



0. A WRITER not a SPEAKER - Story Preface

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The image depicts one of Thomas Jefferson's fountain pens. It was probably made by a Richmond, Virginia watchmaker named William Cowan. Jefferson used this pen in later life. Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

As the American colonies grew more and more frustrated with their mother country, Jefferson stepped into a role he was shaped to play. Later in life he commented on the importance of his time at William and Mary:

It was my great fortune, and what probably fixed the destinies of my life that Dr. William Small of Scotland was then professor of mathematics, a man profound in most of the useful branches of science, with a happy talent of communication, correct and gentlemanly manners and an enlarged and liberal mind.

Dr. Small introduced his student to the writings of many thinkers. For Jefferson, three really stood out: John Locke, Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon. From each of them, and others, he developed his own philosophy of life.

Jefferson loved to write. By the time he died, in 1826, he had personally written at least 16,000 letters (After 1804, he used a polygraph machine to duplicate [scroll down 30%] whatever he wrote.) He was often charming, it is said, in private conversation.

But as much as he enjoyed putting words on paper, he disliked public speaking. Later in life, John Adams described Jefferson as a "silent member" of Congress:

Mr. Jefferson came into Congress in June, 1775, and brought with him a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent of composition. Writings of his were handed about, remarkable for the peculiar felicity of expression. Though a silent member in Congress, he was...prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive upon committees and in conversation... (John Adams to Timothy Pickering, August 6, 1822.)

His voice - it is said - was high-pitched, and he had a lisp. Most likely, this turned him against public speaking. William Wirt (the tenth U.S. Attorney General and biographer of Patrick Henry) said this about Jefferson's voice and his ability to engage in public debate:

The only defect was a physical one: he wanted volume and compass of voice, for a large deliberative assembly; and his voice ... instead of rising with his feelings and conceptions, sunk under their pressure, and became guttural and inarticulate. The consciousness of this infirmity, repressed any attempt in a large body, in which he knew he must fail. (From "Mr. Wirt's Eulogy on Jefferson and Adams," quoted in *Eloquence of the United States* compiled by Ebenezer Bancroft Williston, page 472. Digitized by Google, the book was published by E. & H. Clark in 1827.)

Undaunted by his lack of speaking ability, Jefferson could turn a phrase like few others. With pen in hand, he traveled to Philadelphia during the late spring of 1776.

He was about to write a document which would deliver a very strong message to George III and the British Parliament.

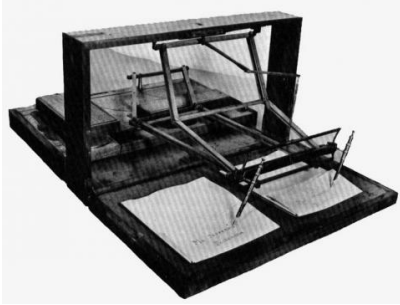
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Media Stream



Jefferson's Polygraph Machine

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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John Adams

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