

Climate and Geography

ON JULY 1, 1776, THE thirty-three-year-old Jefferson had many weighty issues on his mind, but it was on that date, in Philadelphia, that he began to keep the diary of temperature and other weather details that he maintained on a daily basis for nearly fifty years. (The ever-competitive John Adams would no doubt have delighted in the longer record of a near-contemporary New Englander, Edmund Augustus Holyoke, of Salem, Massachusetts, who kept a similar record for seventy-five years.)¹ Among other things, Jefferson recorded that on July 4 the weather in Philadelphia was very pleasant, with a temperature of only 76 degrees Fahrenheit.

The reason for Jefferson's late start in making weather observations—a surprising delay in someone so devoted to measurements and lists of data—may have been that he did not own a thermometer until 1776. In colonial America, even such day-to-day commodities as glassware, silver, spices, and medicines had to be imported, usually from England. Most newspapers carried advertisements from shopkeepers who were selling a newly arrived cargo of domestic goods. Items like scientific instruments and particular book titles were rarely brought in that way; any unusual item had to be specially ordered. Everything took time. When the Reverend James Madison dispatched an order to London to replace the thermometer that British soldiers had stolen during the war—"It is impossible to procure one here"—he expected to wait two to three months for it to arrive.²

But sometimes, against the odds, a merchant would speculate by bringing in something unusual; so it must have been when Jefferson stopped in at John Sparhawk's London Bookstore on Market Street in Philadelphia. A thermometer was for sale, and he bought it for three pounds and fifteen