

IN DEFENSE OF JEFFERSON SCHOOL

An Essay Addressed to the South Orange Maplewood Board of Education

Part One – Introduction and Overview

On August 16, 2021 you committed, by a unanimous vote, to rename the Jefferson School. In my opinion, your process was inadequate and your decision indicated a narrow and misguided understanding both of Thomas Jefferson specifically and of American history in general. That said, your action provides the occasion for a long overdue public discussion of this issue that I hope this essay will provoke. This essay is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the general issue implied by your action; the second deals specifically with Thomas Jefferson; and the third proposes an alternative course of action. It is a long essay, but this is a big topic and I hope you and community members will give it a fair reading.

By way of background, I have lived in Maplewood for 40 years. My son went to the Jefferson School for 3 years, having been an early participant in the Marshall/Jefferson pairing, which my wife and I fully supported, notwithstanding the fact that we live one block from Jefferson School. I have been active in the community, most notably as a “first generation” Trustee of the Community Coalition on Race and later as a Member and Vice Chair of the Maplewood Planning Board. I understand the strong sentiments that attach to this issue and I have debated whether to voice my views. But I think Maplewood and South Orange are not well served by this action, and I think there’s a better way forward.

With regard to process, your decision on August 16 was made without even one minute of discussion by Board Members about the rationale or justification for such an action. There was no consideration of the reasons Jefferson was the chosen name in the first place nor of his virtues and contribution to the founding, preservation and expansion of our nation. At your prior meeting on July 19, 2021 your brief discussion dealt with policy and procedural considerations but again with no substantive discussion regarding the complex historical and educational issues that are involved in this issue. Moreover, you did this without any broad based community discussion that some of you previously had held out as an important precursor to such a decision. Your Resolution indicts Thomas Jefferson as “an enslaver” and thus as an unworthy role model for students. I do not minimize the fact that he was a slaveholder and the immoral nature of that practice. But your action raises some big questions about how we are to think about our past.

The Big Questions at issue here that you must answer are these:

Is it possible for us to honor and grant recognition to ANY American who was a slaveholder? Or to any American who participated in the slave trade? Or to any institution that implicitly or explicitly endorsed slavery? Should we attempt to weigh the contributions of such individuals and institutions to our national life and existence as against their involvement in the institution of slavery?

It appears that your answer to these questions is “NO,” irrespective of whatever else the individuals or institutions may have accomplished. Is this a “one-off” exercise? Or are you advocating a policy that should be applied more broadly? If it’s a one-off, then what does the limited gesture of renaming a single school accomplish? How does it further the cause of justice or equality in any concrete way? How does it improve education? If you are implicitly advocating a broad scale re-naming initiative, then are you suggesting to your students that the names of all

such individuals, including Thomas Jefferson, should be removed from the tens of thousands of towns, cities, counties, streets, schools, buildings, and institutions across the vast landscape of America? Several such locations exist in both Maplewood and South Orange. How should your students regard Jefferson Avenue, one block away, or Washington Park, five blocks away, or Madison Avenue a mile away? Should the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC be torn down? Should the faces of Washington and Jefferson be sandblasted off of Mt. Rushmore? You will say, correctly, that you have no jurisdiction over those situations, but since you're making an educational argument here, have you considered the larger implications of your action? How will you teach your students to reconcile these conflicting realities? It appears to me that your approach to this issue requires a one-dimensional litmus test resulting in a narrow and simplistic portrayal of specific individuals and of American history.

On the other hand, if you would agree that such individuals and institutions may, in some cases, receive honor and recognition then what are the criteria by which you would determine which of them are worthy and which are not? Specifically, on what basis would you deny Thomas Jefferson honor and recognition? Are there positive elements and contributions of Jefferson's life and legacy that should be considered? I believe this is the better approach and I intend here to make the case for Thomas Jefferson. The details of specific individuals are important. For example, removing a statue of Robert E. Lee from a park as was recently done in Richmond VA. is justified . . . he was a traitor in the service of the institution of slavery. Similarly, removing the Confederate flag flying with the American Flag atop the State House in South Carolina was justified . . . it was a symbol of rebellion and oppression. On the other hand, the case of Thomas Jefferson is different by orders of magnitude and merits a very different result.

You have not answered the numerous questions raised above. Your process has denied the community a thorough and thoughtful consideration of these questions. I believe that the community deserves better.

Part Two - Historical Perspective

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. - That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed . . ."

When Thomas Jefferson penned those majestic words in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and when he, along with 55 other brave men, signed it he knew he was taking a huge risk, for if the battle for Independence failed he surely would be hanged as a traitor to the British Crown. He threw down the gauntlet to a tyrant. His words 245 years ago inspired and emboldened 13 disparate colonies to throw off the yoke of British tyranny and to found what would become the greatest nation the world has known. The historian Joseph Ellis has opined that those words

". . . were destined to become the most potent and consequential words in American history, perhaps in modern history."

The project was daring . . . it was a grand experiment in self-government . . . its goals and promises lofty . . . its reality unrealized in 1776, indeed barely begun and even now perhaps not yet finished. But Thomas Jefferson laid the cornerstone and thus the trajectory of America's arc of history was set. Jefferson's words reverberate throughout our history as Americans.

In Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

A few years earlier in 1859 Lincoln was direct in his praise of Jefferson. He received an invitation to speak at a ceremony celebrating Jefferson's birth. He was unable to attend the event, but he sent some comments that concluded like this:

"All honor to Jefferson – to the man, who in the concrete pressure of a struggle for independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that today and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."

And in Martin Luther King's sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta on July 4, 1965:

" God somehow called America to do a special job for mankind and the world. Never before in the history of the world have so many racial groups and so many national backgrounds assembled together in one nation. And somehow if we can't solve the problem in America the world can't solve the problem, because America is the world in miniature and the world is America writ large. And God set us out with all of the opportunities. He set us between two great oceans; made it possible for us to live with some of the great natural resources of the world. And there he gave us through the minds of our forefathers a great creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.""

Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King . . . two of the greatest individuals in the pantheon of fighters for racial justice and the democratic project in America . . . both invoked the words of Thomas Jefferson, and more importantly, his ideals. They knew full well that he had owned slaves . . . that his personal life was a contradiction . . . but that didn't dim their respect for what he had done. They understood what Martin Luther King called the "moral arc of history." If Thomas Jefferson was good enough for Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, why is he not good enough for us?

The world of 1776 was a very different world from the world in which we live today . . . It was a world in which nation states were ruled by kings. It was a world in which slavery in one form or another had been a reality in virtually every society on every continent for thousands of years. In the world of 1776 a multi-racial, multi-ethnic representative Democracy was unknown . . . but that was where the vision and logic of Thomas Jefferson led.

Thomas Jefferson was an immensely talented individual. In addition to his role as Founder, he played numerous subsequent leadership roles in the early years of the nation including as our third President. He was a brilliant Renaissance man . . . a speaker of six languages, and knowledgeable in the arts, humanities, and the sciences. In 1962 at a dinner honoring the Nobel Prize winners President Kennedy remarked:

"I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."

And yet the contradictions in his personal life scream out at us. Thomas Jefferson did not live up to his ideals. He owned slaves . . . 600 of them in his lifetime. The treatment of slaves at Monticello was typical of plantations of that era . . . exploitative, harsh, and sometimes cruel. How are we to come to terms with that contradiction? Some would say that he was a man of his times . . . George Washington, James Madison, James Monroe, and Andrew Jackson all early US Presidents, also were slave-owners. Yet whatever the facts of those men's lives, they do not excuse Jefferson. Some would say that we ought not judge him by today's standards. But what about the standards of that era? Although there were many entrenched supporters of slavery in colonial America, there were also many, indeed some of his fellow Founders, who believed that slavery was a moral abomination. Some would point out that in 1778 as a member of the Virginia General Assembly he led the fight to ban the slave trade in Virginia, the first state to do so. He signed similar legislation again as President in 1807 at the national level. And yet, in his own life he was unwilling to emancipate his own slaves. Indeed, the partial efforts he did take to limit the reach of slavery in the face of his personal inaction highlights his hypocrisy.

Part Three – Reconciliation and an Alternative

We are left with the question of what we should do in Maplewood and South Orange in 2021. All of the above factors provide context, which is critical in the study and evaluation of history, but they do not give us a fully satisfactory answer. I believe there are three complementary themes, which might lead you and the community to a better result.

- As Board Members you have set yourselves in summary judgment of Thomas Jefferson. In America we have a strong tradition of extreme care when it comes to judging others. That ideal is deeply embedded in our moral code and our legal system, although in many cases it has been abused. Such judgment becomes far more difficult when we introduce the element of time stretching well into the past. But whether judging individuals from the past or in the present, it is almost always fraught with difficulty and should never be taken lightly. In all cases it requires humility. Thus there's a spiritual dimension, which harkens back to Biblical times. In those days, the penalty for high crimes was the barbaric practice of execution by stoning. And yet we hear this teaching: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King surely were familiar with that. So I think that humility asks all of us to reflect on our own shortcomings and personal failures and ask whether we wish to be judged solely on those things alone.
- We can openly and honestly and thoroughly weigh the arguments on both sides of the issue. I do not believe that Thomas Jefferson's life should be viewed through a single lens as you have done. When his life is viewed in its entirety, I believe his huge contributions in the founding of our country and later as its President by far outweigh his personal failures as a slave owner. His achievements remain with us today, while his personal failures have no real impact on our daily lives. We need look no further than the Board of which you are members to see how Thomas Jefferson's vision has played out. 245 years ago all 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were White men. Today's BOE is comprised of 2 Black men (one of whom is the Board President), 2 Black women, 4 White women, and 1 White Transgender Non-Binary person. Not a single White man in the group. Each of you was selected in free and fair elections by your fellow citizens for a position of significant public trust. Each of you, in a very personal way, is an inheritor and a beneficiary of Thomas Jefferson's original principles of equality and self-governance. Is that not worthy of honor and recognition?

- The lessons we teach our children in Maplewood and South Orange are of critical importance. We should not expunge Thomas Jefferson from a place of honor in our telling of the American narrative story, but we can and should tell it in a more open and complete way: The critical role Jefferson played in the founding of our country and the inspiration his words provided and continue to provide . . . the leadership he provided thereafter in numerous roles . . . the nature of the world of 1776 . . . the contradictions of his life . . . the evils of slavery and its eventual abolition 40 years after his death. A relevant part of the story would be the settlement of Maplewood in the early 1800's when it was known as Jefferson Village, including the history of slavery in this area at that time.
- We can and should impart to our children these ideas: (1) That individual human lives and collective human history are rife with ambiguities and contradictions . . . achievements and failures, sincerity and hypocrisy, peace and war, and good and evil. (2) That human societies evolve over time, not necessarily in a straight line but in an ongoing pattern of setbacks and advances. (3) That there is a moral arc of history and that over time the human condition has greatly improved. (4) And finally that in our personal lives here in Maplewood and South Orange and in America as a whole we are the inheritors of what Thomas Jefferson set in motion, and that with that inheritance comes the obligation to “pay it forward” by working to make our communities and our country a better place for all.

With all of that in mind, I respectfully suggest that you reconsider your intention to rename the Jefferson School. It is merely a symbolic gesture that accomplishes nothing to improve education in Maplewood and South Orange, nor does it advance the cause of racial equity or justice. Conversely it sends exactly the wrong message that the manifest contributions of Thomas Jefferson are unworthy. It does not accomplish what it aims to accomplish, i.e. to convey a deeper, richer, and historically grounded understanding of who we are as Americans and how we've arrived at this moment. Finally, it may undermine the legitimacy of the Board because it is likely to engender cynicism and controversy even among the many people of good will, myself included, who are supportive of an agenda of equality and inclusion.

As an alternative I make the following alternative proposal for initiatives that I believe would have true educational value:

- Every 6th grade student in the District should be required to attend an innovative 1 day multi-media and participatory program that pulls together all of the themes of the Thomas Jefferson story, the positive and the negative, and explains why 200+ years later we honor him in spite of his personal failures.
- Install museum quality displays in the foyer or some other suitable location in the Jefferson School that portray in summary form all of the themes mentioned above.

There may be other creative approaches that others may suggest . . . my suggestions are merely indicative. But rather than erasing the name “Jefferson” from the school, these sorts of initiatives would have a more meaningful and more lasting impact on the knowledge and consciousness of our youth, and would more fully give voice to the values and aspirations of our two communities.

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