

Q: . . . [chit-chat] . . . So the object that we're going [00:00:38] to talk about is the Jefferson desk. Can you take a second to tell us a little bit about the desk, what it looks like, how it functions, maybe sort of describe [00:00:45] it for us.

Response: Okay. This is a desk that Thomas Jefferson had built to his specifications when he was a delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and he— [00:01:01] He described it as a writing box and that's a pretty good description of it. It has— It's about 14 inches— When it's folded [00:01:12] up and closed, it is about 14 inches long and about 10 inches wide and about three inches deep, so if you think of a sort of a bulky laptop computer, [00:01:31] that's about the size that you're looking at. Now, it has a— So, if you think of it as a laptop computer or the size of a laptop computer, [00:01:45] those are the dimensions, the approximate dimensions that you're dealing with. It can be used as a book rest to read a book or the top can be unfolded [00:01:58] and used as a writing surface.

The underside of the lid has a little— Has two pairs of feet. It's actually a joined set of feet, described [00:02:09] as an easel so you can tilt the top of it up to read a book with a little book rest ledge on it or you could unfold the whole [00:02:17] thing and then you have the writing surface with this— It has a green felt-like covering that's called baize which is the [00:02:26] writing surface and this is the surface that you'll never see unfolded in the museum because of the light level restrictions. The desk also has a drawer [00:02:37], a sliding drawer with a handle that you can pull open and inside is a compartment for paper and also the first thing you notice are the little compartments, [00:02:47] one of which contains an ink well which is a blown glass crystal ink well. It fits into a compartment and then there're other slots for [00:02:56] quills and nibs which are the metal pen points and he would've kept the nibs and the quills and perhaps a knife for sharpening in the drawer and [00:03:09] also the drawer is sort of stained with ink because he used this for his entire life, 49 years before he gave it away as a wedding present, so one of the [00:03:28] remarkable things about it is that when he made it a gift, he attached an affidavit to it in his own hand and I don't have the copy with me. [00:03:38] I'd prefer to read it direct, but he testifies that this is actual desk on which he had drafted the Declaration of Independence and when he was in [00:03:47] Philadelphia in 1776 and, of course, that was probably the last thing that he wrote on it and then he glued it to the underside of the desk.

Q: That's [00:04:02] really interesting. Do you have sort of a favorite feature about the desk that you think is the most interesting?

Response: You know, the most interesting things about these kinds [00:04:09] of things to me are the things that show some social use, so I'm sort of fond of just the spilled ink inside the drawer, but— and it's really [00:04:22] quite elegant and finely featured in its construction, the way the— I mean, somebody who really appreciates fine furniture would be discussing the handmade [00:04:33] hardware or the satinwood inlay, but it's really a kind of modestly decorated functional traveling companion really is what it is. I

think [00:04:47] you really can get some insight into Jefferson's working methods and the way he chose to spend time and just the way he thought about the world [00:04:57] all wrapped up in this neat little, as he described it, writing box.

Q: So Jefferson as the designer, would that be something that would be common of a gentleman [00:05:07] of his time period, to be—

Response: Oh, he designed all kinds of things. No, Jefferson as designer. Well, while he was in Philadelphia from the same [00:05:28] cabinet maker, he commissioned a Windsor chair that revolved. In other words, it had a pivot on it and could turn and that's probably [00:05:39] the chair that he sat in as he composed the Declaration on this desk. It would've sat on a table. Later on— The chair is still at Monticello [00:05:49] and he had added a writing surface not unlike a student's desk to the arm that goes out, but it still revolves and turns. He also invented things or [00:06:00] not invented things, but had things designed like the pantograph which is a kind of a pen holder that holds another pen that enables you to [00:06:12] make copies of things. He was much into making copies of things and spreading them around. That's how things were saved.

Q: When you think [00:06:22] about people viewing the Jefferson desk as visitors to the museum, what do you want them to learn from it?

Response: Well, the importance of this object [00:06:35] to me, it's sort of— it can really say quite a lot about just the nature of museums and the way people thought about saving things and what was important [00:06:48] to them in its time and also the way— sort of almost a comment upon the— what Jefferson described as the imaginary value of sort of superstitious [00:06:57] relics that were gaining importance, the things that were associated with the American Revolution and to my way of thinking, this is the first national object, [00:07:10], I mean, after the physical calligraphy that's on the Declaration that you see at the National Archives. This is where it was drafted and as soon [00:07:19] as someone sets pen to paper and thinking in those terms, you're literally making a nation and so in that sense, I think in a national museum, this [00:07:30] is the primary artifact. This is object no. 1 from which I think you could really benefit and start with this and then go from there. You could [00:07:39] talk about freedom, liberty, democracy. You could talk about slaves. You could talk about traveling and you could talk about copying. You [00:07:51] could talk about any number of things, but to me, that's really what I would like people to understand about it.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about how the Smithsonian [00:08:05] came to be in possession of the desk?

Response: Well, sure. The desk— Jefferson kept it and he used it for some 49 years and it's a kind of a long story. [00:08:20] I mean, do you want the long story that you can cut up or do you want the short story?

Q: Let's start with the short story and then we'll see.

Response: Well, [00:08:25] actually it's an interesting story. Even the long story is an interesting story, but he had a favorite granddaughter. Her name was Ellen Randolph [00:08:44] and she was to be married to a man, [Jefferson] Coolidge, Jr. from Boston and he had his slave carpenter. Jefferson had his slave carpenter John Hemings [00:08:57] make a traveling lap desk for Miss Randolph. Actually, it was a gift given to Joseph Coolidge technically and the ship that was taking this [00:09:14] very handsome, elaborately carved desk that Hemings had made from Richmond to Boston sank and all was lost and so Hemings— His eyesight was [00:09:28] failing and he could not make another desk at this late stage in his life and so Jefferson offered up his traveling lap desk and he affixed the [00:09:43] affidavit and explained what it was and sent that off as a wedding present to Joseph Coolidge in lieu of the desk that had been lost, and Coolidge kept [00:09:52] it his entire life. He passed on 1879. His wife predeceased him by a couple of years, but his children, his adult children determined [00:10:07] that they would give it to the United States and so technically the gift was to the Congress of the United States and it was accepted gratefully in 1880 and it [00:10:19] was put on display at the Department of State, at the State Department and it was seen there for 40, almost 50 years and in 1921, they determined that they [00:10:29] didn't have the facilities any more to display it, so it was given to the Smithsonian, to the national museum, the United States National Museum. [00:10:39] So, it's been publicly displayed, first in the State Department and then at the United States National Museum, today what we would call the Museum of American [00:10:48] History.

Q: So if you were to put on exhibit today, it is upstairs in an exhibit now, but if you were to construct an exhibit, [00:10:57] what things would you like to put with it to sort of create a display that would communicate something?

Response: Well the way that we display it now, it's in [00:11:06] the American Presidency Exhibit but I think it really transcends even the importance of the presidency. We display it with a copy of the Declaration that was [00:11:20] made by a chemical transfer process and that in itself is another story. We have exhibited it from time to time with a manuscript fragment [00:11:33] that was actually penned at the desk that the Library of Congress owns, so it's a pretty straightforward kind of thing. I would much prefer [00:11:45] that people— that it be exhibited much as Jefferson had imagined it might as a relic of the Revolution, not unlike what he described as the head of a parade of [00:12:00] the saints in the church, that kind of interpretation.

Q: I'm sort of wondering— Lots and lots and lots of people see this object on display. [00:12:12] Do you think that people have misconceptions about it, sort of commonly held misbeliefs about the desk or in fact the writing of Declaration, penning the drafting that took place on it.

Response: Well, the latter is probably not well known. I mean, what you're looking at at the National Archives [00:12:30] is done by a calligrapher. It was not done in Jefferson's hand and the method by which copies of the Declaration were first printed on newsprint and those are [00:12:43] really the truly valuable items. They turn up once in a while. Some recently found one folded in a picture frame that they'd purchased at a flea

[00:12:54] market. It's a seditious document to have had then, but the manuscripts were all cut up and then given to people who were making type and so the original [00:13:07] document just don't even exist, but there are earlier versions, earlier drafts that Jefferson wrote that were saved and turned up at the Library of Congress where [00:13:17] they were sort of discovered in the late '40s, that sort of thing.

Q: . . . [chit-chat] . . . we have lots of sort of historical scholarship on, sort [00:13:42] of newer scholarship on how the drafting of the Declaration took place as sort of a community of editors and things like that. Do you have any sort of thought [00:13:54] on Jefferson and his role in it and how he imagined himself as part of the forming of the new nation?

Response: Boy, that's just a little far out of my field. [00:14:05] I couldn't even begin to—

Q: I'm sort of wondering given the note that he affixed to the desk about politics and religion and the [00:14:14] imaginary value of the. I thought we could make some generalizations about how he thought back on that time.

Response: Well, okay, that I can speak to that [00:14:24] I think. There were— In Philadelphia, in the 1820s, there began to be great interest in commemorating the arrival of William Penn and Jefferson was made [00:14:38] aware of these because people then began wondering what house had he actually lived in, what room did he write the Declaration in and people were corresponding with [00:14:50] him about this and the subject of Penn would come up and he was sort of intrigued about this because I don't think he had thought of it until that moment [00:15:02] when people began to correspond with him to determine exactly— I mean, one man writes to him and the purpose of being that he wants to celebrate the [00:15:11] 4th of July in that room, you know, and we're talking about a two-story walk-up with a parlor and a bedroom. This is what we're talking about, [00:15:20] but Jefferson refers to the celebration. . . [chit-chat] . . . a man writes to Jefferson and inquires about the room in which he wrote [00:15:45] the Declaration of Independence because it's the room that the man wants to celebrate the 4th of July in and what we're talking about is a two-story walk-up brick building in [00:15:52] what would now be the cutlery drawer in the kitchen.

So, this great interest in the history of William Penn and the landing of Penn in the 1820s, [00:16:20] early 1820s in Philadelphia and Jefferson is made aware of these commemorations, celebrations of Penn by corresponding with people who are asking Jefferson where [00:16:33] did you write the Declaration, the exact room, the address, this sort of thing and so this is very much on his mind as he's preparing the affidavit that he fixes to the desk to send to his future son-in-law or grandson-in-law, I guess, and he comments about the [00:16:54] fact that people have actually found— Well, Penn still had a mansion so that became a site. They found a chair that had belonged to Penn. [00:17:04] The President of the Society sits in this chair. The elm tree under which Penn had signed a treaty, the first treaty with the Indians, [00:17:14] had been turned into

chairs, this sort of thing, and so Jefferson thought, you know, gee, I have this desk maybe, maybe this would become the Revolutionary [00:17:25] relic and it did.

Q: Are there other famous documents that Jefferson penned on the desk that we know of?

Response: Well, we don't know for sure, but [00:17:36] about which— I mean, this is where he actually did his work. We're pretty sure of that, but what exactly he penned at that desk we really cannot [00:17:45] say because the only thing he ever said in writing, determined in writing that he did, had been the draft of the Declaration but he took it with him [00:17:54] throughout his entire life, as a diplomat, as the Secretary of State and he's still writing on it apparently when he's late in life, when [00:18:04] he's making that affidavit out, so you could say that the Declaration was perhaps the first, among the first documents that he prepared on it, and the affidavit [00:18:13] was the end, the last.

Q: So he had it made especially for the travels back and forth between Virginia?

Response: Right, he would travel in coaches [00:18:27] with a slave servant and I can't imagine him writing anything on this given the conditions and the ink and the jostling of the nibs and the quills [00:18:40] and all of that, but you could certainly use it as a book rest on your lap and just tilt the top up with the easel kicked into the back and use [00:18:50] it that way, so sort of a multi-purpose kind of box that he described it, but I have to add that although he described it as a writing [00:19:01] box, his— Joseph Coolidge, when he received this as a wedding gift, he never referred to it as a writing box. He simply referred to it as [00:19:09] the desk

Q: Are there other sort of particular things about the desk that you'd like to share with us?

Response: Well, [00:19:22] I wish that it was possible to display it publicly open in the way that it would have been used to write, to sit and write at. The best that [00:19:34] we can do given the current necessities or requirements of conservation is to keep the writing surface folded up and certainly you can't expose the affidavit [00:19:47] to light. That's fading, so it presents some display problems just by its own design, but you can show it with the drawer slightly opened [00:20:01] and you can see it with the drawer slightly opened and the effects of his hand and the ink stains and that sort of thing.

Q: In thinking about [00:20:15] the desk, if there was one thing that you would like us to sort of take away about Jefferson as a person.

Response: Well, you can see his inventive turn of mind [00:20:28] at play in these kinds of things that he designed for his own use that I think is a testimony of his just inventive and utilitarian nature. [00:20:39] I mean, stripped down to the elements, you really can't get any more modest than this. It's not elegant. It's not overly decorated. [00:20:46] It's really a purely functional kind of device that has a couple of different uses, for as a storage device, as a reading prop and then as a [00:21:00] writing table, but I guess it's

the inventive frame of his or nature of him as a person I think that comes through pretty clearly.

Q: If [00:21:16] you could imagine yourself for a second as a 17-year-old high school student, do you think that there's something that would stand [00:21:24] out to you from that age group about the desk that might not be the first thing that you would pick out as a curator. If you could imagine yourself [00:21:35] as a novice viewer, do you still think it would be the drawer and the ink?

Response: Yeah, but again, I mean, I wish that you could display it open [00:21:49] with a document on it positioned as if— There's a way to suggest a human presence without using mannequins or just over-propping everything, but [00:22:00] I can see it in my mind's eye. I mean, the way that I first saw it as a kid, it was open and it had a facsimile manuscript placed on the writing [00:22:10] surface with the quill and the ink well and that sort of thing. It made it a little more lively than what we can work with today under these circumstances, [00:22:22] but perhaps that's where this project will come in because we can illustrate it. You can show it and nothing is [00:22:32] like seeing the actual thing but that would be a pretty compelling substitute I would think, just the operating features of it and how it worked. You [00:22:41] come away with the impression that, hey, these are some pretty smart guys, pretty interesting guys.

Q: The size and the weight. When you said creativity, [00:22:58] wouldn't a slave have to carry this and set it up all the time?

Response: No. I wish— Well, okay. [00:23:06] it's about 14 inches wide. When it's folded up, it's about— it's the size of a laptop, let's say a thick laptop. It's about 14 inches across, [00:23:16] about a 10 inches deep and about 4 inches high and that four inches is mostly the two writing surfaces that are folded together and then the drawer [00:23:30] that pulls— the drawer is the length of the inside of the box. That's the major dimension of it, but it's a pretty compact kind of thing. It's [00:23:39] not very heavy at all. It's made of mahogany but it's almost a veneer-like quality to it. It's just— There's a veneer-like quality— [00:24:01] There's a veneer-like quality to its construction. It's very finely made, made by a cabinetmaker who was quite advanced in knowing what their [00:24:12] business was and about going about how to do it. It's held up remarkably well, too. The hinges and the screws are all handmade and all original. [00:24:22] The holes have been puttied up from time to time but the thing is always put back together, held together, but it's something that a [00:24:29] person, an individual would have carried around without much— any— hardly any set-up at all.

Q: Do we have any evidence of the plans for [00:24:37] the design?

Response: No, those are gone. He drew it up. He drew up the designs in his hand and gave them to Benjamin Randolph which [00:24:48] was the man who was hosting him in Philadelphia.

Q: So it was made in Philadelphia?

Response: Yes, but ironically on the affidavit, he— [00:24:57] late in life, he misspelled the name as Benjamin Randall. It was actually Randolph.

Q: Anything else?

Q: So you're [00:25:12] telling me the Declaration of Independence was written on a laptop?

Response: Yes. It was written on a writing box.

Q: Hemings didn't make this one?

Response: No. [00:25:26] He made the one that was lost at sea.

Q: Was it another African American native or who _____ the actual guy that did it?

Response: Randolph is the actual. He was [00:25:42] a noted cabinetmaker and he also made the Windsor chair and—

Q: What do you want people to notice when they see this?

Response: What do they notice? [00:25:55]

Q: What would you like them to see?

Q: When people first encounter the desk, what would you like them to sort of— If there're any particular fine [00:26:13] details that they might miss?

Response: Well, there's what you would like them to see and there's what you can see and of the things that you can see, I [00:26:25] think the ink stains in the drawer that show evidence of some sort of a social use is really something that makes it actually come alive. This is [00:26:33] something Jefferson— He made some mistakes, you know, he was human and this is the box that he carried around where he did his work. He kept it on [00:26:48] a shelf in his study in Monticello. He had it in the White House. He had it as a diplomat. He was— This was where he did his [00:26:57] work on this little contraption.

Q: So this little box has seen the whole creation of the early nation.

Response: Right. This little box.

Q: . . . [00:27:20] [chit-chat]

Response: Writing sooner but it's almost as soon as the thing is received and he just gushes and understands exactly what Jefferson's doing, understands what this [00:27:52] is that he has and people have wondered did he use it and I mean the consensus is no, he never— it was a relic and it's really in great condition. [00:28:11] I mean, there's nothing has happened to the thing which is just amazing. There's another aspect of this, too, and that is it has seldom left [00:28:25] the custody of the museum. Seldom. I mean, it never travels. The last time it went anywhere it went up to Capitol Hill to the Library [00:28:37] of Congress for a Jefferson exhibit. It was at the dedication of the State Department, the laying of the cornerstone in the early '50s [00:28:47] I believe. In the '40s, it was at the dedication of the Jefferson Memorial. It almost has to be a kind of a state occasion [00:28:58] when the thing, for it to leave the building, but, no, it's in a great— It's in fabulous shape, but it was always treated as a relic.

Q: Can [00:29:09] I ask you to go back to your statement about the grandson writing back or I guess Coolidge writing back to Jefferson.

Response: When the gift— The desk [00:29:25] was a gift to Jefferson's, the husband of his granddaughter, Joseph Coolidge, not to her, to him, as custom and Coolidge writes back [00:29:40] almost immediately, apologizing for not writing sooner oddly enough, but he just gushes. He understands exactly what Jefferson's doing. He understands the significance of [00:29:51] this as a relic of the Revolution and he never uses it. I mean, this thing sat in their house basically. It was kept [00:30:05] as a relic, kept and treated as a relic.

Q: The presence of— We're worried about sensitivity to light with the inside, the open—

Response: It's [00:30:21] okay. I mean, for a just a limited time. I'm assuming that different conservators would give you different opinions, but I'm of the opinion that [00:30:33] you could unfold it and look at it and show how it works and people would get it a lot more easily than me sitting here physically describing what [00:30:43] this thing is and how big is it and can you actually, you know, it needs a human— It's very human kind of object. It's a personal object.

Q: _____ [00:30:58] style. I mean, once that was made, were there copies made of it or did it become—

Response: Oh, yeah. There were many copies made of it over the [00:31:09] years and this is often caused a lot of confusion with people. When it was in the custody of the State Department, there are accounts [00:31:20] of somebody taking it to a cabinetmaker at the Navy Yard, some cabinetmakers at the Treasury Department reproduced desks and they [00:31:34] have been reproduced and given away as presidential gifts, but the— and what confused, typically confuses people are the affidavits. There was a really [00:31:50] great reproduction of the affidavit that was pasted to these replica desks that looked, for all intents and purposes, to be an actual affidavit [00:32:03] and one of these desks— If you had the reproduction desk next to the original desk there'd be no question as to what

you're looking at, but to the [00:32:12] untrained eye confronted with the photographic affidavit of— that was made— this process could've been made as early as the mid 1830s, you're [00:32:25] really getting— it really causes a great deal of confusion.

Q: So there're people out there in the world that think that they—

Response: Well, [00:32:34] it happened— it seems to have happened— Well there're a couple of celebrated occasions when it happened. One was in the— I [00:32:47] think it was the 1890s, an American in German saw a copy of the desk that had been given to the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and [00:33:00] saw the affidavit and assumed why is this here, you know, and although he was reassured that, no, the original's at the State Department [00:33:09]. He would just not let it drop and there're been other instances like that that are completely confusing to people who— It's not uncommon [00:33:26] in the business. I mean, I get calls once in a while from somebody claiming to have the Appomattox Court House table on which the surrender was signed, [00:33:36] you know, for which there are no affidavits, but it's just one of those things. . . . [chit-chat] . . .