

# A Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Joel Barlow

Discovered in a file cabinet of American Legion Post #24 in late December 2009, this letter from Thomas Jefferson to friend Joel Barlow is a unique snapshot of 18<sup>th</sup> century travel and mail service. It is not known how the letter came to be in the file, however it was in poor condition. Funded by Christopher and Sally Jones, the letter was conserved and then donated to the City of Alexandria in August 2010.

## What is the letter about?

Thomas Jefferson, while serving his second term as President, wrote a letter to his friend Joel Barlow of Washington, DC to offer the best route between their homes, Kalorama to Monticello. Jefferson had just completed this journey himself, having recently returned home from the Federal City. For this four day and three night trip, Jefferson notes the distance between locations as measured in miles and cents as well as suggestions for where to stop.



Jefferson was hoping that the Barlow's would visit at the same time as his daughter Martha Randolph's family. The end of his letter includes news that his daughter had given birth to a son, Benjamin Franklin Randolph, on July 16 and would not be able to visit for a month. Jefferson uses the term "in the straw," which was a popular saying at the time for a newly-delivered mother.

*Monticello July 25 .08*

*Dear Sir*

*Having been tempted by a cloudy day to leave Washington a day sooner than I intended, among other things which I omitted to do was the furnishing you an itinerary of the route to this place.*

*it is as follows from Georgetown Ferry:*

	<i>miles.cents</i>	
<i>To Wren's</i>	<i>6.38</i>	
<i>+ Fairfax Courthouse</i>	<i>8.65</i>	
<i>+ Centerville about</i>	<i>7.50</i>	<i>Mitchell's is the best house</i>
<i>+ Red house about</i>	<i>10.</i>	<i>Mrs. Hereford's best; Bronaugh's next</i>
<i>+ Fauquier Ct. House</i>	<i>20.</i>	<i>Norris' best, indeed a superlatively good one</i>
<i>- Jefferson</i>	<i>9.80</i>	<i>Kuhn's, but even that a wretched place</i>
<i>+ Culpeper Ct. House</i>	<i>13.77</i>	<i>Capt Shackelford</i>
<i>+ Orange C. H.</i>	<i>18.83</i>	
<i>Mr. Madison's</i>	<i>4.17</i>	
<i>+ Gordon's</i>	<i>8.75</i>	
<i>+ Watson's tavern</i>	<i>13.58</i>	
<i>Monticello</i>	<i><u>7.58</u></i>	
	<i>129.01</i>	

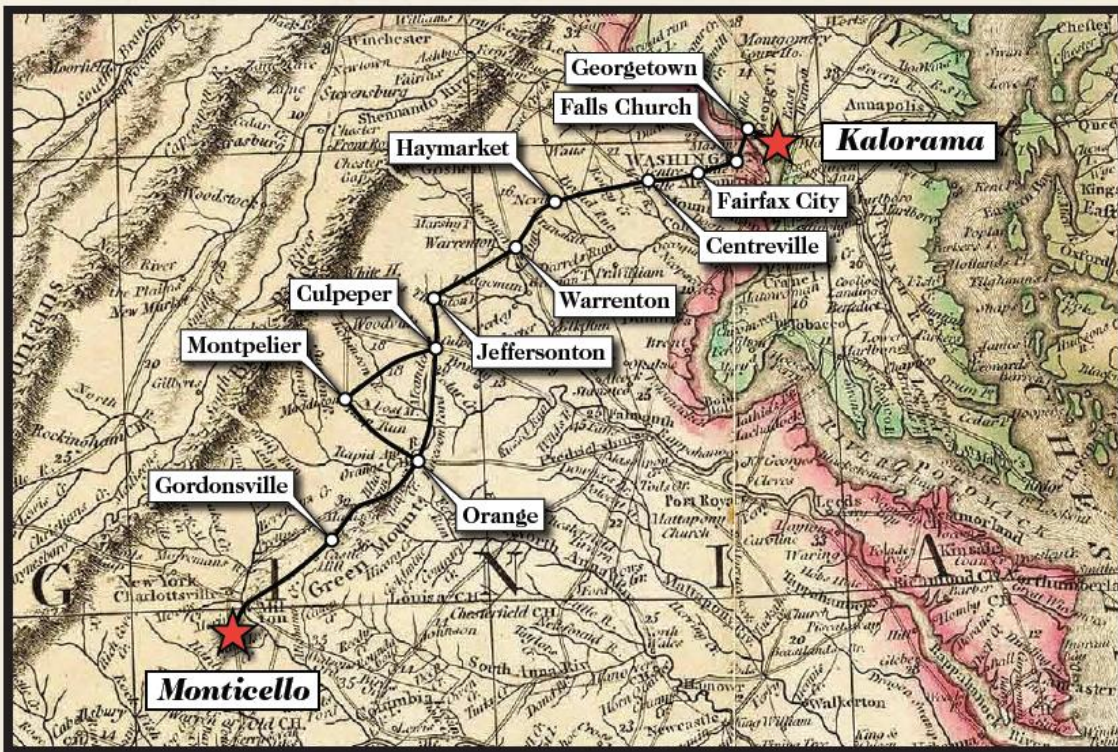
The houses marked thus + are pretty good, comparatively - means bad. You asked me the best time of taking the road, and I observed as well soon as late, but I found Mrs. Randolph in the straw at her own house, having increased her family on the 16<sup>th</sup>. Of course she will not be with us till a month from that, and for her sake as well as Mrs. Barlow's the visit will be doubly pleasing if so timed as that she should be here. In the hope that nothing may intervene to deprive us of the pleasure of possessing Mrs. Barlow & yourself here, after presenting her my respects. I salute you with friendship and great consideration.

Th. Jefferson

In addition to places to stay overnight, Jefferson provides the stage coach stops along the route to Monticello. This information appears quickly scribbled on the side of the letter.

*My stages from Geo.t. Ferry*

to Fairfax	15
New Market	14
Red House or Haymarket	7
Fauquier C.H.	13
Jefferson	10
to armstrong's a miserable hole	4
Culpepper C.h.	10
Orange C.h.	20



1808 Arrowsmith Map of the United States, Detail of the Eastern United States  
 Courtesy, David Rumsey Map Collection

## Stops along the way from Kalorama to Monticello

- *Kalorama*: Jefferson himself suggested this “delightful situation” to Barlow in 1800. Originally known as “Belair,” the Barlow’s purchased the estate in 1807. They renamed it “Kalorama,” which means *fine view* or *beautiful view* in Greek. Architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe updated the mansion to the “new” neoclassical style. The house burned in 1865, but was soon rebuilt and returned to a single-family home. In 1887, Kalorama was torn down by the District of Columbia government for the extension of S Street.
- *Georgetown Ferry*: A number of ferry services operated from **George Town** to the Virginia shore. One of them was owned and operated by John Mason, son of George Mason. It started at the foot of High Street (Wisconsin Avenue) and functioned through the use of a large iron chain. Mason lived at Analostan, built on what is now Roosevelt Island.
- *Wren’s*: An establishment run by Col. James Wren from 1789 to 1821 that Jefferson described as “a very decent house and respectable people.” It was located on E. Broad Street in **Falls Church**. The building no longer stands.
- *Fairfax Courthouse*: Known today as **Fairfax City**, Jefferson was known to have frequented a tavern run by James (Sangster) Songster.
- *Centerville*: Mitchell’s was an ordinary operated by Adam Mitchell, who received his tavern license in 1803. Originally spelled *Centerville* when chartered by the General Assembly in 1792, the town later adopted the spelling **Centreville**.
- *Red House*: Jefferson liked to travel through Red House, known today as **Haymarket**. Mrs. Margaret Hereford (Herriford) operated a tavern in Red House by 1798, when she was charged with an illegal sale of liquor. She officially received her ordinary license in 1799. Another tavern noted by Jefferson is Bronaugh’s, operated after 1807 by Benjamin Bronaugh.
- *Fauquier Ct. House*: Jefferson writes that Norris’ is the best place to stay, “indeed a superlatively good one.” Referring to the Norris Tavern, this building was converted into an academy and then the Warren Green Hotel. It stands today at the corner of Culpeper Street and Hotel Street in **Warrenton**.
- *Jefferson*: Refers to the town of **Jeffersonton**, where the best place to stay is Kuhn’s, though Jefferson writes “but even that a wretched place.”
- *Culpeper Ct. House*: Capt. Benjamin Shackelford, the county’s first postmaster, ran the Bell Tavern at the corner of Main and Locust Streets in **Culpeper**. The building no longer stands.
- *Orange C. H.*: While Jefferson did not make any accommodation recommendations for this stop, he had personally frequented a tavern operated by Paul Verdier in the Town of **Orange**. Jefferson either stayed the night with Mr. Madison at Montpelier or at a tavern.

- *Mr. Madison's*: This refers to the home of James Madison, **Montpelier**. Joel Barlow knew Madison and would have been welcome there during his journey. There is no mention in the Madison paper's of the Barlow's visit, so the couple may have chosen to stay in a tavern in Orange.
- *Gordon's*: Nathaniel Gordon's Tavern was in **Gordonsville**, at the junction of the Fredericksburg and Richmond Roads. Jefferson referred to Gordon's as a "good tavern." The building no longer stands.
- *Watson's tavern*: Mentioned by Jefferson as a place to stay between Gordonsville and Monticello, no information can be found on this tavern.
- *Monticello*: The home of Thomas Jefferson and destination for the four day journey.

## Miles and cents?

*"The people on the road,"* Jefferson wrote to Thomas Cooper in 1808, *"inquire with curiosity what exact distance I have found from such a place to such a place; I answer, so many miles, so many cents. I find they universally and at once form a perfect idea of the relation of the cent to the miles as a unit."*

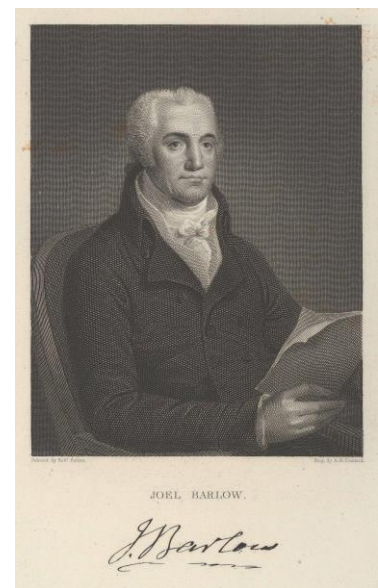
Jefferson traveled extensively and was always eager to find the shortest route to his destination. He tried numerous ways to track mileage, but was unable to find or create a suitable device. In 1807, he was given an odometer by inventor James Clarke of Powhatan County, Virginia that chimed every ten miles and subdivided miles decimally into dimes and cents. This division of the miles, similar to measures of money, evolved into the decimal system. Jefferson wrote that he enjoyed having the ten mile mark announced by a bell and that in particular, he enjoyed using the decimal points in making his travel itineraries – as used in this letter.

## Who is Joel Barlow?

Born in Connecticut in 1754, Joel Barlow was a poet, chaplain, lawyer, and diplomat. His most famous work was *The Vision of Columbus*, an epic poem, published in 1787. This poem, dedicated to the king of France and sponsored by George Washington, was extremely popular throughout the country.

In 1788, Barlow traveled to Europe to work as a promoter for the Scioto Land Company, a fraudulent speculative business. After this was exposed, he became a journalist in France and England, writing many political essays. It was at this time that Barlow made acquaintance with Thomas Jefferson, who was Minister to France, beginning their decades-long friendship.

Barlow was the American consul at Algiers in 1795-1797, securing the release of American prisoners and negotiating a treaty with Tripoli in



Joel Barlow.  
The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art

1796. In 1805, he returned to the United States where he took up residence in the Federal City at “Kalorama.” President Jefferson frequently visited Barlow at Kalorama for consultation on matters of State, but also for pleasure, discussing everything from philosophy to agriculture.

In 1811, President Madison appointed Barlow the American plenipotentiary to France. Charged with negotiating a commercial treaty with Napoleon, Barlow’s task was nearly impossible. He died in 1812 in Poland while trying to rendezvous with Napoleon as he and his army retreated from fighting in Russia.

## Correspondence in the 18th Century

### *Writing a letter*

Letter writing in the early 19th century required ink, paper, quills, pounce, and wax.

- *Ink* used in letter writing came in two forms, dry and liquid. The ink was made of oak galls (a seed from an oak tree), gum Arabic, alum (hydrated potassium aluminum sulfate) and copperas (hydrated ferrous sulfate). The standard recipe for ink was 1 part gum, 2 parts copperas, 3 parts oak galls and 30 parts water.
- *Paper* was made from bits of cloth which were boiled down, chemically treated, and then pressed into large sheets and hung out to dry before being cut into pieces. The numerous paper mills along the East Coast produced a plentiful supply of quality paper.
- *Quills* were generally taken from the first five wing feathers of large birds, most often from geese. Jefferson raised geese specifically for their quills. Quills needed to be sharpened to a fine point frequently with a penknife.
- *Pounce* was a powder that helped ink to dry and soaked up ink spills or blots. Pounce was made from gum sandarac mixed with pumice or cuttlefish bone. It was sprinkled on paper and brushed aside after the ink had dried.
- After a letter was written, it was folded until the interior of the letter was hidden, (as many as nine times), and then sealed with *wax* to ensure that it stayed closed and that the contents could not be read before it was received by its intended recipient.



### *Mailing the Letter*

Thomas Jefferson sent this letter to Joel Barlow through the United States postal system using a process called “franking.” The privilege of franking, taken from the Latin word *francus* meaning “free,” allowed authorized members of the government to send and receive mail free of charge using



their signatures as collateral. Note the wording “free” and then Jefferson’s signature, Pr. US. Franking was permitted by Congress as early as 1775, during the 1st Continental Congress. At the time, postage was paid for upon receipt of a letter and this privilege allowed Congress to freely correspond with their constituents. The Postal Act of 1792 extended this privilege to the President and Vice President.

#### *Delivering a letter*

Mail in the postal system was transported by boat, on horseback, and by stagecoach line between specific points along established routes overseen by federal postmasters. The frequency with which mail was delivered varied. Urban locations would receive mail more frequently, while rural locations would receive mail less often. Since both Monticello and Kalorama were located along a major travel route, letters between Jefferson and Barlow could have been delivered in as little as a four or five days.

#### *Preserving this letter*

This letter was conserved using the latest methods in paper conservation. Conservation began with tests on the solubility of the ink and acidity of the paper. The paper was then dry cleaned to remove existing surface mold and dirt, and aqueous treatments were performed to reduce the staining and decrease the level of acidity in the paper. A sizing agent was added to the paper to repel future oils and to enhance the fiber-to-fiber bonding, making the paper stronger and more durable. After these treatments, the letter was mended, humidified, and encapsulated.