

Description:

In episode 12 of *George Washington Slept Here*, host Jason Raia and Thomas Jefferson actor-historian Steve Edenbo delve into the art of civil discourse and underline the importance of foundational knowledge coupled with experiential learning. Steve, an interpreter at the [American Historical Theatre](#), shares insights from his portrayal of historical figures, offering a unique lens through which to explore characters like Thomas Jefferson. Join us for a captivating discussion on the power of interpretation, the complexities of historical figures, and the impact of immersive education.

Quotes

"Engaging with good faith, even amid disagreements, is crucial. Civil discourse counters bad faith influence." - Steve Edenbo

"Interpretation in historical theater, like history itself, sparks discussions through careful study and preparation." - Steve Edenbo

Featured Guest

Steve Edenbo

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Chapters:

- 00:00 - Introduction
- 09:10 - Legacy Theatre: Animating Historical Icons
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Transcript:

We the people of the United States. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Jason Raia:

Hello, and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, the civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, where we explore American history, civics, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Raia, chief operating officer at Freedoms Foundation, and host of *George Washington Slept Here*. The format is simple, a long form conversation with a friend of Freedoms Foundation where everyone can learn something new. Before we go any further, a little housekeeping. We encourage everyone to subscribe to *George Washington Slept here* wherever you listen to podcasts, and make sure you get every new episode as soon as it is out. We love hearing from our listeners, so please email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com, with comments, questions, or suggestions. And follow us on social media @FFVF on Twitter and on Facebook and Instagram @freedomfoundation. Today's interview is Steve Edenbo of American Historical Theatre where he interprets Thomas Jefferson.

Jason Raia:

Hello, Steve.

Steve Edenbo:

Hello, Jason.

Jason Raia:

Our conversation today is going to be structured in a way to keep us on track as it always is. We wanna explore your origin story, how you became the person sitting here before us, your current work as Thomas Jefferson, and then we're gonna talk a little bit about the state of America today. And finally, we will end with a quiz where, hopefully, listeners will learn something about you that they did not know before the quiz. So, tell us, where were you born and raised?

Steve Edenbo:

Well, I was born in Western Pennsylvania and whiskey rebellion country in Westmoreland County.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Steve Edenbo:

So my parents are both from there, and then we moved to North Carolina for a little while. My father was following work. When I was 4, we moved back to Pennsylvania to Central Pennsylvania in Cumberland County, and that's where I grew up.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Great. So, mostly Pennsylvania with a sojourn down south in, in –

Steve Edenbo:

I don't remember much of it, but apparently, when I came back, originally, I had a very, A fixed southern accent.

Jason Raia:

Oh, I love it. So that's why the Thomas Jefferson thing has You know what I do so naturally.

Steve Edenbo:

That may come from that. I, I sometimes worry I'm gonna go too far with it, but, apparently, I wasn't worried about it when I was 4. It was quite wide open.

Jason Raia:

Okay. So, who were your most important influences sort of growing up?

Steve Edenbo:

I've had cause to reflect how lucky I was to have just started out early with a group of friends I, I met up with in high school who, having now over the years, got more of an understanding of how eccentric I am. Look what I'm pursuing for a living. Right? And, they just accepted me for who I was, and they kinda helped me understand to some degree, to a minor degree at that age, you know, how eccentric I was, but they just accepted me for who I was. It's the kind of thing when you see nostalgic movies, and TV shows of those groups of friends. Well, I had that. They just got to be themselves with each other. And over the years, I've also come to understand that not everybody gets to have that.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

They get to just do it because it was a privilege. It was Mark and Patt and Ed and John just first names to protect the innocent and the guilty. But going on, really formatively, I'll say and this might seem like a cliché, but my parents, but in a very real way again over the years, understanding how lucky I was, and am, that they I mentioned moving early, you know, when I was young, but then my parents made a very clear decision that they wanted to cultivate a stable environment for their children, for the family. And my father could have climbed the corporate ladder a lot more, and he made a conscious decision not to. He wanted to keep us in one place. And I had, now I understand, an almost absurdly stable upbringing. Just it just doesn't happen. One house, they still live in it. I went to college in the same town where I grew up, and that was also I couldn't have done my one of the greatest gifts they gave me was that stability of upbringing. Another one of the greatest gifts that they gave me was I graduated college without a college debt.

Jason Raia:

Ah, yes. And that really allowed you to pursue –

Steve Edenbo:

I couldn't have no. There's no way I would have pursued acting and especially not the odd direction I went with it without - not with a college debt. I would have, there would have been no chance.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right. So, yeah, what a gift.

Steve Edenbo:

Absolutely.

Jason Raia:

And, so between those two things, your parents providing this stable, family life, and household and, the ability for you to graduate from college without debt and then having this group of friends who allowed you to be you.

Steve Edenbo:

And you could repeat that story in college too. I had just so, again, a group of people I'm still friends with in life. They live in different parts of the world. We stay in touch with letters and

things and just people who - it's amazing. Now I realized I have people, and my parents fit in that group too, who they maybe they roll their eyes a little bit...

Jason Raia:

But they let you, they let you be you.

Steve Edenbo:

Yes. That's not, that's not as common as I used to take it for granted.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Yeah. That's so you mentioned college. Dickinson, if I can remember?

Steve Edenbo:

So I've had a connection with the founders, with Benjamin Rush and John Dickinson from earlier than I realized.

Jason Raia:

And remind everyone who John Dickinson is.

Steve Edenbo:

So John Dickinson, he's the namesake of Dickinson College, though it was founded by Benjamin Rush, but both are men who were in the 2nd Continental Congress. John Dickinson, more interestingly to some degree for well, oh, no, Ben Rush fits in too, but John Dickinson, more acutely to, I think, the sort of the ideas behind your podcast here, he famously in the first musical about that era –

Jason Raia:

The great 1776.

Steve Edenbo:

Right opposed independence now. He wasn't against it wasn't that simplistic. He didn't oppose independence, but he just rightfully had very prudent reasons for thinking that we didn't have the resources. And he wouldn't vote for it, but he also recused himself, basically, stepped out so that –

Jason Raia:

He wasn't gonna be the impediment.

Steve Edenbo:

Right.

Jason Raia:

But he was gonna ask the hard questions.

Steve Edenbo:

Yeah.

Jason Raia:

But ultimately—

Steve Edenbo:

He's a principled individual, and he but also and he also it wasn't that he wasn't gonna be the impediment, just that. He knew we needed a consensus. That the American Revolution was an - odd to use this term in this context - but it was a consensual process in many ways.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Steve Edenbo:

And revolution, so we're talking fire you know, firefights Declaration through Constitution and establishment of the government. That's something that I think it's that we'll probably get to later in the way your podcast goes, but it wasn't just a simple majority. They were going to have a majority. Dickinson was going to be in the minority. He knew it, but he knew they needed a consensus.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

And that's why he stepped aside, but then he volunteered for the military, and he defended America. He –

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

– he and Jefferson were friends then.

Jason Raia:

And that's one of the things that I always find so interesting about the founders is, they were not a monolith. They were disagreements, sometimes fundamental. And yet, everybody contributed to the founding of this new nation in their own way. And sometimes it was by asking hard questions, realizing that I'm not going to come to an agreement with this person. But then going off and joining George Washington in the army and contributing in different ways. It's unique in some way. The way they found their way, around the obstacles even when they themselves were the obstacle. They found a way to to, to to to work to consensus and, and figure this out. But what did you study at Dickinson?

Steve Edenbo:

I was an English major. I almost minored in theater, but, you know, as one of Clint Eastwood's famous characters said many times, a man's got to know his limitations. And, I thankfully, fortunately realized that to do that kind of thing, you've gotta have a talent for logistics, and I do not have that. So I made the choice, just one major, and I'm glad I did, but I definitely got sidetracked by theater.

Jason Raia:

Tell us about how ultimately you once you graduate, you'd be How did you become involved with American Historical Theatre? Tell us what American Historical Theatre is.

Steve Edenbo:

Oh, that's a good place to start.

Jason Raia:

And then and then we'll we'll go from there about how you ended up, you know, in this career.

Steve Edenbo:

Sure. So American Historical Theatre, the name is a little bit deceptive because it makes it sound like there's a brick and mortar theater, building, and there's not. It's a 100% outreach, I guess, is a good way to put it, not for profit, historical theater organization. It's been around now for over 30 years, founded by William and Pamela, Pamela Summerfield. Bill Summerfield was the first person to officially portray George Washington for Mount Vernon. And for the United States government. It was for the bicentennial of Washington's inauguration, and there was a national audition for it. Now he has passed away over 10 years ago, both Bill and Pam passed away, but their theater company lives on, their legacy. And what we do is we've got a few score actors, a few dozen. It's a smaller number of actors, but over a 100 different characters. We've got some amazing talents from people who yes, they're actors, I will often use hyphenated actor historians because I don't know of a better - You can say first person interpreter, but that's more confusing. Where they are they are actors. There's a lot of theater involved, but there there's a continuum or seesaw maybe relationship if that that could be a good image for it between the actor and the historian. They whereas research is always part preparation's part of any actor's role, the history here is you these actors, they create most of the time, they create their own scripts, and then they open up to question and answer or even just improvisational visits where they are in character at a cocktail hour or something, and you're talking to these historical figures, and they chat with you. We try to stay out of modern day things, and though every one of our actors, historians, are independent contractors, we don't tell them what they have to do. But so it's and we go all over the country, school anything from schools to bar associations, and CLEs to corporate functions to motivational speeches, pretty wide and community events, pretty wide range of events.

Jason Raia:

So I wanna drill down on the difference between what an actor historian who is doing first person interpretation. In other words, they are embodying a specific character. And it might be something as simple as a colonial soldier or something as complex as George Washington or Thomas Jefferson or, for instance, Bessie Coleman. But, you know, as opposed to acting where there is a script and you may be playing that character, but you're not the it's and to me, it's that word interpreting, that you are interpreting the character that you are playing. So how is it different?

Steve Edenbo:

With this, this odd duck of a sub facet of theater that I often well, I often refer to it as a platypus. We have this mixture, and the platypus has got the duck bill, but it's not a it's not waterfowl but it has fur and has a pouch. It's a marsupial, and it's got all these different things, but it's a unique animal. And you've got some of the actors, you've got some the historians, and you've got, in many cases, you have some of the teachers and, some of the it's such a wide range. So when you take on a role and the role is written, by someone, let's say, Shakespeare. I mean, that's written in stone. You know? That's such a great example of an extreme. Your script is your vehicle. And what you can get away with with the script, and you can bend a little bit, that that

creates a tension that allows you this if you have that tension and those boundaries around it, now you've got room to play because you've got the walls to bounce off of, and it creates that dramatic tension. And that's a key element of it. With this, yes, you'll have a script oftentimes. Some actors write their own script and stick to them more strictly, others more or less depending, and I do more and less depending on my situation. But in this, so much of this in it I think maybe it's idealized is probably the wrong word, but in a form that is a model form of first person interpretation. You can go off book and be perfectly comfortable..And as a matter of fact, I resist situations that do not allow Q&A, off, you know, off book interaction with the audience, that unexpected element, because I feel like that best showcases what this is, where you immerse yourself in the information and and the life, and you acknowledge the limitations of what we have on record and what we do not. And then you find ways to bolster that depending on how much is written about your historical figure. I call them characters even though they're real people. People have said to me, oh, you're you're you're channeling Jefferson, and you're inviting him. And I get a little bit, I try to be very careful. I've worked very hard over the last 23 years to not let it take over because, weirdly, it can take over, and I think your life in a way that especially with these better known prominent characters.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Steve Edenbo:

And I've seen it happen. I won't name names, but I've seen it happen where you sort of lose who you are. You see the person losing who they are. Because we're doing this professionally, we have to be more outwardly focused toward the audience.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

So this digs in, I think, to cut circle back to use the use of this term interpretation and that, yes, I'm in character when I'm speaking to students, when I'm speaking to an audience. But I work very hard to be cognizant of, yes, I'm in character as Jefferson. I'm embodying Jefferson, but not to the point that I lose track of the context. A great maybe a good way to contrast here is because Oppenheimer right now, he's people can you make that reference now. People know who he is because of the movie.

There's no no such thing as pure science, And there's no such thing as pure history, and Jefferson especially, especially not. So there are things where I don't twist history. I won't change to fit politics. I need to be cognizant that I'm not going to pretend as though there's pure history, that if I drop certain words, certain phrases, talk about certain things that I am now I'm

somehow imagined that I'm disconnected from the current context of those things and and and where they are, how people respond to them, and in some ways, how they can be abused. So I need to be cognizant of that. That - there's where interpretation comes in. Whereas with plays, let's say you've got *Taming of the Shrew*. It's really difficult. It's problematic. I hesitate to use the term, but it is.

Jason Raia:

Sure. Absolutely.

Steve Edenbo:

That maybe you cut a little bit, but you still got the script there. Are you gonna put it on or not?

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

You know, it's problematic. You better wrestle with that. And, you know, so and *1776*, in some ways, people have recently wrestled with it that you could there's a discussion that we have as-

Jason Raia:

Absolutely.

Steve Edenbo:

-the latest is they actually do the musical. Right?

Jason Raia:

Exactly. I saw the most recent Broadway production, and it was the gender flipped or all female cast. It really wasn't gender flipped.

Steve Edenbo:

Okay.

Jason Raia:

And I just felt like there was some interpretation going on, by some of the actors. Rutledge, was played as quite simply, you know, two-dimensional evil. This would be this is and and what

came across to me whether this was intended or not was, this was a slave owner. Therefore, he was a dastardly person, and that was the interpretation that came through.

Steve Edenbo:

He almost twirled his mustache.

Jason Raia:

Yes. Exactly. As opposed to a more nuance where you can still make that same, this is problematic. This is a slave owner, but let's try and, can we figure out what he is trying to deal with?

Steve Edenbo:

It is presented in the script that they contextualize that.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

Actually very effectively.

Jason Raia:

And it's one and it's one of the things that we're gonna get to in just one minute, because that's a big issue for you as Thomas Jefferson. But before we get there, I do want to ask you about your studies. Because I remember when I first met you, you talked your way into a fellowship at Monticello in order to read Jefferson's letters firsthand and to imbibe that. I think you were there for, like, a month or something. And you and your colleagues at AHT do a lot more scholarly reading, I think then, people would believe because it's not just about the script. It really is about understanding who this person was, but also that potential Q&A at the end where somebody can ask you a question. But tell me about what you know, what it took to learn who Jefferson was.

Steve Edenbo:

Well, first, I'll say that my, my fellowship at the International Center for Jefferson Studies, thank and it was really thanks to Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, who was in charge at the time. It was a career changing pivotal moment for me, and in some very big issues, I was able to, really work through some things, test some things, and solidify a couple very difficult things and get and get some context for things in just ways that would've been absolutely impossible since.

And since I haven't published a book or anything, I can't credit them in it, but it's really a formative moment. But as far as the research and learning goes, it's constant. I mean, when I first started out, I set my, I knew because I was an English major, I knew I had a lot of catching up to do, so I set myself a regiment where I, I had a notebook, a log of reading, and I set myself five hours of reading a day. And I did that for the first year, basically. A couple days here and there, I wouldn't be able to, obviously, but that was I kept that pretty and I was reading Jefferson's biography, so I'm thinking, wow. He was reading, they say, 12 hours a day while he was in college, so I can't do that. So fine. Okay. Then I can't do, fine. But now that wasn't guided. I didn't have the benefit of the guidance of if someone's working on their doctorate, that kind of a thing. Right? So I didn't have that guidance. But over the years, it's been everything I can get between constant reading. Audiobooks have become more accessible now. Some amazing podcasts are out there. As well as the continuing reading. Historical sites are amazing ways to do it. To go and speak to people in the national - being in Philadelphia, having Independence National Historical Park has been in the and my working with rangers and everyone and the people there has been an amazing resource. My own fellow colleagues who do the first person interpretation, bouncing things off them, things off them doing the research to write scripts. Different people do different levels of how much they research and they dive into it. For me, I have to occasionally back away because it gets to be too much. And, again, back to what I said earlier, this can become overwhelming. It can become you can kind of lose yourself in it.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. Well, I mean, you know, we talk about the 10,000 hours it takes to become - I mean, you did that in you know, you did 15,000 hours of reading in that first year.

Steve Edenbo:

You know, I think 10,000 hours is not The road, that's not the amount of time it takes to achieve mastery. It's just where you get started.

Jason Raia:

Right. Right.

Steve Edenbo:

That's just enough that you know okay.

Jason Raia:

That and that to think that was your first year, and you've never stopped since then.

Steve Edenbo:

No. I haven't been able to do five hours of reading a day. Sadly. But if I won the lottery I'll—

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

—will get back to that.

Jason Raia:

But, you know, I I do know that every, you know, every new book that comes out, a major book on Thomas Jefferson —

Steve Edenbo:

—try to get those things in my head as best I can.

Jason Raia:

You were at *Hamilton* to see that version of Thomas Jefferson

Steve Edenbo:

That was another place. I was lucky with the people I had surrounded myself with, there were some people who, so now a number of them operate the Alexander Hamilton Awareness Society, which you'd think I wouldn't like them because of that. You right? You'd think, no. It's team Jefferson. It's not like that, at least with us. And they were telling me, oh, you've gotta see this musical. We've got early tickets for the first showing of it on Broadway, and it's this rap musical about Alexander Hamilton, I thought that's gonna be terrible.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Steve Edenbo:

I was gonna be, it's gonna be awful

Jason Raia:

We all underestimated that.

Steve Edenbo:

And they said, okay. But know what? This is my job. I'm, okay. And there are other things going on at the time. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but I went to go see it. And, of course, in the five minutes, as they say, I was blown away.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

I'm just so lucky that I was associated with people who pushed me in the right direction.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. So the biggest question of the day, why Thomas Jefferson? How did you land on you wanted to spend your professional career, on the third President of the United States?

Steve Edenbo:

Well, again, other people send things my way. I've been the recipient of people who along, all along the way, it's always been people helping me, and and lifting me and, and, and supporting me along the way. And this is a case too where I I didn't know this kind of work existed on this level. And it was the folks who were operating the American Historical Theatre. Now at the time, it was the two founders of the company, Bill and Pam Summerfield and Kim Hanley, who's now the Executive Director. And, really, Kim saw me, and she's got this talent.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

She sees people and says, oh, that person can do this thing, and then that person could do that thing and as far as finding talent, you know, she saw early on, a few years after I'd started as Jefferson, she met, Dean Malissa, who then succeeded eventually was to succeed, Bill Summerfield at at Mount Vernon's George Washington. And, you know, Dean was doing regular acting work and, obviously, an immense talent. And Kim convinced Bill and Pam to meet with him, and he should be Washington and that and, of course, he was.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

To a great degree. And, you know, he came, and then she introduced me to Bill and Pam, and all of them said, you look like Thomas Jefferson. I said, I do. They said, you do. And they said, we need one because in Philadelphia, yes, we go all over the country, but In Philly, there's a tourism industry, and so there's that kind of thing. And they said, we need one. And, they gave me my first costume, my first books, and my first performance was at Independence National Historical Park, fittingly. And, immediately, as I mentioned earlier with the metaphor, the platypus of the ability to do the deep dive and dive in the reading and the writing and the thought, but then the ability to take that and put it on stage in dramatic form, that that mixture. And then the travel part is absolutely a big part of what I saw as an opportunity and definitely loved it, and all those things came together. And I I never gave it a thought of, oh, I was at a crossroads. You know, it was Yogi Berra, and when you come to a fork in the road, take it. And I'm like, I just didn't even think it was such a perfect fit. You know, I took it off the rack and it fit. I just found this in the window and it's Yeah.

Jason Raia:

You know? So so tell us, When you are Thomas Jefferson and and you are with group students, with group teachers, with group lawyers, are there a couple of things that you want to, communicate about Thomas or something that if they leave the room knowing these two or three things, you feel like you've you've done your job?

Steve Edenbo:

Sure. First, I think one would be something that makes him look bad, but really doesn't, but kind of. Two would be something that makes them look better, but not perfect. And then three would be something that makes them look just like us. And so the one would be, I always get worried if nobody asks about slavery. And now it's happening less where I walk away where nobody did. The last three years, I'll say, which is a positive thing because then we can have a conversation.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

When people don't, I want them to know that you not only can, but you need to ask about these difficult subjects when you're talking to the people who are situated to address them and asking about the difficult subjects, talking about the difficult subjects is not the hurtful part. There's a way to do it that you're not doing damage, that, but you're also not sugarcoating. There's a way to do that, and Jefferson is, I think, the best situated of the most famous of the founders to

nurture a conversation about that notion, specifically, in his case, one of the issues about slavery. And that's such a big thing that I try to do. Now the thing that's making him look a little bit better in a complex way that I've been doing the last few years more and more has been focusing on his relationships. This idea we started with with John Dickinson and he's such an emblematic figure of that, but there's no no current musical that puts in the public eye that I can really talk about him. But I'll talk about John Adams, Alexander Hamilton. And because of the musical, the *Hamilton* musical, I get to talk about Aaron Burr.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

And his relationships with with these, with these people and and where he and they either were able to put, put, put their love of America above their party or their even their philosophy and, but not their principles, and work together even begrudgingly, but but for the greater good or as I use Burr as an example, were a contributor to the conversation in bad faith.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

And they all Hamilton, Adams, and Burr in their own way realized that each of the others, well, Jefferson and Burr and or rather, Adams and Hamilton, I think, never never ever. But kind of where they did realize it, you can point to ways where they didn't work it out in all cases, but they recognized the other one was operating in good faith even though we disagreed in some ways fundamentally. Whereas Burr is the contrast there. So that's the second part. And then the third part is a very quintessentially Jeffersonian idea that of all his changes, all his Smoke and mirrors some people have accused him of and is evolving and changing over the years. Something that was consistent throughout was that the Earth belongs to the living, not the dead. And but it then it then it belongs to the next generation too, so you don't have the right to wreck it for the next ones, which then means all men are created equal means you right now are on this if if you put the founders on a pedestal, well, then you better get up there and expose yourself like that too. And if you wanna take them off the pedestal, don't put yourself up there. You know? Let's we're on the same level, and that's something that makes him consistent, I think, is very inspiring.

Jason Raia:

So that's, I'm so glad you introduced those words, all men are created equal, that Jefferson is so connected to from the Declaration of Independence. But, there is this cognitive dissonance in

Jefferson. The guy who writes those words, all men are created equal, as you say to the students, was born a slave owner. And he knew it. And he understood that he had made this great principled claim on behalf of the nation, and yet he was not, living up to it.

Steve Edenbo:

Right.

Jason Raia:

So how do you square that circle as one of his interpreters?

Steve Edenbo:

I love the expression square the circle. It's such an 18th Century enlightenment expression, and it's perfect for the day.

Jason Raia:

Perfect for Jefferson.

Steve Edenbo:

A part of it is that I don't. You know, it's the Gordian knot, and I'm not going to pull on Alexander the Great and just flash it. Right? I'm not that and part of it is that I don't, and I think part of it is that I'll start out saying something that I think he also believed I don't think he, in his best moments, denied that he failed.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

In some ways, and this is one of the ways he failed, and his generation failed. And so I try to, no. I just do. No. I, I don't pull punches with it a lot less now than maybe I did before, where you I, I guess one of the things I'll say, it's not a Jefferson quote, but I think it summarizes what I'm doing as an interpreter. And what I'll say is no man who refuses to acknowledge his failures is worth listening to when he talks about his successes. And so it's, it's one of the things, and this is actually one of the things I had to learn, at when I was at, the International Center For Jefferson Studies, and at the end, I they asked me to well, before, at the very beginning, they asked me to give my, fellows form in character, which changed my whole approach and scared the scared the breaches off of me, that instead of having a nervous breakdown about the night before going to speak to a library full of, the number turned out to be 76 people there, so that

was something you can't make up and all these were scholars and guides and Monticello and, instead of having a nervous breakdown, what what I came to the realization was is I don't have to be the smartest guy in the room. I don't have to be the master of all this information. I don't know, I'm here to share a specific technique of examining history, not just of telling the story, but this technique leads you into specific, really unique ways of looking at it where you have to put on the shoes and walk in them literally. And that limits you in some ways and then expands your ability to do things in others. I'm sharing and demonstrating this technique here, and that's the best I can do. In which case then, if I don't know the answer to a question, I'll say, I'll find ways to say it in character. Oh, I'm 280 years old or whatever. You know? I, or I didn't write that down. If I didn't write it down, I can't remember it, you know, kinda thing and I'm not making excuses. People trust you more when you do that.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

And I've also, over the years, found that if I try too hard to justify Jeffers Jefferson's ownership of slavery, and you can find text that he wrote plenty of it as deeply as you wanna double down to do that kind of thing, you lose faith more in that conversation. Whereas if you start out saying, alright. Yep. I failed. I failed at this. I can give you a few reasons why. I go through them pretty quickly when I do because it starts to become excuses and say, here, you know, here are places I or he as Jefferson succeeded. Here are places he, his generation as well, failed.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm. Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

Your turn. And then the next step is and one of the things I do in the shows is a very Jeffersonian thing, which is, okay, now 200 years from now.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

When you, the generation listening to this guy portray Jefferson. Nobody's going to praise you 200 years from now because you didn't own slaves. And now this is where I do something. I thought about this before coming in here. If I was gonna mention it, well, we'll see. I'm gonna jump in the pool here. I'm gonna do a cannonball with it. But one of the things I'll say is first, first,

I say, bear with me. What I'll say at first won't make any sense, but please bear with me and I say, the fact that you do not own slaves now does not make you morally superior to someone who was born a slave owner, like me, like Jefferson, in the 18th Century. Now that doesn't make any sense why owning slaves is wrong. Jefferson knew it was wrong. They knew they knew that it was wrong by that point. Right? So then why does it not make you better? Because Jefferson was born a slave owner, and he died a slave slave owner. For you to own a slave, you would have to break the law to own a slave. Doesn't mean slavery doesn't exist there. We know that there are more people who are enslaved in various ways, human trafficking, that kind of thing in the world now than there were in the 18th Century and in the 19th Century.

But, you don't own one. You don't even see them anywhere in the world. You might buy a shirt from a sweatshop somewhere. You don't know where it was made, but you can own them. So you don't own them. You didn't end slavery. There's a generation who fought and bled to end slavery in America, they deserve the accolades. So what will you do to earn posterity's praise? Because if all you do is go through life saying, well, I don't own slaves, aha, aren't I better than them? You're doing nothing different than the norm for your society, which is what a slave owner in the South was doing if he was born a slave owner. Jefferson's first memory is being carried on a pillow on the back of a horse by a slave to the home that his family was moving to. That was the norm, not morally defending it, but it was the norm. So if all you do is this thing that's the norm, 200 years from now, no one's going to applaud you for it. What will you do? What are you doing that you can say at the end of your life, ah here are the things I did for the people who are going to be alive 200 years from now. That's how you earn. So, yes, you should judge Jefferson and his generation for the failures and the successes and to not do so, to explain it away by saying, oh, they're a man of their time. That's letting yourself off the hook because now I'm just a man of my time you know, all the things I could say I'm, I'm doing that are normal, but that are harmful, or to say, oh, they were horrible and evil. I'm not going to listen to them. You're letting yourself off the hook because what are you doing that's better? So then that hook of what are you gonna do for 200 years from now, I think it's a very Jeffersonian twist. If the earth belongs to the living also means so does the responsibility.

Jason Raia:

So, and you really get to, one of the things I think is most important in his in in looking at history is this question of moral judgment, and, and, and, and how we contextualize and understand, whether it's an individual like Jefferson or whether it is a period of, how it is different, from our own time and what has changed in the in between. And to your point, the fact that the Civil War happened, slavery was outlawed, We are the beneficiaries of that. It is simply not a question for us today in the way that it wasn't a question to your point for Jefferson because that was the reality. This is the reality. And and and that's complex and nuanced, and, I, I, I think it's one of the things that, we struggle with looking backwards, and we have seen it and and over the last particularly, the last five years or so, how we strike this balance between saying that human chattel slavery, was morally wrong. It is a bad thing. It should never have happened. And at the same time, say, yet for most of human history, it happened, and it happened in this country and, that doesn't mean that, the Declaration of Independence is worthless because it was written by

someone who owned slaves. And and yet we see that some people want to go to that place to say –

Steve Edenbo:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

–the founders, at least most of them, other than, a couple of them. We don't need to pay any attention to them because they did that there were these moral failures, chief amongst them slavery.

Steve Edenbo:

I think I wanna add a codicil to my rant of a moment ago. And to say that as a qualifier, to say that I also would be letting Jefferson and there by my logic myself off the hook a little bit by saying that he was just a man of his times, you know, by owning slavery that, yes, when he was born, it was normal. When he was a child, he thought it was normal, but he eventually knew it was wrong.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

He did. And there were fewer people in the South, but you've got a few examples that are shining examples of people who gave up a lot, to make themselves examples to fight against it, though, generally, they were younger by a generation than Jefferson. So there was pushback, and it wasn't considered to be totally normal. However, I am put right in the middle of this in a way that, well, I've got a conflict of interest, don't I? And here I am sure. Here I am and it's my livelihood. On the other hand, you know, know, I mentioned it earlier as a metaphor. It's not a metaphor with me when you don't judge someone until you walk a mile in their shoes. Well, I've walked it a lot more than a mile.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

In his shoes, and that doesn't mean I'm defending him and everything he did was right, but it does change things. And along with you know, I haven't seen the current version of the musical,

but your analysis of the way the musical and the way certain characters are interpreted you know? If you're really diving into a character in theater, be it this kind or be it where everything is scripted, no one is the villain in their own story.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

And if you're playing that person like they are that they believe they're the villain, then it gets boring. It's not interesting. You know? And the best villains are the ones where you kinda they're seductive. You start to kinda see. So I don't wanna be the seductive villain here, but at the same time, you've got to walk them out in those shoes to portray that character, and that puts me in a certain place. So rather than with with that conflict of interest here and try to defend the importance of Thomas Jefferson for tut tutting any anybody who who says, well, because he owned slaves and because of his relationship, qualified as you will with Sally Hemings, therefore, we will not respect or listen to him at all. I'll take a different tack, I'll say, from a tactical point of view. If you are engaged in constitutional law and those parts of American life that are bound up in it, like civil rights, if you reject everything before the 14th Amendment, you cut your knees out from under you legally because in law, yes, there's history, but then there's law history. And law. Precedent means something. Precedent those are the building blocks. You know, I make a joke in character as Jefferson saying there was nothing original in the Dec - there wasn't an original idea in the Declaration of Independence. And I say, I'm a lawyer, we do that. People chuckle, but, no, that's the strength of it. He was humble enough to know and trained enough as a lawyer to know he got those phrases everybody had hashed out and the precedents that had become legal and natural law precedents and actual phrases. They were there. People weren't as likely to dive into a scrum over them and restart a whole new argument. They could vote. Okay. We'll vote on that, great. We are all under nothing new here. And if you cut out everything in American constitutional history before the 14th Amendment, you are weakening your own argument even if your argument is Jefferson is bad. You're weakening yourself by ignoring him and because of how involved he, his legacy and the founder's legacy is in the very basis of the constitutional precedent that makes the groundwork for our civil rights cases now.

Jason Raia:

Well, I think it speaks loudly to the complexity of humanity that we are all individually complex. We can, we can do great things and we can do terrible things, and we can do them in the same day, in the same hour and so..

Steve Edenbo:

At the same time.

Jason Raia:

At the same time. Exactly. The same act-

Steve Edenbo:

Right.

Jason Raia:

-seen from two different points of view. So I think, to me, I have been noticing this greatly, that people are unaware or or don't acknowledge that a lot of the failings that we see in government, in any institution, often are the human failings of the people who make up those institutions. And, and, and I see the founders in very much the same way that they gave us so much, and and we are better off for it today for what they gave us in the Constitution and in a Constitution that would, that could be changed and that could and yet they were imperfect. Well, we're we all are, and that's the interesting thing. So I wanna jump to what we tend to talk about in America today. You do a lot of work with students, teachers, and lawyers, and we've talked about that. But I want you to talk a little bit about your experience when you are before students.

Steve Edenbo:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

Now some of that here is here at Freedoms Foundation. You've been coming here a long time, as Thomas Jefferson.

Steve Edenbo:

I think my first performances here were in 2000.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Yeah. So, yeah, almost 25 years ago, 23 years ago. So that's the beginning of your, but then you're also doing schools here in Philadelphia. I know you've flown out to California, to, you know, schools that we have a connection to, to others. What are you and I'm asking this in the context of here about, the lack of civic education, national test scores. What's your experience? Because I suspect you may have some, some mixed experiences, but, you know, speak to what you see when you come in as Thomas Jefferson and engage and give them the opportunity to ask you questions or you're being Socratic and asking them questions. What are you seeing?

Steve Edenbo:

There's a mix, and there's a pretty vast difference, I'll say, when you have a self selected group of students like you have at Freedoms Foundation. They work to get here.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

Maybe it's a writing contest or something, but they work to get here, versus if you go and you perform for the entire middle school or the entire 8th grade, that kind of thing. So once you jump into an entire grade, or an entire school, then you get a wide swath of society, and you get so you have extremes. And on one extreme, there are people who just aren't interested. This is all just this is all the stuff my teacher says and I fear there's on the one extreme. On the one extreme, there's been a lot in a conversation nationwide. There has been a big contribution to the conversation nationwide that somehow teachers are, they are the enemy almost. They are and they are not connected with daily life, and they are not the things they're teaching you. You just roll your eyes, and that doesn't apply to why don't they teach me things in school that really matter? Well, they're trying to, but they're not teaching you how to do your taxes. They're not teaching you how to calculate APR on a credit card, that kind of thing. So why, you know? And in there, there's, you know, a shutoff from the conversation.

However, if you go away from that extreme, there's also I see once you invite students to engage, and you, I do a lot of this, I work very hard to do this where once you can if you can convince them that or just find a way to allow them to feel like they are welcome. And that, like I said earlier, but the difficult subjects, the ones that are rankling them, they just can't think of either they can't think of the right way to ask it or they think saying anything about it will get them in trouble.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

Once you invite, find a way to invite that or or have them forget themselves, and just next thing they know, they're participating. And the debate formats do a lot of that. And I've got a couple techniques I use to do that as well where the next thing they know, they can't be cynical teenagers anymore they're engaging, and they think they're challenging you. And the last thing you need to do is let them know how excited you are that you're challenging you because then they're not being cool anymore in their minds. Right? But once they whatever it is that crosses past that threshold, that's holding them back of feeling like they're not welcome or that the

subject matters is not welcome and bad, then they begin to experiment and, yes, to make mistakes in how they word it or or or in their knowledge is imperfect, but they begin to that exploration, the the making of mistakes, and the the the having to learn to have that pushback in that conversation, then it's off to the races. And that's one of the formats I like best about this, where some of it's scripted or prepared remarks. But especially with high school and on, I mix things up more, giving them periodic, selected times during the presentation to answer questions and engage and encourage them to challenge me. I've seen some amazing back and forth there when they feel I don't wanna say safe because there's pushback, and then other ones, sometimes they get into a debate with each

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

Over Jefferson or Hamilton. You know what I mean?

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Steve Edenbo:

So safe is the wrong word. But then the ones who're challenging the other one feels welcome that they get to do that, which is different than feeling safe. But there's an environment where a civic discussion can happen on not a Pollyanna level of, well, we're marching in lockstep or nobody's being offended. It's like the *1776* musical, which John Adams says is a revolution we're going to have to offend somebody? But that there is a way to engage and have differences and challenge and push back that is productive and that is in good faith. And that happens, this theater technique, in what way I like to use it? And with a group with adults too. It works.

Jason Raia:

Sure. Sure.

Steve Edenbo:

You know, once that once it's and with the groups of lawyers is a great example. Once they realize, oh, I mean, they're okay with us asking questions when they don't already know the questions coming because a lawyer will never do that. You know? You don't ask the question you know the answer to. You don't know what you know? And then it's off to the races, and we

barely have time for the rest of our prepared script with the lawyers. You know? So this is a human thing, not just with kids.

Jason Raia:

And there have been plenty of studies that show, particularly with civic education, that experiential learning has a deeper impact. It lasts longer. It's more meaningful, and we've certainly seen that, with the way that students interact. Here, you have done presentations on your own. You've done them with John Adams. You've done them with Alexander Hamilton. You've done them with Abigail Adams. So you're interacting with different, historic individuals who Jefferson would have interacted with, naturally often but it is that opportunity, when they are something more than an audience that they come alive than what you're describing.

Steve Edenbo:

I'll predicate my response to that by referencing something that Annette Gordon-Reed talked about, how she for some reason, the way she said it really reached me and that she has a way of saying things that are controversial, but that are just sober and grounded. And, basically, what she said was, but you do need to know this happened on this date,

Jason Raia:

That's right.

Steve Edenbo:

You need that. I mean, that is a foundation.

Jason Raia:

You need foundational knowledge.

Steve Edenbo:

Right.

Jason Raia:

But then when you can engage that knowledge in, in an experiential way—

Steve Edenbo:

Yeah.

Jason Raia:

–that and then that solidifies that knowledge.

Steve Edenbo:

They get to jump in.

Jason Raia:

It's meaningful. And it's as important as being able to balance your checkbook and and understand alone. Yeah. And we don't know? Too often, we give education attempts to give them knowledge without a lot of context that is, you know, read this, take this test, write this essay, and, and with just a little bit whether it's a classroom debate or it's interacting with a historic interpreter, or it's going to visit a historic site. We know that all of a sudden that base of that foundational knowledge connected with that experience. All of a sudden, it is, you know, $1 + 1 = 3$.

Steve Edenbo:

Mhmm. I've been in situations. I mean, Monticello is one of them, but there have been battlefields too where I've been to in various homes, that kind of historical homes and historical sites where that exact epiphany moment happened. Where, oh, that's what you meant.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

I mean, it's not the American Revolution. It's not the founding period, but my interest in history goes a bit beyond that. And I was at when I was in Farmington, New Mexico earlier this year for a debate John Adams went to, the Aztec Ruins National Memorial.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

And I had one of those absolute coalescence moments. First going through the museum setup, and they've got it curated. They were writing about the basket makers in this culture they called the basket makers, and they wove baskets, and it was a big part of their culture. Okay that and I remember thinking, okay. At first, that's an interesting way to just refer to a people, but a very

archaeologist, anthropologist way to do it. You categorize them that way. But going out and seeing the site, it was just something about seeing the kiva, this central gathering place, and they built the they had one reconstructed and have a dome roof to it and reading about it. And the dome roof mimicked the dome of the sky, and also the basket was mimicking the dome that they make in everyday functioning and in their economy, and also the dome roof of this religious and social space they met was mimicking the dome of the sky. And so their cosmogony and their economy and their social environment were all the same thing. And I remember looking up at the sky, and it's in New Mexico, so there I was in it. It's from Farmington all flat and thinking, oh, basket makers and I walked in, and I was kind of as enthusiastic as I've gotten in some of my rants today with the rangers, and they loved it about that moment. And I never could have had that, but I stood there at that historical site.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

And it was curated by x generations of experts to give me the context, and there were what you could call very primary documents in objects and buildings and things. So the 1, 2, 3 punch of curation and expertise for context of primary documents, you know, and of the importance of place all in the same moment. And those three things cannot be done by a school. I don't think we should pile more on schools to do all that.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

We need to realize education is not just to be done during school and then never again.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. I was privileged to be asked to write a piece on the challenges of civic education for the ABA, who you work a lot with, and, in different bar associations. And and I basically closed the piece by talking about how we all need to be civic educators, that it is not simply a matter of one more thing schools need to do, because we have just piled one thing on top of another over the last 40 years of you need to teach this and teach this and teach this. And, yes, they need to teach civics, and they need to teach history. But, I think when our country was better at civic education. It was when there were these reinforcing institutions, whether they were scouting or church or sports leagues, or whatever where there were these there were these lessons and there was, you know, the the reinforcing experiences, of, that that did not we did not require that. The only place civic education was going to happen was in school.

Steve Edenbo:

I wonder if I've been, I think you and I have been wondering, and we've had conversations, offline as they say plenty of times about this diaspora perhaps from a unifying principle. You know, you've said the reason for naming the podcast after George Washington was because of the unifying figure that he was in so many ways. And even Jefferson said, when he's convincing Washington to come back for that second term, North and South will hang together if they have you to hang on to.

Jason Raia:

That's right.

Steve Edenbo:

And, yes, there was an East and West conflict, but Jefferson named it. There was no. There was North and South too, and they could hang on to Washington. And I wonder, especially over the last couple years, if what we're seeing is not a breaking apart, but a we're maybe we're seeing new civic sites and new historical sites that can be you know, we see a whole new national holiday.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

That we haven't fully defined yet. We haven't really found our footing with it yet.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

Right? But so many things that, you know, like that, it takes a while that, yes, we're in a moment of destabilization, but the strength and the weakness of any government by the people and certainly one that mixes in elements of democracy is the unstable nature. Yes. That means it can break apart, but also it can adapt and react and not just stick to something that worked a 1000 years ago but doesn't work anymore.

Jason Raia:

Right. Absolutely. And, again, it brings us back to how these institutions are human institutions made up of people, and people change their minds. And the things that made sense 50 years ago may not make sense anymore, but new things, new new paradigms, can replace them. I wanna bring us back before we get to the quiz on one last thing, and that is Jefferson's friendship with Adams, the 1800 election. We are, you know, gonna be coming into a new presidential election.

Steve Edenbo:

Are we? I had no idea.

Jason Raia:

I know, they're - not a word. Not a word. But I'm curious if you think, because you and I know, lots of our listeners know that the Jefferson Adams election. Both of them were guys who were friends who then, you know, were no longer friends for many, many years because of the election.

Steve Edenbo:

They wouldn't admit that, but, yeah, you're right.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. And, I'm wondering if there are so I think it speaks to the fact that politics has always been rough and tumble in this country. It has always been polarizing and there are some particular elections that we can point to certainly, the one that gets kicked into, the House of Representatives, that Jefferson eventually wins because Hamilton supports him. What, what-

Steve Edenbo:

Who is turning over in his grave that Hamilton's getting so much credit. You want to get that question. You want to get - what you feel about the fact that Hamilton made you win?

Jason Raia:

That's right. It was really Henry Clay. But yeah. But do you think there's a lesson there, you know, for us as we sort of do the hair on fire, and come into another presidential election.

Steve Edenbo:

I've seen some flaming hats already. Yes. Absolutely. And as a matter of fact, Though this is not a program I get to do here at Freedoms Foundation a lot just because of the specific nature of what I'm working with the students on here. But I've been preoccupied with my most recent solo

piece that I've been developing for the last number of years is based on the election of 1800, and when I've mentioned these themes of it going along here. And I think that I mean, it was every bit the constitutional crisis, every bit the bordering on Civil War, you know, in 1800, 18-early 1801. You know, militias in Pennsylvania and Virginia were called out by the governors. You know, it almost wasn't, you know? And this was the first transition of power from one party to another party.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

Though they wouldn't admit that either.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

You know? But it was, you know, the first power from Washington to Adams was extremely important and not to be downplayed, but this was the first from one political party to another. And the whole world thought, oh, this is it. And they had a good reason to think that. Here's the lesson I've been drawing from it and working on ways to draw from it and it I've worked on parting from it being a fairytale of can't we all just get along, and I think a simplistic admonition of well, we have to respect the people on the other side, And there are two sides of every argument, and that, I think, doesn't go far enough. And I think so I use Adams, Hamilton, and Burr as this triumvirate. To get away from what I think is, probably a false I'll call false binary. Of there being two sides to every discussion even if you simply simplify it to be functional. There are really three sides, and Hamilton and Adams represent two sides. If you are at Jefferson, and these are people I disagree with, and the one Adams represents is family and friends but you disagree with them. And the other represents people that are never going to be your friend. You don't like them. You know? That's the Hamilton

Jason Raia:

Right. It's the work colleague.

Steve Edenbo:

Right.

Jason Raia:

You've gotta work with them. But –

Steve Edenbo:

Right. In America, well, they're here, but you don't, you don't even like them. You don't even wanna be in a room with them, and they're not family or friends. And so those two, in a sense, I've been working on for the last 20 years or so because first, I started out going all over the country with debates with Alexander Hamilton.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

Then switched over much more to John Adams. And so it worked through those. But in both those situations and in both those situations, in their own way, Adams and Hamilton helped get through that crisis. Adams, and this sounds like an insult every time I say it, I get a laugh from the audience. But the greatest thing he ever did was to avoid a crisis in the 1800 election, he went home. That sounds like an insult. It wasn't. It was a crisis. He could have stayed. He could have ridden the whirlwind, another expression they like to use. He could have used the he was he held the reins of power still. It didn't cross his mind. You know, because you know Adams so well you studied him. You know it didn't cry. He would have written it down. He wrote everything down.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

You know, this is a man the dog that didn't bark is a big deal for the writings of John Adams he wrote everything. And it wouldn't have occurred to him because he had such principles and such virtue and such honesty that is almost impossible, especially to reach that high end in politics. He went home peacefully, so we grump at him for not staying for the inauguration. He's a hero. The greatest things George Washington ever did were the two times he went home.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

Voluntarily surrendering his commission as general.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

Voluntarily leaving at the end of the second term when he was now maybe he would have died in office. Things would have turned out the same, and that would have been a precedent. So that's Cincinnatus-

Jason Raia:

Yes.

Steve Edenbo:

—example was an impossible example. So then Hamilton, what did he do? He is turning to his colleagues and saying, basically, Jefferson's principles may be misguided, but at least he has them.

Jason Raia:

Mhmm.

Steve Edenbo:

Burr has none you know, at least Jefferson's has I think one of the near quotes is at least Jefferson has pretensions to character. You know? This is as close as you can get. It's a backhanded compliment, but he did say, but Burr has none. Burr is totally completely bankrupt except in the plunder of his country. And if he gains this office, he will never leave. You know, Hamilton called it. He saw something we couldn't handle. And so the comparison I use is that there you have the two good faith contributors to the conversation with whom you fundamentally, some cases violently as those cabinet meetings Jefferson described with Hamilton as being descending daily into the pit like a gladiator, you fundamentally disagree, and you don't even like them. But Jefferson came to realize Hamilton was engaging in good faith. He even said so.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Steve Edenbo:

That he was honest in his public dealings, and we saw in Jefferson's Presidency that he took on some of Hamilton's that was less against commerce, less against industry, pushed for home industry, American manufacturing, because this all could help us, and that Louisiana Purchase, very Hamiltonian. Hamilton lived long enough to gloat about that a little bit. So I don't use the room where it happened deal. I think it's too pollyanna, and Jefferson later regretted it. Because it set up the banks. But later Jefferson moved in his direction. Adams and Jefferson also. They didn't just stop talking about politics and become friends and just not know. They talked about it. They hatched through it.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Steve Edenbo:

So those are the examples that are positive and who's the fly in the ointment that I think breaks the bind the false binary that becomes a fairy tale, can't we just all get along or have civil conversations, you have to find those people that you disagree with but are in good faith, the Hamiltons and the Adams in your life, because they are the Aaron Burr. And if you can't find in your life, the ones you fundamentally disagree with, either you they're family and friends or that you just don't like them, but you have to you realize, no. Mm-mm. They love America. They just disagree on the best way to protect it. If you can't find them, that's on you, I think, and you gotta do some soul searching.

Jason Raia:

That is just a really wonderful way for us to end because I think that gives us something to think about. That there are so many people out there that we can fundamentally disagree with. But, if we are honest and true, we are able to say much the way, Hamilton said of Jefferson. They never agreed with him once. He loves the country.

Steve Edenbo:

He's wrong, but he wants to be right. He's trying to be right as opposed to—

Jason Raia:

He's not trying to burn it all down.

Steve Edenbo:

Aaron Burr just wanted to get power.

Jason Raia:

Yep. Ex absolutely. Okay. Let's wrap this up with our quiz, and no study is necessary. Here we go. Excluding Washington and Lincoln. Who's your favorite president?

Steve Edenbo:

I will self-recuse Jefferson because of a conflict of interests

Jason Raia:

I was wondering if you might.

Steve Edenbo:

Because of conflict of interest. It was a conflict of interest. But I'm gonna say Adams, and it's because of what I said.

Jason Raia:

Oh, I love that.

Steve Edenbo:

So I'm going home.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Steve Edenbo:

It never even occurred to him, and that permeates his struggle with Washington's Cabinet and all that struggle he was the first. If we had someone less than Adams for that, would he have to be the guy that followed Washington?

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Steve Edenbo:

Well, that would have been it.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Steve Edenbo:

Nobody some - a lesser man would have been crushed under that.

Jason Raia:

Okay. What's one thing you would want every American to learn more about?

Steve Edenbo:

Hmm. I would say the difference between anecdote and data, that data is not the plural of anecdote and what all that implies.

Jason Raia:

Interesting. Okay. If you had not chosen a career as an actor, what do you think you might have become?

Steve Edenbo:

You know, when I was a kid, I wanted to be a lawyer. That's why my parents encouraged me to go to Dickinson.

Jason Raia:

So now you play one on T.V.

Steve Edenbo:

I play one on T.V. Whether or not that was a good decision or not is still, the book's still open on that.

Jason Raia:

Let's see. What pet peeve annoys you the most?

Steve Edenbo:

Overpackaging. When you get it, you buy something, and it's hermetically sealed. And you need a saw and a hammer and a chisel just to get the thing out of it.

Jason Raia:

It's a pair of pliers because you can't yeah -

Steve Edenbo:

And it's petty, so it's a pet peeve. Yeah. Man.

Jason Raia:

Love it. Love it. What's one thing, you think most people would be surprised to learn about you?

Steve Edenbo:

One thing that most people would be surprised to learn about me. Well, you know, because I make my living with words, and it's as Shakespeare, as well as, Tom Stoppard said. They all they're all we have to go on. So I would say that I'm terrible at scrabble. I'm just embarrassingly awful. An hour and I spell "the".

Jason Raia:

Right. Just you just don't have the recall for the big

Steve Edenbo:

I think it's a different side of the brain. You use words for meaning. These words aren't math. Yeah. And that's just not -

Jason Raia:

Yeah it's not that you don't know the words.

Steve Edenbo:

It's just that I'm off. It's horrible. It's just-

Jason Raia:

If you could meet one just one historical person, who would it be?

Steve Edenbo:

Again, I'm not gonna say Jefferson, but not because I'm self-recusing because I wouldn't learn anything important about him. I'd be charmed for an entire dinner we had together. And by the end, I'd realized I'd learned nothing about him because he was good at that.

Jason Raia:

But at least he'd be drunk on really good French wine.

Steve Edenbo:

I would get to drink some wine. I can't ever I would say, though, maybe one of his granddaughters, like Cornelia or Ellen or because what now the, National Archives and with ICJS and these other institutions are doing with it with the founders online and with the Jefferson Papers is the Jefferson Papers are beginning to go through The letters that his granddaughters would write to each other when he would bring one to Poplar Forest, another one stay at Monticello, and they would spy on grandpapa.

Jason Raia:

Oh.

Steve Edenbo:

And they would gossip about him. They spilled the beans out where you can learn you're starting to learn things about him that he kept deep undercover about his feelings. Like, John Adams would write about all that stuff.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Steve Edenbo:

And so I maybe this is predicated on they would actually talk to me.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Steve Edenbo:

I wouldn't be a stranger. They'd open up.

Jason Raia:

No. No. Absolutely.

Steve Edenbo:

I think they'd spill the beans, and I'd learn a lot of nuance and an insight about Jefferson that he would never want me to know but they would say, o00, let me tell you, and they're in.

Jason Raia:

Oh, that's fascinating. I love it. Okay. Final question, bourbon or scotch?

Steve Edenbo:

You know, a couple years ago, I would have said scotch without a blink. But for some reason over the last few years, for reasons of their own, people have been giving me bottles of the various iterations of Jefferson's Kentucky Bourbon.

Jason Raia:

Yep.

Steve Edenbo:

No idea why. They just do. I don't know. And I'm so I'm it's a cliché, but I'm developing a taste for it. So now going more in the direction of bourbon.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Jefferson's is definitely a great one.

Steve Edenbo:

Yeah.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Well, thanks to our guest, Steve Edenbo. Can't wait to have you back.

Steve Edenbo:

Thank you so much for having me.

Jason Raia:

I also wanna thank our producers, Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen, and a special shout out to friend of the pod, Bill Franz for his art design. Special thanks to longtime Freedoms Foundation AHT historic interpreter, Bob Gleason, for his contributions to the intro music. And most of all, I want to thank all of you, our listeners. Please subscribe, follow, rate, and review *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to your podcasts, and please tell your friends. If you wanna learn more about Freedoms Foundation, you can visit us at www.freedomsfoundation.org and follow us on social media or email us gwshpodcast@gmail.com with your comments, questions, or suggestions. Have a great week!