

Science and the Mastodon

ON JUNE 8, 1784, EZRA STILES, president of Yale College, noted in his diary that Thomas Jefferson “is a most ingenuous Naturalist and Philosopher, a truly scientific and learned Man, and every way excellent. He visited the College Library and our Apparatus. Govr. Jefferson has seen many of the great Bones dug up on the Ohio. He has a thighbone *Three Feet long* and a Tooth weighing *sixteen Pounds*.”¹

Along with measuring things and keeping tables of data, Jefferson loved fossils, especially those of the American mastodon, with its giant teeth, bones, and tusks. The mastodon was a giant American relative of elephants, but just what kind of elephant was unclear; it was often called the American incognitum—the unknown. When Jefferson wrote about American wildlife in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the mastodon was the first scientific subject he tackled.

Jefferson was a born teacher and, like some teachers, could be an infuriating know-it-all. Just as he enjoyed advising young people on what books to buy and what subjects to study, he enjoyed explaining. As a master of lawyerly argument, he could use his rhetorical skills to demolish a bad idea and promulgate a good one (and sometimes vice versa). His passages on the mastodon in *Notes* are among his most decisive writings on any scientific subject.

Fossil remains of the mastodon, a creature that (as we now know) once roamed across the American interior, had been found in several places in North America since at least 1705, when bones, tusks, and teeth were dug up near the Hudson River in what is now New York State. The Reverend Cotton Mather sent a secondhand report on them to London’s