Jefferson's “Marble Mausoleum”: Incongruence in the Historical Memory of Thomas Jefferson, 1936-1943

Meredith Barber

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 2

Chapter 1 - Memorializing Jefferson as the “Father” of a Party, Freedom, and Democracy: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission, 1936-1943 ........................................................................ 8

Chapter 2 - The “Cherry Tree Rebellion”: The Controversial Addition of Jefferson to the Washington Memorial Landscape, 1936 - 1939 .................................................................................. 33

Chapter 3 - “The Cause which was the Passion of his Soul”: Jefferson Randolph Kean and the ‘Slavery’ Inscription, 1939-1941.................................................................................................................. 55

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 74

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................... 82
Introduction

On 20 April 1937, a newspaper reported “George Washington’s name is associated with the chopping down of one cherry tree. If the plans of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission are not changed, the name of the third President may henceforth be linked with the destruction of the 723 most famous cherry trees in the country.”\(^1\) Seven months later, 150 women chained themselves to Japanese Cherry Trees at the construction site of the Jefferson Memorial to prevent their destruction. Their actions became known as “the Cherry Tree Rebellion.” The day after the “rebellion,” the women picketed outside the White House, singing Joyce Kilmer’s poem, “Trees” which goes, “I think that I shall never see, a poem as lovely as a tree… Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.”\(^2\) The Washingtonian women were not happy about the construction of the Jefferson Memorial at the Tidal Basin and mourned the loss of the beloved cherry trees.

The Thomas Jefferson Memorial was constructed in a moment that historian Francis Cogliano considered “the age of Jefferson monuments.”\(^3\) After the Civil War and until the 1920s, Americans saw Jefferson as a symbol of division, nullification, and secession, but his reputation experienced a “face-lift” in the 1930s. By the end of the Second World War, Americans saw him as a symbol of freedom and patriotism.\(^4\) “The age of Jefferson monuments” occurred in a moment that Jefferson’s reputation underwent a revival. Between 1927 and 1943, the federal

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1 “Jefferson and the Cherry Trees,” The Hartford Courant (Hartford, CT), 20 April 1937, 12.


4 Cogliano, Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy, 4-5; Andrew Burstein, Democracy’s Muse (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), IX.
government dedicated the Jefferson nickel, Jefferson’s sculpture at Mount Rushmore, the Jefferson Memorial, and the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* to the memory of Jefferson. In 1927, only three years after opening its doors to the public, Monticello saw 49,446 visitors. By 1946, that number had increased to more than 100,000. Historians of Jefferson’s legacy have assumed that the construction of the Jefferson memorial fits neatly into this age of memorialization. Today, the memorial appears as one cohesive structure, a “marble mausoleum” for Jefferson. When tourists visit the Jefferson Memorial, they might hear about the story of the 1938 Cherry Tree Rebellion, but not learn about Jefferson’s ever-changing legacy. If the Jefferson Memorial fit so neatly into “the age of Jefferson monuments,” then why did the women of the Cherry Tree Rebellion use their bodies to prevent its construction? What did their protest have to do with the way they remembered Jefferson?

In order to answer these questions, I turned to congressional records, correspondence between members of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission (TJMC), *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, and American newspapers. The correspondence of Jefferson Randolph Kean, a member of the TJMC and descendant of Jefferson, have not been used by previous historians of the Jefferson Memorial. Through my research, I found that the

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Barber 4

Cherry Tree Rebellion was not the only example of contested memory of Jefferson in the history of the memorial. Congressmen debated Jefferson’s historical significance to determine if he deserved a memorial akin to the George Washington Monument and the Abraham Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.. There was dispute amongst the TJMC over including an inscription that memorialized Jefferson as an abolitionist. Today, this inscription still exists without context or qualifications. Investigating the decisions that determined the location, design, and interior of the memorial reveal that changing and conflicting memories of Jefferson shaped the Jefferson Memorial. Based on my research, I argue that the structure does not fit neatly into a moment that Jefferson’s reputation improved, as historians of Jefferson’s legacy have asserted. Instead, it represents various memories of Jefferson over a span of seven years (1936-1943): Jefferson as a Democrat, a symbol of freedom, and as a founder of democracy. The TJMC employed these memories intentionally, because they viewed it as their responsibility to promote American patriotism through defining a national history. Their national history had to include Jefferson at the forefront. Historians who have written about the memorial have failed to acknowledge the TJMC’s role in shaping the memory of Jefferson. The TJMC’s ideas did not go over smoothly with the public, and memorializing Jefferson while his legacy experienced change caused great controversy in the capital city.

When the TJMC first released the plans for the memorial location and design in 1937, they faced intense push back from the Washington public, but as the creation of the memorial progressed, the resistance faded and the public eventually approved of the memorial. This shift from disapproval to approval coincided with the TJMC’s evocation of Jefferson as a symbol of freedom and democracy. The first chapter follows this shift and answers the question: why were
specific memories of Jefferson as the first Democrat, symbol of freedom, and founder of democracy employed in certain historical moments? The TJMC used contemporary events like New Deal reforms and the Second World War to make Jefferson more relevant to Americans. This turned the memorial into a symbol of patriotism that Washingtonians and Americans could understand and support. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and individuals on the memorial commission, such as New York Representative (D) John J. Boylan, scholar Dr. Sidney Fiske Kimball, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Chairman Stuart Gibboney, and Utah Senator (D) Elbert Thomas, directly contributed to the transformation in Jefferson’s reputation that occurred in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Their efforts to defend the Jefferson Memorial made Jefferson a more interpretable figure for the American public.

The second chapter explains the Cherry Tree Rebellion. The controversy that resulted in the Cherry Tree Rebellion stemmed from contention over the location and design of the memorial. The TJMC wanted a classical, non-utilitarian memorial at the Tidal Basin, but this idea did not resonate with the Washington public.9 The proposed design was intended to assert Jefferson’s status as one of the greatest American presidents, alongside Washington and Lincoln, who were already memorialized on the National Mall. It was a statement of party politics, because New Deal Democrats recognized Jefferson as the founding Democrat and Republicans recognized Lincoln as a representation of the Republican party. The TJMC selected the location and design of the memorial in a moment that Jefferson’s reputation still connoted party politics.

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9 I use the phrases “utilitarian” and “non-utilitarian” throughout this thesis because they were consistently used by both Washingtonians and the TJMC in congressional hearings and newspaper articles. I am not referencing architectural “Utilitarianism” that was popularized in the twentieth century, but rather the usefulness and practicality of a structure. I specify a “utilitarian” memorial as one with a function other than as a space of memory, such as an auditorium or stadium.
and division. Therefore, the design was especially significant to the New Deal Democrats on the TJMC, but especially insignificant to the Washington public, who did not see Jefferson with the same political importance that politicians saw him with. In contrast to the TJMC, the public valued the park at the Tidal Basin and wanted to protect the cherry trees.

The memory of Jefferson as a symbol of Americanness that the TJMC employed in the late 1930s meant that his role as a slave-owner was left out of the memorial. In fact, to simplify memory of Jefferson and fit his legacy into the consensus history of the mid-twentieth century, the TJMC memorialized Jefferson as the “first abolitionist” and credited him with “freedom of the slaves.”

The third chapter answers why the TJMC remembered Jefferson as an abolitionist and determines why an inscription in the memorial is dedicated to Jefferson’s non-existent effort to end slavery. The inscription represents a contested memory of Jefferson that narrowly made it into the memorial. The TJMC argued for years over whether or not to include the inscription, but it exists in the memorial today as a testament to changing and complicated memories of Jefferson.

The creation of the Jefferson Memorial was a valuable moment in historical memory of Thomas Jefferson because it gave individuals with diverse experiences the chance to directly state what Jefferson meant to them, or how he should be memorialized. The disputes over the memorial were passionate – women chained themselves to cherry trees and Washingtonians

\[\text{J. R. Kean thought of Jefferson as the “first abolitionist” and wrote the inscription. He also credited Jefferson with “freedom of the slaves.” See; Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney, 13 February 1941, Box 3, Folder 4, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers, University of Virginia; Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 20 January 1940, Box 72, Folder 11, Fiske Kimball Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives, Philadelphia, PA, 2.}\]
threatened congressmen. Historians of Jefferson’s reputation consider the mid-twentieth century a point where Jefferson’s legacy was restored, but the controversies over the memorial revealed that at the time of the memorial’s creation, Americans had no unified understanding of Jefferson.

Today, as Jefferson remains a controversial figure, it is important to acknowledge that there is not a precise or completely accurate interpretation of Jefferson. Federally funded sites of memory, such as the Jefferson Memorial, do not tell a comprehensive story of public memory. Instead, they highlight ideas individuals in power held about historical figures or events. Memorials influence public consciousness by framing history in a concise and often oversimplified way. The Jefferson Memorial does not reflect Jefferson as a man or leader. It represents the specific image of Jefferson that was in the minds of members of the TJMC. It does not reveal Americans’ or Washingtonians’ perception of Jefferson. The memorial’s portrayal of Jefferson as a symbol of freedom and democracy impacts Americans and historians today, as they grapple with the paradox of Jefferson: a symbol of freedom, but also a slaveholder. If we recognize that the memory of Jefferson as a symbol of freedom was one curated in the late 1930s, it will be easier to come to terms with the complexity of the founding father.

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11 New York Representative John J. Boylan, TJMC founder, expressed his fear to attend the congressional hearings for the memorial in 1938, “I was almost afraid to come over here: I heard that there was a great outpouring of citizens that were going to do dire things to the Jefferson Memorial Commission and annihilate its chairman.” See, U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 75th Cong., 1st sess., 1937, H. J. Res. 337, serial 180738, 58.
Chapter 1

Memorializing Jefferson as the “Father” of a Party, Freedom, and Democracy: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission, 1936-1943

The Jefferson Memorial enshrines a nineteen-foot statue of Jefferson in a circular dome and surrounds him with twenty-six ionic columns. The classical, non-utilitarian design was highly contested, but approved by the TJMC by 17 November 1938, when construction began. The walls of the memorial contain five inscriptions, each dedicated to an American “freedom” Jefferson achieved in his lifetime. The inscriptions were also highly contested, but etched into the memorial by 13 April 1943, when the structure was dedicated. The choices of the design and inscriptions in the memorial occurred in different historical moments.

The TJMC employed different memories of Jefferson in these separate moments in order to ensure the successful construction of the memorial and assert the historical relevance of Jefferson. The TJMC evoked the memory of Jefferson as the “Founder of a Party” as the design was chosen in 1934-1938. This memory was shaped by New Deal Democrats and in response to the construction of the “Republican” Lincoln Memorial (1914-1922). President Roosevelt and most of the TJMC were New Deal Democrats. The memorial had an especially weighted importance to these Democrats because they viewed it as their party’s answer to the Lincoln Memorial. Therefore, it was essential to the TJMC that they memorialized Jefferson in a manner equal to Lincoln - with a classical, non-utilitarian memorial. The memorial began as a statement of the political prowess and historical precedence of the Democrats, but the meaning of the memorial changed as the construction continued. As the Second World War began, President

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Franklin Roosevelt and the TJMC brought forth memory of Jefferson as an “Apostle of Freedom” and “Father of American Democracy.” This memory of Jefferson lasted until the dedication of the memorial, when Roosevelt called the memorial a “shrine to freedom.” The TJMC constructed the memory of Jefferson as a founder of freedom and democracy while they drafted the inscriptions of the memorial. The design of the memorial reflects a memory of Jefferson as a Democrat, but the inscriptions reflect a memory of Jefferson as a founding father.

In the midst of the memorial’s creation, the TJMC attributed Jefferson with achieving the “four freedoms” in the United States: “abolition of feudal tenure of land - freeing the earth; abolition of human slavery - freeing the body; establishment of universal education and freedom of speech - freeing the mind; establishment of religious liberty - freeing the soul.” The glaring similarities between what the TJMC labeled “Jefferson’s four freedoms” and President Roosevelt’s 6 January 1941 “Four Freedoms” speech were no coincidence. Roosevelt drew the language for his “Four Freedoms” speech from members of the TJMC. Roosevelt and the TJMC worked together to draft the inscriptions of the memorial and both recognized the American need to define the “freedom” they were fighting for abroad. Roosevelt’s use of the “Four Freedoms”

13 Address at Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 13 April 1943, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Samuel I. Rosenman, (New York: Random House, 1938-1949), 12, 162; Thomas Jefferson's Claim to a Site of Major Importance for a Memorial, 1 August 1935, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.

14 Address at Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 13 April 1943, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 12, 162.

15 For more information on “abolition of human slavery” as part of “Jefferson’s four freedoms,” see chapter three, which is dedicated to understanding this aspect of memory of Jefferson. See: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission: Program of Competition for a Monument to Thomas Jefferson, 1939, Box 73, Folder 13, Fiske Kimball Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives, 2.

marked the transition in Jefferson’s reputation from a symbol of the Democrats to a symbol of patriotism. Additionally, his use of “Four Freedoms” revealed the success of the TJMC in molding Jefferson’s legacy to be a representation of “freedom.”

There is a gap in histories of the memorial that does not acknowledge the differing memories of Jefferson employed throughout the existence of the TJMC. Merrill Peterson, Francis Cogliano, and Andrew Burstein, historians of Jefferson’s legacy, have considered the memorial a symbol of the revival of Jefferson’s reputation in the mid-twentieth century.\(^{17}\) The different and changing memories of Jefferson employed by the TJMC revealed that this revival of Jefferson’s reputation actually coincided with the creation of the memorial. It was a product of President Roosevelt and the events of the 1930s and 1940s, not a product of Jefferson’s revived reputation.

Architectural historian Kirk Savage pointed out the political significance of a Jefferson Memorial of equal stature to the Lincoln Memorial, but did not further investigate the memorial as a political symbol in the context of the 1940s. Michael Kammen, a prolific historian of historical memory, explained that in the 1930s and 1940s, “the government assumed responsibility for American memory to a degree and in ways hitherto unanticipated,” but his work does not cover the Jefferson Memorial.\(^{18}\) Savage explored the memory of Jefferson employed in the first few years of his memorialization and Kammen explained the way the Second World War (which occurred in the later part

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of the memorial’s creation) shaped American memory. Historians who have researched the Jefferson memorial have largely failed to recognize the changing political nature of the memorial as well as the role that members of the TJMC had in shaping Jefferson’s legacy. The creation of the Jefferson Memorial began as a political statement by congressional Democrats to assert their historical relevance and precedent, as they considered Jefferson the founder of their party. Over time, as the Second World War commenced, the TJMC and Roosevelt shaped the memorial to be a patriotic - but still political - statement of the preeminence of “freedom” and democracy.

**Jefferson the “Founder of a Party”: Comparisons between the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials**

At the cornerstone laying of the Jefferson Memorial on 15 November 1939, President Roosevelt acknowledged the accomplishments of President Washington, who “represented abilities recognized in every part of the young nation,” and President Lincoln, a “rallying point for a torn nation” and “emancipator.”19 He described why the past presidents deserved their own memorials. He went on, “to those we add today another American of many parts - not Jefferson the founder of a party, but the Jefferson whose influence is felt today in many of the current activities of mankind.”20 Roosevelt simultaneously acknowledged Jefferson’s significance to the Democratic party and denied the political meaning of the memorial. Despite Roosevelt’s assertion that the memorial was not meant to cement Jefferson’s legacy as the first Democrat, members of

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19 Cornerstone Laying of the Jefferson Memorial, 15 November 1939, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt*, 8, 578.

20 Ibid.
the TJMC explicitly recognized the political nature of memorializing Jefferson.

Additionally, they consistently compared the Jefferson Memorial with the Lincoln Memorial, which was meant to honor the prominent Republican.

Roosevelt and much of the TJMC viewed it essential to add a Democrat to the canon of great presidents because it could validate their legitimacy and establish historical precedence of their party. New Deal Democrats exercised an unprecedented level of governing power and they used Jefferson to legitimize their actions. In the 1920s and 1930s, Jefferson’s ideals were often tied to New Deal policies to explain their purpose.21 New Deal Democrats argued that “Jeffersonian principles” were related to New Deal principles because both were fundamentally aimed at increasing the freedom of the masses. In his preparation to serve on the TJMC, Fiske Kimball read scholar Robert K. Gooch’s *Reconciling Jeffersonian Principles with the New Deal* (1935).22 Gooch redefined what liberty meant in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. He wrote, “original champions of liberty and liberalism, like Mr. Jefferson” were interested in “defending the mass of the people against the privileged class, in whose hands political power rested for the moment.”23 Gooch described that, “liberty and liberalism were the means for seeking the general interest of the masses. This general interest was the true

21 In *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, Merrill Peterson articulated that the New Deal was to be “a twentieth century model of Jefferson’s principles of government,” and “Jefferson was a patriotic symbol.” See: Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, 356, 379.

22 In his book, Gooch argued, “if Jefferson were on earth today… he would beyond reasonable doubt most certainly be a staunch supporter of the underlying principles of the New Deal” because it “assumes the priority of the welfare of all the people over the privilege of the few.” See, Robert K. Gooch, *Reconciling Jeffersonian Principles with the New Deal*, June 1935, Box 73, Folder 5, Fiske Kimball Papers, 4.

end.”

Gooch, a scholar from the University of Virginia, exemplified the effort to tie Jeffersonian principles with New Deal policies. The connection between the two gave the creation of the Jefferson Memorial higher political stakes for Roosevelt and New Deal Democrats. The association between the New Deal and Jefferson made the memorial a political statement of the Democrats’ success.

New York Representative John J. Boylan, TJMC founder and chairman, was recognized by his peers as an authority on Jefferson and he often framed Jefferson as a figure that represented New Deal ideals. Every year, Boylan made a speech about Jefferson to honor his birthday. On 13 April 1935, Boylan’s honorary speech was meant to tie Jefferson’s ideals to New Deal policies. Boylan stated,

In days of distrust of the populace, agitation, and revolution, and at a time when democracy was but a name, he stood firm for a government in which the power would be resident not in the men of intellect, of financial influence, or social standing, but in the artificers of the cities, the woodsmen of the frontier, the laborers on the farms and plantations, the seamen along the Atlantic coast.

Boylan went on to describe the importance of individual liberty and Jefferson’s contributions to religious freedom. His rhetoric was similar to that of Robert Gooch. New Deal Democrats frequently argued that their policies favored common people, and Boylan made sure to point out that Jefferson was a man of the people. Jefferson was Boylan’s lifelong hero, so the memorial held both political and personal significance to

24 Gooch, 12.

25 Kirk Savage, Monument Wars (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 244.

26 Fiske Kimball to Howard Smith, 1 March 1943, Box 72, Folder 7, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2.

him. His personal conception of Jefferson largely formed the way Jefferson was memorialized. His advocacy for the memorial was partly due to his own admiration for Jefferson, but also related to the relationship between Jefferson and the Democratic party. As an influential member of congress and the TJMC, Boylan formed congressional conceptions of Jefferson as a figure that would have supported New Deal policies. He was responsible for directly tying the Roosevelt administration to Jeffersonian principles. Boylan died in 1938, before the memorial was completed. Members of the TJMC felt it was their duty to carry out Boylan’s vision for the memorial, which meant that his interpretation of Jefferson held a lot of weight in the memorialization process.

President Roosevelt and the TJMC considered the Democratic administration uniquely capable of memorializing Jefferson because they remembered Jefferson as not only a progressive founding father, but also as the first Democrat. In 1937, when Boylan recalled his first visit to Washington, D.C., he remembered wondering why there was no memorial to Thomas Jefferson, “the third President of the United States and a man who had done so much for civil and religious liberty.” In 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt recounted a similar experience, explaining, “it was a sort of funny thing that

28 Other congressmen recognized Boylan as primarily responsible for the memorial. In 1936, Indiana Representative Louis Ludlow (D) acknowledged Boylan’s dedication to the memorial: “Mr. Boylan, who has labored for this project year after year, in season and out of season, and whose cup of happiness surely must be flowing over, now that he is about to witness the realization of his dream.” It was no secret that Boylan was personally invested in the creation of the memorial. In 1938, Boylan died in New York City. Members of the TJMC mourned and reflected on Boylan’s career-long dedication to the memorial. A fellow commissioner wrote that “It is to his [Boylan’s] initiative and persistent advocacy that the erection of this memorial should always be credited.” See: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial: Remarks of Hon. Louis Ludlow, 3 June 1936, Box 72, Folder 5, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2; Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission: Final Selection of Design, 29 March 1938, MSS 2169, Box 1, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, 447.


30 U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 58.
one of our three greatest presidents had no memorial in the National Capital.”

Representative Boylan introduced a bill in the early 1920s to solve this problem and erect a memorial to Jefferson in the capital. For more than 12 years, Boylan opened every session of congress with an attempt to have his resolution to memorialize Jefferson passed. Boylan described the life of his bill:

Well, our good friends the Republicans were in power, and they did not pay any attention. They thought, “What does this Democrat want with a memorial to the memory of Thomas Jefferson?” They did not say it publicly, but they said it, probably, privately, because nothing was ever done about my resolution, it slept the sleep of the just, pigeonholed in the Committee on the Library's archives.

Boylan associated the memorial with party politics. At Roosevelt’s five hundred and first press conference in 1938, Roosevelt reflected on Boylan’s attempts, stating, “it was a strange thing that while quite a lot of people backed some memorial - they would not admit they did not like a memorial to Thomas Jefferson - they did not like the particular one suggested. So the thing failed.” Roosevelt went on to blame the Republicans in power for the failure of the memorial bill.

Both Boylan and the President recognized the Democratic administration as the reason for the successful creation of the TJMC. At the hearings for the site of the

31 Five Hundred and First Press Conference, 18 November 1938, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 7, 605.

32 In Dr. Kimball and Mr. Jefferson, historian Hugh Howard called Boylan “a man who, for more than a dozen years, had opened every session of congress by introducing a resolution to build a memorial to his boyhood hero, Thomas Jefferson.” See: Hugh Howard, Dr. Kimball and Mr. Jefferson, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2006), 230.

33 U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 58.

34 Five Hundred and First Press Conference, 18 November 1938, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 7, 605.
memorial, Boylan reflected on the long-awaited success of his bill, stating, “along comes the turn in the tide when we elected a Democratic President. He thought well of my resolution, and the Library Committee reported it out.” Roosevelt reinforced Boylan’s thoughts at a press conference: “when the Democratic Administration came back in 1933, we all decided we ought to have a memorial for Thomas Jefferson.” At the dedication of the memorial on 13 April 1943 (the two-hundredth anniversary of Jefferson’s birth) Roosevelt mentioned that “there are reasons for gratitude that this occasion falls within our time; for our generation of Americans can understand much in Jefferson’s life which intervening generations could not as well see.” The association between the success of Boylan’s bill and the Democratic Administration revealed that Roosevelt and the TJMC considered the memorial a political structure from the outset.

New Deal Democrats claimed that their policies would have been supported by Jefferson, and therefore, it was necessary to assert his importance. In order to do so, they memorialized Jefferson with a structure similar in style to the Lincoln and Washington memorials. This made comparisons to the Lincoln Memorial, constructed between 1914 and 1922, inevitable. Boylan, as the primary advocate for the memorial, repetitively used comparisons between Lincoln, Washington, and Jefferson to defend the necessity of

35 U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 58.
36 Five Hundred and First Press Conference, 18 November 1938 The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 7, 605.
37 Address at Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 13 April 1943, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 12, 162.
a giant marble memorial. At a congressional committee meeting on 30 March 1936, Boylan stated that the consensus among the TJMC was that “the Jefferson Memorial should be a major memorial ranking with the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument.” He felt it was important that the memorials were of equal stature. He added his own opinion about Jefferson, “one of the master minds of American history,” and included that “next to Washington I think he was the very greatest.” This idea about Jefferson justified a memorial to assert his position as one of the three greatest presidents. Boylan was also sure to point out that the Republican-approved Lincoln Memorial cost over seven million dollars, which justified the three million dollars requested for the Jefferson Memorial. Boylan not only viewed Jefferson as a historically significant figure, but also consistently compared the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials, which at the time was a politically motivated statement.

Dr. Fiske Kimball, a recognized expert on Jefferson and architecture and the chairman of restoration at the TJMF, defended choosing a site “of major importance,” and like Boylan, worked to assert Jefferson’s historical importance in comparison with Lincoln’s. In 1935, Kimball wrote to the Commission of Fine Arts regarding the site selection for the memorial, claiming that “the whole matter will doubtless hinge on the

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41 Ibid.

42 Thomas Jefferson's Claim to a Site of Major Importance for a Memorial, 1 August 1935, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.
question of how big a historical figure Jefferson is thought to be.”43 He continued, “I believe the thought of the Jefferson Memorial Commission is that Jefferson is a figure more nearly coordinate with Lincoln.”44 In a later letter, he argued that the memorial should be on a site “comparable in isolation and dignity to that of the Lincoln Memorial.”45 He claimed that Jefferson’s legacy rested, “on far more than any single act, such as the authorship of the Declaration of Independence. It rests rather on his general position as the Father of American democracy.”46 Additionally, upon Kimball’s appointment to the TJMC, he acquired and read the Lincoln Memorial Commission Report.47 Kimball, like other commissioners, measured the Jefferson Memorial against the Lincoln Memorial in order to determine the site, size, and design of the structure. Kimball felt they should be equal because the figures held equal historical and political importance. He drew historical parallels between Lincoln and Jefferson to defend the TJMC’s choices, which showed the competition between the two memorials. Kimball’s statement that the Jefferson Memorial should be “coordinate” with the Lincoln Memorial was a political statement because of Jefferson’s and Lincoln’s roles as symbols of the Democrat and Republican parties, respectively.

43 Fiske Kimball to Major Gilmore D. Clarke, 17 April 1935, Box 72, Folder 5, Fiske Kimball Papers.

44 Fiske Kimball to Major Gilmore D. Clarke, 17 April 1935, Box 72, Folder 5, Fiske Kimball Papers, 1.

45 Thomas Jefferson's Claim to a Site of Major Importance for a Memorial, 1 August 1935, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.

46 Ibid.

47 Lincoln Memorial Commission Report, 5 December 1912, Box 73, Folder 5, Fiske Kimball Papers.
The Jefferson Memorial began as a political statement by New Deal Democrats to assert the figure they interpreted as the “founder” of their party as one of the three greatest presidents. Commissioners compared the memorial to the Lincoln memorial, erected to the Republican hero by Republicans, and frequently referenced the Republican resistance to memorializing Jefferson in the 1920s. They also consistently argued for Jefferson’s historical significance and deservingness of a memorial equivalent to Washington’s and Lincoln’s. The TJMC evoked memory of Jefferson as a figure significant to the Democratic party at the beginning of the memorial’s creation because of the changes Democrats enacted through the New Deal in the 1930s. The memorial was a way to establish Democrats’ historical precedence.

Jefferson the “Apostle of Freedom”: Representing American Values in the Jefferson Memorial

As the process to memorialize Jefferson progressed, the TJMC began to consider Jefferson outside his role as a founder of a party and form his legacy as relevant to Americans enduring New Deal reforms and the start of the Second World War. Roosevelt’s speech at the 1943 dedication of the Jefferson Memorial began with “Today, in the midst of a great war for freedom, we dedicate a shrine to freedom. To Thomas Jefferson, Apostle of Freedom, we are paying a debt long overdue.” The most important theme in the memorial and at the dedication was “freedom.” Two years earlier, in 1941, President Roosevelt defined how he believed Americans interpreted “freedom” in his

48 Address at Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 13 April 1943, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 12, 162.
January 6th State of the Union Address, when he gave his famous “four freedoms” speech, stating,

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship god in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want…everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear…anywhere in the world.49

The speech was meant to sway Americans to support the U.S. entry into the Second World War, especially on the European front. Before Roosevelt gave his 1941 State of the Union Address, the phrase “four freedoms” was often used by members of the TJMC to describe Jefferson’s contributions to the United States. The members of the TJMC thought most about Jefferson and freedom in relation to the inscriptions in the memorial, which were drafted between 1939 and 1942.50 Each of the four inscription panels in the memorial were dedicated to Jefferson’s contributions to American freedom. Reframing Jefferson as a symbol of freedom came alongside a push to define freedom that arose in the face of challenges to democracy abroad. The use of the term “freedom” so frequently in both memorializing Jefferson and motivating citizens to support the United States revealed that the memorial had become a statement about American patriotism rather than the political influence of the Democratic party.


50 Time frame based on correspondence among members of the TJMC. See: Box 3-5, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers; Box 72, Fiske Kimball Papers.
The connection between Jefferson and freedom was based on more than Jefferson’s role as a founding father. The evocation of “freedom” and push to define its meaning in the late 1930s and early 1940s was in response to the beginning of World War II. Members of the TJMC felt the memorial represented their dedication to preserving “freedom.” Additionally, “freedom” was tied with the New Deal, as politicians argued that New Deal policies would increase the liberty of the average American. As historian Elizabeth Borgwardt argued in *A New Deal for the World*, Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech was his vision to “internationalize the New Deal” and Roosevelt “hoped to apply the lessons of the depression and interwar era to the world's burgeoning international crises.”\(^{51}\) The principles of the New Deal were no longer solely associated with the Democrats, but became patriotic, international goals. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” were, “New-deal infused commitments.”\(^{52}\) Therefore, Jefferson’s position as a representation of the Democrats shifted towards a representation of patriotism and “Americanness” during the Second World War. The TJMC had overcome Republican resistance to their authorization and subsequently worked to make Jefferson relevant to congressmen, Washingtonians, and Americans in a time of international turmoil.

“Jefferson’s four freedoms,” a phrase coined by commissioner Fiske Kimball in 1939, simplified Jeffersonian principles and made them applicable to Americans during


\(^{52}\) Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, 52.
the New Deal reforms. According to Kimball, “Jefferson’s four freedoms” were:

freedom of property, freedom of mind, freedom of soul, and freedom of body. Fiske Kimball drew from historian Edwin Alderman to describe Jefferson’s “general contributions to the welfare of mankind”: “the abolition of primogeniture and entail - ‘He freed the land’; the proposed abolition of slavery - ‘He would free the body’; the establishment of universal education - ‘He freed the mind’; the establishment of religious freedom - ‘He freed the soul’.” Kimball simplified Alderman’s words so that they were more interpretable for Americans. Eventually, in the “Program of Competition for a Monument to Thomas Jefferson,” which Kimball drafted, the TJMC commemorated Jefferson for “the apostleship of the ‘four freedoms’ of America: … freeing the earth, … freeing the body, … freeing the mind, … freeing the soul.” The freedoms attributed to Jefferson identified specific, quintessentially “American” ideas that the public could understand and appreciate.

Politicians drew from the work of Kimball and the TJMC and used the phrase “four freedoms” while discussing the New Deal and Second World War, even before Roosevelt popularized the phrase. In a radio address, TJMC member Elbert Thomas

53 Elbert Thomas acknowledged Fiske Kimball’s creation of the term “Jefferson’s four freedoms” as Kimball’s original thoughts, stating “I have taken poetical license several times with Jefferson’s four freedoms” and that he hoped Kimball approved of the use of his phrase. See: Elbert Thomas to Fiske Kimball, 25 October 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.


55 Thomas Jefferson's Claim to a Site of Major Importance for a Memorial, 1 August 1935, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.

56 Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission: Program of Competition for a Monument to Thomas Jefferson, 1939, Box 73, Folder 13, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2.
stated that “if we take away these civil liberties [Jefferson’s four freedoms] or refuse to overcome new violations thereof, we destroy the finest blessings to man ever chronicled in history.” He went on to emphasize that these “civil liberties” could only be preserved if the government provided “at least in measure for physical, cultural, educational, and economic opportunities.” He not only defended the New Deal government intervention, but also advocated for American intervention in the Second World War in order to protect the “four freedoms.” Thomas drew his reference to “Jefferson’s four freedoms” directly from Kimball, who approved of his use of the phrase. The work of the TJMC was made applicable to contemporary events through connections between Jefferson’s four freedoms, the New Deal, and the Second World War.

Kimball’s writing and Thomas’ speech are remarkably similar to Roosevelt's rhetoric in his 1941 State of the Union Address. Roosevelt's speech writer considered the “Four Freedoms” speech a summation of the New Deal. Similarly, Thomas drew parallels between Jefferson’s four freedoms and the freedom guaranteed by the New Deal. Roosevelt’s speech writer wrote about the drafting of the “four freedoms” speech,


59 Ibid.

60 Elbert Thomas to Fiske Kimball, 25 October 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.

claiming, “the language came directly from FDR himself.” He recalled, “the words seemed to roll off his tongue as though he had rehearsed them many times to himself.”

In *A New Deal for the World*, Borgwardt wrote that “the evolution of Roosevelt’s formulation of the Four Freedoms can be traced back to a press conference on 5 June 1940, when Roosevelt discussed “the elimination of four fears.” Both the speech writer and Borgwardt failed to acknowledge the influence of the TJMC over Roosevelt’s speech. In reality, Roosevelt encountered those words many times before he made his speech, while he prepared and approved plans for the inscriptions in the Jefferson Memorial.

Roosevelt frequently communicated with members of the TJMC regarding the inscriptions and was familiar with the phrase “four freedoms” in the context of the memorial. On 3 January 1941, three days before he gave the “Four Freedoms” speech, he received a response from the Library of Congress to his request for potential quotes for the memorial. These quotes were in categories of “education and free speech,” “political economy,” “agriculture,” “democracy,” and “liberty.” The inscription he was responsible for drafting was meant to fit into one of “Jefferson’s four freedoms.” Additionally, a few months after Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech a commissioner wrote, “I think we should all appreciate highly the continued interest which the President takes in the memorial in spite of the tremendous responsibilities which he is facing on matters in

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63 Engel, 197.

64 Borgwardt, 48.

65 Kean indicated that the President should be credited with the text from panel I. See: Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 23 October 1941, Box 72, Folder 12, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2.
which the whole world awaits his decisions.”\textsuperscript{66} Roosevelt worked on the inscriptions alongside the TJMC and this collaboration formed his ideas for his “Four Freedoms” speech. The connections between the use of the phrases “four freedoms” and “Jefferson’s four freedoms” show the relevance of the work of the memorial commission on the world stage.

Jefferson’s four freedoms were written by Fiske Kimball to encompass Jefferson’s relationship to American values: freedom of the body, freedom of the land, freedom of the soul, and freedom of the mind. Similarly, Roosevelt’s four freedoms laid out American interpretation of freedom: freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from want and fear. Both Jefferson’s four freedoms and Roosevelt’s four freedoms defined “freedom” and were incredibly important as Americans felt like their freedom was restricted by the Great Depression and dawn of the Second World War. The association between Jefferson and freedom rose out of the connection between his principles and the New Deal. By the late 1930s – as the debate about the inscriptions began – Jefferson’s legacy had been shaped into “Apostle of Freedom” by New Deal Democrats and the TJMC. Commissioners that drafted the inscriptions in 1939-1942 incorporated “Jefferson’s four freedoms” into each panel and focused on Jefferson’s contributions to freedom. Roosevelt and the TJMC successfully shaped Jefferson’s legacy from a politically divisive figure and towards a unifying one by framing him as a patriotic, rather than political, symbol.

\textsuperscript{66} Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney, 29 May 1941, Box 3, Folder 4, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers.
Jefferson the “Father of American Democracy”: The Jefferson Memorial and the Second World War

By the time the United States entered World War II, Jefferson had come to not only represent “freedom,” but also to represent “Democracy.” In a time of a conflict that many people interpreted as dictatorships versus democracies, Jefferson’s role as “Father of American Democracy” was emphasized by Roosevelt and the TJMC. In a letter defending the historical significance of Jefferson, Fiske Kimball used the phrase, stating that Jefferson’s “general position” was as the “Father of American Democracy.” This role became increasingly important as the Second World War progressed. Members of the TJMC recognized this, and focused on the new political significance of the memorial. The inscription that runs across the interior dome of the Jefferson Memorial reads, “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” The quote clearly poses conflict between Jefferson, “Father of American Democracy,” and “tyranny over the mind,” which was embodied by the Axis powers at the time the memorial was created.

Even before the United States entered the war, congressmen recognized and asserted the significance of the Jefferson Memorial as a representation of the strength of American democracy. In 1935, TJMC Chairman Boylan gave a radio address to honor Jefferson. He explained that Jefferson had an “instinctive hatred of all forms of

67 Thomas Jefferson's Claim to a Site of Major Importance for a Memorial, 1 August 1935, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.

oppression and tyranny.” He speculated that if Jefferson was alive, he would be “against bowing the knee to Europe.” Boylan asserted Jefferson’s relevance as a historical figure and founding father who planted “the seeds of democracy” in Virginia and the United States. In 1936, Representative Louis Ludlow speculated that the memorial would have political significance on the world stage. He remarked, “at a time when tyrannical dictatorships are rising to the zenith all over the world and popular government is sinking to the nadir everywhere, it is particularly appropriate that we should erect… this memorial to Jefferson.” Ludlow believed that erecting the memorial “will have a greater significance than any of us can envision – a world significance. It will have, if by directing attention to the ideals of America, conceived and fashioned by the genius of Jefferson, it serves to kindle fresh fires on the altars of freedom throughout the world.” He went on, “I wish devoutly that the erection of this Jefferson memorial might bring to every human being in the world a mental picture of the difference between dictatorships and rule by the people.” Boylan and Ludlow made clear connections between Jefferson and American democracy and simultaneously pointed out its significance during the dawn of the war. This connection caught on among members of the TJMC and President


70 Ibid., 2.

71 Ibid., 4.

72 The Thomas Jefferson Memorial: Remarks of Hon. Louis Ludlow of Indiana, 3 June 1936, Box 72, Folder 5, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2.

73 Ibid., 3.

74 Ibid.
Roosevelt by the time the memorial was dedicated in 1943. They capitalized on the consideration of the memorial as an “altar of freedom” in a time of war.

President Roosevelt consistently drew parallels between Jefferson’s establishment of democracy in the United States and Americans’ fight to preserve democracy during the Second World War. It was his way to establish further relevance for the memorial. At the groundbreaking for the memorial in 1938, he stated that Jefferson should be recognized for “the services he rendered in establishing the practical operation of the American government as a democracy and not as an autocracy.”

About one year later, Roosevelt gave an address at the cornerstone laying of the memorial and related Jefferson’s advocacy for democracy with the contemporary struggles Americans faced. He said, “he lived, as we live, in the midst of a struggle between rule by the self-chosen individual or the self-appointed few” and, “he believed, as we do, that the average opinion of mankind is in the long run superior to the dictates of the self-chosen.” Roosevelt continually posed Jefferson as a representation of Democracy.

At the dedication of the memorial, President Roosevelt focused more obviously on the significance of the memorial in a time of war. He spoke to an audience of descendants and commissioners, explaining “Thomas Jefferson believed, as we believe, in Man. He believed, as we believe, that men are capable of their own government, and that no king, no tyrant, no dictator can govern for them as well as they can govern for

75 Address at Groundbreaking for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 15 December 1938, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 7, 646.

76 Cornerstone Laying of the Jefferson Memorial, 15 November 1939, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 8, 579.
Roosevelt’s statements at the ceremonies for the memorial consistently acknowledged Jefferson as “Father of American Democracy” and pointed out the significance of this title in time of war. His speeches reveal the political message of the memorial: American democracy withstood challenges in the past, and would prevail through challenges in the future. The memorial was a permanent acknowledgement of democracy’s endurance.

The TJMC and the War Savings Staff recognized the connection between Jefferson and “democracy” and worked to profit from it. They collaborated during Jefferson’s Bicentennial, which coincided with the dedication of the memorial, to sell war bonds and stamps at the ceremony. The War Savings Staff used “certain references to Jefferson,” created by the Jefferson Bicentennial Commission - which consisted of members of the TJMC - for publicity. Fiske Kimball suggested to the War Savings Staff that they publish Jefferson quotes regarding public debt, including “to preserve the faith of the nation by an exact discharge of its debts and contracts . . . (is one of the) [sic] landmarks by which we are to guide ourselves in all our proceedings.”78 The pamphlet distributed at the Bicentennial, which included a sketch of the Jefferson Memorial and a quote from the Declaration of Independence, stated “savings bonds are the land of the people. Through the ownership of these bonds, great numbers are building for future

77 Address at Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 13 April 1943, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 12, 163.

78 Kimball also recommended the quotes “The evidence of public debt are solid and sacred. I presume there is not a man in the United States who would not part with his last shilling to pay them,” and “There can never be a fear but that the paper which represents the public debt will ever be sacredly good. The public faith is bound for this, and no change of system will ever be permitted to touch this.” These were drawn from Marie Kimball’s book, Jefferson - The Road to Glory. See: Fiske Kimball to Ross Barrett, 16 February 1943, Box 72, Folder 7, Fiske Kimball Papers.
During the dedication of the memorial, Jefferson’s words were evoked to encourage the public’s donation to the war effort and the TJMC clearly evoked the memory of Jefferson as “Father of American Democracy.” The government was able to benefit from this image of Jefferson by using the dedication as a way to inspire patriotism and assert the prominence of democracy in the world.

Different memories of Jefferson were employed throughout the nine year memorialization process. Each memory benefitted the needs of individuals in power. At the founding of the TJMC, Jefferson functioned as a symbol of the New Deal Democrats in order to emphasize their legitimacy. Once the Second World War began and Americans questioned the meaning of “freedom,” members of the TJMC explained “freedom” by tying it to Jeffersonian ideals. This legitimized their efforts to memorialize Jefferson. When the memorial was finally dedicated, Jefferson’s memory was once again used to serve the needs of those in power by framing his ideals as against authoritarian governments abroad. While Jefferson’s legacy changed throughout the creation of the memorial, it always served the needs of Roosevelt and the TJMC.

Conclusion: The Jefferson Memorial as a Political Symbol

Beginning in the early 1920s, President Roosevelt and TJMC Chairman John J. Boylan felt a sense of urgency to memorialize Jefferson in the national capital. When the TJMC was originally approved in 1936, they considered the Democratic Roosevelt administration as the only administration capable of memorializing Jefferson because they felt Republicans would resist a memorial to Jefferson. Boylan’s statement that “our

good friends the Republicans were in power, and they did not pay any attention,” along with repeated comparisons between the Jefferson Memorial and Lincoln Memorial, revealed that the TJMC considered Jefferson a figure representative of party politics.\(^{80}\) The commission’s sense of urgency to memorialize Jefferson originally stemmed from their desire to assert the Democratic party’s historical significance. The memorial was an inherently political structure from its origin. As the Jefferson Memorial underwent approval, construction, and dedication, it had fluctuating political meanings. The urgency to memorialize Jefferson persisted through the construction of the memorial until its dedication in 1943, but the political meaning of the memorial shifted from a commemoration of Democrats to a commemoration of American democracy.

In the second half of the memorial’s construction, Roosevelt and the TJMC drew parallels between Jefferson’s work to defend democracy in the United States and the American entrance into the Second World War. The similarity between the commissioners’ discussion of “Jefferson’s four freedoms” and Roosevelt’s “four freedoms” showed not only that the TJMC had successfully made Jefferson’s legacy relevant to twentieth-century Americans, but that both Roosevelt and the commission recognized a widespread need to define freedom and establish its historical precedence. The TJMC drew their interpretation of freedom from New Deal Democrats and asserted that it encompassed freedom of property, freedom of thought, freedom to work, and freedom of religion. By labeling their interpretation of freedom “Jefferson’s four freedoms,” the TJMC furthered the connection between Jefferson and New Deal principles. They appropriated Jefferson’s

memory to achieve their desired definition of freedom. This definition served Roosevelt and the TJMC at the start of the Second World War because Americans were forced to defend their idea of freedom. Jefferson’s title as the “Father of American Democracy” became increasingly important as the Second World War progressed.

The shift in the Washington public’s reaction to the memorial coincided with the shift in Jefferson’s reputation. Initially, in 1936-1939, the Washington public resisted the TJMC’s choice of memorial site and design. Their resistance culminated in the Cherry Tree Rebellion. By the time the structure was finished, Washingtonians seemed to approve of the classical, non-utilitarian memorial and the fire of the Cherry Tree Rebellion had fizzled out. The Washingtonian’s approval for the memorial corresponded with the change in the TJMC’s interpretation of Jefferson’s legacy. As Roosevelt and the TJMC evoked Jefferson as a figure of freedom and democracy and the Second World War commenced, the memorial became more appealing to the Washington public. The Washington Evening Star, which had originally published material opposing the memorial, named the structure, “Washington’s Majestic Beauty” on 1 July 1940.81 In 1941, Fiske Kimball wrote to a fellow commissioner, “My friends in Washington, who suffered with us under the early attacks, told me that Washington newspapers never refer to the building now except as ‘the beautiful Jefferson Memorial’.”82 The “early attacks” were the protests led by the Cherry Tree Rebels. In response to a newspaper photograph sent to him by Elbert Thomas, Kimball wrote that it gave him, “great amusement and

81 Washington Evening Star, Washington’s Majestic Beauty, 1 July 1940, Box 72, Folder 5, Fiske Kimball Papers.
82 Fiske Kimball to Charles Moore, 31 October 1941, Box 72, Folder 6, Fiske Kimball Papers.
satisfaction.” He continued, “It is funny how times and public opinion change.” The change in public opinion was a result of the change in the meaning of Jefferson.

By the time the Jefferson Memorial was dedicated in 1943, its significance as a symbol of success for the Democratic party had faded. It instead represented the permanence of Democracy and asserted that “freedom” would prevail through the Second World War. At the start of the war, Fiske Kimball preserved newspaper clippings advertising the books *Thomas Jefferson Voices: America’s Answer to “MEIN KAMPF”* and *Democracy by Thomas Jefferson*, which both served to explore “America’s first and greatest apostle of Democracy.” Kimball must have recognized these books as part of the larger movement to acknowledge Jefferson as a patriotic symbol. Jefferson’s legacy as a politically divisive figure had faded and members of the TJMC capitalized on the relationship between Jefferson, freedom, and democracy during the war in an effort to make the memorial more relevant to Americans. Understanding the memorial as a statement of Democrats historical validity, an attempt to define freedom, and an assertion of the prevalence of democracy reveals why the public’s interpretation of and reaction to the memorial wavered. When construction of the memorial first began, Jefferson’s legacy was still one of division and had not been clearly defined or certainly revived. But, as the war began and Americans unified in the war effort, Jefferson and the memorial became

83 Fiske Kimball to Elbert Thomas, 5 April 1941, Box 72, Folder 6, Fiske Kimball Papers.
84 *Ibid.*.
85 Democracy by Thomas Jefferson (Newspaper Clipping), n. d., Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.
patriotic symbols. Washingtonians considered the memorial a beautiful spectacle once Jefferson was directly tied to freedom and democracy.
Chapter 2

The “Cherry Tree Rebellion”: The Controversial Addition of Jefferson to the Washington Memorial Landscape, 1936 - 1939

The New York Times, 19 November 1938

“Cherry trees caused more excitement today than they have since, it was said, young George Washington whacked one down,” reported The Daily Boston Globe on 19 November 1938. The newspaper recounted the “Cherry Tree Rebellion,” a term coined by Washington, D.C. newspapers to describe the 150 women who chained themselves to Japanese cherry trees around the Tidal Basin. These women intended to prevent the trees from being removed for the


87 The phrase “Cherry Tree Rebellion was used in: The New York Times, “Roosevelt Curbs Tree 'Rebellion'” New York Times (New York, NY), 19 November 1938, 19.; the women at the rebellion were described in the Chicago Daily Tribune: “Women Vanquish Police in Battle of Cherry Trees,” Chicago Daily Tribune (Chicago, IL), 19 November 1938, 2.
construction of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. One of the cherry tree rebels angrily told a reporter from *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, “this is the worst desecration of the Capital since the British burned the White House.”88 The women made headlines around the country. “Washington Women Fight to Save Cherry Trees” was the front page story of the 19 November 1938 *Hartford Courant*. The article explained that the women were “grabbing shovels from astonished workmen” and “started refilling the holes left gaping by the uprooted flora.”89 Later in the day, as *The New York Times* reported, “rain brought an armistice.”90 The “Cherry Tree Rebellion” was the culmination of a long controversy over the site and design selection of the Jefferson Memorial, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt deemed “the worst case of flim-flamming” that Washington D.C. had faced in a long time.91 How did this “flim-flamming” catch the attention of the president, the Washington public, and newspapers around the nation?

Years of negative press coverage regarding the Jefferson Memorial preceded the Cherry Tree Rebellion, which indicated a rift between the Washington public and the TJMC over the proposed site and design. The shifting historical memory of Jefferson and changing perceptions of how the government should use public land led to disagreement over the memorial plans. The controversy revealed incongruent interpretations of Jefferson’s legacy: the TJMC viewed Jefferson as a symbol of Americanness and founder of the democratic party, but the Washington


89 “Washington Women Fight to Save Cherry Trees,” *The Hartford Courant* (Hartford, CT), 19 November 1938, 1.


public remembered him as an unpretentious advocate for the people. The tension over the design for the memorial revealed contention over the meaning of Jefferson. The TJMC insisted upon a classical, non-utilitarian memorial similar to the Lincoln Memorial. Washingtonians largely disagreed.

Washington-based papers, including *The Washington Post*, published articles and editorials that expressed not only the qualms the press had with the memorial site and design, but also the concerns of some members of the Washington public. The Washingtonians who had the loudest opinions about the memorial were middle-to-upper class whites, including the 150 women who participated in the Cherry Tree Rebellion. The women were members of Washington women’s clubs, which women used in the mid-nineteenth century as a forum for women to discuss and advocate for their political views.92 The Cherry Tree Rebels felt entitled to protest the construction of the memorial because they viewed themselves as part of the culture of the capital. The women felt they were protecting the interests of the Washington people.

These Washingtonians’ protests were not taken seriously by the president or the TJMC because of the Roosevelt administration's hostile relationship with the Washington press, who voiced the concerns of the people.93 The recent big-government changes of the New Deal had attracted negative press coverage and editors of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* did not have amicable relationships with President Roosevelt. Reporters often disapproved of Roosevelt, a face of the TJMC, due to his dismissive demeanor at press conferences.


93 Because the Washington Press consistently voiced the concerns the Washington public had with the memorial site and design, I will use “Washingtonians” to refer to the like-minded elements of the press and vocal citizens.
Washingtonians’ concerns warranted serious consideration by the TJMC and Roosevelt because they consistently and forcefully expressed their disquietude through several outlets. Washingtonians were present at congressional hearings, wrote to members of the TJMC, and protested at the site of the Jefferson Memorial, but the TJMC persisted with their plan for a classical, non-utilitarian memorial at the Tidal Basin site. The president and the TJMC blamed the push back against the plans for the Jefferson Memorial on the press coverage it received and did not give the people’s protests, including the Cherry Tree Rebellion, merit.

Most of the Washington public’s resistance to the memorial plans related to their distaste for the classical design and ideas of how public land should be used. To them, it was important to have a useful building and to preserve the beauty of West Potomac Park, which surrounded the Tidal Basin. The cherry trees at West Potomac Park were essential to Washington’s economy because they brought considerable income to the city through tourism and many Washingtonians feared a change would result in income loss. Washingtonians did not see a purpose in building another classical memorial in the capital because the Lincoln and Washington memorials already dominated the landscape of the mall. In addition, memorialization trends were not in favor of the Jefferson Memorial. Architectural historian Kirk Savage explained in *Monument Wars* that the “hero monument” had lost popularity as “victim monuments” like the Lincoln Memorial and the 1931 District of Columbia World War I monument in West Potomac Park were created.94 The World War I monument included a bandstand, making it a “living memorial,” or a utilitarian

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one. Americans favored living memorials over statue monuments after the First World War. The Washington public largely turned to the press to voice their concerns with the plans for the memorial site and design.

The TJMC felt an urgency to silence the press because they associated the creation of a non-utilitarian, classical memorial (comparable to George Washington’s and Abraham Lincoln’s) with the validation of the Democratic party. The TJMC considered utilitarian memorials less noble than non-utilitarian memorials. The Commission’s conception of Jefferson as akin to Washington and Lincoln was inflexible because of the political importance New Deal Democrats placed on Jefferson. They viewed him as one of the three greatest American presidents. In contrast, the Washington public had a dynamic conception of Jefferson that changed as portions of the plan for the memorial were released. They interpreted Jefferson as a figure to defend their positions on the memorial and invoked him differently throughout the memorial’s creation. Themes of Jefferson as simple and forward-looking rang through their changing interpretations of the figure.

The TJMC’s conception of Jefferson as an “apostle of freedom” that needed a classical, non-utilitarian memorial at the Tidal Basin did not resonate with Washingtonians because his

95 Savage, Monument Wars, 241.

96 Savage, 241.

97 The Democrats viewed the Jefferson Memorial as their imprint on the Washington memorial landscape, as the Lincoln Memorial was for the Republicans. Kirk Savage articulated this argument, writing that “Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats saw it as a way to put their imprint on the Capital’s monumental core, which, until then, had been dominated by Republican plans and Republican heroes.” Merrill Peterson explained that Roosevelt and the New Deal Democrats used Jefferson as a face of their party, and they often asserted that their policies were “Jeffersonian” because of their progressiveness and flexible interpretation of the Constitution. See: Savage, Monument Wars, 244; Peterson, The Jefferson Image in the American Mind, 355-359.
position in American memory was in a state of change. Scholars including Merrill Peterson, Francis Cogliano, and Andrew Burstein have considered the status of Jefferson’s reputation in the mid twentieth-century. Peterson, who wrote the primary work on Jefferson’s legacy, asserted that during this time Jefferson’s reputation was essentially a blank slate. As the United States underwent the Great Depression and the New Deal reforms, Americans were forced to reassess what “Jeffersonian” meant. The New Deal Democrats emphasized Jefferson’s idea that “the earth belongs to the living” and presented him as a figure that would support the changes they made to the American government. This presentation of Jefferson did not fully resonate with the people of Washington. As the United States faced major changes, Jefferson’s reputation did as well. Interpretation of Jefferson and how he would be memorialized was susceptible to controversy.

The moment of the Jefferson Memorial’s creation is unique because it provided an opportunity for members of the Washington public to discuss their perception of Jefferson in public forums. Historians of Jefferson’s legacy have analyzed the creation of the Jefferson Memorial as a reflection of the revival of Jefferson’s reputation, but have not acknowledged the significance of the resistance the TJMC faced. Historians are often critical of newspapers as a reflection of public opinion because of the many bias-holding individuals involved in writing and publishing them, but the newspaper articles and editorials about the Jefferson Memorial controversy are legitimate reflections of prominent Washingtonians’ interpretations of Jefferson.

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98 Roosevelt called Jefferson an “apostle of freedom” at the dedication for the memorial. See, Address at Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 13 April 1943, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin, 12, 162.

99 Building off of this observation by Peterson, Burstein noted in Democracy’s Muse (2015) that throughout “Jefferson’s twentieth-century makeover,” it was the “Democrats who ‘owned him.’” New Deal Democrats replaced Thomas Jefferson’s association with defined political principles such as states rights, free trade, and “least government.” Jefferson became a symbol of progressive thought, democracy, and freedom, rather than a political ideology. See: Peterson, The Jefferson Image in the American Mind, 356, 358-359; Burstein, Democracy’s Muse, 7.
Their ideas were consistent and re-asserted at congressional hearings, protests, and through letters to congressmen. Washington newspapers best capture the controversy surrounding the memorial because they were seen by Washingtonians as the primary outlet to express their qualms with the memorial. The editorial boards were often populated with Washingtonians who pursued a similar agenda regarding the memorial. Interpreting the newspaper sources as a legitimate reflection of how Jefferson was remembered by Washingtonians gives historians the chance to understand how people without government or scholarly roles understood an influential, yet controversial early American.
“The Worst Case of Flim-Flamming”: The TJMC and the Press

The tension between the TJMC and Washington newspapers reached its height when Roosevelt called the press coverage of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial “a complete deception of the public” at a press conference on 18 November 1938.\textsuperscript{100} That same week, a member of the Memorial Commission wrote to an editor of \textit{The Washington Post}, requesting that he cease publishing such negative coverage on the memorial.\textsuperscript{101} Washington newspapers continued to publish articles with headlines including “Memorial Flimflam,” “More Readers Protest: Stop This Vandalism” and “Women Vanquish Police in Battle of Cherry Trees.”\textsuperscript{102} The tense relationship between the Washington press and the Roosevelt administration created an environment that led the TJMC to blame the memorial controversy on the press rather than take the public’s concerns seriously. Shifting this blame allowed the TJMC to maintain its conception of Jefferson as a Democratic hero despite its incongruence with the public’s indistinct idea of him.

\textit{The Washington Post} was the loudest voice against the memorial. Eugene Meyer, the owner of the paper and a Republican financier disapproved of “unlimited and careless spending of public funds” and the \textit{Post} often took stances against the New Deal government.\textsuperscript{103} Felix Morely, the editor of the editorial page, published letters that highlighted the position of \textit{The

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\textsuperscript{100} Five Hundred and First Press Conference, 18 November 1938, \textit{The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt}, 7, 605.

\textsuperscript{101} Jefferson Randolph Kean to Felix Morely, 30 November 1938, Box 1, 1934-1938, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers.


Washington Post’s readership against the site and design of the memorial. Washingtonians frequently wrote to the editors of the Post because they saw the paper as the primary outlet to express their thoughts on the memorial. The TJMC and President recognized the paper as a threat to their memorial plans and saw them as influential over their Washington readership.

The Roosevelt administration’s tense relationship with Washington news outlets extended to the Washington bureau of The New York Times, who often published news about the Jefferson Memorial. Both Washington reporters and President Roosevelt recognized the Times as an essential Washington paper.104 In 1936, sociologist Leo Rosten polled 127 Washington correspondents, asking them to list “the three newspapers which give the most fair and reliable news.”105 He also asked them to note which ones were “the least fair and reliable.”106 In Rosten’s study, The New York Times was listed first most often for “most fair and reliable” and not on the list of “least fair and reliable.” Even with that “unbiased” reputation, they had a complicated relationship with the Roosevelt administration. The Washington bureau of the Times was run by Arthur Krock, who was considered “THE Washington Correspondent” by other reporters.107 Krock suggested that the Roosevelt administration had “more ruthlessness, intelligence and subtlety in trying to suppress legitimate unfavorable comments than any other I have known.”108

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Krock’s importance in the network of the Washington press meant that his ideas about Roosevelt influenced other reporters.

Roosevelt’s habit to suppress “unfavorable comments” was especially evident during his press conferences. In Rosten’s study, he explained that Roosevelt had an amicable relationship with the Washington press correspondents until around 1935, when the correspondents began to feel irritated with Roosevelt’s “calculated” presence at press conferences.109 He wrote that “newspapermen began to feel that the exercise of presidential wit to evade a question was less of a novelty than an irritant.”110 The tension between the Roosevelt administration and Washington Press that culminated in the Cherry Tree Rebellion built for years before 1938. Blaming the press for the memorial controversy allowed President Roosevelt and the TJMC to be unreceptive to the needs of Washingtonians and let their vaunted conception of Jefferson persist through the creation of the memorial.

Roosevelt’s 501st press conference on 18 November 1938, provides a glimpse into how the TJMC and president approached the press. It was the first time Roosevelt was asked about the “Cherry Tree Rebellion” and he called it “one of the most interesting cases of a flim-flam game being started by the owner of a paper.”111 Roosevelt did not address any problems the public had with the memorial other than the destruction of the cherry trees and he blamed the public’s uproar regarding the trees on the coverage from Washington news sources. At the end of the conference, a reporter interjected, “of course this is serious to some of us newspaper men.

109 Ibid., 53-57.
110 Ibid., 57.
111 Five Hundred and First Press Conference, November 18, 1938, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 7, 605.
Women are going down there to chain themselves to these trees.” Roosevelt interrupted him with, “we will move the tree and the lady and the chains, and transplant them to some other place,” to which the conference responded with laughter. Roosevelt did not take the reporter seriously, exemplifying Arthur Krock’s suspicion that Roosevelt worked to silence the press’ dissent regarding his decisions.

At the same press conference, Roosevelt said, “I don’t suppose there is anybody in the world who loves trees quite as much as I do.” He went on to attempt to satisfy the press by telling them that the 88 cherry trees removed would be replaced with 1,000 more surrounding the Tidal Basin. John J. Boylan, the chairman of the TJMC, used this same method to appease the public more than a year earlier, at the hearings for the site of the memorial on 23 April 1937. Boylan expressed, “no one has a greater love for trees and flowers and shrubs than I have.” Boylan may have claimed that he was the greatest tree-admirer, but President Roosevelt apparently felt otherwise. How did the controversy surrounding the Jefferson Memorial become a forum to brag about loving cherry trees more than most? Boylan and Roosevelt’s statements were their way to dismiss the public’s concern over the memorial as only related to the trees. Calling themselves tree-lovers was a snide way for them to put off the real issues people had with the memorial, which were related to Jefferson’s legacy. The press, especially The Washington Post, poked fun at their assumptions. One editorial asked, “If ‘Franklin D.’ does cut

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112 Ibid., 607.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., 606.

115 Ibid.

116 U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 58.
down the cherry trees with his little hatchet, will he deny doing it, or will he tell his mother the truth?”

The hostile relationship between the TJMC and the press was exacerbated when the TJMC made efforts to stop the press’ articles about the destruction of the cherry trees by contacting Felix Morely, an editor of The Washington Post. Both Boylan and Roosevelt considered The Washington Post to be one of the most influential sources on the public’s position regarding the memorial. Jefferson Randolph Kean, a presidential appointee to the TJMC and descendant of Jefferson, wrote to Morely on behalf of the TJMC on 18 November 1938. Kean requested that the Post cease publishing negative articles about the memorial site choice, especially regarding the cherry trees. Felix Morely responded a few days later, “it is not a matter of the uprooting of a few dozen cherry trees, which we have certainly never stressed as vital in our editorials.” In his letter, Morely explicitly explained his stance on the design of the memorial. Morely wrote his “humble opinion” that the proposed memorial would be “less rather than more appropriate with the passage of time” because of the classical design.


118 At Roosevelt’s 501st press conference, he stated “I don’t know whether I should be polite as to what was done by Washington newspapers or not, especially two newspapers in Washington,” See: Five Hundred and First Press Conference, 18 November 1938, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 7, 605; At the congressional hearings for the memorial, New York Senator John J. Boylan blamed newspapers for the controversy when he said, “suddenly there was a great outcry in some of the papers that we were going to destroy the cherry blossoms,” See: U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 59; cross referencing these two statements with TJMC member Jefferson Randolph Kean’s letter addressing the Post’s coverage on the memorial reveals that the commission thought of The Washington Post to be an extremely influential source over the Washington public’s opinion regarding the memorial. See: Jefferson Randolph Kean to Felix Morely, 30 November 1938, Box 1, 1934-1938, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers.


120 Felix Morely to Jefferson Randolph Kean, 26 November 1938, 1.

121 Felix Morely to Jefferson Randolph Kean, 26 November 1938, 2.
architecture was associated with Jefferson’s era of American history, not the mid-twentieth century. Kean responded curtly, writing, “your objection to the site selected is that you do not like classic monuments in parks - this is a question of taste and there is a [sic] old classic saying that matters of taste are not subjects for dispute.” Kean continued, “so in a matter like this in which every one has an interest and each also a right to his own opinion, you will, I am sure, agree with me that there is no occasion for passion or for the ascription of unworthy motives.”

The correspondence between Morely and Kean not only reveals the tension between the Post and the TJMC, but also indicates what was at stake for each side of the controversy.

The “Subjects for Dispute”: A Classical Jefferson Memorial

The hostility between the Washingtonians and the TJMC was driven by different ideas of how Jefferson should be memorialized. The classical, non-utilitarian design held political significance to the TJMC. The Washingtonians considered the memorial in the context of the city, and felt the design was not fitting to the landscape. Both sides invoked Jefferson’s legacy when defending their position on the memorial. These discussions of Jefferson reveal his complicated position in American memory at the time.

Jefferson Randolph Kean’s desire to preserve the TJMC’s plan and quiet the Post stemmed from the political importance the commission rested on the memorial. It was to be a Democratic memorial that placed Jefferson on the same pedestal as Republican presidents memorialized in the capital city. A New York Times article from 16 April 1938, reported “the capital is divided today in a debate over the relative virtues of elegance of the Pantheon and simplicity of the White House. The center of the controversy is the Thomas Jefferson

122 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Felix Morely, 30 November 1938, 2.
Barber 48

Memorial.” The article was sure to indicate “the president likes the pantheon. So do Representative John Boylan of New York, who is chairman of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission, and Dr. Fiske Kimball of Philadelphia, a member of the commission, who helped in the restoration of Monticello.” The article posed the TJMC as supporters of the design. The TJMC was hesitant to change their position on the design for the Jefferson Memorial because they wanted it to be viewed similarly to the Lincoln Memorial. Therefore, they presented a unified front against Washingtonians’ suggestions for the memorial.

The conflict over the classical, non-utilitarian design of the memorial was central to the controversy. The idea that few presidents were worthy of a classical, non-utilitarian memorial in Washington was articulated at the hearings for the memorial: “there are three men who are in a class by themselves - Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. Washington was the father of our country, Lincoln saved it, and Jefferson made it a democracy, which it was not before.” Creating a classical, non-utilitarian memorial for Jefferson would assert his position as one of the greatest American presidents. The three memorials were bound to be compared. The TJMC felt the memorials should be equal in stature because of their association between the American

125 U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 126.
126 In a review of a Fine Arts Commission report on the design for the memorial, one design was regarded as “inadequate in comparison with the importance of the ponderous mass of the Lincoln memorial.” The review stated that “even though these two memorials are considerable apart as to location, a comparison would be inevitable.” At the hearings, there was extensive discussion about how the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorial would compare in terms of placement and design. For instance, John J. Boylan, the TJMC’s chairman, mentioned criticism that the Jefferson Memorial would “dwarf the Lincoln Memorial.” Royal H. Carlock, a Washingtonian artist, suggested a change to the site at the hearing. He asked “Why should we steal the beauty and grandeur that belong to Washington? Why should we destroy the beauty and grandeur that enshroud Lincoln?” See: Otto Eggers to Stuart Gibboney, 11 March 1939, Box 1, 1939, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers; U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 60, 104.
figures and their political parties. Lincoln’s memorial represented the success of the Republican party and the TJMC wanted the Jefferson memorial to assert the Democrats’ similar historical prominence.

The Washington public saw a classic, non-utilitarian memorial as inappropriate to Jefferson’s legacy and were concerned about the design’s fit in the Washington landscape. Felix Morely ignored Kean’s requests to stop negative coverage of the memorial and asserted in the Post’s editorial section that the design of the memorial was central to the public’s opposition.\textsuperscript{127} The day after Morely received the letter from Kean, the Post published a letter to the editor from a Washingtonian named Gladys Atbee that was written on 28 November 1938. Atbee asked, “Why should he have a tomb of classic inutility?”\textsuperscript{128} Atbee’s position was one many other Washingtonians held. It is significant that the Post published Atbee’s criticism of the memorial so shortly after the exchange between Felix Morely and Jefferson Randolph Kean because she explicitly disapproved of the non-utilitarian, classical design. Morely and the Post chose this piece because Atbee expressed that she cared about the type of memorial that was to be created rather than the well-being of the cherry trees. The headline “More about the Jefferson Memorial” was bound to catch the eye of Kean.

Many Washingtonians felt classical memorials were out of style and they argued that the design was not complementary to West Potomac park. This sentiment was asserted in The Washington Post editorials and reinforced at congressional hearings. Washingtonians explained how they remembered Jefferson while defending their position on the memorial. The writer of

\textsuperscript{127} Gladys Atbee, Letter to the editor, The Washington Post, 1 December 1938.

\textsuperscript{128} Gladys Atbee, Letter to the editor, The Washington Post, 1 December 1938.
The Washington Post editorial “No Case for the Memorial,” called Jefferson an “apostle of simplicity,” and said Jefferson himself would oppose a classical memorial because of his “frugality and unpretentious Americanism.” It continued, “everything about the memorial project runs counter to the spirit of the man who chose as his last resting place the simple hillside vault amid the woods of Monticello.” Another Washingtonian expressed in a letter to the editor, “I do not approve of memorials in marble! A cold awe-inspiring spectacle - not commensurate to the humanity so typical of the living Jefferson!” The Washingtonians had broader support from papers other than The Washington Post, including the St. Louis Dispatch, Washington Evening Star, and New York Times-Herald, which published that the design was “suitable to the Versailles of Louis XIV but totally alien to everything for which Jefferson stood.” At the congressional hearings for the memorial, members of the public expressed their distaste for the classical design. One woman urged the commission to consider the “memory of Jefferson” before they “permit the Jefferson Memorial Commission to destroy the life of a single cherry tree, to drain a drip of water from the Tidal Basin, to blast a single rock for this Pope-

132 An article published in the New York Herald-Tribune described the memorial design as “a pile of Roman architecture at variance with Jefferson’s simplicity and his contribution to developing a modern native architecture.” See: “Art Battle on in Washington Over Memorial to Jefferson,” New York Herald-Tribune (New York, NY), 8 April 1937. A piece published by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch remarked that people protesting the marble memorial “have pointed out that Jefferson was a free spirit, a hater of shams and pretenses and frauds, practicing his own life an almost Spartan simplicity and holding to the belief that the mark of high civilization was not its public monuments but the well being of its people.” See: Marquis W. Childs, “Proposed Jefferson Memorial in Washington Stirs Storm Equal to that Over Like St. Louis Project,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch (St. Louis MO), 14 March 1937. An article in the Washington Evening Star summed up the controversy surrounding the memorial and stated, “patriot’s fame grows while modern capital suffers from spirited controversy over form of his memorial and selection of site.” It asserted that the TJMC’s existence was in danger and that Washingtonians’ desired a memorial that would “take a mold more appropriate to the twentieth century.” See: William A. Millen, “Should Old Inspire New?,” Washington Evening Star (Washington, D.C.), 8 May 1938, C-5.
Ietinos design.” A classical memorial to Jefferson did not resonate with the Washington public because they viewed Jefferson as a representation of simplicity. Their thoughts about memorialization were shaped by their experience of the Great Depression and they viewed Jefferson as an advocate for the people.

Classical monuments were also unappealing to experts in design, including many American architects. They were familiar with both Jefferson’s architectural work and contemporary architecture, so they felt strongly about the design for the memorial. Much like the TJMC and Washington public, architects manipulated memory of Jefferson to fit their ideas about the new structure in Washington. While the TJMC cast Jefferson as a classical architect and intended to memorialize him in the same style as Washington and Lincoln, architects focused on Jefferson’s forward-looking designs and considered him a progressive architect. In March of 1937, the Designers of Shelter in America indicated their stance on the memorial, “the proposed design has nothing whatsoever to do with the idealism of Thomas Jefferson, or with the idealism of America today. The proposed design is contrary to that very idea of a living

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133 U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 98.

134 The president of the League for Progress in Architecture, Henry Churchill, wrote a letter to The New York Times after they published an article about the design for the memorial. Churchill said, “The argument that Jefferson was a classicist does not hold water. Of course he was. It was the spirit of his time and culture. But what a classicist- how fresh his interpretation, how charming and alive.” See: U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 28.; One young architect wrote to President Roosevelt, “we find the design a perpetuation of that expensive frozen tastelessness that has long been characteristic of our public buildings.” See, Morris B Sanders to Franklin D. Roosevelt, (Letter, Washington, D.C., 1 April 1937), Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, League for Progress in Architecture Records, box 1.; The Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians stated that the memorial was “impractical, esthetically [sic] weak, and contrary to the true Jeffersonian spirit.” See Rose Levine to Henry Churchill, 25 March 1937, Box 1, League for Progress in Architecture Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University; The American Federation of Arts wrote that they were “opposed to the erection of the proposed Jefferson Memorial” because “the approved design for the memorial does not express Jefferson’s ideals, philosophy, or manner of living.” See F.A. Whiting, American Federation of Arts, 23 April 1937, Box 1, League for Progress in Architecture Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C..
American culture for which Jefferson fought during his entire life.” In April 1937, Henry Churchill, a prominent member of the American Institute of Architects, wrote, “Thomas Jefferson? Were the gentleman alive today he would be first to scorn the stupid erudition mistaken in his honor and, abreast of the advanced thought of today, as he was leader of the advanced thought of his own time, he would probably condemn both the folly and the waste.” Architects generally wrote that the design for the memorial was outdated and did not reflect what Jefferson represented to them. They believed that the memorial should have been a progressive or modern design, as Jefferson was a forward-thinking leader and architect.

Washingtonians, architects, and members of the TJMC based their arguments about the classical design for the memorial on different interpretations of Jefferson. The TJMC defined Jefferson as a figure that surely needed a classical memorial, but the public did not. While asserting their position against the classical design for the Jefferson Memorial, some people argued that Jefferson was a simple man (which is somewhat surprising considering the design of Monticello) and some that he valued progressive architecture above all else. These ideas stood out as common between Washingtonians, but they did not present a unified idea of what Jefferson meant to them or how he should be memorialized. They especially did not have the same conception of Jefferson that the TJMC did. While the public’s conceptions of Jefferson were not necessarily negative, they contrasted with the TJMC’s conceptions of him.

The “Subjects for Dispute”: A Non-Utilitarian Jefferson Memorial

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135 Walter Sanders, Public Affairs Committee, Designers of Shelter in America to TJMC, 24 March 1937, Box 1, League for Progress in Architecture Records.

136 Henry S. Churchill, April 1938, Box 1, League for Progress in Architecture Records.
The Washington public not only disapproved of the classical design, but also of the non-utilitarian nature of the Jefferson Memorial. The TJMC believed it was important for Jefferson to be memorialized in a non-utilitarian design because Washington and Lincoln had non-utilitarian memorials. The Washington public did not hold Jefferson to that standard and valued a utilitarian structure more than a shrine to the memory of Jefferson. Washington was recovering from a point of economic turmoil and many people did not see a use in constructing a memorial to Jefferson, especially in a spot that already brought the city money through tourism. They felt that it would make more sense to create an auditorium, library, or other utilitarian memorial.

Washingtonians invoked their memory of Jefferson as an advocate for public interest while defending their stance on what fit into the landscape of Washington at the time.

*The Washington Post*’s editorial section included a vast number of criticisms of the non-utilitarian design choice as well as suggestions for utilitarian spaces. An article titled “Another Mausoleum,” published in *The Washington Post* on 21 February 1937 (three days after the plans were released) reflected the position of the *Post* on the memorial. The article, which named no author, explained that “the memory of Jefferson is cherished today, not so much because he was a scholar, a president and author of the Declaration of Independence, but because he was a leader who trusted the common man.” It went on, “That is why many citizens hoped that the Jefferson Memorial Project would be combined with the movement to provide a useful auditorium in the capital city.” On 17 April 1937, Washingtonian C. L. Woosley wrote that he disdained a memorial that shouted “look at me. I am the finest yet” and that it “hardly seems a fitting tribute


to the great and democratic Jefferson.” He went on, “But a Jefferson Memorial Planetarium, erected elsewhere, could be made a marvel of beauty as well as a perpetual means of advancing knowledge.” In a “Letter to the Editor,” a Mable Fern Faling of Washington noted, “We all associate a library with the name of Jefferson.” Faling suggested that “various sections of Washington seem to be badly in need of libraries. Why should not a beautiful Jefferson library be built in some needed section. That would be another choice for a fitting memorial.” Other individuals suggested the construction of a school, a scholarship for students to attend the University of Virginia, or a patent museum. The public expressed in The Washington Post that they did not see a point in a non-utilitarian memorial. The construction of a new building through government funds allowed them to brainstorm public buildings they believed were needed in Washington. The Washington Evening-Star re-emphasized the ideas that were submitted to the Post, calling the design a “useless pile of marble.” The Washingtonians used Jefferson’s legacy to defend their choices, like in the case of the design of the memorial.

Washingtonians asserted their stance on the non-utilitarian memorial at congressional hearings and reiterated their ideas that were published in The Washington Post.


142 An article wrapped up the proposals of Washingtonians regarding a utilitarian memorial and stated that Washingtonians wanted the TJMC to “give the public something that is sorely needed instead of erecting a useless pile of marble.” It went on, “some would like to see a great auditorium,” and “others would have the Thomas Jefferson Memorial take the form of scholarships to deserving young women and men in consideration of Jefferson’s own great love for learning and his keen interest in education,” and finally, “there are yet others who would like to see the Federal Government take over Monticello.” See: William A. Millen, “Should Old Inspire New?,” Washington Evening Star (Washington, D.C.), 8 May 1938, C-5.
Washingtonians described their needs regarding public land, but the TJMC was not receptive. A woman representing a Washington citizen’s association passionately stated, “if you [Boylan] and the Congress should autocratically disregard the earnest entreaties of the thinking people of our country… Thomas Jefferson will look coldly down upon your futile efforts,” and presented the couplet: “Your temple by the Basin’s brim, A pile of stone will be to him.” Instead of a pile of stone, she suggested that the funds for the Jefferson Memorial be put towards an auditorium. A congressman from Nebraska followed her statements with a comment that, “this lady represents a local organization… perhaps she in some way reflects the ideas of people who are citizens of Washington.” Her ideas were considered valid by other people present at the hearings, including a representative of the Cleveland Museum of Art, who stated “I am absolutely opposed to spending millions of dollars on a great pile of masonry which can serve no useful end.”

Washington clubwomen, the same women who participated in the Cherry Tree Rebellion, presented their stance against the non-utilitarian memorial at the congressional hearings. Mrs. Ernest William Howard represented the District Federation of Women’s Clubs at the hearings for the memorial. She presented the stance of the 6,000 women that were members of Washington


144 Ibid.

145 Ibid.

146 At the hearings for the site of the memorial, I.T. Frary of the Cleveland Museum of Art stated, “I am absolutely opposed to spending millions of dollars on a great pile of masonry which can serve no useful end.” A representative of a citizens association explained her stance that “there not enough palpable necessity for useful projects in our Capital that we must devote labor and taxes to a ‘mere memorial’ We need badly, among many other buildings, a comprehensive and efficient national employment bureau, a benign and scientific institute of human adjustment, Vocational schools, better hospitals, libraries, a national stadium, and especially a national auditorium.” Another representative of a Washington citizens association suggested “the acquisition of the property described above for the erection of a main public library building, or of a senior high school, or of a civic auditorium, or for some other useful project to honor the name of the man to whom this country owes so much.” See: U.S. Congress, House, Site for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 23 April 1937, 57, 98, 99, 124.
women’s clubs: “could Thomas Jefferson speak he would beg the Commission to construct a memorial which will prove of great use to the people of these United States, and not be a mere pile of brick, stone, and mortar.” The clubwomen opposed a non-utilitarian memorial, and suggested the construction of an auditorium, which would serve as a “lasting memorial to a great and wise leader who cared, above all things, for the welfare of all the people.” Memory of Jefferson as an advocate for the people was a consistent theme through Washingtonians’ defense of a utilitarian design. The women’s opposition to the memorial plans originated in their disapproval of the non-utilitarian memorial and culminated in the Cherry Tree Rebellion. Their distaste for the memorial was rooted in their ideas about the government’s use of public land and they invoked memory of Jefferson while defending their stance. The Cherry Tree Rebellion was not simply a case of “flim-flamming,” like President Roosevelt stated. The Washington clubwomen’s stance on the Jefferson Memorial was one that they maintained for more than a year before they tied themselves to cherry trees at the site of the construction for the memorial.

Conclusion: Jefferson’s “Marble Mausoleum”

The rift between the Washington public, press, and the TJMC that led to the Cherry Tree Rebellion stemmed from an incongruence in the interpretation of Jefferson, whose reputation was in a state of change. Until the mid-twentieth century, Jefferson was closely associated with his political ideology and was not an essentially American symbol, but the Great Depression and changes from the New Deal transformed American thought and Americans began to consider


148 Ibid.

149 Five Hundred and First Press Conference, 18 November 1938, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 7, 605.
Jefferson differently. The mid-twentieth century shift in Jefferson’s legacy made his memory vulnerable to contrasting interpretations during the creation of the Jefferson Memorial, such as those of the TJMC and Washington public. The TJMC closely associated Jefferson with the Democratic Party and remembered him as one of the greatest American presidents. They approved of the classical, non-utilitarian memorial design because they felt the Jefferson Memorial should compare to those for Presidents Washington and Lincoln. Washingtonians had a less defined memory of Jefferson. As they learned more about the memorial plans, their opinions regarding its site and design changed and they invoked Jefferson differently to support their positions. Jefferson represented progressive thinking, simplicity of design, the voice of the people, or all three at the same time. Rarely did the public’s conception of Jefferson align with the TJMC’s idea of Jefferson as an “apostle of freedom” to be memorialized with a “marble mausoleum.” The conflict over the memorial design was a result of the Washingtonians’ and TJMC’s contested memories of Jefferson. The TJMC dismissed dissent regarding the memorial design because of the political significance they rested on the memorial. The unfriendly relationship between the Roosevelt administration and the Washington press made the press an easy target for the TJMC to blame for the memorial controversy. The TJMC condensed the public’s uproar into distress over the destruction of the cherry trees around the Tidal Basin, even though many Washingtonians made it clear through news articles and speeches at congressional hearings that they were not as concerned with the cherry trees as they were with the classical, non-utilitarian design.

150 At the dedication of the memorial, Roosevelt said in his speech, “We dedicate a shrine to freedom. To Thomas Jefferson, apostle of freedom, we are paying a debt long overdue.” See: Address at Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 13 April 1943, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin*, 12, 162. Felix Morely dubbed the memorial a “marble mausoleum,” See: Felix Morely to Jefferson Randolph Kean, 26 November 1938, 2.
The dispute over the memorial was passionate. The mid-twentieth century has been understood by historians of Jefferson’s reputation as a point where his legacy was restored, but the controversy over the memorial revealed that there was no unified understanding of Jefferson. The TJMC viewed Jefferson as an embodiment of American morals and memorialized him with a “great shrine” that asserted his position in American memory as equal to Presidents Washington and Lincoln. The Memorial Commission had incredible power over Jefferson’s legacy. Despite the public’s resistance, the commission permanently placed Jefferson on the pedestal of Washington’s memorial landscape and his status as one of the three greatest presidents was set in stone. As the construction of the memorial continued and Jefferson’s legacy became more unifying, public resistance to the memorial faded. By 1940, Jefferson was directly linked to American ideas of freedom and the memorial was eventually labeled a “shrine to freedom.”

151 President Roosevelt called the memorial a “great shrine.” See, Cornerstone Laying of the Jefferson Memorial, 15 November 1939, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 8, 578.

152 Address at Dedication of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 13 April 1943, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Roosevelt, 12, 162.
Chapter 3

“The Cause which was the Passion of his Soul”: Jefferson Randolph Kean and the ‘Slavery’
Inscription, 1939-1941

On 1 November 1939, Jefferson Randolph Kean wrote to Fiske Kimball, “the more I
study T.J.’s life and the history of his time the more I am impressed with the fact that from an
early date he was the leader in the movement to abolish slavery and the slave trade.” He went on,
“I think this is not appreciated by people generally today, perhaps because it has not been
stressed by the historians as it should be.”153 For the next two years, Kean, a member of the
TJMC committee for inscriptions and great-great-grandson of Jefferson, pushed to include an
inscription honoring Jefferson for the “freedom of the slaves.”154 Kean persistently insisted that
“the abolition of slavery was the earliest, latest, and strongest passion of his [Jefferson’s]
soul.”155 No other members of the inscription committee were particularly interested in or fond
of including the “freedom of the slaves” inscription, but due to Kean’s efforts, the Northeast
Portico reads,

God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we
have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for
my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever.
Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in
the book of fate than that these people are to be free.156

153 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 1 November 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers, 1.
154 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 20 January 1940, Box 72, Folder 11, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2.
155 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 6 February 1941, Box 72, Folder 12, Fiske Kimball Papers, 3;
Minutes of the U.S. Expansion Commission, Box 3, Folder 2, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas
learn/photosmultimedia/quotations.htm.
The inclusion of Kean’s inscription has consequences. Memorializing Jefferson as an abolitionist and for “freedom of the slaves” teaches visitors of the memorial to remember Jefferson as an uncomplicated representation of American freedom. The inscription whitewashes Jefferson, a slave-owner, and does not accurately depict his views on the system of slavery. It is essential to uncover Kean’s influence over Jefferson’s legacy and the addition of the “freedom of the slaves” inscription in order to understand how Jefferson is situated in American memory today. Kean understood Jefferson as an abolitionist and attributed him with “freedom of the slaves” due to the national surge in 1939-1941 to define a unifying American story and because the construction of the Lincoln Memorial was in his recent memory.

The existence of the TJMC (1936-1943) occurred in a decade when the government assumed responsibility for creating a unified national story. The New Deal created a slew of programs that allowed government workers to shape national memory of historical events, including the creation of National Parks and preservation of historic records and artifacts. According to Michael Kammen, a prolific historian on memory, 1939-1941 were “pivotal years” where the country experienced a “heartfelt resurgence of patriotism.” This resulted in a political use of the American past - one that was framed against totalitarian regimes. Kammen wrote in *Mystic Chords of Memory* that “Americans briefly deviated from their normative pattern of seeking to depoliticize the past, usually by fabricating a history of consensus.” Americans experienced what Kammen labeled “crisis times,” and consensus history provided a “meaningful

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sense of heritage” as well as a “stimulus to patriotism.” The inscriptions in the memorial were written in the exact years Kammen defined as pivotal and patriotic. As a government official in 1939-1941, Kean considered himself responsible for forming a patriotic history that would fit into the consensus history he was familiar with. Kean’s interpretation of Jefferson as an abolitionist was heavily influenced by the need to frame him as non-partisan and quintessentially American. Jefferson the slave-owner did not fit into the consensus history Kean promoted.

The slavery inscription helped justify Jefferson’s deservingness of a memorial on the National Mall, as the construction of the Lincoln memorial was in recent memory for Americans. Lincoln was a symbol of freedom and thought of as America’s “Great Emancipator.” Kean felt that if Lincoln was memorialized for abolition, Jefferson’s memorial should include abolition as well. Kean framed Jefferson as similar to Lincoln in order to assert the equality of the memorials and figures they enshrined. This was a political move. Jefferson and Lincoln were often posed as representations of the Democratic and Republican parties and the Democrats on the TJMC worked tirelessly to pose the figures as equal in order to assert the prominence of the Democratic party. Interpreting the Jefferson Memorial as a response to the Lincoln Memorial can reveal why “freedom” and “abolition” were such important words to the TJMC. Jefferson was only the third president memorialized on the National Mall, and the precedent set by the Lincoln Memorial, constructed about twenty years earlier, was extremely influential over the Jefferson Memorial.

Historians Kirk Savage and James Loewen have analyzed the inscriptions in the Jefferson Memorial, but not fit them into the context of Washington, D.C. history or the transformation of

160 Ibid., 460.

161 Nina Silber, This War Ain't Over: Fighting the Civil War in New Deal America, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 107.
national memory of Jefferson in 1939-1941. Savage’s *Monument Wars* situated the Jefferson Memorial into the landscape of Washington D.C., but did not explore the historical moment when it was constructed. Savage wrote that the inscriptions contain “excerpts from Jefferson’s writings, cherry-picked to put his thoughts and achievements in the most favorable light.”\(^{162}\) He acknowledged that the inscriptions on the memorial “flatten out” complex history to make Jefferson “sound like an abolitionist.”\(^{163}\) This brief discussion of the inscriptions pointed out the problem, but Savage did not incorporate discussion of memory of Jefferson or slavery into his argument. *Monument Wars* lacked an explanation of the patriotism and consensus history that influenced the drafting of the inscriptions.

In *Monument Wars*, Savage recognized popular historian James Loewen as the leading scholar on the inscriptions in the memorial, but Loewen’s research lacks depth and accuracy. Loewen did not access the correspondence of Kean or Fiske Kimball to explain the appearance of the slavery inscription in the memorial. He credited Saul Padover, assistant to the secretary of the interior under Roosevelt, as the individual who “chose the monument’s quotations while writing an adulatory biography of Jefferson published in 1942.”\(^{164}\) Padover’s involvement in the inscriptions was actually quite limited. In a letter to other commissioners, Kean specifically credited himself, Fiske Kimball, Stuart Gibboney, Elbert Thomas, and President Roosevelt with

\(^{162}\) Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars*, 244.

\(^{163}\) Savage considered the “inner conflict” Jefferson had with the system of slavery as “complicated history.” Savage wrote that “the designers [TJMC] could not entirely avoid one major problem: Jefferson’s complicity with slavery, which undermined practically every ideal inscribed on the monument” and “slavery is the repressed always threatening to return.” See: Savage, *Monument Wars*, 245.

writing the inscriptions.\textsuperscript{165} While Loewen emphasized that “the Jefferson memorial juxtaposes fragments from widely scattered writings of Thomas Jefferson to distort his ideas and policies,” he lacked an understanding of the committee for the inscriptions and their reasoning for memorializing Jefferson as an abolitionist.\textsuperscript{166} Loewen assumed that the inscriptions intentionally framed Jefferson inaccurately. In reality, Kean firmly believed in what he wrote, but his interpretation of Jefferson was formed by Jefferson’s legacy as a symbol of freedom and the national surge towards consensus history. Both Savage and Loewen failed to fully convey the memories of Jefferson that resulted in the questionable inscriptions of the memorial.

The correspondence of the TJMC members Kean and Kimball provided a wealth of information regarding the specific memories of Jefferson that went into the inscriptions. Kean and Kimball argued with other commissioners about the inscriptions for years. Kean worked to justify the inclusion of the slavery inscription and subsequently laid out his understanding of Jefferson as an abolitionist. The correspondence of members of the TJMC can help synthesize the work of Kammen, Savage, and Loewen. Incorporating historical memory into the history of the memorial explains the inaccurate inscription. The TJMC added the “freedom of the slaves” inscription because it completed the memory of Jefferson as a unifying symbol of freedom, a notion important to the nation at the dawn of the Second World War. Most historians today would recognize Kean’s interpretation of Jefferson as an abolitionist as misleading. In an attempt to understand Kean’s portrayal of Jefferson, it is essential to answer the following questions: Why was this memory of Jefferson deployed in the specific moment of the memorial creation? What

\textsuperscript{165} Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 23 October 1941, Box 72, Folder 12, Fiske Kimball Papers.

\textsuperscript{166} Loewen, \textit{Lies Across America}, 345.
hopes did Kean have for this memory of Jefferson to achieve? What kind of national anxieties does this memory reflect?

The high number of memorials on the National Mall make it a microcosm for contests in memory that happen more broadly in the United States. In a study done for *The Presence of the Past*, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen identified that the public considers historic sites and museums the most authentic ways to learn history. This means that there are high stakes for inaccurately portraying historical figures at historic sites. Closely examining the memory of Jefferson that resulted in the slavery inscription can explain why many Americans are uncomfortable with acknowledging Jefferson as a slave-owner today.

“Freedom of the Slaves:” Jefferson Randolph Kean’s Choice to use the Word “Freedom”

In a letter to commissioner Elbert Thomas on 27 October 1939, Kean wrote that “Jefferson's efforts during his life were directed to the winning of five freedoms” which, “in order of historical importance,” were: political freedom, religious freedom, freedom of slaves, freedom of the mind, and freedom of the land. Kean incorporated freedom of slaves into Fiske Kimball’s “Jefferson’s Four Freedoms,” in order to assert what he felt was the historical importance of Jefferson's role as an abolitionist. Kean used the word “freedom” to describe Jefferson and slavery not only because of the sources he used to find Jefferson quotes, but also because his research occurred in a historical moment when Americans worked to define freedom and define their national story. He drew his interpretation of Jefferson from Thomas Jefferson

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168 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Elbert Thomas, 27 October 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.

169 Elbert Thomas to Fiske Kimball, 25 October 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.
Randolph’s edition of the Jefferson papers, his peers in the TJMC, and the emerging national memory of Jefferson in the mid-twentieth century. While historians today acknowledge that Jefferson had complicated views on slavery, they do not attribute him as an abolitionist, emancipator, or with “freeing the slaves” as Kean did.170

The primary sources from which Kean drew his argument were limited and intended to portray Jefferson as a beacon of freedom. They were either public sources or papers Jefferson intended to be published after his death. Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson’s grandson and Kean’s grandfather, published these papers in 1829, three years after Jefferson’s death.171 Kean was sure to mention to the TJMC that he used his grandfather’s publication for his research, which revealed the importance of his familial ties in drafting the inscription.172 In his research and in piecing together the inscription, Kean largely used excerpts from Jefferson’s proposed constitution for Virginia, the draft of the Declaration of Independence, and Notes on the State of Virginia.173 He found all of these in T. J. Randolph’s Memoir; Correspondence, and Miscellanies from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson. Historian Francis Cogliano, a leading scholar on historical memory of Jefferson, included a history of Jefferson’s papers in Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy. Cogliano wrote that Jefferson’s papers have been “the key to the evolution of


171 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 4 December 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers, 1; Francis Cogliano, Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 79.

172 Kean wrote to Fiske Kimball that “I have not any full edition of Jefferson’s correspondence in which to look up quotations as to slavery - only the four volumes edited by my grandfather and printed by F. Carr & Co in Charlottesville 1829.” Francis Carr was also a descendant of Jefferson. See: Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 4 December 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers, 1.

Jefferson’s reputation.”174 T. J. Randolph published the first edition of Jefferson’s papers, which Cogliano called an attempt “to portray his grandfather as a steadfast, largely uncontroversial public figure who made a substantial contribution to the founding of the American republic.”175 The edition included some of Jefferson’s letters, his autobiography, the anas, and some miscellaneous state papers. These were all items Jefferson curated and intended to be published upon his death and they, “presented Jefferson as a consistent supporter of republican liberty, while softening the rough edges of Jefferson’s character and conduct by omitting the strongest criticisms of his rivals.”176 Kean researched Jefferson using T. J. Randolph’s edition almost exclusively and therefore had a tainted vision of Jefferson’s efforts towards “freedom of the slaves.” He heavily relied on T. J. Randolph’s version of Jefferson’s papers, so he forwarded Randolph’s celebratory (and whitewashed) memory of Jefferson.

Kean understood Jefferson’s writings on chattel slavery as work towards a “fifth freedom” not only because of his limited sources, but also because of his consistent correspondence with Fiske Kimball. He primarily communicated with Kimball about the inscriptions and frequently asked for Kimball’s approval on his inscription drafts. Kimball’s intellectual influence over Kean was made evident when Kean called “freedom of the slaves” Jefferson’s “fifth freedom.”177 Kimball had previously coined the term “Jefferson’s Four Freedoms” and considered Jefferson’s major accomplishments as steps to achieve these


175 Cogliano, 81.

176 Ibid.

177 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Elbert Thomas, 27 October 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.
As the leading scholar on the TJMC, Kimball crafted the way Jefferson was remembered by the commission. Kimball framed Jefferson as the creator of pillars of American freedom. Kean associated Jefferson’s political achievements and “freedom.” Therefore, Kean connected “freedom” with Jefferson’s discussion of slavery when reading T. J. Randolph’s edition of Jefferson’s papers.

Each inscription in the memorial was dedicated to one of “Jefferson’s Four Freedoms,” so for the slavery inscription to be considered for inclusion, Kean posed “freedom of the slaves” as Jefferson’s fifth freedom. In 1939, at the start of their correspondence, Kimball informed Kean that he did not approve of an inscription dedicated to slavery because “you mustn’t claim too much for our hero,” and explained that “freedom of the body includes at one and the same time freedom from tyranny as well as freedom from slavery.” Kean immediately responded, “I was pleased to know… that by “freedom of the body” you meant precisely the abolition of African slavery.” Additionally, he wrote, “I hope when you put your hands on your notes as to the four freedoms, you will be able to give us some references as to his attitude on that which will not be too long for quotation.” Kean did not interpret Kimball’s response as a rejection of the idea that Jefferson should be memorialized for “freedom of the slaves.” Instead, he believed Kimball agreed with him, and continued to pass over Kimball’s soft resistance to the idea for the next few years.

178 For information on Kimball’s use of the phrase “Jefferson’s Four Freedoms,” see: Elbert Thomas to Fiske Kimball, 25 October 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.

179 Kimball wrote that “you mustn’t claim too much for our hero” because he believed that Jefferson was ineffective in making any change towards freeing the slaves. He drew this from Paul Leicester Ford’s edition of Jefferson’s writings (1905). Kimball also wrote the insightful line, “he didn’t say men were born equal or created equal” See: Fiske Kimball to Jefferson Randolph Kean, 4 December 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers, 1.

180 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 4 December 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers, 1-2.

181 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 4 December 1939, 2.
years. Kean’s ignorance of Kimball’s disagreement showed his desperation to fit “freedom of the slaves” into Jefferson’s four freedoms and consequently add abolition to his grandfather’s legacy. Kean realized that Jefferson would only be memorialized as an abolitionist if he fit “freedom of the slaves” into the context of Jefferson’s four freedoms. Because Kean was informed by T. J. Randolph’s edition of the Jefferson papers and his work on the TJMC, he interpreted what he read about Jefferson and slavery to mean that Jefferson worked towards “freedom of the slaves.”

In the mid-19th century, Kean would have found historians who agreed with him, which made his interpretation valid and believable to other commissioners. According to historian Robert Parkinson, mid-century biographers of Jefferson had newfound access to more of his papers and portrayed him as a symbol of freedom, democracy and “someone deeply disturbed by slavery.” Scholars began to explore aspects of Jefferson including his work as an architect, scientist, and his approach to slavery. In Reputation and Legacy, Cogliano traced scholarly discussion of Jefferson and slavery and pointed out that many mid-twentieth century scholars “followed the Memorial Commission’s practice of judiciously selecting from Jefferson’s writings in order to portray the Virginian in a sympathetic light as an opponent of slavery.” In correspondence between Kean and his relative, Thomas Jefferson Coolidge (also a member of the TJMC and descendant of Jefferson), Coolidge quickly accepted Kean’s research as true.

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182 Kimball included a footnote in a letter that was drawn from Paul Leicester Ford, an early publisher of Jefferson’s papers, to emphasize that Jefferson’s work to end slavery was not effective or extremely important to him. See, Fiske Kimball to Jefferson Randolph Kean, 22 January 1940, Box 3, Folder 3, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers.


184 Cogliano, Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy, 205.
Coolidge wrote, “your knowledge is far better than mine as to Jefferson’s contributions on the slavery question” and, “I know as a young man he was active against the theory of slavery.” Kean and Coolidge consumed scholarship on Jefferson that was meant to uncover aspects of his life that had been “neglected or unknown” and were likely prepared to accept new ideas about Jefferson without deep investigation or critique. The rhetoric about Jefferson and freedom was something they were familiar with as well. The history of Jefferson produced in the twentieth century was shaped by the need to define a unifying national story and Jefferson as a symbol of freedom extended past the TJMC and into scholarship. Kean’s interpretation of Jefferson fit in to the national rhetoric surrounding Jefferson.

Today, historians on Jefferson have largely acknowledged that Jefferson’s ideas about slavery prioritized the well-being of white people and were fueled by fear of rebellion and a desire to keep people of color out of America. While Jefferson did write about his distaste for slavery, his ideas about its end are not considered “abolitionist.” Current scholars assert that Jefferson believed enslaved people and their descendants should not remain in the United States after emancipation, that they relied on their white owners for their well-being, and that racial mixing would “degrade white Americans.” These historians conclude that his ideas were not intended to increase the freedom of black people. This transition in interpretation of Jefferson

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186 Cogliano, Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy, 86.


188 Cogliano, Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy, 203.
and slavery corresponded with shifts in the ways historians and the public think about founding fathers and changes in Jefferson’s legacy. Additionally, historians have been trained to consider Jefferson’s writings more holistically and critically. Cogliano explained that “in anticipation of this posthumous judgement Jefferson sought to present himself in his writings as an opponent of chattel slavery trapped by a system that he had inherited and could do little to change.” Since Kean wrote his inscription for the memorial, scholars have worked in various ways to understand Jefferson and slavery. The memory of Jefferson as an abolitionist that was perpetuated by the TJMC, J. R. Kean, and scholars on Jefferson in the mid-twentieth century lingers today. Historians repeatedly have to address Jefferson’s conflicted writings on slavery. Additionally, public history spaces have to explain the “Jefferson paradox” to visitors previously taught that Jefferson was responsible for “freedom of the slaves” in places like the Jefferson Memorial.


Kean considered the abolition of slavery “a story in two volumes.” He wrote in a letter to Fiske Kimball that, “The first volume is by T.J. and it is one that has never been read by the present generation. The second volume with the conclusion is by A. Lincoln and it can in no way diminish his fame to put it in its proper historical setting.” He dedicatedly explained, repetitively, that Lincoln era Republicans “were simply carrying out the Jefferson plan of 1784.” Kean’s idea that Lincoln looked to Jefferson as the political precedent for the abolition of slavery was based on Lincoln’s speeches, when he “proclaimed that he followed in the footsteps of Jefferson.” Kean primarily used the connection to justify adding an inscription for slavery into the memorial. Kean asserted that if Lincoln was memorialized for “freedom of the slaves” in any way, Jefferson should be too. In a letter to TJMC Chairman Stuart Gibboney, Kean wrote that the “passion of his [Jefferson’s] life” were his “sentiments and labors as an abolitionist.” Today, readers of the inscription may be shocked by the interpretation of Jefferson as an “abolitionist,” but Kean understood Jefferson that way because the memorialization of Lincoln was in his recent memory. Kean and the TJMC used the term “abolitionist” because the creation of the Jefferson Memorial occurred in light of and in response

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190 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 6 February 1941, Box 72, Folder 12, Fiske Kimball Papers, 3.

191 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 6 February 1941, 3.

192 The “Jefferson plan of 1784” that Kean referenced was Jefferson’s proposal to prohibit slavery in new northwest territories. The proposal did not pass in the Continental Congress. See: Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 8 February 1941, Box 72, Folder 12, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2; Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 6 February 1941, 3.


194 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney, 13 February 1941.
to the creation of the Lincoln Memorial. Kean’s consistent references to Lincoln reveal how memory of Jefferson in the TJMC was shaped by the memorialization of Lincoln.

The way that past administrations memorialized Washington and Lincoln formed Kean’s idea of what memorialization meant. Commissioners looked to the memorialization processes of Washington (1876-1884) and Lincoln (1914-1922) to justify their choices about the Jefferson Memorial. In 1940, Kean wrote a “memorandum as to inscriptions” where he explained why Washington and Lincoln’s legacies were cemented on the National Mall. Washington, “won our fight for independence,” and “presided over the birth of the Constitution which changed a loose confederacy into a more perfect union.” Lincoln, “saved this union.” Kean then stated that Lincoln was responsible for “the termination of the dangerous anomaly of slavery in this free country.” He then concluded, “so Abraham Lincoln in 1865 consummated the task begun by Thomas Jefferson in 1769. The two memorials will thus be seen as complementary one to the other.” Kean considered the memorialization of Jefferson in the context of the Washington and Lincoln memorials. From those memorials, Kean determined that “the purpose of memorials is to remind the coming generations of the ideals and great works of our most distinguished leaders


\[196\] Jefferson Randolph Kean, Memorandum as to Inscriptions, 1940, Box 3, Folder 3, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers, 1.

\[197\] Ibid., 1.

\[198\] Ibid.

\[199\] Kean used the year 1769 because it was the year Jefferson became a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses. See: Ibid., 7.
in thought and action." Kean wanted to present Jefferson as a complete representation of freedom, the way Lincoln and Washington were presented. He asked, “would a memorial to Jefferson be complete which makes no definite allusion to his life-long and never changing attitude on slavery?” The “slavery” inscription was added into the memorial because of the comparisons members of the TJMC made between Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson, who were the only presidents memorialized on the National Mall until that point. The TJMC wanted to ensure that visitors to the National Mall saw Jefferson as “as great” as Washington and Lincoln.

Kean recognized the political nature of comparing the Lincoln Memorial - erected by Republicans for a Republican - and the Jefferson Memorial - erected by Democrats for a Democrat. He acknowledged that attributing Jefferson with “freedom of the slaves” would possibly interfere with public perception of Lincoln’s work towards emancipation and argued that the two were not in competition, but collaboration. Kean believed that the other commissioners’ resistance to the slavery inscription was due to their ideas about Lincoln. Stuart Gibboney persistently resisted the slavery inscription, and Kean wrote to Kimball, “I have an intuition that Mr. Gibboney feels that to mention slavery in T.J.’s memorial would be to trespass on A. Lincoln’s grounds.” In order to sway Gibboney towards accepting the inscription, he wrote, “I suppose that you feel that we would appear to be competing with the fame of Lincoln, but… there is no such competition any more than there is between he who breaks the ground and

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200 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 6 February 1941, Box 72, Folder 12, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2.

201 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 6 February 1941, 2.

202 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 6 February 1941, 3.
sows the seed and the reaper who cultivates and gathers the crop.” In a recognition of the political implication of his argument, he explained, “I am convinced that if Jefferson had lived in Lincoln's day, he would have stood by Lincoln's side as a Republican.” Kean wrote similar sentiments to other commissioners as well. There were political stakes to memorializing Jefferson as an abolitionist, but Kean argued that this was not the case because “Lincoln sits in his marble chair in the beautiful Greek temple of Bacon, not because he freed the slaves, but because he preserved the Union, which is as he wished it.” To Kean, this not only made memorializing Jefferson for “freedom of the slaves” apolitical, but also essential.

The Jefferson Memorial was constructed at a pivotal time in Washington, D.C. history when the National Mall was being transformed to reflect a curated national memory and at the beginning of World War II, which is why the correlation between Jefferson and freedom was so important to the commissioners. In Monument Wars, Kirk Savage wrote that the National Mall is an “essential landscape” and many Americans recognize it as “seemingly as pure and unchanging as a million-year-old river gorge.” Understanding the creation of the National Mall as a

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204 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney, 13 February 1941, 3.

205 In a letter to Elbert Thomas, Kean wrote “I have been quite unable to comprehend how anyone 115 years after T.J.’s death and three quarters of a century after the matter had been settled for all time can consider this question to be controversial or anything but historical in character. That it can in any way diminish or reflect adversely on the name of Abraham Lincoln should, it seems to me, never occur to any historically minded person.” He also presented his views to the TJMC. See: Jefferson Randolph Kean to Elbert Thomas, 8 August 1941, Box 3, Folder 4, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers; Stuart Gibboney to Jefferson Randolph Kean, 19 February 1941, Box 3, Folder 4, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers.


207 Savage, Monument Wars, 8.
chronological process allows historians to see the memorials as correlated responses to each other. The Jefferson Memorial was built shortly after the Lincoln Memorial and in many instances, served as the Democrat response to the Republican Lincoln Memorial. Kean viewed Jefferson’s approach to slavery as “abolition” because while on the TJMC, he thought about Jefferson as a precedent of Lincoln.
“His race is indebted to Thomas Jefferson”: The Successful Inclusion of the Slavery Inscription

In his “Memorandum as to Inscriptions,” J. R. Kean wrote, “it is fitting that every colored person who goes into the memorial and reads its inscriptions should take away with him the knowledge that his race is indebted to Thomas Jefferson as the American statesman who began the fight against African slavery in the United States.”208 In a letter to Fiske Kimball, he expressed that “I would like for every negro who visits it to take away this knowledge, which none of them have now. There are 12 millions [sic] of them who should be interested.”209 Kean used this argument to advocate for the inclusion of the inscription. Additionally, he claimed that the rest of the American public was not familiar with Jefferson’s “movement to abolish slavery” and that the memorial was the opportunity to bring the history forward. The attempt to relate Jefferson to African American history by attributing abolition to him fit with the cultural push to create a collective memory that evoked patriotism and a sense of national identity.

Despite Kean’s beliefs that African Americans would discover a sense of reverence for Jefferson after visiting the memorial, his efforts to draw in African Americans to the Jefferson Memorial were not successful. While white response to the memorial was widespread and incredibly well documented, black Washingtonian newspapers did not report on the memorial or the memorial controversy. The only article in black Washington newspapers regarding the memorial was published on 10 April 1943 in the Baltimore Afro-American. It depicted an African American woman sitting on the steps in the memorial and stated, “charming Peggy Harper poses before the building honoring Thomas Jefferson, third U.S. President… Oh yes, Jefferson held

208 Jefferson Randolph Kean, Memorandum as to Inscriptions, 1940, Box 3, Folder 3, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers, 7.

209 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 3 February 1940, Box 72, Folder 11, Fiske Kimball Papers, 3.
slaves, had children by them and once sold two of his slave children.”210 While this claim was only partly true (there is no record of Jefferson selling the enslaved children he fathered), it does explain why the memorial did not appeal to many black Americans during the time of its construction. Kean hoped that by portraying Jefferson as an emancipator, African Americans would visit the memorial and feel “indebted” to Jefferson. This was not the case.

Kean argued that African Americans did not already feel “indebted to Thomas Jefferson” because most of the American public was unaware of the glowing piece of history he had uncovered. He felt that this public ignorance was an incredibly important reason to include the slavery inscription. In a letter to Kimball after President Roosevelt’s cornerstone laying address at the memorial, Kean wrote, “you noticed that the president in his address made no reference to

his activities as an abolitionist… This shows how unknown to the public generally is his attitude as to this freedom & how important it is to have one of the inscriptions refer to it.” In a letter to Stuart Gibboney and Elbert Thomas, he asserted that “Jefferson’s attitude, during his whole life, on the subject of slavery deserves a panel to itself.” He explained, “it does not seem to have been brought out by American historians and seems to be little known or appreciated by the general public today, yet it had a large influence on our national life.” Kean felt this made the inclusion of the inscription imperative.

In his argument that the American public was ignorant of this piece of history, Kean also evoked discussion of Jefferson’s tombstone. Jefferson’s epitaph credits him as “author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom & Father of the University of Virginia.” Gibboney argued that the inscriptions should be dedicated to those accomplishments, and Kean responded, “Why then is it necessary to record them also in his memorial in preference to the cause which was the passion of his soul?”

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211 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 4 December 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers, 2.

212 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney and Elbert Thomas, 30 January 1940, Box 3, Folder 3, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers, 1.

213 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney and Elbert Thomas, 30 January 1940, 1.


215 Kean wrote that the slavery inscription was “the one to which I attach the greatest importance, because of the vast and enduring results of Mr. Jefferson’s long fight against slavery and the slave trade and because there is so little popular appreciation of it.” Kean continued, “his connection with the declaration is known to every schoolboy. It and his connection with Religious Freedom are recorded, as you have remarked, on his tomb.” Kean also argued in a later letter that “freedom of the slaves” was not included on Jefferson’s tombstone because, “his work had not yet come to fruition and he could not see it as we see it. He did not have the testimony of Abraham Lincoln, who proclaimed that he followed in the footsteps of Jefferson.” See: Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney, 23 April 1941, Box 3, Folder 4, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers; Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney, 13 February 1941, Box 3, Folder 4, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers.
determined to have Jefferson memorialized for abolition of slavery. The tension between Kean and Gibboney revealed that there was debate over whether or not to include the inscription. Kean’s memory of Jefferson as an abolitionist was contested by the TJMC, but the inscription still made it into the memorial.

As a descendant of Jefferson, Kean felt it was his duty to not just preserve but to defend this memory of Jefferson. He published an essay on Jefferson and slavery in the Monticello Association annual report, which was intended to be read by only members of the “small family group of the descendants.” He also wrote to Stuart Gibboney that, “I for one would feel that I had failed in the duty placed upon me by the president if I should be a party to a conspiracy of silence in regard to it.” Kean not only had personal interests to celebrate his ancestry, but also held power on the TJMC because of his status as a descendant. In a letter to Fiske Kimball, Kean expressed, “I hope that you share the satisfaction that the conversion of Senator Thomas and the benevolent neutrality of Chairman Gibboney have brought me in the matter of panel III.” Even though Thomas, Kimball, and Gibboney all resisted the memorialization of Jefferson as an emancipator, an inscription is meant to credit him with “freedom of the slaves.” His persistence, evocation of Jefferson as a symbol of freedom, and insistence that the public had to be made aware of Jefferson the “abolitionist” helped his success in creating the slavery inscription.

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216 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Elbert Thomas, 12 June 1941, Box 3, Folder 4, Correspondence and Records Regarding Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington 1917-1943, Jefferson Randolph Kean Papers, 1.

217 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Stuart Gibboney, 23 September 1941, Box 72, Folder 12, Fiske Kimball Papers, 1.

218 Jefferson Randolph Kean to Fiske Kimball, 25 August 1941, Box 72, Folder 11, Fiske Kimball Papers, 1.
Conclusion: Implications of the Slavery Inscription

The Jefferson Memorial presents a flawed image of Thomas Jefferson and the National Park Service has not acknowledged these flaws. The memorial website presents a brief biography of Jefferson, but does not mention his role as a slave-owner or slavery at all. The site describes the inscription as illustrating “his beliefs in the evils of slavery.” Failing to recognize the flaws in the memorial perpetuates the “eternal” view of the National Monuments. Instead, the monuments, including the Jefferson Memorial, need to be situated in the time they were constructed. This requires contextualizing the “slavery” inscription and conveying the story of the TJMC in the 1930s and 1940s.

Kean drew the “slavery” inscription from words that Jefferson wrote, but skewed them to mean something outside of what Jefferson meant. Jefferson’s views on slavery were complicated. He is a perfect example of the Founding Father “paradox:” men who wrote about freedom, but owned people. Jefferson recognized slavery as a dangerous institution, but did not view African Americans as people who deserved freedom and equality. The phrases “freedom” and “abolition” that Kean used to describe Jefferson’s views on slavery are not accurate. As a descendant of Jefferson and member of the TJMC, Kean interpreted Jefferson in a flawed way in order to portray him as a unifying symbol of freedom. If the National Park Service acknowledged Kean’s effort to construct a memory of Jefferson that glossed over his role as a slave owner and


portrayed him as an abolitionist, they could contextualize the story of the inscription. Kean and the TJMC should be a more prominent part of the conversation about the Jefferson Memorial.

The existing historiography of the Jefferson Memorial explains the structure in the context of Jefferson’s legacy or Washington, D. C. history, but does not consider the memorial as a product of its historical moment. Jefferson’s legacy, Washington history, and the movement to create a unifying national story all shaped the memorial. Kean was successful with the addition of the “slavery” inscription into the memorial because the TJMC worked in response to the Lincoln Memorial. Additionally, there was an emerging national memory of Jefferson as a representation of American “freedoms.” Kean effectively altered American memory of Jefferson through the “slavery” inscription and his work lives through the Jefferson Memorial today.
Conclusion

The National Mall is a pilgrimage site that people from around the world visit to remember the American story. This American story, which acknowledges “great” Americans, is a heavily curated national history. Today, more than 25 million people visit the National Mall every year and are surrounded by the nation’s curated historical memories. In Kirk Savage’s *Monument Wars*, he wrote, “the most cherished axiom of the memorial landscape is its permanence, its eternity.” The visitors to the National Mall view the memorials as unchanging and long-standing and they interpret history told on the National Mall as an authentic story. Despite its eternal appearance, the Jefferson Memorial has existed for less than a century. The Jefferson Memorial was a product of memories of Jefferson that were employed by the TJMC between 1936 and 1943. It reflects more about that historical moment than about Jefferson himself.

The TJMC existed for seven years and invoked different memories of Jefferson throughout their existence. In 1936-1939, the United States was recovering from the Great Depression, and the Roosevelt administration enacted New Deal policies to encourage economic growth. In the New Deal Era, the government assumed responsibility for constructing the national historical narrative. Americans were faced with unprecedented hardships after the Great Depression and as the Second World War began, and the government viewed it as their job to promote patriotism through American history. Roosevelt and the TJMC were part of this effort and viewed it as their duty to encourage Americans to associate Jefferson and patriotism. This


originally manifested through New Deal Democrats, who connected Jeffersonian ideals with New Deal policies by arguing that both expanded the freedom of the masses, instead of only elite individuals. The New Deal Democrats asserted that Jefferson was their historical precedent and even went so far as to argue that Jefferson would have been a New Deal Democrat. It was in these years that the TJMC considered Jefferson the “founder of a party,” or the first Democrat. It was also in this moment that the TJMC selected the site and design of the memorial.

The TJMC insisted on a classical, non-utilitarian design for the Jefferson Memorial because it asserted Jefferson’s status as one of the three greatest presidents. Both Washington and Lincoln had classical, non-utilitarian memorials, and the TJMC wanted to add Jefferson – a Democrat – to the Washington, D.C. memorial landscape. The Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in 1922 and served as the precedent to the Jefferson Memorial. The TJMC looked to the process of memorializing Lincoln in their design and inscription selections. Additionally, they felt that the two were going to be compared, as they were in close proximity and memorialized Lincoln, a symbol of the Republican party, and Jefferson, a symbol of the Democratic party. The TJMC resisted protests from the Washington public over the memorial’s location and design because they wanted to assert Jefferson’s importance as equal to that of Lincoln and Washington. In the minds of the TJMC, this would build the national narrative and assert the importance of freedom and democracy – two things Jefferson came to represent as the memorialization process continued.

The Washington public, especially wealthy white business owners, architects, and women’s organizations, steadfastly resisted the TJMC’s choices regarding the memorial’s location and design. Unlike the TJMC, the public had flexible views of Jefferson that changed as
decisions were made about the memorial. The public did not feel the same responsibility to form
the national narrative that the TJMC felt. Washingtonians opposed the classical, non-utilitarian
design and argued that Jefferson was simple and practical, and deserved a simple and useful
memorial. They opposed the location of the memorial because they felt it would destroy the
beauty of West Potomac park, and they argued that Jefferson would have supported them because
of his trust in the populace. The conflict between the Washington public and TJMC that
culminated in the Cherry Tree Rebellion occurred because Jefferson’s reputation was in a state of
change. Different interpretations of Jefferson existed before the Second World War, when
Americans more directly associated him with freedom and democracy. There was incongruence
in the Washington public’s interpretation of Jefferson and the TJMC’s interpretation of Jefferson.
Today, the Jefferson Memorial does not reflect this contested memory of Jefferson, but the
classical, non-utilitarian memorial portrays him as a figure that has been eternally revered.

As the Second World War began, American patriotism increased, the nation adopted
consensus history, and Jefferson lost his association with the Democrats and instead became a
symbol of freedom and democracy. Fiske Kimball wrote “Jefferson’s four freedoms:” freedom of
property, freedom of mind, freedom of soul, and freedom of body.223 These not only identified
which of Jefferson’s accomplishments were important to the TJMC, but also reflected the
American urge to define freedom at a moment it was challenged abroad. The Second World War
forced Americans to consider which aspects of their freedom were valuable to them – or why
they had entered into the war. President Roosevelt drew from Kimball’s “Jefferson’s four
freedoms” in his Four Freedoms speech on 6 January 1941, when he dictated America’s “four

223 Civil Rights and Liberties: Extension of Remarks of Hon. Sherman Minton, Radio Address By Hon. Elbert D.
Thomas, 12 October 1939, Box 72, Folder 10, Fiske Kimball Papers.
freedoms:” freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The similarity between Jefferson’s four freedoms and Roosevelt’s four freedoms revealed that Jefferson had become a quintessentially American symbol and a representation of freedom.

The inscriptions of the memorial were drafted between 1939-1942, when Jefferson was a symbol of freedom. After a long debate among the commissioners, an inscription was dedicated to Jefferson’s efforts towards “freedom of the slaves.” Historians today do not associate Jefferson and abolition, so why does the inscription exist? Jefferson Randolph Kean, the author of the inscription and descendant of Jefferson, viewed Jefferson’s ideas about slavery as Jefferson’s “fifth freedom” because he remembered Jefferson as a symbol of freedom and interpreted all of Jefferson’s writings through a lens of “freedom.” Additionally, his interpretation of Jefferson as an abolitionist stemmed from the national consensus history that existed at the time.

Acknowledging Jefferson as a slave-owner would have complicated the idea of Jefferson and freedom, and the TJMC followed the American trend of exclusionary history and failed to recognize Jefferson as someone who owned people. The memory of Jefferson as sympathetic to the abolition of slavery is dangerous. While Jefferson’s ideas about slavery were complex, he did not believe in increasing the freedom of people of color. Instead, he felt ending slavery could protect white men and did not think that African Americans belonged in the United States. His ideas about ending slavery were motivated by his racism. Kean’s inscription does not

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acknowledge this, but states, “nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free.”

Today, public history sites struggle with the memory of Jefferson as a symbol of freedom. Visitors to Monticello often have a hard time grasping that Jefferson owned more than six hundred people in his lifetime. They wonder if Jefferson was a benevolent slave owner and ask tour guides questions like: “did he free his slaves at his death?” and “were enslaved people at Monticello treated nicely?” These questions are jarring to historians, but they are the product of Kean and the TJMC’s memory of Jefferson as a symbol of freedom. It is hard for the public to understand that Jefferson took freedom away from people when he is remembered for “freedom of the slaves” in the Jefferson Memorial.

James Loewen, in *Lies Across America*, is highly critical of memorials and museums. While his research about the inscriptions in the memorial exposed the inaccuracy in the slavery inscription, it did not accurately uncover the individuals behind the inscription or the memory of Jefferson that resulted in the inscription. Regardless, Loewen presented an insightful critique of inaccuracies in public history sites: “these misrepresentations on the American landscape help keep us ignorant as a people, less able to understand what really happened in the past, and less able to apply our understanding to issues facing the United States today.” The National Park Service does not acknowledge the flaw in the inscription, so visitors to the memorial do not have the opportunity to see the structure as a product of the 1930s and 1940s, and instead interpret it

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as a reflection of Jefferson’s true character. The TJMC’s memory of Jefferson lives on through the memorial.

In 2019, billionaire David Rubenstein donated $10 million to the Jefferson memorial for upgrades, new exhibit spaces, and other refurbishments. The memorial was in a state of minor disrepair, but Rubenstein’s donation ensured that the structure will continue to memorialize Jefferson as a symbol of freedom, in the way that the TJMC imagined. While the memorial appears to be a “shrine to freedom” or “marble mausoleum,” it was the product of contested memories of Jefferson. Its creation was protested by Washingtonians, its inscriptions hotly debated, and Jefferson’s memory was manipulated to fit the agendas of members of the memorial commission. The Jefferson Memorial was built during what historians of Jefferson’s legacy have labeled the “age of Jefferson monuments,” but the history of the structure does not fit in nicely to this narrative.

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