



Thomas Jefferson and the Big Cheese

A True Story From American History

Back in 1801, many Americans just loved President Thomas Jefferson.

And why wouldn't they? Our third President was an American hero. He wrote the Declaration of Independence. He got the French to sell us the Louisiana Territory, which doubled the size of the United States. He was charming and intelligent. And he wasn't bad looking, if you don't mind a man who wears a white wig.

One person who particularly admired President Jefferson was a man named John Leland. He was the minister of a Baptist church in Cheshire, Massachusetts.

One day, Leland told everyone in town that he wanted to send a wonderful gift to President Jefferson. And he said he had the perfect gift idea: cheese. Not just any cheese. The biggest cheese that anyone had ever seen. A truly stupendous cheese. He asked everyone who loved President Jefferson to donate one-day's worth of milk.

The people of Cheshire loved the idea. On the appointed day, they all arrived with pails of milk curds. They mixed up the curds and pressed the cheese in a huge cider press. By the time the cheese was dried, it weighed more than 1,600 pounds. It was more than four feet in diameter and one-foot thick.

Leland and his neighbors hoisted the cheese up onto a sled. They hitched it up to a horse, and off Leland rode to Washington. He made the three-week journey by himself. He must have been quite a sight.

When Leland got to Washington, he borrowed four horses and a wagon and brought his gift straight to the White House.

And how did President Jefferson like the gift?

He was thrilled! He had his servants bring it into the East Wing of the White House. He kept it there for more than a year. People came from far and wide to admire this most unusual gift. A poet even wrote about it:

"Some said 'twas Jefferson's intent,
to erect it as a monument."

Finally, on July 4, 1802, President Jefferson decided it was time to share. He invited all his friends and fellow politicians to enjoy this most stupendous cheese.

Most people agreed it was very tasty.

By Lauren Tarshis, Editor, *Storyworks*
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