



Critical Reading

## Thomas Jefferson on Native Rights and the Slavery Question

### Historical Context

By 1824, Thomas Jefferson was near the end of his life, reflecting on his role as a founding father of the United States. He had served as the third US president (1801–1809) and, even in retirement at Monticello, stayed involved in national issues. This letter to Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney, a poet who advocated for Native American rights and the abolition of slavery, shows his mixed views on Indigenous peoples and slavery. In the early 1800s, Native American relations were a major issue as the United States expanded. Jefferson believed Native Americans should adopt European customs and farming to become "civilized," but this ignored their traditions and led to forced displacement. When he mentions the "transactions of the late war," he likely refers to the War of 1812, when many Native groups sided with the British against US expansion. Jefferson also discusses slavery, calling it a moral issue but offering no real solution. His phrase "having the wolf by the ears" suggests he saw slavery as dangerous for both enslavers and the enslaved, yet he took no real action to end it. This contradiction defined his life as he spoke against slavery but owned hundreds of enslaved people. Jefferson recognized the tensions of the moment, and left the problem to future generations. His letter gives insight into how he justified his role in shaping the nation while avoiding direct responsibility for its biggest injustices.

### Connection to Habit

The ability to read critically and distinguish between evidence (facts) and assertion (opinions) is essential in understanding historical figures like Thomas Jefferson. His letter to Lydia Sigourney presents his views on Native Americans and slavery, but a closer examination reveals contradictions and unsubstantiated claims.

## Discussion Questions

- What motivations or biases might have influenced Jefferson's statements? What historical events challenge or support his claims?
- Why do you think Jefferson expresses regret about Native American treatment and also justifies US expansion?
- Why does Jefferson acknowledge slavery as a problem but fail to act against it?
- How do Jefferson's words compare to the lived experiences of Native Americans and enslaved people at the time?
- How does this letter reflect larger debates happening in the United States at the time?

## Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Printed copies of [Jefferson's letter](#)
- Notebook Paper
- Pencil/Pen

Step 1: Primary Source Analysis [15 mins]

- Distribute [Jefferson's letter](#)
- In small groups, students will categorize Jefferson's statements into three columns:
  - Fact (based on historical events or evidence)
  - Opinion (a belief or assertion without direct proof)
  - Contradiction (statements that go against his actions or earlier claims)

Step 2: Two Minute Presentations [20 mins]

- Students will have one member of the group present their findings to the class (2 minutes per group), with justifications for their categorization.

Optional Extension: Students transcribe their columns on chart paper to post around the classroom. Conduct a gallery walk to compare their answers to others'.

## Primary Source

From Thomas Jefferson to Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney, 18 July 1824

Monticello July 18. 24

I thank you Madam, for the kindness of your letter of June 30. and the partial notice you are so good as to take of the part I bore in our great revolutionary struggle. I was one only of many, very many indeed who exerted their best endeavours in the accomplishment of that change in our condition. its success will make it the greatest event in human history, and although rivers of blood are yet to flow for the general establishment of its principles and its consequences towards the amelioration of the condition of man throughout the universe, they will be finally established. we have had to be sure one great example of retrogradation in the improvement of man, in the extinction by the Northern Barbarians of the science of Greece and Rome. but the art of printing was then unknown. that renders impossible the loss of lights once gained.

I rejoice also in your advocacy of the Indian rights. & concur in all your sentiments in their favor. I once had hopes that the Southern tribes were nearly ripe for incorporation with us. the facility with which the cotton plant enables them to clothe themselves renders their civilization easier than that of the Northern tribes, who are obliged to resort to the beasts of the forest for covering. but my hopes in the South are damped by the transactions of the late war which in destroying many of them have produced in the rest so implacable a hatred of us as to revolt them against all counsels coming from us. the happy numbers in which you have so strongly and so feelingly expressed their wrongs will ensure their being read, and felt by breasts which humble prose can rarely touch. reading, they will reflect, and feel the duties we owe to that race of men. I wish that was the only blot in our moral history, and that no other race had higher charges to bring against us. I am not apt to despair; yet I see not how we are to disengage ourselves from that deplorable entanglement, we have the wolf by the ears and feel the danger of either holding or letting him loose. I shall not live to see it but those who come after us will be wiser than we are, for light is spreading and man improving. to that advancement I look, and to the dispensations of an all-wise and all-powerful providence to devise the means of effecting what is right. I pray you to accept assurances of my high and respectful consideration.

Th: Jefferson