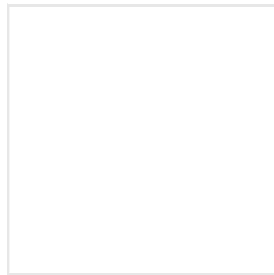


Interviews - Lucia Cinder Stanton | Jefferson's Blood | FRONTLINE | PBS

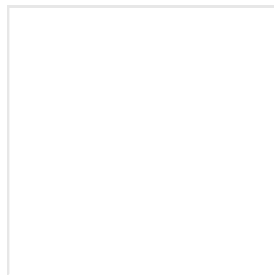
How much media interest has there been in this story? This has been a simmering controversy for 20 years or so since Fawn Brodie's book. On another level, you could say it's been a controversy of longer duration. But when did it begin to heat up?

There was always a feeling that there would be a judgment day some day--some defining moment when everyone would have to say what they really believed. But when Gene Foster first decided to take the DNA test, we knew that somewhere down the line . . . it was going to be a big story and change our lives. And we still do. We talk about "before DNA" and "after DNA." Things are different. My life was changed. From November 1 to January 4, I talked to some member of the press every single day. . . . After a couple of months, it would die down a bit, and then there'd be something new, with a little flurry of interest. So it's been continuous.



Why do you think it touches such a nerve?

It touches many nerves. One reason is that both Jefferson and Sally Hemings are symbols, and have been for 200 years. Jefferson is symbolic of contradictions in American society, a sort of hypocritical nation espousing liberty and enslaving a sixth of its residents. This was a very patent contradiction from the very beginning, and so it contains many things: freedom and slavery, and issues of race. Sally Hemings is a symbol of denial and erasure, an invalidation--not just of African oral traditions, but contributions and even presence. You have 200 years of history all encapsulated in this one issue. And, of course, all of those issues still resonate today.



When you say "erasure," give me an idea of what's missing about Sally. . . . There's so little to work with when it comes to Sally. . . .

Despite her celebrity, we know very little about her, perhaps even less than about many other members of her family. And nobody has tried to learn much about her. She's become a stereotype, which began at the

very beginning with the terrible racial stereotypes in the Federalist newspapers describing Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson.

Nobody has cared to look beyond that in all these years, until very recently. Fawn Brodie certainly did. But it was a long time before anyone decided to look at Sally Hemings as a human being.



What is gone forever in terms of the information that we can hope to get about Sally? There are no portraits. . . .

Her appearance is about the only thing we do know much about, because two people, at least, did briefly describe her. I think we know something about character and values that we can infer from circumstantial evidence. But in terms of her personality, I don't think we have a clue what she was like to be around on a day-to-day basis.



Describe Thomas Jefferson's intimacy, or lack thereof, while growing up around slaves. Characterize his world, and slaves' presence or non-presence therein.

He really closed the door on whatever experience he had growing up with African-Americans, so we know very little. We can only assume that it was very much like the experience of others of his generation. He certainly had a nurse, an African-American enslaved nurse who probably sang to him, and told him stories. As a child, his playmates were almost certainly young slave boys, probably even Jupiter, who became his personal servant later, because he had no brothers anywhere near his own age. He probably spent a great deal of time in the midst of this culture that surrounded his house.

But he has left not an inkling of that, and really turned his back on anything. Whatever he did take from that went underground in some way.



Underground because he talked little about his childhood? Or underground because he talked little about that aspect of his childhood?



We just have no sense from anything Jefferson tells us of his experience growing up with African-Americans. He was a very private man, as we all know, and left little inkling of his inner self in his writings. But he seems to have rejected black culture so completely in later life that you get the sense that he must have experienced it, but where did it go? We just don't know.



There's a little fragment of information that we do know about his early contact with mulattos.

We do know that there were slaves of mixed race at Shadwell. Peter Jefferson's will includes at least two mulattos in the inventory of his estate after his death. One of those was Sonny, who was given to Thomas Jefferson. So I don't think that mulattos were as much of a rarity as the Madison Hemings memoir implied. They were present in Jefferson's life from the very beginning.

Who was George Wythe, and what was his relationship to young Tom?

. . . Jefferson studied law with George Wythe. . . . Wythe became a very important mentor to Jefferson. Jefferson greatly admired Wythe. Jefferson spoke of Wythe's purity of soul. It was a kind of father-son relationship. Wythe also admired Jefferson. . . .



What ideas or thoughts on slaves would Wythe have had? Did he influence Jefferson in that regard?

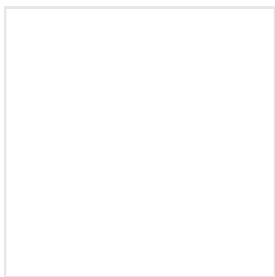
I've always been struck by the fact that, late in his life, George Wythe took pains to give a classical

education to a young mulatto boy named Michael Brown, which was very rare for a person of color in those days. Wythe raised him up in his household with this full education, giving him what very few white boys of that time would have had as well.



As a young lawyer, one of Jefferson's first cases was defending a young mulatto man. Does that case shed any light on Jefferson's views?

Jefferson took a freedom case of a young mulatto man. . . . It's hard to see just how that fits in terms of Jefferson's views of race, or of mulattos in general. But he did take a number of freedom cases. And in this case, he said in his argument that in the law of nature, all men are born free. This was a very early statement of views that would be later stated in the Declaration of Independence, etc. But I think it's very hard to draw any conclusions about his views of mulattos or views on race from those cases.



It's a bold statement to make, though, in a court, in an argument of law.

Yes, yes, I agree. But they lost the case.

If we talk about young Jefferson's views on slavery--say, before age 40, before he goes to Paris--would you describe Thomas Jefferson as in the mainstream among his Southern peers, or out of the mainstream?

As David Bryan Davis said, had Jefferson died in the 1780s, he would be considered a hero of the anti-slavery movement, because he was one of the most outspoken, and made concrete proposals for ending slavery. He was one of the earliest men to do that. His leadership role in taking steps toward emancipation in Virginia was really quite striking.

What are the things that would make him a hero?

Jefferson drafted the law that made the international slave trade illegal in Virginia. Also, very early on during the 1769-70 period, he began to take some measures to make the manumission of slaves easier for slave owners. But that was not a success. He continued to articulate gradual emancipation plans in various

documents. Some were not adopted, like the constitution of Virginia. He made these views clear to his contemporaries in Virginia. They knew his views.

But his emancipation plan always included the repatriation of freed slaves outside of the United States. That was true throughout all his life--this combination of emancipation and expatriation.



So he had these proposals. But politically, doesn't that suggest that he's pretty far out of the mainstream, if he can't get much of them enacted?

Right. He's probably best known for his provision that was partially adopted by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787--to outlaw slavery west of the original colonies.



What were the views on slavery in Paris among his Parisian friends, such as Lafayette? What were they saying?

When Jefferson was in Paris, there were all kinds of discussion of slavery--ways to end it, and ways to abolish the slave trade. He became a bit implicated in this. Certainly at every dinner table conversation, I'm sure he was talking to his peers about this. But when they tried to get him to join a society for the abolition of slavery, he held back and did not join, because he felt that he was the representative of the entire United States, which had not yet expressed a consensus on this issue. But certainly it was a topic very much under discussion in Paris when he was there.



Presumably, it's a happy time in his life, and he's engaged in these conversations about human liberty, the rights of man, etc. And while he's in one of those dinner table conversations, his cook downstairs is a slave. His livelihood is coming from slaves. Do you have any sense if that creates awkwardness in Paris? How do you reconcile all of that?

When we see Jefferson in Paris, he has brought with him one slave, James Hemings. Sally Hemings comes three years later. We immediately wonder if he talked to them about freedom and their possibilities for freedom in Paris. We have no real way of knowing. But he did write a letter to an American acquaintance who had brought a young slave into Paris saying, "If you don't tell anybody about this, then he won't claim his freedom." Or probably he's too young to even think about claiming his freedom.

But I think that James and Sally Hemings were probably old enough to think about claiming their freedom. It wasn't automatic. Any slave brought in from outside France had to go through the courts. It was a long process, something that would really take a commitment and support to do. But certainly it was much closer to freedom that James and Sally would have been in Virginia.

Sally Hemings achieved something no other enslaved woman at Monticello achieved, and that's the freedom of all of her children.

Jefferson suggests that the idea would never cross their minds.

He says it about this very young boy--that he probably wouldn't think of claiming his freedom. But I think that was an age thing. There certainly was a whole vibrant community of Africans and former slaves in Paris. The Hemingses would probably have known people. James Hemings would have.



So Sally and her brother might have been exposed in Paris to worlds that they wouldn't have known before?

It's pretty clear that in Paris at this time, there was a community--not a huge community--but a small community of Africans, slaves from the French colonies and former slaves. Many of them were working in the households of aristocratic Parisians. James and Sally Hemings would have become familiar with this community, and learned of their status, of their possible changed status from this community.



What would they have learned from that community? . . . What would they have learned about their own lives or their own possibilities?

The possibility for freedom is the most striking thing they might have learned from their fellows of African

heritage living in Paris. There would have been a sense of community that they could have belonged to. I'm only speculating at this point what it would have been like. But they certainly would have learned about what freedom was for someone of African heritage.



So while Jefferson is in Paris, Notes on Virginia is published. . . . It seems kind of a divided book. Some passages are explicitly racist. Other passages are very critical of slavery. What do you learn about Jefferson and race from reading that book?

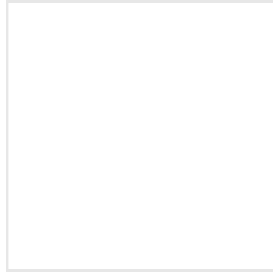
Notes on Virginia is really mystifying, because it's so full of contradictions. It has some of the strongest statements Jefferson made against slavery, against the whole institution, and some of the strongest statements any American made on issues of race and the innate inferiority of people of African heritage. It's interesting how Americans have forgotten, in some ways, the half about race. A number of people have stood up and read portions of Notes on Virginia, and asked people in the audience who wrote it, and everybody was amazed when they hear that it was Thomas Jefferson.

Was it the bigoted side that got buried?

The bigoted side has gotten buried in American memory. I see in Jefferson an extreme expression of the ambivalence of Americans in the revolutionary era. They were trying to act according to these wonderful new principles that they've expressed in documents like the Declaration.

At the same time, those below the Mason-Dixon line are trying to come to terms with owning human beings, and this is what Jefferson is trying to do in this document. He can state the abstract belief in individual rights and liberty for all. But he can undermine the full humanity of African-Americans, thereby pushing them lower down on what he calls "the scale of civilization." In that way, he cannot exactly justify, but can feel more comfortable with keeping them in bondage as possessions.





He's in his mid-forties by now. What do you learn about his views on the racial mixing?

Jefferson's stated views on the mixing of the races are crystal clear--that it was a blot on the white race, and on civilization in general, to mix the races. He was consistent about this throughout his life in his statements, mainly in letters. . . .

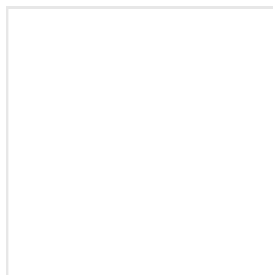
By the time he's in Paris, how are his finances? What kind of money is he spending? What kind of money is he bringing in, and what kind of pressures are on him?

Jefferson was a lifelong debtor. He inherited a huge debt, and also accumulated one himself through his own purchases on credit before the Revolution. So he arrived in Paris with a massive debt. I think he came face-to-face with the implications of this huge debt when he went across the Channel to London and talked to some of his creditors. He realized he was going to have to buckle down and do something about this. He couldn't just ride ahead of that wave all his life.

So he became suddenly more acutely aware of his financial condition while he was in Paris. At the same time, to keep up his position as a diplomat, he had to spend a lot of money to outfit his house, to serve his guests and so

forth. . . . So he was spending rather ahead of his salary. But he did eventually get reimbursed for some of this by the government.

The whole five-year experience in Paris and France really caused a revolution in Jefferson's tastes in so many areas--architecture, food and very much in wine. He spent a lot of energy visiting vineyards and having James Hemings educated as a fully qualified French chef, to have those things for himself, and to translate them to Virginia when he returned.



While he was in Paris, he comes up with a scheme to free his slaves. It may only be in a single letter, but he's talking about the German plan. . . . He kicks around some pretty bold notions.

While he was in Paris, he wrote one letter talking about a scheme that's very much like sharecropping. . . . He would bring a number of German people over to his lands, and give them farms of 50 acres, intermixed with his slaves. The Germans were known for their industry, so his own slaves would learn how to support themselves, to work hard and till their land. He thought they wouldn't know these things already, or wouldn't be able to learn them themselves. That way, they would acquire habits of foresight and industry-- things that would help them in another land, because they were eventually intended to be sent elsewhere...

Fairly late during his Paris stay, James Hemings is joined by his sister Sally. Obviously, not much is known. But we have a few shards of information. How old is she when she comes? What are her responsibilities? What are the descriptions of her, and what does she look like?

Sally Hemings arrived in Paris in the summer of 1787. She was either 14 or 15. We don't know her exact birth date. But we know what year she was born. And we get one of the very few descriptions of Sally Hemings because of this journey to Europe.

Sally Hemings and Jefferson's daughter, Maria, stay with John and Abigail Adams in London for two weeks before they come to Paris. Abigail Adams writes about Sally Hemings, describing her as fond of Jefferson's daughter, so we get a sense of an affectionate nature, and she's seemingly good natured, as well.

Abigail Adams sees Sally Hemings as acting younger than her age. Or maybe she didn't know her real age--didn't know she was as young as 14. But these two girls had just crossed the Atlantic basically alone, knowing no one else. I'm sure it was perhaps an exciting trip, but maybe also terrifying in some aspects.

What do we know about physical descriptions of her?

. . . We only know of two physical descriptions of Sally Hemings. One was by a former slave, who said that she had long straight hair down her back, and was light-skinned. Jefferson's grandson also recalled that she was decidedly good-looking. Both witnesses agree that she was very attractive and light- skinned. "Mighty near white," was what the slave Isaac Jefferson said.



Let's speculate. Is there any sense of what Paris meant to her at the end of those two years? What would she have been exposed to? . . . What can we infer?

Sally Hemings's son said that she was just learning the French language well when she left France. So we know that she was probably able to converse in French. We don't know if she had lessons. She was trained as a lady's maid while she was there. It's almost certain that that was true, because she was acting as a lady's maid to both of Jefferson's daughters by the end of the stay.

In that case, that meant that in the last six months of their stay in Paris, she would have had a rather broad introduction to Parisian society--Parisian society at the beginning of the French Revolution. Sally Hemings was in Paris for the storming of the Bastille, for instance. Martha Jefferson attended many balls with aristocrats--the ones who were hoping to keep their privileges, as well as those like Lafayette, who were going to modify such privileges. So she would have been exposed to a lot of this.

When Martha Jefferson attended these aristocratic balls in the spring and summer of 1789, almost certainly Sally Hemings accompanied her as a lady's maid. And you see reference to Sally in the letters between Martha and some of her friends. "Give my regards to Sally." So she was well known to Martha Jefferson's friends.

Isn't there some reference to "Mademoiselle Sally?"

Jefferson's butler calls her "Mademoiselle Sally."



There's probably not much more information about Paris. . . .

We don't know where she lived. . . . It was obviously a big thing in her life. Jefferson's overseer recalled that Sally Hemings always used to talk about her journey to France and crossing the ocean alone. So I think the whole experience, not just the travel, but the two years in Paris made an indelible impression. She talked about it a lot afterwards, and in later years.



So Jefferson completes his stint in Paris, and returns to Monticello. . . . What general role did the Hemings family play at Monticello?

The Hemings family had a virtual monopoly on the domestic positions at Monticello in the household

positions. Many of them were also tradesmen. Jefferson's grandson talks about how Jefferson's "mechanics," as he expresses it, and his household servants were virtually all of the Hemings family connection.



. . . If someone important, like Lafayette, comes to Monticello, what's their exposure to slavery and to the Hemingses?

Anybody who came to Monticello to visit Jefferson handed off their horse to a stableboy or was served at dinner by boys. A servant brought their water and wood in the morning to their room. They would have seen only members of the Hemings family.



Can we say anything or infer anything about how the Hemingses functioned as a family unit among themselves, what each meant to the other?



The extended Hemings family--Betty Hemings and her children and grandchildren--were very tightly knit. We only have a few clues about this. For instance, when her grandson Burrell Colbert--Jefferson's butler--fell ill one summer, he was nursed night and day by his uncle, John Hemings. You get this sense of a closely knit family with very strong bonds of affection.

And their status on the estate?

We have a couple of hints about the Hemings family and how they were viewed by others. Because they occupied virtually all the domestic servant positions, they got the best clothes. They were spared the backbreaking labor of the wheat harvest in the summer. In some ways, many would consider this the best position. But on the other hand, they were also at the beck-and-call of Jefferson and his family.

Is there any sense of their autonomy? . . .

Many things set the Hemings family apart from others who were enslaved at Monticello, and one is their mobility. Several of Betty Hemings's sons were allowed to hire themselves out to other masters, and travel about Virginia on their own. Jefferson would summon them back to the mountaintop when he would return there for his vacations. We don't know of any other slaves that were allowed to travel on their own in this way.

And certainly because of the positions they occupied, they had better clothing than other slaves did. According to Jefferson's overseer, household servants had very little to do when Jefferson was off in public service. The overseer said that he basically left them on their own to do what they wanted for those months. So for many months, they were free to operate within the house and the plantation as they wanted. But of course when Jefferson came back, they worked basically around the clock, and didn't have the weekends off, as some other slaves did.

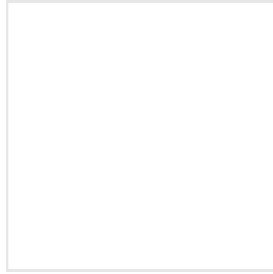
Jefferson's grandson said that the Heminges' occupation of all the best household positions was a bitter source of jealousy to other slaves at Monticello. . . . One of Betty Hemings's grandsons talks about a peculiar fact--that all of Jefferson's household servants were members of one family, and that he was brought up differently and clothed differently from the plantation slaves, as he puts it.

There would normally be distinctions of this type among house slaves and field slaves. There's not a clear-cut division. Even one of Betty Hemings's grandsons married the daughter of a farmworker. So it's a permeable boundary. But you do get a sense that the Hemings were a kind of caste apart, and were special in ways that were quite striking.

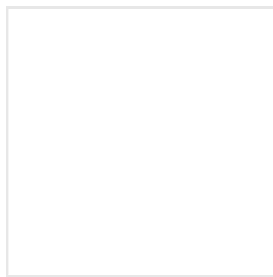
A number of things further affirm this, one being the fact that they very rarely married within Jefferson's plantation. They found their spouses on neighboring plantations among other domestic servants or free blacks in the Charlottesville community. Of course, their greatest distinction was their access to freedom. No other family at Monticello had this.



So after a long absence, after his post in France, he returns to Monticello. Sketch out your sense of what returning to Monticello meant to him.



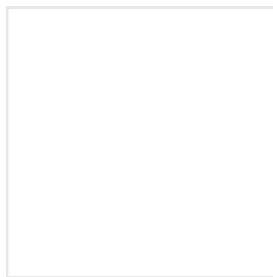
Monticello was really Jefferson's anchor. He called it the "safe harbor," where he always returned to from the boisterous sea of politics. When he came back from France, he thought he was just coming for a six-month vacation. But then he got tapped to be secretary of state, and really didn't return full time to Monticello until 1794. And this was a period when he had retired there, as he thought, forever. He threw himself into the reformation of his farms. This is when he called himself "the most ardent farmer in the state." He was out on the plantation, actively engaged in serving and starting the nail factory, and all the agricultural experiments, such as having threshing machines built. He was busy.



He's also returning to what he sometimes describes as his family. What did that word mean to him?

The word "family" had more meanings in Jefferson's time that it does today. Jefferson used it, as we do, about blood kin. But he also used it in a now- archaic sense of a household, or in his case, an entire plantation. This is sort of a patriarchal institution. He would talk about his "family of 104 souls." . . . This would include himself and his wife and child, but also all the free white workmen in the family, and all the enslaved African-Americans as well.

He would talk about his indoor family, meaning his immediate kin and his outdoor family, meaning everybody else living on the plantation. . . . This was common use at the time. But it shouldn't be confused with the way that we use "family" today. He wasn't thinking that his overseer, for instance, was as close to him as his daughter, or that some of his slaves were as close as perhaps a sister who was living in the same household for a time.



He made a lot of friends in Paris, and a lot of those people reappear in Monticello. What were some observations and reactions of the French who come to visit him at Monticello

after 1794?

I wish I had been a fly on the wall when Europeans came to Monticello to visit Jefferson, because I'm sure that they asked him about the institution of slavery, for instance, asking when he was going to free his slaves. And two French aristocrats who came in 1796 did remark on the remarkably light-skinned slaves who were living at Monticello.

The French didn't have to be as careful of mores as other Virginians were. They would have asked him about it, and I'd love to have heard his answer at that time. But we don't know. Lafayette visited in 1824 and 1825 with an entourage, and Lafayette at that time was talking about the institution of American slavery as "the great drawback on my enjoyments." I like that term.

We know that Lafayette discussed this issue with Jefferson when he was here at Monticello. So did Fanny Wright, the Scottish writer, who was here at the same time, incubating her own ideas about how to abolish slavery in the United States.

That was another time when it would have been fascinating to know Jefferson's responses. It's interesting that, during that visit, the responses that do come down to us of Jefferson come down to us through the voice of a former slave, Israel Gillette Jefferson. He talks about overhearing a discussion between Lafayette and Jefferson about slavery and about the education of slaves.

Israel overheard Lafayette and Jefferson talking about slavery, and he talks about "Lafayette's noble heart," about his desire that all the slaves be freed. Jefferson appears, in this recollection, as somewhat cold and dispassionate about the whole issue. . . .

And they also talk about the issue of the education of slaves. Lafayette asks why shouldn't they be at least given an education. And in Israel's memory, Jefferson said, "Yes, they should be allowed to read print but not taught to write, because then they could not be kept in subjugation. They would be able to forge free passes," and so forth.

It's really interesting how virtually all the accounts are from former slaves about how learning was passed on in the slave community at Monticello. We hear nothing from Jefferson himself about this issue. We hear a little bit from a granddaughter. But this hunger for education was so great in the slave community that there are a number of references to how they learned their letters at Monticello.



Lafayette seems to emerge a little disappointed, or at least pretty clear-eyed about Jefferson and slavery by the time the visit's over.

I'm not certain what Lafayette said afterward, but Fanny Wright, who was there at Monticello at the same time as Lafayette, talks about how she became acutely aware from this one visit of the deep prejudice against blacks in Virginia. It changed her whole view about how she would go about ending slavery in America. I think it's interesting that she picked this up at Monticello. She doesn't talk in any direct way about what Jefferson said.

After Jefferson died what happened to this larger family?

About six months after Jefferson's death, there was a sale of his estate by his executor to help pay the enormous debt that he left. On a very cold day in January, a three-day sale was advertised, of some furnishings, livestock, farm equipment and, as the advertisement stated, "130 valuable Negroes."

For the Hemings family, this was obviously a terrifying experience, full of sorrow for most of them. Some of the Hemingses had been freed in Jefferson's will. Joseph Fossett, for instance, was free, but had to watch his wife and seven of their children sold to a number of different bidders.

Sally Hemings, while she saw a number of her family members--nephews and cousins sold at that auction--knew that her own children would not be sold. She was the only one freed of that terrible worry of being separated from her children.

It's apparent that Joseph Fossett went to men in the Charlottesville community, asking them to purchase his children, promising to pay them back when he had earned enough money as a blacksmith, to reunite his family.

So this was the case for many of the Hemingses. Some might have achieved their freedom, but others were sold off. Sally Hemings and her children were spared that experience.



What is the biggest single fact that we know about Sally Hemings's life?

Sally Hemings achieved something that no other enslaved woman at Monticello achieved, and that's the freedom of all of her children. And their freedom came at the very beginning of their adult lives, when they could set the courses of their own lives. This is absolutely unique at Monticello.

The Hemingses, as a family, also were the only slaves that had access to freedom. All of the slaves that Jefferson freed during his life or in his will were members of the Hemings family. But not all of their immediate nuclear families became free in the way that Sally Hemings did.



So this is not an insignificant thing to pull off, if you're a slave? . . .

It's certainly unique at Monticello, and very, very rare across the South under the institution of slavery. And as Madison Hemings, Sally's son, said, "We knew all our lives that we would become free," so they were free of that worry. We don't know, in Sally Hemings's case, how conscious this was. But it was certainly a remarkable achievement in that time and place.



Can you talk a little bit about the differences between the kind of slavery that was practiced and occurred at Monticello and the American stereotype of slavery, which is sort of a monolithic brutal institution? . . . Particularly in reading your work, I see a much more complex practice of it here.

I think that's true, and it's because we know more about the people in this place. You can fill out lives and experience and make it seem not such a monolithic institution. We can put a more human face on slavery at Monticello because of the vast amount of material that helps us understand it there. But we can't forget that, in many ways, it was absolutely typical of slavery across the South. At the edges of this envelope of the enslaved experience was violence and force, and it was brought to bear at Monticello as well.

Jefferson spoke about having scruples against selling slaves except at their own wish, but he sold almost 100 in his life. The sale and the fear of sale were a daily presence for the slaves at Monticello. He spoke about wanting to moderate harsh punishment that was usual in other places, such as the use of the whip, but in his absence, this would be continued by his overseers. So all those aspects of the violent side of slavery were present at Monticello. But Jefferson certainly tried to moderate them.

Sally's sister Betty had firewood brought to her house every week. She had all the food and clothing that

she wanted. Her labors were apparently light. But one of her daughters was given away to Jefferson's daughter, who lived 100 miles away from Monticello. One of her nephews was beaten very severely, probably right next door to her house. . . .

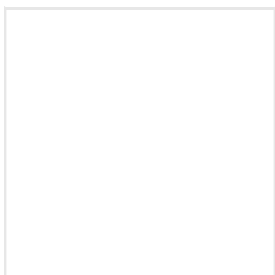
And two of her sons were sold. So even in the most privileged enslaved family at Monticello, you have the same experience that was true across the South. We can't shy away from thinking about the harsh realities of slavery. But we can fill in by thinking about the human responses to that institution.



. . . How did people like Joe Fossett and Burwell Colbert . . . become artisans, and apparently function at a pretty high level? How did they come to have an opportunity that certainly those in the fields would not have had--to develop skills, and then rise in importance at Monticello?

There were some highly skilled members of the Hemings family--John Hemings, the cabinetmaker for one. Burwell Colbert, who was a butler, was also a painter and a glazier. They grew up basically on the mountaintop, because their mothers held important domestic positions, so Jefferson would have seen them as they were growing up.

Burwell Colbert and other Hemings cousins worked in the nail factory on Mulberry Row, and at a time when Jefferson was in there on a daily basis, monitoring their performance and deciding their future careers. So Jefferson himself probably decided that John Hemings would probably be a good woodworker, and Burwell Colbert excels in the domestic area.



One almost gets the sense that this nail factory was almost a training ground, where he would select people to go on and advance in the crafts. . . . How did their professionalism compare to whites who were also artisans in that era? Obviously they couldn't negotiate for wages, but were they comparable in terms of their abilities, and so forth?

Someone like John Hemings was probably the equal and even the superior to many other white woodworkers in the same time and area. Of course, we have to remember that he was trained by white

woodworkers. Jefferson said of the work that John Hemings completed together with James Dinsmore, the Irishman who trained him, that he had never seen any superior in the United States. He's talking about the interior woodwork of Monticello. So I think it was an exceptional skill and development of those skills in his case.



Certainly I, as a black, have a hard time imagining being a slave in that circumstance, and being motivated to put in the time and effort to develop oneself into this really rather high-functioning artisan, when you know the fruit of your labor is not going to be yours. Is there anything at Monticello that would suggest a motivation? Was it simply pride on their part?

That was part of it. In the case of the most skilled of the Hemingses, we read from what did happen that they had more access to money, to actual cash. The artisans were allowed to keep a percentage of the profits of the nail factory, for instance, or from the barrels that they made.

John Hemings and his cousin Burwell Colbert were exceptional in that they were actually given a regular annual premium--\$20 a year--and allowed to go down to the Charlottesville stores and pick out the clothing they wanted. No one else was given this.

They actually went into the stores?

Yes, and got their clothing. And it's apparent from John Hemings's work that survives that he had pride in his work and a sense of his creative identity. When he was duplicating a certain chair for Jefferson, he got the basic shape of the chair, but each chair is different in its details. These are little designs that he added himself. So certainly, as a workman, he took pride in his work.

So maybe self-expression was a motivation there?

Yes, I think that's definitely true. And then, we have to remember that John Hemings and Burwell Colbert and Joseph Fossett, the Hemings blacksmith, all did also achieve their freedom.



This would have been very different than the life of the field hands?

Yes. The field hands didn't have access to Jefferson. The Hemingses had access to Jefferson. Therefore, they had access to money, to training in a skilled occupation and to freedom.



. . . To what degree was slaves' fate given to or forced upon them, and to what degree did they negotiate a fate for themselves as individuals? The stereotype is that there was no negotiation, and certainly that was probably predominant. . . . The Hemingses seemed to have a lot of room to negotiate, due to their access to Jefferson. Was there negotiation? Once they began to have skills, did they bargain those skills with Jefferson?

Negotiation to improve the conditions of their lives or to gain more privileges or even freedom was a constant presence at Monticello--not just in the Hemings family, but also with other families. . . .

But definitely in the case of James Hemings, for instance, who had acquired outstanding skills as a chef in Paris. It is apparent that when he comes back to this country, Jefferson pays him a wage. It keeps going up. You have a sense that James Hemings is getting restless with his enslaved status. Eventually, there's a contract for freedom, and then three years later, there's freedom.

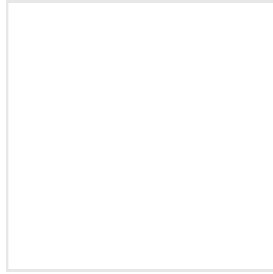
So it's very apparent in the case of James Hemings, who did have a marketable skill, which he used in Baltimore, and perhaps back in France after he became free.



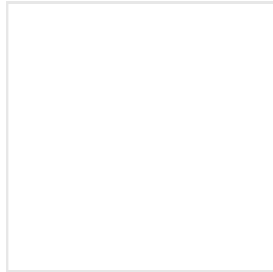
Why would Jefferson negotiate with him, if he owned him? . . .

Jefferson didn't have to negotiate. He could decide what he wanted to do with James Hemings. He owned him as property. But if he didn't make these concessions--give him more money, or perhaps special dispensations and eventually freedom--James Hemings probably would have run away or would have made life very difficult for Jefferson. He had many actions at his disposal to make life difficult.

But that's an interesting question. I'd like to think about that more myself.



. . . When we talk about black American culture, there's the idea that during the slave period, individuals had no means or opportunity to ever express their individuality or negotiate their own fates.



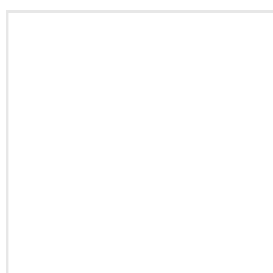
There were a lot of complaining going on at Monticello. For a while, Jefferson gave up raising hemp for clothing, because his slaves were complaining how terrible a job it was to break and beat the hemp. He gave it up until he came up with a machine that could do the same thing. You get a lot of cases like that.

. . . You describe Jefferson asking one of the overseers to not use the whip as much with boys in the nail factory because he feels that . . . this very brutal way will some how injure their characters. Can you say a little bit about this?

The most important thing to Jefferson was the smooth running of his plantation. That was the bottom line--that everything run smoothly--like a machine. So he didn't want any turbulence in the slave quarters or in the nail factory.

This whole issue of character is pretty interesting. It's almost like Jefferson and contemporaries feel they have discovered that slaves are capable of having a character, and that the whip is no longer the only means of encouraging industry.

That character, though, is very much like the ideal slave, which is industrious and basically trustworthy. Honesty, industry and fidelity are the words that they use. This is the kind of character that Jefferson is trying to develop. He doesn't want to be a tyrant. He's just spent ten years of his life working through the whole revolutionary era. He wants to live by the principles that he expressed and espoused. So this is a more congenial way of managing human beings to him.



That phrase "human beings" fascinates me. In order to understand how to manage the slaves, he has to see them as human beings. And those human beings do have a pride and do have character. It's kind of an interesting sort of irony.

Right. This is where it's starting to veer toward the standard paternalism of the nineteenth century. They are now recognized as human beings capable of having those traits you mention. But they are more like children than adults, you know, not to the same degree.



It's as though "I need to understand that they're human so I can better use them as slaves." . . . Looking back from our era, the word "racist" is now rather easily used with regard to Jefferson. Certainly, in Notes from Virginia and in other places, there's no doubt that he seemed throughout his life to be committed to the idea of black inferiority. But for many people the word "racist" also implies meanness and hatred, not just a judgment of inferiority. Was that a part of Jefferson's character, in terms of race?

No I don't think that the full twentieth-century view of a racist fits the Jefferson model at all. But I think his views, by our standards, are racist, in terms of his views of black inferiority. But they're without the sort of inhumane aspects that you're describing.

Was there ever any response or statement made by Jefferson concerning his relationship with Sally Hemings?

There is one letter that some historians have interpreted as a denial of a relationship with Sally Hemings. But the actual letter is lost, and only a cover letter remains. It's very ambiguous. Other than that, all we know is that at one time, Jefferson's daughter brought him a scurrilous poem about the relationship. One account says he gave a hardy laugh and said no more. Another account said he just smiled. So that's his only known response to this relationship.



What do you think would have been the consequences if he publicly acknowledged this relationship?

Jefferson could not have been a public servant. He would have been ostracized by his neighbors. And it would have been virtually impossible to continue his life as he did and acknowledge the relationship. Others who acknowledged slave mistresses in Virginia became kind of pariahs in society.



And what would have been the consequences if Jefferson had spoken out publicly against slavery?

Probably he never would have been president. But I think he might have been able to have some influence, actually. . . . Jefferson spoke about how it would disarm his influence--those are his words--to join abolition societies or to take small steps toward ending slavery. But if he had ever really decided that it was safe to speak out more loudly on this topic, I'm not sure what really would have happened.

I think it depends on when he might have done it. As a sitting president, for instance, he could have done more than just open the way to ending the international slave trade. He could have affected public opinion, and not totally lost power.



But were there slave owners who did acknowledge that they had fathered children with their slaves?

In the case of someone like Jefferson who had a family--his daughters by his wife, Martha, and grandchildren--it was basically very rare to acknowledge a second family. Those slave owners that we know who did acknowledge their enslaved children were almost all single men. It would have been virtually unheard of, an incredible shock to his immediate family, the whole state and nation if Jefferson had stepped forward and said, "These are my children."

. . . I don't think there was another case that matched Jefferson's, where you had someone who had a legitimate family and was also a president, a secretary of state--all the things that he was. I'm not aware of any others that matched that model.

. . . Certainly for Southern men who were married and had families, it was almost unheard of for them to acknowledge children they might have had by slaves. . . . There definitely was a taboo against this. But

cases of single men whose only relationship was with a slave are the cases where they might acknowledge their children, leave their estate to them in their wills, send them to Ohio to be educated.



Do we know anything about how Jefferson dealt with his relationship with Sally Hemings, in terms of his own family?

We can't see it from this distance. The silence, or the denial, whatever you want to call it, was so ingrained that it really didn't affect basic familial relations inside the household. Certainly everything did not run smoothly at Monticello. There was the drunken grandson-in-law who caused a lot of turbulence in the later years. But I think Jefferson's relationship with his surviving daughter and her children remained very deeply affectionate, and I don't see any ripples of trouble there.



What can we imagine about the closeness of these two sides of Jefferson's families--the children he fathered by Martha Wayles, and those by Sally Hemings? What would it have been like in Jefferson's dining room? Would all or some of them potentially have been together there at mealtimes?

Potentially, yes, the children of Sally Hemings or her sisters would be there in the dining room with Jefferson's family. I don't know how far we can go in trusting what Thomas Jefferson Randolph [Jefferson's grandson] said. But when he talks about a guest at Jefferson's dining table looking up and seeing the waiter standing behind him being the spitting image of Thomas Jefferson, it must have been very striking to people who came from outside.

Who else would have been in the dining room?

Standing behind Jefferson probably was either Burrell Colbert, the butler who put the main dishes onto the table. Or possibly Sally Hemings's sons Madison or Eston would be waiting at table. . . . When Jefferson's biographer Henry Randall heard Jefferson's grandson tell this story of a young slave standing behind Jefferson who looked exactly like him, he asked, "Why didn't someone have this slave removed from Monticello? Why didn't someone speak to Jefferson?" And Thomas Jefferson Randolph said, "We

would have never dreamed of approaching him on this topic or talking about it." That is a very strong symptom of denial and suppression within the family.



Is there any evidence or indication that his relationship with Sally troubled him?

It's not visible. I don't see it visible anywhere, and he was so good at covering up what he didn't want to see in so many areas that I think he probably preserved his tranquility in this area. His debts were the main thing that brought sleepless nights. But there's no sign of this issue troubling him that much.

The whole way he treated Sally Hemings's children--not providing them an education, for instance--is very striking in this way. It's obvious that if he was in fact the father, then he was a father in a very different category in his own mind as the father of those children.



What was the impact on Jefferson of the Missouri Compromise--the debate about whether the spread of slavery should be allowed to other parts of the country?

Jefferson was devastated by the first news he had of the dissension that led to the Missouri Compromise. His believed that the Union was in danger of being shattered by this issue. That moment really points up the priorities that he had throughout his life.

He talks about his two greatest anxieties being maintaining the viability of the new Republic and ending slavery. But the nation and its unity were primary. So his statements at this time of the Missouri Compromise are, at first, incomprehensible, because he seems to accept this idea that the diffusion of slavery is no worse than containing it within certain borders. But I think it's very consistent with the primacy of his concern about the United States as an experiment. . . . So keeping it together was more important than containing slavery.



At the time of the Missouri Compromise, what were his personal circumstances?

His finances were in a terrible state at that time. He was deeply in debt in the midst of an agricultural depression. But he was really basically optimistic by nature, and never stayed long in these moments of despair. All his letters will can contain both despair and hope at the same time. He was always going back and forth in that way. And sometimes one sentence will lead from one to the other easily, and he would always finish with a hopeful expression.

Can you talk about Jefferson's farm book and what it reveals?

We have lists of slaves' family groupings, and birth dates. . . . He's a plantation manager, trying to decide how much corn to raise and how much cloth to make or to purchase. We learn wonderful things because of Jefferson's farm book, which is really a remarkable document.

Sally Hemings is listed along with the other slaves in this roll of Negroes. For instance, in 1810, he provides the names of her children and their birth dates, sometimes even to the exact day. He doesn't do it just for the Hemings family. He's using it to make a clothing list. He knows how old everybody is, and therefore how much cloth each one requires according to their size. That's why we have this kind of information about Sally Hemings, as well as others.

Here's a roll of the Negroes according to their ages that he did in the same year of 1810. On this page, you find out about Sally's children, Beverly and Harriet. And next to their names, he has put brackets around, meaning they're gone in some way. He wrote "runaway 22," which means that they left Monticello in 1822.

There's another page of the farm book that's actually not in this. It was separated somehow, and the kinds of things that you can pull out is that it's a cloth ration list for 1821-1822. Jefferson probably drew it up at the end of December or the beginning of January, and Beverly and Harriet Hemings are not on this list.

You can learn very subtle things from this. They probably left around Christmas at the end of 1821. These are the sorts of details one pulls out. Christmas was a time when the slaves got a break from labor for four or five days. It was a time when slaves who were hired out came back to Monticello to be with their families, while boys who worked in the nail factory at Monticello would go back to Poplar Forest to be with their families. There was a lot of movement back and forth. And so it was a time for leaving as well. It's a time when many slaves ran away.

We can also learn something from the farm book about Sally Hemings from the kind of clothing that she wore. Here's a page listing the clothing of the house servants, before Jefferson goes on to list how much cloth everybody else would get. And you see the distinction made between the house servants and the rest of the slaves. They get Irish linen and real stockings instead of socks. Sally Hemings is there in this list as

getting virtually the same as the other house servants, but very different clothing from what the others would receive.

Is there any evidence that Sally Hemings had any privileges?

I see no sign of any special privileges that Sally Hemings had, based on what's in the farm book. She was treated as other domestic servants. She gets the same food rations, the same amount of cornmeal and meat, the same clothing as the other house servants. There's nothing to suggest special distinctions in here.

. . . She is still a slave. I remember when the Woodson family came to Monticello. I started to point out where the log cabin she might have lived in probably was located. They were shocked that she would live in a log cabin with an earthen floor, and a little stick-and-mud chimney. But I think she had the same living conditions as others in her family.

Is there anything else that is revealed in Jefferson's farm book?

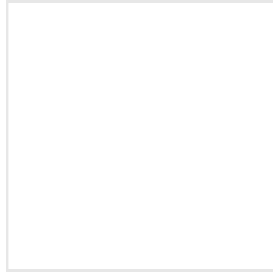
In these lists of families in the farm book, Jefferson lists them the way virtually every other slaveholder at the time did--usually by first name only, and often a diminutive. This was part of the whole way of dehumanizing his enslaved labor force.

But Jefferson uses the surname Hemings very often through here. They were almost the only Monticello family whose surname he does use in the farm book. And we know that the other families did have surnames. . . . This is another indication of the Heminges' distinctiveness on the mountaintop.



. . . Can you point out some other significant pages from this farm book of Jefferson's?

Here's a page where Jefferson lists his slaves in order of their birth dates. He only does this very rarely. We find Sally Hemings's son Beverly and daughter Harriet listed here with brackets, indicating either someone that Jefferson has moved to another plantation, or someone who's left Monticello, as no longer there. He makes this afterward. Next to Beverly's name, he wrote "runaway 22." That means 1822. And "run 22" down here by Harriet Hemings. It's very probable they left together at the same time.



Is there any indication that this term "runaway" doesn't tell the whole story?

Oh, yes. In fact, Edwin Bacon the Monticello overseer, said that he actually gave Harriet Hemings money at Jefferson's direction for the stage fare north. Madison Hemings also comments that they were allowed to leave the plantation without being pursued.

Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen Coolidge wrote that a number of slaves were allowed to leave the plantation. She said it was called running away, but they were never reclaimed. And Beverly and Harriet were two of those.

