

## THOMAS JEFFERSON, AMERICAN GEOGRAPHERS, AND THE USES OF GEOGRAPHY\*

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**ABSTRACT.** Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) had a lifelong interest in geography. Except for his role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition and a few references to his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, however, geographers have taken a relatively slight interest in this aspect of his thought, despite his having sometimes been referred to as “one of the greatest American geographers.” This essay suggests that we need to reexamine Jefferson as a geographical thinker. Reviewing some of the more important literature thus far, it suggests where such topics may profitably be extended and points to some aspects of his geographical interests not yet incorporated into the geographical literature. *Keywords:* history of geography, Alexander von Humboldt, Thomas Jefferson, University of Virginia.

Speaking in April 1962, at a dinner honoring nearly fifty Nobel Prize honorees as well as university presidents and other distinguished guests, John F. Kennedy famously remarked that it was the most extreme concentration of talent and knowledge ever to dine at the White House, “with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone” (1963, 161). The comparison was exaggerated for humorous effect, of course, but it points both to the depth of his predecessor’s intellectual accomplishments and to the range of his intellectual interests.

Among those interests was geography, as understood in the late eighteenth century. Yet interest by geographers in Jefferson’s geography has been minimal, sporadic, and highly selective. In the last 110 or so years geographers have made only three significant general attempts to examine Jefferson’s interests and accomplishments in this field broadly, the most recent almost fifty years ago. The last full treatment of Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* in an American geographical periodical appeared during World War II (Brown 1943a).

The literature of the Lewis and Clark Expedition is a partial exception to this recent neglect of Jefferson as a geographer. Scholarly and popular interest has been stimulated by the bicentennial of that major event. The recent comprehensive publication of the journals of the expedition may well give further impetus to our understanding of Jeffersonian geography, as may other documents relating to it (Jackson 1962, 1978; Moulton 1983–2001). But geographical survey and the associated increase in scientific geographical knowledge is only one part of Jefferson’s geographical legacy. Indeed, the Lewis and Clark Expedition itself is only a part of Jefferson’s interest in the new geographical knowledge that comes through exploratory travel and scientific survey. This article attempts to survey the “state of the literature” on Jeffersonian geography, primarily by geographers and a few other scholars in closely related fields.

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\* I thank my Clark University colleague George Billias and the editor and reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments.

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