

## Resource Sheet #02

### Where Did Thomas Jefferson Stand on the Issue of Slavery?

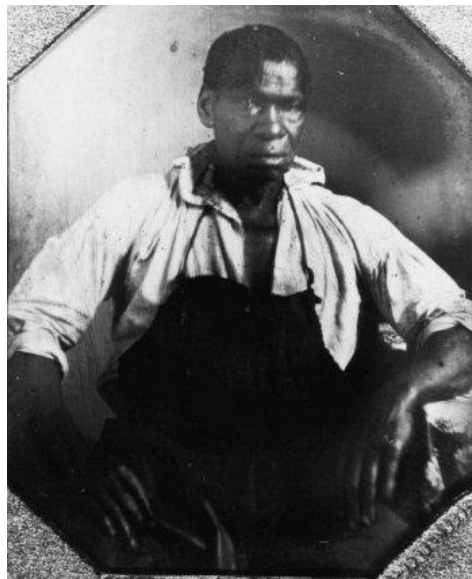
Thomas Jefferson has achieved fame as a founding father of the United States. He was an accomplished Revolutionary author, foreign diplomat, secretary of state, vice-president, president, inventor, educator, planter, **slave owner and abolitionist**. He was the primary author of the **Declaration of Independence**, the chief architect of the **Northwest Ordinances**, the driving force behind the **Louisiana Purchase**, and the founder of the University of Virginia.

While Jefferson contributed much to our American historical culture, he often comes under criticism for his support of and participation in the enslavement of African-Americans. Jefferson, who called the institution of slavery an "abominable crime," was a slaveholder for all of his adult life. Successful in outlawing the international slave trade to Virginia, he was disappointed by the failure of his early efforts to end or restrict slavery, and came to believe that a practicable solution to the problem could not be found in his lifetime. He continued, however, to advocate privately his own **emancipation** plan, which included a provision for resettling slaves outside the United States.

While considering slavery a moral travesty, hideous evil, and clearly at odds with his values of the American Revolution and republican virtue, Jefferson owned several hundred slaves at his home at **Monticello** and surrounding agricultural farms and businesses. In much of his correspondence to friends and business associates, Jefferson laments the immoral institution of slavery and yet describes how it must continue.

Jefferson and many of his peers were afraid that the **abolition** of slavery would cause violence throughout the South and racial **prejudice** in the North. They were concerned that agriculture on large farms, long dependent on slave labor, would collapse without a subjugated labor force. While Jefferson defended abolition in the Northwest Territories, he allowed it to expand in the Louisiana Territory. As a revolutionary, he attacked slavery. As an elected politician of a divided nation, he defended it.

Jefferson's relationship with slavery is certainly riddled with **contradiction**, both in words and deeds. His words expressed a hatred and disdain for an institution that ran contradictory to the ideals of democracy and human rights; while defending racial inferiority, political indifference, and economic security. His deeds reflected a dedication to righteousness, but only when they were socially popular or relevant to personal or political security. Many questions remain unanswered. Why did Jefferson change his views over time and when his responsibilities to the nation were altered? How did he feel about the African-American and his capabilities, as well as his rights? After studying the many documents presented here, one question might be answered: "*Where Did Thomas Jefferson Stand on the Issue of Slavery?*"



Isaac Jefferson, (1775-c.1850)  
Courtesy of University of Virginia Library