

A Classical Beginning: An Examination of Greek and Roman
Influence on Thomas Jefferson and Early America

Emma Powell '20

Classical study is not just an academic concentration; it is a way of life. As indicated by his actions, Thomas Jefferson believed in this sentiment. Jefferson's political position as a founding father allowed him the power to promote ideas of classical moralism and a distinct, new, and free America. Like other wealthy colonial men of his time, Jefferson placed great value on his early education in the literature of Greek and Latin historians, poets, and philosophers. He valued his own education, and as a result, he sought to replicate classical models in American higher education. Inspired by the value and style of Greek and Roman architecture, Jefferson and other American founders advocated for classical influences and created designs based on them. The government's fundamental ideas that Jefferson advocated were also rooted in classical terminology. An examination of American governmental terms, like *capitol*, offers evidence of this. Classical influence was prevalent in this time period in Europe and, by extension, to settlers in America. Thomas Jefferson's commitment to the classics can serve as a case study of how the American colonial elite assimilated classical architecture, education, and governmental ideology into American life, creating a distinct nation informed by Greco-Roman influences.

Jefferson most prominently used architecture to create a new republic, one heavily influenced by Rome, but clearly distinct from England. This is directly shown in the aesthetics of early American buildings. For Jefferson, England represented the monarchy – rule by one – whereas the United States represented the opposite: liberty and individuality. Architecture served as a visual display distinct from English culture. Jefferson’s vision for the Virginian capitol is recalled by Wegner:

In the context of independence, Jefferson’s temple became an overflowing vessel of personal and social meanings—a fitting expression of the quasi-religious devotion propelled leading thinkers of the revolutionary Enlightenment—keeper of what Jefferson called that “sacred deposit of rights and liberties,” that “holy fire...confined to us by the world.” The capitol, however, was also a temple of reason. Classical architecture was a highly codified system of ornaments, organically linked to one another by prescribed proportional relationships. The flexible order and mathematical determinacy of this system appealed to Jefferson’s profoundly rational temperament. (Wenger 92)

Jefferson noticed and applied the code of columns and mathematical rules in ancient architecture to his own architecture in America. Here, the temple demonstrated the order of the American people, who would seek to hold and emulate classical virtues as the cornerstones of their ideal society. In antiquity, the temple served as a holy symbol where heroes of epics would seek guidance for quests from oracles. The holiness of a temple, in combination with its rational aesthetic orders and classical

values, reinforced concepts of American identity in reference to divinity, rationality, and virtue. More interesting is Jefferson's choice of a temple to represent reason, for temples are often associated with religion. As an enlightened thinker, Jefferson believed in a specific type of Christianity. Jefferson believed that God made men equal with a "sacred deposit of liberties" (Wenger 91). The holiness of the temple, when balanced with the rationality of government, powerfully strengthened American ideals with a sense of being called by the divine. Despite that humans have absolute rights as written in the U.S. Constitution, the government and the people must have a rational will to protect those rights. In designing the temple, Jefferson created a scale with sacredness and rationality on each side. He wanted viewers to clearly see this balance through the Capitol building and apply it to American identity.

In addition, Jefferson and the founding fathers used classical terminology to link the classical world to the United States' foundation. Wenger remarks that, "the very term 'capitol' invoked the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus and thus signified a link to the civic life of ancient Rome" (Wenger 90). "Capitolinus" refers directly to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, but most specifically to Jupiter. Not only does the word capitol signify first-most importance, but the word capitol comes directly from the Latin word "caput," or "head." Capitol has become the term we use to describe the most important buildings, like the Virginian Capitol, and even the most

important cities in our nation. The term not only refers to the head in the sense of importance, but also directly refers to the “head” of a human. The head houses the brain, which holds reason, and the brain is a beautiful metaphor for the American government. The brain functions on rationality, holds the spirit, and makes critical decisions. Jefferson and others of the time period hoped the American government would hold the same attributes for the American people.

Jefferson advocated for classical education in molding the individual American. Jefferson wrote in his correspondences:

“You ask my opinion on the extent to which classical learning should be carried in our country.... The utilities we derive from the remains of the Greek and Latin languages are, first, as models of pure taste in writing. To these, we are certainly indebted for the rational and chaste style of modern composition which so much distinguishes the nations to whom these languages are familiar” (Wright 226).

From this, Jefferson makes clear the highest form of education and refinement. There was a specific quality in the literature of great Roman and Greek writers that Jefferson thought important to developing the entire person, rather than solely supplying a person with the skill set for any given profession. As a result, he pushed for classical studies at the University of Virginia and other institutions of higher education. This is important to note because it means, at least in Jefferson’s time, that many educated Americans’ ideas of a well-rounded educated person stemmed from Enlightenment Europe and, by extension, antiquity. For Jefferson, classical education most importantly contained the

idea of wisdom. It is one thing to be informed, but it is another to be wise. Wisdom comes not only when you are knowledgeable about poetry, art, science, math, and morals, but when you apply them to make a mark in the world. Jefferson hoped his love for classical wisdom would not apply to the building of the individual, but the nation as the whole; he wanted everyone to strive for a utopia.

Jefferson was not the first man or woman who functioned under classical ideals. However, his actions to strive to take the study of classics and place them in an American context are uniquely noteworthy. His gestures to architecture, diction, and education are riddled with antiquity. Further, Thomas Jefferson was able to incorporate the classics in a lively manner, despite their ancient quality. This is evident in U.S. architecture, education and ideals. The concrete streets of D.C. have eerily similar steps to the cobblestone roads of Rome. It is important to discover and dissect the similarities of America and antiquity – not only to celebrate our cultural similarities, but to be aware of the downfalls of Greco-Roman societies. If Americans are truly informed by antiquity, they can be critical of their own culture and more fully understand their own peoples' past, development and future. Overall, through study of classics, Americans can better understand their own humanity.

Bibliography

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