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Engaging Jefferson: Blacks and the Founding Father

Annette Gordon-Reed

WHAT to the American slave is your Fourth of July?" Frederick Douglass asked famously in 1852. In a stinging oration, the great abolitionist threw down the founding document of the American experiment like a gauntlet, challenging those who would celebrate the Declaration of Independence when millions of individuals born on American soil were denied the blessings of liberty extolled in that charter. "The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence bequeathed by your fathers is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is *yours* not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn."¹

Douglass was using what he referred to as the "sacrilegious irony" of the occasion to make clear his fervent desire that black Americans would one day share the benefits of freedom and equality bequeathed to white Americans by their spiritual and literal "fathers." This strong rebuke of the fathers' hypocrisy was meant to shame the original objects of paternal affection into sharing their patrimony with the "children" who had been excluded. In insisting upon the "equal manhood of the Negro race," Douglass deflected the anticipated rejoinder that blacks, not possessing humanity equal to that of the founders, could never be considered their "children." The more cynical members of the audience may have noted that the fathers, by leaving slavery in place while they pursued their flight to freedom, had effectively denied any connection to these putative children. Under the circumstances, in what sense could these men ever be considered "fathers" to the black "children" of America?

It is a question that black Americans have been asking themselves and others in one form or another at least since the time of the American Revolution. The existence of racially based slavery during that era and beyond virtually mandates that every generation of blacks consider what,

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¹ Douglass, "What To the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" in *Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African American Writing*, ed. Deirdre Mullane (New York, 1993), 157.

if any, relationship they bear (or want to bear) to the founders of the United States. Should blacks make a connection to America through the Spirit of '76 or were the founders of their America those members of the Civil War generation (abolitionists and legislators, black and white) who made it possible for blacks to become true citizens of the United States?

Of all the Revolutionary founders, Thomas Jefferson has figured the most prominently in blacks' attempts to constitute themselves as Americans. His life, in public and private, has long served as a vehicle for analyzing and critiquing the central dilemma at the heart of American democracy: the desire to create a society based on liberty and equality runs counter to the desire to maintain white supremacy. Others of the founders held slaves, but no other founder drafted the charter for American freedom. Jefferson, of course, did not invent the ideas contained in the Declaration. But it is a supreme understatement to say that his manner of expressing them has been enormously influential.

Given the criticism he regularly receives today for not being more forceful on the question of slavery, and for being somewhat too forceful (and wrong) on the question of race, it is useful to remember that in his time, Jefferson had the reputation of being a dangerous social radical. One can easily see that putting the words "all men are created equal" into the public discourse would be frightening—even if one doubted (as many do today) Jefferson's sincerity. What was perceived then, and should be considered now, is that whether he believed to the extent that we would wish him to is relatively unimportant. The more critical point has always been how much others would take his words to heart. Generations of blacks have taken those words to their hearts—even if they've found themselves unable to bring along the man who wrote them. Because he was so squarely in the path of the collision between rhetoric and reality, each generation of black leaders (Douglass, David Walker, Martin Luther King, Jr.) points to Jefferson or his Declaration when making their claims upon American society.² In some cases, his example is used to argue that it is folly to think those claims could ever be honored.

Whatever the perspective, Jefferson has been useful to blacks in a way that highlights the divide between black and white Americans' perceptions of the world. The contradictions that make Jefferson seem problematic and frustrating—a figure of mystery to some whites, make him

² See *ibid.*; Walker, "Appeal, Four Articles, together with a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly to Those in the United States of America," reprinted in *"One Continual Cry": David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829–1830), Its Setting, and Its Meaning*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York, 1965); King, "Letter From Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1963).

more accessible to blacks, who find his conflicted nature a perfect reflection of the America they know: a place where high-minded ideals clash with the reality of racial ambivalence. As this combination daily informs black lives, Jefferson could seem no more bizarre than America itself. He is utterly predictable and familiar—the foremost exemplar of the true America spirit and psyche.

Blacks have known (and feared) this from the beginning. The noted astronomer Benjamin Banneker went directly to the source of the problem in 1791 when he wrote to then Secretary of State Jefferson. Banneker sent Jefferson a copy of his *Almanac*, the first such work done by a black American, to help refute Jefferson's musings in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* about the possibility that blacks were mentally inferior to whites. In the letter accompanying the work, Banneker quoted Jefferson's own words to him about the equality of all men and described it as "pitiable" that Jefferson could write those words and at the same time "be found guilty of the most criminal act which [he] professedly detested in others."³

Banneker spoke to Jefferson on behalf of his "brethren" (meaning blacks), thus acknowledging the race's social separation from whites. By invoking the "universal Father" who gave rights to all men and stating with confidence that Jefferson agreed with him on that point, Banneker sent a clear message: The dueling sentiments expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the *Notes on the State of Virginia* cannot be reconciled. Having put both into the public discourse, it was Jefferson's responsibility to signal which view should guide the American experience.

As one might expect, Jefferson's answer to Banneker was an artful dodge. The Jeffersonian penchant (and talent) for avoiding conflict was on full display. He gave ground to Banneker, complimenting the astronomer on his achievements, taking care to let Banneker know that he was sending the *Almanac* to the secretary of the Academy of Sciences at Paris, the marquis de Condorcet. Wanting as ever to appear the good scientist, Jefferson presented himself as open to any evidence that his suspicions of black inferiority were incorrect. Yet he was careful not to meet the full force of Banneker's complaint.⁴

Banneker's letter can be seen as the beginning of blacks' formal political and personal engagement with Thomas Jefferson, save for his own slaves who always engaged him personally. Banneker was quite right to seek Jefferson out and challenge him on his contradictory presentations

³ Banneker to TJ, in Silvio A. Bedini, *The Life of Benjamin Banneker* (New York, 1972), 155.

⁴ TJ to Banneker, Aug. 30, 1791, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York, 1904), 6:309–10; TJ to Condorcet, Aug. 30, 1791, *ibid.*, 311.

to the world. He was right, for reasons that he probably could not have known at the time. For there is every reason to believe that at the time of Banneker's missive, Jefferson's involvement in the American dilemma was as personal as it could be. The story of Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman on his plantation, long denied by white historians, has been an article of faith among black Americans. While some whites read Jefferson's writings against miscegenation as foreclosing his involvement with a black woman, blacks seem to view the split between Jefferson's public pronouncements and his private behavior as standard operating procedure. The majority of black Americans have white ancestry dating from the time of slavery. Because of their own family situations, they understand how that game was played. The public recitation of the catechism of white supremacy (done for the sake of the community) is not enough to ward off all the thoughts, feelings, and impulses that can exist within individual human beings.

When in 1998 the results of DNA tests on Jefferson and Hemings descendants, along with evidence from the historical record, supported the truth of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship, the reaction in the black community, as presented in the press, was unanimous: "We told you so." In the black community the Jefferson-Hemings liaison stands along with the Declaration of Independence as evidence of the deeply conflicted nature of American society, and blacks' struggles with the precariousness of their existence in the United States. It is easy to see why the story of a white founding father of America, his black mistress, and their black offspring would capture the imagination of black Americans. To the extent that American racism seeks to establish whites' greater claim to America because of their racial connection to white founding fathers, the knowledge that a group of blacks are "closer" genetically to Jefferson than all whites who are not Jeffersons is an irony too delicious to go unappreciated. Nathan Irvin Huggins once observed, "The Sally Hemmings story . . . ties a people to the founding of the nation, reinforcing birthright claims."⁵ While this is undoubtedly true, it tells only part of the tale. The rejection of the Sally Hemings story can be seen as a denial of black ties to the founding of the nation and a rejection of black birthright claims. It certainly has been interpreted in that fashion.

After I published a book about Jefferson and Hemings in 1997, I grew accustomed to hearing some variation of the following from black people, particularly older ones, "Oh, it's about time the truth came out." or "They know it's true, they just don't want to say it." It would be wrong to say that these responses were based purely upon the important

⁵ Huggins, *Revelations: American History, American Myths*, ed. Brenda Smith Huggins (New York, 1995), 277.

symbolic value that could be attached to the Hemings story. There were always, in fact, a number of evidentiary based reasons for blacks' general refusal to accept the "official" position on Jefferson and Hemings.⁶

We can start with the writing of American history itself. Black Americans have more than enough reason to mistrust the views of those who helped write the history of America, given the distortions of black life that regularly cropped up in such writings. The time period in which the acceptable boundaries of this story were set, the 1850s through the 1960s, was not noted for great sensitivity to black concerns. The changes in southern historiography that brought an increased focus on the perspectives of blacks, begun in the 1950s, did not emerge as a major feature of biographical sketches of Jefferson, save for Fawn Brodie's use and acceptance of Madison Hemings's memoirs, until the 1990s. The publication of Lucia Stanton's essay "'Those who Labor for My Happiness': Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves" in *Jeffersonian Legacies* was a pivotal moment.⁷ Until that time, historians wrote about Jefferson and the race problem, but not Jefferson and his relationships with individual black people, save for discussions of the Hemings controversy. Traditional Jefferson scholarship seemed incredibly "white" oriented. It was completely rational then for blacks to be skeptical about the handling of the Hemings matter.

Loyalty to the oral tradition, which is all the majority of black families have had to rely on when piecing together what happened during slavery, also accounts for the attachment to the story. One cannot discount how greatly the evidence of extensive miscegenation in the families of most black Americans has influenced the community's thinking on this matter. Miscegenation is real for blacks in a way that it is not for whites. It is common within black families to have relatives with skin colors ranging from black to white, hair texture from kinky to straight, and facial features from African to European. The notion that a slaveowner would take a mistress from among his slaves could not strike blacks as far-fetched when so many blacks descended from such unions.

But there is another, deeper reason for blacks to accept the truth of a liaison between Jefferson and Hemings. There has been an automatic assumption that "they," meaning white people, were hiding the truth or being deliberately obtuse about it to serve a purpose. The suppression of the Hemings story was simply another example of white supremacy at work. As that doctrine demands that whites have the ultimate power to

⁶ Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, 1997).

⁷ Stanton, "'Those Who Labor For My Happiness': Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves," in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter Onuf (Charlottesville, 1993), 147-80.

shape reality, any truth seen as threatening to white power, would be ignored, ridiculed, or otherwise refitted to serve the goal of maintaining whites' dominance over blacks.

It has not escaped the notice of black Americans that since colonial times, race-mixing has provoked severe anxiety among many whites. Whether the issue was emancipation, desegregation of schools, integration of housing—at some point, the specter of race-mixing was (is) offered to deny every effort to promote social equality in America. There should be little surprise that blacks would see resistance to the Hemings story as an outgrowth of that anxiety. The vehemence and the manner in which the story was put down by Jefferson scholars have only served to heighten this suspicion. Their attitude suggested a firm determination not to allow an American icon—one of *the* American icons—to be portrayed as having fallen so low as to have mixed his blood with a member of a degraded race. If blacks tend to see the story in symbolic terms, as Huggins suggests, it is in direct response to the symbolism coming from the “other” side. Rejection of Jefferson's connection to Hemings was, in effect, a rejection of blacks' claim to what some white saw as the “best” America had to offer.

The pattern is all too familiar. The exclusion of black people creates a value. An activity, a good or service, a neighborhood, a club—all become highly prized by whites when no blacks are present to share the good. Those items instantly become less attractive when blacks gain access—black involvement is equated with degeneracy. Constant vigilance is required. The borders must be patrolled lest the unworthy take a share of what should never belong to them and spoil what would otherwise be heaven.

A recurring theme in the attacks on the Hemings family tradition as recounted by Madison Hemings, who claimed in a memoir to be the son of Thomas Jefferson, is that it was a specious attempt to add luster to the Hemings family lineage. Merrill Peterson forcefully made this point in *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, when he attributed blacks' belief in the story to their “pathetic wish” to gain a little pride. This formulation not only speaks about Jefferson's exalted character, it locates the character of blacks at the opposite end of the spectrum.⁸

The Jefferson family's alternative story about the paternity of Sally Hemings's children further illustrates the problem. Two of Jefferson's grandchildren, Thomas Jefferson Randolph and Ellen Randolph Coolidge, said the Hemings offspring were fathered by one of Jefferson's nephews, although each of them picked a different one. In both versions of their stories the men, Peter Carr and Samuel Carr, appear in a nega-

⁸ Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 187.

tive light. Their purported liaison with Hemings was tragic and decadent. Ellen Coolidge, in particular, speaks in extremely disparaging terms about her candidate, Samuel Carr.⁹ It was not enough to deny that Jefferson was the father, it had to be made plain that the men chosen to be the fathers were bad people. Historians picked up on this refrain when they offered their version of Jefferson's character as a defense to the story, presenting the public with the following syllogism: No decent white person could be involved in an affair with a black slave. Jefferson was a decent white person. Therefore, Jefferson could not have been involved with a black slave.

Whether historians knew it or not, this description of Jefferson's nature carried with it a sinister message about the nature of blacks. An elderly man, obviously of black-white ancestry, identified the issue when he told me, with a laugh, "They [again, meaning whites] claim that it was Jefferson's nephews who were going with Sally Hemings. Why do they always want to make us out to be low?" He was addressing the practice of stating that only wastrel nephews and no-account overseers—again, bad low people—ever had sex with blacks during slavery. In his view, white historians were not just acting defensively to protect a vision of Jefferson. They were aggressively sending a message to present-day blacks: nothing we think of as "good" could ever be in you. To the extent that we are forced to acknowledge your blood connections to the white race, we must always emphasize that you come from the degraded among us and, therefore, are not worthy.

What did this elderly man think about Jefferson and the master class? Was his complaint about the failure to admit that miscegenation was practiced all along the social spectrum presumptive evidence of a pathetic wish to claim blueblood lineage for blacks? Not at all. He seemed primarily frustrated by the idea that the truths of blacks' lives could be so narrowly circumscribed by the boundaries of white anxiety. Who were whites to decide which things in black life could be accepted and which ones were to be rejected out of hand because they were discomfiting to whites?

Now that science has weighed in on the side of the Hemings family's version of reality, does this mean that blacks and whites will reach a common understanding about the relationship? In "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in the American Memory 1943–1993," Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers offer another example of the different ways in which blacks and whites process information about the Hemings story. Whites who believe Jefferson and Hemings had been

⁹ Ellen Coolidge to Joseph Coolidge, Oct. 24, 1858, in Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, 258–60.

involved with one another, are more likely to cast the relationship as rape or to emphasize that it must have been totally impersonal. Blacks are more likely to see it as having been based on affection. Although this is a generalization, it is a useful one. The portrayal of the Jefferson-Hemings liaison in the popular black press, *Ebony* and *Jet*, for example, shows a clear preference for Sally and Tom as lovers. Certainly, the novel *Sally Hemings*, written by a black woman, Barbara Chase-Riboud, promotes the theme of a doomed romance. On the other hand, those white historians inclined to view the story as true, or possibly true, were adamant in insisting that Jefferson could not have had any affection for Hemings. Garry Wills has been the most emphatic on this point. Before and after the DNA results were published he went on record insisting that Hemings could only have been a prostitute to Jefferson.¹⁰

Given the great power differential that existed between masters and slaves, one could say that talk of romance seems designed to fill modern-day needs at the expense of a realistic view of slavery. But it is also possible to say that the insistence that there can be no true affection between individuals who are not equals is also a product of modern-day concerns about finding the proper construction of male-female relationships—which would have little to do with the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In any event, the automatic construction of the Jefferson and Hemings story as a tale of decades of affectionless sex is suspicious. We have no letters from Thomas and Sally detailing how they felt about one another. Still, some sense of the way heterosexual males and females go through the world must inform this inquiry. What manner of man goes to the same prostitute for twenty years and has no one else when other women are readily available to him? What specific evidence do we have that Jefferson was such a man?

If Jefferson had been an ordinary slaveowner, devoid of symbolic value and it was thought that he had kept a slave woman named Sally Hemings as a mistress for decades, to the exclusion of forming relationships with other women, white or black, there would be little hesitancy in saying that he was probably emotionally attached to Hemings. It would be said and we would move on. Why tread so lightly where Jefferson is concerned? Why should his present-day symbolic value cancel out what would in other contexts be reasonable and uncontroversial inferences drawn from the existing circumstances?

¹⁰ French and Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory," in Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies*, 418–56; Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings* (New York, 1979); Wills, "Uncle Thomas's Cabin," review of *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* by Fawn Brodie, *New York Review of Books*, 21 (April 18, 1974) 26; *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 1999

Douglass Adair's interpretation of the Hemings question is instructive. Despite its flaws, Adair makes the deepest and most thoughtful attempt to analyze the Jefferson-Hemings controversy. He was virtually alone among his generation in perceiving that, in order to come to grips with the story, one has to come to grips with Sally Hemings. He sees that Hemings was no stereotypical slave woman. She had traveled and seen Europe. She had led an existence very different from that of other blacks at Monticello—or anywhere in the country for that matter. She was, he believes, Jefferson's wife's half-sister, a woman of beauty who had accepted "middle-class" values of monogamy. What man could not love a woman like this? She was perfect—for Peter Carr. Adair offers the length of the putative Hemings-Carr relationship, spanning twenty years of childbearing, as evidence of the depth of Carr's passion for Hemings.¹¹ Adair had no trouble in portraying the nonentity Peter Carr as having been passionately attached to Sally Hemings, even though he married another woman in the midst of their supposed long-term love relationship. If Hemings was so wonderful that Peter Carr could have loved her in some fashion over many years, why is it impossible for Jefferson to have done so? By the terms of Adair's own analysis, it was not impossible. It was simply problematic, because Jefferson's "love" has deep symbolic meaning to whites. As it turns out, his "love" plays an important symbolic role for blacks as well.

Just as the rejection of the truth of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship can be seen as a way of insuring that blacks do not have a literal claim to connection to the founders, the insistence that Jefferson could not have formed an emotional bond with Hemings serves similar ends. Once again, an item of value (the love of a founding father) is enhanced through the exclusion of blacks. We may try to get at this by thinking of the Ayers-French observations about the gap between white and black views of the Jefferson-Hemings affair.

What is the symbolic value to blacks of viewing Jefferson and Hemings as lovers? Love and sex are great levelers. Lovers are vulnerable to one another. If affection existed between Jefferson and Hemings, Hemings would necessarily have gained some measure of power over Jefferson, in the same way that women typically exert power over heterosexual males. The novel *Sally Hemings*, is based on just this notion. Hemings's slave status is never obliterated, but in the confines of her intimate relationship with Jefferson she, on occasion, exercises power over him. In this scenario, the familiar responses between males and females are more elemental than the legal relationship that was imposed

¹¹ Adair, "The Jefferson Scandals," in *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, ed. Trevor Colbourn (New York, 1974), 160–91.

on them. In a small but important way, the humanity of Hemings is re-emphasized. Jefferson's humanity comes back into focus too. She is raised. He is cut down to size. Thus, two of the major requirements for black progress (restoration of black humanity and obliteration of the cult of the godlike white person) are fulfilled.

As is too often the case, the very thing that some blacks find empowering (Jefferson in thrall to Hemings) is threatening to some whites. Certainly the cult of the celibate Jefferson, the Jefferson who diverted his sexual energy to political and philosophical endeavors (or to building Monticello) is of enormous importance. He was too busy creating a nation to be bothered with creating passion and children with Sally Hemings. Sex, particularly with a black person, is impure and signifies decadence. This is the very opposite of what is required to be a builder of nations and empires or, for that matter, fine homes. In addition, the thought that Jefferson, even in moments of private passion, could have been under the influence of a black slave would be cause for alarm. It is no accident that Fawn Brodie's suggestion, based on her view of Jefferson's personality and the duration of the relationship, that Jefferson had an emotional connection to Hemings drew almost hysterical responses from some quarters, responses that seemed wildly out of proportion to the occasion. However, there seems to have been something at stake that was very powerful, and unspoken. In the course of excoriating Brodie's biography of Jefferson, John Chester Miller sarcastically accused her of saying that Jefferson and Hemings had lived in "idyllic bliss" until the end of Jefferson's life. In another venue, Miller described Jefferson's accusers as having claimed that Jefferson had "prostrated himself at the feet of" Sally Hemings.¹² Why exaggerate matters in this fashion? Brodie's description of Jefferson and Hemings did not come close to saying that they lived in idyllic bliss. In her presentation, they seem as much hounded as happy. Why did Miller transform the allegations against Jefferson into a charge that he was prostrated at the feet of Hemings? How does a claim that a man was sexually involved with a woman and may have gained some emotional sustenance from her translate into his being prostrated at her feet?

There are undoubtedly some unresolved gender-related issues in this formulation, but the racial one is striking. In Miller's mind, apparently, any moment of equality between black and white, however small, was equated with black domination, a thing to be resisted above all else. It is the historiographical equivalent of the "tipping" phenomenon. When a

¹² John C. Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977), 168; *Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Biography*, ed. Peterson (New York 1986), 429; Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York, 1974).

neighborhood or apartment complex gets too great a representation of blacks, whites move away, fearing control by the "others." Sociologists have shown that the number of blacks could be as low as 10 percent and whites will perceive the neighborhood as being taken over by blacks.¹³

What is to be made of all this in the aftermath of DNA and the collapse of the traditional view on Jefferson and Hemings? If blacks and whites were fighting a symbolic cold war over the affair, as it seems they were, can the combatants come to agreeable terms about what this story means? The vindication of blacks' views on this subject creates an opportunity and obligation to move beyond seeing Jefferson and Hemings as symbols. Given what Jefferson and slavery mean to Americans, black and white, the pair will always have some symbolic value. The knowledge that blacks' contributions to our understanding of this piece of history were not merely symbolic, but were real and concrete, is extremely important. It reminds us that there is much work to be done, many more things waiting to be discovered about the Hemingses and Jefferson. What we find may change our view of who they were and what relationship we bear to them.

It is useful to recall that the story of Jefferson and Hemings inspired the work cited as the first novel by an African-American, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter*. William Wells Brown took up the subject, using the Hemings story to indict Jefferson for his, and by extension, his country's failure to act with decency toward black Americans. In the novel, the connection between the Declaration and the fictionalized Hemings story is made explicit by Brown's decision to reproduce language from the Declaration at the beginning of the book. Although Brown treats other interracial relationships in the book with a degree of romanticism, there is not the barest trace of the sentiment in his fictional portrayal of Jefferson and Hemings. Brown uses the most enduring symbol of slavery's degradation, the auction block, to expose the hollowness of Jeffersonian rhetoric. In Brown's powerful, but actually false presentation, "two daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic, were disposed of to the highest bidder." The father, in this case the spiritual and literal father, had betrayed his children and the ideal on which the country he helped found was supposedly based.¹⁴

The true Jefferson daughter, Harriet Hemings, was not sold into slavery. She was given money and put on a stagecoach to freedom in the

¹³ See, for example, *United States v. Starrett City Associates*, 840 F. 2d. 1096, cert denied, 488 U. S. 946 (1988), for discussion of reports of housing experts on the phenomenon of "tipping" and white flight.

¹⁴ Brown, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (New York 1969 orig. pub. 1853), 68.

North at her father's direction. She spent the rest of her life in Washington, D. C., as her brother described it, in a comfortable marriage to a white man in "good circumstances" raising a "family of children." This paternal act derived from a man Madison Hemings described as "not being in the habit" of showing his black children "partiality" or "fatherly affection."¹⁵ It will be left to our generation and later ones to ponder how Jefferson's complex family life fits into the construction of him as a spiritual and literal father to Americans, black and white. The engagement with Jefferson, on the part of blacks and whites, will necessarily continue well into the foreseeable future.

¹⁵ "The Memoirs of Madison Hemings," in Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, 246, 247.