



## Jefferson: Post-DNA

Joseph J. Ellis

*The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 57, No. 1. (Jan., 2000), pp. 125-138.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0043-5597%28200001%293%3A57%3A1%3C125%3AJP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-5>

*The William and Mary Quarterly* is currently published by Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/omohundro.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Jefferson: Post-DNA

Joseph J. Ellis

IN the wake of the recent DNA revelations concerning Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, two questions strike me as salient and seminal. First, how convincing is the scientific evidence? The answer here is reasonably clear: *pretty* convincing. Second, what difference does it make for our understanding of Jefferson, to include his world, his character, and his legacy. The answer here, shall we say, is not yet self-evident. My view is that the new evidence extends and reinforces a critical interpretation of Jefferson that has dominated the scholarly literature since the 1960s.

The DNA evidence is reasonably compelling on its own, establishing a perfect match on the Y-chromosome markers between the Jefferson line and descendants of Eston Hemings. The chance of such a match occurring in a random sample is less than one in a thousand. The study shows no match between the Hemings line and the Carr family, thereby undermining the long-standing explanation offered by Jefferson's white descendants (that is, that Peter Carr or Samuel Carr is the culprit) and endorsed by several prominent Jefferson scholars, to include Douglass Adair and Dumas Malone. Finally, the new scientific evidence interacts with the old circumstantial evidence, much like a beam of light cast into a previously dark room. It not only exposes the Carr explanation as a contrivance; it also enhances the credibility of Madison Hemings's testimony, which had always been a major document for the prosecution. Annette Gordon-Reed makes Madison Hemings her chief witness and his credibility her central contention in her interrogation of Jefferson's defenders. The DNA evidence strongly suggests that her witness was telling the truth. And according to Madison Hemings, Jefferson began his sexual liaison with Sally Hemings in Paris around 1788 and was the father of all her children.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph J. Ellis is Ford Foundation Professor of History at Mount Holyoke College. For their excellent advice, whether taken or not, he wishes thank Andrew Burstein, Don Higginbotham, Dan Jordan, Robert McDonald, Eric McKittrick, and Edmund S. Morgan.

<sup>1</sup> E. A. Foster et al., "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child," *Nature*, Nov. 5, 1998, 27–28. See also Eric S. Lander and Joseph J. Ellis, "DNA Analysis: Founding Father," *ibid.*, 13, and Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, 1997). My summary of the circumstantial evidence in the pre-DNA days, including the problem of assessing credibility, is in *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), 303–07.

To be sure, the DNA evidence establishes probability rather than certainty. A spirited rebuttal has been mounted by the Jefferson genealogist Herbert Barger, suggesting that Randolph Jefferson or his son Isham (Jefferson's brother and nephew, respectively) is a more likely candidate. No one had mentioned Randolph Jefferson as a possible alternative before the DNA study. He is being brought forward now because he fits the genetic profile. This belated claim strikes me as a kind of last stand for the most dedicated Jefferson loyalists. If history were a courtroom, the Barger explanation would constitute a desperate appeal to the jury designed to generate sufficient doubt in the minds of enough jurors to block a guilty verdict. It might serve that purpose among the white descendants of the Jefferson family, permitting them to deny requests from Hemings descendants for inclusion in the family burial plot at Monticello. And if there are any surviving members of that informal organization half-jestingly called the "Monticello Mafia," they can plausibly claim that the genetic evidence is inconclusive. Historians of the Lost Cause syndrome will recognize the poignant fusion of sincerity and futility at work here.<sup>2</sup>

How then to put it? To say that Jefferson's paternity of several Hemings children is proven "beyond a reasonable doubt" sounds about right, though it also embraces the somewhat misleading legalistic framework that I have inadvertently fallen into myself in the sentences above. In the end, history is more like a classroom than a courtroom, a more capacious space where room remains for shaded versions of the truth, up or down verdicts are not demanded, scholars are not expected to behave like legal advocates, who are professionally obliged to dismiss evidence that does not fit their case. Perhaps the best way to put it, then, is to say that the burden of proof has shifted rather dramatically. If history is an argument without end, skeptics and agnostics will still have a role to play in the debate. But the new scholarly consensus is that Jefferson and Hemings were sexual partners.

Whether Jefferson fathered all of Hemings's children is still unclear. Madison Hemings claimed he did. And since Eston Hemings was born in 1808, when Jefferson was sixty-five years old, it seems highly unlikely that the relationship began and ended at that time. On the other hand, the DNA study produced a nonmatch with Thomas Woodson, the first of Sally's surviving children. Either Madison Hemings was wrong about the origins of the relationship, or the nonmatch with Thomas Woodson is

<sup>2</sup> Barger's work has not yet been published. His paper, "The Truth about the Thomas Jefferson DNA Study," which was subsequently distributed to the major newspapers and national magazines, discussed at several press conferences, and aired on several television talk-shows, is available via e-mail at [herbar@erols.com](mailto:herbar@erols.com).

the result of a “false paternity,” that is, a subsequent break in the genetic line that falsifies the results. The African-American descendants in the Woodson line have been among the most outspoken claimants of a biological connection to Jefferson, and at their urging another DNA study focusing on that lineage is currently being contemplated. Until the results of that study are known, an agnostic posture on the origins of the sexual liaison is probably wise. It does seem likely that Jefferson fathered most if not all of Hemings’ children and that the relationship was long-standing.

What about the character of the relationship? Was it consensual or coercive? love or rape? or a mutual arrangement that provided both parties with something they wanted (Jefferson with physical gratification and Hemings with privileged status and the promise of emancipation for her children)? The scholarly debate over these questions is sure to be spirited, loaded as they are with heavy racial and ideological freight. The likely longevity of the relationship suggests that it was consensual, though after that tentative conclusion all is pure conjecture for the elemental reason that the historical record is almost completely blank. The one exception is Madison Hemings’s testimony, in which he says that “my mother became Mr. Jefferson’s concubine,” a characterization that leaves the field open for interpretations that run the gamut. This subject is sure to be the primary interest of future novelists and filmmakers. (CBS is planning a miniseries for the 2000–2001 season.) All scholars disposed to make it the main focus of their inquiry, however, are well advised to abandon history in favor of fiction. There are some things we can never know.<sup>3</sup>

What difference does it make? Well, for a whole host of historical achievements responsible for Jefferson’s prominent place in the history books, not much at all. Jefferson’s intimate relationship with Hemings has no bearing on his visionary approach to the American West, which includes the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition. It does not affect his stature as the major architect, along with James Madison, of Virginia’s landmark legislation requiring the complete separation of church and state. And speaking of architecture, it does nothing to erode his standing as a powerful force in shaping American aesthetics through his design of the Richmond state capitol, Monticello, the University of Virginia, and Poplar Forest. The list could be extended to include Jefferson’s central role in creating what is now the Democratic Party, revising the entire Virginia legal code, or shaping American foreign policy as our first secretary of state and third president.

<sup>3</sup> The Madison Hemings testimony is reprinted as an appendix in Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, 245–48.

This mere sketch should be sufficient to make the point that Jefferson's place in American history is secured by multiple guidewires. When American citizens visit Monticello or the Jefferson Memorial, when they gaze up at his image on Mount Rushmore or look down at his profile on the nickel, several streams of thoughtful admiration run together in their minds and flow past the recent revelations about his private life without much interruption. Moreover, at least based on my own experience as a teacher and public lecturer, a majority of ordinary Americans has already assimilated the "Tom and Sally" story. Fawn Brodie's book on the subject received a good deal of criticism from scholars, but it was a huge best-seller, as were the novels of Barbara Chase-Riboud. More recently, the Merchant and Ivory film *Jefferson in Paris*, also endorsed the liaison. At the level of popular opinion, the DNA revelations constitute old news. When my students at Mount Holyoke went down to Monticello and the Jefferson Memorial to interview tourists the week after the DNA results were published, they reported that more than 80 percent of the interviewees claimed to have known it all along.<sup>4</sup>

The protean character of Jefferson's legacy also rests on an almost bottomless popular affection, a public version of unconditional love deposited in deep pools throughout the American populace. As scholars of the historical Jefferson, we ignore this mythical dimension at our own peril. Once, while delivering a public lecture in Richmond based on my book about Jefferson's character and legacy, a well-spoken elderly woman rose to protest my blasphemies, said that Jefferson appeared to her every night in her dreams, insisted he was not at all the flawed creature I was describing, then concluded with the triumphant assertion: "Professor Ellis, you are a mere pigeon on the great statue of Thomas Jefferson!" Please recall that my critical treatment of Jefferson's character is hardly a frontal attack. Nor does it include accusations of sexual dalliances with Sally Hemings, which in those pre-DNA days struck me as possible but unlikely. All of which suggests that the abiding affection for Jefferson out there in that murky collective he championed as "the people" has deep-rooted sources impervious to historical evidence of any sort. If the American past were a gambling casino, everyone who has bet against

<sup>4</sup> Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York, 1974); Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings: A Novel* (New York, 1979) and *The President's Daughter* (New York, 1994). For many historians, the most exasperating feature of Brodie's book is its cavalier reliance on psychological canons of evidence that defy standard historical criteria. See Garry Wills, "Uncle Thomas's Cabin," *New York Review of Books*, Apr. 18, 1974, 26–28. For Malone, the most troubling features were Brodie's huge sales and widespread success in the battle for popular opinion. See Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory, 1943–1993," in Peter S. Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville, 1993), 418–56.

Jefferson has eventually lost. There is no reason to believe it will be different this time. And because of this grassroots Jeffersonism, there will be a steady and strong current to interpret the relationship as a love affair in the Fawn Brodie mode.

In the scholarly world the situation is quite different. There Jefferson's status has been declining for more than thirty years. Leonard Levy's critical account of Jefferson's record on civil liberties started the trend, though the decisive event was Winthrop D. Jordan's *White over Black*, the magisterial account of race and racism in early America, which included a lengthy section in which Jefferson served as the most telling illustration of the way racist values had infiltrated American society from the start and at the deepest psychological levels. Jordan's work framed the debate so as to make race and slavery the central issues in any appraisal of Jefferson. Once race and slavery became the window through which to view Jefferson's life, his stock was fated to fall.<sup>5</sup>

For the overwhelming burden of the evidence revealed Jefferson to be an outspoken advocate of white supremacy and inherent black inferiority. All recent scholarly work on the man has had to negotiate this formidable obstacle, along with the less-than-uplifting recognition that his eloquent denunciations of slavery never prompted him to assume public leadership of the antislavery cause or to free but a few of the roughly six hundred slaves he owned over his lifetime. As Peter S. Onuf's review of the historiography made clear in this journal, by the 1990s Jefferson had become a highly problematic hero in scholarly circles. Matters became even worse soon after Onuf's article appeared. In the volume on Jefferson's legacy published to recognize the 250th anniversary of his birth, Paul Finkelman declared in prosecutorial tones that Jefferson should be banished from

<sup>5</sup> Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (Cambridge, 1963); Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968). The most compelling piece of circumstantial evidence for the Jefferson-Hemings liaison is the timing of Sally's pregnancies, which occurred in each instance while TJ was at Monticello and therefore available, even though he was away from Monticello about two-thirds of the time. Jordan deserves credit for being the first historian to notice this conjunction. In *American Sphinx*, I give credit to Malone. This is not wholly off the mark, since Malone published "chronologies" of Sally's pregnancies and TJ's whereabouts in the 3 final volumes of his *Jefferson and His Time*, 6 vols. (Boston, 1948–1981). My point was that Malone, despite his rejection of the sexual relationship between TJ and Hemings, possessed sufficient professional integrity to publish information that did not fit his case. I still think this is true. Nevertheless, Jordan was the first historian to notice the pattern of proximity for the full span of Sally's child-bearing years and to feature that evidence prominently in his appraisal of the controversy. Jordan had actually done the research as early as 1963, a year I can recall personally, because he mentioned it in his section of the American history survey at the College of William and Mary at that time, and I was one of his students. The article herein by Fraser Neiman offers a more precise and statistically sophisticated assessment of the problem and confirms the Jordan conclusions.

the American pantheon as a slave-owning racist. Michael Lind and Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote books actually calling for the dismantling of the Jefferson Memorial and the removal of his face from Mount Rushmore.<sup>6</sup>

The DNA findings deepen and darken the portrait of Jefferson that has been congealing in the scholarly literature since the 1960s. We already knew that he lived the great paradox of American history, which is to say that he could walk past the slave quarters at Monticello thinking grand thoughts about human freedom and never seem to notice the disjunction. Now the sense of paradox grows exponentially and begins to take on the look and smell of unmitigated hypocrisy, for the evidence of a sexual liaison with Sally Hemings strikes the Jefferson legacy at an especially vulnerable spot. It is not just that his intimate relationship with an attractive mulatto slave contradicted his public position on the separation of the races. One could, after all, interpret the relationship as a genuine love affair, and in that sense, as clinching evidence that, whatever his head told him about black inferiority, his heart emphatically denied. This, in fact, is the main thrust of the Brodie interpretation and the major reason for its seductive appeal.

The jarring evidence that greatly complicates the romantic heart-over-head version of the story is Jefferson's posture toward the human consequences of his union with Sally Hemings. He never acknowledged his paternity of her children, and for good reason. His major rationale for insisting that slavery could not be ended in his lifetime was his oft-stated fear that abolition would lead to racial mixing. That rationale now has a horribly hollow sound to it, since we know that he was engaged in behavior as a slave master that he claimed slavery was designed to prevent. His chief justification for living with slavery and not doing more to end it rested atop a deeply personal deception. Indeed, Jefferson's well-known position on a range of major historical issues—his fear of racial mixing, his aversion to a leadership role in the antislavery movement, his response to the slave insurrection in Haiti, his highly sentimental relationship with white women, and much more—must now be revisited in light of his deeply personal experience with race and sexuality. Winthrop Jordan's pathbreaking work anticipated this line of inquiry brilliantly, but the psychological paradoxes at the core of Jefferson's life and thought are now sure to attract more intense scholarly scrutiny.

<sup>6</sup> Onuf, "The Scholars' Jefferson," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 50 (1993), 671–99; Finkelman, "Jefferson and Slavery: Treason Against the Hopes of the World," in Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies*, 181–221; Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York, 1995); O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution* (Chicago, 1997).

As I see it, the most salient feature in this piece of scholarly terrain is Jefferson's extraordinary capacity for denial. It is part of a larger pattern, again one that has become more visible in the recent scholarship, and now, in the post-DNA era, cries out for comment. One can catch stirring glimpses of the pattern in Jan Lewis's work on domestic life at Monticello, in Herbert E. Sloan's analysis of Jefferson and debt, in the revisionist study of the political culture of the 1790s by Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick. Consider the following examples.<sup>7</sup>

First, as secretary of state and then as vice president, Jefferson hired political writers to criticize the policies and libel the characters of George Washington and John Adams, the very presidents under whom he served, then claimed when accused of duplicity to know nothing about the matter. Second, during the presidential elections of 1796 and 1800, Jefferson served as titular leader of the Republican Party and, along with Madison, invented the tactics and organization of party politics, all the while claiming to despise political parties, even claiming not to know that he was, on both occasions, the Republican candidate for president. Third, Jefferson spent lavishly on his personal comforts in Paris and at Monticello, purchasing expensive wine, sparing no expense on the renovations and furnishings at Monticello, thereby drawing himself deeper into debt but never recognizing the relationship between his lavish lifestyle and his mounting indebtedness, then insisting as president that debt reduction was his primary domestic priority. Fourth, Jefferson routinely contrasted the savagery of public life to the serenity of his domestic haven at Monticello, demanding that his two daughters and many grandchildren support his romanticized version of the domestic ideal, even though Martha's husband was an emotionally unstable alcoholic, Maria preferred to stay away from her father's influence, Monticello itself was a permanent construction site forever occupied by workers, visitors, and tourists, and the entire estate was thoroughly mortgaged to his creditors.

One could go on, but the abiding pattern is clear. Jefferson created an interior world constructed out of his own ideals into which he retreated whenever those ideals collided with reality. To say that he was a dreamer or visionary catches only a piece of the psychological dexterity at work. Whether it was his crop rotation scheme, which never worked; or his conviction that the French Revolution would be a bloodless triumph, which fell victim to the Terror and then Napoleon; or his insistence that the Embargo Act would bring the English government to its knees, but

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, "'The Blessings of Domestic Society': Thomas Jefferson's Family and the Transformation of American Politics," in Onuf, ed., *Jefferson Legacies*, 109–46; Sloan, *Principle and Interest: Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Debt* (New York, 1995); Elkins and McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic* (New York, 1993).



instead wrecked the American economy; or his comprehensive scheme for public education in Virginia, which never had any chance because it presumed the existence of clustered communities in the New England mode, whereas Virginia's population was widely dispersed, Jefferson clung to his own interior version of the truth and brooked no disagreement even when his version was exposed as illusory. To my knowledge, the only occasion when a close friend confronted him personally on his capacity for denial came in 1804. On that occasion, Abigail Adams refused to accept his plea of innocence and ignorance concerning James Callender's scurrilous role in libeling her husband during the presidential campaign of 1800. "Faithfull are the wounds of a Friend," she snapped back at Jefferson, then observed that Callender's subsequent revelations of the Sally Hemings affair, whether true or not, constituted something between divine retribution and poetic justice.<sup>8</sup>

The very term "Jeffersonian," in short, has begun to take on new meanings. It previously referred exclusively to politics, suggesting a reverential posture toward the democratic or liberal tradition. Now the term can also refer to a psychological condition, suggesting an interior agility at negotiating inconvenient realities and often an impressive capacity at denying with utter sincerity their very existence. (The modern synonym for "Jeffersonian" is "Clintonesque.") The archetypal scene that depicts the old definition is Jefferson drafting the Declaration of Independence, which in the mythical version of that semisacred moment featured a solitary genius crafting the magic words of American history under the inspirational influence of the gods. The new version of "Jeffersonian" places the retired president at his dinner table at Monticello, surrounded by his white family members and a few admiring guests, all served by a light-skinned slave named Madison Hemings, whom at one level everyone knows or strongly suspects to be Jefferson's son, but at another level remains invisible, unacknowledged, even perhaps a presence that Jefferson himself cannot quite account for.

Beyond the core question of Jefferson's character, two collateral areas of scholarship are almost certain to attract more intense attention because of the DNA revelations. The first area, already a contested academic battlefield, involves the question of interracial sex in the slave societies of the Chesapeake and Lower South. Strictly speaking, Jefferson's complicity in sexual activity across the color line should make little difference, since we have known for some time that all of Hemings's children were fathered by a white man or men, as was Hemings herself. John

<sup>8</sup> Abigail Adams to TJ, July 1, 1804, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1959), 1:271-74.

Adams, who doubted that Callender's charges against Jefferson were true, also observed that the credibility of the Callender accusations derived from the widespread presumption that "there was not a planter in Virginia who could not reckon among his slaves a number of his own children." Whether or not Jefferson was personally involved, in other words, many slaveowners were. Once Jefferson's name enters the list of offenders, however, it immediately raises the stakes of the debate.<sup>9</sup>

Older statistical studies based on plantation records have tended to produce results much lower than John Adams's estimate, suggesting that between 2 and 8 percent of the slave children born on southern plantations were fathered by whites. More recent studies of manumission records in post-Revolutionary Virginia reveal that an even smaller percentage of white owners freeing their slaves acknowledged paternity. But the major tendency of the recent scholarship has been to question the reliability of these numbers and the sources on which they are based. Unlike the Caribbean, where interracial unions were probably more prevalent and certainly more open, sexual relations between the races in the Chesapeake and Lower South remained covert and secretive affairs unlikely to leave a trail in the written record.<sup>10</sup>

The Jefferson case is illustrative in this regard. Apart from the few routine entries in his Farm Book, there is no mention of Sally Hemings in the vast Jefferson correspondence. Nor did Jefferson ever acknowledge his paternity of Sally's children, which would have violated the Virginia code of racial etiquette and also placed a stigma on the image he wished to transmit to posterity. (We need to remember that when Callender first made his accusations, the offense was regarded principally as racial rather than sexual.) The oral tradition in the Hemings family has proven more reliable than the written record on the white side of the Jefferson family. This confirms a trend already present in the scholarly literature; namely, to attribute greater credibility on this score to slave narratives and the oral tradition in black families. One recent study of slave narratives, for example, finds that 35 percent of the slave women commenting on the subject claimed that their fathers were white or that at least one of their

<sup>9</sup> John Adams to Colonel Ward, Jan. 8, 1810, in *The Microfilm Edition of the Adams Papers*, 608 reels (Boston, 1954–1959), reel 118.

<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974), 133; Herbert Gutman and Richard Sutch, "Victorians All? The Sexual Mores and Conduct of Slaves and Their Masters," in Gutman, ed., *Reckoning with Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1976); Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York, 1980). For the Caribbean contrast I am indebted to Philip D. Morgan for sharing his unpublished essay "Interracial Sex in the Chesapeake, and the British Atlantic World, 1779–1810."

children had a white father. For all the obvious reasons, conclusions about this most intimate and secretive subject are likely to remain controversial. But the research is sure to increase, oral history projects are sure to multiply, and the general thrust of the new evidence is likely to show that, while the Adams estimate of racial mixing is too high, the Jefferson-Hemings liaison was hardly exceptional.<sup>11</sup>

A second collateral area of scholarship likely to be influenced by the DNA findings is the research industry affiliated with Monticello, both the mansion itself and the larger grounds of the plantation. Again, this represents an extension and acceleration of trends already started. Ever since Daniel P. Jordan became director of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in 1985, Monticello has broadened its programs and made them more responsive to ongoing work in Jefferson scholarship. Tourists have been hearing for years that the Sally Hemings story is both plausible and quite possibly true. In 1993, the research department launched what is arguably the most comprehensive black oral history project in the nation to recover the recollections from descendants of Monticello's slave population, with the primary focus on descendants of the Hemings family. Monticello also welcomed and assisted the research of Annette Gordon-Reed, then provided a public platform for conversations about her book, embracing her important contribution to a reinvigorated debate over the evidence of a Jefferson-Hemings liaison in the pre-DNA days.<sup>12</sup>

We can now expect to see Monticello expand its programs on the former black residents, who always composed the vast majority of the population on the mountaintop, to include the historic re-creation of slave quarters. Monticello will come to mean not just an architecturally

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, 1997), 19–38; Robert M. S. McDonald, "Race, Sex, and Reputation: Thomas Jefferson and the Sally Hemings Story," *Southern Culture*, 4 (Summer 1998), 46–63; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 404–12. The best and most recent summary of this extensive scholarly literature is Joshua D. Rothman, "Mr. Jefferson's Notorious Example: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and Sex Across the Color Line under Slavery in Virginia," presented at the Charlottesville conference convened by Jan Lewis and Peter Onuf, Mar. 5–6, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Monticello's oral history project, "Getting Word," began in 1993 under the supervision of Lucia Stanton and Dianne Swann-Wright and has, to date, interviewed more than 100 descendants of Monticello's slave community. On Nov. 3, 1998, in the wake of the DNA revelations, Monticello issued a press release in which Dan Jordan summarized the recent efforts to address the Sally Hemings question and to develop new programs focusing on the black residents on the mountaintop. Jordan also announced the formation of an advisory committee to assess the DNA evidence and "follow truth wherever it may lead us."

impressive mansion where a great American statesman sought solace from the tribulations of public life, but rather a working plantation where blacks and whites lived alongside one another, both together and apart. Any monolithic, faceless, and wholly generic sense of the slave community is sure to dissolve under scrutiny, replaced by a more textured and detailed picture in which the light-skinned members of the extended Hemings family stand apart from the dark-skinned field hands. (Betty Hemings, Sally's mother, will emerge as the great matriarchal figure in this story.) The status and social standing of Monticello's slaves broke down quite dramatically along the color line, with the Hemings family enjoying privileges and freedoms denied their blacker and less visible fellow slaves. If there was a covert sexual history inside the mansion, there was also a covert racial history inside the slave quarters. Based on Jefferson's special treatment of the Hemings family, along with the much-mentioned description of Sally as "mighty n'ar white," one plausible way to reconcile Jefferson's sexual relationship with Sally and his lifelong belief in the biological inferiority of blacks is to suggest that Jefferson never regarded her or any members of the Hemings family as completely or even primarily black. Indeed the divisions within the slave community at Monticello constituted a dramatic refutation of the rigidly dichotomous character of Jefferson's racial categories. One can easily imagine scholarly speculation that the theoretical rigidity of those very categories was a function of his intimate knowledge of their biological blending.

Meanwhile, inside the great house the accumulated curatorial and architectural expertise will need to develop closer connections with the insights of social and cultural historians. The interior of Monticello, itself a set of physical spaces, must be made to match up with the interior world of the white members of the Jefferson family, who were constantly negotiating a set of secretive psychological spaces. Here the unpublished papers of Martha Jefferson Randolph, which the staff at Monticello has just begun to catalogue, is the essential source. My own reading of those papers suggests that, much like her father, Martha Randolph possessed extraordinary powers of denial. She did not consciously cover up the ongoing sexual liaison so much as convince herself it did not exist. (How she managed this defies logic, but not in its new "Jeffersonian" version.) The next chapter in Monticello's history will have the salutary effect of exploding the highly sentimental fictions that have obstructed our understanding of domestic life inside the mansion. (We really do not know what all the residents actually did during an ordinary day.) Surely we will want to put away those Victorian romantic novels and break out our copies of Jane Austen, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The standard source on domestic life at Monticello is Sarah N. Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, 1978; orig. pub. 1871). The sentimental

Finally, the extraordinary coverage of the DNA results in the mainstream media confirms Jefferson's unique status as the dead-white-male who matters most. Every network and cable news program, every national news magazine, all the major newspapers, and many of the syndicated talk shows featured the story. Jefferson has always been America's most resonant and ideologically promiscuous icon, fully capable of levitating out of his own time and landing on all sides of the contested political turf up here in the present. While historians talk responsibly about the "lost world" of Thomas Jefferson and the inherent "pastness" of the eighteenth century, Jefferson lives on in the hearts and minds of ordinary Americans as a contemporary presence who best embodies the competing truths at the center of our ongoing arguments about the meaning of the American promise. Jefferson has become the great American Everyman, less important for what he said and did when he walked the earth from 1743 to 1826 than for the meanings we can project onto him.<sup>14</sup>

What we might call Jefferson's inherently "presentistic" character, that is, his tendency to embody contemporary rather than historical issues, was on display throughout the public debates over the meaning of the DNA study. Descendants of the Hemings family appeared on national television to express their understandable sense of vindication, coupling it with pride at being related to Jefferson, whom they saw in the Fawn Brodie mode as Sally Hemings's devoted lover and lifetime partner and therefore our most prominent early advocate for biracial and multicultural values. Op-ed writers and talk-show callers insisted, on the other hand, that the DNA evidence clinched the case against Jefferson, exposing the hypocrisy that lay beneath his eloquent platitudes about freedom and equality, confirming the predatory character of most slaveowners and the racist reality of our national origins. The producers of "60 Minutes" began work on a program devoted to the salutary impact of DNA research on long-standing historical controversies. Meanwhile, a hastily convened scholarly conference in Charlottesville made its major focus the complicity of the historical profession in rejecting the existence of the sexual relationship prior to the DNA findings, suggesting that those who had found the circumstantial evidence unconvincing were harboring racist prejudices that now required purging.<sup>15</sup>

---

picture it paints, which has exercised such hegemonic power over all subsequent interpretations, is now fading.

<sup>14</sup> The fullest and best coverage of the DNA story appeared in *U. S. News and World Report*, Nov. 9, 1998. During the two weeks following release of the story, a Lexus-Nexus search of major newspapers and news magazines yielded 221 entries.

<sup>15</sup> My main point here, that Jefferson defies the traditional scholarly definition of a historical subject, is reflected in the dilemma he poses in documenting the evidence presented in this paragraph. I appeared with descendants of Eston Hemings on both "Good

The fiercest and most improbable debate occurred when conservative journalists noticed the exquisite timing of the DNA study, released just before the November 1998 elections and just as the Judiciary Committee in the House of Representatives was considering impeachment charges against President William Jefferson Clinton. William Safire of the *New York Times* and the editorial staff at the *Wall Street Journal* smelled a left-wing conspiracy, carefully choreographed to make Clinton's sexual indiscretions appear less offensive by suggesting that presidential dalliance has a long and distinguished pedigree. The plot thickened when one examined the list of four hundred historians who signed a petition arguing that the charges against Clinton did not meet the historic standard for impeachment required by the Constitution. Indeed, one of the signatories, yours truly, is also the co-author of the explanatory note that accompanied the DNA study in *Nature*. (I inadvertently provided ammunition for the conspiracy theorists by calling attention in the piece to the eerie conjunction of Clinton's impeachment and Jefferson's exposure.) Conservative activist groups mobilized to question the scientific reliability of the study, the motives of historians who endorsed the likelihood of a Jefferson-Hemings liaison, and the allegedly transparent liberal agenda of academicians who were using Jefferson to rescue Clinton. The historical Jefferson mattered hardly at all in the ensuing exchanges. Indeed, the meaning of the DNA evidence itself became a function of one's position on Clinton rather than Jefferson, on Monica Lewinsky rather than Sally Hemings.<sup>16</sup>

While it is flattering to be credited with such singular influence over the Jefferson industry and the House Judiciary Committee, which as we all know proceeded to pursue its own partisan agenda unimpaired, my main point is less personal than historical. Namely, Thomas Jefferson has

---

Morning America" and "Today" on Nov. 2, 1998. The producers of "60 Minutes" spent two weeks researching the story, then decided not to run a segment for their weekly program. On Dec. 8, 1998, Jan Lewis and Peter Onuf distributed their announcement of a conference on "Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture" at Charlottesville, Mar. 5-6, 1999. The announcement observed that previous Jefferson biographers had failed to get the story right "because they relied too heavily on the authority of previous scholars and apologists" and were therefore ill prepared "to accept the full implications of our complicated racial history." Scholars invited to participate in the conference were asked to "reconsider their own assumptions and practices" and to "reflect on how these stories are constructed and the purposes they serve." Unlike Professors Lewis and Onuf, I am unpersuaded that previous scholars who rejected or doubted the liaison were covert racists or blind defenders of Jefferson.

<sup>16</sup> See the editorial and op-ed pages of *N. Y. Times*, Nov. 2, 1998; *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 26, 1999, W-15. I received more than 150 letters and e-mails from impassioned Clinton-haters, who also claimed to be Jefferson-lovers, all throbbing with indignation that any respectable historian would accuse Jefferson of sexual indiscretion or any Christian parent could oppose Clinton's impeachment.

become the most potent weapon and most valued trophy in the culture wars. He electromagnetizes all historical conversations that he enters and transforms them into contemporary events. Although we are the official custodians of the past, Jefferson has escaped the past and our control over his place in it. All discussions of his legacy, even those conducted by professional historians, end up being less about him than about us.

Try as we might to render a more realistic picture of his flawed felicities, much as we strive to inject a dose of skepticism into hyperbolic claims by those wishing to canonize or demonize him, our best efforts fall victim to the political and ideological imperatives that he, more than any other American figure, has come to symbolize. With Jefferson so much always seems at stake. He has so thoroughly infiltrated the national ethos, has so thoroughly insinuated himself into the contradictory convictions at the core of America's promise to itself and to the world, that no wholly detached or thoroughly historical rendering of his legacy is possible. This is an old story, elegantly told in its earlier versions by Merrill Peterson in his authoritative account of the Jefferson legacy from 1826 to 1943. Now, in its post-DNA phase, the story continues in an even more intensely melodramatic and presentistic mode. He is more a sphinx than ever before.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960). A revised paperback edition, with a new introduction by Peterson, was issued by the University Press of Virginia in 1998.