

Is It True? - The White Jeffersons | Jefferson's Blood | FRONTLINE | PBS

Does it make a difference if Jefferson lied? This, finally, is the question we confront: the meaning of a lie or lies told in private; by one member of a family to another, about a private matter. Jefferson certainly threw his allies and his family off the track. It also seems that he conducted his relationship with Sally Hemings with sufficient discretion that his family either did not know about it or, more likely, could avoid confronting its reality. If Jefferson did not lie about Sally Hemings, he misled, and if he misled, he did it to protect himself--that is, his reputation, and his family-- that is, their reputation, as well as their notions of themselves as a family near-perfect in its happiness.

Because Jefferson's denial was not complete or coherent enough-- there was that troubling matter of the family resemblance, after all--his white family had to elaborate his little lie. His daughter Patsy tried to document it, making her sons cross-check some dates. His grandson told a historian about this account-book evidence, and the historian, thinking that second-hand "documentary" record somehow inadequate, asserted that he had double-checked it, using an account book that conveniently went **pop**, as if opened by the hand of God. Patsy could have been mistaken, but probably not Jeff Randolph, and certainly not the historian Randall.

We are now into the realm of demonstrable falsehood, a falsehood that became part of the historical record when Randall told it to Parton, in the middle of the nineteenth century. Once that falsehood entered the historical record, the defense of Jefferson then seemed to rest upon something more empirical than notions of his character: secondhand testimony about a verifiable documentary record. Jeff Randolph's motive was understandable; he wanted to preserve his grandfather's reputation, and he was, after all, talking to a historian. He must have known, however, that the account book could not have demonstrated his grandfather's innocence. He lied for history, and to history. And then history told us that Jefferson could not have been the father of Sally Hemings's children.

Yet these were not the only lies the white Jeffersons told history. When Jeff Randolph and his sister Ellen Coolidge implicated their cousins Carr, they were lying only among themselves. But it was a stunning lie, all the more stunning because they told it primarily for the other white Jeffersons. Perhaps it offered the assurance they needed in order to be able to hold their heads high when defending their beloved grandfather in more general terms. Perhaps it assuaged old wounds, determining for once and for all who was in the family and who was out. But these lies, even if told first and foremost to and for the family, made their way into the historical record. They have become part of history.

Let us assume that the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings was founded and maintained, or one or the other, in love, or commitment, or a sense of responsibility--in other words,

somewhere along the spectrum of what we would consider responsible behavior. Let us assume, also, that the relationship was kept a secret from Jefferson's daughters and their children, although Sally Hemings may well have told her children while they were still living at Monticello. "We were free from the dread of having to be slaves all our lives long," her son Madison remembered, "and were measurably happy." Is it possible that the black Jeffersons knew who their father was, while the white Jeffersons did not?

When we look at this story, or imagine it, from the perspective of Sally Hemings or Thomas Jefferson, it is one thing. When we try to see it from the point of view of the children, it is quite another. This is always the case in families. If Freud was right in the slightest, then the relationship between parent and child always embodies at least an element of conflict, of disappointment, of unrequited love. The secrets that look so understandable, so necessary for Thomas Jefferson, look quite another thing to his two families. How could you do this to us, his white family must have asked. Or rather, if we wish to confine ourselves to what we know, he could not have done this to us, they said. There are such things, after all, as moral impossibilities, which is another way of saying that our lives cannot make sense if such a thing is possible. If you were a white Jefferson, and your world was ordered by the knowledge that your father or grandfather loved you above all else, that you were entrusted with the knowledge of the real him, and if these things were more real to you than the features on the faces of your Hemings kin, then perhaps you would have lied, too.

And perhaps if you were Beverly Hemings or his sister Harriet, you would have gone to Washington, taking the freedom your mother had made your father give you as his only legacy, other than a face so like his that in the moonlight strangers could not tell you apart. And if you were Beverly or Harriet, you would have married whites, seizing for your children the privilege of fair skin, promised in the moonlight of a Monticello night. And you would have turned your backs on your father's family and your mother's, as well, perhaps concluding that family was a bad business, in the process trading the truth of who you knew you were--the child of Thomas Jefferson, the child of a slave--for the lie of who you now claimed to be.

And perhaps if you were Madison Hemings or his brother Eston, you would care for your mother until she died, marry a black woman, raise a family, and tell your children who they were, that is, who their parents were, and their parents before them, and who you wanted them to be. And they would tell their children and their children's children after them, and even though white people would scoff and even say that you were just trying to make yourself into something you were not, one day a scientist would come asking for a sample of your DNA. And it would confirm the story your mother had told you and your father had never acknowledged, except by the ambiguous act of letting you go free.

Let us imagine a man. Let us call him Thomas Jefferson. Let us imagine that he evades the truth, or tells a lie, perhaps to save face, perhaps to spare the ones he loves. It is probably both, for the two are in some measure inextricable. He needs his family to love him, and they cannot, he fears, if he appears to them as

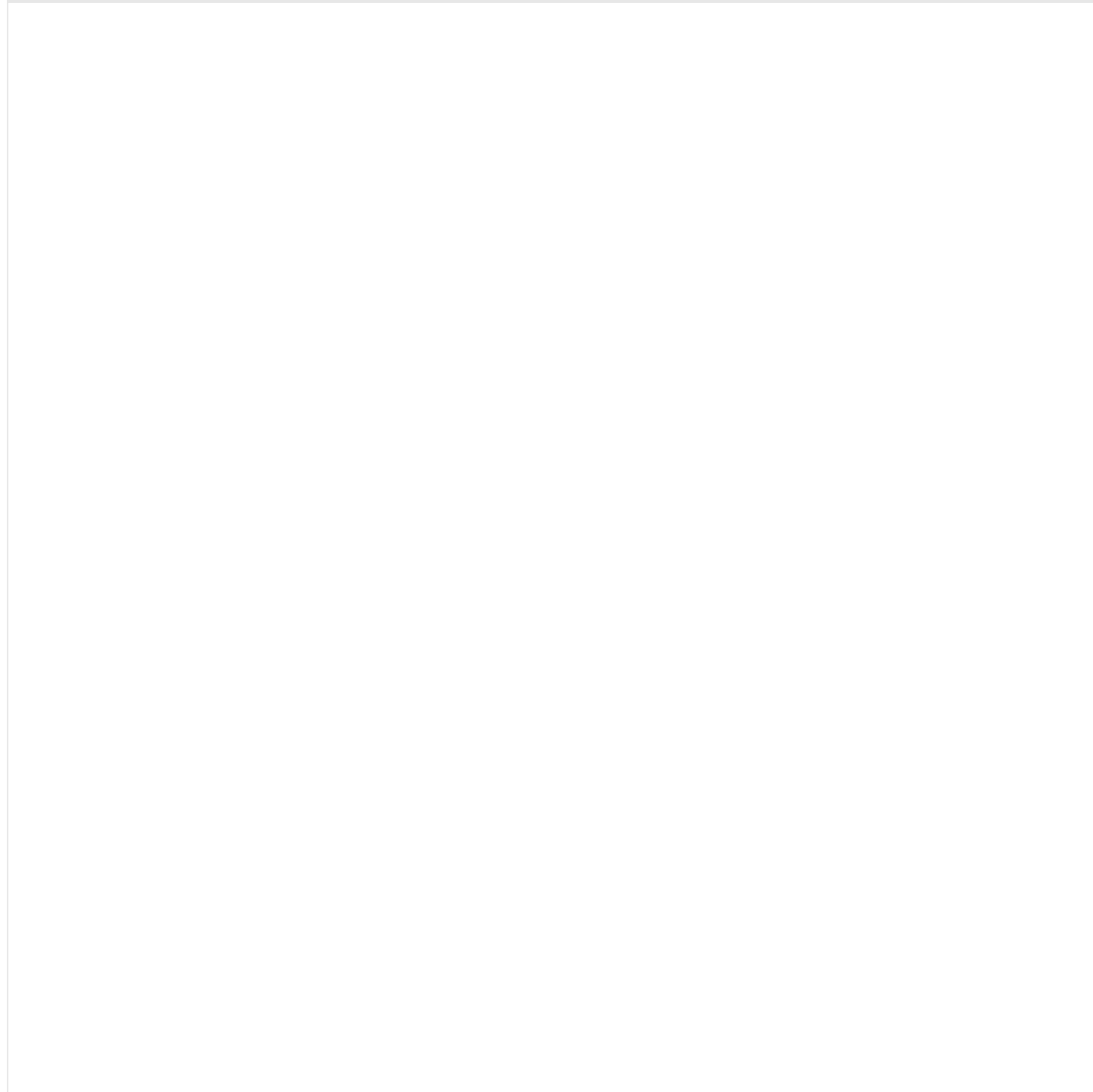
less than the devoted father he has claimed to be. And in the moment that he evades the truth or tells the lie, if not before, he has made a decision about whose love matters most, about who will receive his tenderest love. And those white children, and their children after, are bound by his lie, or his evasion, and they have to prop it up. It will not stand of itself. There are at the very least the family resemblances of their Hemings kin, and who knows how many half- caught glances and troubling sounds, not to mention the newspapers that just happen to fall to the ground. And there may be the nagging fears that all children have, the uncertainties about the certainty of a father's love. And so the white family imagines or invents a documentary record, fortuitously confirmed in account books that go pop. And they imagine or invent a family confession, the convenient Carrs. And in protecting the reputation of one kinsman, they tar another's.

Then, a century later, that lie, like the ones before, becomes part of the public record. White cousins whose names otherwise would have been lost to history are now known as scoundrels. Black children are written out of their family, their claim upon it dismissed by history as "the Negroes' pathetic wish for a little pride." And so the lie begun in the family becomes part of the national lie of race, which is itself a kind of truth, a fiction that orders the national life much as the moral impossibility of Jefferson's interracial liaison ordered that of his white kin.

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? Perhaps we just add them to the unpaid bill of race, the interest skill compounding, year after year, day after day.

And how are we to reckon the costs to the nation of an evasion compounded and elaborated until it became a thing in itself, a cornerstone of our civic culture?

Monticello sits atop a mountain; its slopes are slippery indeed. A public man enters into a private relationship. He attempts to keep it private, even from his family, even, in fact, from the family that the relationship begets. He gives his white family his love, his black family their freedom. Which legacy is the greater? The white part of his family uses its legacy-- the love, the knowledge of him that this love provides--to disinherit their black kin, to dismiss their black family's claim as moral impossibility. Theirs is a lie, founded in love. Half the black family uses its freedom to escape the grasp of history altogether. The other half uses it to claim its rightful inheritance, which is to say, a heritage, a connection to history itself. Subsequent generations take sides. A family quarrel becomes a national one as well. These are the things we do for love.



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