

Six

*I think our governments will remain
virtuous for many centuries, as long
as they remain chiefly agricultural.*

*This will be as long as there shall be
vacant lands in any part of America.*

— Thomas Jefferson



Roots of Democracy

TOWN AND COUNTRY

TOWN AND COUNTRY: Roots of Democracy

I began my quest to photograph democracy at the St. Louis Gateway Arch overlooking the Mighty Mississippi. Here on the banks of the river separating America into East and West, I contemplated my future. This is where Lewis and Clark began and ended their journey. For them, this was a window facing west. They traveled by foot, horseback and canoe, mapping a route across a continent.

My goal was different, as would be my route. I took old Route 66 past the urban high-rises and I kept driving until I ran out of city. Then I bumped into the suburbs, passing shopping centers that in my youth had been farmland. Only miles later, a barn popped up, then a tractor, and pretty soon a corn silo appeared on the western horizon behind the setting sun. As I drove by my past and into my future, with farms to the north, south and west of me, I reflected on how it was out of farmland that all America had come. It is in this soil that we find the roots of our democracy, roots that spread and fed our cities and small towns.

Thomas Jefferson, America's first Secretary of State and Alexander Hamilton, America's first Secretary of the Treasury, disagreed about almost everything. Most significant in their opposing beliefs were their thoughts on where the citizenry should live. Jefferson believed America should continue to be a nation of farmers living in the countryside, just as he did. Hamilton envisioned Americans living in metropolitan cities like New York, just as he did. President Washington became the reluctant referee between these competing American visions.

In 1776 the numbers were on Jefferson's side; 98% of our inhabitants were farmers and only 2% of Americans were urban dwellers.



(Hamilton's) imagination was conjuring up a futuristic industrial city, a microcosm of the manufacturing society that he envisioned to counter Jefferson's nation of citizen-farmers. At a time when nineteen of twenty Americans tilled the soil, Hamilton feared that if America remained purely agrarian, it would be relegated to eternally subordinate status vis-à-vis European societies.

— Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*

The big cities, with the manufacturing and financial jobs Hamilton foresaw, did not yet exist. But over time it was Hamilton's vision of America that became our reality. Jefferson's dream of an agrarian Eden was eventually swallowed up by Hamilton's image of big business and big banks. Hamilton is actually the uncelebrated captain of capitalism, and even Adam Smith might crown him the architect of modern America.

them. If their conflict were cast as a Vegas boxing match, it would be announced something like this: "In this corner we have the author of the Declaration of Independence and the last man of the Agricultural Age, and in the other corner, we have the inventor of American capitalism and the first man of the Industrial Age. May the best man win!" Now that's a match I'd pay big money to see.

The legendary dispute between Jefferson and Hamilton was a perpetual competition of ideas. The disdain these men had for each other was as large as the statues that commemorate

Thomas Jefferson



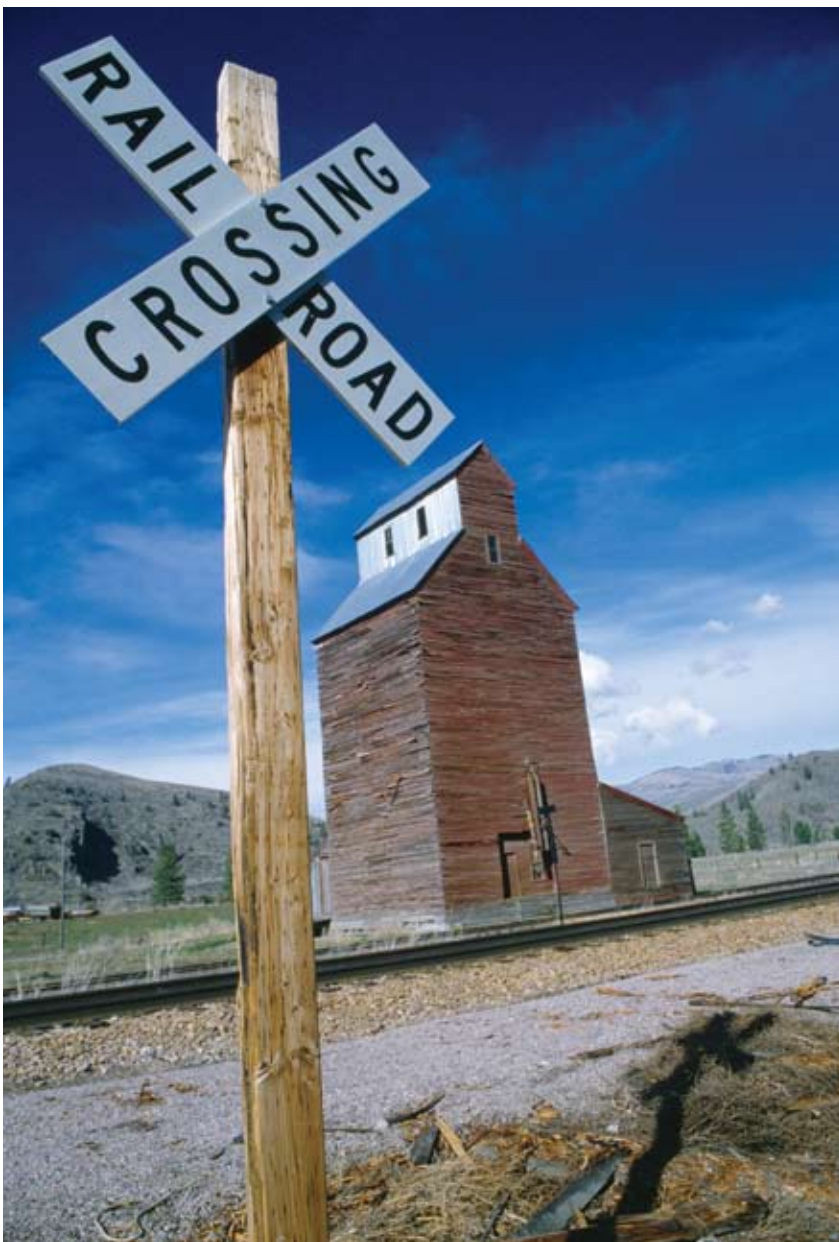
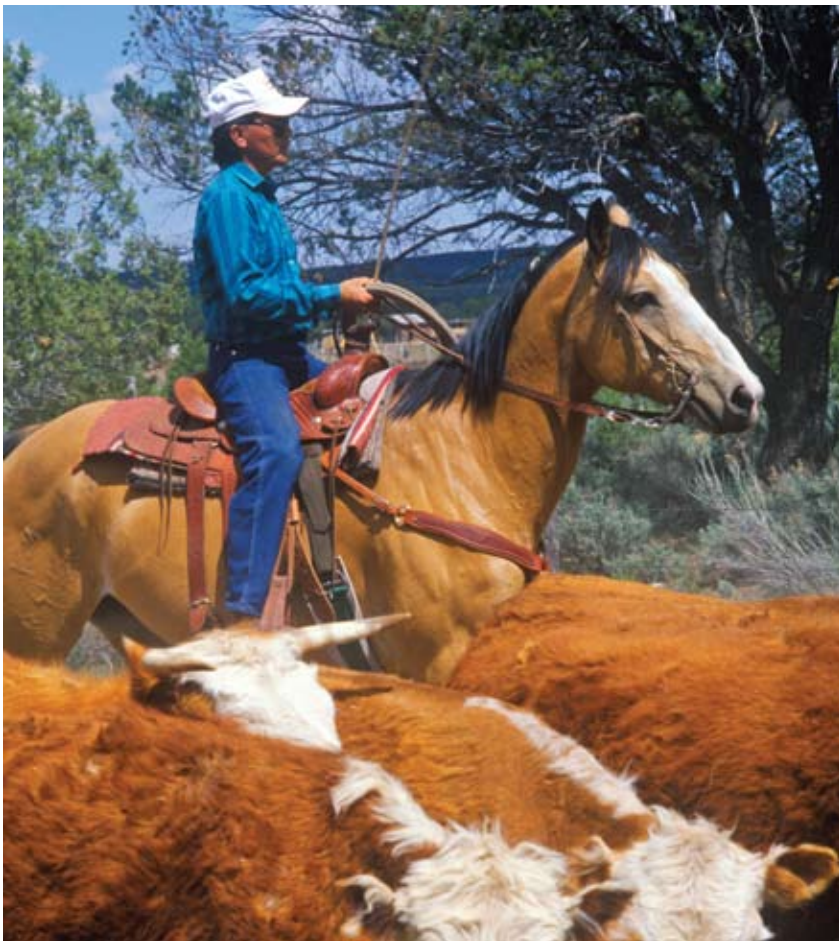
Alexander Hamilton

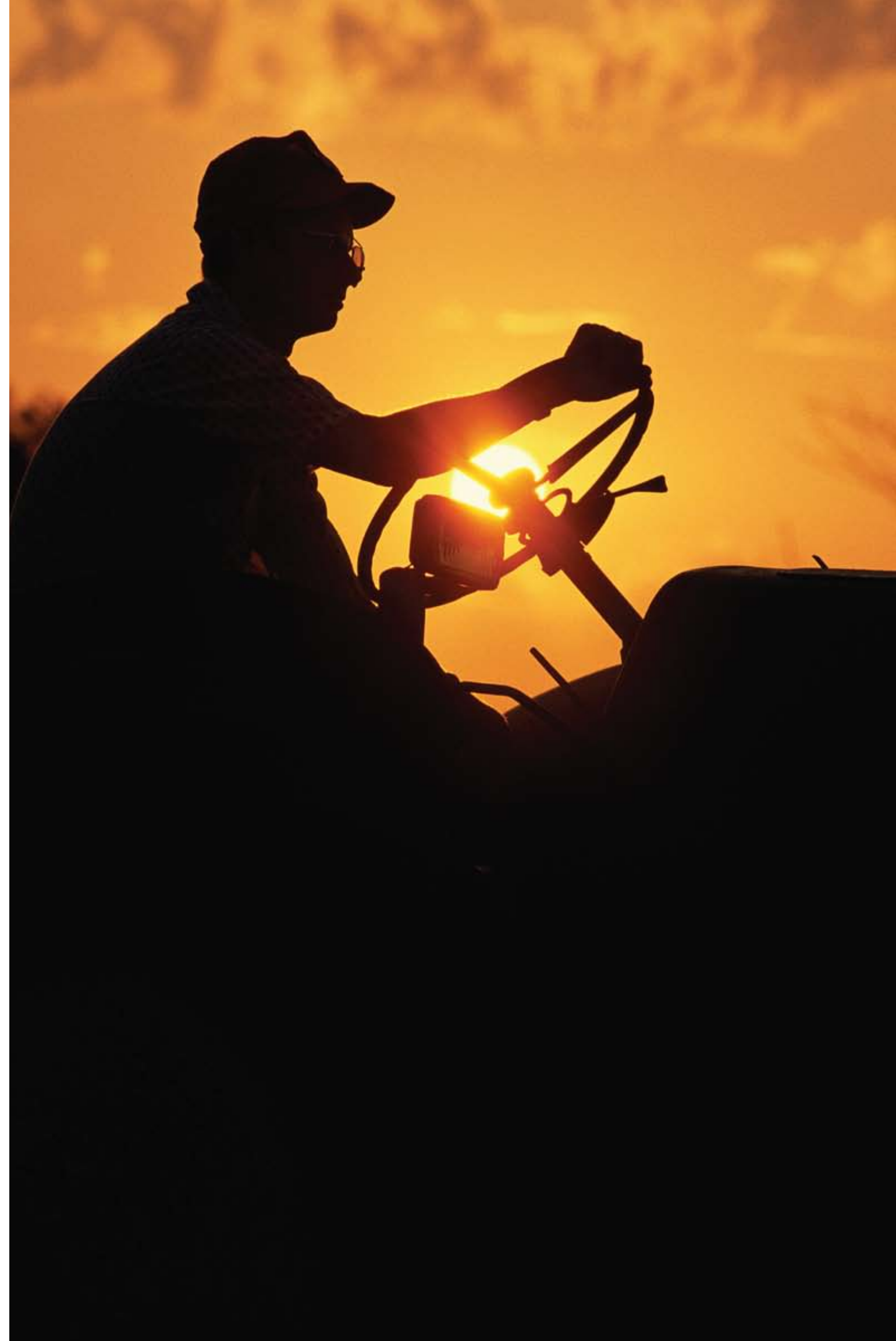


In the conflicting visions of these two men, we can find the same voices behind many of today's political and cultural debates: Democrat versus Republican, federal government versus states' rights and farmer versus businessman. Though many consider Jefferson to be our first futurist, more appropriately the title belongs to Hamilton, as his ideas became the seed corn for the 20th and 21st centuries.

Hamilton's vision may have been victorious, and farm life forever changed, but our farms have not disappeared. In a reversal of statistics, today it takes less than 2% of our citizens to feed the other 98%, more than 300 million of us! Both Jefferson and Hamilton would be staggered by that news. Although we may live in the world that Hamilton envisioned, we remain Jefferson's people; farmers at heart, if not by trade.







I am a farmer settled, after a variety of fortunes near the banks of the river Delaware, in the province of Pennsylvania. I received a liberal education and have been engaged in the busy scenes of life, but am now convinced, that a man may be as happy without bustle as with it. My farm is small, my servants are few and good, I have a little money at interest, I wish for no more, my employment in my own affairs is easy, and with a contented, grateful mind, undisturbed by worldly hopes or fears relating to myself, I am completing the number of days allotted to me by divine goodness.

— John Dickinson



MAIN STREET, USA



FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, St. Louis was surrounded by a patchwork quilt of farms. Then a veritable garden of villages sprang from the Mississippi topsoil, towns with names like Kirkwood, Manchester and Lindbergh. Each likely had its own high school and barbershop, and most assuredly each had its own Main Street. Disneyland's Main Street USA was actually inspired by Walt Disney's hometown in Marceline, Missouri.

One of St. Louis' suburbs is Webster Groves and that was my hometown. As a kid, I grew up thinking all towns were like Webster, with streets named after its trees: Elm, Oak and Spruce. Webster was a place where the local stores were only that, local. The storefronts had colorful awnings, which produced all the

shade we needed on a hot summer day. We didn't lock our homes or chain our bikes, and our dogs had free rein to explore the lawns and sidewalks.

A rite of passage in Webster was to get your driver's license on your 16th birthday and then cruise down Lockwood Boulevard, our Main Street, with as many friends as you could jam into your car. In 1965 (with little help from me), my high school class ranked #1 in the U.S. for our S.A.T. scores. This feat attracted CBS, which unofficially anointed Webster Groves "Main Street USA." They even made a documentary called *16 in Webster Groves*. It aired nationwide in living color. I was featured in the barbershop scene getting a Beatle haircut. Ironically, my TV fame didn't prevent me from going bald by 28!

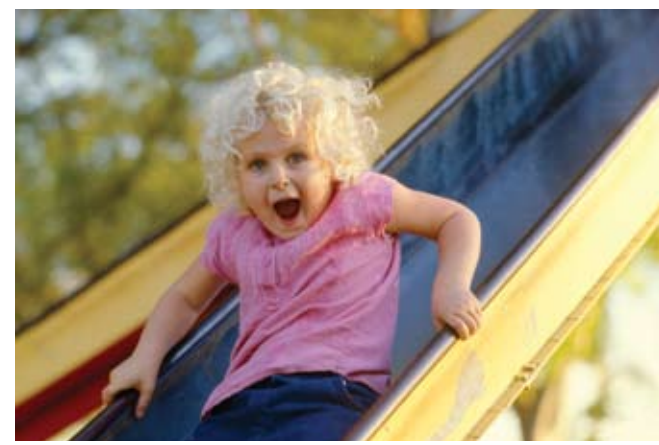


America's small towns are the direct outgrowth of democracy. Unlike the European system of aristocracy and feudal land ownership, our Constitution guaranteed us property rights and established private property as the bedrock of American values. The Common Man now possessed the legal right to buy a farm, a business, a home or even a second home. If we couldn't build a castle from scratch, at least we could buy a little bungalow and call it our own. Washington, Jefferson and Madison, all large landowners, would certainly marvel that in these modern times, two out of three American adults own their own home.

Though later in life I spent many years in Wash-

ington, D.C., Los Angeles and New York, it's not surprising that when I began photographing democracy, I gravitated to shooting small towns with brightly colored awnings, village greens and locally owned restaurants that served home-cooked meals. Whether I was in New Hampshire, Montana or Louisiana, I searched for homes surrounded by white picket fences on streets named for the trees that lined them. Though it's been said that one can never go back home and that the essence of life is moving forward, over the years I've found myself drawn back to those small towns that feel like home. In fact, many of the photos I've published over the years have been inspired by the Main Street of my youth.







*"So I'm going to have a copy of this play put in that cornerstone
so that a thousand years from now people will know a few simple facts about us.
This is the way we were — in our growing up, in our marrying, in our living and in our dying."*

Our Town, Thornton Wilder

