

Summary

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were two of the most influential Founding Fathers. They both died on the 4th of July, exactly fifty years after the Declaration of Independence. And both had a deep and abiding love of nature, something that their would-be imitators today seem to have totally forgotten.

The Fourth of July calls to mind that date in 1776, but another Fourth, exactly fifty years later, also deserves to be remembered. On that day in 1826, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams--two architects of American Independence who later served as Presidents--both died, marking the end of an era. These two Americans did much to shape our country. We tend to think that early Americans, like our current President, saw nature as merely something to be conquered and exploited. That wasn't true of either of these Founding Fathers. Their deep appreciation of nature reveals an aspect of their thinking that is often under appreciated.

Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson's view of nature was on exhibit in his decisions to purchase and then preserve land with a dramatic natural arch Jefferson described the arch at length in his book on Virginia, where he called it "the most sublime of Nature's works." In terms of the experience of seeing it, he had this to say:

"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 on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet and peep over it. Looking down from this height about a minute, gave me a violent head ach[e]. If the view from the top be painful and intolerable, that from below is delightful in an equal 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!"

At one point, in desperate financial straits, Jefferson tried to sell the land, but he later thought better of the idea. In an 1815 letter, Jefferson wrote that he now had "no idea of selling the land. I view it in some degree as a public trust, and would on no consideration permit the bridge to be injured, defaced or masked from public view." This is a noteworthy early appearance of the idea of that we hold nature in trust for the public, not for private gain.

John Adams.

Adams has the reputation of being dry, humorless, and a bit of a prig – the sort of person you might hire as an accountant but wouldn't want to have coffee with. Reading some of his descriptions of nature provides a glimpse of another side of his character. Here are a few passages:

From a 1759 diary [entry](#):

“So many Birds of several different species, all singing, chattering, whistling, fluttering, flying, hopping, leaping, on the ground, in the Air, and on the Trees, was a very pleasant Amusement to me...There is very little beauty [in] the face of the Earth now, but the Vegetables will soon spring fresh and green, and young and sprightly [illegible] Grass, and flowers, and Roses, will appear on the Ground, buds, blossoms, leaves on the Trees, and 100 species of Birds, flying in Air, alighting on the Ground and on Trees, herds of Cattle, Sheep, horses, grazing and lowing in the Pastures. Oh Nature! how [bright?] and beautiful thou art.”

From a 1774 [entry](#):

“After Meeting in the Afternoon Mr. Tudor and I rambled up the western Common, and took a View of a Place which I have never seen since my Removal to Boston. I felt a Joy, I enjoyed a Pleasure, in revisiting my old Haunts, and recollecting my old Meditations among the Rocks and Trees, which was very intense indeed. The rushing Torrent, the purling Stream, the gurgling Rivulet, the dark Thickett, the rugged Ledges and Precipices, are all old Acquaintances of mine.”

And from a 1763 [paper](#) on agriculture:

“[F]or, believe me, the finest Productions of the Poet or the Painter, the Statuary, or the Architect; when they stand in Competition with the great and beautiful Works of Nature, in the Animal and Vegetable Kingdoms; must be pronounced mean, and despicable Baubles.”

These writings don't prove that either Jefferson or Adams was an “environmentalist” in the modern sense. But they do show an attitude toward nature that modern environmentalists would recognize. It wasn't until the end of the 19th Century that

the Sierra Club was founded, and environmentalism didn't become a national force until the 1960s. But we tend to overlook just how deep the roots of environmentalism go in American history.

In that sense, environmentalism is as American as the Fourth of July. That's something that the many believers in original intent might do well to remember today.

This is an updated version of a post from July 4, 2025.