

**Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on
the State of Virginia***
A Prolegomena

M. Andrew Holowchak

Series in American History



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Table of Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	<i>v</i>
	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xiii</i>
	<i>Part I. Structure and Intendment of the Work</i>	<i>1</i>
Chapter I.	Scholarly Takes on <i>Notes on Virginia</i>	3
Chapter II.	In Jefferson's Own Words	15
Chapter III.	Reception of the Book, Then and Now	39
	<i>Part II. Historical Antecedents</i>	<i>61</i>
Chapter IV.	Empiricism and Science	63
Chapter V.	Jefferson and the Economy of Nature	83
Chapter VI.	The Stadial History of Jefferson's Day	111
	<i>Part III. The Philosophy of Nature & Culture</i>	<i>131</i>
Chapter VII.	"Apologia" for the New World	133
Chapter VIII.	Arguments for Religious Freedom	155
	<i>Part IV. Jefferson's Empiricism</i>	<i>173</i>
Chapter IX.	A Sublime and Beautiful New World	175
Chapter X.	Scientific Description & Explanation	201
Chapter XI.	Testing Hypotheses	227
	<i>Appendix I</i>	<i>245</i>
	<i>Appendix II</i>	<i>249</i>
	<i>Index</i>	<i>255</i>

Preface

When Thomas Jefferson toured the pleasure gardens of England with John Adams in March and April 1786—he examined gardens at Chiswick, Hampton-Court, Twickenham, Claremont, Paynshill, Woburn, Caversham, Wotton, Stowe, Leasowes, Hagley, Blenheim, Enfield Chase, Moor Park, and Kew—he took with him Thomas Whately’s *Observations on Modern Gardening*. “While his descriptions, in point of style, are models of perfect elegance and classical correctness,” said Jefferson of Whately, “they are as remarkable for their exactness.” When he compared Whately’s descriptions with the gardens under scrutiny, Jefferson “found them so justly characterized by him as to be easily recognized, and saw with wonder, that his [Whately’s] fine imagination had never been able to seduce him from the truth.”¹

While touring each garden, Jefferson took detailed notes and later wrote down his impressions in the form of a critical commentary of the gardens. His overall aim in Europe was to learn what he could of the culture of different countries—France and England especially—and to import the fine into America and eschew the ill. Moreover, his critical notes would prove an aidful tool when he addressed beautification of the grounds of Monticello upon his retirement.

That historical episode which led to his notes and commentary on the pleasure gardens of England, I maintain, sheds light on his motivation for turning his notes on the state of Virginia into *Notes on the State of Virginia*. I elaborate.

Because there is no manifest thread that takes readers through Jefferson’s book, there are today two common procedural theses advanced by scholars who have tackled the issue of Jefferson’s intendment in crafting his *Notes on Virginia*. The first thesis, which I dub the *Alphabet-Soup Thesis*, maintains that the book is more or less a loose collection of notes in answer to the queries given by French diplomat François Barbé-Marbois. Jefferson’s altering the arrangement of his answers to the questions is a matter of allowing for a smoother “narrative” for his answers, but other than that, one ought to be cautious not to read too much into his restructuring. The second thesis, which I dub the *Deconstructionist Thesis*, is that meticulous deconstruction of the

¹ Thomas Jefferson, “A Tour to Some of the Gardens of England,” *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 623.

text reveals a latent thesis, which Jefferson consciously, or subconsciously, kept from his readers.

Both views are, I think, problematic. The former cannot explain why Jefferson fell so deeply into the project, rearranged Marbois' questions so that the book would flow smoothly from nature to culture, and continually revised his often lengthy answers, even after the Stockdale edition in 1787. The latter suffers from the fact that Jefferson tended never to write elliptically. He chose language to convey precisely and economically his thoughts, even if the custom of the day tended toward verbosity.

The procedural thesis I advance, which is acknowledged by others, is that Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* was crafted to be a guidebook, like Whately's, but with critical, often philosophically critical, content. The aim was to take readers from a description of Virginia (and its surrounds) in its raw, uncultivated, and natural state, in the first seven queries, to a critical expiscation of Virginian, and even American, culture, in the remaining 16 queries.

The goal, in some sense, was simple movement from nature (Gr., *phusis*) to culture (Gr., *nomos*)—a movement, or distinction, that was much discussed by philosophers in Greek antiquity, Sophists especially. Yet that movement was neither discretionary nor forced, but necessary and natural. The aim, for Jefferson, was the aim for the great naturalist Comte de Buffon and other natural scientists and philosophers with utopian ideals (e.g., Kames, Condorcet, More, Harrington, and Mercier). That was appropriation of what nature had given for humans' use—to perfect the social state by taming nature and putting it to use for human betterment—that is, to cultivate the uncultivated. Thus, Jefferson's close descriptions of *phusis* in the early queries of the book and the current state of *nomos* in the remaining queries have been no idle undertaking. It was a snapshot of the current state of things for the sake of future betterment—the most efficient use of nature's resources, such as minerals, vegetables, and animals, for political and social improvement. Jefferson was proffering the snapshot, as well as a running critical commentary, but it would be for the next generation of Americans to put to use that snapshot in a way that puts to use nature's bounteousness.

Some background information on Jefferson's political philosophy and on the Virginia of Jefferson's time is here needed to ground my thesis.

With the colonization of the New World, with the promise of documents such as Jefferson's Summary View of the Rights of British America, which spoke loudly of the right of those expatriated to form their own government, and with the success of the American Revolution, the eyes of Europe were on America. Would the "great experiment" of republican governing—of government of and for the people—prove successful and revolutionize political thought? Of one

thing, Jefferson was sure: Aristocratic forms of governing of all sorts have been tried and they have failed to promote public wellbeing. Republican governing—with elected and recallable representatives of the people and representatives chosen on account of intelligence and virtue—needed to be tried.

Yet, for Jefferson, there was a twist. His snapshots of Virginia, of its neighboring regions, and of the cultural climate of his day were for the sake of developing a “countrified” culture. Virginia, in his day, was massively underdeveloped and capable of inordinate improvement. It could choose a blueprint of urbanized Europe—with its overcrowded cities, concentration of wealth and political power the hands of the few, and its abuse of nature’s resources—or move in a more conservative, rustic direction.

That for Jefferson was no dilemma, but in today’s languages, a no-brainer. And so progressive development of Virginia was to be in the direction of agrarian improvements: e.g., new methods of getting the most from soils, more efficient ways of organizing laborers on plantations, and inventions to ease the burdens of everyday living and to allow for some degree of leisure to enhance political involvement of farmers. The Virginian landscape was at that time a howling wilderness, greatly in need of human intervention—hence, the motivation for naturalistic *Queries I through VII*. One needed intimate knowledge of the Virginian landscape to cultivate and improve it. To work and improve the land, it was necessary to have knowledge of Virginia’s soil, of the biota endemic to it, and of its climate. It was necessary also to have knowledge of obstacles and arteries, like mountains and rivers, for irrigation and transport of farmed goods and for improved infrastructure.

Moreover, what was already cultivated could certainly be improved by making it more amenable for human usage. Jefferson’s years as minister plenipotentiary of France were also years as a careful scrutator of the boons and banes of European culture. His elaboration of the cultural components of Virginia in *Queries VIII to XXIII*—comprising its politics, religions, laws, constitutions, manners, economics, and even histories, memorials, and state papers—was done to catalogue Virginian culture for the sake of future human improvement by others, especially those of the next generation.

All of Jefferson’s political actions as Continental Congressman, Virginian delegate, ambassador, governor, and president, were aimed at social progress based on moral improvement not only of Virginia, but also of the rest of his country.² Those moral improvements, undergirding the political progress,

² E.g., TJ to Tench Coxe, 1 June 1785; TJ to Count Diodati, 3 Aug. 1789; TJ to James Madison, 28 Aug. 1789; TJ to Bishop James Madison, 31 Jan. 1800; TJ to David Williams,

were accretions of liberty through governmental nonintervention in citizens' activities, a more informed citizenry, and improvements in social structure (e.g., improved infrastructure, riddance of all vestiges of aristocracy in government, and freedom of religion) to maximize those accretions. That progress, he acknowledged, would be limacine—slow, but definite. “The ground of liberty is to be gained by inches,” he says to Rev. Charles Clay (27 Jan. 1790), “that we must be contented to secure what we can get from time to time, and eternally press forward for what is yet to get. It takes time to persuade men to do even what is for their own good.” The aim—and here lies the mistake of many Jeffersonian scholars—was not merely liberty, but liberty for the sake of human thriving, human happiness. Hence, Jefferson was not a liberal radicalist—that is, an autotelist about liberty—but a liberal eudaimonist. Human happiness—an industrious life of virtuous activities—was his aim and liberty was a means, *sine qua non*, not an end in itself.³

The result, likely unwittingly to Jefferson, would be the resolution of a centuries-old debate, part of the warp and woof of ancient Greek culture. That debate was played out in Jefferson's day through Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, who stated in his “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” that humans, following instinct and not reason, were happier in the state of nature, and Immanuel Kant, who said in “On the Beginning of Human History,” that human history was inevitably moving slowly, but progressively, to a state of amicable relations between nations, each under the direction of the will of the people. Writes Rousseau, “I ask if anyone has ever heard tell of a savage who was living in liberty ever dreaming of complaining about his life and of killing himself?”⁴ Says Kant in “Speculative Beginning of Human History”: “Contentment with providence and with the course of human things as a whole, which do not progress from good to bad, but gradually develop from worse to

14 Nov. 1803; TJ to Caesar A. Rodney, 10 Feb. 1810; TJ to John Adams, 11 Jan. 1816; TJ to John Adams, 12 Sept. 1821; and TJ to Cornelius Blatchly, 21 Oct. 1822.

³ The notion of Jefferson as outright liberal leads to the unhappy consequence of political relativism—the unsavory notion that there are not better or worse constitutions—and that is untenable, given Jefferson's progressivism. See M. Andrew Holowchak, “Jefferson's Liberal ‘Eudaimonism,’” *Dutiful Correspondent: Philosophical Essays on Thomas Jefferson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 51–68, and “Why Jefferson Was no Political Relativist,” *Thirty-Six Short Essays on the Probing Mind of Thomas Jefferson: “A sentimental traveler”* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2020), chap. 7.

⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 52.

better; and in this progress nature herself has given everyone a part to play that is both his own and well within his powers.”⁵

Jefferson rejected Rousseau’s dystopianism concerning human socialization. He, like Kant and many French *philosophes*, believed that humans were progressing politically and morally, hence he was no political relativist. He also believed, like Kant, that humans could retard or expedite that progress.

Yet, for Jefferson, the distinction between the state of nature and the social state is forced and false, apropos of humans’ moral duties. He says in “Opinion on the French Treaties”:

The Moral duties which exist between individual and individual in a state of nature, accompany them into a state of society & the aggregate of the duties of all the individuals composing the society constitutes the duties of that society towards any other; so that between society & society the same moral duties exist as did between the individuals composing them while in an unassociated state, their maker not having released them from those duties on their forming themselves into a nation. Compacts then between nation & nation are obligatory on them by the same moral law which obliges individuals to observe their compacts.⁶

For Jefferson, the social state is part of the nature of humans, each of whom, like Aristotle notes, is a “political animal” (*politikon zōon*). Therefore, the same moral duties that humans had in the state of nature they have in the state of society. Thus, the social state, in effect, nowise changes persons, as moral beings. The liberty that Rousseau says is experienced in the state of nature can equally, for Jefferson, be experienced in the social state.

At day’s end, I argue that there is an underlying and not-so-readily-visible narrative, threaded throughout *Notes on Virginia*, though it is not a matter of deconstruction to get at it. The book, moving naturally and neatly from *phusis* to *nomos*, is a guidebook, with philosophical content, which sets the groundwork for the sort of society envisaged by utopists, such as Thomas More, James Harrington, Immanuel Kant, and especially Louis-Sébastien Mercier. *Notes on Virginia* is, I maintain, a precursor for the sort of hoped-for

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 59.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 423.

future American society—a society agrarian, religiously tolerant, with citizens having moderated wants, and where reasoned discussion takes the place of politics-incited violence—that Louis-Sébastien Mercier envisaged in his widely read *L'an 2440*. The similarities between Mercier's political future and Jefferson's are astonishing.⁷

Yet *Notes on Virginia* is more than a comprehensive guidebook. Its comprehensiveness argues against that. It reads instead, upon careful inspection, dialectically. The seven naturalistic queries are a reference resource by which the claims of critics of the New World, Jefferson's replies to those critics, and Jefferson's own data-driven scientific assertions can be evaluated by critical readers. Jefferson must have imagined that the most alert readers of his book in his day would have had it in hand when visiting the Natural Bridge, when studying the extant constitution of Virginia, when digging through its Native American barrows, or when studying birds, native to Virginia, as he had Whateley's book in hand when he studied the pleasure gardens of England. Moreover, Jefferson had in mind that the early naturalistic queries, to a discerning reader and in keeping with the strictures of Aristotle and the Hippocratic physicians, would impose natural limits to the sorts of cultures that a locale can expect to cultivate. A proper appreciation and understanding of nature would enable Virginians, even Americans, to grasp that bulky urbanization was at odds with nature, and thus, to be at all costs eschewed, if the aim was human happiness. Thus, there is interplay, a dialectic as it were, between the naturalistic and cultural queries. One cannot, for instance, understand the manners and laws of a community without appreciation of the climate and location (e.g., mountainous or flat, rainy or dry, and sea-bound or inland) of that community.

This book, *Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia*, began merely as another edition of Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, but this one with a running, and extensive, critical commentary. The need of an extensive critical commentary, I reasoned, was for the sake of getting clear on much that has been missed in other writings on the book: the large empirical content of the manuscript that betrayed a debt to Bacon and Newton but had roots as far back as Aristotle and Hippocratic medicine; the reexamination of *phusis* and *nomos* in the revivification neo-Stoicism in Jefferson's day; and the science of race, the stadial history, the *Scala naturae*, and the debate between monogenesists and polygenesists concerning the origins of humans by Enlightenment philosophers and scientists; *inter alia*. All such things are prevalent in

⁷ M. Andrew Holowchak, *Jefferson's Political Philosophy and the Metaphysics of Utopia* (London: Brill, 2017), 85–93.

Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, and Jeffersonian scholars typically overpass such subjects, perhaps because of ignorance of the history and philosophy of science.

As I began my commentary on Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, I had devoted so much of my energy to background information—*viz.*, things that a scholar needed to know prior to reading *Notes on Virginia*—that it dawned on me that my critical commentary was becoming a prolegomenon of sorts: a book not only about what the manuscript is, but also about how to read the manuscript, or what one needs to know prior to reading it. And so, I opted to make the book a prolegomenon.

There are four parts of this book and 11 chapters. As the work is a prolegomenon, Part I answers the questions about why Jefferson wrote the book and how it was received; Part II addresses certain things one needs to know that Jefferson believed; Part III examines certain aspects of Jefferson's philosophy of nature and culture; and Part IV is a study of Jeffersonian empiricism on display throughout his book—a study that astonishingly has never been undertaken.

The first part has three chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the two most prominent takes on the book—the Alphabet-Soup Thesis and the Deconstructionist Thesis. The second chapter discusses the motivation for the book, mostly by examination of Jefferson's writings. The third chapter looks at the reception, in Jefferson's day and ours, of the book.

Part II has chapters on the empiricism of his time; the *Scala naturae* or Ladder of Nature, prevalent in Jefferson's day; and the stadial history, common in his time. Ignorance of empiricism, which urges caution before generalizing hastily, is often puzzlingly cited by scholars as evidence of Jefferson's confusion. The Ladder of Nature and stadial history also inform *Notes on Virginia* and cannot be overlooked.

There are three chapters to the third part, which is philosophical. I begin with Jefferson's defense of the New World in chapter 7, and then religious tolerance and the aesthetics of America in the next two chapters.

Part IV is an explication of Jefferson and the praxis of science. I cover his abundant use of scientific description and explanation in chapter 10, and his employment of testing hypotheses in the last chapter.

If the thesis I advance is correct, then it is clear why Jefferson argued vociferously against popular publication. It was to be a book mostly inaccessible to the general public. It was meant for discerning readers—them with a

thorough grasp of the science, broadly understood and with politics and morality considered as sciences, of Jefferson's day.⁸

Readers will indulge me for two peccancies: one, sesquipedality or use of large words, which I have tried to minimize (I have a love of words and languages, and a word, once acquired, I like to put to usage), and two, the tendency to slip in much of the present tense, especially when introducing quotes or paraphrasing, for I think that it brings life to historical works.

⁸ There has never been a thorough analysis of the evolution of Jefferson's book. The best account is Wilson's. Douglas Wilson, "The Evolution of Jefferson *Notes on the State of Virginia*," *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*, Vol. 112, No. 2, 2004, 98–133.

Introduction

This is an erudite, complex study of Thomas Jefferson's intellectual background as it influenced his organization of *Notes on the State of Virginia* and explains his interpretive positions in that text. Jefferson began researching and writing the book while wartime governor of Virginia, completing it and arranging for its publication during his residency in Paris as U.S. minister to France. Andrew Holowchak's manuscript is divided into engaging and generally provocative chapters, which play off Jefferson's own curious arrangement of the text and arguments in *Notes*.

The strength of the author's examination lies in his familiarity with an extensive historiography and in his fearless attempts to probe Jefferson's thought processes on the basis of Jefferson's philosophical imagination and reading habits—with an emphasis on ethics (notably, human happiness) and the Virginian's passionate reading of the ancient Greeks. The addition of Louis-Sébastien Mercier as an overlooked influence on Jefferson is new to me and compelling.

Jefferson's naturalism, appropriately, figures throughout, along with controversies that swirled about *Notes* in his time as well as ours. The discussion of Buffon, where the author claims that Jefferson's "refutation" was less than a refutation, while comprehensive, doesn't really have a whole lot to say that previous Jefferson scholars haven't already said. To be clear, this is a minor criticism. The author painstakingly lays out Jefferson's views on "corruptions" in religious orthodoxies—religious convention made sense to him only when advancing morality and justice and remaining clear of politics. Indeed, on this extended topic, I find Holowchak thorough and revealing in his assessment. The one modern scholar whose three rigorous book-length studies of Jefferson are important, yet unengaged here, is Maurizio Valsania. I strongly recommend these, especially *Nature's Man: Thomas Jefferson's Philosophical Anthropology* (2013).

Holowchak's conclusion resonates: In *Notes*, Holowchak writes Jefferson was "a dyed-in-the-wool empiricist whose scientific methods were starkly influenced by Newton's principles of philosophy, rooted in Greek antiquity." This matches some of Holowchak's previous work on Jefferson, but is by no means repetitive.

I am unquestionably convinced of the scholarly value of this new book and would recommend it to deep thinkers who care about the tenor of Jefferson's

mind. It adds much to historical scholarship on the European and American Enlightenment. As a commentary on Jefferson's *Notes*, it is particularly useful.

Andrew Burstein

Part I
Structure and Intendment
of the Work

Chapter I

Scholarly Takes on *Notes on Virginia*

Jefferson was an avid writer, but his *Notes on the State of Virginia*—whose title Kevin Gutzman calls a pun, presumably because “state” can be read to mean “condition”¹—was his only book. It was begun in response to several questions sent indirectly to Jefferson by the Secretary of the French legation,² François Barbé-Marbois, in 1780. Jefferson began merely with the intendment of answering Marbois’ questions. Circumstances, abroad and at home, prompted Jefferson to lengthen and polish the manuscript—i.e., to prepare a book.

The book, the title suggests, is descriptive in intent—a guide-book to the geography, climate, and people of Virginia and their laws, religions, manners, and commerce, *inter alia*. Yet in spite of its putative descriptive intent, it is peppered with informative critical insights—vignettes, as it were, that are often of a philosophical and exegetic nature—that stray from the descriptive intent. These vignettes are rich sources for clues to Jefferson’s frame of mind during the time he wrote *Notes on Virginia*.

What were Jefferson’s reasons for writing a book-length manuscript in answering the questions of Marbois?

To that question I turn directly in chapter 2, but examination of the structure of the work is also pertinent to any answer, and so I begin with a look at the structure of Jefferson’s book, or its lack.

There is no scholarly consensus, though two views predominate in the secondary literature: the Alphabet-Soup Thesis, that there is no real structure to the work, and the Deconstructionist Thesis, roughly, that there is a latent narrative thread or thesis. Many other scholars, perhaps perplexed, discuss the book or several of its subjects without amplification of Jefferson’s intentions in crafting it.

¹ Kevin R.C. Gutzman, *Thomas Jefferson, Revolutionary: A Radical’s Struggle to Remake America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017), 118. There is no support in Jefferson’s letters for this reading. It is also noteworthy that Jefferson typically refers to his book as “*Notes on Virginia*.”

² The queries were originally sent to Joseph Jones, of Virginia’s Congress, who then passed them to Jefferson, then governor. TJ to Charles François D’Anmours, 30 Nov. 1780.

This chapter, introductory, looks at the two predominant theses in the literature on Jefferson's book. I make no attempt to offer an exhaustive look on the secondary literature—there is no need for that—but only a representative sample.

“The subjects are all treated imperfectly”

Alphabet-Soup Thesis

The received view, in keeping with Jefferson's chosen title and his avowed skittishness concerning the book in the Stockdale's version's advertisement and in subsequent letters, is the *Alphabet-Soup Thesis* (T_{AS})—*viz.*, that the book, essentially an attempt to offer answers to Marbois' questions, has little, if any, structure, and in its most complete form, winds up being nothing more than a somewhat ragtag guidebook to Virginia and other noteworthy parts of America with, in places, a running critical commentary, when Jefferson feels the need of getting, as it were, some things off his chest. Jefferson essays to answer all the questions put to him by Marbois, though he does some reshuffling or the order, and then, as he sees fit, discretionarily adds a running critical commentary.

This view is largely prompted by Jefferson, who writes in his “Advertisement” at the beginning of the 1787 edition:

The following notes were written in Virginia in the year 1781, and somewhat corrected and enlarged in the winter of 1782, in answer to Queries proposed to the Author, by a Foreigner of Distinction, then residing among us. The subjects are all treated imperfectly; some scarcely touched on. To apologize for this by developing the circumstances of the time and place of their composition, would be to open wounds which have already bled enough. To these circumstances some of their imperfections may with truth be ascribed; the great mass to the want of information and want of talents in the writer.³

³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 2. Jefferson's “preface,” as it were, might seem to be another instance of his false modesty, as many revisionist scholars are wont to note, but it is not. When Jefferson writes of the imperfections of the work and blames them on the ignorance and limits its author, he is being truthful. The project, as some attempt to give an accurate and exhaustive answer to Marbois' questions, is prodigious, hence modesty is warranted.

PAGES MISSING
FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

Index

A

- Abbé Raynal: 20, 104, 133, 138,
144, 234–35
Adams, John: v, 40, 41, 84n3, 121,
122, 136–37, 169, 197, 202, 203
Albert Magnus: 86
Alphabet-Soup Thesis: v, xi, 3, 4–9,
11, 158, 209
American Philosophical Society: 22
Anaxagoras: 87
Aquinas, Thomas: 86n9
Aristotle: ix, x, 58, 58n51, 66–67, 68,
73–76, 77, 79, 81, 84, 85–86, 86n6,
86n8, 87, 106, 112, 128–29, 136,
140, 147, 147n42, 169, 186, 204,
204n7, 207, 227–28, 247, 254
Arnold, Benedict: 21
Austin, Benjamin: 119

B

- Bacon, Francis: x, 6, 64–65, 76–77,
201, 202, 228, 251, 252, 253, 254
Barbé-Marbois, François: v, vii, 3, 4,
4n3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 15, 16–18, 19,
20, 21–23, 21n3, 21n4, 22n5, 24,
26, 37, 54, 108, 134, 158, 201, 251
Barker, Gordon: 29–31
Barton, Benjamin Smith: 154
Blair, Hugh: 193, 196
Boles, John: 48
Bolingbroke, Lord: 195
Bonnet, Charles: 91–93
Brahe, Tycho: 75
Buffon, Comte de: vi, xviii, 20, 24,
28, 40, 47, 81, 94, 99, 102, 104,

- 108, 133–35, 139–40, 142–44,
145–53, 144n30, 153–54, 175, 181,
197, 216–18, 233–34, 247, 250
Burke, Edmund: 182, 185–86, 188,
191, 192, 196, 197, 253
Burke, John D.: 195
Burststein, Andrew: 11, 58

C

- Campbell, John W.: 34
Carmichael, William: 31, 41
Carr, Peter: 165
Carrington, Edward: 125
Cary, Nicholas: 144n32, 148n46
Catholic Church: 86, 227
Chastellux, Marquis de: 6, 27, 44
Chevalier D'Anmours: 20
Church, Angela: 166
Cillerai, Chiara: 134, 152
Clark, George Rogers: 24
Clay, Rev. Charles: viii
Clayton, John: 145, 145n33, 215
Cohen, William: 56
Coles, Edmund: 105
Commager, Henry Steele: 8
Condorcet, Marquis de: vi, 52,
126–28, 157
Conjectural history: 111, 113
Copernicus, Nikolas: 75, 220, 241
Cornelius, Washington: 138
Cosway, Maria: 191, 192, 197
Crawford, John: 103
Currie, James: 196
Cuvier, Georges: 97, 100–1, 103,
109, 154, 246, 247

D

Danbury Baptists: 171
 Darwin, Charles: 103, 108, 109
 Davis, Matthew L. and William A.:
 33
 Davy, George Alan: 9
 Dawidoff, Robert: 10
 Declaration of Independence: 43,
 44, 157
 Deconstructionist Thesis: v–vi, ix,
 xi, 3, 9–13, 19, 220n52, 251
 Descartes, René: 76, 89–90
 Duane, William: 34
 Dugatkin, Lee: 134
 Dumas, C.W.F.: 28, 40, 42

E

Ellis, Joseph: 7, 57
 empiricism, early: 65–72
 empiricism, Enlightenment: 65,
 73–81
 England: v, x, 29, 40, 49, 121, 158,
 235
 Eppes, Francis: 195

F

Ferguson, Robert: 9, 113, 125
 Fishback, James: 167
 Forbes, Robert: 43–44, 220, 220n52
 France: v, vii, xiii, 24, 25, 41, 43, 45,
 54, 121, 126, 154, 155, 157, 158,
 196n50, 214n32, 235, 250
 Franciscus de Pauw, Cornelius:
 138–39, 144
 Frankel, Matthew Cordova: 10–11,
 177
 Franklin, Benjamin: 115
 Frye, Joshua: 32

G

Galilei, Galileo: 75, 79, 81, 157,
 202, 206, 228, 241
 Galen: 69–71, 70n17, 98
 Gallatin, Albert: 197
 Gerry, Elbridge: 168
 Gish, Dustin: 12, 35–37, 40, 46, 64,
 134, 176, 206, 249–54
 Gmelin, Johann Georg: 99
 Golden, Alan: 11–12
 Golden, James: 11–12
 Goldsmith, Oliver: 99–100, 102, 154
 Gutzman, Kevin: 3

H

Hamilton, Alexander: 136
 Hargraves, Neil: 112n3
 Harper's Ferry: 194, 198
 Harrington, James: vi, ix, 120, 125
 Healey, Robert: 165n24
 Hellenbrand, Harold: 9–10, 176–
 77, 198
 Helo, Ari: 105n62
 Helvetius, Claude-Adrien: 112
 Hemings, John: 222
 Henry, Patrick: 12, 184, 195–96
 Hippocratic medicine: x, 68, 70,
 71, 98, 101–2, 106, 138, 140–42,
 144, 254
 Hogarth, William: 182, 186, 187,
 188, 191
 Hogendorp, G.K.: 28, 41–42
 Hopkins, George: 243
 Hopkinson, Francis: 41
 Hume, David: 26, 65, 78, 112, 121–
 22
 Humphreys, David: 40
 Hutchins, Thomas: 24
 Hutton, James:

J

Jefferson, Martha: 5
 Jefferson, Peter: 32
 Jefferson, Thomas
 on aesthetic sense: 181–85
 agrarianism of: 120–24, 126–29
 anticity sentiments: x, 118–20
 apology for America: 145–53
 on beauty: 185–91
 on “Big Buffalo”: 231–33
 bill for religious freedom: 155–58
 on biological classification: 245–48
 on Blacks: 52–58, 104–6, 188, 220–24
 on Buffon’s four theses: 233–34
 classification of plants: 145
 on the Constitution: 39, 44, 47–52
 on creation of cosmos: 106–7
 on dew inside buildings: 239–40
 empiricism of: xi, 177–248
 on freedom of religion: 160–63, 163–71
 on liberty: viii
 liberal eudaimonism of: 20
 on limestone: 228–29
 on looming: 219, 219n49
 map of Virginia: 31–32
 on masses of warm air: 235–36
 medialism of: 124–29
 on medicine: 71–72
 mock modesty of: 46–47
 on morality: ix
 on Native Americans: 104, 125, 192, 216–18, 236–38, 238–39
 on natural aristocracy: 136–37
 nominalism of: 110
 as obsessive: 18–19
 on petrified shells: 229–30

 progressivism of: 27
 on Quakers: 169
 on religion: 44–45, 155–72, 241–42
 and rhetoric of emotions; 177–81
 on slavery: 39, 44, 52–58
 on sublimity: 191–97
 tables of American animals: 148–52
 on Virginia’s caves: 211
 on Virginia’s frosts: 218–19
 on Virginia’s mountains: 209–11
 on Virginia’s rivers: 207–9
 on Virginia’s springs: 212–15
 Jenner, Edward: 71
 Jones, Joseph: 3n2, 15, 21n4
 Jordan, Winthrop: 56–57
 Jouett, Jack: 21

K

Kames, Lord: vi, 65, 112, 114, 116, 182, 183, 183n15, 184–85, 196, 253
 Kant, Immanuel: viii–ix, 78, 220, 220n52
 Kaplan, Lawrence: 7
 Kepler, Johannes: 79, 81
 Kinloch, Francis: 42, 44
 King, Miles: 168
 Klinghard, David: 12, 35–37, 40, 46, 64, 134, 176, 206, 249–54
 Koch, Adrienne: 8

L

Lafayette, Marquis de: 43
 LaFeber, Walter: 124
 Lamarck, Jean-Baptiste: 94–96, 109, 110
 Laplace, Pierre Simon: 87

Leibniz, Gottfried: 87–88, 87n14, 93
 Leiper, Thomas: 168
 Levy, Leonard: 8
 Linn, William: 45, 166n27
 Linnaeus, Carl: 90–91, 93, 97–98,
 98–99, 108, 110, 140, 145, 245–
 47
 Locke, John: 64–65, 77, 80, 169n34,
 201, 202
 Lubke, Fred: 170n36
 Ludlow, William: 111, 116, 117,
 125, 128
 Lyell, Charles: 96

M

Madison, James: 22, 26, 27, 28, 29,
 41, 42, 44, 52, 125, 157
 Madison, Rev. James: 41, 83n2, 202
 Madison's Cave: 211, 215, 229
 Magnis, Nicholas: 57
 Malone, Dumas: 5, 42–43, 133, 155
 Malthus, Thomas: 122, 123
 Manners, John: 109, 110, 246ff.
 Mapp, Alf: 8
 Matthews, Richard: 56, 63
 Mazzei, Philip: 41
 McCoy, Drew: 115
 McPherson, Charles: 194–95
 McPherson, James: 194–95,
 195n47
 Medicine, ancient: 66–70
 Melish, John: 34
 Mercier, Louis Sébastien: vi, ix–x,
 xii, 120, 126, 157, 242, 242n48
 Millar, John: 112, 125
 Miller, Charles: 8
 Miller, John Chester: 57
 Monroe, James: 25, 26, 27, 41, 52,
 195
 Montesquieu: 134
 Monticello: v, 157, 191–92, 219

Moor, Jeremiah: 167
 More, Thomas: vi, 125, 126,
 126n45
 Morellet, Abbé: 12, 28–30, 40

N

Natural Bridge: 43, 192, 194, 199,
 212
 Neem, Johann: 57
 Newton, Isaac: x, xiii, 64–65, 79–
 81, 91, 106, 153n48, 157, 161,
 201, 202–7, 204n11, 211, 213,
 225, 228, 230, 241, 242, 243, 252,
 253–54
 Niagara Falls: 192
 Nicholas of Cusa: 87
nomos: vi, ix, x, 13, 19, 20, 68, 111,
 193, 252

O

O'Brien, Conor Cruise: 57
 Onuf, Peter: 7, 19, 57
 Opinion on the French Treaties: ix
 Owen, Robert: 116–17

P

Page, John: 41
 Paine Thomas: 195
 Parker, Thomas: 170
 Parmenides: 227
 Peden, William: 8, 39, 46
 Peterson, Merrill: 6, 64, 127, 133, 155
phusis: vi, ix, x, 13, 19, 20, 68, 111,
 141, 193, 252
philosophes: ix
 Pickering, Charles: 103
 Pierres, Philippe-Denis: 25
 Plato: 65–66, 67, 77, 86n8, 112,
 112n2, 115, 136, 196n49, 227

Pocock, J.G.A.: 114n8
 Presocratic Philosophers: 227
 Price, Richard: 220
 Priestley, Joseph: 196, 197

R

Ramsay, David: 41
 Reid, Thomas: 182
 Retzius, Anders Adolph: 103
 Revolution, American: vi, 21, 22,
 36, 135, 190, 221
 Riley, Isaac: 33
 Rittenhouse, David: 41, 202
 Robertson, William: 112, 138, 154
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques: viii–ix,
 115, 116, 193
 Rudwick, M.J.S.: 96
 Rush, Benjamin: 120, 167, 196
 Rutledge, Edward: 190

S

Sancho, Ignatius: 223
 Say, Jean Baptiste: 122
 Scala Naturae: xi, 83–101, 111
 Schachner, Nathan: 134
 Schaffer, William: 139
 Shalev, Eran: 124
 Sheehan, Bernard: 134
 Shuffleton, Frank: 7–8, 21n3, 134
 Sinoza, Baruch: 87
 Skipwith, Robert: 182
 Smith, Adam: 112, 113, 114, 115,
 117, 118
 Sophists: vi, 77
 Stadiatism: 111–129
 Stewart, Dugald: 114
 Stockdale, James: vi, 4, 31–34, 37,
 40, 41, 45, 81
 Summary View of the Rights of
 British America: vi, 44, 135, 157

T

Tacitus: 170n35
 Tessé, Madame: 189
 Thompson, Peter: 57
 Thomson, Charles: 6, 22–23, 24,
 41, 81, 83, 106, 107, 189, 190,
 201, 231n10
 Thomson, Keith: 11
 Tucker, David: 10, 160n11, 161n12,
 166n28, 175–76
 Turgot, Anne-Robert-Jacques: 112

U

Ussher, Bishop: 97

V

Voltaire: 45, 230

W

Walker, Thomas: 23, 41, 148n46
 Wallace, Alfred Russel: 108
 Washington, George: 99n40
 Whately, Thomas: v, vi, 223
 Wheatley, Phyllis: 223
 Whitehurst, John: 106
 William and Mary College: 8, 9, 19,
 25, 26–27, 40
 Willamos, Charles: 28, 29
 Wilson, Douglas: xiin8, 6, 33, 46,
 134, 178n8
 Wirt, William: 195
 Wistar, Caspar: 71
 Wythe, George: 41, 42, 164, 189

Z

Zane, Isaac: 22
 Zuckert, Michael: 177