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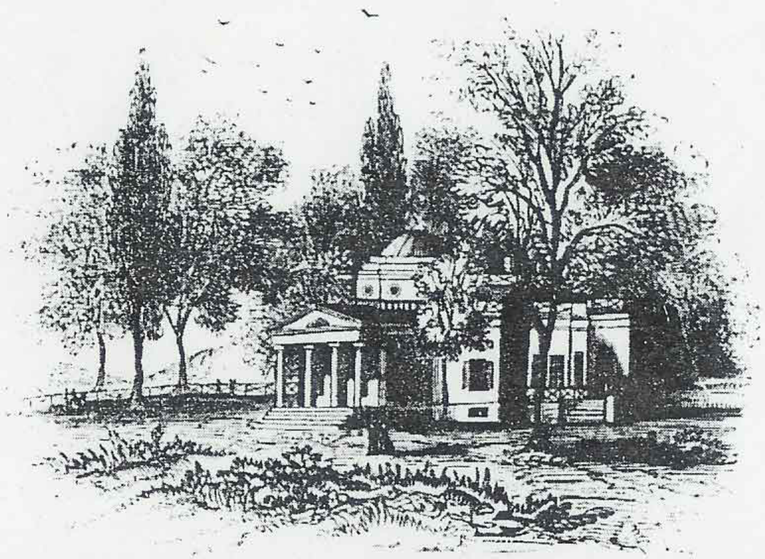
The myth of Tom and Sally

By Kathryn Moore and D. M. Giangreco



Genetic scientists recently concluded that Thomas Jefferson likely fathered the last child of Sally Hemings, one of his slaves, a finding they downgraded this week stunned by the reaction that greeted the news published in the British journal Nature. Because of their findings, some now say that he should be removed from Mount Rushmore; others demand a revision of Jefferson's place in history. What textbooks say about the life of Jefferson may, however, be little affected by the genetic research because of a wider range of facts that figure into the story.

Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha, inherited the Hemings family, including Sally, from her father, John Wayles, and they were members of the Jefferson slave household by 1774. Madison Hemings, Sally's son, told a reporter in 1873 that Sally's mother Elizabeth was a slave concubine of Jefferson's father-in-law, and stated that Elizabeth was the daughter of a slave and a slave ship captain. Sally was a year younger than Jefferson's eldest daughter, also named Martha, and 30 years younger than Jefferson.

In 1787, 14-year-old Sally served as a last-minute replacement for the personal servant of nine-year-old Mary Jefferson when she traveled from Virginia to France to be reunited with her father and elder sister. She stayed with the family in Paris, then returned with them to Virginia two years later. From 1795 to 1808, Sally Hemings bore five children who were accounted for at Monticello. She continued to live and work there as a household slave until Jefferson's death. A year later she gained her freedom at the age of 54.

Articles about "Tom and Sally" began to appear in the early 1800s during Jefferson's first term. Their author was James T. Callender who gained notoriety writing for various publications in the 1790s. Among the charges he leveled at important men of the day was that Washington was "a scandalous hypocrite [who] authorized the robbery and ruin of his own army." He also maintained that John Adams was "a British spy," and under the Sedition Act of Adams' presidency, Callender was fined and jailed. After Jefferson became president he promised Callender the fine would be refunded. Delays ensued. Ultimately Meriwether Lewis, Jefferson's secretary, went to Callender to give him $50. Taking this as hush money, he demanded more —a government position.

Callender's threats to blackmail the president fell on deaf ears and stories soon began to appear in his newspaper including one stating that Jefferson had been engaged in an affair for many years with a slave named Sally. To bolster his accusations, Callender heralded a slave named Tom as his chief exhibit, claiming him to be the eldest progeny of the liaison. To clinch his case, Callender insisted that Tom had a close physical resemblance to Jefferson but DNA samples from descendants of a man who claimed to be Tom did not support this.

These are the known facts; the rest is mere speculation and oral history — and the oral histories disagree.

Members of the Jefferson family steadfastly maintained that his nephews, Samuel and Peter Carr, believed that they had fathered Sally Hemings' children. Part of the genetic study included the Carr's descendants, but no match was found. Meanwhile, the Hemings family insisted that Sally Hemings had been Thomas Jefferson's mistress for nearly 40 years, beginning in Paris, and that five children were born to her and Jefferson. Thomas Woodson also claimed that he was the son of Jefferson and Hemings, only he was sent away when about 12 years of age. Later he took the name of his adopted family. His descendants were tested, too, but no match was made to the Jefferson line.

Some now argue that the lack of a DNA link to Jefferson doesn't disprove that Woodson was his son because another person may have been an illegitimate father somewhere along the way who then would alter the results. This is an interesting argument because the reverse could also be true. Perhaps at some point, the genetic path took a detour when a Hemings may have merged with a Jefferson from a later time. Speculative? Certainly. Yet this is exactly the type of logic which is being hailed as conclusive because it is supported by "overwhelming evidence" that Thomas Jefferson was at Monticello eight to 10 months prior to the birth of Sally's children.

However, while this may seem to point the finger at Thomas Jefferson, it is important to remember that people did little traveling 200 years ago because it was both difficult and time consuming. When they did travel, the stay at their destination would be for extended periods and Monticello saw the greatest number of visitors when its master was in residence. One or more of these visitors — which included neighboring family members — could have been involved with Sally. The times when Jefferson was at home from 1790 to 1809 were irregular, and births of Sally's children actually *ended* when Jefferson retired permanently to Monticello.

The only thing that can be stated with certainty is the results of the genetic study comparing DNA from the descendants of the following people: Thomas Woodson, the child allegedly born to Sally after the family's return from France in 1789; Eston Hemings, Sally's youngest son; Peter and Samuel Carr, nephews of Jefferson; and Field Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's uncle. One match to the Jefferson line was made: Eston Hemings.

A look at the myriad of evidence, testimony, and speculation, however, raises more questions.

- The logistics of carrying on an extensive affair under the noses of two adult daughters and the crushing crowd of grandchildren stretches credibility. There is no record that any of the overwhelming number of visitors (sometimes as many as 50 a night) ever detected so much as a slip of the tongue, a movement, expression, or any other indication of anything elicit.
- Jefferson never brought Hemings to New York, Philadelphia, or Washington. Since he resided alone, save for his secretary, they would have been in a much more discrete and private environment than that found at the bustling household of Monticello. His daughters, in fact, commented that his bedroom and living quarters in the original White House were much more remote than those of Monticello.
- Thomas Jefferson Randolph, the eldest grandson, related after his grandfather's death that the Carr nephews were responsible for Callender's charges because it was they who fathered Heming's children. Both nephews were her age, but DNA evidence ruled this out for either Thomas Woodson or Eston Hemings. Nevertheless, the interesting point is the belief of Peter and Samuel Carr that *they* were the fathers.
- Early in the 1790s, when the political party system began with Jefferson and Hamilton, many Federalists would have eagerly added the charge of Jefferson having a slave mistress to their other accusations if it had been "common knowledge" as Callender maintained.
- Other possible candidates for the fathering of Hemings' children have escaped the level of scrutiny directed toward Thomas Jefferson. They include Randolph Jefferson, who was 12 years younger than his famous brother and 18 years older than Sally. Randolph regularly visited Thomas and Isaac Jefferson, a slave at Monticello, recounted that Randolph "used to come out among black people, play the fiddle and dance half the night." Randolph's sons could also be considered as possible sources of the Jefferson family DNA as well as the children and grandchildren of Field Jefferson, from whose descendants the DNA was drawn.

Did Thomas Jefferson father slave children? Perhaps. Was Sally Hemings a willing partner in a 38-year love affair or forced into an extensive sexual liaison by her master? We don't know. The geneticists' conclusion was that an affair involving Thomas Jefferson was the "simplest and most probable explanation" for their findings. Life, however, is far from simple or always probable, and unlike their colleagues in the press, most textbook editors will examine the wider range of factors before dramatically altering what appears on their pages.

Kathryn Moore is working on "First Lady of Monticello," a biography of Martha Jefferson. D. M. Giangreco is an editor for the US Army's professional Journal, Military Review.

The original draft of this article carried the subtitle "Jefferson DNA Findings Unlikely to Change Textbooks"