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## *The Academic Village: The University of Virginia*



*Dear United States of America,*

Jefferson chose the inscription on his own tombstone — and one likes to think that this alone tells you everything about the man. Not President of the United States. Not author of the Louisiana Purchase. What he wanted to be remembered for were three things: the Declaration of Independence, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and the founding of the University of Virginia. That last one he built with his own hands after leaving office, in his seventies, when most men of his era were long past doing much of anything. Chartered in 1819 and opened in 1825, the University of Virginia was unlike anything America had before it. Every great university carries the imprint of its founding convictions and America's earliest institutions were born of a genuine faith that learning and devotion went hand in hand. Jefferson's founding conviction was different: reason, full stop. No religious affiliation, no denominational oversight. He called it his "Academical Village" — and meant it literally. The idea was that knowledge grows between people living and thinking alongside one another, not from the top down.

He designed every part of it himself. The site, the plans, the curriculum, the selection of professors brought over from Europe and then lobbied the Virginia legislature for the money with the same stubbornness he had once brought to the Continental Congress. The result is genuinely beautiful. At the center is the Lawn: a long terraced green, flanked by student rooms and ten pavilions, each built in a different classical style so that the architecture is itself a kind of lesson. At the top stands the Rotunda, modeled on the Pantheon in Rome, scaled down to something that feels approachable rather than overwhelming.

The Lawn was also practical in its design. Putting students and professors in daily proximity — sharing the same green, the same walkways — was deliberate. Jefferson thought real education happened as much at dinner as in any lecture hall. He regularly had students over to Monticello and treated them as people worth arguing with, which was not the norm. Most universities of the time kept faculty and students at a firm distance. He also made one structural decision that still stands out: no president, no chancellor. The faculty would run the place themselves. The rector of the Board of Visitors, a role Jefferson held until he died, would serve the institution rather than command it. A university as a republic in miniature. It was, of course, entirely on brand for Jefferson.

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Two hundred years on, the Lawn still works the way he intended. Students still live in the original rooms. The Rotunda has been rebuilt and restored multiple times after a fire in 1895, again in the 1970s and again recently. Yet each time it goes back to his original design. Graduation still happens outside, on the Lawn, in the open air, no walls, no ceiling, just sky and grass and two hundred years of an idea refusing to grow old. Jefferson would have found this entirely appropriate. In fact, one suspects he would have found it perfect.

*Yours, with great admiration and transatlantic devotion,*

**Franz J. Heidinger**

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