The Journal of Thomas Jefferson’s Life and Times

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Jefferson and Women
Dedicated to preserving knowledge of the life and times of the man who wrote the *Declaration of Independence* and the history of the nation formed on its principles.

The Journal of Thomas Jefferson’s Life and Times

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HOMAS JEFFERSON WAS A RADICALIST and visionary when it came to many things—politics, revolutions, constitutions, education, architecture, and agriculture, to name a few—yet he was no visionary when it came to women. There he held conservative views.

This edition of The Journal of Thomas Jefferson’s Life and Times is titled “Jefferson and Women.” In it, we look generally at Jefferson’s view of women as well as at several significant relationships that he had with females: e.g., his daughters, Elizabeth Walker, Maria Cosway, Abigail Adams, and Madame de Corny.

In the featured essay, Vivienne Kelly and M. Andrew Holowchak offer a critical analysis of the recent “discovery” and reconstruction of slave Sally Hemings’ bedroom in the South Wing of Monticello. The room, directors acknowledge, is not known to be Hemings’. Moreover, so very little is known about Hemings. And so, the authors ask, is the reconstruction politically aimed? If not, why reconstruction of a room for Hemings when so many other of his slaves were much more important to Jefferson? Richard Dixon and Army psychologist and philosopher Michael Lavin offer critical responses to this essay.

What of Jefferson’s relationship with his wife, Martha? It has been widely argued that Jefferson withdrew from political activity in the summer of 1776, after much activity in the Continental Congress, to tend to a sickly wife. James C. Thompson argues in “The Storm before the Calm,” that his return to Monticello that summer was on account an irate Martha, who wished her husband to spend more time at home.

Arthur Scherr, next, gives us an alternative take on psychological assessments of Jefferson by Milton Greenblatt and Gisela Tauber. While both authors focus on the effects of his childhood traumata, his need for love, and his feelings of abandonment on Jefferson’s later life, Scherr, by focusing on Jefferson’s affair with Elizabeth Walker, shows that both critics fail to appreciate the extent to which Jefferson overcame early psychological issues through extraordinary accomplishments.

While in France, Jefferson fell much in love with Italian Maria Cosway, an accomplished artist and wife of artist Richard Cosway. John Kaminski, an expert on their relationship, argues that the correspondence between the two over decades gives us a window to the
emotional mind of Jefferson like no other correspondence. The correspondence also comprises beautifully written letters that can be enjoyed on their own.

David Dietrich, retired national security analyst, then contributes an essay on Jefferson’s correspondence with Abigail Adams. Their correspondence, comprising prosaic and singular letters, is evidence of a deep and unique friendship. Dietrich, focusing on the singular letters, shows that Adams was matchless in her day and that Jefferson enjoyed her friendship on her, not his, terms.

In the next essay, historian Garrett Ward Sheldon argues that Jefferson’s views of women seems chauvinistic by today’s standards but they were not. Following a model that goes back as far as Greek antiquity, Jefferson adopted a view of different roles for men and women in which men had social and political roles and women were responsible for domestic affairs. Thus, women and men had natural reciprocal roles for social stability. Those roles offer no evidence of an antagonistic relationship between men and woman.

Last, M. Andrew Holowchak, in the final essay, examines Jefferson’s view of the right sort of education for a “genteel woman.” That that education was mostly in the Fine Arts suggests, to many scholars, that he was a misogynist. He was conservative, not misogynistic, says Holowchak, when it came to the natural capacities of women, and thus, when it came to the relevant sort of education that they needed, but he was not misogynistic. Women had a social significance, if only domestic, that was as vital and needed as that of men.
About the Contributors

David Dietrich served for over 40 years as a professional national security analyst and educator at the international (NATO), national, and military-service levels. Since his retirement in 2015, he has been working both as an Assistant Professor of Political Science (adjunct) and as a volunteer docent at a Thomas Jefferson historical site. He also serves as a director of the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society.

M. Andrew Holowchak—philosopher, historian, and editor of this journal—is a professor of philosophy. He is author/editor of nine books and over 65 published essays on Thomas Jefferson and is acknowledged by several to be one of the world’s foremost authorities on the thinking of Thomas Jefferson.

John P. Kaminski founded and directs the Center for the Study of the American Constitution at the University of Wisconsin. He has published widely in the Revolutionary era including more than 30 volumes of the magisterial Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution. His books include Adams and Jefferson: Contrasting Aspirations and Anxieties from the Founding (editor), The Quotable Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson: Philosopher and Politician, and Jefferson in Love: The Love Letters of Thomas Jefferson and Maria Cosway (editor).

Vivienne Kelly is an ardent, lifelong student of Thomas Jefferson. She received her M.F.A. in Classical Sculpture from The American University in Washington, D.C. Her visual background has led to, at the National Gallery of Art, analyses of architectural, conceptual sketches, one of which resulted in the exhibition, “Lines of Thought,” and transcriptions of collections of early American letters which are housed at the Library of Congress. She continues to write, teach, and create in her sculpture studios. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society.

Garrett Ward Sheldon is John Morton Beaty Professor of Politics at The University of Virginia College at Wise, where he teaches Political Theory (Classics), Constitutional Law, and Religion and Politics. He is the author of several books and articles on Jefferson, including The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson (Johns Hopkins University Press) and has been a Visiting Scholar at Oxford University; the University of Vienna, Austria; and Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. Sheldon has received The Outstanding Faculty in Virginia Award, the highest honor conferred on an academic by the Commonwealth.

James C. Thompson studied Philosophy as an undergraduate and graduate student at the University of Virginia. His interest broadened into a study of Ideas in History while teaching courses in Philosophy, Religion, and Ethics and Western Civilization at Strayer University in Alexandria, Virginia. He has written six books relating to Ideas in History, including The Birth of Virginia’s Aristocracy, George Washington’s Mulatto Man: Who Was Billy Lee?, and Thomas Jefferson’s Enlightenment: Paris 1785.
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IN 1781, THOMAS JEFFERSON RETIRED from public service. For the last two years he had been Virginia’s governor, serving at the very time when the wartime military activities had shifted to the South. Virginia had been invaded by the British Army and the state government had fled from Richmond to Charlottesville with British Rangers in hot pursuit. With his second annual term completed, Jefferson and other government officials were almost captured. Jefferson’s political opponents accused him of malfeasance and cowardice. Despite being exonerated by the legislature, 38-year-old Jefferson, disillusioned, retreated to Monticello. He vowed never to serve in public office again.

In early September, 1782, shortly after giving birth to their sixth child, Martha Jefferson died. Jefferson was grief stricken, massively so—so much that his friends feared that he might be suicidal. His three surviving daughters had to be cared for by others. To shake him from his solitary depression, James Madison encouraged the Virginia legislature to appoint Jefferson as a delegate to Congress. Jefferson accepted the appointment and thereafter immersed himself in a wide variety of political matters. In 1784, Congress appointed Jefferson to join Benjamin Franklin and John Adams in France as commissioners to seek military assistance and commercial alliances with European and North African countries.

Jefferson set sail from Boston for Paris on July 5, 1784, with his eldest daughter Martha (Patsy), who was 12 years old, and slave James Hemings. His two other daughters stayed in Virginia with his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Wayles Eppes, and her husband, Frances Eppes. The Ceres, a new ship, was only on its second transatlantic voyage. The passage to England took but 19 days. Patsy described the voyage as “a lovely passage” as the sea was “as calm as a river.” They stayed four days in England while Patsy recovered from a fever. The stormy 13-hour channel crossing to Havre de Grace was far more stressful. From the French seaside, the Jeffersons took a coach on “a most pleasing road” paralleling the Seine River, reaching Paris on August 6.

Once settled, the recent arrivals shed their American wardrobes and purchased more fashionable Parisian attire. Jefferson bought a sword and belt, buckles, knee breeches, lace ruffled shirts, embroidered waistcoats, and silk stockings. Patsy was enrolled in an
exclusive convent boarding school in Paris with sixty other girls—half were Protestant; three were princesses of royal blood. Soon Patsy spoke French as commonly as English. Her father, however, struggled with his conversational French. Fortunately the presence of other Americans in Paris—Benjamin Franklin and John and Abigail Adams—made the transition easier for Jefferson.

Soon, however, bad news arrived from America. Jefferson's two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Lucy Elizabeth, had died from whooping cough and worms. Jefferson, who had just gotten over the “seasoning” illness that afflicted many immigrants, was again grief stricken as he stayed confined to his apartment during the winter. When spring arrived, the sun—Jefferson's “almighty physician”—assisted in recovering his equilibrium. But now, Jefferson lost his American colleagues. By mid-1785, John Adams left France to become U.S. minister to England and the nearly 80-year-old Benjamin Franklin returned to America. Congress named Jefferson, replacing Franklin, as its minister plenipotentiary to France. Jefferson rented new quarters at the fashionable Hôtel de Langeac on the Champs-Élysées and presented his credentials to Louis XVI on May 17, 1785.

In March, 1786, Adams asked Jefferson to come to London to assist in negotiating treaties with Portugal and Tripoli. Congress had required the approval of two of its three commissioners to sign treaties. Thus, with Franklin back in America, both Adams and Jefferson were needed to enter into any treaty. After seven weeks, negotiations collapsed, and Jefferson returned to Paris at the end of April.

In August, 1786, the artist John Trumbull arrived in Paris. The son of the former governor of Connecticut and himself a former aide-de-camp to George Washington during the war, Trumbull had met Jefferson four months earlier while in England. At that time, Jefferson invited Trumbull to be his house guest when Trumbull came to France to paint Jefferson and some prominent French officers who had served in America during the war. Trumbull's visit would profoundly change Jefferson's life.

While Trumbull and Jefferson were sight-seeing at the Halle aux Bléds, Paris' magnificent indoor domed marketplace, Jefferson fixated on a stunningly beautiful young woman. Noticing his friend's attraction, Trumbull readily introduced Jefferson to Maria Cosway and her husband, Richard. They had come to Paris so that Richard could paint the portraits of several wealthy French women and their families. The foursome stayed together the rest of the afternoon and cancelled evening engagements so that they might dine together in the village of St. Cloud. After dinner they went to Ruggieri's cabaret-style garden restaurant where they listened to music from an orchestra and watched a dazzling fireworks display, followed by a concert by Johann and Julie Krumpholtz, the most renowned harpists on the continent. Over the next few days the four friends continued
their sight-seeing companionship, but soon Trumbull left Paris for Germany and Richard Cosway started his painting. That left Maria and Jefferson alone to enjoy their company throughout the Parisian countryside for the next month, as Jefferson later wrote by days and half days.

Maria Louisa Catherine Cecelia Hadfield was born in Florence, Italy, in 1759. Her father managed a hotel that catered to English travelers. Four of Maria’s six siblings were killed by a deranged nanny. Maria would have been the next victim but for the plot being discovered. The killer was put into an insane asylum, and Maria was placed in a convent where her musical and artistic talents were nurtured. She learned to play the harp and the harpsicord and became an accomplished painter specializing in landscapes and miniature portraits. The Academy of Fine Arts in Florence displayed some of her paintings, and she was elected to the academy at the age of nineteen. She considered Italian as her native tongue but she spoke and wrote in five other languages as well, sometimes unintentionally mixing them together.

When Maria’s father died in 1778, she announced her intention to become a nun. Her mother, realizing that Maria alone could provide for the family by an advantageous marriage in England, forbade such a move. Maria dutifully accompanied her mother to England where she became the protégé of Angelica Kaufmann, the most renowned female painter on the Continent. Kaufmann and Maria’s mother eventually settled on Richard Cosway as an acceptable spouse. The marriage occurred in January, 1781.

Richard Cosway, enjoying the patronage of the Prince of Wales, was a prominent painter in London’s society. Almost twice Maria’s age, Cosway was a short, foppish man, who was rumored to have repeated sexual affairs with both women and men. These sexual escapades persisted after the marriage. Cosway was satirized as the man with the monkey face—a macaroni.

Cosway used his wife’s beauty and talent to great advantage. She “retired” for a year to become acclimated to London society. The Cosways held lavish receptions in their fabulously decorated mansion on Pall Mall at which Maria would play the harp and harpsicord and sing music which she herself had often composed. With her coquettish charms, she allured the wealthy and socially prominent, especially the men, who would engage with Cosway to paint their portraits so that they might have further contact with Maria. Somewhat jealous of his wife’s talents, Cosway did not allow Maria to paint professionally, although she continued to paint landscapes and miniature portraits of her friends, but she concentrated on her music.

As a native of the Florentine countryside, Maria was miserable in damp and dreary London. The filthy streets and belching smoke stacks aggravated her natural melancholia.
Consequently, she eagerly embraced the opportunity to visit Paris in the summer of 1786. She relished the changed surroundings, and in Jefferson, the handsome, well-read American diplomat, she found a perfect companion who made her happy.

It was easy to see why Jefferson was so attracted to Maria. In his eyes, she was the perfect woman. Twenty-seven years old, Maria was slim yet voluptuous, and had curly golden hair that cascaded halfway down her back, smooth skin, violet-blue eyes, saucy lips, a melodic Italian accent, a blithe spirit, and fashionable attire. Her music and art further enticed him. They conversed for hours, but never mentioned politics—a subject Jefferson believed that women should avoid. Jefferson wrote that Maria possessed those “qualities and accomplishments, belonging to her sex, which might form a chapter apart for her: such as music, modesty, beauty, and that softness of disposition which is the ornament of her sex and charm of ours.”

While on one of their daily excursions, Jefferson fell over a fence or a hedge and fractured his right wrist. The physicians poorly set the break, which left Jefferson in great pain for weeks and was never fixed. Jefferson’s anguish heightened when Cosway finished his painting. The Cosways planned to take a month-long vacation on their way home to London stopping in Antwerp, Flanders, and northern France. Jefferson and Maria dreaded the departure and their separation. One last evening together traveling in a carriage over the jarring cobblestone further aggravated Jefferson’s wrist. That evening, he again called on the physicians to ease his pain. Little, however, could be done to alleviate the anticipated pain of their separation. Maria wrote to Jefferson late on that last evening (5 Oct. 1786) that she would always “remember the charming days we have past together.” She looked forward to the following spring when she hoped to return to Paris and be with him once more.

Despite his pain, Jefferson insisted on taking the Cosways in his carriage to St. Denis at the outskirts of Paris by the medieval wall that surrounded the city, from which the Cosways would transfer to a public coach that would take them to Antwerp. After assisting Maria into the public carriage, Jefferson turned away “more dead than alive.” He went home and sat sad and solitary by the fireside and started to compose an elegant love letter in the form of a dialogue between his head and his heart. In October, he finished the 12-page letter, which he then wrote in final form with his left hand. He subsequently made a press copy from a machine that he had custom made by a French artisan from dimensions Jefferson had taken of a similar portable copy machine that he had seen in England. Without that copy machine, it is doubtful that any of Jefferson’s letters to Maria would have survived.

1 TJ to Maria Cosway, 12 Oct. 1786.
The head and heart letter (12 Oct. 1786) was one of those rare occasions when Jefferson laid bare his true feelings through personifying his head and his heart. Heart readily admitted how much he missed Maria—he was “indeed the most wretched of all earthly beings. Overwhelmed with grief, every fiber of my frame distended beyond its natural powers to bear.” Head berated his heart for being so miserable. Heart responded: “This is no moment to upbraid my foibles. I am rent into fragments by the force of my grief! If you have any balm, pour it into my wounds.”

Head recollected the day that Jefferson first met Maria. By the end of that first evening, Heart seemed to have known her for at least a month. Heart remembered the pleasant days that they had spent alone together. Head called Heart “the most incorrigible of all the beings that ever sinned!” Such relationships, Head pronounced, were more painful than death, because with death our suffering ends, but with separations from those we love, the pain merely begins.

Head warned against making friends so easily. “Consider what advantages it presents, and to what inconveniences it may expose you. Do not bite at the bait of pleasure till you know there is no hook beneath it. The art of life is the art of avoiding pain.” Heart responded. “Friendship is precious.” Maria had brought him out of his depression and had given him a new reason to live to the fullest. His world had changed. All sites they visited “wore its liveliest hue” because she was there. “They were pleasing, because she seemed pleased. Alone, the scene would have been dull and insipid: the participation of it with her gave it relish.” Happiness, Heart explained, was not simply the absence of pain. “We have no rose without its thorn; no pleasure without alloy.” Yes, Heart admitted, he was suffering terribly. “I feel more fit for death than life. But when I look back on the pleasures of which it is the consequence, I am conscious they were worth the price I am paying.”

Jefferson left the dialogue and told Maria that except for his wrist, he was in good health. His wrist was mending slowly, but his mind mended not at all “but broods constantly over your departure.” He wanted Maria to read only one-sixth of the love letter at a sitting, but knew she would devour it all at one time. Along with the letter, Jefferson sent Maria the sheet music for *Jours heureux!* (“Happy Days!”), an aria from Sacchini’s opera *Daranus*, which they had attended together two days before Maria’s departure for Antwerp. Jefferson had promised to send Maria the sheet music with the hope that she would “sing it with feeling” and that she would return to him in Paris and bring with her the happy days they had once shared.

Jefferson’s letter awaited Maria when she returned to London. She was overwhelmed. “Whatever I may say will appear trifling,” she wrote Jefferson (30 Oct. 1786). She could spend “an hour to consider every word, to every sentence [she] could write a volume.” She
apologized for not following his instructions in reading the letter piecemeal. She could not help herself, even if it meant “committing an act of disobedience. Forgive me, the crime merits it.”

The head and heart letter spoiled Maria. She was never satisfied with the number of letters from Jefferson. She referred to herself (15 Feb. 1787) as “an enfant gâtée,” a spoiled child. Make them shorter but more frequently she wrote.

Jefferson’s busy schedule, his sore wrist, and the lack of a reliable conveyance inhibited him. His correspondence was regularly opened by the postal authorities in Paris and London. He hated the thought that “the breathings of a pure affection would be profaned by the eye of a commis of the poste.” Attempting to disguise his correspondence, he would occasionally send his letters to her unsigned or merely initialed “T.J.” He asked Maria to send her letters to him in care of Ferdinand Grand, a Swiss-born, Parisian banker. Jefferson assured Maria that he was “never happier than when I commit myself into dialogue with you, tho’ it be but in imagination.” He encouraged Maria to “Write to me often. Write affectionately, and freely, as I do to you. Say many kind things, and say them without reserve. They will be food for my soul.”

Repeatedly Jefferson wrote Maria about his desire to see her once again. He remembered (24 Dec. 1786) the history of Fortunatus who “had a cap of such virtues that when he put it on his head, and wished himself anywhere, he was there.” Jefferson longed for such a cap. “Yet if I had it, I question if I should use it but once. I should wish myself with you, and not wish myself away again.” While waiting for the cap, Jefferson told Maria that “I am always thinking of you. If I cannot be with you in reality, I will in imagination.” He pleaded with her to return to Paris. He did not want to be told that she would never return. “I had rather be deceived, than live without hope. It is so sweet! It makes us ride so smoothly over the roughnesses of life. When clambering a mountain, we always hope the hill we are on is the last. But it is the next, and the next, and still the next.” And once they met again, Jefferson would never accept the idea “that we are ever to part again.” He asked Maria to “Place me in your breast with those who you love most; and comfort me with your letters.”

Maria returned to Paris on August 28, 1787. As a house guest of the beautiful Franco-Polish Princess Aleksandra Lubomirska, Maria eagerly thrust herself into the busy social life of the Parisian nobility. Jefferson, on the other hand, lived on the other side of Paris and always avoided large social gatherings. The fates seemed to conspire against them as each was absent when on several occasions one would visit the other’s apartment. Jefferson later explained the difficulty to Trumbull (13 Nov. 1787). “A fatality has attended my wishes,
and her and my endeavors to see one another more since she has been here. From the mere effect of chance, she has happened to be from home several times when I have called on her, and I, when she has called on me. I hope for better luck here-after.”

Unfortunately, they rarely saw each other during this visit. Maria expressed her regret (1 Dec. 1787). “If my inclination had been your law I should have had the pleasure of seeing you more than I have. I have felt the loss with displeasure.”

After Maria returned to London, Jefferson wrote (31 Jan. 1788), “It was not my fault, unless it be a fault to love my friends so dearly as to wish to enjoy her company in the only way it yields enjoyment, that is, en petite comité.” He hoped that “when you come again, you must be nearer, and move more extempore.”

They saw each other the last time at dinner on the night of December 7, 1787. Although scheduled to breakfast together before Maria’s departure the next morning, Maria broke the date. “To bid you adieu once is sufficiently painful,” she wrote Jefferson (7 Dec. 1787), “for I leave you with very melancholy ideas.”

Jefferson regretted missing this last breakfast. It “spared me indeed the pain of parting, but it deprived me of the comfort of recollecting that pain.” He replied to her (31 Jan 1788) and asked her to “think of me often and warmly, as I do of you.” Maria did think of Jefferson often and repeatedly asked John Trumbull to paint a miniature portrait of Jefferson for her from the portrait Trumbull had painted of Jefferson while in Paris.

When Jefferson returned to Paris after a diplomatic mission to Amsterdam, he found a letter from Maria waiting for him. He wrote her immediately (24 Apr. 1788) and told her how much he had thought of her while he traveled. In Dusseldorf, he much preferred Adriaen Van der Werff’s painting of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar to the overly voluptuous pink nudes of Reubens. He imagined himself as the ancient Abraham reclining in his bed whose elderly barren wife presented her young topless dark handmaiden to Abraham hoping to be impregnated so that Abraham’s seed would inherit the earth as promised by God. Jefferson called the scene “delicious.” In Strasbourg, Jefferson could but think of Laurence Sterne’s history of Diego’s nose that had set the town aflutter. Although a not-too-subtle reference to the Spanish traveler’s enlarged penis that he saved inviolate for his lover, the allusion was lost on Maria because of her limited knowledge of English literature.

Over the next few months, Maria and Jefferson wrote each other sporadically. Maria was uncertain that she could soon return to Paris. Instead she suggested (24 Apr. 1788) that Jefferson visit her in England. “We should go to see many beautiful villas, enjoy all the best England can afford and make the rest up with our own society; we shall not have a numerous cortege, I promise to make myself and my society according to your own wish.” Jefferson
sent no immediate response. Increasingly irritated, Maria responded with three more letters; the last (15 July 1788) signed “Maria Cosway in waiting.” Jefferson finally responded (27 July 1788) by asking Maria to sketch a card while she was having her hair done one morning. She should sign the card so that Jefferson could put his card next to hers and their “names may be together if our persons cannot.” He bade his “dear friend” adieu admonishing her to “love me much, and love me always.” Maria (19 Aug. 1788) agreed to paint Jefferson a picture that he should hang “in the room you inhabit the most” so that the artist would “be recalled to your remembrance as often as possible.” Maria also told Jefferson that Trumbull had given her a miniature portrait of Jefferson for which she would be forever grateful. She also told Jefferson that her husband planned a trip to Italy in 1789. She hoped that Jefferson could join their party. She asked, “Can you resist this proposition?”

Jefferson quickly responded (26 Sept. 1788) and said that “there is nothing nearer my heart than to meet all the testimonies of your esteem.” Unfortunately, however, he was planning to return to America. His daughters were losing their American identity and Patsy had recently announced her intention to convert to Catholicism. Jefferson immediately removed his daughters from the convent school. He assured Maria that he would return to France once the girls were settled in Virginia. In his next letter (14 Jan. 1789), he told Maria that he expected that she would join him in America. “We are apt to believe what we wish.” He would delight in showing her the natural beauty of America. Sensing, however, that such a trip might never happen, he wrote: “Let us be together in spirit. Preserve for me always a little corner in your affection in exchange for the spacious part you occupy in mine.”

Ever fearful of travel by sea, Maria (6 Feb. 1789) thanked him for the invitation, but declined it. She would, however, be with him in spirit and “walk thro’ the beautiful scenes you will describe to me by letter.” But before he departed for America, she begged him to visit her in England.

While awaiting Congress’ permission for him to return, Jefferson wrote his final farewell (21 May 1789). “When wafting on the bosom of the ocean I shall pray it to be as calm and smooth as yours to me.” He bid her adieu expecting “our affections [to be] unchangeable, and if our little history is to last beyond the grave, be the longest chapter in it that which shall record their purity, warmth and duration.”

Maria responded (25 July 1789) by saying that she had longed “excessively for a letter from you…. I wish to converse longer with you. But when I read your letters they are so well wrote, so full of a thousand pretty things that it is not possible for me to answer such charming letters. I could say many things if my pen could write exactly my sentiments and feelings, but my letters must appear sad scrawls to you.”
In one last-minute letter (14 Oct. 1789), he asked her to preserve her affection for him; it would “comfort me in going and encourage me returning.” He hoped and expected to see her again in the spring of 1790 in April “with the first swallows.” “Remember me,” he ended, “and love me.”

Jefferson and his daughters arrived in Virginia in late October, 1789. In a month they were home at Monticello, where a letter from President George Washington informed him that he had been nominated and confirmed to be the country’s new secretary of state. Disappointed in not being able to return to France, Jefferson reluctantly accepted the new position. Six months later, Maria wrote (6 Apr. 1790) and acknowledged his appointment. She hoped that Jefferson would speak of her to their mutual friend John Trumbull. “I shall be happy to have my name breathed up by the delightful air of your country.”

Jefferson (23 June 1790) felt relief and ecstasy when he read her letter. It gave him “a foretaste of the sensations we are to feel in the next world, on the arrival of any newcomer from the circle of friends we have left behind.” He longed to see her, but they were now “divided by a wide sea.” Again he invited Maria to come to America. In the interim he ended, “je vous aimerai toujours”—I will always love you.

Both Jefferson and Maria continued to exchange letters sporadically, but they realized that they would not see each other for years to come. Jefferson heard that Maria had a baby girl in early 1790. Suffering from illness and post partem melancholy, Maria left her husband and daughter and traveled to Italy with Luigi Marchesi, a noted castrato, as her companion. While residing in a convent in Genoa, she heard of her husband’s illness and returned to London to nurse him back to health. Although he recovered and now at the peak of his professional popularity, he became more eccentric and experimented with exotic religions and hallucinogens. She wrote to Jefferson (24 Nov. 1794) and expressed her increased “antipathy” for London especially after her idyllic stay in Genoa. She added that she often thought of America and wished that she could make the journey.

Maria wrote to Jefferson (24 Nov. 1794) describing her daughter Angelica, who seemed to be blessed with “natural talent and a good soft disposition.” Maria enjoyed instructing her. She supposed by this time Jefferson had become “un gran Papa!” Jefferson wrote back in September, 1795. He had “retired to my home in the full enjoyment of my farm, my family and my books. . . . I am eating the peaches, grapes and figs of my own garden and I only wish I could eat them in your native country, gathered on the spot and in your good company.” He was amazed that she had returned to the rain and soot of London. However, he told her that “you have the power of making fair weather wherever you go.” He could see them traveling together in Italy and enjoying “many romantic scenes.” The rest he left “to imagination.—in truth, whenever I think of you, I am hurried off on the wings of
imagination into regions where fancy submits all things to our will.” He regretted “the distance which separates us and will not permit myself to believe we are no more to meet till you meet me where time and distance are nothing.”

Maria then congratulated him on his retirement (4 Dec. 1795). She wished that she could surprise him one day at Monticello, but knew that that was impossible. She reminded Jefferson that she had his picture painted by Trumbull “on the side of my chimney always before me. She regretted, however, “that perhaps never can I see the Original.” His “letter t’would be some compensation, but to be deprived of both is too much.”

For the next couple years Maria devoted herself to her daughter. Richard Cosway abandoned his wife and went on a six-month “sketching trip” with Mary Moser, a talented artist. Richard kept a journal in which he lasciviously compared Maria with Mary. Maria was quite aware of the adulterous relationship but seems to have accepted it as she devoted herself to her daughter. Tragically, however, the child died at the age of six on August 6, 1796, leaving Maria deeply depressed. After months of mourning and seclusion, Maria transferred her attentions back to her painting.

In 1802, Maria traveled to France and announced an ambitious project of making an engraving of every painting in the Louvre and writing a history about each painting. She reminisced about her Parisian forays with Jefferson. He subscribed to her project and recollected their first meeting that had “produced an attachment which has never been diminished.” Soon, however, the French government stopped her work at the Louvre, but would not provide her with a passport to return to London. In 1803, she moved to Lyons where with the encouragement of the archbishop and the approval of her husband, she founded “a college for young ladies.” In October, 1805, she wrote Jefferson (10 Oct. 1805) that she had at one time a single daughter; now she was the mother of sixty. “Nothing,” she wrote, “is more interesting than rendering oneself useful to our fellow creatures, & what better way than that of making their education?”

A change in government suspended the operation of the school and Maria traveled to Milan to visit her sister. The Duke of Lodi encouraged her to found another school similar to the one in Lyons. He provided a handsome villa at which the college began in 1812 with the understanding that she would return to London if her husband needed her. Such was the case in 1819 when Richard Cosway suffered a paralytic stroke. Maria wrote Jefferson from London (7 Apr. 1819) after a hiatus of nearly 14 years. She was then engaged in “the occupation of a Nurse.” Her fate had surprised even her. “Who would have imaged, I should have taken up this line? It has afforded me satisfaction unfelt before; after having been

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3 Maria Cosway to TJ, 25 February 1802.
deprived of my own child.” “What Comfortable feelings Seeing Children grow up accomplish’d, Modest, & virtuous Women. They hardly are gone home from the Establishment at fifteen but are Married & become paterns to their Sex.” She remembered the dialogue between Jefferson’s head and heart. “Your head would tell me, ‘that is enough,’ your heart perhaps will Understand, I might wish for more. God’s will be done.”

Jefferson responded (27 Dec. 1820) by praising her for being “so usefully and pleasingly occupied in preparing the minds of others to enjoy the blessings you have yourself derived from the same source, a cultivated mind.” Sadly he recollected their old Parisian coterie so many of whom were “dead, diseased, and dispersed.” He might be the next to pass away—he was seventy-eight; she was sixty-two. He looked forward, however, to the time when “we shall meet again” in happiness in the world after death. Richard Cosway suffered another stroke and died on July 4, 1821.

After settling the estate, Maria wrote Jefferson (10 July 1822) that she would be returning to the tranquility, good Climate & favorable as well as usefull occupation of my dear College at Lodi.” It turned out that Richard Cosway was not as rich as was thought. His wealth was tied up in his art collection, and the depressed times reduced the market value of the paintings. “However, if what I have is not sufficient for this Country, where I am going I shall be Comfortable and at ease.” She, like Jefferson, remembered those who had passed away. “I have lost many valuable old friends and at my Age & my Sentiments new ones I little Care for. Children are growing tender plants, & by planting Virtue in their hearts & minds, Affection & gratitude reward & console my assiduity & labours, and is a Constant Succession of Satisfaction & enjoiment.”

On October 23, 1822, Jefferson wrote his last letter to Maria. He was pleased that she would be financially solvent and hoped that she would enjoy life more once she left “the eternal clouds and rains of England to the genial sun and bright skies of Lodi.” Both of them should be pleased that they devoted their remaining years to the education of young people. “You retire to your college of Lodi and nourish the natural benevolence of your excellent heart by communicating your own virtues to the young of your sex who may hereafter load with blessings the memory of her to whom they will owe so much. I am laying the foundation of an University in my native state.” Maria, in turn, congratulated him on his university (18 June 1823). “The work is worthy of you and you are worthy of such enjoyment. Nothing, I think, is more Usefull to Mankind than a good Education.”

Jefferson died on July 4, 1826. Maria outlived him by almost 12 years. In 1830, she bought the college’s villa and settled a large endowment on the school attaching the buildings to the church of Santa Maria della Grazie. Four years later, Emperor Francis I of Austria visited the college and made Maria a baroness for her good deeds. Maria died at the college
four years later on January 5, 1838, much beloved and admired by her students. None, however, loved her as much as had Thomas Jefferson.

The relationship between Jefferson and Maria Cosway has long fascinated historians. Over a 14-month span, they were in close physical proximity for less than two months. Yet every biographer has mined this correspondence. The reason for this interest is that it provides a window into Jefferson’s emotional self. No other set of extant letters provides the insight into the enigmatic Jefferson. Jefferson himself destroyed the correspondence between him and his wife shortly after her premature death. Jefferson’s famous Head-and-Heart letter especially lays bare the struggle between his intellect and emotions. Over and above the portal into Jefferson’s psyche, they are beautifully written letters that can be enjoyed simply for their literary merit.