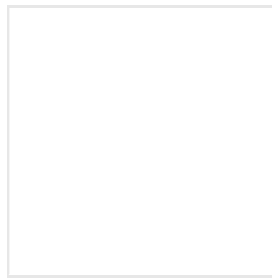


Interviews - Annette Gordon-Reed | Jefferson's Blood | FRONTLINE | PBS

When you wrote this book, did you have any idea that it would create this kind of controversy, and become this important issue in American life? Or is that why you wrote the book?

I hoped that it would become this kind of controversy, at least in terms of getting people to think about the issue--about the way blacks are portrayed in history-- you're dealing with issues that are volatile, like race and sex.

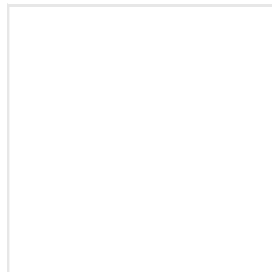
I didn't know that it would go to this extent. . . . But I did hope that we would have a chance for this kind of conversation.



Why is it so interesting to people in America? Why are we fascinated by this possible union between Jefferson and Hemings?

People have been interested because of Jefferson's stature. He is an American icon. The sex part of how blacks and whites interacted with one another is interesting to people. But also this notion of a family, of the kind of connections between blacks and whites, has been a forbidden topic. It's extraordinary to be able to talk about it, and to talk about it in the light of a very popular figure.

I can't imagine that the interest would be there if it involved any other person. But Jefferson is of interest to so many different types of people. He's a vehicle for talking about the subjects that people typically may find uncomfortable.



Does this story touch on what might be called a secret territory in American life? We've all sort of suspected it was there, but now we have very good evidence that it actually was there--that there was a mixing of the races. Does that have something to do with the curiosity?

People generally accept the idea that there was a mixing of the races. The question is who was doing the mixing. Jefferson has been called the personification of America. For some people, there's enormous symbolic value if the personification of America mixed his blood with a black person.

It's not as though people are saying, "Oh, wow, we've just discovered that there was miscegenation." It's who was doing the miscegenating that has caused the interest. To the extent that people see themselves in Jefferson, and identify him with the nation, what does it say about the nation that he had children who were of mixed race?

The notion of excluding blacks, or the will to exclude blacks, is part of some people's hostility, at least some people's hostility to the story, to the possible truth of it, because of its symbolic value. It's symbolic, and it's real, and we shouldn't confuse the two aspects of it.

Symbolically, it's tremendously important for people . . . as a way of inclusion. Nathan Huggins said that the Sally Hemings story was a way of establishing black people's birthright to America.

If you look at the flip side of it, rejecting the story is a part of the rejection of black people's birthright and claims to America. So people invest a lot in the topic and the subject.



In terms of a birthright . . . On a literal level, and even on a symbolic level, Jefferson's children with Sally Hemings would be illegitimate--would be technically thought of as bastards. Is this emblematic of the race in general? Do you sense that this has something to do with the interest, or maybe the passion of blacks to "work their way back" to Monticello, and establish a connection, or as Nathan Huggins, says to establish a birthright-- to establish legitimacy?

I don't know how passionate blacks are about working their way back to Monticello or how passionately a number of blacks are about working their way back to Monticello. But it is a way of establishing the truth of American life. And when you can participate in the shaping and the acceptance of the truth of American life, that is a way of claiming a birthright, literally.

The truth, and the willingness to accept black people's truths, no matter how difficult they are, establishes yourself as an American. That's the way I would frame it. I don't know that other . . . Obviously members of the Hemings family have a legitimate reason for wanting to talk about the truth of their lives.

But mainly, for blacks, it's being able to say, "This happened, and this was a part of our history. And when we can include what happened to us, then we are true American citizens."



What brought you to this subject?

A lifelong interest in Jefferson and Monticello and slavery, and dissatisfaction with the way historians were treating the story. I saw it really as a rejection of black people's input and black people's participation in American society. I wanted to do much more than prove that Jefferson and Hemings had children together--something that happened lots of times all across the South. I wanted to show just how marginalized black people were. Think of Madison Hemings, whose memoir talks about his life at Monticello, saying that he was the son of Jefferson. By all rights, I think the words of slaves should be taken seriously.

Typically, people who are known victims are listened to. People care about their lives and what has happened to them. And here it was exactly opposite, because he was saying something that people didn't like. The focus was on protecting slave owners, as opposed to listening to slaves.

There's a letter from someone telling about a person looking up and seeing a servant who looked like Jefferson--so much so that he was startled.

What I wanted to do was to say, "Hey, if you're going to do history, you have to do history that's inclusive, and not just inclusive on topics that are not hot button issues." Because I'm not saying that historians never paid attention to blacks. But this is a critical issue. Defining Jefferson and Madison Hemings defines Jefferson in a very, very real way. And I saw people rejecting that. So that's what really drove me to write about it.



In your book, you talk about the difficulty historians have in looking at Jefferson, in looking at blacks--that generally, historians often tend to relate to people like Madison Hemings, for example . . . out of a stereotype. And then the historians are in the position of answering the stereotype, rather than the human being.

Methodologically speaking, has that been your secret? To simply see that Sally Hemings was actually a human being, and that her actions could be explained in very common human terms?

Yes, that was a part of it--not just the Hemingses, but Madison Hemings, Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Jefferson's grandchildren, who told a story that Jefferson's nephews fathered the Hemings children. I wanted to look at all of these individuals as individuals, and not as representations of slave owners, slaves, slave woman, master. Those categories are important. But to me, there was a very simple issue--he either had children with her or he did not.

And the way you go about that is to look at individuals' lives, not by talking about them in terms of what they are supposed to represent. What they represent is important. But the work of actually figuring this out had to be done at an individual level. Methodologically, that's the way we do everything. If you really want to find out the answer to something, that's the way you proceed.



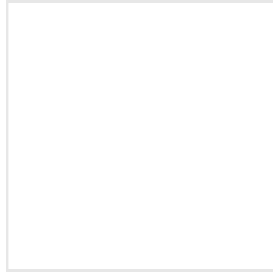
That's very interesting. You mention one example--I forget the historian's name--who you said wasn't really dealing with Sally Hemings, but was really dealing with the entire brutal institution of slavery, and he brought all the attributes of that institution to . . . the person.

Exactly.



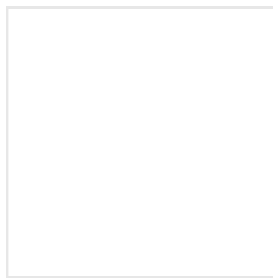
His view changed the nature of her motives as a figure in history.

It was Garry Wills who was explaining why it was unlikely that Jefferson was involved in this relationship, and he said something to the effect that Jefferson longed to escape the horrors and the degradation of slavery. And the system was degraded. But not all of the people within it were degraded. They were people who had spirits and personalities. Wills sort of put onto Sally the institution itself, which you cannot do.



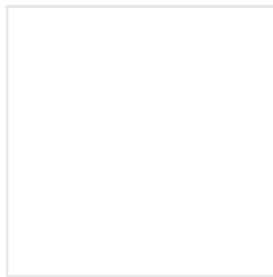
How was she different than our stereotypical view of the institution, or Garry Wills's stereotypical view?

She had experiences that the typical enslaved person, or the typical freewoman would not have had at the time. She traveled. She lived in Europe for over two years. Those kinds of experiences change us. People go on Grand Tours to Europe to change themselves. And anybody who has ever been in a foreign country knows that residence there for any length of time changes your outlook on life. But people never considered that that could have happened to her--they just saw her as slave girl, who could have been in Georgia, or Texas, or anywhere. They were not seeing her for what had actually happened in her life.



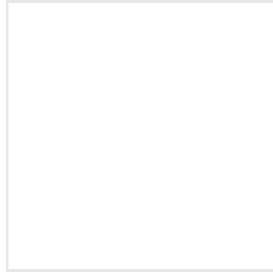
And as "slave girl," she becomes invisible.

Yes, she becomes invisible. She becomes a part of a faceless mass of people who have characteristics that are largely been given to us by popular fiction, like Gone With The Wind. And she's not a person in her own right.



Is your own passion for this subject for the truth--simply to establish the record as accurately as possible?

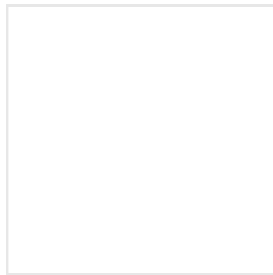
Absolutely. It's a way of establishing black people's participation as American citizens from the very beginning. You have to be able to help write the history of the country in order to establish your right to be here, to say that you're legitimately here. And to the extent that they were not believed and scorned because their contributions didn't fit the picture--that was another way of saying, "You're not really a part of this. You can't be a part of it if you can't help write this story."



Why has that been so difficult, particularly for recent historians . . .

It's a legacy of slavery. A part of the system of white supremacy says that whites define what is real and what is important, and that has been a feature of the country from the very beginning. We're getting away from that. The whole fight is to get away from that. But it's hard. This was embedded in the very laws of the South and of America.

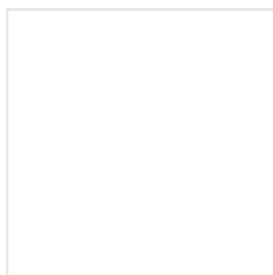
Blacks couldn't testify against whites for long periods of time in sections of this country. And it's hard to get away from that.



Even into the 1970s and 1980s and 1990s . . .

Even to now, as a black . . . I went to visit my brother, who worked at an airline. He was talking about how, sometimes when he'd say things to whites, they act like you don't know what you're talking about. This happened all the time. There's this constant sense of having to prove yourself, and having to do more in order to establish yourself.

So when Madison Hemings's memoir appears and defines Jefferson in a way that historians were unwilling to have him defined, it was easier to just say, "Oh, he's just a former slave. He's someone of lower status." It's not just race--class also enters into this--that people like that are not believed when they say something.



Regarding the racial difference itself . . . between Jefferson to Sally, or historians toward the memoirs of Madison Hemings . . . Is it possible to say that the racial difference itself is an opportunity to disregard the humanity on the other side, who is of a different race?

It's an opportunity, in the sense that the structure for doing that is already there.

. . . If you're an historian and you're writing about this in the 1940s and the 1950s and the 1960s, on a conscious or on an unconscious level, you know that he's just a former slave--why listen to him? He has all these motivations. The tendency in the society is that you do what will work.

That worked for a very, very long time, until you get to a point where someone says, "Wait a minute. What if we treated him like he was a person, and we actually listened to what he had to say?" And then the picture looks very, very different.



Let's talk about the young Tom Jefferson. Could you characterize his racial views, as he's coming of age as a young man, coming into his career and moving into politics? He's soon to write the Declaration of Independence, and so forth.

The first time his early racial views are expressed in any cogent form is in Notes on Virginia, when he's a younger man. And he is, by all standards, a racist, by today's standards what you would think of as a racist.



How so? What does he say?

He muses about the differences between blacks and whites and Native Americans. He has a very romantic notion about Native Americans for all kinds of reasons. Native Americans are native to America. He was very interested during that period in trying to prove to Europeans that everything that was natural in America was just as good as Europe, and the Europeans had said that everything that lives in America degenerates. He had to prove that that wasn't true, so Native Americans are part of this, and so he romanticized them.

On the other hand, when he makes a comparison between blacks and whites, he speculates about their mental inferiority. He says that blacks smell funny, that they're not as attractive as whites. He has a phrase that he can't imagine "one among their number comprehending Euclid."

However, when you know the things he's asking people to do at Monticello. . .

. . . He's asking people to do things that are much above what he says. He says all they can do is tell a story, that they can't reason. People at Monticello were reasoning all the time and he had to know that.



What are some examples of that?

He has his artisans. He trusts his artisans with a variety of tasks that just are not simple things. They required the exercise of judgment. He had slaves using black powder to dynamite out areas and fell trees, and he entrusted them with tasks that required reasoning. I can't imagine that he didn't know that in the day-to-day life of Monticello

But when he is writing this sort of official position of Virginians about blacks, it's some pretty awful stuff about blacks. Most of what he learns he gets out of books. At one point, he says that blacks prefer to mate with whites just as orangutans prefer to mate with black women. And you know he's never seen never seen an orangutan. He doesn't know what he's talking about. He says things throughout his life that are either incredibly prescient, or incredibly stupid.



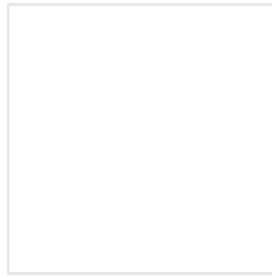
He's indulging here in really very uninformed views, even for his time.

I don't know about "for his time." Jefferson was ahead of his time in a lot of ways. But on racial matters, he was pretty much of his time. Interestingly, when he was secretary of state, Benjamin Banneker wrote to him and sent him a copy of his Almanac and said, "I read what you said about us in the Notes on Virginia. I'm here to tell you it's not true."

Jefferson writes back to him and says, "Thank you for the Almanac, and I'm always happy to see people like you who are" . . . Basically he says, "You're a credit to your race." And he gets in trouble for this. A lot of people are very upset at the idea. Jefferson gets in trouble for corresponding with a black person, . . . At the time, it's one of those things where the times had moved beyond him.

. . . For his times, some people considered his racial views as radical. But by our times, of course, we recognize the sort of deep flaws in his thinking, and he would definitely be considered a racist. So it's a

strange mix.



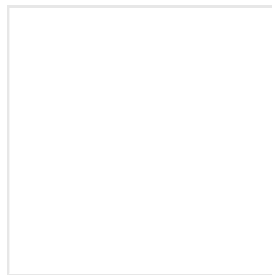
In current times, these views are clearly racist. Are the views still there at the end of his life, and are they consistent throughout? Does he ever really recant them?

Not that I know of. I don't think that there's any evidence of his recanting them. He did not believe that blacks and whites could live together in the United States. He thought that there would be a race war, in which blacks would most likely all be killed.

Strangely enough, that was why he wanted colonization. He thought blacks should be freed, but they should be sent to live somewhere else, to avoid a race war and, somewhat strangely, to avoid the possibility of general amalgamation.

So either they're going to kill each other, or they're going to mix themselves into a mongrel race. And those are somewhat contradictory views. But he really didn't think that blacks and whites could make it here together, because blacks would never be equal citizens.

Some people would say that he wasn't entirely wrong. We've come a long way, but we're still fighting for that--for that same kind of thing that he thought was impossible.



Can we say that, in his lifetime, Jefferson never achieved what we would think of, in our own time, anything like a modern view--an enlightened view of racial differences, or of blacks particularly?

I haven't seen any evidence that he did. He definitely believed that mulattos were different than pure blacks. He thought that white blood improved black people.

When he comes to a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration, he declines. and he sends a letter. He talks about the Declaration, and he says something to the effect that "the words applied to the few at that time, but one time they will apply to everyone."

You may read something into that. We don't know whether he thought that it would apply to everyone in

their own country or everyone here. But as far as his very sharp statements in the Notes on Virginia, I don't see know of any specific instance of his recanting that.



The young Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, says all men are created equal and so forth. Does he seem to have a very progressive view in the sense that, even if blacks are inferior, he feels that does not justify slavery? Can you talk about the progressive side of him?

You're right. In Notes on Virginia, when he realizes that he's made this statement separating blacks from whites, he comes back and says, "I'm venturing this only as a suspicion. I haven't seen them in their native country. Maybe it's different. Maybe the differences that we observe are due to their condition."

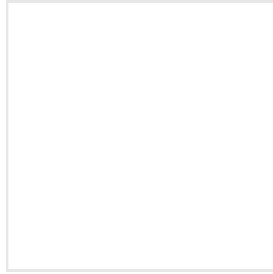
So this is an early instance of a person saying, "I'm not a racist, but." He's tentative about it. But even with that, he believes that blacks are equal in terms of their souls, in terms of what he would call their moral sense. And for those reasons, he's not a person who says blacks are inferior and so therefore they should be enslaved. That's not the calculation that he makes.

He is just concerned about how to bring these people who are so very different from us into full citizenship. He just doesn't have the confidence that it can be done. The progressive side of him says that people should be free, that all men are created equal by their creator. In that sense, they have the right to their own self-determination and to live as free and equal human beings, but that that doesn't mean that we're all the same.



Is it fair to say that his commitment to the ideals that we later came to think of as democratic ideals--the idea of the individual, that rights should be grounded in the individual--did he feel that should apply to blacks?

I would think that he that he did. But, again, there's the question of where does it apply to them.

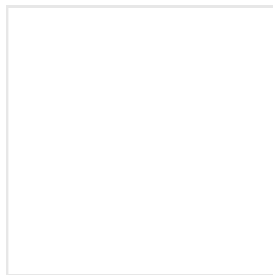


It was entirely an intellectual sort of thing?

No, I don't think. He's committed to it. But the point is that there's this difficulty when he talks about having blacks somewhere else. His vision must have been that blacks would be in their place, with their representatives, their leaders, and their way of life, according to what he would call democratic principals. The commitment is there. The question is, can we do it here with these two very different--in his view--races of people? And he just didn't have the confidence that we could.

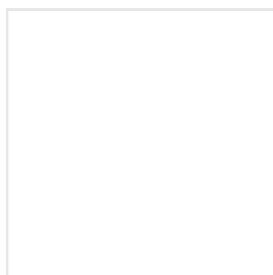
And he's taken a lot of hits, because his ideals are so attractive to us. And then we see something like Notes on Virginia and we see him in two extreme terms as a racist. What he's saying in that book is that it's possible that blacks are not as smart as whites, that blacks are not as attractive. Those are sentiments that lots of people held at that time and now. So I'm of the view that he's a racist, but I don't think that his racism was exceptional.

It's not as much as a chasm for me as it seems to be for other people, because I believe he is ordinary in his prejudices. That's not so much a statement about him as it is a statement about my perspective about the nature of American society. A critical mass of people have, over the years, acted as if whites are more intelligent than blacks, that whites are more attractive than blacks. It's part of a common currency, more common than people want to admit. And so he is used, I think, in some ways, as a scapegoat.



So his views really were sort of a fabric?

Of a fabric, exactly. He's struggling, I think. He's a very intelligent person who knows what the right answer is, but, as with all of us, we can't quite get there if it means we have to give up something--namely, Monticello.



Let's we move ahead to Jefferson's years in Paris, where he seems to have been very happy. On one hand, Jefferson and the social world of Paris are seen as a progressive thing coming from the American Revolution, and France is beginning to entertain these ideas. On the other hand, he's coming from a slave society, a society that clearly has slavery, which the French don't have. How do his racial views and that conflict stand him in Paris? How did it affect him in his time in Paris?

Once, he was asked to become a part of an abolitionist society when he was there, and he declined to do so. He apparently believed, mistakenly, that blacks on French soil were automatically free. . . . But blacks had to have petitions granted in order to be free. But it was not like England. If you're in England, you're free.



One thing that seems to make Jefferson somewhat popular in his Paris years is the fact that he had come from America, from this great democratic revolution. France is beginning to have turmoil in the same sort of direction. In many ways, he seemed to be in advance of their thinking about equality and freedom, and so forth. On the other hand, he came from a society where slavery was clearly still a very entrenched institution. How did he carry that irony in Paris?

Well, people mentioned this to him. The topic was discussed. But his answer was that this was something that would just wither away, that slavery would just leave, that it would not always be a part of the American landscape. It was a problem that would take care of itself, but that people had to understand where the South was and what situation they were in.

So he was able to deflect that by saying that one day, it would all solve itself.



How did he handle his own slaves?

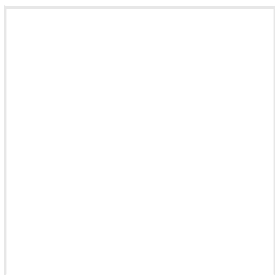
He brought with him James Hemings, Sally Hemings's older brother, to train as a chef. There's a letter from him to a man in which the guy evidently was asking, "What do I do about my servant that I brought over here? Is he free or is he not free?" And Jefferson says, "Well, I know a man who brought a servant

over, and he never said anything to him about the fact that he could be free in France. If you don't say anything to your servant, everything will be okay." And, of course, he's talking about himself.



So, as he's coaching this man to maintain his slave, he's also in the salon society, talking about freedom.

He's talking about freedom, and so forth, in a very philosophical way. But on the practical side of it, when someone says what do I do with my own slave, he says, if you don't say anything about it, they'll be none the wiser. And that's the situation that he thought obtained with James Hemings--which was apparently not the case.

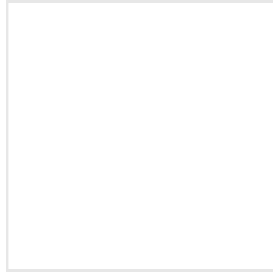


What was the actual circumstance with the French? What was their actual position with regard to slaves who people brought into their society?

For a long time, France had been very liberal about allowing people to bring slaves into France to stay there. But they had become concerned, because a number of men were bringing women in and establishing families with them. And they were concerned about what they called "the impurity of bloodlines."

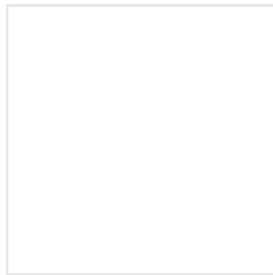
So there was a law that was passed to sort of tighten the reins. . . . If the slave was in England, there was a statement that the air of England is "too pure for a slave to breathe." If you were on English soil, you were free. That was not the case in France. At the time of Jefferson was there, the slave would actually have to make a petition to an assembly. These petitions were granted, but it wasn't clear that they would always be granted.

His slaves would have had a chance to make this petition and would have a chance to be free. Jefferson apparently thought that he was in England in this situation, but it really was not the case.



Did he ever learn? Was he ever the wiser about it?

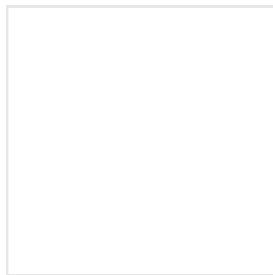
We don't know. But in looking at the Sally Hemings story, the story that Madison Hemings tells is that they were free in France. So both parties, apparently, the Hemingses and Jefferson, believed that just by being there, they were automatically free.



Is there anything to indicate that the two Hemings servants in his household--Sally and her brother James--were ever interested in pursuing freedom in France?

Nothing besides Madison Hemings's memoir, in which he says that his mother wanted to remain in France, and then Jefferson promised her various things if she would come back. At some point near the end of his tenure, James hired a tutor to teach him French, which may be an indication that he was serious about the possibility of staying there. He'd been there for almost five years, but it isn't until . . . the end of his time there that, with the wages Jefferson pays him, he hires a tutor to really learn the language.

There may be some suggestion that he had some sort of long-term plan about it. But there's nothing said specifically, other than Madison Hemings talking about his mother's desire to speak French and to stay.



How did Sally Hemings come to be in Paris? How did she then come to have a relationship with Thomas Jefferson, or how it is now surmised that she had the relationship there?

The story is that Jefferson had taken his oldest daughter to Paris with him, and left two young daughters with their aunt. One of his daughters, Lucy, died not long after he was got to France. He wanted to reunite his family.

So he wrote and said that we should send his youngest daughter, Polly--her real name was Mary, she was

later called Mariah, at that time she was Polly--to send her along with a mature woman who had been inoculated against smallpox.

Instead, the person that they were going to send was pregnant. So they sent Sally instead. Sally, at this point, was between 14 and 15 years old. She had been the companion of Polly, the nurse companion for Polly for many years. And so they went to London, and stayed at the home of Abigail Adams and John Adams for several weeks until Jefferson sent for Polly. And that's how Sally ended up in Paris.

She was originally not supposed to be there. It was supposed to be a mature woman, someone who was really suitable for bringing a young child across the ocean. But that's how she got to Paris.

No one knows how or when this started. Madison Hemings says that his mother was pregnant when she returned to America from France. So you can surmise that, at least, probably this was something that started at least near the end of their tenure there.



Do we know how long Sally was in Paris?

She was in Paris about roughly 26 months.



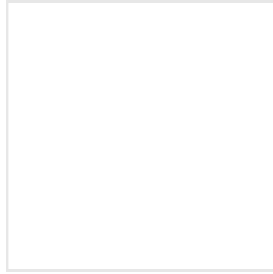
And when Jefferson left, she left.

Yes.



Is there anything to indicate that Jefferson may have shown her special attentions while she was there?

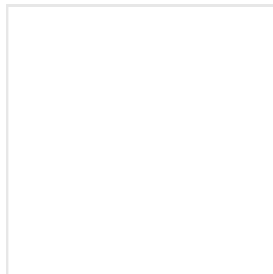
Not really. There are statements in his account books about his buying her clothing, and spending a fair amount of money on clothing for her.



More so than would be normal?

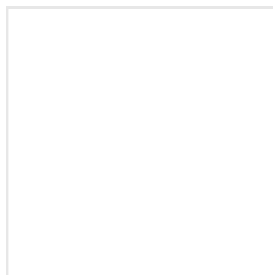
It's hard to say what normality is in that time. We do know that she was apparently going out with Martha, his oldest daughter, when Martha would go on social occasions when she got to be a certain age. And so there's some speculation that the clothes buying is really about that. But we'll never know. It was a pretty good amount spent on the clothing. But we don't know what it was for.

She was paid wages along with James, her brother, who was paid wages. But that was a practice that Jefferson followed whenever he had any of slaves in a place where the other servants were free workers. He paid them wages along with the others, so that there wouldn't be slaves there working along with servants and not getting paid. Again, it's hard to say what is special.



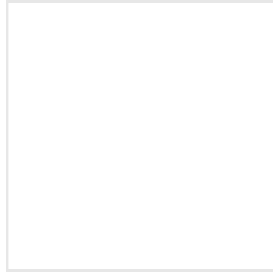
If we wanted to build a case for specialness, we could do that. But, in their right, they don't quite add up--we can't really make a case for it.

Given what we have, it's hard to say what all of that is about. The special privilege she got was to have all of her children walk away from that place free, and herself, free. At Monticello, they lived differently than the other people there. It's hard to know what's going on in France.



Is there anything at all to suggest what Sally looked like?

Just the references to her in Isaac Jefferson's memoir as being fair-skinned, with long straight hair down her back. She's described as a handsome woman. Thomas Jefferson's grandson was quoted as referring to her as good-looking. It's mainly things like that, of her being an attractive woman, but fair-skinned.

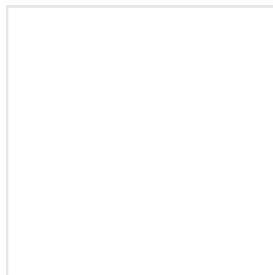


Do we know anything else about the actual life that she may have led in Paris--what it might have been like on a day-to-day basis?

It's hard to say, because we don't know where she was. She was either at the Hotel de Langoque with Jefferson and James, or there's a possibility that she may have lived at Jefferson's daughter's school.

I looked at his account books. The interesting thing is, when Polly comes to school, he pays the same thing for Polly as he pays for Martha. He actually pays a little bit more for Martha's schooling, because she has some extra lessons. They might have boarded and fed Sally Hemings for two and a half years without having charged him anything. But in the account books, there's no record of any charge for Sally.

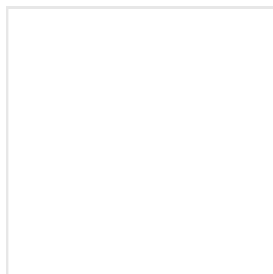
So I surmise . . . that she was probably at the Hotel de Longoque with Jefferson, but that's just speculation on my part. There are no charges for her upkeep at the school. Maybe other arrangements were made. But that's why it's hard to get a grasp on what she's doing. There's one period where she's boarded with a woman for six weeks and we don't really know what that was about.



While Jefferson traveled?

We don't know. It doesn't coincide, it doesn't fit. For part of the time, he's gone, and there are another three weeks where he's back. So we don't really know what that's about.

But that's interesting, because she's independently living another residence, presumably on her own.



On her own in a foreign country. In your book, you talk about Sally's own lineage. Both her mother and her grandmother had a fate very similar to hers, in the sense that they both had long-term relationships with white men who were their slave owners. I don't want you to

draw conclusions that are impossible to draw. But this was what she knew--it was an intimate part of her life. Is it plausible that, like the women in her family before her, she would not have seen a relationship with someone like Jefferson at all as strange? Might she have seen it as a kind of destiny?

Again, you're right. We can't talk about her seeing it as a destiny. But I can't imagine that she would have thought it was strange. It was prevalent, something that happened not only in her own household. And her mother and her grandmother had been involved with a white man. I can't imagine that she would see it as strange.



Would Jefferson have seen it as strange?

No, he wouldn't have seen it as strange, again, for the same reason. They're part of the same community here. They all know. Their elders had been role models. Historians long accepted the notion that Jefferson's father-in-law was Sally's father. There are other people in the community who were involved in relationships like this, so he wouldn't have thought it was strange at all.



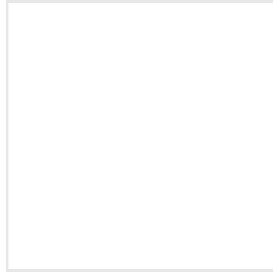
They come back from Paris to Monticello. Let's look at their relationship there. Children began to come from this union. Do we know how many pregnancies Sally had, overall?

Seven.



And all by Jefferson?

All by Jefferson, yes. There isn't anybody else on the horizon. They were all conceived at the time that he was here, and she didn't conceive any children when he was not here. There's never been any talk about her. . . . None of her contemporaries talk about her being with other men.

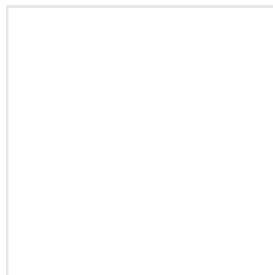


Do we know anything about how Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings and the various children--but particularly two--might have functioned at Monticello as a couple, and as a family?

Illicit or otherwise? She was his chambermaid. She was responsible for keeping his bedroom. She was a seamstress, and that's pretty much what we know about what she did. In Madison's memoir, that's the way he outlines her duties--taking care of her children, and keeping Jefferson's room.

Other than that, there are accounts from newspapers. People who are writing about this, the scandal at the time of the scandal, described her as something like a housekeeper, the person in charge of the house. But we don't really know whether that's just their characterization of it. The bare records, the statements that we have from people at Monticello, is that she's a seamstress and she takes care of Jefferson's wardrobe.

From Madison's memoir and from some of Jefferson's records, it seems the children pretty much hung out, were responsible for doing errands and were always with their mother or allowed to be with their mother, whereas other kids weren't, because their parents were off doing other things. The sons were apprenticed to their Uncle John Hemings at age 14 . . . They spent their lives learning how to become carpenters, and at some point, musicians as well, because they all played the violin.

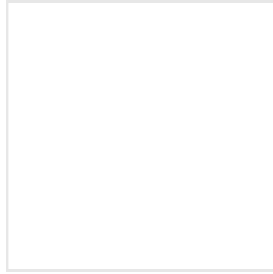


How does this differ from the education of his children by his white wife?

His children by his white wife, his daughters, go to school. They are formally trained, whereas Madison Hemings said that Jefferson's grandchildren taught him how to read and write. So we don't really know whether that was just him, or whether that was the pattern that was followed with all of the children.

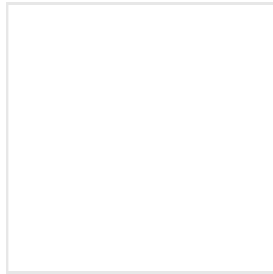
There are sort of tantalizing bits about the oldest child, Beverly, who is described as having set off a hot air balloon in Petersburg. At the time, this was a big deal. It's a scientific venture. You wonder how someone who had no training at all as a young man could be doing something like this. But we don't really know whether Jefferson seems to have had no direct hand, at least from Madison's view, in their education.

So, that's different. Jefferson's daughters are educated in the way that he thinks girls should be educated.



**How would that compare to the way other Virginia planters felt girls should be educated?
Was he more aggressive in that area or less?**

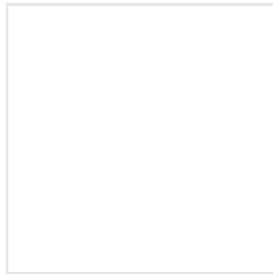
He was more aggressive.



So he was committed to education?

When he talked to other people, he sort of outlined a program for women that fairly rigorous, but not as rigorous for men. But his own daughters had a very, very good education. The school he sent them to in Paris . . . was a very, very good school.

He had his granddaughters reading Latin and he suggested things for them. So again, there's this picture of him as someone who thinks that men and women have a separate domain. But some of the women in his life were very well trained.



Do we know anything from the record about the character of Sally Hemings ? What kind of a human being was she?

We don't know much. A newspaper writer who wrote during the Calender crisis-- he wasn't associated with Calender, who broke the story about Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson--this reporter had done some checking, because he knew that she was a seamstress, and that had never ever been in a Calender report. This man's source described her as very good-natured, and industrious and orderly. Those were the terms that were used.

Abigail Adams described her as good-natured. That's where that comes from, when Sally was a young girl living in the Adamses' house. The newspaper reporter described her as industrious and orderly, from his

sources.

But that's just about it. Attractive. Good-natured, industrious and orderly.



That's not bad.

That's an interesting combination of things, when you think about what we were discussing before about blacks--using the institution to describe individuals, when you actually have people talking about the person. These are the words they used to describe them.



Very counter to the stereotype of what a slave woman would be like. Some people have said that her great achievement was that she negotiated the freedom of her children. Is that, at least as far as we know, her great achievement?

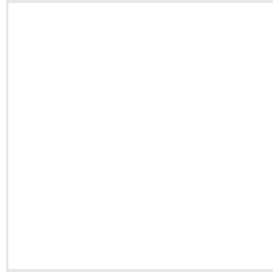
I would think it would be. Her children got an almost four-decade head start on emancipation, and were able to make the most of that. So I would say that probably her greatest achievement was in seeing that through.



Were people in Jefferson's position at that time they often amenable to that idea of freeing favorite slaves or slaves? Was that a common thing?

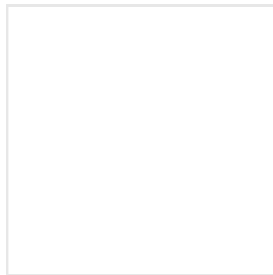
Yes, people very definitely did that. . . . But there's this notion that she couldn't have really bargained with him, because she was a slave and he was a master.

So that's a difficulty that some people have with it. I don't have that particular difficulty. Because if you have something that someone wants, you can bargain with anybody. That's just life.



Slavery would not mitigate that human bargaining between this man and this woman?

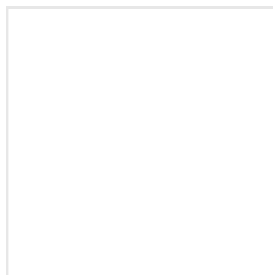
Not about this topic, I wouldn't think. I understand the concern that people have, because they say, why didn't you bargain everybody's way out of slavery? But this is a particular circumstance that has happened. Slave women have bargained with masters since biblical times. And for people to say it was different during American slavery just strikes me as more political than, I think, an intellectual judgment.



Did Jefferson ever, in any way at all, acknowledge his relationship with Sally? Any Freudian slip, or any other kind of slip?

. . . All of Sally's children are named for people in his family or for people who were close to him. And I was somewhat taken aback by that, if you think of what that would have meant. Names meant a lot in the eighteenth century. People would have recognized William Beverly. They would have recognized Thomas Eston, and James Madison. And Harriet--they would know that this was a part of his family.

And so that suggests that there was a relative degree, on his part at least, because either he did this or he allowed Sally to do this. She had her own people to name her children after, not Randolph. He must not have cared. . . . It would have given him away. But he evidently didn't care.



Was it that he didn't care? Or was he relying on the custom of the time, which was to maintain a kind of silence?

Probably both things. . . . People write about this now as if Jefferson would be sort of furtively running around hiding and fearing what the neighbors will think, like he's some suburban dad or something. And that's not what this was. He had the force of custom--not taking Sally down to the chapel to get married, not making some open announcement about it--living his life the way other people lived their lives. That

would be enough to protect him. As long as you don't step too far out of bounds. . . . People live lives the way they choose if they don't put it in other people's faces.



One hears that people's affairs are discreet. . . .

If people are left alone. That's what happened in this community. Josh Rothman has written about Charlottesville, and there were other interracial relationships among people that Jefferson would have known, such as merchants, and people in the town. These people lived this way for years until they did something that indicated that they were flaunting it, acting together as a couple, such as buying property jointly. That's a no-no. But just living together and having children . . .



Society seemed to draw the line there.

Yes, it was private. It was a private affair.



What would have happened, what might have happened if Jefferson had openly acknowledged this relationship?

It's difficult.



Would he disappear immediately?

Disappear from the consciousness? At the time, it's hard to say what would have happened. People would

have been aghast. It's possible that his political career would not have been what it was. He certainly would not have become the beloved figure of so many historians. . . . Would he have made it past whatever happened in his time? And it's hard to say. I don't know.



You think there is a possibility that, if he had said "This is my wife," his political career would have been able to survive?

No, no. . . . I don't think that he could have been president. He would have still been somebody who wrote and did things, and he could have still functioned in his community at some level.



But at a far lesser level?

A far lesser level. That was such a taboo at that time.



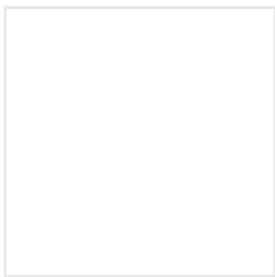
Some people have suggested that he had an opportunity. America was still a fledgling nation, and that if he had been forthcoming about this, he may have helped us get past a difficult racial impasse that we subsequently had to deal with in history. If Jefferson had taken a position like this, might it have helped America? No.



So he was probably somewhat wise in his decision to use subterfuge?

There's using subterfuge, and there's just not talking about it. He didn't talk about it, and kept it to himself. . . . Certainly, he was wise for his own sake, in not standing up and saying, "Oh, Sally's my wife."

I have a wild surmise. . . . Jefferson valued whiteness, and thought that being a white person was important in America. Three of his children passed, unknown, into the white world. There are people walking around today who are Americans and don't realize what their origins are. They have not gone through the kinds of things that other blacks have gone through. I think that Jefferson would probably think that was a success, that this was a sacrifice that had to be made in order to make them white, and to have them go off into the world. That's a wild surmise on my part.



. . . In the Madison Hemings memoir, there is a small, well, maybe a larger resentment toward his father. He suggests that Thomas Jefferson certainly paid a different kind of attention toward his children with Sally than he did toward his grandchildren--that he did not show them fatherly affection, and so forth. Can you talk a little bit about that?

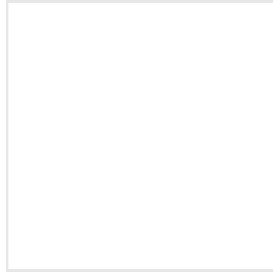
He describes. . . Jefferson being affectionate with his grandchildren--and we know this from other sources. Jefferson played games with them and read to them. In their memories of him, and in Madison's recollections of him, he's a very, very affectionate grandfather. Madison says that Jefferson was "not in the habit of showing us fatherly affection." "Partiality of fatherly affection," is what he says.

You do sense the resentment there. But I really wonder myself what that means--"not in the habit." Does that mean "never," or does it mean "seldom?" Were there times when he did do something, or was there some other way that it was expressed? It's hard to say.

It's fairly clear that Madison was around Jefferson quite a bit. There are letters from Jefferson to his overseer at Poplar Forest, mentioning, say, that he'll be visiting soon, and that Johnny Hemings and two aides will be coming first. Then the overseer would write, say, that Johnny Hemings and the aides arrived safely, and so forth.

We know Johnny Hemings's two aides are his sons, and that's what he's writing about. So, on his trips to Poplar Forest, he was there with his grandchildren. But he was also there with Madison and Eston, who were essentially working on the house as part of their apprenticeship.

We don't know about the character of the real day-to-day relationship between them. It's all expressed pretty much in what happened to them--namely, that they left slavery.



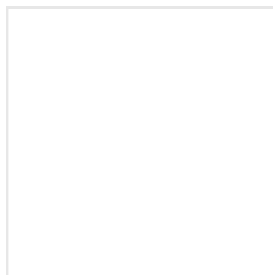
You mentioned in your book that to have resentment like that, it's possible there might have been some shows of affection, such that Madison would have a higher expectation that he was due affection.

Yes, I wonder about it. . . . If the typical pattern was, or the understanding was that there was nothing there--why would you expect anything different?

Madison had a clear expectation that he wanted more, and you get that from the memoirs. . . . It does raise the question, why do you think you're owed this? He clearly thinks he's in a family. He definitely thinks that he and his siblings and Jefferson and Sally Hemings are part of a family.

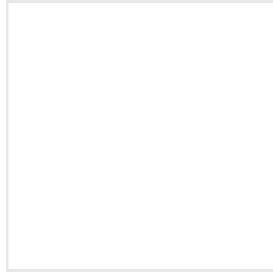
I went back and looked at the actual microfilm of his memoir. I noticed that Fawn Brodie--the historian who printed his memoir in the back of her book, who first wrote about this story as true--had made a mistake. At several points, when she has him saying, "Our father," or "My father," he's saying, "Father. Father did this. Mother did that." I thought that that was an interesting way of looking at it.

Why did Madison see Jefferson as a father if it was just a matter of biology? He clearly had some kind of expectation. That's is one of the things that's so tragic, in my view, about the way this has worked out. If people had listened to him, if people had done what they were supposed to do when they were supposed to do it, we could have an answer to a lot of these questions.



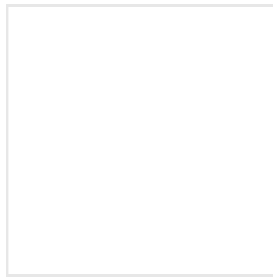
By "people," do you mean "historians?"

. . . If historians hadn't talked to each other about who is Madison Hemings's father. . . He had children who were alive into the 1920s. If anybody had gone to Ellen Wales Hemings--who was named for Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen Wales--what she knew. . . We may have been able to get it. But it's all lost. When you asked me why I wrote the book, you have to know about the missed opportunities, as well as the opportunities that are taken.



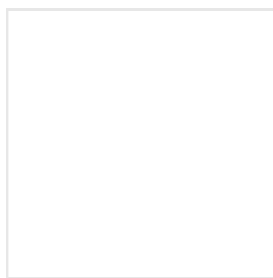
Were historians . . . and Jefferson guilty of the same crime, in the sense of disregarding the humanity of people across the racial lines?

Oh yes, definitely. It's perpetuated, and it's part of the system of devaluing black people, the system that has been from the very beginning of this country. You're not going to get away from that unless you attack it at every turn.



So part of the problem that blacks have today in establishing a truthful record is the result of the failure--not just of public leaders in the past--but of scholars and of historians?

Absolutely. . . . You can't talk about a system of white supremacy that operates in politics, in business, in health care and whatever, and say that it's every place except in the writing of history. It's clearly there. It's has been confronted much more so in the last 30 years. But Jefferson's whole story has sort of been in a time warp. Everything else around Southern historiography has changed. But this was a pristine place, where slaves were disregarded, the master class is protected, and things kept rolling along as the way they always had. So in that way, it was an anomalous situation. But what's encouraging now is finally being able to talk about this in a coherent way.



. . . Jefferson clearly had cultural support, and was protected in this sort of double life that he would have been leading at Monticello. . . . But it's fascinating to ask . . . what psychological devices enable somebody to carry that off? Imagine sitting at a dinner table with your family, having one's white daughter beside one, and being served around that table by one's black son. . . . That certainly requires an emotional gymnastics as well as a mental gymnastics..

I don't know that it's any greater than existed in dozens of other plantations around the South. As far as

the son serving, that, we don't know that his son was serving. That's one statement.



An exaggeration?

No. There's a letter from someone telling about a person looking up and seeing a servant who looked like Jefferson--so much so that he was startled. But that's it. We don't know that that was actually his son. We don't know what the nature of that recollection is, or its veracity.

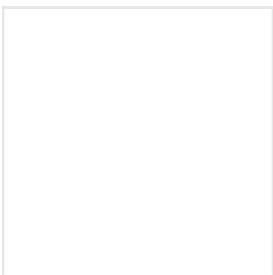
The point is, I don't think it takes a lot of mental gymnastics. A lot of people do such things. . . . That's what this system was about. How do you say that somebody's a piece of property, and then punish them criminally? Furniture and chairs don't get sent to jail. The whole system requires lying and duplicity and contradiction.

I know that Jefferson is seen as a contradictory figure. People make too much of Jefferson and the weirdness stuff, the weirdness factor. . . . He has this elaborate construct. . . . He's not hiding anything from himself.



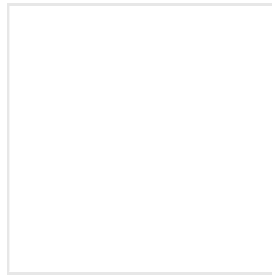
You don't think that he is building layers of protection around himself, so that the horrors of slavery are not visible to him?

He's trying to minimize it, because he doesn't want shacks around his house. A lot of people wouldn't want shacks around the house. He's doing a lot of things that people all over the South are doing. They're building slave quarters away from their homes. The quarters that they have around their houses look better than the ones that are further away. He's not as weird as you make him out to be.



There's not a neurotic obsession about making slavery invisible, and so forth?

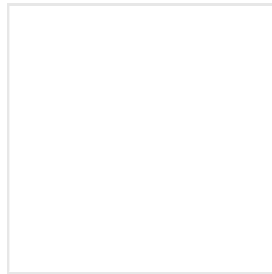
No more so than the rest of them.



. . . Is there any indication that the lying and the duplicity began to take a toll on Jefferson himself? In order to maintain and to carry a lie over a period of time or to live with one on that scale, one usually has to repress a lot of feelings. In this case, he would have probably had to repress possible fatherly feelings toward his own progeny. Does he pay a price for that constant repression? Does he become a more hollow man as time goes on?

. . . Does his soul become emptier? The early Thomas Jefferson had this moral courage, this moral daring, in saying that all men are created equal. Did his long relationship with Sally cause him to lose that?

No. In his later years, Jefferson was not the idealistic person that he started out to be. But then again, most people are not as idealistic at 82 and 83 as they are when in their 30s.



So it's just normal?

It's not due to Sally. A lot of things are going on. There's trouble in the Union. There's the Missouri crisis. There's a sense that this thing that he helped to build--this country, this nation--is going to split apart because of sectional rivalries and problems with slavery. The southerners feel the North is pressuring them. That would have happened whether there was a Sally in his life or not. And he would have been faced with the possibility of seeing all that he had helped to build fall apart under the crush of tremendous debts that he never got out of.

In other words, there's a lot going on in his life, and in the country, that would make him become what he became at the end--that is, less idealistic. He's less idealistic about the future of the country. He still would express . . . that things are going to turn up, and eventually, we're all going to be saved here. What he's really thinking about is the financial debt. . . .

I'm not sure how much it's the lie that he's living. I'm not sure that the lie is so perverse and so out of the ordinary and so different than what other people and other plantations were living, or that it would be

enough to warp his soul.

I think he would count himself a success . . . he could convince himself that the prime thing is to get his children out of this institution, get them out of here, and let them live a life that is free from this degradation. . . . When you're faced with these kinds of situations, particularly somebody like him, you do the best that you can do.

And you try to make the best deal that you can make. What he must have done was to say, "They're born." He has marked them with their names. He has treated them, in his view, not like white sons. But I would imagine that he noted that they get to be with their mother, and they learn a trade. And then they go and they leave all of this behind. If you think about the horrors of slavery, I would think that he, from his perspective, had done pretty well to get somebody out of that.



Could one say that the idea of black inferiority in a sense spared Jefferson from the feeling that he was living a duplicitous life? In that sense, "They're inferior, and given that, then I'm doing them a favor. I'm being generous."

They've certainly been done a favor by being made white. By Virginia law, they had passed the line, and were white. He's done them that favor. . . . For somebody who loved liberty as much as he did, he knows that the status of children follows the status of their mother--you're born from a slave woman. Unless someone removes this condition, you are doomed to be a slave. You're doomed to be black, and you are a slave.

I think doing that would have been enough to prevent the kind of corrosive thing you're talking about. . . . You're focusing on the bad. If you focus on his perspective--not from Madison's perspective, not from Sally's--but from his perspective, look what he's done. They're white, and they're going to be free white men. Within one generation, two of his grandchildren are millionaires. They own businesses in Madison, Wisconsin.



Grandchildren from the descendants of Sally?

From the descendants of Sally. The thing is, if you're a white man, a white person in America, and you apply yourself, that worked. That's exactly what happened.



So that sense, Thomas Jefferson didn't really pay any sort of psychic price the 38-year relationship that he had? It was all a positive?

No, he may have paid a price, but not in the way you were describing it before.

I have no doubt that he paid a price in terms of his daughter. Think of what this must have meant for his white daughter, Martha, and his relationship with her.



What do we know about that?

Martha was clearly the most important person in his life. They were very, very close. She eventually decides to cast her lot with him over her husband by moving herself and all of her children to Monticello after Jefferson retires from the presidency.

. . . He had to pay a price. But I don't think we can say that his bitterness, what he became at the end of his life, was because of this. There were other reasons. This could have been a contributing factor. But I don't think it was angst over Sally and the children that caused that.



. . . In his latter years . . . he's asked to contemplate the whole issue of slavery once again. It almost seems that, as time goes on, he becomes older and older, and more entrenched in his life, and his dealing with it becomes more abstract. He talks about it in mathematical terms--over how many years have we moved, how many can go back to Africa. . . . This is how much it's going to cost.

Yes, how much it will cost, and they'll still be multiplying, so after 20 years, we'll still be . . . The calculations at this point seem very removed, very inhuman. The racism seems to be pretty consistent. But certainly earlier in his life, there seemed to be a bit more positivity in his dealing with this problem and the whole business of slavery.

You know the old saying: the devil is in the details. When he's talking as a young man about all the things that you're going to do, certainly in the Notes on Virginia, he still thinks that blacks are going to have to go somewhere else.

But then when you sit down to think about that, it's one thing to have this idealistic things. "They can be freed and set up in another place, we'll give them a year," and blah, blah, blah. When he actually sits down to start thinking about what that means, it does become very cold and practical. Because then you realize that this isn't just a problem for the South. It's a problem for the whole country.

. . .

So it's a difference in the level of idealism. But it's also a difference in what he's doing. In the beginning, he is speaking theoretically, in philosophical terms about what ought to happen. In the letters that you're referring to, he's saying, "Now let's sit down, and see what's going to have to happen."

And I wonder, at some point, whether or not this is his own statement about the possibility of it, that there's no way that this is going to happen.



. . . Jefferson was so good at articulating the idea of freedom grounded in the individual, not on a group, not on a race, but in an individual, who then has rights and responsibilities as a citizen. Is there any indication that he ever applied those inspiring human principles to the problem of race? Is there any suggestion where he says, "This is what will get us through?"

No.



The civil rights movement and leaders . . . stated that we're citizens in a democracy, and that's where our rights are grounded, therefore racial difference should not matter. There's no indication that Jefferson ever even came close to using those ideas to deal with the racial problem?

No. No. No. I would have to say that from his view, his practical view, of the chances that white people would ever accept black people as full citizens.

And keep in mind what citizenship means. It's not citizenship where you have to fight for your rights, where you have to have a whole mechanism of law to make that people treat you right. Malcolm X says, "If you're a citizen, why do you have to fight for your rights?" Citizens don't have to fight for their rights-- they have their rights. And knowing his countrymen, Jefferson couldn't think that that it would ever happen. He's somebody who values liberty and values the individual standing as a citizen--what is it like to be in a place where you won't have that? And he didn't think that we could do it. He's an optimistic and idealistic person. But he never applied that idealism, or never thought that that idealism would carry through on the question of the two races.



Is Jefferson's life--and particularly his double life--really a cautionary tale against democracy? Does he feel that democracy is too weak a set of principles to ever really deal with a problem as intractable as race? In other words, is he his own argument against democracy?

He may be a cautionary tale about mixed democracies, about democracies as a melting pot. The jury is still out on that. It's unpleasant to the extent that blacks are still fighting for rights, not legal rights, but fighting for respect. What he says is unpleasant, but he poses the central dilemma. It is the central question. Can blacks be full citizens--not just people who are patronized and protected? Can you stand as a true citizen in this republic? He didn't think that it was possible. And I guess our challenge . . . is to answer if it can be possible.



If he doesn't think it's possible, doesn't that suggest that his formulation of democracy was too idealistic, and ultimately impractical?

No, it just suggests that he was uneducated. . . . We haven't yet disproved it. I may be optimistic in saying that we're on the way to that. But as someone later wrote, it's a lot to put on somebody who never saw a train; a person who didn't think that animals became extinct; who thought that there was a woolly mammoth in California; who thought that there was no such thing as a meteor shower.

He could see a lot, but he can't see everything. His failure of vision on this question doesn't destroy his vision. It just means that it was limited. He can be respected and admired in some ways. But he is limited by the information that was available to him at that time, which was that he was living on a mountain with people whom he was enslaving, and his livelihood was tied up in keeping them in that position.

He had no incentive, and had no way, really, given his personality, to break out of that. So you can have a vision of democracy based upon the importance of individuals, but you have to have other information. You have to have other inputs.



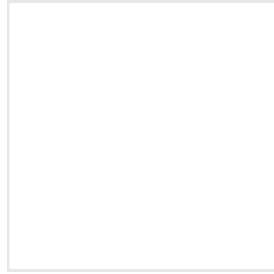
So his limitations are not, then, an argument against the democratic promise?

No, not now. Not now. . . . We don't know what he would have been if he had lived to see some of the things that have happened. We have the advantage of the past. One hundred years, and we're still struggling with it. And it's hard to criticize him if we're still struggling after all we know. We don't really know what he would have been like had he had the opportunities that we have.



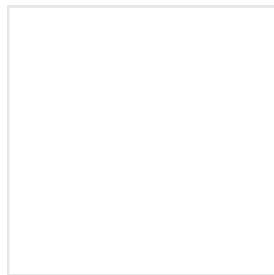
Is it fair to say that we have higher expectations of democracy than he would have, given natural limitations?

We certainly have a greater sense of human potential than he did.



. . . Did race afford Jefferson, in many ways, what might be called a double convenience? . . . When it was convenient, when he wanted to be with Sally as a woman, as a human being, he could deny her race and say she was really just sort of a surrogate white woman. And when it came to the matter of giving her the normal entitlements that human beings are due, he could say, "She's black." Did the idea of racial difference serve him in that way?

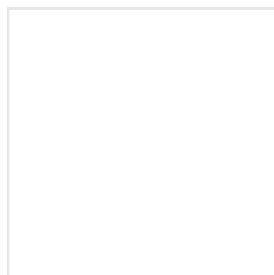
Again, it's hard to know what's going on in his head about this. She couldn't have been entitled to what was her due in life, because . . . it would have been impossible for her to be a wife.



Wasn't the racism that made that the case very convenient for him? He could have a wife without having to give her the entitlements of a wife. He didn't have to bring her into the institution of marriage

But he couldn't have brought her into the institution of marriage. What we're assuming, and what we couldn't ever know, is . . . whether he wouldn't have done that if he could have.

He couldn't legally have married her. It would have been against the law for him to do that. I'm not saying that Thomas Jefferson would have married Sally Hemings. But if we're speculating about how he felt about the relationship--how this is a convenience for him one way or another--you can't think about this without the thinking about the fact that he couldn't have been with her any way other than illicitly.



. . . One thing that seems fairly clear is just the simple racial difference, the fact that he was of one race and that she was of another race, a supposedly inferior and unentitled race. This was a very convenient situation for Thomas Jefferson. . . . He could say that she's a human being, almost white.

. . . But conveniently, he doesn't have to bestow the entitlements of a wife on her. . . .

I'm saying that race was a convenience to white society at that time, if not still. . . . They had opportunities to conveniently exploit people. . . .

Yes. It's a convenience. I guess I'm hesitant. . . .



Could a white person be a slave?

Yes, you're right. Race is what made it easier for people to enslave blacks. There's a whole controversy about whether or not they could have enslaved whites, or would have enslaved whites. . . . And I'm stumbling over saying that he used it as a convenience, because we don't know how he views it.



It's a convenience that came to him as a white. It's what we would call today "white privilege."

Yes, there's definitely convenience there. And he has privilege. . . . But we don't really know how he's thinking of her. . . . if it's convenient for him to alternately think of her as a concubine or as a wife.

What if he's sitting there thinking . . . "I wish I could do something different." What would he do? If he wanted to be with her, and the law will not allow you to marry, the alternative of not using her is to not be with her at all. With a white woman, the choice is to marry her or live with her. . . .



. . . Or use her as a convenience.

With a black woman, the subject of marriage is out of the picture.

Right. I haven't been very clear about this. But . . . what we're looking at is the idea that the evils of race . . .

provide this opportunity for those who are on the right side of the racial line to use people on the other side in convenient ways.

Exactly. And you don't know, and it's hard. That's why we're sitting here stumbling over this, because we have no way of knowing. We don't know what his motivations are.

. . . For instance, Sally Hemings's sister, Mary Hemings, lived in Charlottesville with Thomas Bell, who was, by law, her master. But they lived together as a couple. And when he died, he left her the house, and her children were freed.



Was she freed?

Her children were freed and then she was technically their property. There's no formal document of her being freed. But she's considered freed. We don't really know what's going on in Thomas Bell's head at this point. He could be using her as a convenience. But the things that he did at the end suggest that, during the time that he is listed legally as her master, there was something else in his head about who she was and what the nature of their relationship was.

Jefferson is more ambiguous. He didn't have any property to leave to his white family, let alone his black family. But you're right. It essentially gives white people the power to do whatever they want to do--to use this convenience as a convenience, or to maybe a higher motive. But you never know, because the privilege is there.



Through the years, have historians been guilty of a similar use of racial difference as a convenience in their interpretation of Jefferson's story?

Yes. Absolutely, certainly in the Hemings story. Jefferson wouldn't have sex with a "slave girl." That phrase was in newspapers and in books, as if everybody knows what a slave girl is. You say the phrase "slave girl" and you know what every African American woman was like from 1619 to emancipation. She was a slave girl.

We all know who she is. She's Prissy or she's Mammy. And Jefferson wouldn't be involved with Prissy or Mammy. You can use that as a shorthand for not explaining to your audience what you're talking about. You don't have to consider Sally if you use stereotypes of blacks as a shorthand instead of actually looking at facts, digging out circumstances and trying to draw a real picture.



What's the future of history, in terms of . . . Are we going to be able to get beyond that? Are you positive?

I'm very positive about it. I'm sure there are other pockets of resistance. But southern historiography and writing about slavery is a burgeoning field. In the past 30 or 40 years, and certainly in the past 10 years, there's been an intense interest in slavery. I'm very positive about it. It's just that Jefferson has been so central a figure in American life as an icon. He's on Mount Rushmore.

The closer you get to the light like that, the more difficult it becomes to be realistic about things. I'm very positive with what has happened just in the past--the reception of the book, even before the DNA, showed that there had been a real change. People were much more positive about it, and very accepting of it. I'm generally very optimistic.



Have you gotten a negative reaction about the book from any quarter?

Not as much as I expected. I would say that most of the mail I get from the public, from blacks and whites, has been 99% positive. There are some rumblings of discontent from people who think that I might be apologizing for Jefferson--that, in a way, I'm not seeing the real horrors of slavery and not seeing that Sally was oppressed. Sally was a slave. Of course she was oppressed.

But in the main, no, I have not gotten a negative reaction. I was sort of accused at one point of playing the race card in the book, as though I was using race as a way of to play on people's sympathies about the story. I don't think it was a fair charge, and I don't think it's anything that's been taken really seriously.

But, overall, the reception of the book was so different than the reception that Fawn Brodie got, even in the 1970s. Now that was due to some of the problems with her presentation, even though she had a lot of

good points in the book. But it's been very positive.



One thing I loved about the book is the fact that it was written essentially as an argument, almost as a brief. And the story emerges out of the argument, in a fuller way, really, than I've seen it anywhere else. Will you continue to use that method?

It was suited to this. This is what law professors do. You break apart stories, and try to get people to think critically about presentations. A controversy involving "he said" and "she said" is the perfect vehicle for doing that. It was a lot of fun.

In Notes on Virginia and at other times in his life, Jefferson is haunted by, or at least preoccupied by this idea of a war between the races. What's his vision of that? Why is that his expectation?

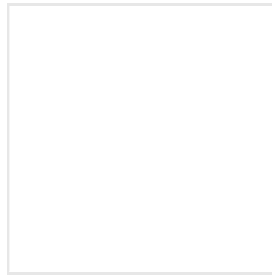
He doesn't think, at first, that whites will accept blacks as equal citizens. But he's also thinking about the way blacks view whites, and here he puts himself in the minds of black people. He says that they will never forgive or forget all the things that have been done to them during slavery.

"The memory of a thousand wrongs," is part of his quote. So he sees in black people this resentment that will never go away. He doesn't have the confidence that it could ever be extinguished. And he feels that they're going to go to war. They're going to fight each other eventually, and that blacks would inevitably be destroyed, because there are obviously more whites than blacks.



Does that surprise you in an eighteenth-century person? Does that put him in the mainstream of eighteenth-century thinking?

That puts him pretty much in the mainstream. There were other people who spoke very apocalyptically about what would happen if you had blacks remaining in Virginia, or remaining in the South, after emancipation. They would raise an army, there would be a constant threat--not only because of their deficiencies, but because they had reason to feel that they had been treated badly. And so he saw that as the source of a grievance that would lead to conflict.

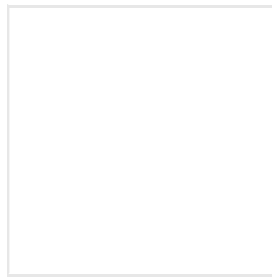


I'm jumping around here. In 1784, he arrives in Paris. . . . What was the city's impact on him in terms of plain architecture and aesthetics? What was it like for him?

He loved it. He wrote of this as the happiest time of his life. And Malone, his biographer, surmised that these were the happiest years of Jefferson's life. Jefferson himself said that, as an old man, if he didn't live in Virginia, he would live in Paris. That's what it meant to him.

He loved the architecture, the food, the wines, traveling about Europe, the sophistication. He loved being somewhere, other people have surmised, where there was no slavery. He had servants, but they were paid servants. And he could be away from all of that. He could live in a grand manner without the degradation of slavery.

Paris and France were the most critical time in his life, and certainly the most happy time of his life as he described it.

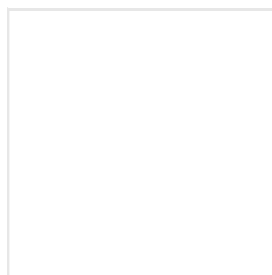


What were things like for him socially in Paris?

. . . Later on, when he becomes president, the great republican president is noted for not dressing very well. But in Paris, he kept in fashion, and kept his family in fashion.

He flirted with a number of women and had a lot of flirtatious . . . He had lively correspondence with women and men. He made great friends there. So he's definitely a part of the scene. . . .

It was a wonderful time for him. And he threw himself into the social life there.



He also visually loved that city. . . . It's an astonishing city just to look at, and when you

think about how much he cared about that stuff . . .

It meant a great deal to him. He loved architecture and he loved building, and he had a great eye. . . . It was intoxicating to him to see those kinds of sights. He saw himself as bringing a little bit of that back, to teach his countrymen about culture. He brought a great deal of it back when he came back to the United States. It was part of rounding out himself, as a vision of the gentleman that he aspired to be.



What were the views and conversations with his French friends about slavery?

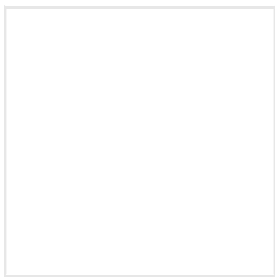
They're obviously anti-slavery. The French abhor slavery in the main, and they talk to their friend about this. He tries to tell them--when there are criticisms about slavery and questions about it--that this is a problem that will work itself out. He presents himself as being optimistic, that it's not something to worry about, that it will eventually go away.

But they definitely challenge him on it, because it's a glaring contradiction between his words and the ideals of America, and what the French were trying to do on their own, later on.



What about his finances in Paris? . . .

He wasn't getting any reimbursements from the government. He was spending his own money in the main. Jefferson spent lots of money in Paris. He bought lots of things, lots of wine. He was largely responsible for this because the United States government was broke. . . . So debt was on his mind. And it was one of the reasons he decided to return, to try to handle his finances at home, to put them in order. . . . It was a pressing problem for him.



. . . In a couple of letters, at least, he entertains a bold scheme of emancipation, of a certain numbers of slaves going to cohabit with German workers.

It's a salon scene in which he's surrounded by anti-slavery people. . . . At the moment, he's really entertaining bold thoughts. . . .

The idea was to replace a lot of slaves with German workers from Europe, who would come in and work the land and be farmers. Gradually, slavery would wither away. Like a number of his schemes, you'd have to wonder how much it really is a part of him, or how much he's just brainstorming these ideas.

But it's something that obviously was quite impractical from any standpoint. And it was not anything that he would be willing to come back and actually try to put into place. So at this point, they're just ideas that he's entertaining, and not something that seems to be really much a part of him.

He saw slavery, probably from very early on, as a national problem, that everybody had to solve together, rather than individual people emancipating slaves. It was all or nothing in his view.



. . . The awareness of his financial trouble closes in on him in Paris. What impact did that have?

He's a meticulous recordkeeper. He kept all notations about his debts, and so forth. But he didn't seem to have a big picture view of them. But he does realize that he's in trouble when he's in Paris, and he does want to come back and take care of his finances. You have to speculate about how this relates to slavery. His slaves were a source of his wealth. And to the extent that somebody is worried about the diminution of their wealth, they would be not as inclined to get rid of their wealth. It's a problem. And it was a problem all along for him,

Although not as much of a problem as when he became president. He started making a really good salary. There was a time when he might have had a chance, if he had been inclined, to do something. But certainly in Paris, he realizes that the debt from his father-in-law is never going to go away. It's a problem and he has to settle things.

I cannot think that that would be a time that he'd think of getting rid of his assets.



Except maybe to sell them . . .

Except maybe to sell them. Even then, it wouldn't have closed everything out.



. . . Can you talk about Sally's exposure to life in Paris--the sophistication she might have gotten?

It's all speculative. Her son and another person who wrote about her--a critic of Jefferson, who was describing the relationship in disparaging terms--said that she had the benefits of a French education. This was about eight years after she comes back from France.

So you get the idea that she did, in fact, have some familiarity with the French language. She obviously was not a field slave. . . . She spent most of her time around Jefferson and his family.

If you measure sophistication in terms of your knowledge of French, and some people do, she had that. And that's about all we can say about what she was like.

There are no letters from her. We don't know whether she was literate or not. Her brothers were literate. But we don't know about her.



. . .You said the toll on Jefferson may or may not have been that great. But Martha is a different story.

Again, it isn't anything that you can know. It's all speculative. But it's just very difficult for me to imagine that it would have been easy for his daughter to have another set of children by a slave woman mixed in with her and her children.

She moved to Monticello when he retired from the presidency. And all of her children were here and many of them would have been contemporaries of Sally Hemings's children. Madison Hemings would have been, at this time, around four years old. And Eston just born. And Harriet and Beverly were ten and

twelve. I can only speculate that it would be difficult.



Difficult how? So what, so they're around. . . .

Martha's son said that she took the talk about Sally Hemings very much to heart. It bothered her. That's an inkling that this was some item of concern. Now, of course, this story is told in terms of refuting the story. Supposedly, at one point she called her sons to her, and said that they always had to defend the reputation of their grandfather, and that she could prove that this wasn't true, because at one point, Jefferson had been away from Sally Hemings for 15 months and could not have conceived a child with her. That was not true. These types of actions, to my mind, suggest a little desperation, or a little concern about the matter.

Regarding Jefferson's grandchildren . . . the DNA is an amazing turn of events. . . .I had always been doubtful about the Carr story. I thought it was untenable, even on the documentary record. But certainly the DNA puts the nail in the coffin.

Think about his relatives, being willing to name, by name, some of their other relatives as the fathers of Sally Hemings's children when it wasn't true. You only do something like that if there's a substantial amount of desperation there. I have no doubt that they loved their grandfather, and that Martha Randolph loved her father and wanted to protect him.

But they clearly saw this as something of a threat. Certainly a threat to Thomas Jefferson, would be, I think, a threat to them. The knowledge of this story and people's belief in it was a threat to them. And their actions, I think, pretty clearly show that.



. . . If Martha's in the home, if her children are in the home--what does she know? What does she not know, and what would she have to choose not to know? What's the dynamic?

We can't say what the real dynamic is. . . . The children are there. People in the community talk about it. She would have returned to France with her father and Sally when Sally was pregnant. This would be something that would be part of everyday life. The question would be, and it's unanswerable . . . to the

extent that people were more open about this--it's hard to see how they managed it, other than a clear view that Martha and the whites are in charge, and Sally and her children are favored, but they are not the prime heirs to Thomas Jefferson.



. . . You say not to get hung up on Jefferson as being this psychologically bizarro character who can divide and deny, and keep all these things separate. It's not that exceptional. If we say that it's not that exceptional, are we saying therefore also that it's not necessarily that painful? That it's just another way of running a family life?

. . . There would be pain, I would think, in pulling this off. But life is painful, and those kinds of issues were faced by families all over the South, who managed to cope. That's what families do. They manage to cope in the best way that they can. And if you put yourself down in the middle of any bizarre family situation, you'll stand around and say, "How do these people do this?" But every single one of those people would have had years to fit themselves into whatever role you find them in.

. . . That's the nature of family life. It's especially bizarre to us, because this is a family that happens to own people. That's the most bizarre thing of all of it. To me, that hurdle is the biggest one. Figuring out what to do with your unmarried father's mistress and their children is an easier one for me to think of negotiating. You would not have to do some huge mental gymnastics in order to do that.

The real hurdle is . . . when there's a marriage, and you send a dozen people to the new household. Or if you need a mortgage, and these people can be sold to the bank.

. . . I'm not saying that he wouldn't feel pain, or that it wouldn't require some adjustments. But it's an exaggeration to say that it would require a sort of schizophrenic person in order to pull it off.



. . . What are the twists and turns that Martha has got to take to get to the point where . . . they're sitting at home and some of the people are servants, waiting on the family?

What she has to do is not to challenge him. She has to accept her role, to know that she is as a white person and her children are white children, and they're the dominant forces in the household. . . . But

there are petty jealousies . . . as there are on other plantations . . . between the owners and the slaves, and the paramours.

People don't write about the sort of normal human things at Monticello, so they're not apparent. But in other contexts, we know that those kinds of petty jealousies existed, and we can surmise that Martha Randolph was a pretty normal person and that those jealousies might be there. But her role is not to make too much of a scene about this.

This is the way it is. This is a hazard of the business. . . . Every business has its own kind of hazards. . . . Those in the slavery business would know that one of the hazards of that business is that there are mulattos, and that there are these families that co-exist. They have their way of coping. I can't tell you how they did it, but they did it without a lot of craziness on their part, no more crazy than the fact that they owned people--which was the craziest thing of all.<



Without a lot of craziness . . . and presumably also without a lot of talk.

Without a lot of talk. Although they mingled their names, and saw themselves as one family . . . in some ways.

Everybody knows it, but it isn't something you talk about. That's the way lots of families operate. You know these things, but you don't talk about them. This is the way it is and you just carry on.



Even Jefferson if had any impulse to come clean--and nobody is assuming that he does--he's not entirely free to move without . . . calculating, from his point of view, the dynamics of his family.

In dealing with Sally Hemings and her children, and his daughter Martha and Mariah and their children, Jefferson has to figure out how to handle this in a way that is acceptable to the white society of which he is a part, and also in a way that he would think was honorable, in terms of dealing with children whom he has created.

So it's a balance. Doing right by his slave children . . . conflicts with what white society demands. White society demands that you not acknowledge openly these relationships.



How does it conflict with Martha or her children?

They are owed certain things by the conventions of white society. She is his daughter. These are his white children. And by being his white children, there are certain things that they are due. One of the things that they are due is the respect of white people. In other words, not having people who are of lesser status-- blacks, slaves--treated in the same manner as they are.

If he were treated his sons by Sally Hemings . . . the same way he treated his white grandchildren, he would be putting them on par with people who had been born of a slave woman. That conflicts with the needs and the demands of white society at that time, which said that whites are up and blacks are down. He would be equalizing their situation by doing that. He would be disinclined to shame his daughter in that fashion. He would see that as dishonoring his family.

On the other hand, unlike his father-in-law, John Wales, had six children by a black woman. When he died, he left every one in slavery. Jefferson evidently felt he couldn't do that. He apparently felt that it was his duty to take them out of this institution. And he did do that.

So he tried to maneuver this in a way that caused the least amount of harm to the status and the stature of Martha and his grandchildren, while at the same time at least honoring a sort of baseline minimal level of honor and decency towards . . . his children with Sally Hemings.



. . . Jefferson presumed that democracy could not overcome the problem of race, and the inability of the two races to actually ever occupy equal status. What's our challenge? Is it possible in our times? . . .

Jefferson lacked confidence in the ability of blacks and whites to build a democracy together. The jury is still out on that, given the fight that black people still have in terms of maintaining their citizenship or establishing their citizenship. The challenge for us is whether we can be more idealistic than he was--if we

can, in fact, overcome this sense that we will never be one people, as citizens of the country. . . .

But the challenge is for us to have a more expanded vision of American possibilities. He had a more limited vision of American possibilities. The challenge for us is to go beyond his vision.



The DNA evidence, in other words, seemed to go in the same direction as your book was going. In concise form, tell us your own conclusions that you reached about the Woodson story when you were doing the research, and what you now believe.

I researched the question of whether or not Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had a child named Tom, who was first Tom Hemings, and then later changed his name to Tom Woodson. I came to the conclusion that that story was not supportable.

There was simply not enough in the documentary record for me to say that I believed that Thomas Woodson, who definitely existed, was in fact the son of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. I came to that conclusion because there are no records at Monticello ever listing him as a child of Sally Hemings, even when he would have been a very small child.

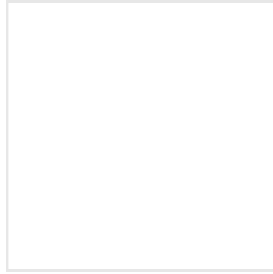
Madison Hemings's memoir says that Sally Hemings was pregnant when she returned from France with Jefferson, but that that child had died, and the thinking is that perhaps he just didn't know. . . . But why would his mother say that the child died?

There was no documentary record of Tom, unlike the Madison Hemings situation, where you actually have a child telling his story. Madison Hemings's story is not really properly cast as oral history. He is a witness, a historical witness from the time, who's telling you about his life.

The oral history of the Woodson family is very strong, but it was not enough for me to say that that story was as wrapped up as the Madison Hemings story.

The DNA information pretty much supports that position. The two lines that they've tested so far did not show a connection to Jefferson. The Eston Hemings connection to Jefferson was shown. And so this goes, I think, very importantly towards corroborating Madison Hemings's version of his life at Monticello.

And in his version of life at Monticello, there were four surviving children of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. . . . There was no Tom in that group.

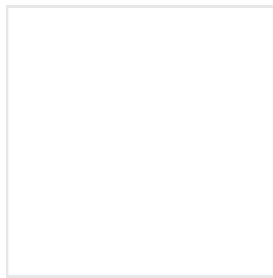


How did the Woodsons react to your book and to the DNA findings?

Some felt that I had not paid enough attention to their oral history, and that their oral history was dispositive of the issue. And I sensed some disappointment that I didn't accept the story.

Others had a different attitude. "Let's see if anything else turns up." They are still saying that we don't have the final word on this, and I don't think we do. We don't have the final word on Thomas Woodson. We may have the final word on the line of Woodsons who were tested up until this point.

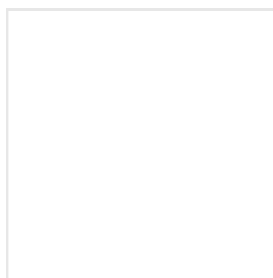
But the story of Tom Woodson is by no means over. But it's not close to being as clear to me as the Madison Hemings story. And that's my position on it.



You weren't at the big get-together in May. . . . Why not?

Lucian Trescot, who is a member of the Monticello Association, very graciously asked me to attend the reunion, and I decided not to, because it's a family reunion. I felt my presence there would be seen primarily as political. I wouldn't have a real reason to go to anyone else's family reunion.

And it was something that I hoped that the family would work out on its own. It's a family matter. . . . As much as I'd like to be an observer of the scene, I felt that, given my book and the role I've played in all this, it would be best if I was on the sidelines.



. . . What did you make of what happened?

I didn't think that much was going to happen, because this was sort of a case of first impressions for them. I got the impression from the news reports that the Monticello Association hadn't really thought very much about this. . . . Not all of the members were going to be there. . . . I didn't really think very much was

going to come of it. But there were wonderful pictures. And I know that a lot of people made some very valuable contacts, and there was a lot of talk across racial lines about this issue.

So overall, it seems to have been a good thing, even though I did get reports of some hostility on the parts of some people. But you would expect that. Overall, it was probably a good thing.



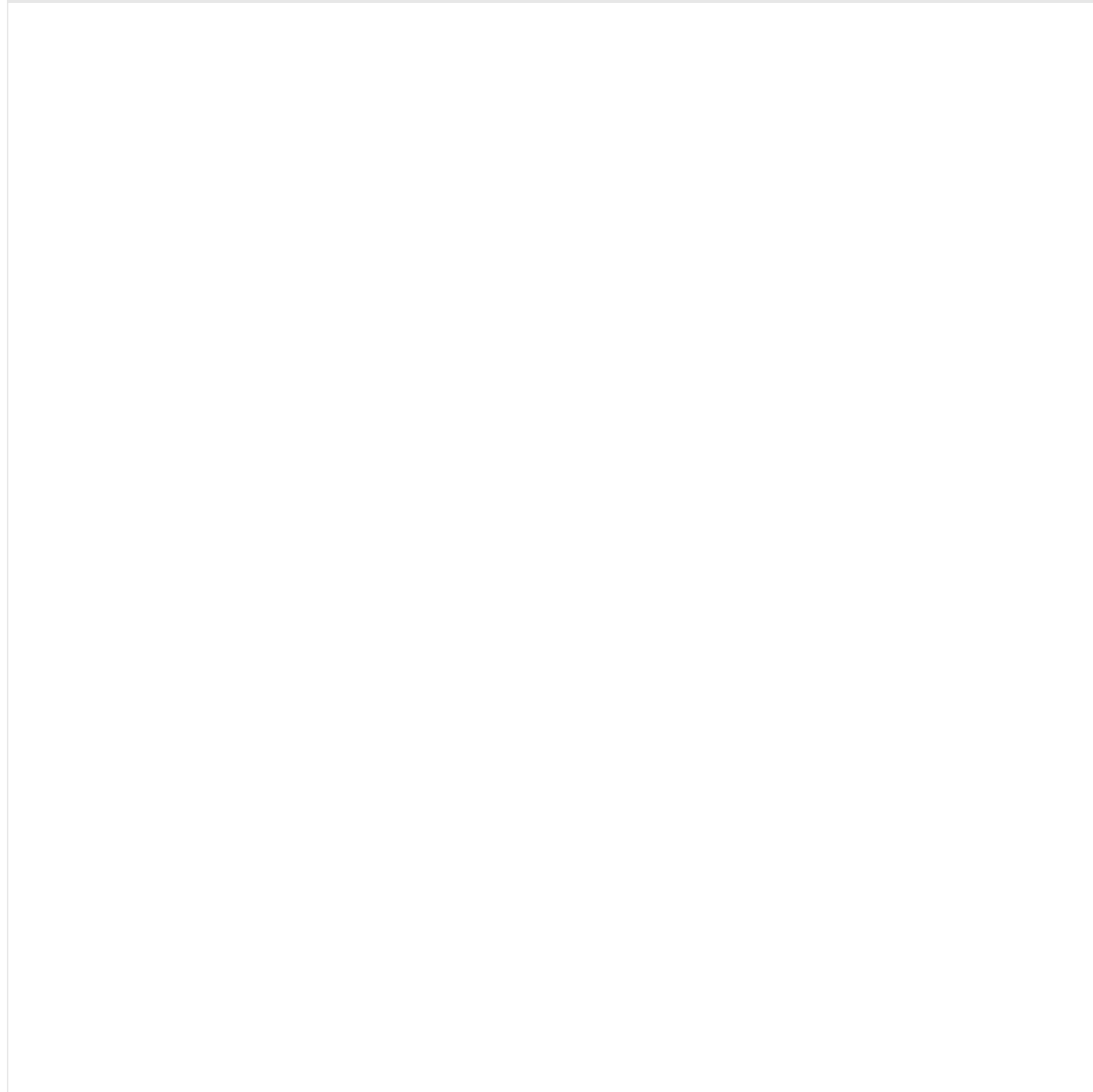
I was there. The Woodsons were not a marginal presence in that gathering. What do you make of that?

For some people, the jury is still out about their membership in the Jefferson family. And it's certainly within the rights of the Monticello Association to accept the Woodson family, to have their version of whatever family they want.

What was made of it is that the Woodsons were undaunted by the DNA, and have tremendous faith in their oral history. And perhaps something will turn up. Maybe we don't have the final word on it.

But DNA is not the only answer to all of this. For me, the DNA principally corroborated Madison Hemings's story. And that should be seen as the beginning, instead of an end to this story.

So the Woodsons still have faith.



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