



Is It True?

In 1998, the scientific journal Nature published the results of DNA tests designed to shed new light on questions first asked some two hundred years earlier: Did Thomas Jefferson have a relationship with a woman who was his slave? Did that relationship produce children?

Now, the new scientific evidence has been correlated with the existing documentary record, and a consensus of historians and other experts who have examined the issue agree that the question has largely been answered: Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one of Sally Hemings's children, and quite probably all six. The language of "proof" does not translate perfectly from science and the law to the historian's craft, however. And the DNA findings in this case are only one piece of a complicated puzzle that many in previous generations worked hard to make sure we might never solve.

In this section, FRONTLINE has gathered some of the key scientific and documentary evidence which has led historians to believe in Jefferson's paternity, as well as the "dissenting views" of those who continue to maintain that the evidence is not conclusive. FRONTLINE has also enlisted the help of historians to consider the Jefferson-Hemings relationship in the context of their own time.

[The DNA Evidence](#) · [Dissenting Views](#) · [Jefferson-Hemings in Context](#)

THE DNA EVIDENCE

The Official Report from Monticello (January, 2000) ▶

In November of 1998, following the release of DNA tests which, combined with the historical record, strongly point to Thomas Jefferson as the father of at least one of Sally Hemings's children, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation formed a Research Committee to verify the findings, gather all relevant evidence, and make a full assessment of the matter. This web version of the final report of the Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings is organized into six sections, evaluating the DNA science and the documentary evidence; listing the "uncontested facts"; and investigating the possible paternity of other Jeffersons, including the Carr brothers, who were long reputed to have fathered Sally

SUPPORT PROVIDED BY



brothers, who were long reputed to have fathered Sally Hemings's children. The final section of the report contains the committee's conclusion: that there is a high probability that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings and probably all six of Sally Hemings's children.

- [Sally and Tom: A Guide to the Documentary Sources](#)

Dr. Foster's Research ▶

In 1997, Dr. Eugene Foster, a retired medical professor, began investigating the possibility of a genetic link between living descendents of Thomas Jefferson and those of Sally Hemings. He compared the blood from five descendents of Field Jefferson, Thomas's paternal uncle, with the blood of the descendants of Sally Hemings, Thomas Woodson, and the Carrs. The DNA was extracted from the blood samples at the University of Virginia, then sent to Oxford, England where it was tested by three different laboratories. The results showed a match [\[see chart\]](#) between the Y chromosomes of the Field Jefferson descendents and the Eston Hemming descendent, providing strong support to the theory that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one of Sally Hemings's children. The chances that this match happened by coincidence are less than .1 percent.

- [U.S. News and World Report Cover Story on Foster Research](#)

Historians, Descendants React ▶

Just after Dr. Foster's findings were reported worldwide, PBS's Newshour convened one of the first roundtable discussions on the meaning of the findings. Listen in real audio (or read the transcript) of the Newshour discussion with historian Joseph Ellis, who won the National Book Award for Non-Fiction for his 1997 book, [American Sphinx, The Character of Thomas Jefferson](#), Annette Gordon-Reed, law professor and author of [Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, An American Controversy](#), and Daniel Jordan, president of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, a private group that owns and manages Monticello. While you won't get a heated debate (at this point, all three discussants all more or less agree), you will get thoughtful insights into how this new discovery affects our understanding of Jefferson.

- [DNA and "America's Jefferson Fixation"](#)
- [Jefferson Descendant Lucian Truscott Responds](#)

Jefferson-Hemings Before DNA-A Text/Video Report ▶

Why did historians for so long discount considerable evidence in the historical record which supported the relationship? And why did Jefferson historians promote an alternative theory involving Jefferson's nephews--a theory which could have been disproved without DNA? In this text/video report, FRONTLINE revisits key moments in the history of the Jefferson-Hemings story to see what was said and why.



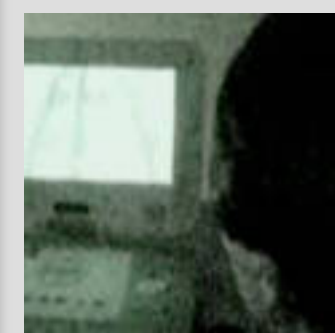
NEXT ON FRONTLINE



The Madoff Affair

ENCORE PRESENTATION
December 9th

RECENT STORIES



December 2, 2014 / 6:44 pm

[Was the Sony Cyberattack North Korea's Strike Back at Western Media?](#)



December 2, 2014 / 10:35 am

[Coming in December on FRONTLINE](#)



December 1, 2014 / 4:00 pm

[1.7 Million Syrian Refugees To Lose Their Main Source of Food Aid](#)

JOIN OUR NEWSLETTER

e-mail address

- [History of a Secret" Chronology](#)
- [Historians' "About-Face" on Hemings](#)

DISSENTING VIEWS

[The "Minority Report" from Monticello ▶](#)

In March of 2000, White MacKenzie Wallenborn MD, one of the members of the Research Committee that prepared the official Monticello report on Jefferson-Hemings, issued this "Minority Report" to voice his reservations about the committee's conclusions. Dr. Wallenborn does not believe that the combined historical and DNA evidence sufficiently proves Jefferson's paternity. He writes: "The findings enhance the possibility that Thomas Jefferson was the father of one of Sally Hemings children, Eston Hemings, but the findings do not prove that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Eston"

- ["Accuracy in Academia" Criticizes Jefferson Report](#)
- [Dissenting memo from John H. Works, Jr., a Jefferson descendant and a past president of the Monticello Association.](#)

[A Jefferson Family Historian Stands Opposed ▶](#)

This site is a clearinghouse for detailed information, essay, and argument against any conclusion linking Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings in any way other than simply master and slave. The site includes a critical essay by Herbert Barger, a Jefferson Family Historian who disagrees with the DNA findings of Dr. Foster. The site also features Eyler Robert Coates Sr.'s critical analysis of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Report. There are multiple links to other sites that present critical opinions of the report and of the DNA evidence.

[The Woodson Family's Claims ▶](#)

Some of the earliest documentary evidence linking Jefferson and Hemings makes mention of a first son, conceived in Paris, named "Tom." Many believe this to be a reference to Thomas Woodson--and Thomas Woodson's descendants have passionately pressed this conclusion for years and continue to do so. Their convictions about being Jefferson descendants rest on oral testimony, passed down independently by separate branches of their family. But the DNA tests do not support their claims. Since no documentary evidence places their ancestor clearly at Monticello, the history is at best inconclusive. This Web Page of the Thomas C. Woodson Family Association aims to bring together descendants of Thomas and Jemima Woodson and to promote scholarship pertaining to the Woodson ancestry. The site contains family history, an internet family tree, discussion boards, and links to related sites and recent articles.

- [Ken Burns Interviews a Woodson Descendant](#)
- [Feature on Michele Cooley-Quille and Her Father](#)

Subscribe »

facebook



394,431 people like this. Be the first of your friends.



[Vermont to Legalize Assisted Suicide – The Suicide Plan - FRONTLINE](#)

930 people recommend this.



[Inside the NFL's Concussion Crisis – Live Chat Transcript – League of Denial: The NFL's Concussion Crisis - FRONTLINE](#)

698 people recommend this.

[Why The French Like Nuclear Energy | Nuclear Reaction | FRONTLINE | PBS](#)

42 people recommend this.



[Bill Tries, Again, to Curb For-Profit Colleges' Share of GI Cash – Educating Sergeant Pantzke - FRONTLINE](#)

738 people recommend this.



[What's Changed Since the BIA Took Over at Spirit Lake? – Kind Hearted Woman - FRONTLINE](#)

157 people recommend this.



Facebook social plugin

Follow @frontlinepbs

120K followers

FRONTLINE on



OWN FRONTLINE ON DVD TODAY

SHOP NOW >

shop



PBS

Interracial Sex in Jefferson's Chesapeake ▶

Philip D. Morgan, a professor at the College of William and Mary, places the Jefferson Hemings relationship in the social and historical context of the early national Chesapeake where relationships between white male slave owners and their black or mulatto female slaves were not uncommon. Morgan argues that although each of these relationships was ultimately "a forced embrace," they ranged in nature from abusive to "the functional equivalent of a loving marriage." Occasionally these relationships were open, but they were more often concealed and hidden from public and private scrutiny. Interracial sex in the Chesapeake "brought whites and blacks close together, blurred the distinctions between them and broke down barriers," Morgan writes. But interracial sex was also potentially explosive, "threatening to close the gap between the free and the enslaved, and producing a group of people whose position was deeply ambiguous."

Was Jefferson's "Secret" Really a Secret in 1802? ▶

Affairs between slave owners and slaves were "open secrets" in antebellum Virginia, argues Joshua D. Rothman of the University of Virginia. These "open secrets" were protected by a societal code that mandated public silence. When James Callender published the first public telling of the Jefferson-Hemings story, he broke this code and suffered for it. Callender failed to generate the response he desired because the accusation--keeping a slave mistress-- was not a shocking or even an unfamiliar situation to most Virginians. "Callender never understood that in Virginia and in other parts of the South there were honorable and dishonorable ways of sharing information about the interracial sexual affairs of elite men" writes Rothman. When Callender published his accusation, it was as if he directly confronted Jefferson, and with that he brought more dishonor upon himself than he could have hoped to bring to Jefferson.

Did the "White Jeffersons" Lie about Sally Hemings? ▶

What happens when a lie told among family members gets folded into the nation's history? We will never know exactly how much Jefferson's white family knew about their slave siblings, but one thing is certain, according to Rutgers professor Jan Ellen Lewis: the story created by Jefferson's white family that persisted throughout history--that Jefferson's nephews fathered Sally Hemings's children--was a lie. The Carrs served as the family lambs, sacrificed by their Jefferson cousins, while the Hemings's were written out of the family story altogether. "How are we to reckon the costs entailed upon the Hemings family first by their father's silence and then by his white family's lies?" asks Professor Lewis. "Perhaps we just add them to the unpaid bill of race, the interest still compounding, year after year, day after day."

[special video reports](#) · [discussion](#) · [links](#) · [quiz](#) · [chronology](#) · [gene map](#)
[interviews](#) · [synopsis](#) · [tapes](#) · [teacher's guide](#) · [press](#)
[FRONTLINE](#) · [pbs online](#) · [wgbh](#)

web site [copyright](#) 1995-2014 WGBH educational foundation