



FRAMING *A* LEGEND

*Exposing the Distorted History of
Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*

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FOREWORD

*I*n March 2000, I was asked to chair a panel of more than a dozen scholars from across the nation for the purpose of investigating every aspect of the allegation that Thomas Jefferson had engaged in a sexual relationship with an enslaved woman named Sally Hemings over a period of several decades that had produced one or more children. Most of those involved had written or edited books that have been sold in the Monticello gift shop, and have either served as a departmental chair or held a chaired professorship at universities from California to Maine to Alabama. The invitation came from a group of Jefferson admirers who felt he had not received a “fair trial” on this issue and had formed the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society. They decided to seek an independent review by a panel of experts that came to be known as the Jefferson-Hemings Scholars Commission. We were promised (and received) complete independence, and our mission was simply to investigate the various facts and arguments thoroughly and to make a public report of our findings.

In all candor, I was surprised by the request. I had not carefully followed the issue, but I had read in the newspapers that DNA tests reported in the prestigious science journal *Nature* in late 1998 had confirmed that President Jefferson had fathered at least Sally’s youngest child Eston; and even the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation had conceded the point. As surprised as I was, I nevertheless assumed the issue was settled.

But, with some hesitation (primarily because I had recently become a single parent), I agreed to take part in the inquiry. A year later, in April 2001, we issued a lengthy report concluding with but a single, very mild, dissent, that the story is probably *false*. During our investigation we found that many of the alleged “facts” being proffered to support the story were simply not true (such as that Jefferson freed Sally Hemings and all of

her children when they turned twenty-one or in his will, and that Sally and her children received “extraordinary privileges” at Monticello), and some of the documents being relied upon had been materially altered in transcription. These are discussed in the book version of our report, titled *The Jefferson-Hemings Controversy: Report of the Scholars Commission*, which was published in 2011 by Carolina Academic Press and contains in excess of 400 pages with more than 1,400 footnotes.

Despite *Nature*’s misleading heading, “Jefferson Fathered Slave’s Last Child,” we discovered that the DNA tests had not even involved a DNA sample from *Thomas* Jefferson, and the actual conclusion of the scientists was that one of the more than two dozen Jefferson men known to have been in Virginia at the time of Eston Hemings’s conception was almost certainly Eston’s father. Based on the scientific evidence alone, the probability that Eston’s father was President Jefferson was about 4 percent. Limiting suspects to only those Jefferson males for whom there was strong reason to believe were present at Monticello at the time of Eston’s conception, the odds that the president was his father rise to about 17 percent. But if we then factor in President Jefferson’s advanced age (sixty-four, in an era where most men did not live to see forty), declining health, and character, the odds that he was Eston’s father drop precipitously.

We were not asked to identify Eston’s most likely father, but most of us felt the strongest case pointed to the president’s much younger and less cerebral brother, Randolph—or perhaps one of Randolph’s five sons, who ranged in ages from mid-teens to twenty-seven years and were also likely present at Monticello at the time of conception. There is one report that the widower Randolph fathered children by other slaves, we know he was invited to visit Monticello (to see the twin sister he dearly loved, who had just arrived for a visit) fifteen days before Eston’s most likely conception date, and an oral history taken down from a Monticello blacksmith—published years later by the University of Virginia Press under the title *Memoirs of a Monticello Slave*—asserted that when brother Randolph visited Monticello, he would “come out among black people, play the fiddle, and dance half the night.” There is no evidence that Thomas Jefferson ever socialized with his slaves.

When President Jefferson was in Washington, his daughter Martha was in charge at Monticello, and surviving family letters establish that Randolph was widely known at Monticello as “Uncle Randolph” at the time of Eston’s birth. We found it noteworthy that the oral tradition passed down by generations of Eston Hemings’s descendants was that he was *not* the child of President Jefferson, but rather of an “uncle.” So Randolph is the only potential father who fits all of the evidence.

Those were just some of the findings of our commission.

Having studied Thomas Jefferson for four decades and spent more than a dozen years focused heavily on this specific controversy, when I was approached about writing the foreword to this volume, I did not expect to learn a great deal as I began reading the manuscript. To my delight, I was profoundly mistaken. There have been several volumes written about this issue since our initial report came out a dozen years ago and was posted on the Internet. The best of them, in my view, was self-published by a remarkably able genealogist who has been studying the Jefferson family in the Charlottesville area for decades, Cynthia Harris Burton. Her book is titled *Jefferson Vindicated: Fallacies, Omissions, and Contradictions in the Hemings Genealogical Search* (2005). I highly recommend it. It is filled with the product of considerable original research and thoughtful analysis, and it reaffirms the conclusion I reached when I worked with Ms. Burton, while preparing my own “Individual Views” for the Scholars Commission report, that she is among the finest “natural scholars” I have ever encountered. I was pleased to learn that Dr. Mark Holowchak shares that view.

Rather than largely recounting the facts and arguments set forth in the 2001 Scholars Commission report, as have some other recent volumes on this issue, Dr. Holowchak applies an impressive skill set to examine some of the specific arguments made by key scholars in what might be termed the pro-paternity camp. To do this, he brings to the table a remarkable array of scholarly expertise of great relevance to this debate. With five academic degrees in psychology, philosophy, and the history and philosophy of science, he has taught and/or authored books about logic, critical reasoning, ethics, ancient philosophy, psychoanalysis, Freud, and Thomas

Jefferson as well. As readers will quickly discover, he makes excellent use of his impressive background in examining and unraveling some of the popular "scholarship" that has driven much of the modern debate on the Jefferson-Hemings issue.

For a century and a half after Thomas Jefferson's death, serious scholars tended to dismiss the accusation that America's third president was sexually involved with a slave woman—if they bothered to take note of it at all. First of all, there was widespread agreement that it was totally out of character for Jefferson. But, more important, the charge was originated by a disreputable scandal-monger named James Thomson Callender, who declared that he was seeking "ten thousand fold vengeance" after his efforts to blackmail Jefferson into appointing him to public office had failed. According to an 1802 Federalist newspaper (published shortly before Callender got around to the Sally Hemings accusation, when he was still trying to portray Jefferson as a "French agent" and/or an atheist), after being turned away by a servant Callender stood on the sidewalk in front of the White House and shouted "My lies made you president," referring to a series of libels he had published against President John Adams during the election of 1800. He demanded appointment as postmaster of Richmond in compensation, but Jefferson ignored him. Both Jefferson's political enemy Alexander Hamilton and John Adams dismissed the liaison story as false—as they were both quite familiar with Jefferson's character and Callender's notorious lies.

Things began to change when Fawn Brodie published her "psychobiography," *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, in 1974. With but undergraduate and master's degrees in English, and no apparent formal training in psychology or psychoanalysis, Brodie nevertheless sought to exhume Jefferson's inner feelings by "psychoanalyzing" his writings. An editor at her publisher, W. W. Norton, reportedly wrote in assessing the manuscript: "Doesn't [Brodie] know about making the theory fit the facts instead of trying to explain the facts to fit the theory? . . . [S]he doesn't play fair."¹

Ironically, this was the same reaction of Berkeley-educated playwright Karyn Traut (the spouse of Scholars Commission member and University of North Carolina Medical School professor Thomas Traut), who was

so moved after reading Brodie's book that she began researching a play (*Saturday's Children*) about the son "Tom," whom both Callender and Brodie contended was conceived in Paris and born after Sally Hemings returned to Monticello with the Jeffersons at the end of 1789. But, after carefully researching the topic, she concluded that Brodie had "thrown out the pieces of the puzzle that didn't fit her model."² Ms. Traut ultimately concluded that the president's brother *Randolph* Jefferson was most likely the father of Brodie's "Tom."

Speaking of "Tom"—the focus of both Callender's and Brodie's accounts—for decades, the strongest bit of evidence supporting a possible Jefferson-Hemings sexual relationship was a collection of almost-identical oral traditions passed down by descendants of former slave Thomas Woodson, who had settled in different parts of the country. Woodson had surfaced after Jefferson's death and claimed to have been the "Tom" conceived by Jefferson and Hemings in Paris upon whom Callender had premised his allegations. He claimed that, after the story was published, President Jefferson sent him down the road to be raised by the Woodson family, and several credible witnesses left testimony that Tom Woodson was a highly intelligent, tall and lean man, with erect and dignified posture, who even had a tinge of Jefferson's red in his hair to support his claim.

However, in addition to comparing DNA from a descendant of Eston Hemings with that of descendants of Thomas Jefferson's cousins and those of his nephews Peter and Samuel Carr (sons of Jefferson's sister Martha and his childhood friend Dabney Carr, who had been identified by Jefferson grandchildren as having admitted to fathering children by Sally Hemings), the scientific study reported in *Nature* also tested the DNA of six descendants of three sons of Thomas Woodson. In so doing, it conclusively eliminated Woodson as a possible son of Thomas or any other member of the Jefferson family. We have no way of knowing whether Woodson was the son of Sally Hemings, but his father could not have been Thomas Jefferson.

Returning to Fawn Brodie, her Jefferson biography was a commercial success and earned her hundreds of thousands of dollars in royalties.³ It became a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, and lay reviewers show-

ered it with praise. In contrast, reviews by serious scholars dismissed it as unserious. Perhaps no critical review was more devastating than the *New York Review of Books* appraisal by Johns Hopkins professor Garry Wills. Noting that Brodie's first bit of evidence in her "psychohistory" of Jefferson was that he had frequently written the word *mulatto* in his journal to describe soil color during a 1788 trip through Europe—which Brodie interpreted as clear evidence that he was longing for the arms of his alleged mulatto mistress (Sally Hemings) back in Paris—Wills observed that Brodie was apparently unaware of the fact that during the late eighteenth century *mulatto* was a term of art used by American geologists to identify a specific soil color. Continuing, Wills observed that during the same trip Jefferson used the words *red* or *reddish* nearly five times more frequently than *mulatto*, and wondered why Brodie missed this obvious subliminal expression of lust for his red-headed, nine-year-old daughter, Polly. Wills characterized Brodie's biography as "sub-freshman absurdity." He said: "Error on this scale, and in this detail, does not come easily. There is skill involved."⁴ Cornell history professor Michael Kammen declared in the *Washington Post*: "Mrs. Brodie does not so much humanize Jefferson as trivialize him. She is a historical gossip, incapable of distinguishing between cause and effect."⁵

Relying heavily upon Brodie's scholarship, in 1997 Professor Annette Gordon-Reed published *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, using her legal training to make a more compelling case that it was "possible" Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings began a sexual relationship while in Paris. Speculating that Jefferson "might" have felt this, and that Hemings "could" have done that, she argues that such a relationship might have occurred. Since virtually everything we know with any certainty about Sally Hemings of possible relevance to this issue could be written on a three-by-five-inch index card (which we demonstrated in the Scholars Commission report⁶), there is considerable opportunity for speculation and fantasy.

Although common sense and the limited information that has survived strongly suggest that, while in Paris, Sally Hemings resided in the Abbaye Royale de Panthemont (a Catholic boarding school across town

from Jefferson's residence that was known to have had servants quarters) with Jefferson's daughters, Professor Gordon-Reed simply assumes that she must instead have lived in Jefferson's residence. A contrary assumption would obviously have greatly undermined her premise. Why let little things like Sally's duties as the ladies' maid to Jefferson's daughters (which she acknowledges), the absence of any surviving reference to Sally by the many Americans who visited and wrote about Jefferson's Paris residence, or the existence of letters from a Paris classmate—written years later to Jefferson's daughter Martha at Monticello and extending warm greetings to Sally—interfere with her speculation?

The Gordon-Reed volume appeared at a time when it was popular among some historians to try to topple the great "dead white males" of American history. As Mount Holyoke professor Joseph Ellis has observed, Thomas Jefferson is "the dead-white-male who matters most," and the "most valued trophy in the cultural wars."⁷ Not surprisingly, Professor Gordon-Reed quickly became a favorite of the politically correct establishment.

When it was widely reported the following year that a scientific study published in *Nature* had confirmed that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least Sally's youngest child, many assumed the debate was over. After all, Thomas Jefferson was a man of science, and he would have wanted us to embrace scientific proof from the latest technological advances.

Building upon these erroneous news stories, Professor Gordon-Reed produced a new book—*The Heminges of Monticello*—that simply assumed that the paternity of all of Sally's children had been scientifically proven by science and went on to tell the story of those children and their descendants. Despite the fact that the DNA tests compared only DNA from a single Hemings child, pro-paternity scholars declared that the tests had eliminated the possibility that either of the Carr brothers had fathered *any* of Sally's children and concluded that Jefferson's grandchildren who pointed suspicion at them were misrepresenting the truth.⁸ In their view, the debate was over.

Professor Gordon-Reed and her new book received virtually every award for which they might have been eligible, including the Pulitzer Prize in History, the National Book Award, the National Humanities Medal from

the president of the United States, a half-million-dollar "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation, and induction into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Harvard University appointed her to *three* professorships, including in law and history.

Now comes Dr. Holowchak to caution "not so fast." In the pages that follow, he examines claims by Professor Gordon-Reed and several other prominent scholars in the pro-paternity camp, and he painstakingly reveals error after error. He draws upon his knowledge of ancient and modern Greek, Latin, ancient history and philosophy, and logic to expose careless scholarship and—to put it kindly—shoddy reasoning.

Almost exactly four decades ago, when I was a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, I had the great pleasure of getting to know Professor Sidney Hook, who had recently retired as chairman of the Department of Philosophy at New York University. We had several lengthy conversations, and during more than one of them he emphasized the importance of *courage* in the character of a good scholar. You must be prepared to pursue the truth wherever it leads, he told me, without regard to what others might believe or the possible costs their disagreement might impose. Without this vital element, you will never achieve your full potential as a scholar.

His comment reminded me very much of advice Thomas Jefferson had given to various young friends and relatives. Indeed, it was a core principle in his founding of the University of Virginia, where it has been my great pleasure to work and teach for more than twenty-five years. In a famous and oft-quoted letter to British historian William Roscoe, Jefferson said of his new university: "This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

I mention this because Jefferson's admonition frequently came to mind as I was reading this book. Perhaps above all else, this book is an exercise in *courage*. Even here at the University of Virginia, in the eyes of some, defending Thomas Jefferson is beyond the pale, and I have faced some negativity as a direct result of my participation in the Scholars Commission inquiry.

For the record, those who have reacted negatively to my role in this project are not bad people. I suspect that some believed (as I had when first approached) that science had conclusively resolved this issue, and thus anyone who continued to resist the truth was either a racist or a fool. Alternatively, some who have followed the issue more closely may have realized there was a compelling case to be made in Jefferson's defense but feared that anyone who spoke out publicly on the issue was likely to draw fire in the form of allegations of racism that might do collateral damage to the university's reputation. I, too, understood that risk, as I had observed several very able scholars who had in my presence expressed dismay that Jefferson was being treated very unfairly nevertheless decline an invitation to join in the inquiry.

On October 27, 2012, the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society hosted a daylong program at the University of Virginia's Newcomb Hall on the Jefferson-Hemings issue. Believing that the audience would benefit from a good debate, the group's president on August 21 invited Peter Onuf, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Professor of History at the University of Virginia, to take part in a debate with me over the issue. Although this distinguished chair was previously held by Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson—each widely regarded as the nation's preeminent Jefferson scholar of their time—Professor Onuf has been a strong critic of Jefferson and has endorsed the view that there was a decades-long sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings that produced several children. But in response to the debate invitation, Professor Onuf replied later that same day: "I'm afraid I will have to decline your invitation: the controversy has long since ceased to be interesting to me."

It was at this program that I had my first (and, thus far, only) opportunity to speak personally with Dr. Holowchak, who was one of the speakers. When he overheard that the Heritage Society had been unable to find a senior professor to present the pro-paternity viewpoint, his face perked up and he exclaimed: "Debate! I'll debate!" He was prepared to take on anyone from the pro-paternity camp, or to debate me if we could find an issue on which there was sufficient disagreement. After you have read the pages that follow, I suspect you will understand his willingness—nay, his

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enthusiasm—for a free and open public exchange of views on the issue. You may also understand why some on the other side of the issue are reluctant to see such a debate. Enjoy the book.

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