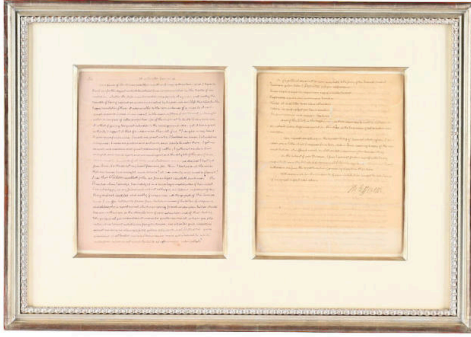


# Basic Detail Report

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## Thomas Jefferson letter to Amos Cook, regarding the Constitution and George Washington

### Date

1816

### Primary Maker

Thomas Jefferson

### Medium

Paper

### Description

A letter from Thomas Jefferson to Amos Cook, preceptor of Fryeburg Academy. Monticello, January 21, 1816. Jefferson reflects on freedom, wisdom, and happiness, and sends as a gift George Washington's letter transmitting the Constitution to Jefferson (see 2022.037.0001). The letter is one sheet, quarto, folded to make four pages, handwritten by and signed by Thomas Jefferson. The letter has been framed with a white mat and gilt frame. A remarkable and oft-quoted letter in which the 72-year-old "Sage of Monticello" furnishes his philosophy on freedom, wisdom, happiness and virtue, responds to Cook's quoting "the elegant and philosophical lines communicated by the Nestor of our revolution" (John Adams), and fulfills his request for "something in the handwriting of General Washington," by sending Washington's September 18, 1787, where Washington announced to Jefferson the adoption of the United States Constitution. Jefferson offers to Cook quotations from Ecclesiastes, Cicero and Horace. The latter two evidently had deep resonance for the former president as he had first copied them into his Literary Commonplace Book some 50 years earlier. Since then, Jefferson had weathered a lifetime of personal, professional and financial ups and downs, and from the perspective of old age he reflects on his life through a paraphrase of Ecclesiastes, 2.3-13: "I sought in my heart to give myself unto wine; I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and orchards, and pools to water them; I got me servants and maidens, and great possessions of cattle; I gathered me also silver and gold, and men singers, and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all sorts; and whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy. then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and behold! all was vanity and vexation of spirit! I saw that Wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.'" The future founder of the University of Virginia concludes by offering a profound summation: "And if the Wise, be the happy man, as these sages say, he must be virtuous too; for, without virtue, happiness cannot be. This then is the true scope of all academical emulation." Lastly, Jefferson responds to Cook's request for "something in the handwriting of General Washington," by enclosing "a letter which I received from him, while in Paris, covering a copy of the new Constitution" In Amos J. Cook's (1778-1836) December 18, 1815 letter to

Thomas Jefferson, which prompted Jefferson's reply here, the schoolmaster explained that he was seeking specimens "of the hand-writing of a number of our most eminent characters" for his museum at Fryeburg Academy in Fryeburg, Maine (founded 1792). He had earlier received a reply and sample of writing from Jefferson's former political rival, John Adams, in 1807, to whom Cook had made a similar request. Cook closes by requesting from Jefferson "Whatever you may have to bestow on us, in behalf of science and literature will be gratefully received and acknowledged.—A piece of your hand-writing (and in Latin for our translation, if you think proper) I hope you will be pleased to grant". He then adds a postscript: "Perhaps you may be able to furnish us a piece of the late George Washington's hand-writing." (see lot 14) Cook displayed the letters in Fryeburg Academy's museum, until the building was destroyed by fire in 1850. Both Washington and Jefferson's letters were assumed lost in the conflagration, until they were rediscovered in 1902 among the papers of Major James Osgood, an Academy trustee. In 2006, both letters were sold to benefit the Academy, and have not been offered for sale since. The survival of this letter from Thomas Jefferson to Cook establishes the unbroken chain of provenance of lot 14. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was an American statesman and politician who was a Founding Father of the United States. Jefferson served as the third President of the United States from 1801-1809, having previously served as the country's second Vice President under John Adams and the first Secretary of State under George Washington. Jefferson was a key figure in the American Revolution and was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson was born in the British colony of Virginia and raised there on his family's plantation. Jefferson attended the College of William & Mary and became a lawyer. He later served in the Virginia House of Burgesses from 1769-1775. At the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War, Jefferson became a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. While serving with the Continental Congress, Jefferson was appointed to the Committee of Five, charged with authoring a declaration of independence. Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence between June 11 and 28, 1776 while staying in Philadelphia, and after receiving feedback from other committee members presented the final draft to the Continental Congress on June 28, 1776. Debate over its contents lasted until July 4, 1776, when the Continental Congress ratified the document before it was signed by delegates on August 2, 1776. Jefferson returned to Virginia during the Revolutionary War, where he was named a Colonel in the Albemarle County Militia and was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates, charged with writing a state constitution. Jefferson was then named as a Virginia delegate to the Congress of the Confederation, where he served from 1783-1784 before being named as Minister Plenipotentiary for Negotiating Treaties of Amity and Commerce, and was sent overseas to Great Britain and France as de facto ambassador. Jefferson served overseas until 1789 when he returned to the United States. President George Washington appointed Jefferson as the country's first Secretary of State, where he worked to decrease America's dependence on Britain for trade. In the 1796 presidential election, Jefferson lost to John Adams and became Vice President due to the election laws of the time. In the election of 1800, Jefferson again contested Adams and in an a tie between Jefferson and Aaron Burr, Jefferson was elected president by a tie-breaking ballot in the U.S. House of Representatives. Jefferson's presidency was marked by expansion of the country through the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and the use of the U.S. Navy as part of the country's first foreign war on the Barbary Coast. Jefferson was reelected in 1804, and continued his attempt to strengthen the United States' standing through annexation and trade embargos. After leaving the Presidency, Jefferson returned to Monticello, his estate in Virginia. In 1819, he founded the University of

Virginia, and helped plan the university's buildings and curriculum. He died on July 4, 1826, on the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence.

### **Dimensions**

Frame: 25 1/4 x 17 3/4 x 1 3/4 in. (64.1 x 45.1 x 4.4 cm) Letter: 9 5/8 x 7 3/4 in. (24.4 x 19.7 cm)