

Is It True? - Was Jefferson's "secret" Really A Secret In 1802 | Jefferson's Blood | FRONTLINE | PBS

In early national and antebellum Virginia, standing sexual affairs between white men and African American women were nearly always open secrets. Divorce petitions in Virginia involving accusations of interracial adultery, for example, amply demonstrate that neighbors, friends, and relatives--although rarely saying anything publicly until called on by the petitioner to provide testimony in court--always knew, sometimes for many years, about the illicit sexual conduct of both men and women in their families and communities.

Other legal cases from the late eighteenth century to the Civil War in which sex across the color line became an issue, such as in disputes over wills or executions of estates, also show that in Virginia, where racial definition fundamentally helped order society, sexual conduct that blurred the color line made for piquant and prurient local chatter.

Interracial sex became scandalous, however, only when it was made public, meaning that whites involved in such liaisons had to rely on others to adhere to a cultural code of public silence. Such reliance, in turn, made exposure the ultimate weapon for anyone with an ax to grind against a white participant in interracial sex.

That a personal grudge motivated James Callender is not surprising, for personal antagonisms, especially those involving conflicting financial interests, often help explain why and when interracial sexual relationships became matters of public record. Take, for example, a case in Jefferson's own backyard, that of David Isaacs and Nancy West. Isaacs, a Jewish merchant, and West, a free woman of color and a baker, had their first child in Charlottesville in 1796. By 1819, the couple had seven children. Only in 1822, however, did the Albemarle County Court bring West and Isaacs into court on a charge of fornication. A careful reading of the documentary record indicates that two elements of their relationship changed around 1820, provoking one or more of their neighbors into asking the court to bring the charge. West and Isaacs only began living in the same house in 1820. By acting as if their relationship were legitimate, they surely aroused some hostility. More importantly, Nancy West began accumulating valuable property in 1820, and Isaacs began divesting himself of some of his assets and selling them to West. Because the couple could not legally marry, this arrangement freed West from the laws of coverture, enabling her to retain ownership of her own property. Particularly in the event of deep debt or insolvency--risks that merchants such as Isaacs always faced--West and Isaacs both had greater economic stability than most businesspeople ever could. For West and Isaacs simply to have sex and bear children did not pose any particular threat, but when they attempted to use their peculiar, and illegal, situation for economic advantage, other Charlottesville residents (most probably other merchants) chose that moment to

complain publicly. The penalty for fornication was a small fine and could hardly have affected West, Isaacs, or their relationship. The point of their antagonists was to harass and embarrass the couple by making their private lives matters of public scrutiny. Similarly, humiliating Jefferson was an important goal of Callender's even as he had a broader vision of catastrophic consequences for Jefferson's political career.'

What, though, did Callender really know about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings? The crux of the matter, as Callender originally reported it in September 1802, was that Thomas Jefferson and his house servant Sally were involved in a sexual relationship; that Sally had gone with Jefferson to France, where he was serving as the American minister, along with his two daughters; that the two had "several" children together, including a ten- or twelve-year-old son named Tom; and that "President Tom," as Callender sarcastically called this boy, closely resembled Jefferson.

Two weeks later, Callender brought specificity to the number of Sally's offspring, writing that the couple had exactly five children. By presenting so many details of the relationship, Callender tried to establish from the outset that his charges, far from being concocted, were grounded in verifiable fact. He challenged Jefferson's supporters to refute them, writing that "if the friends of Mr. Jefferson are convinced of **his** innocence, **they** will make an appeal.... If they rest in silence, or if they content themselves with resting upon a **general denial**, they cannot hope for credit.... We should be glad to hear of its refutation We give it to the world under the firmest belief that such a refutation **never can be made.**"

Callender got most, if not all, of the information for his first round of articles directly from individuals who lived in Albemarle County, and he may even have made a special trip there after being released from prison, as suggested by a toast made in his honor at Richard Price's Albemarle tavern just over a month after he got out of jail. Callender certainly implied that people in Jefferson's county were his sources when he claimed there was "not an individual in the neighbourhood of Charlottesville who does not believe the story; and not a few who know it."

Callender correctly reported not only the story's outline, but he also knew some significant details. He correctly identified Hemings by her first name, and he knew both that she had been in France with Jefferson and that she worked at Monticello as a house servant. That Hemings had had exactly five children was also true in 1802. After having the two children mentioned earlier, she had given birth to a son named Beverly in 1798, to an unnamed daughter who was born and died in 1799, and to another girl named Harriet in 1801. The accuracy of this information strongly suggests that some of Callender's informants had, or knew people who had, extensive familiarity with domestic life at Monticello over the course of at least a dozen years.

The original source of the information easily could have been the enslaved population of Albemarle

County. Everywhere in the South, enslaved African Americans had kin and community networks that extended across vast distances. Slaves at Monticello knew of the association between Hemings and Jefferson and had greater access to details of their relationship than nearly anyone else. Edmund Bacon, Jefferson's overseer between 1806 and 1823, described the entire Hemings family as "old family servants, and great favorites," and Jefferson's grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, reported that other slaves envied the special treatment afforded the Hemingses and suspected ulterior motives, "account[ing] for it with other reasons than the true one," which he claimed lay in their trustworthiness and intelligence. Israel Jefferson, meanwhile, a Monticello slave who worked as a postilion, scullion, and waiter, confirmed late in his life and after gaining his freedom that Jefferson and Hemings were sexually involved based on his "intimacy with both parties."

Given Callender's disgust for African Americans, it is unlikely that he spoke directly to any Albemarle slaves. He claimed in print to have collected evidence from a large number of people, even asserting in December 1802, in response to repeated denials of the Hemings affair by Republican journalists, that he would happily meet Jefferson in any court and "prove, by a dozen witnesses, the family conviction, as to the black wench and her mulatto litter." If he was serious about this challenge, his witnesses would have to have been white. He would have acquired his information from the most likely places to hear local gossip in Albemarle, as in any Virginia county--taverns, markets, the steps of the courthouse, and other social gatherings. He probably relied especially on members of the Virginia gentry from Albemarle and counties nearby for what he believed to be his most accurate evidence. These men--and they were almost certainly men, given the significant breach of etiquette it would have been for a woman to discuss sexual matters with a man not her husband-- might have overheard their slaves discussing the Hemings story. They also would have been the whites most likely to have visited Jefferson at Monticello, to have been inside the house (and to have seen Sally Hemings and perhaps her children), and to have heard the prevalent gossip about Jefferson and Hemings in elite circles. Callender may well have received some reports from other whites who might only have been at Monticello briefly if at all but could see Jefferson or his slaves when they came down from the mountain to town. Some sources were more reliable than others, but anyone who lived near Jefferson was a possible source of material.' As Henry Randall, an early biographer of Jefferson, wrote in private correspondence in 1856, Callender "was helped by some of Mr. Jefferson's neighbors." [...]

Jefferson's granddaughter, Ellen Randolph Coolidge, picking up on a family story told by Thomas Jefferson Randolph, blamed Jefferson's nephew Samuel Carr for the paternity of Sally Hemings's children in an 1858 letter, accusing him of being a "master of a black seraglio kept at other men's expense." Although the recent DNA test has ruled out both Samuel and his brother Peter Carr as the father of Sally Hemings's last son, they nonetheless might have been selected as the scapegoats because they were known to participate in sex across the color line. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, Jefferson was already known

by 1802 to have facilitated the interracial sexual relationship of one of Betty Hemings's daughters. In 1792 Jefferson had sold Sally Hemings's oldest sister Mary, at Mary's request, to a white man named Thomas Bell, and the couple lived together on Main Street in Charlottesville's downtown, across from David Isaacs and part of a burgeoning interracial community. Many people who lived in Jefferson's neighborhood believed the Hemings story because Virginia's slaveowners and Jefferson himself had prepared them to believe it.

By the turn of 1803 the newspapers in Virginia for the most part ceased discussing Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, and the Jefferson Hemings story was little more than a footnote in the 1804 national presidential campaign. For numerous reasons, even in Virginia Callender's articles failed to have the impact he had hoped. For some people in Virginia the Jefferson-Hemings story was as much as twelve years old by 1802, and Callender's claims were unlikely to change whatever opinions they already held. Other Virginians were unlikely to believe anything written by James Callender, given his motives and his usual methods of operation, or to accept that Thomas Jefferson might have sex with a slave. Those who strongly admired Jefferson might very well have felt, as did Jefferson's granddaughter (and the vast majority of subsequent historians), that there were "such things, after all, as moral impossibilities." In addition, in July 1803 James Callender, stumbling drunk through the streets of Richmond, fell into the James River and drowned. Other newspapers had picked up on the Jefferson-Hemings story, but their editors had neither the network of informants nor the desire for personal vengeance that animated Callender. When Callender died, a significant portion of the energy behind the story died with him.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Callender misunderstood white attitudes toward interracial sex in Virginia and thus failed to foresee that although his allegations might embarrass Jefferson and his white family, they were unlikely to provoke any larger consequences for his career or standing. To be sure, few white men would publicly voice their approval of sex across the color line. Children of mixed race confused the ideally bifurcated racial order and, as Jefferson himself noted, sex with black women was thought to degrade whites morally. As Callender observed, "it is only doing justice to the character of Virginia to say that this negro connection has not a single defender, or apologist, in Richmond, as any man, that even looks through a spyglass at the hope of a decent character, would think himself irretrievably blasted, if he had lisped a syllable in defence of the president's mahogany coloured propagation."

Callender misread the silence among white male Richmonders. It did not necessarily mean that they were outraged or disgusted by the suggestion of interracial sex. Most white men, especially slaveowning whites, understood that the systematic sexual abuse of enslaved women helped bolster slavery by reminding all slaves that their masters held power over their bodies. Moreover, since slaves followed the condition of their mothers, all the children produced by liaisons between white masters and slave women, even if consensual, would still be slaves and hence far less potentially destabilizing to the social order than free

people of color. Finally, what a man chose to do with his slave property was for the most part his business. With Virginians being of at least two minds about interracial sex, a story about a white man--no matter who he was--having sex with his female slave could hardly be expected to elicit universal outrage.'

No great tumult was likely to occur when it came to Thomas Jefferson, not only because of who he was but also because of how he conducted himself in his relationship with Sally Hemings. In the slave South, ethical norms governed even activities not generally perceived to be intrinsically ethical, such as interracial sex. If a white man engaged in a sexual relationship of any duration with one of his slaves, he could never prevent people in his community from gossiping. No one in his community, however, was likely to say anything to him directly provided that he kept his affairs *discreet, which entailed never acknowledging any rumors about his sexual behavior and never demonstrating that he cared for his enslaved sex partner or treated any mixed-race offspring as legitimate blood relations. From 1789 until the day he died, Jefferson never directly addressed the rumor of his relationship with Sally Hemings. Whatever the nature of the relationship, Jefferson acted with sufficient discretion that, according to his grandson, not "a motion, or a look, or a circumstance" would lead anyone "to suspect for an instant that there was a particle more of familiarity between Mr. Jefferson and Sally Henings [**sic**] than between him and the most repulsive servant in the establishment." Jefferson rarely showed affection toward his children with Sally Hemings and apparently never in front of others. As Madison Hemings recalled, his father "was not in the habit of showing partiality or fatherly affection to us children." If there ever was such a thing in white eyes as the ethical amalgamator, Thomas Jefferson was the prototype

Just as he failed to appraise accurately how most Virginians were likely to respond to his revelations about Jefferson, 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. Consequently, he never foresaw that even people who believed Jefferson's sexual behavior was less than admirable might very well feel that Callender's own behavior in publishing the story was at least distasteful. The **Frederick-town Herald** from nearby Maryland, for example, believed Callender's reports and thought the entire affair to be a subject of great hilarity. But its editors also called Callender a "sad fellow" and claimed they would not pursue the story. "Modesty," the paper argued, "orders us to drop the curtain.... We therefore assign it over to less scrupulous hands, confessing at the same time, that there is a merriment in the subject, which we should be graceless enough to pursue at the President's expence, were it less offensive to serious and decent contemplation."

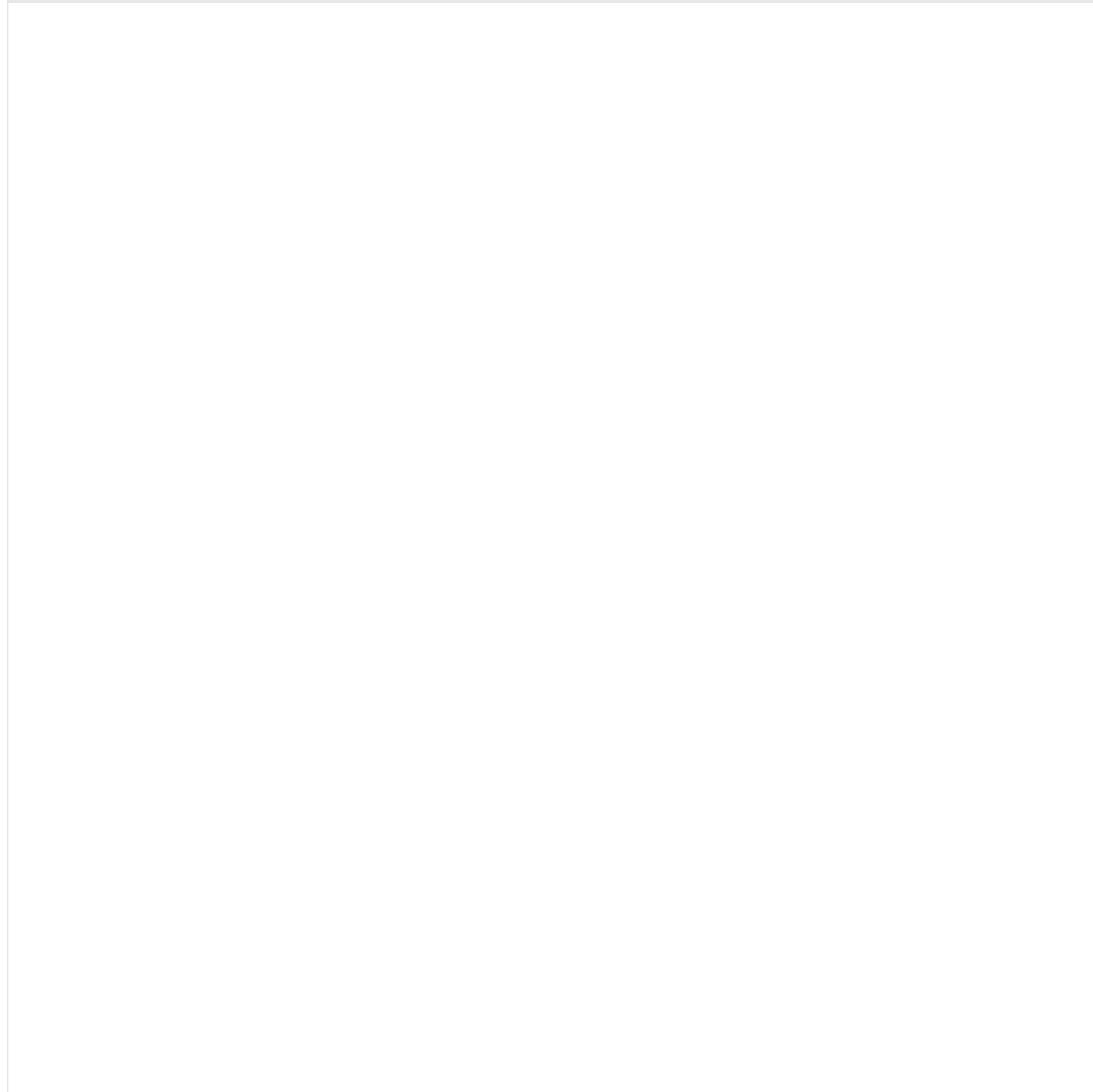
Virginians may have found Jefferson's sexual behavior wonderful material for gossip. Some even fed Callender information knowing he would print it, but no one, not even Callender's informants, would ever say anything to Jefferson directly about it. To do so not only would have been extraordinarily insulting but would also have been a challenge to Jefferson's honor as a gentleman. As one hostile letter writer to the

Recorder castigating Callender asserted, "He has no character, no honor, no sensibility." By moving the rumor of Jefferson's interracial sexual affairs from private gossip to public *scourge, Callender touched off whole new rounds of *discussions about the president all over the country, but he also succeeded in cementing his own reputation as a scoundrel, a judgment that has lasted two hundred years.

The story of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson remained in the memories of many African Americans, especially those descended from the Hemings family, who have never doubted the oral history passed down to them over the past two centuries. At least some white Americans also continued to believe the story's basic truth even after Jefferson died in 1826. British traveler and author Frances Trollope, for example, writing of a visit to America shortly after Jefferson's death, reported that Jefferson's interracial sexual affairs were openly spoken of in the United States. The Americans from whom she heard the story claimed that Jefferson had children with numerous enslaved women, that he took great pleasure in having those children serve at his dinner parties, and that he allowed his enslaved children to run off the plantation if they were white enough to pass unsuspected in white society.

In Trollope's account, as in Callender's, we can see fact and fiction mixing, as a liaison with a single enslaved woman had become sexual relations with many. As Jefferson's children with Hemings grew older, they acted as house servants when their father had guests, but Trollope's storytellers gave this truth a perverse spin, foreshadowing the abolitionists later in the antebellum period who leapt onto the story, sometimes making up facts and frequently exaggerating the truth to make their case against the peculiar institution. Jefferson did allow both Beverly and Harriet Hemings to leave Monticello after they turned twenty-one, making notations in his Farm Book that they were runaways. Both also were able to marry into white families and pass as whites in the Maryland and Washington, D.C., areas. But there is no evidence that he allowed them to leave specifically because they could pass, or that Jefferson ever made a policy of allowing any other "white slaves" to run away as a means of covertly emancipating them, a claim later made by his granddaughter.

Whites in Albemarle County kept the story in their minds too at least until the Civil War. John Hartwell Cocke owned a large plantations, served as a general in the War of 1812 and held an original membership on the University of Virginia's Board of Visitors. Cocke was also a close friend of Jefferson's. In his journal in 1853, he commented on the prevalence of sex across the color line, particularly the practice of married white men having children with enslaved women. Cocke observed that such cases were...



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