

## Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and the Natural Bridge of Virginia

David W. Coffey



THE importance of the Natural Bridge to this county cannot be overestimated. Not only is it one of our chief tourist attractions, it also gave us our name—Rockbridge—making our county one of the few in Virginia which takes its name from a landscape feature.

Moreover, the Bridge made easier the exit from Rockbridge of those early pioneers who had decided that their futures would best be made elsewhere to the south and west. Some of our evacuating ancestors, when crossing the Bridge for the last time on their way to Kentucky or Tennessee, must have seen the Bridge as a symbol of freedom—a freedom to move on and try one more time to achieve the American Dream. And, certainly, those god-fearing pioneers (and, of course, we assume that they were all god-fearing) must have seen the arch as its first owner, Thomas Jefferson, did—as a tangible proof of a Creator God.

These two visions—the Bridge as a symbol of freedom and the Bridge as evidence of an omnipotent creative force—are underlying themes which resonated with many of the early Virginians who experienced the Bridge.

They were present in the interpretation given the Natural Bridge by the Monocan Indians, the first people we know to have encountered the Bridge and to have viewed it as particularly their own. The Monocan

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tribe, an eastern branch of the Siouian Nation, once claimed as their domain the lands along the James River westward from the Fall Line to beyond the Blue Ridge into the Valley. Now, there are just a few Monocans living on Bear Mountain in Amherst County on the northern edge of the region which had once been especially theirs, a region which, of course, included the Natural Bridge. The Monocans obviously wondered how such an amazing rock formation came to be; to answer their question, they developed a legend which not only explained to their satisfaction why the Bridge was there, but bolstered their self-image as well—the Bridge was put there for them by the Great Spirit. A version of the legend, was included in *Bits of History and Legends Around and About the Natural Bridge of Virginia*, compiled in the mid-twentieth century by J. Lee Davis, for many years the president of The Natural Bridge of Virginia, Inc.:

Long, long ago, thousands of years before the Princess Pocahontas saved the life of Captain John Smith, there was a terrible war among some of the tribes. The Shawnees were noted for their cruelty; and they joined forces with the Powhatans. These Indians roamed through Virginia and fell upon the Monocans, a more friendly tribe.

There had been a famine that year and the Monocans were weakened by hunger; and many of their braves fell in battle. After a long conflict, the Monocans decided to retreat and they gave way before the enemy. But they were pursued relentlessly. The Monocans sought refuge in a strange forest and suddenly they came upon a high chasm, whose steep walls were of rocks. The braves peered over and were made dizzy when they saw the great distance to the bottom below, where a swiftly running river looked like a small silver ribbon.

Even the strongest could not have jumped across the wide chasm, for it was over a hundred feet wide. Their swiftest scouts ran hither and yon, but each brought back word that there was no way around.

These Monocans were in despair and in their distress threw themselves upon the ground and cried aloud to the Great Spirit to spare their lives from the approaching enemy.

One of the braves arose and went again to the edge of the cliff. He stared down at his feet, then turned and shouted, "Our prayers have been granted us—the Great Spirit has built for us a bridge across the great abyss."

And so the women and children passed over this into the shelter of the forest beyond. Even as they went they could hear the war whoop of the advancing enemy.

But the Monocans were refreshed in spirit. Their courage had returned, for was not the Great Spirit on their side? The braves quickly took positions on the Bridge, each feeling he stood on sacred ground, and like the Greeks of old at Thermopylae they turned and faced their

enemy and fought victoriously. From that day, we are told they called it “The Bridge of God” and worshipped it.

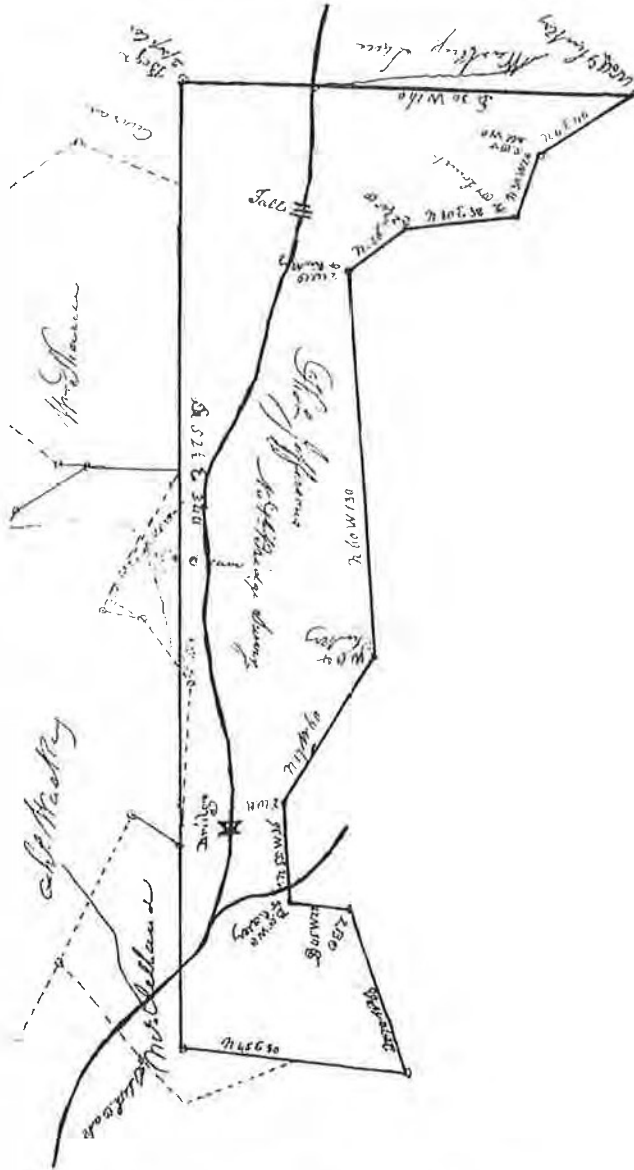
For the Monocans, the Bridge meant continued freedom (an escape from certain defeat and possible annihilation at the hands of the Shawnee and Powhatans) and a sure sign of divine benediction upon their tribe, a reassuring belief that the Great Spirit preferred them over their enemies.

John Peter Salling, a German weaver whose earliest home in the colony was in Williamsburg, was the first white person to take up residence in the vicinity of the Natural Bridge. Though he had visited the area previously, he did not return and settle here until after had been taken captive by the Indians and had traveled with them as far west as the Mississippi. After gaining his freedom, Salling and his family established their residence at present-day Glasgow. He took the occasional visitor to see the Bridge, but his recorded observations of the great stone arch are descriptive only, dwelling exclusively upon its physical dimensions. Having by his choice settled in an area where the nearest European was dozens of miles away, one can assume that Salling sought the freedom of solitude—and the freedom of contact with the Native Americans with whom he had spent considerable time as, one suspects, a somewhat willing captive.

As a young man, George Washington, we are told, came to the Bridge while conducting a survey for his mentor and employer, Lord Fairfax. One version of this story has it that Washington was surveying the path southward from Winchester in the company of Peter Jefferson, father of the eventual owner of the Bridge. The survey would have been of benefit to Benjamin Borden, one of Fairfax’s circle, who had acquired title to much of present-day Rockbridge County, though not to the Bridge itself. Peter Jefferson, a renowned map-maker, may have reported to his young son back home at Shadwell of the impressive natural wonder which lay beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains. Whether he told young Tom of Washington’s marring of the Bridge with his initials is, of course, not known. In any case, if Washington in fact carved that big “GW” on the cliff above Cedar Creek, he became the first graffiti-artist to visit the Bridge; his wanton act of vandalism is, by today’s standards, not a worthy beginning to the long and illustrious career of “the Father of our Country.”

In 1767, on the 23rd of August, Thomas Jefferson, who was just beginning his career as a lawyer, visited the Natural Bridge for the first time. He was probably surprised to find that the great arch he described as “so beautiful, so elevated, so light, and springing, as it were, up to heaven” had not been claimed by any of the thousands of settlers who

had poured into the Valley since his father and George Washington had made their survey in the early 1750's. Remarkably, except for Washington's initials, the Bridge remained untarnished and unblemished as (in Jefferson's words) "the most sublime of Nature's works." Jefferson, using his connections with the government in Williamsburg, paid a registration fee of twenty shillings and acquired title to 157 acres of land which included the Bridge and the creek which had formed it as far west as Lacy Falls. It was an odd-shaped parcel of land which Jefferson now owned. Its elongation was due in large part to the fact that all the surrounding lands suitable for farming had been claimed, leaving behind this largely useless parcel which had no probable agricultural or commercial value. For Jefferson, this was fortuitous since he now owned all the land that one can see when one approaches the Bridge from the area behind the present-day Gatehouse, as well as all the terrain visible while standing under the Bridge and when proceeding westward through the gorge formed by Cedar Creek between the Bridge and Lacy Falls. To use modern terminology, Jefferson had acquired



*A drawing of the plat of Jefferson's Natural Bridge property as it appears in the back of a ledger kept by William Douthat who ran a store in the vicinity. This plat was probably used to help determine the boundaries of Jefferson's property which were the subject of a dispute between Jefferson's neighbors and his tenant, Patrick Henry. (Virginia Historical Society.)*



*Edward Meyer, a German artist, published this illustration of Natural Bridge in 1858. (Album of Virginia, plate 36.)*

the viewshed of the Bridge and Cedar Creek. In his own words, Jefferson saw ownership of the Bridge as “a public trust,” and, functioning as a one-man Nature Conservancy, Jefferson deserves to be recognized as an early environmentalist.

Oddly, having acquired title to the Bridge, thus protecting it from encroaching development, Jefferson did not visit the Bridge again until 1781, and there are only three more visits to the Bridge recorded in his journals or memoranda books, in the years of 1815, 1817, and 1821, all made late in his life when he was in retirement at Monticello and Poplar Forest.

During the American Revolution perhaps, and definitely during the War of 1812, Jefferson leased out the Bridge property for use as a shot tower. In 1809, hard-pressed for cash (as he always was), Jefferson considered selling the Bridge. But by 1815, even though his financial situation was not much better than it had been in 1809, Jefferson wrote that he had changed his mind and had “no idea of selling the land. I would,” he wrote, “on no consideration permit the bridge to be injured, defaced, or masked from public view.”

What was the meaning of the Bridge for Thomas Jefferson? For one thing, it symbolized the glorious possibilities of the West as the creator of a future greatness for the infant nation. It is odd today to think of the Natural Bridge as emblematic of the West—but for Jefferson it was, as it were, the gateway to that vast region which lay beyond the mountains. The Natural Bridge was, in fact, as far west as Jefferson himself ever went, and engravings of the Bridge (and of that other “western” wonder, Niagara Falls) were prominently displayed at Monticello along with the artifacts which had been sent to Jefferson by Lewis and Clark. While in France in the 1780s, Jefferson had become embroiled in an ongoing, proto-evolutionary debate between Europeans favorably disposed to the United States and one of France’s greatest scientists, Count Buffon, who argued that America was unhealthy and would cause the decline and degradation of any Europeans who dared to make it their inhabitation. Basically, Buffon argued, Old World emigrants to the New World would soon skid backwards down the slope of progress until they reached the level of the American aborigines. Jefferson thought differently, and, using his 6’2” height to his advantage, argued that America actually had larger animals than did Europe. (To further prove his point, he arranged to have a large moose skeleton delivered to Paris for display to the skeptics who agreed with Buffon.) And then, of course, there was the grandeur of the American landscape which carried for Jefferson the same meaning as it had for the Monocans—it was a sign of a special Providence provided for all Americans by “Nature’s God.” Jefferson wanted images of his Bridge to be made available to Europeans, but believed that only an American artist could truly do it justice. He did not want it “misrepresented” by “some bungling European” painter (though he was willing to make an exception if access to his Bridge could entice his English artist friend, Maria Cosway, to come to America).

Figuratively speaking, Jefferson always faced west—Monticello is oriented so as to face the mountains, and the Lawn at the University of Virginia was intentionally left open at one end to entice students to contemplate the unending vista of America. The Natural Bridge was Jefferson’s own personal foothold in the greatness which lay ahead for America in its westward expansion. Jefferson was given the opportunity to rhapsodize about his Bridge when he answered a series of queries posed to the American states in the early 1780s by a representative of the French government who wanted to know more about the region whose independence France had supported. The result was Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, a book-length report on the state of the Commonwealth which certainly exceeded the expectations of the French diplomat who had requested the information—after all, he had only asked twenty-three basic questions. One of those queries, the fifth one, inquired

about “cascades and caverns.” Jefferson admitted, reluctantly, that Virginia had no world-class waterfalls or caves, but then, he said, we have this Natural Bridge, and though natural bridges were not included in the question, he could not resist including a description of this “most sublime of Nature’s works.” (It’s worth noting that Jefferson very modestly did not reveal his ownership of the Bridge.)

It is on the ascent of a hill, which seems to have been cloven through its length by some great convulsion. . . . Though the sides of this bridge are provided in some parts with a parapet of fixed rocks, yet few men have resolution to walk to them and look over into the abyss. You involuntarily fall down on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet and peep over it. Looking down from this height about a minute, give me a violent head ach. . . . descending then to the valley below, the sensation becomes delightful in the extreme. It is impossible for the emotions, arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here: so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing, as it were, up to heaven, the rapture of the Spectator is really indescribable.

Jefferson’s account of the sublimity of his Bridge reads more like the work of a Romantic than an inhabitant of “The Age of Reason.” Certainly, throughout the nineteenth century, the descriptions written of the Bridge by visitors almost always parrot Jefferson’s words. Though his word-picture of the Bridge may be the most widely known part of *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson spoke on many topics—of his admiration for the land of Virginia, of his desires for a more perfect government for the Commonwealth, of his struggle to procure a “Statute of Religious Freedom” for Virginia, and of the nobleness of the Native Americans (perhaps related to his debate with Count Buffon). Unfortunately, for those who wish to make Jefferson a man ahead of his time in all regards, in *Notes*, Jefferson gives expression to his most blatantly racist comments on the future possibilities of African Americans. Ironically, Jefferson’s ownership of the Natural Bridge and his desire to protect it from encroachment, brought him into contact with a particular type of African American, the free black, about whom Jefferson normally had conflicted opinions.

In 1787, the year of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, and while Jefferson was still in France, a boy named Patrick was born on a plantation in Westmoreland County, Virginia. The owner of this plantation, Martin Tapscott, may, in fact, have been Patrick’s father, but Patrick’s mother was a slave—and that was legally all that mattered in determining the baby’s destiny. According to *The Tapscotts of Virginia* by family genealogist, Joseph Dan Tapscott, Martin Tapscott was a third-generation resident of the Northern Neck and his grandfather had come to Virginia in the late 1690s as an indentured servant. The family had

prospered and, at the time of his death in 1804, Martin Tapscott owned considerable land and thirty-three slaves, one of whom was Patrick. While not as well-to-do as a few of his neighbors, Tapscott was better off than most. Talk of freedom for slaves was commonplace in the Westmoreland County of Patrick's youth. The ideals of the American Revolution (so aptly summarized by Jefferson in the phrase "all men are created equal") seemed to many to make slavery an institution incompatible with life in a new and virtuous republic. Furthermore, Baptists and Methodists were making strong gains among all classes and races in Virginia, even among the white elite, and their anti-slavery teachings were changing many slaveowners into manumissionists. The most notable example in Westmoreland County was Robert Carter of Nomini Hall who freed all five hundred of his slaves in the early 1790s. And Westmoreland's most famous native son, George Washington, would grant his slaves their freedom in his will. But Martin Tapscott was not moved by these examples. During his lifetime he only freed one slave, a woman named Lavinia, who was, more than likely his mistress and Patrick's mother. In 1794, ten years before he died, Tapscott had penned the following deed of manumission, though it was not filed with the Clerk of the Court until after his demise:

To all whom it may concern, Know Ye that I, Martin Tapscott of Westmoreland County in the State of Virginia for and in consideration of the faithful Services, together with other conscientious motives, have forever, Emancipated, discharged and set free (whatever Law to the Contrary) one Negro named Lavinia, born in the year 1761, together with all her future posterity or increase forever.

No less an authority than Martin Tapscott's brother, John, indicated that Martin Tapscott had intended for Patrick to be granted his freedom as well. Martin's sudden death before Patrick had reached the legal age for manumission had, however, prevented Patrick's owner from actualizing his offer of freedom (and, coincidentally, sent Lavinia to the Courthouse to register her manumission document). It took Patrick seven additional years of labor to earn his freedom. Patrick's new owner, John Tapscott, described the process in his deed of manumission recorded in the Westmoreland County Deed Book:

Whereas Patrick a Mulattoe man was in February 1806 sold for the sum of 300 dollars and was purchased for that sum by John Tapscott of the County of Westmoreland, who, when he made the purchase was well knowing that it had been the intention of his Brother Martin Tapscott to have Emancipated and set free the said Patrick, but from doing which he the said Martin was prevented by sudden death in the month of November in the year 1804. He the said John Tapscott did promise the said Patrick that so soon as he could make up the said sum of 300



dollars and would pay the same to him, the said John Tapscott, that he the said Patrick shold be free, and whereas the said Patrick by his own exertions and from the liberality of others hath been able to make up the said sum of 300 dollars which he hath paid to the said John Tapscott, the payment and receipt whereof he the said John Tapscott doth hereby acknowledge—now in consideration of the promises he the said John Tapscott hath EMANCIPATED and set FREE the said Patrick . . . giving hereby to the said Patrick all the Priviledges and Enjoyments of a free man according to the Laws of this Commonwealth.

While one may readily fault John Tapscott for compelling Patrick to earn the freedom for which he had been destined by his original owner, one must also acknowledge that if Patrick had been purchased by someone not cognizant of or compliant with Martin Tapscott’s wishes, Patrick might never have become free. Somewhere along the way, many of the Tapscott slaves had adopted the surname Henry—a fortuitous choice for the now twenty-four-year-old free man named Patrick. What better name for him than that of the famous Virginian who had proclaimed, “Give me liberty or give me death.”

Like many Virginians, and others of his family, Patrick Henry believed his best chances for success were to be found in the West. Many members of the Henry family gravitated towards the Valley of Virginia, and they began to show up in the *Free Black Registers* of Augusta and Rockbridge Counties. Why did they come to the Valley? Were they following the example of members of the Tapscott family who had similarly and previously come west. (One of Martin’s brothers owned land in Rockbridge and Botetourt Counties and served as one of Botetourt County’s sheriffs in the early 1800s; Martin Tapscott’s only legitimate child, Henry, had been sent west to enroll at Washington College after his father’s death.) Since the Tapscotts of Westmoreland had family members resident in the Valley of Virginia, so, more than likely, did their slaves, for slaves had extended families, too.

By 1815, Patrick Henry, five years a free man, had found his way to Lexington. The next year, he purchased and freed a slave woman named Louisa who had previously belonged to Benjamin Darst. Her deed of manumission is on file in the Rockbridge County Courthouse. A year later, in 1817, Patrick Henry, now thirty years of age, found permanent employment and a place to live. In June of 1817, Thomas Jefferson agreed to a suggestion by William Caruthers of Lexington, who had been managing his affairs in Rockbridge, that Patrick Henry be given duties as caretaker of Jefferson’s Bridge property, primarily to prevent trespassers and neighbors from encroaching upon Jefferson’s nature preserve. Caruthers wrote Jefferson on 2 June 1817:

Patrick Henry a free man of Coular requested me to write you that he will rent what land is cultivatable on the Bridge Tract. . . . Patrick is a man of good behavior and as the neighbours are destroying your timber verry much it might not be amiss to authorize him to take care of it in order to which it might be well to have the lines run by the surveyor of the county.

Jefferson responded affirmatively to Caruthers and Henry's proposal a few days later, adding as an additional condition the requirement that Henry pay the taxes on the property (particularly significant for the former president since he had, on occasion, come close to losing the Bridge for nonpayment of local taxes).

Patrick and Louisa thus moved to the Natural Bridge and Patrick began building a cabin within 150 yards of the arch. Since Jefferson was very much an absentee landlord (though his last three visits were during Henry's tenancy), Patrick Henry achieved a status as a quasi-landowner. For Patrick, and those who knew him, his independence at the Bridge added additional verification to his status as a free man. Jefferson occasionally sent Henry some money to help pay his local taxes and as compensation for the extra laborers he had hired and for his work entertaining the frequent visitors whom Jefferson sent out to view his Bridge. However, troubles developed with some of the neighbors who found the presence of Mr. Jefferson's guard disagreeable—the fact that he was a free black man certainly did not make the situation any easier to take. Jefferson received in April of 1819 a letter from John Henry (Patrick's brother, who, unlike Patrick, was literate):

By request of my Brother Patrick Henry I write to inform you of his disagreeable situation respecting the house in which he lives. By your permission after your land was run by Mr. Graham and Mr. Douthat he built him the house mention[ed] within a hundred and fifty yards of the Bridge and is now threatned of haveing it taking from him to which he has devoted two years labor but he is satisfied in hopeing of seeing your soon. He would come to your house but being so bisy plowing on the place joining your land which he has rented prevents his comeing.

There is no surviving written response from Jefferson to John Henry's letter—but evidently the controversy died down. At least, Patrick Henry, his wife, Louisa, and their two children remained on the property until Patrick's death in 1831. Jefferson had died essentially bankrupt in 1826, but five years later no action had been taken to liquidate Jefferson's Rockbridge County holdings. Henry was thus able to speak optimistically of the future in his will filed in the Rockbridge County Courthouse in 1831, the year of his death. Patrick's brother, John, or another witness, James R. Jordon, wrote down the words as Patrick dictated them:

I, Patrick Henry, conscious of approaching dissolution, but of sound mind, do make this my last will and testament. 1st. I wish to be decently interred at the back part of the garden attached to the house in which I now live. 2nd. The land now in my possession conveyed to me by Thomas Jefferson, if it can be retained by said conveyance, I wish to be disposed of in the following manner. The family shall keep it in possession until the Children arrive at years of Maturity after which time each shall be entitled to a third part, in case of the previous death of my wife to be equally divided between said Children Joseph and Eliza Ann.

Patrick Henry's wishes were presumably carried out as long as the ownership of the Bridge was in the hands of Jefferson's heirs. But, in 1835, the Bridge and its surrounding 157 acres were sold to Joel Lackland who began to develop the site commercially as a tourist attraction.

Louisa Henry apparently stayed on, working for Lackland as a domestic and kind of docent for the Bridge. (Several visitors to the Bridge reported the pleasure of meeting an elderly black woman there who had known Thomas Jefferson.) There is no record of what became of Joseph and Eliza Ann; but John Henry eventually migrated to Liberia.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that all previous accounts of Patrick Henry's tenancy at the Natural Bridge have assumed that he was a slave of Jefferson's, sent out from Monticello to do his master's bidding, gratefully occupying a cabin which Jefferson had previously built there. This falsehood is probably the result of the unsurprising assumption that all blacks were slaves prior to the Civil War. Most were, but there were exceptions like the Henrys.

Though Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry were hardly equal in status, wealth, or education, they were both free men. Their relationship was one of mutual convenience—Jefferson's Bridge was protected from greedy neighbors who, among other things, wished to poach his timber—and Patrick Henry had achieved a situation which approached landownership. The Bridge was, as far as he was concerned, his castle, and he had come closer to achieving the American Dream than he could have imagined growing up someone's slave in Westmoreland County.

Hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Bridge since Jefferson's ownership have continued to consider the arch as “among the most Sublime of Nature's works.” The development in the twentieth-century of the sound-and-light show called “The Drama of Creation” has emphasized this view. Chances are that the Henrys were the last to see the Natural Bridge as a symbol of personal freedom.