

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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The Jefferson–Hemings Controversy

A Survey of Recent Articles

The persuasive scientific evidence in the British journal *Nature* (Nov. 5, 1998) that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one child by his slave Sally Hemings is likely not to end debate about the character of this American demigod but only to carry it to a new level—beyond the reach of DNA testing.

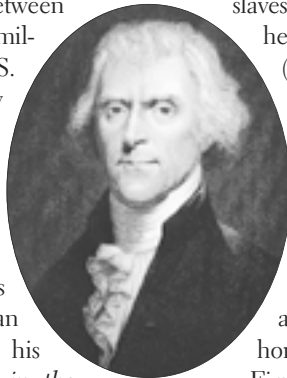
Jefferson's character has come under intense scrutiny in recent decades. Earlier in this century, historians looked upon American history as a titanic struggle between Jeffersonian democrats and Hamiltonian aristocrats, noted Peter S. Onuf, a historian at the University of Virginia, writing in the *William and Mary Quarterly* (Oct. 1993). But this neat scheme was thrown into confusion by the New Deal's affirmative use of government, which New Dealers portrayed as the employment of Hamiltonian means for Jeffersonian ends. In his 1960 book *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, Merrill Peterson wrote that scholars were turning away from the partisan Jefferson to a new image, that of "the civilized man," with his many diverse interests and achievements. But even as Jefferson earned such admiring attention, other historians began to focus on the glaring discrepancy between his idealistic pronouncements and his behavior as a slaveowner.

"How could the man who wrote that 'All men are created equal' own slaves? This, in essence, is the question . . . that contemporary Americans find most vexing about him," observed Douglas L. Wilson, director of the International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello, in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Nov. 1992). In his view, asking the question that way

"reflects the pervasive presentism of our time." The question should be: "How did a man who was born into a slave holding society, whose family and admired friends owned slaves, who inherited a fortune that was dependent on slaves and slave labor, decide at an early age that slavery was morally wrong and forcefully declare that it ought to be abolished?"

But while the argument against "presentism" seems to put Jefferson's ownership of slaves in perspective, the contention that he had children by Sally Hemings (whose father was probably John Wayles, Jefferson's father-in-law) may be a different matter. "If he did take advantage of Hemings and father her children over a period of 20 years," Wilson argued in his 1992 essay, "he was acting completely out of character and violating his own standards of honor and decency."

First publicly aired in 1802 by James Callender, a scandal-mongering journalist with a grudge against Jefferson, the allegation about his relationship with his young slave was like "a tin can tied to Jefferson's reputation that has continued to rattle through the ages," historian Joseph J. Ellis observed in his National Book Award-winning *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (1997). The rattle grew very loud in 1974, when Fawn M. Brodie's best-selling psychohistory, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, appeared. She accepted the truth of the allegation, but put it in a benign light: it was "not scandalous debauchery with an innocent slave victim, but rather a serious passion that brought Jefferson and the slave woman much private happiness over a period lasting 38 years."



Though Brodie's interpretation proved popular, inspiring several novels as well as a movie, most historians were unpersuaded. Among scholars, particularly Jefferson specialists, said Ellis in his book, "there seems a clear consensus that the story is almost certainly not true." He called the likelihood of a liaison "remote."

Now, thanks to the inspired genetic sleuthing of Eugene A. Foster, a retired professor of pathology at the University of Virginia, and his British colleagues, the evidence is clear that Jefferson was the father of at least Hemings's last son, Eston, born in 1808. Ellis, adroitly adapting to this turn of events, appears with a co-author, geneticist Eric S. Lander, in the *Nature* issue and alone in *U.S. News & World Report* (Nov. 9, 1998) to embrace the new truth. "Within the scholarly world," he writes, "the acceptance of a Jefferson-Hemings liaison had been gaining ground over recent years. Now that it is proven beyond any reasonable doubt, the net effect is to reinforce the critical picture of Jefferson as an inherently elusive and deeply duplicitous character."

Although freelance writer Christopher Shea takes Ellis to task in the on-line magazine *Salon* (www.salonmagazine.com) for fancy footwork, the historian may have been right in both of his accounts of the pre-DNA scholarly consensus. But if a Jefferson-Hemings liaison "had been gaining ground," the reason, unmentioned by Ellis, is clear: Annette Gordon-Reed's devastating analysis of historians' treatment of the evidence, in her 1997 book *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*.

In an op-ed essay in the *New York Times* (Nov. 3, 1998), Gordon-Reed, a professor at New York Law School, says that the new scientific evidence "squares perfectly with overwhelming circumstantial evidence that has been available for well over a century. . . . The trouble is that the scholars who fashioned Jefferson's image were either unwilling or unable to weigh the matter objectively." In an 1873 interview, published in an Ohio newspaper, Madison Hemings said that he and three siblings were the children of Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Yet many historians, Gordon-Reed asserts, discounted his claim because of his race and status as a former slave, choosing instead to believe Jefferson's aristocratic white relatives. Indeed, Merrill Peterson, in his 1960 book, wrote that the Sally Hemings story persisted in part because of the "Negroes' pathetic wish for a little pride." The late historian Dumas

Malone, who spent more than 40 years writing his magisterial six-volume biography of Jefferson, dismissed the possibility of a "vulgar liaison" as "virtually unthinkable in a man of Jefferson's moral standards."

Ironically, noted Princeton University historian Sean Wilentz, reviewing Gordon-Reed's book and others in the *New Republic* (Mar. 10, 1997) prior to the DNA bombshell, the "most compelling evidence" of a Jefferson-Hemings liaison was assembled by Malone himself. It showed that Jefferson, who was with Hemings in Paris in 1789 but later spent only occasional stretches of time at Monticello until he finished his second presidential term in 1809, always happened to be visiting when she conceived a child. "After finishing Gordon-Reed," Wilentz said, "it is difficult to avoid thinking in terms of the probability, and not merely the possibility, of a Jefferson-Hemings liaison."

Now, in the *New Republic* (Nov. 30, 1998), with the liaison a virtual certainty, Wilentz concludes that the story "is about a slave-holding widower who, having promised his dying wife that he would never remarry, struck up a covert relationship with his wife's half-sister, of partial African descent, who was also one of his house slaves. It is the stuff of great history and great art. . . . And, though we may never know how much love, if any, Tom and Sally shared, the record shows at least an element of decency," in that at his death, Jefferson freed Hemings's children.

Yet Patricia J. Williams, a law professor at Columbia University, writing in the *Nation* (Nov. 23, 1998), questions the rush to "love." Jefferson "owned Sally Hemings," she notes. "[Let] us not project modern notions of romance upon unions born of trauma, of dependence and constraint."

Nearly a quarter-century ago, in a contemptuously dismissive review of Brodie's book in the *New York Review of Books* (Apr. 18, 1974), journalist-historian Gary Wills agreed. He judged the contention that Jefferson fathered children by Hemings "reasonable"—but not the notion that it was a romantic attachment. To Wills, writing more recently in *The New York Review of Books* (Aug. 12, 1993), it was "psychologically implausible that [Jefferson] had a love affair with one of his slaves. He tried to suppress their existence, so far as that was possible, from his consciousness." Many historians who admired him seem to have done the same with Sally Hemings. But no more.