

Jefferson Takes on Buffon: The Polemic on American Animals in *Notes on the State of Virginia*
By Gordon M. Sayre

In Query 6 of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson's only published book, he made a spirited argument against the theories of the leading French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, who believed the Americas had fewer species and smaller animals than in the Old World. Many historians and biographers have championed Jefferson's patriotic defense of American nature, but few have recognized how closely Jefferson relied on Buffon even as he tried to refute his theories. This article examines the composition of *NSV*'s Query 6 based on the archived manuscript and notes held at the Massachusetts Historical Society, as well as the French translation published in Paris in 1786. It includes an annotated version of one of Jefferson's several tables of American animals, cross-referencing it to sources in Buffon and to modern species names. Whereas many assume that Jefferson got the better of Buffon, in fact the latter's evidence for a decline in the size of large quadruped species was accurate. Jefferson's paper about an animal he called the megalonyx, which he read to the American Philosophical Society in 1797, revisited the debate, added high-quality engravings of fossil bones, and—because Jefferson argued that the mammoth and the megalonyx still lived in North America—reiterated his difficulties in taking on Buffon.