

*Schooling, Formal and Informal*

PHILOSOPHY IN ITS BROADEST SENSE—love of knowledge and inquiry into the basis of knowledge—was in Jefferson’s day infused with the living spirit of the Enlightenment. Jefferson and his contemporaries were the direct beneficiaries of recent intellectual achievements ranging from the discovery of basic laws of the universe to the establishment of the law of nations. This kind of philosophy was not only exciting but necessary and immediate, not at all arcane but practical. For men like Jefferson it became the foundation and guide in their private and public lives; they did not acquire knowledge simply for its own sake but as the basis for change in the human condition. Among other things, this kind of philosophy shed new light on the concepts (now so familiar as often to be taken for granted) of life, liberty, and the meaning and possibility of happiness. This kind of philosophy changed the whole world, and science was one of its central elements.

Jefferson began his formal schooling when his father placed him “at the English school at five years of age; and at the Latin at nine . . . My teacher, Mr. Douglas, a clergyman from Scotland, with the rudiments of the Latin and Greek languages, taught me the French . . . On the death of my father, I went to the Reverend Mr. Maury, a correct classical scholar, with whom I continued two years.”<sup>1</sup> It was at Maury’s school that Jefferson’s introduction to formal natural history (and possibly also to natural philosophy in the form of Isaac Newton’s celestial mechanics) began.<sup>2</sup>

In 1760, at the age of sixteen, Jefferson began two years of study at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, a period that coincided with the brief tenure there of William Small. As Jefferson wrote