



Episode 3, Jefferson Pledge, Charlottesville, VA and Washington D.C.

Wes Cowan: Our next story investigates how Thomas Jefferson pledged his private money for a very public passion. It's 1805. Twenty-two years have passed since the Colonial Army declared its historic victory over the British. The man who first put the country's dreams into words is now president. Thomas Jefferson realizes that military victory was just the beginning. He wants to lay the foundation for a great and enlightened republic. But how to build this new nation, when many Americans are illiterate? And education is a privilege only the wealthiest few can afford. Now an archivist at the Washington D.C. Public Library has stumbled across a fading document, which appears to have been signed by President Jefferson and that may shed light on one of his greatest passions.

Mark Green: I found this document in our archives covered in dust. And I hope it's going to have an interesting story.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan and I've come to Washington to see what Mark Green has discovered.

Mark: Wes, Mark Green, nice to meet you.

Wes: So tell me, how did you find this thing?

Mark: We were in here doing some work in one of these aisles. I said, what the heck is this thing? I pulled it out....

Wes: The document was covered with dust and appears to have been forgotten, sitting on the shelf for decades.

Mark: Take a look at this.

Wes: Wow! Big sheet of vellum. Two big sheets of vellum, huh? Wow. Gosh, it's almost impossible to read. It's a manuscript, but, boy, is it faded. Terrible shape. Let's see, what's this say? I can make out...education...City of Washington, 1805. And then there's all these names with columns of, it looks like some subscribed. Mark points out the signature that first drew his attention.

Mark: Like a moth to a flame, I noticed right here....

Wes: Oh, yeah, look at that. Thomas Jefferson. This is 1805. Jefferson was a sitting president.

Mark: Yes, he was.



Wes: Education was one of Jefferson's passions. And whatever this document is, he appears to be giving money. There's 200 dollars beside his name. Huh. Has anybody else seen this since you've discovered it?

Mark: Just those here in the library. We haven't taken it out to anybody.

Wes: There were some things that I would like to ask, but what do you want to know?

Mark: Well, we want to know a little bit more about the history of the document. And since Jefferson signed it, what's his involvement?

Wes: First I want to know what the document is. Mark says that astonishingly, the library has no record of this manuscript in their catalog. He sends me to see his colleague, Jerry McCoy. I can make out the word "Washington", so I ask for any acquisition records for materials relating to the capital's history. *Washingtoniana, A Day Book for 1946*. This looks to be like almost like a diary that the director of the Washingtoniana collection kept. Nothing here. *Selected Acquisitions, Washingtoniana Division*. Now this sounds more promising. Listen to this. "August 22nd, 1947. Signatures and pledges on two large sheepskin documents." Mark's manuscript is on vellum. That's a kind of parchment made out of calf or sheepskin. That's got to be the document. Strange, there's no reference to Jefferson's signature. Purchased for 30 dollars. That's puzzling too. At 30 dollars, it hardly seems like they investing in a significant document. Maybe that's why it was left on a shelf all these years. I've got to tell you, this is in terrible condition. At one time, this document was probably sewn together with this document. There's a series of what I think are probably thread holes at the bottom here. So this was at one time one long thing. There's no doubt this is an original manuscript of some kind. Let's see if I can figure out what this is about. Undersigned....I can hardly read it. Robert Tully or Tilly. Orlando Cook. Huh. I wonder who these guys are? There are probably 100 signatories to this document. Anything signed by a sitting President, and especially somebody like Jefferson is valuable. But, I can't tell anything about its monetary value or its historical significance until I can read what this actually says. I need some help. I'm taking the document to Dr Nels Olsen at the Conservation Department of the Library of Congress. Okay, here it is.

Nels Olsen: Wow! Well, it's been rolled up a lot. It's really really seen some action. And, a lot of light.

Wes: The ink is really faded isn't it?

Nels: Yeah.

Wes: Is it a lost cause?



Nels: Let's go and find out.

Wes: Nels has a high powered UV camera that might be able to increase the contrast and make the handwriting more readable. As the light hits the vellum, the fading words spring to life. I can read it much better already. The first thing I look at, the preamble at the top. Board of Trustees, Washington Institution....But the ink is smudged.

Nels: Well, let's zoom in on that part where the smear is a little bit, so you can get a closer look.

Wes: Under magnification, gradually, we decipher what it says. Oh, it says Institution for The Education of Youth.

Nels: Yeah.

Wes: Oh! That's what it says. "We pledge the sums affixed to our names in ten equal installments. The first of which shall be paid on the first Monday in October, 1805." It seems that the document is a pledge by Jefferson and others to set up some kind of school in Washington D.C. Nels has given me photographs of the document from his UV camera and I've brought them with me to the library. You know, I can finally read this document and I'm trying to figure out who some of these people are. There's Henry Dearborn. He's Jefferson's Secretary of War. Gabriel Duvall. He's the first Comptroller of The Treasury of the United States and then he's later appointed a Supreme Court Justice. This list of people is like a who's who of powerbrokers in the District of Columbia. Some of the most important people in government have joined with Jefferson on this project. I'm adding up all these individual pledges. \$3578. Let me tell you, in 1805 that was a lot of money. But why are so many powerful men in government, including the President, backing some sort of local school pledge? Nancye Suggs of the Sumner School Museum is an expert on the history of schools in the nation's capital. You've got to be Nancye.

Nancye Suggs: Welcome to Sumner School.

Wes: I've got this document that I cannot wait to show you. At first Nancye has no idea what she's looking at. Then it hits her.

Nancye: Oh, my. I've heard about this document, but I didn't know that it really still existed.

Wes: Really!

Nancye: I didn't...I really didn't know that.



Wes: Our document had been published in a period newspaper and transcribed in the minutes of the school board. "We promise to pay to the Treasurer of the Board of Trustees of the Permanent Institution for The Education of Youth in the City of Washington." This is it! Nancye tells me that our document dates to what can be considered a low water mark for education in America. At the turn of the 19th Century, large segments of the population were impoverished and illiterate. The situation threatened to stunt the growth of the young republic.

Nancye: Well, there wasn't much out there for you in 1805. If you were from a privileged family, you were either taught at home or you had a tutor. If you were from a poor family there was nothing. There was absolutely nothing.

Wes: So, basically, if you could pay for an education, you got educated.

Nancye: Right.

Wes: Jefferson helped open two Washington schools, for boys and girls, regardless of their ability to pay. The Western Academy, just two blocks from the White House, and the Eastern Academy on East Capitol Street where the Library of Congress now stands.

Nancye: There was no public education in the City of Washington. Until this group of gentlemen got together and said, you know what? We need to have public education for young people.

Wes: And Jefferson actually signed the document and pledged his money.

Nancye: More than that. Thomas Jefferson was elected president of this committee on public education.

Wes: So, wait a minute. He was President of the United States, but he's also president of this new school system?

Nancye: That's a concept that would be hard for us to grasp today.

Wes: It's a great story. The first public schools in Washington D.C. But I'm still a little baffled. Why would the President be so involved with two small schools, when he could surely push for so much more? I e-mailed the document and transcript to University of Virginia historian Jennings Wagoner. He says the school pledge speaks volumes about Jefferson's character and political guile.

Jennings Wagoner: Your document is proof of the lessons that you learned, which are so important, and that is don't give up. Keep trying. Try different ways, try different angles.



Wes: The two Washington schools were not the first attempts Jefferson had made to improve public education. The library at Monticello, Jefferson's Virginia home, has the records of a disastrous earlier effort.

Jennings: Here it is. Let's go to the table here. That's the Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge.

Wes: Almost a quarter century earlier, as Governor of Virginia, Jefferson had proposed building schools all across the state using public tax money.

Jennings: Jefferson said, if we want to survive as a new nation, a free nation, we had to be educated, from the lowest levels to the top. Not just an educated leadership, but an educated population. That's what this Bill was about.

Wes: But his proposal did not get a warm reception.

Jennings: It was defeated. And the main reason is the expense. The legislature doesn't want to raise taxes or impose taxes for the education of other people's children.

Wes: And nothing new under the sun there.

Jennings: Nothing new under the sun. Jefferson said, I wish that a legislator could understand that people living in ignorance is going to cost us a great deal more than the cost of supporting public schools.

Wes: Bloodied by the Virginia Legislature, Jefferson realized that even with the power of the presidency, he'd need private support for public education.

Jennings: This idea of getting donors to get the idea kicked off, to get the plan underway, was a good political move on his part.

Wes: So the idea was...start small here in D.C. and then if it works, we can take this program nationwide?

Jennings: That would be a good way of putting that, I think. Start locally and then see if others follow the example.

Wes: Jennings says Jefferson's donation is evidence of the President's personal commitment to causes he believed in, even when those causes took a very personal toll. Thomas Jefferson has signed this document and pledges 200 dollars. Everybody else is pledging five, ten; Jefferson pledges 200 dollars.

Jennings: Right, and that's 200 dollars he couldn't afford.



Wes: You mean to tell me that the President of the United States was dead broke?

Jennings: If not dead broke, then near broke.

Wes: A combination of lavish spending and charitable giving had plunged Jefferson into serious debt.

Jennings: So he was a man who thought education was important; important enough to pledge money to, even if it put his own financial circumstances at risk.

Wes: Was financial ruin worth it? Did the plan laid out in our document work?

Jennings: Let's go down the mountain and I'll show you how this turned out.

Wes: What Jennings shows me next makes it clear just how important Mark's document really is. You know, Mark, this is a great story. I love Thomas Jefferson. And I can't believe that this was sitting in the vault and that nobody knew that it existed. I tell Mark that his document was well known in its day. But that the original was thought to have been lost. You rediscovered something that had really disappeared from history.

Mark: Wow.

Wes: But it really is much more than that. Jennings, why did you bring me here? I haven't been in an elementary school since my kids got out.

Jennings: It does bring back memories, doesn't it?

Wes: It really does. [Laughs]

Jennings: This is an American public school designed on the model of Washington D.C. public schools for all the kids, supported by public funds. And your document personifies the birth certificate of this dream.

Wes: The two Washington schools ultimately failed, because many of the donors did not come through on their pledges. But a foundation had been laid, the nation had seen the promise of public education. This document, in a sense is the keystone document for the public education system, not just in Washington D.C., but in the entire country.

Mark: That's amazing. That's truly amazing.



Jennings: Education was the fundamental touchstone, I guess we could say, of this Republican society. He said: I want to be remembered for these three things and nothing more. He was the author of the American Declaration of Independence. He was the author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which provided for the freedom of worship. And Father of the University of Virginia, which provided for intellectual freedom. We cannot have a free people, a free society, without an educated population.

Wes: Thomas Jefferson continued to donate to the causes that he believed so passionately in. But as his generosity grew, so too did his debt. While he did pay his 200 dollar pledge to the Washington D.C. schools, by the time of his death in 1826, he owed a staggering \$170,000. He was painfully aware of the fate that awaited his beloved home. After his death, Monticello and its contents wound up on the auction block. Thomas Jefferson left the world his legacy as a visionary. He also left it penniless.