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Thomas Jefferson as he appeared in 1821, when he was 78 years old. Portrait by Thomas Sully. Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

As Thomas Jefferson approached the end of his life, he thought about how he would like to be remembered. He designed an obelisk which would mark his grave. He created the words (the misspelling is his) he wanted used:

*On the faces of the Obelisk the following inscription, & not a word more
Here was buried
Thomas Jefferson
Author of the Declaration of American Independence
of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom
& Father of the University of Virginia.*

Jefferson and John Adams both died on July 4, 1826 - fifty years to the day that the Declaration of Independence was signed. It is said Adams' last words were:

Jefferson still lives.

He was wrong, by about three hours.

Jefferson's words - especially "all men are created equal" - are his most enduring legacy:

- They were an inspiration to his friend, Lafayette, and others involved in the French Revolution.
- They were an inspiration to Abraham Lincoln, who appropriated Jefferson's words as he tried to save the Union and end slavery.
- They remain an inspiration today, even for African-American scholars like Julian Bond who try to understand the man's complexities and apparent inconsistencies.

Perhaps the poet Robert Frost best captured the thought-provoking importance of "all men are created equal" when, as a young man, he wrote of Jefferson ("the Welshman") in The Black Cottage:

*That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.
What did he mean? Of course the easy way
Is to decide it simply isn't true.
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
But never mind, the Welshman got it planted
Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
Each age will have to reconsider it.*

Were *that* to happen, Jefferson would be proud indeed.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-SPECIAL-4TH-OF-JULY-Thomas-Jefferson>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/A-SPECIAL-4TH-OF-JULY-Thomas-Jefferson>

Media Stream



Thomas Jefferson - Portrait

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

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