

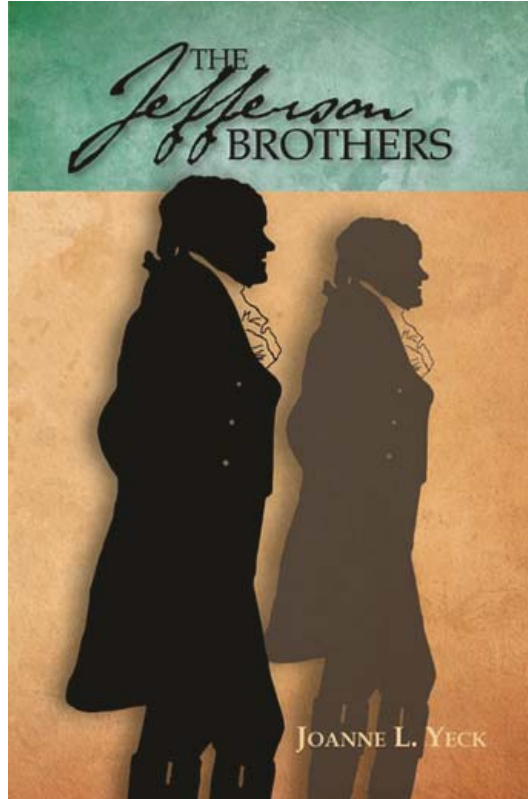
The President's Brother: Capt. Randolph Jefferson of Buckingham County, Virginia

By Joanne L. Yeck

When someone learns I am investigating the life of Randolph Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's only brother, they inevitably want to know: "What was his relationship with the great man?" That question inspired *The Jefferson Brothers* (Slate River Press, 2012).

The Jefferson brothers were very different men, living very independently from each other. Randolph was younger by more than twelve years—virtually a generation apart in Colonial America. Thomas spent much of his adult life away from central Virginia, whereas Randolph spent his entire life living and farming in Buckingham County, at the James River's Horseshoe Bend.

The early death of their father, Peter Jefferson, played a significant part in determining the separate lives of the brothers. As Randolph approached manhood, Thomas guided his education in the early 1770's. In 1776, Randolph inherited Peter Jefferson's distant Buckingham plantation, Snowden, isolating him from Shadwell, the Jefferson homeplace in Albemarle County, and Thomas' eventual home at Monticello. When Thomas Jefferson stepped onto the national and international stage, their lives diverged for decades. Then, during Thomas' retirement in the early 19th century, the two men resided



The Jefferson Brothers
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Book Cover Design by Andy Snow

within a day's journey of each other, relating as planters, as well as brothers. They had their extended family and farming in common. Their surviving correspondence primarily discusses this mundane world, providing a window into their mutuality, which includes the interconnected lives of several of their slaves.

Randolph was born in Albemarle County at Shadwell on October 1, 1755. The only surviving brother of Thomas Jefferson, Randolph led a quiet, local life, dying short

of his 60th birthday. The squire of Snowden from 1776 until his death on August 15, 1815, Randolph Jefferson's life in Buckingham County was typical for a man of his station. His education and experience far exceeded the average Virginian of the day; it included a year in Williamsburg, where he took courses at the Grammar School at William and Mary, supplemented by a private tutor from the College. He also studied the classical violin with his brother's Italian-born mentor, Frances Alberti.

Randolph Jefferson was a successful planter, maintaining his patrimony, something many Virginia farmers found hard to do in the late 18th century. He never accumulated crippling debt, something many Virginia farmers found all too easy to do. Randolph was not a spender or a high liver; in fact, he became extremely distressed when his second wife was a little too free with his money.

During the American Revolution, Randolph rode with Gen. Thomas Nelson's Corps of Lighthorse, joining other young gentlemen like himself in what turned out to be an aborted effort to aid Gen. Washington. Later, when Banastre Tarleton and the Redcoats threatened central Virginia, Randolph patriotically served the

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cause. Following the war, he volunteered for at least eight years in the Buckingham militia, retiring with the rank of Captain. He would remain Capt. Randolph Jefferson the rest of his life, content with his title.

In 1781, at the age of twenty-five, he married his first cousin, Anne “Nancy” Lewis, and together they raised six children to adulthood at Snowden. Following Nancy’s death (c. 1800), Randolph married a Buckingham native, Mitchie B. Pryor, whose presence at Snowden proved disruptive within Randolph’s first family.

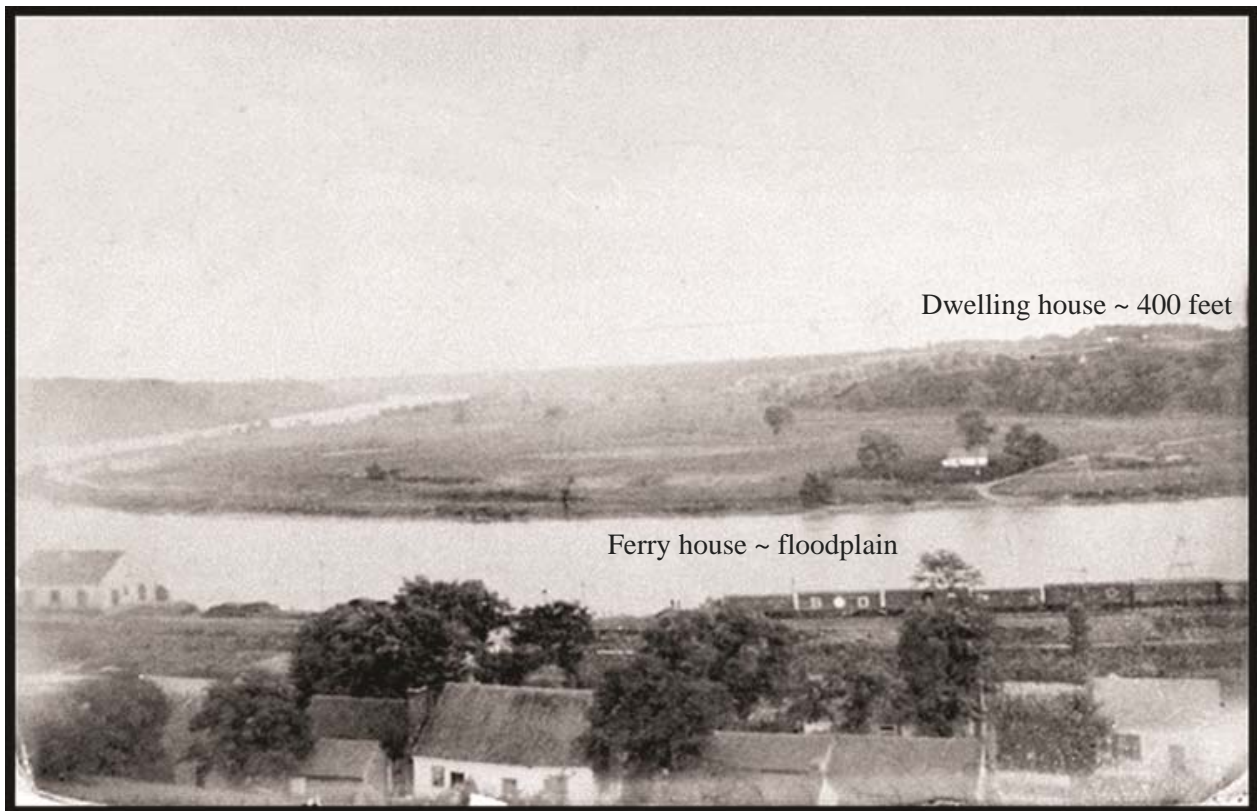
While he never entered politics professionally, Randolph participated in government and certainly held political opinions. In 1777, he joined many of his neighbors and relations when he signed the “Oath

of Allegiance in Albemarle.” Others supporting the document included his brother, Thomas. A decade later, a rare 18th-century poll list for Buckingham County reveals that on April 14, 1788, Randolph voted for delegates Joseph Cabell and Thomas Anderson to represent the county in the Virginia General Assembly.

Thomas Jefferson characterized his brother as diffident, easily influenced by the strong opinions of others. Occasionally, those strong opinions came from Thomas Jefferson himself. As it turns out, Randolph did not always follow his brother’s advice, though he graciously acknowledged it. Not surprisingly, Thomas also commented on his younger brother’s “kindness of temper.” Randolph may have lacked self-confidence; however, he asserted himself when

he felt wronged, including taking his cousin, John Jefferson, to court for damages. Randolph won the case.

Randolph Jefferson was no intellectual to be sure, and, unjustly, his apparent rustic sense of humor has been misinterpreted as dimwittedness. An oft-quoted summation of his personality was made by former Monticello slave, Isaac Jefferson Granger, who remembered various Jefferson family members and described Randolph as follows: “Old Master’s brother, Mass Randall, was a mighty simple man: used to come out among black people, play the fiddle and dance half the night; hadn’t much more sense than Isaac.” It should be recalled that Isaac had enough “sense” to arrange his freedom in about 1822 and to dictate his memoirs in 1847.



Dwelling house ~ 400 feet

Ferry house ~ floodplain

Location of Snowden on the south side of the James River’s horseshoe bend.

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Keeping late hours might reveal that Randolph Jefferson was less disciplined than his “bookish” brother, and his relaxed association with blacks on the plantation has led to the speculation that Randolph fathered mixed-race children. Since he did not marry until he was nearly twenty-six years old, there was plenty of time for him to father a “mulatto” child before he committed himself to Anne Lewis. He could have simply sowed some wild oats or, as a young romantic, indulged in an interracial *affaire de coeur*. To date, there is no irrefutable proof that he did either. Over the years, however, he expressed unusual concern for his own slaves, more than once selling off his best land to keep his servants with him.

When Randolph Jefferson wrote his will in May of 1808, he was fifty-two years old. Significantly, he valued a fair and equal distribution of his property among his sons over the preservation of Snowden in his family. With five sons to consider, rather than cut his plantation into slivers, he requested that his land and other property be sold and the proceeds dumped into a “hotchpot,” to be divided equally among his sons. Importantly, this did not include his human property. In keeping with his strong desire to retain his slaves, Randolph requested that they not be sold, but stay with the family.

Randolph experimented with sev-

eral ideas about how to ease into his “retirement,” to prepare his sons as planters, and to transfer his property. Among them was his failed alliance with his cousin, John Jefferson; another was a non-agrarian, family business venture known as “Nevil and Jefferson.” His son-in-law, the very competent Zachariah Nevil, was married to the Jeffersons’ only daughter, Anne Scott “Nancy” Jefferson; he had property of his own in both Nelson and Albemarle counties and was Randolph Jefferson’s generational peer.

By 1809, though Randolph had been a widower for nearly a decade, he never lacked for family around him. Surrounded by his children and grandchildren, he could sit back, enjoy his increasing leisure, experiencing the very life his older brother Thomas so longed for—the Virginia planter at his ease. Then Randolph “spoiled” it all when he married again. He was in his mid-fifties; his youthful bride, Mitchie B. Pryor, may not yet have been twenty-one.

Mitchie came from an upstanding, “middling,” Buckingham family and had grown up at the Pryor plantation, Woodlawn, located about four to five miles north of Buckingham Courthouse. Her exact age at the time of her marriage is not known, but it is likely that she was younger than most of, if not all of, Randolph’s children. While this kind of May-December second marriage was far from unique among Virginia planters, they were rarely appreciated by the children of the first

wife. Inheritances were not only threatened, they could completely disappear. Additionally, Mitchie possessed a strong personality, even unafraid to approach her potentially imposing brother-in-law concerning Randolph’s operations at Snowden.

An uncomplicated and practical man, as Randolph Jefferson aged, his health concerns grew, but not abnormally so. At age forty-five, he was in need of spectacles and, in 1811, he suffered a severe attack of gravel (kidney stones). The ultimate cause of his death is unknown, as is the length of his final illness, though it was apparently not long. In June of 1815, he wrote to his brother, Thomas, stating that he was quite fit, having recovered from a spring illness and was now busy with the wheat harvest at Snowden. Two months later, he was dead.

When Randolph Jefferson died on August 7, 1815, his twin sister, Anna Scott (Jefferson) Marks, was with him. His brother, Thomas, headed for Snowden from Monticello, only to reach the James River and learn that his brother was already dead. No published obituary has been located for Randolph nor is his grave site known.

Indications are that he was an easygoing man, especially in his youth, though later in life he became less tolerant of his sons’ criticisms. In middle age, he struggled to maintain control over his finances and his second wife’s behavior. An open, guileless friendliness may have attracted

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“users,” resulting in interpersonal disappointments. Still Randolph was resilient.

Ultimately, the combination of too many sons, a second marriage, and a disputed last will meant that Snowden was sold out of the Jefferson estate, passing into the hands of others. Rather quickly, all traces of Randolph Jefferson’s reign at Buckingham’s Horseshoe Bend faded away. He left a legacy of successful sons, several of whom were involved with the establishment of Scottsville at the southern tip of Albemarle, particularly Peter Field Jefferson. There, he owned the ferry, which crossed the James River and connected to the landing at Snowden, a general store, the tobacco warehouse, and a grist mill.

He was also instrumental in the building of the canal at Scottsville. Randolph’s other sons were successful planters. One grandson, Elbridge Gerry Jefferson, became a Baptist minister, founding a church in Buckingham County.

If it were not for his famous brother, Randolph Jefferson long ago would have faced into obscurity. He lacked the intellectual curiosity and ambition which drove Thomas to the top of the national and international political world and, as a result, Randolph’s realm in Buckingham County and his sphere of influence was much, much smaller than that of his brother. This did not faze Capt. Jefferson, however. There is nothing in the record to indicate that he was not happy with his lot in life. In fact, there is a great deal to indicate that he accepted that lot with patient, if

simple, understanding.



About the author:

Joanne Yeck has spent many happy years delving into the history of Snowden and life of Randolph Jefferson. In 2010, she was awarded a Jefferson Fellowship by the International Center for Jefferson Studies. She is the author of *At a Place Called Buckingham* (2011) and *The Jefferson Brothers* (2012). To learn more, visit: