

27. *Information on Mr. Jefferson*

To Samuel Harrison Smith

Montpellier, November 4, 1826

I have received your letter . . . requesting from me any information which would assist you in preparing a memoir of Mr. Jefferson. . . . Few things would give me more pleasure than to contribute to such a task. . . .

The period between his leaving Congress in 1776, and his mission to France, was filled chiefly by his labours on the Revised Code,—the preparation of his “Notes on Virginia” (an obiter performance):—his Governorship of that State:—and by his services as a member of Congress, and of the Committee of the States at Annapolis.

The Revised code in which he had a masterly share, exacted perhaps the most severe of his public labours. It consisted of 126 Bills, comprizing and recasting the whole statutory code, British & Colonial, then admitted to be in force, or proper to be adopted, and some of the most important articles of the unwritten law, with original laws on particular subjects; the whole adapted to the Independent & Republican form of Government. The work tho’ not enacted in the mass, as was contemplated, has been a mine of Legislative wealth, and a model of statutory composition, containing not a single *superfluous* word, and preferring always words & phrases of a meaning fixed as much as possible by oracular treatises, or solemn adjudications. . . .

The University of Virginia, as a temple dedicated to science & Liberty, was after his retirement from the political sphere, the object nearest his heart, and so continued to the close of his life. His devotion to it was intense, and his exertions unceasing. It bears the stamp of his genius, and will be a noble monument of his fame. His general view was to make it a nursery of Republican patriots as well as genuine scholars. . . .

Your request includes “his general habits of study.” With the exception of an intercourse in a session of the Virginia Legislature in 1776, rendered slight by the disparity between us, I did not become acquainted with Mr. Jefferson till 1779, when being a member of the Executive Council, and he the Governor, an intimacy took place. From that date we were for the most part separated by different walks in public & private life, till the present Gov^r. brought us together, first when he was Secretary of State and I a member of the House of Rep^s.; and next, after an interval of some years, when we entered, in another relation, the service of the U. S. in 1801. Of his earlier habits of study therefore I can not particularly speak. It is understood that whilst at College [Wm. & Mary] he distinguished himself in all the branches of knowledge taught there; and it is known that he never after ceased to cultivate them. The French language he had learned when very young, and became very familiar with it, as he did with the literary treasures which it contains. He read, and at one time spoke the Italian also; with a competent knowledge of Spanish; adding to both the Anglo-Saxon, as a root of the English, and an element in legal philosophy. The Law itself he studied to the bottom, and in its greatest breadth, of which proofs were given at the

Bar which he attended for a number of years, and occasionally throughout his career. For all the fine arts, he had a more than common taste; and in that of architecture; which he studied in both its useful, and its ornamental characters, he made himself an adept; as the variety of orders and stiles, executed according to his plan founded on the Grecian & Roman models and under his superintendance, in the Buildings of the University fully exemplify. Over & above these acquirements, his miscellaneous reading was truly remarkable, for which he derived leisure from a methodical and indefatigable application of the time required for indispensable objects, and particularly from his rule of never letting the sun rise before him. His relish for Books never forsook him, not even in his infirm years and in his devoted attention to the rearing of the University, which led him often to express his regret that he was so much deprived of that luxury, by the epistolary tasks, which fell upon him, and which consumed his health as well as his time. He was certainly one of the most learned men of the age. It may be said of him as has been said of others that he was a "walking Library," and what can be said of but few such prodigies, that the Genius of Philosophy ever walked hand in hand with him.