

A Measured and Orderly World

ALTHOUGH JEFFERSON LOVED THE philosophical side of science, he remained constantly concerned with its practical application. No fact was too small to catch his attention; what others might find trivial, he turned into useful information. Scattered throughout his notebooks and letters are endless lists of facts and figures and dozens of little gemlike calculations, such as this one testing the efficiency of different kinds of wheelbarrows for hauling dirt. “Julius Shard fills the two-wheeled barrow in 3. minutes and carries it 30 yards in $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes more. Now this is four loads of the common barrow with one wheel. So that suppose the 4. loads put in the same time viz. 3. minutes, 4. trips will take $4 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes = 6’ which added to 3’ filling is = 9’ to fill and carry the same earth which was filled & carried in the two-wheeled barrow in $4\frac{1}{2}$ ’. From a trial I made with the same two-wheeled barrow I found that a man would dig & carry to the distance of 50. yds 5. cubical yds of earth in a day of 12. hours length.”¹

It was possibly from his mother, Jane (1720–1776), a member of the prominent Randolph family, that Jefferson acquired or inherited a love of nature and gardens. The Randolphs were keen students of botany.² All his life, Jefferson collected natural history information, whether from his farms, from his travels, or from his wide reading. It would not be an exaggeration to say that by 1785 he was, in addition to everything else, America’s most knowledgeable naturalist. The gift of Peter Jefferson, his father, was a love of numbers and precision and a passion for recording detailed data and for making sense of it. For Jefferson, knowing and understanding the world required actually measuring it and analyzing the numbers. This applied whether he was recording the weather, which he did wherever he stayed, or