Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: A Brief Account

The claim that Thomas Jefferson fathered children with Sally Hemings, a slave at Monticello, entered the public arena during Jefferson's first term as president, and it has remained a subject of discussion and disagreement for two centuries. Based on documentary, scientific, statistical, and oral history evidence, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation (TJF) Research Committee Report on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings (http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/report-research-committee-thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings) (January 2000) remains the most comprehensive analysis of this historical topic. Ten years later, TJF and most historians believe that, years after his wife's death, Thomas Jefferson was the father of the six children of Sally Hemings mentioned in Jefferson's records, including Beverly, Harriet, Madison, and Eston Hemings.

Historical Background

In September 1802, political journalist James T. Callender (http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/james-callender), a disaffected former ally of Jefferson, wrote in a Richmond newspaper that Jefferson had for many years "kept, as his concubine, one of his own slaves." "Her name is Sally," Callender continued, adding that Jefferson had "several children" by her.

Although there had been rumors of a sexual relationship between Jefferson and an enslaved woman before 1802, Callender's article spread the story widely. It was taken up by Jefferson's Federalist opponents and was published in many newspapers during the remainder of Jefferson's presidency.

Jefferson's policy was to offer no public response to personal attacks, and he apparently made no explicit public or private comment on this question (although a private letter of 1805 has been interpreted by some individuals as a denial of the story). Sally Hemings left no known accounts.

Jefferson's daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph (http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/martha-jefferson-randolph) privately denied the published reports. Two of her children, Ellen Randolph Coolidge (http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/ellen-wayles-randolph-coolidge) and Thomas Jefferson Randolph (http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/thomas-jefferson-randolph), maintained many years later that such a liaison was not possible, on both moral and practical grounds. They also stated that Jefferson's nephews Peter and Samuel Carr were the fathers of the light-skinned Monticello slaves some thought to be Jefferson's children because they resembled him.

The Jefferson-Hemings story was sustained through the 19th century by Northern
abolitionists, British critics of American democracy, and others. Its vitality among the American population at large was recorded by European travelers of the time. Through the 20th century, some historians accepted the possibility of a Jefferson-Hemings connection and a few gave it credence, but most Jefferson scholars found the case for such a relationship unpersuasive.

Over the years, however, belief in a Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings relationship was perpetuated in private. Two of her children--Madison and Eston--indicated that Jefferson was their father, and this belief has been perpetuated in the oral histories of generations of their descendants as an important family truth.

**DNA Evidence and Response**

The results of DNA tests conducted by Dr. Eugene Foster and a team of geneticists in 1998 challenged the view that the Jefferson-Hemings relationship could be neither refuted nor substantiated. The study--which tested Y-chromosomal DNA samples from male-line descendants of Field Jefferson (Thomas Jefferson's uncle), John Carr (grandfather of Jefferson's Carr nephews), Eston Hemings, and Thomas Woodson--indicated a genetic link between the Jefferson and Hemings descendants. The results of the study established that an individual carrying the male Jefferson Y chromosome fathered Eston Hemings (born 1808), the last known child born to Sally Hemings. There were approximately 25 adult male Jeffersons who carried this chromosome living in Virginia at that time, and a few of them are known to have visited Monticello. The study's authors, however, said "the simplest and most probable" conclusion was that Thomas Jefferson had fathered Eston Hemings.

The DNA testing found no genetic link between the Hemings and Carr descendants, refuting Jefferson's grandchildren's assertion that his Carr nephews fathered Sally Hemings's children. Additionally, the DNA study found no link between the descendants of Field Jefferson and Thomas Woodson (1790-1879), whose family members have long held that he was the first son of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Madison Hemings, Sally's second-youngest son, said in 1873 that his mother had been pregnant with Jefferson's child (who, he said, lived "but a short time") when she returned from France in 1789. There is no indication in Jefferson's records of a child born to Hemings before 1795, and there are no known documents to support that Thomas Woodson was Hemings's first child.

Shortly after the DNA test results were released in November 1998, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation formed a research committee consisting of nine members of the foundation staff,
including four with Ph.D.s. In January 2000, the committee reported that the weight of all known evidence—from the DNA study, original documents, written and oral historical accounts, and statistical data—indicated a high probability that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Eston Hemings, and that he was likely the father of all six of Sally Hemings's children listed in Monticello records—Harriet (born 1795; died in infancy); Beverly (born 1798); an unnamed daughter (born 1799; died in infancy); Harriet (born 1801); Madison (born 1805); and Eston (born 1808).

Since then, a committee commissioned by the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society, after reviewing essentially the same material, reached different conclusions, namely that Sally Hemings was only a minor figure in Thomas Jefferson's life and that it is very unlikely he fathered any of her children. This committee also suggested in its report, issued in April 2001 and revised in 2011, that Jefferson's younger brother Randolph (1755-1815) was more likely the father of at least some of Sally Hemings's children.

From the Historical Record

The following summarizes what is known about Sally Hemings and her family.

- Sally Hemings (1773-1835) was a slave at Monticello; she lived in Paris with Jefferson and two of his daughters from 1787 to 1789; and she had at least six children.

- Sally Hemings's duties included being a nursemaid-companion to Thomas Jefferson's daughter Maria (ca. 1784-1787), lady's maid to daughters Martha (http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/martha-jefferson-randolph) and Maria (1787-1797), and chambermaid and seamstress (1790s-1827).

- There are no known images of Sally Hemings and only four known descriptions of her appearance or demeanor (http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/appendix-h-sally-hemings-and-her-children).

- Sally Hemings left no known written accounts. It is not known if she was literate.

- In the few scattered references to Sally Hemings in Thomas Jefferson's records and correspondence, there is nothing to distinguish her from other members of her family.

- Thomas Jefferson was at Monticello at the likely conception times of Sally Hemings's six known children. There are no records suggesting that she was elsewhere at these times, or records of any births at times that would exclude Jefferson paternity.

- There are no indications in contemporary accounts by people familiar with Monticello that Sally Hemings's children had different fathers.
• Sally Hemings's children were light-skinned, and three of them (daughter Harriet and sons Beverly and Eston) lived as members of white society as adults.

• According to contemporary accounts, some of Sally Hemings's children strongly resembled Thomas Jefferson.

• Thomas Jefferson freed all of Sally Hemings's children: Beverly and Harriet were allowed to leave Monticello in 1822; Madison and Eston were released in Jefferson's 1826 will. Jefferson gave freedom to no other nuclear slave family.

• Thomas Jefferson did not free Sally Hemings. She was permitted to leave Monticello by his daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph not long after Jefferson's death in 1826, and went to live with her sons Madison and Eston in Charlottesville.

• Several people close to Thomas Jefferson or the Monticello community believed that he was the father of Sally Hemings's children.

• Eston Hemings changed his name to Eston Hemings Jefferson in 1852.

• Madison Hemings stated in 1873 that he and his siblings Beverly, Harriet, and Eston were Thomas Jefferson's children.

• The descendants of Madison Hemings who have lived as African-Americans have passed a family history of descent from Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings down through the generations.

• Eston Hemings's descendants, who have lived as whites, have passed down a family history of being related to Thomas Jefferson. In the 1940s, family members changed this history to state that an uncle of Jefferson's, rather than Jefferson himself, was their ancestor.

According to Madison Hemings, Sally's mother Elizabeth Hemings (1735-1807) was the daughter of an African woman and an English sea captain. By Madison Hemings's and other accounts, Sally Hemings and some of her siblings were the children of John Wayles, Thomas Jefferson's father-in-law, making her the half-sister of Jefferson's wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson (1748-1782). Elizabeth Hemings and her children lived at John Wayles' plantation during his lifetime.

Questions remain about the nature of the relationship that existed between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings; whether she had a child at Monticello shortly after they returned from France in 1789; and whether there is anything to connect Jefferson, Hemings, and Thomas
Woodson.

To learn more, consult the readings, some with differing points of view, listed here.

**RELATED RESOURCES**

- [Sally Hemings](http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/sally-hemings) (a brief biography)

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Primary Accounts:*


*Secondary Accounts:*


TAG THIS
Well said, Patty49er. The real question is "should it even matter?" No. it should not. However, the old saying "in a hundred years from now, nobody is going to care anyway" should read "in a hundred years from now, let it rest, for God sake".

White_Lion (site/blog-and-community/users/dvandercreek) – Student
March 9, 2012, 11:16 am

I did not expect that he would pull the same idiotic move like Alexander Hamilton did by publishing it in the newspaper. Gentlemen did not do that of course his friends defended him that is how it was done.
http://eyler.freeservers.com/JeffPers/jefpnotg.htm

This last result of the DNA tests has devastating results for those who claim that Thomas Jefferson began a 38-year affair with Sally Hemings in 1787 when Sally accompanied his daughter to Paris. According to Annette Gordon-Reed in her recent book, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy, Sally was pregnant with her son, Thomas (Hemings) Woodson, when she returned with Jefferson and his daughters in 1789, and the child was born shortly after her arrival back in the States. But the DNA tests prove conclusively that this child was NOT fathered by Jefferson! Moreover, according to Ms. Gordon-Reed, Sally did not want to leave Paris and return to the U. S. with Jefferson!

In the article reporting on the DNA test results from the Nov. 5 issue of the journal Nature, page 27, is the following statement:
"Four of the five male-line descendants of Thomas Woodson shared a haplotype (with one MSY1 variant) that was not similar to the Y chromosome of Field Jefferson but was characteristic of Europeans. The fifth Woodson descendant had an entirely different haplotype, most often seen in sub-Saharan Africans, which indicates illegitimacy in the line after individual W42 [i.e., after the 4th generation]."

Therefore, the DNA tests do indeed prove conclusively that Jefferson did NOT father Sally's child born after her return from France, and that this child's Y
chromosome was unquestionably of the EUROPEAN, not the African variety. In fact, the DNA tests prove this more surely than they do that Sally's son, Eston, was fathered by Thomas Jefferson, since any of about twelve or more descendants of Field Jefferson could have been the father and have provided Eston with the Jeffersonian Y chromosome.

It takes very little insight to figure out from these facts what was actually going on. Having a child by another man, and resisting the return to the U.S. with one's reputed "lover," is hardly suggestive of the beginning of a love affair. Rather, it is reasonable to infer from this evidence that Sally had an affair in France, but not with Thomas Jefferson. She had an affair with someone who lived there, and she wanted to stay there with her new-found lover.

It should also be noted that after Sally returned to Monticello and gave birth to her first child, there was a period of more than five years before she gave birth to her second child. If, indeed, she and Thomas Jefferson were having a love affair that began in France, this absence of births at the beginning of the alleged affair, and a recommencement at a much later date, would be quite puzzling and without explanation. Rather than an affair with Jefferson, it suggests that the affair was with someone in France that Sally had left behind when she returned to the United States, and that the absence of births was because her lover was no longer present.

According to Gordon-Reed, Thomas Jefferson was only able to persuade Sally to return with him by promising her that her child would be granted freedom when the child reached age twenty-one. This evidence, and its clear implications that there was no "affair" between Sally and TJ, has been completely ignored. William Safire even made the ridiculous statement in a syndicated column that the much maligned James Callender, the muck-raker who started the accusations in 1802, was wrong then, but was actually right, because DNA indicates Jefferson was the father of a child born six years later!

Without a doubt, Thomas Jefferson returning from France with a young slave girl who was pregnant, raised a lot of eyebrows. And, no doubt, these suspicions and the gossip they generated were the source of the Callender accusations. But the recent DNA evidence has demonstrated that these accusations were false. Jefferson, however, did not have the benefit of DNA tests, and almost never attempted to defend himself against gossip at any time -- certainly not in the public press. As a result, the accusations gained some level of currency, and have persisted to this day.

The "Jefferson-Hemming Matter" tells us as surely as any disclosure that no small amount of what a good many who pass for "scholars" inflict on the public is not history at all but merely the most transparent political propaganda. I see that you are using your Saul Alanski text book. Calling someone racist or implying such: Is
the Progressive 'get out of logic free card.

I love history but it has to be based on facts not fiction or speculation. You can not claim paternity on a man who's DNA you do not have. There is no evidence. Period.

For those of you who have not studied French culture at the time of Jefferson the ideas of courtly love and flirting outrageously was something everyone just did even the rotund Franklin flirted.

Are you also implying there should be some type of "white guilt" associated with the slave trade of the 1600-1800?

I see no reason for it MY ancestors were involved in that trade as slaves as were many other AMERICANS. If you have IRISH ancestry you were probably in a British slave ship. The history they NEVER teach you is that only 6% of the slaves brought to America were black 2/3 of the labor were white and the slaves ships of Britain were built not for black slaves but for ridding the Isles of the accursed Irish. Most of the black slave trade went to south America and to the West Indies for the sugar trade of the Portuguese, Spanish, French and only later the Brits. See BBC SCOTLAND video Barbado'ed

http://www.veoh.com/watch/v1835859553zDf2sP?h1=Barbado%27ed%3A+Scotland%27s+Sugar+Slaves

Before there was a Botany Bay in Australia there was Jamestown in Virginia. Google Oliver Cromwell and Irish slave trade. They stole children in Ireland and Scotland That's were we get the words spirited away and Kid Nabbed= kidnapped from Aberdeen Scotland almost the whole town was involved in stealing children. The Irish, probably the people with the most tragic history of all, because it has been forgotten.

The Irish Slave trade and genocide under Oliver Cromwell.
Books:
To Hell or Barbados
The Irish Slaves
White Cargo

http://www.raceandhistory.com/cgi-bin/forum/webbbs_config.pl/noframes/re... (http://www.raceandhistory.com/cgi-bin/forum/webbbs_config.pl/noframes/read/1638)

http://www.scoilgaeilge.org/academics/slaves.htm
(http://www.scoilgaeilge.org/academics/slaves.htm)
Not an easy task for staff at Monticello but it would appear they have established a balanced approach based on the information available. Obviously, a great man in the history of your nation and the entire world.
In Canada, we tend to revile all revolutionaries and staunch Loyalists would say very nasty things about 'slave-raping, Indian exterminating, Frenchified, Rebels' like Jefferson.
Those who vilify the man are ignoring the contributions of Jefferson in the advancement of democracy, not only in the U.S. but around the planet. Those who deify the man are ignoring the complex society he lived in and good old-fashioned human nature.
Thank you for your work and dedication.

J Hill – Teacher
October 20, 2011, 10:43 am

I would encourage you to update this page by posting pages 231-235 of The Real Thomas Jefferson. The book provides evidence that Sally Hemmings was the mistress of Jefferson's nephew, Peter Carr. This relationship was well known at Monticello. Carr being related to Jefferson would have familial DNA.

SGW – Jefferson/Monticello Enthusiast
September 29, 2011, 3:01 pm

Then I probably would NEVER go on a tour given by you.
Jefferson fought that lie while he was alive and people around him knew that was a lie as well.
There is absolutely no evidence that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings ever were lovers, that based on genetic evidence, any one of at least 25 men on Jefferson’s side of the family may have fathered one or more of Hemings’ children (Jefferson family historian Herbert Barger argues persuasively that Jefferson’s brother, Randolph, was Hemings’ lover.), and that the Jefferson paternity story was born as the fabrication of a disappointed office seeker (James Thomson Callender) with a history of libeling the Founding Fathers. Truscott and Staples resorted instead to insinuating that only a racist would deny the story.
Typical.
There is also a diary of man who worked for Jefferson free on line. Jefferson at Monticello: The Private Life of Thomas Jefferson From Entirely New Materials. Freeport

http://www.archive.org/details/jeffersonatmont00conggoog
(The http://www.archive.org/details/jeffersonatmont00conggoog)

The fact you not a historian but a liberal is showing.
gatekeeper96740 (/site/blog-and-community/users/1678401109facebook) – Jefferson/Monticello Enthusiast
September 15, 2011, 10:51 pm

Actually, Jefferson never "fought that lie." He never responded to it. He let others do the talking for him. It didn't seem to mess with his political aspirations too much. I find it interesting that you don't want to entertain the idea that Jefferson could be the father of Hemings' children when that was common practice among slaveholders. Why would Jefferson be any different than his neighbors? He was only forty-six when his wife died, plus she made him promise not to remarry (not cool). This seems like a decent compromise and it didn't break any sort of moral code of the South. I find it interesting that people don't want to see their heroes as humans with human frailties and character flaws. I think it makes them more interesting and as a history teacher, much more interesting to teach about. Yes, those of us who teach or study history know about Callender--Jefferson lied about having financed Callender's anti-federalist pamphleteering before he was arrested. And we also know about Callender's accusations against Jefferson, which included fathering Sally's children. But imagine Jefferson's dilemma while in Paris--he already had a flirtation going on with a French woman and then there's a sweet young thing that's practically Caucasian right under his nose. What's a guy to do? I don't buy that he remained celibate for the rest of his life; that's just not realistic. So what if he fathered children with a partly black woman? Does that negate anything he's done for our country? Of course not. And since when has even THIS become a political issue? Have even issues of historical interest become topics for conservatives and liberals to argue over? How pathetic is that?
patty49er (/site/blog-and-community/users/patty49er) – Teacher
September 24, 2011, 8:51 pm

Since history is deliberately distorted by liberal professors and facts are left out, yes it is something to argue about.
Do you also teach about the Irish slave trade that preceded the black slave
trade or do you leave that out? Google Oliver Cromwell and the Irish slave trade. I know not one teacher or professor ever mentioned it. I only discovered it while doing Ancestry.com looking for Irish relatives.

http://www.rhettaakamatsu.com/irishslaves.htm

http://www.veoh.com/watch/v1835859553zDf2sP?h1=Barbado%27ed%3A+Scotland%27s+Sugar+Slaves

I have no problem believing that Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings children. I think it is possible (and likely) and wouldn't be surprised if it was ever proven (which it hasn't been and never will be)

My problem is the continuing stance by many historians who speak of this as though it has been proven without a doubt and that Jefferson is certainly the father of her children. The "evidence" should be presented and when done the answer from historians to the question should be the same answer they give on thousands of historical topics...."We really don't know."

Not even the DNA test that people constantly reference is 100% proof of anything. It certainly causes me to pause and lean a little towards the "Yes he did" side of things, but there is enough doubt (Randolph Jefferson is just as likely a "candidate") for me to refuse to take a stance one way or the other.

It's a fascinating mystery and will be a contentious issue for the rest of human history.

So interesting...I also have to remind myself that upon her deathbed, Martha Jefferson made TJ promise her never to remarry--a practice that was common for widowers at the time, especially one as eligible at TJ. He obviously never did, but it is reasonable to think he would never form feelings (of any nature) for another woman? "The Hemmings of Monticello" by A. Gordon-Reed is another great source on the family and this story.
Whenever I’m giving a tour in the house, I will ask my group, "Is the name Sally Hemings familiar to you?" Inevitably, there is a mixed reaction - some nods, some startled looks ("Is she really going to talk about Sally Hemings?"), and some curious stares. Regardless, all eyes look at me a bit more intently for what’s to come next. I state that most historians believe that Jefferson - years after his wife's death - was the father of his enslaved maid's many children. What most visitors want to know next is the character of that relationship. Then I have to give the hardest answer a guide anywhere must give: "We don't know." The Thomas Jefferson Foundation website has a number of primary and secondary resources to help those interested in learning more about the relationship discover what evidence exists, and how historians have used documents and scientific evidence over time to talk about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.