferson favored single-story pavilions that blended seamlessly with the landscape. He redesigned Monticello to look like a single-story home from the outside, hiding the second floor behind a continuous balustrade, a very popular French architectural trick of the era. Furthermore, he sought to elevate the culinary culture of Virginia. He brought back an extensive collection of French wines and introduced a distinctly French style of cooking to his estate. Crucially, this was executed by James Hemings, an enslaved man belonging to Jefferson, whom Jefferson had taken to Paris specifically to be trained by master French chefs.



The story of the Declaration of Independence is inseparable from the story of France. The French Enlightenment provided the intellectual ammunition for 1776, and later, the French military and financial alliance secured the actual victory over the British. For Thomas Jefferson, the connection was deeply personal. He viewed the American and French Revolutions as two chapters of the same global struggle for human liberty, a struggle he literally built into the walls of his Virginia home.

Yours, with great admiration and transatlantic devotion,

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