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New Book Undermines the Case for a Jefferson-Hemings Relationship

***The Jefferson-Hemings Myth: An American Travesty.* Presented by The Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society, edited by Eyer Robert Coates, Sr. Charlottesville, Va.: Jefferson Editions, 2001. 11.95 paperback ISBN: 0-934211-66-3 Available now from Amazon.com.**

"An incredible new book that really destroys the case that Jefferson had a relationship with Sally Hemings." --Dr. James McClellan, *London University*

The alleged affair between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings began as gossip and was published in 1802 by scandalmongering reporter James Callender, during Jefferson's first term as President. These allegations were widely reprinted by Jefferson's political enemies, even though they were based solely on gossip, not on any know facts. They were revived in 1974 by Fawn Brodie, an historian who employed the imaginative techniques of psychobiography in her book *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. Her methods were roundly denounced at the time.

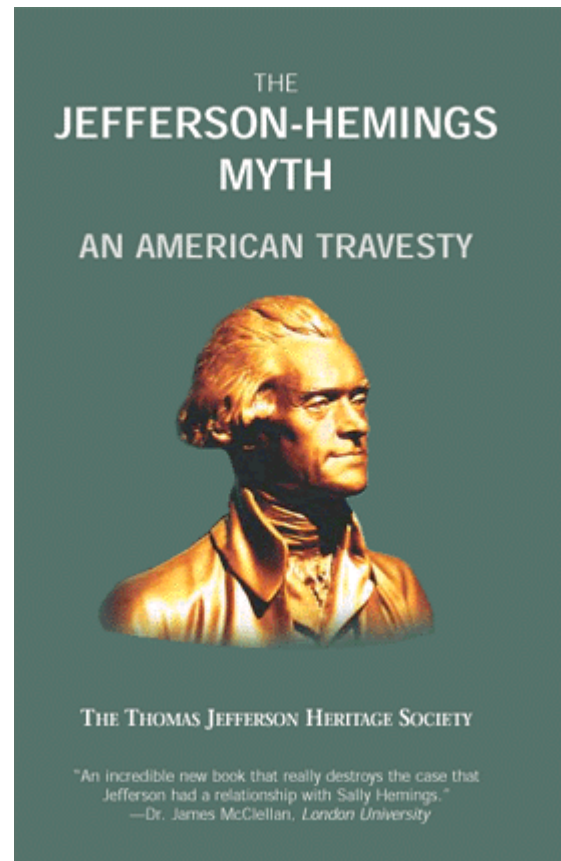
Until recently, most historians had dismissed the charges as too unlikely to be believed. In 1997, another author -- Annette Gordon-Reed, who was a lawyer, not a historian -- produced a detailed examination of the available evidence in her book *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, and with the help of many "might-have-been" suppositions, was able to construct a reasonable-sounding case for Jefferson having had a slave mistress.

Then, in 1998, DNA tests were performed on five Jefferson descendants and six Hemings descendants by Dr. Eugene Foster, with one of the Hemings descendants producing a match with the Jeffersons. For many, this seemed to clinch the argument. DNA, after all, is believed to provide unmistakable results.

Following that, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation which owns Monticello, Jefferson's home, did a study and came out with a report in January 2000. The report stated that there was a "high probability" that Jefferson was the father of one son of Sally Hemings, and most likely fathered all her children. For most people, that settled it. If an organization dedicated to memorializing Thomas Jefferson supported the idea, they assumed that Jefferson must have had a relationship with one of his slaves.

There are a few problems in all this, however. There still is no direct evidence linking Thomas Jefferson to the Hemings descendants. The DNA tests on the Jefferson male descendants were on descendants of his uncle, not on Thomas Jefferson, since he had no direct male descendants. And this particular kind of DNA test did not test the full spectrum of DNA, it tested only the Y chromosome -- a very small part. That kind of test cannot point the finger at any specific individual, only at "some" male family member with the same Y chromosome. There were about 25 Jefferson males living in Virginia at the time who could have supplied the Y chromosome, and at least eight of them were thought to have frequented Monticello.

The principal pieces of historical evidence against Thomas Jefferson were the scandalous accusations in the press, the family oral tradition (especially an interview given by Sally's son Madison almost 50 years after Jefferson died) and the fact that the President was at Monticello nine months before the birth of each of Sally's children. But the DNA tests proved that the strongest piece of handed-down family tradition identifying one Hemings branch (the Woodsons) as descended



from Thomas Jefferson was absolutely wrong. And that branch is the one that is descended from the child that was also named in the scandalous press reports. Moreover, the single Hemings descendant whose test turned out positive (descendant of Eston) was from a branch whose oral tradition had said they were descended from the President's uncle. The statements by Madison were suspect because they were made to a partisan reporter about things, most of which happened before Madison was born and about which he couldn't possibly have had any personal knowledge.

While it is true that Thomas Jefferson was at Monticello each time Sally Hemings got pregnant, it is also true that all the other possible fathers naturally came there when the President was there. In fact, Monticello was kept locked-up when Thomas Jefferson was away, and relatives and visitors would hardly go there to visit an empty, shut-down house.

On top of all of this, the scientific journal announcing the DNA tests used a sensational headline -- "Jefferson fathered slave's last child" -- that was not supported by the DNA test results, since those results could not identify an individual as the father. And the foundation that owns Monticello and did the detailed study ignored or dismissed out of hand all the evidence that would exonerate Thomas Jefferson. Their assumption was, if anyone liked and respected Jefferson, that person was probably biased and likely to lie about Jefferson having an affair in order to protect him. As a result, anyone who said anything to exonerate Jefferson was thought to be disqualified on that basis alone. The foundation also suppressed a minority dissent and revealed it to no one, not even other members of the research committee, until after the final report had been publicized.

Not only was some evidence ignored, some was even altered. One handwritten letter by Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen was mistranscribed to make it read just the opposite of what the original stated.

With all these shenanigans and faulty pieces of evidence, the accusations against Jefferson, rather than looking like the result of an honest assessment of the facts, began to look like a giant smear campaign. Apparently, facts were selected and pieces of evidence distorted in order to reach what seemed to be a pre-ordained conclusion.

A group of Jefferson supporters came together in March of 2000 and began to question what was going on. They formed an organization -- The Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society, Inc. -- and determined to have an honest, straightforward look into the matter.

One of their efforts was to sponsor a completely independent "Scholars Commission" that issued a report on April 12, 2001. Another of their efforts is this book. The Commission, which included thirteen senior scholars from some of the nation's finest universities, concluded a year long study of the evidence, and twelve of the thirteen found that Jefferson was probably not the father of any children by Sally Hemings. "Our individual conclusions," they wrote, "range from serious skepticism about the charge to a conviction that it is almost certainly false." One dissenting member was in general agreement that there was not sufficient evidence to determine if the charges are true, but believed it somewhat more likely than not that Thomas Jefferson was the father of one of Sally's children.

Along those same lines, this book carefully examines the facts and finds that, contrary to the way the matter has been portrayed recently, there is no substantial evidence at all to support the charge that Thomas Jefferson had a relationship with Sally Hemings. In fact, there is very good evidence that indicates it never happened! Thomas Jefferson, the authors felt, was being sacrificed on the altar of historical revisionism and media manipulation, using distorted conclusions drawn from falsely-labeled scientific evidence, biased interpretations of dubious evidence, and handed-down family gossip of questionable origin.

The ten authors of this book discuss a whole range of interesting facts connected with this controversy, including:

- How the myth that accuses Thomas Jefferson of fathering the children of Sally Hemings began with allegations made by a scandalmongering reporter as part of an unsuccessful blackmail scheme to force President Jefferson to appoint him to a government job.
- How the results of a 1998 DNA study were presented in such a way as to mislead the public into believing that scientific tests had proved Thomas Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings' last child.
- How information about other Jefferson males living in the vicinity of Monticello who could have been the father of Sally Hemings' last child was kept from the news media and even omitted from some scholarly books.
- How the news media were provided with the fallacious title of a scientific study, and how some were misled into denigrating Thomas Jefferson as a liar, a hypocrite, and a fraud based on that false and misleading information.

- How the descendants of Tom Woodson, one of Sally's alleged sons, continue to maintain he was the son of Thomas Jefferson even though the DNA tests conclusively disproved this long-repeated family story.
- How these attacks on Jefferson are also used to undermine the principles he stood for and on which the American republic was founded.

With careful attention to detail, the authors explore all of the above described machinations and manipulations plus many more in this interesting and penetrating investigation into the Jefferson-Hemings story. The reader of this book will come away convinced that the evidence supporting the proposition that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings' children is not at all the open and shut case it has been made out to be. In fact, it appears there is no case at all.

Publication scheduled for May 2001.
This book may be ordered now from Amazon.com.

For further information, see <http://www.tjheritage.org>



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