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■ **What is your relationship with Thomas Jefferson?**

Thomas Jefferson is my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.

“Thomas Jefferson is my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.”

■ **How did that come about?**

Well, my grandfather told me about it when I was 10 years old. He called me into his livingroom in Pittsburgh and he said, "Son, it's time for you to learn about your heritage." And my grandfather was the president of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society, and he said, "You're a special person. You're part of a special family. You, through your mother and me, and my mother and so on, are a descendant of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States." I was 10 years old at the time. I was very precocious, too. I was a graduate of high school at the age of 15 and college at 19 and I was a JD at the age of 22. But I knew who Jefferson was. I didn't know who Sally Hemings was but I knew who Jefferson was. And, for a moment, I was very thrilled by that revelation.

■ **So without a doubt, Sally Hemings was Thomas Jefferson's mistress?**

Yes. That is...Sally was, without a doubt, Thomas Jefferson's mistress, lover, substitute wife, for 38 years. No question about it.

“We didn't know one another, but each of us had virtually the identical oral

■ **How does your family know that Sally had a relationship with Thomas Jefferson?**

Oh, we know it because Sally was a very articulate woman, contrary to current

history.”

characterizations. She was very articulate. She was very educated. She told us. She told her son Thomas, and Thomas told others in his family. And so, in my family, I have the benefit of 200 years of consistent, solid oral history. And this history was carried on by representatives of at least five different sons and daughters of Thomas Woodson, and later by people who didn't know one another. There were families in Pennsylvania, in Ohio, in Texas, and in Tennessee. We didn't know one another, but each of us had virtually the identical oral history.



[Notes on the State of Virginia,](#)
[Query XIV,](#)

■ **What does this mean for you, and what does this mean for America—for you to be the descendant of arguably the greatest American who ever walked the earth, as a black man?**

It means a great deal to me, to my family. There are 1,400 of us. I'm only one of 1,400. And we're scattered around the world and throughout the United States. We're all....We know who we are. And I think it's quite significant not only to us, but to America and to the world. This relationship that Jefferson had with Sally extended beyond the two of them. It highlighted the contradiction that Jefferson was all about. He was Mr. Contradiction. He wrote those wonderful words. He held slaves as he was fighting for his freedom from England. Nonetheless, he had a relationship with this woman. She was very beautiful. She was meaningful to him but, nonetheless, from a different race. And so, while he was saying one thing, he felt obviously something else. And considering the words that he wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the life that he actually lived is significant in relation to the problems and the issues that we're facing today. It's about race relations, about the contributions that blacks have made to America's development and growth, about everyone's desire for freedom, and about the power of love. It's just an amazing amalgamation.

■ **What do you feel personally about**

Thomas Jefferson?

My feelings about Jefferson are ambivalent. On the one hand, I remember what he wrote about black people...said that we were inferior in reason, and these other things that he wrote. But I must admit, he wrote these before he met Sally. So I don't forgive him for those things. I don't forgive him for slaveholding. I don't forgive him for his failure to end slavery. On the other hand, I'm proud to be a part of Jefferson. There's a secret ambition inside to do two things: to make sure that I prove Mr. Jefferson wrong about his feelings about black people, and yet I understand that he's still my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, and there is a sense of pride that's there too.



[First Plan for Monticello.](#)

■ What do you feel when you walk around Monticello?

I have ambivalent feelings about Monticello. Personally, from my own line of descendancy, except for Sally Hemings who was a slave woman, none of the other people in my direct line of descendancy were slaves. Thomas Woodson—their firstborn son and my fourth great-great-grandfather—was not a slave. And so I don't have a sense of inferiority, by any means. On the other hand, I have empathy for the families who did work there and who were enslaved at Monticello.

“But black people built this building.”

■ Monticello couldn't have been run or built without slaves. That's the contradiction.

That's part of the contradiction. Monticello has been noted as the finest example of American architecture. Mr. Jefferson received the highest award from the American Institute of Architects. But black people built this building. And so we have a share in that celebrity. We have a share in America. We were the bulldozers. We were the ones who built the building, who made the gardens that Mr. Jefferson loved so much. It's time for us to have some recognition and for that fact, for our partnership, to be acknowledged.

■ **Isn't this the contradiction of America—that the man who wrote the words "all men are created equal" could own slaves and never free them during his lifetime?**

Mr. Jefferson's words and his deeds do constitute perhaps the greatest contradiction that we know about. The fact that he's trying to lead the colonies out of bondage from England, that he's writing these great philosophical pronouncements that all men are created equal and have these rights to life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but he goes home to his slaves. Certainly that's a great contradiction. It's a terrible contradiction. But I think it also characterizes not only Jefferson, but America.

■ **Do you forgive him?**

In part. And no. I am dichotomized in my thinking about Jefferson. I can't forgive him, because he should have done something for us. He didn't do it. No, I can't forgive him for that. But he is my great-great-grandfather. And so I have to temper my feelings for him in that respect.

■ **What would you say to him?**

If I met Thomas Jefferson today, I don't know what I would say to him because there's so much. Mr. Jefferson's feelings about race relations in some respects were quite prophetic. When he spoke about having the wolf by the ears, and that he couldn't hold on but he couldn't let go, and so he was afraid that the 10,000 recollections that blacks would have about slavery and what happened to them would come to the fore....We see that, we see that now. And so I'd have to tell him, "You were right about that. But you were wrong not to do something about it, and you were wrong to relinquish that to later generations. We're still wrestling with that."

■ **Can a great nation only focus on one serious problem at a time? What is your response to the idea that America had to postpone the problem of slavery while it**



[Notes on the State of Virginia,](#)
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struggled to be born? Do you believe that we could have been born without the state of slavery?

Certainly I believe that. I believe that it was a gross error for America to ignore millions and millions of people who were held in bondage. We—contrary to the fiction that was created to justify slavery—we were not chattel. We had feelings; we had emotions; we had families; we had culture. We were just torn away from those things. And we adapted to what we found in America. And to just completely ignore millions and millions of people who bled and lived and died and suffered was wrong. And—Churchill notwithstanding, and others who felt that way—I'm sorry, but they have missed, completely missed, the significance of the black contribution to America. And that's part of the problem with history. It's been rewritten and recorded by others than black Americans. We've not really had the opportunity to convey our perspective.

■ **Is there poetic justice in Sally and Thomas' relationship? If there is a contradiction between his words and his actions, is their relationship a positive thing? Does it prove irrefutably that he was wrong?**

I think it proves that he was wrong. Absolutely. You look at his children. We are...we are phenomenal. In this family of mine—I'm just a part of it—but we have college professors, we have military generals. I've got a three-star general who's a cousin. We've got UN diplomats. We've got teachers, businesspeople. We are an absolutely awesome family.

■ **So he was right. All men were created equal.**

All men were created equal. He was wrong that we were inferior. We're not inferior. His kids are tremendous. But not only us. There are other black families who have succeeded as well. But there's something about the Jeffersonian, the Woodsons, that's absolutely

amazing, all of us.

■ **Good genes.**

Sally was very, very powerful.



[Declaration of Independence,](#)

["Original Rough Draught"](#)

■ **What do you feel when you hear the words "all men are created equal"?**

I give those words the full meaning that I'm one of the beneficiaries, that they apply to me and everybody like me, all black people are a part. Because we're Americans. And as Americans, this is our birthright. Jefferson was very much in the natural law school of thought. And we are here by nature. There's been so much mixing of the races through the years that we're more American than we are African. And, as a result of this, when we sing what is known as the Negro national anthem—the last phrase of the last stanza says "True to our native land"—we're talking about America. So, yes, I'm entitled to the pursuit of happiness and all of the other forms of liberty. And all other black Americans are too, absolutely.

■ **Was Thomas Jefferson a racist?**

I would say yes. I say yes, he's a racist. I think any slaveholder is a racist. Well, sociologists may try to make some distinctions, but clearly Jefferson was what we call in the black community "colorstruck." If a person was not of a certain hue, if a person's skin color was not a certain coloration, he wouldn't have any relationship with them. And, from that standpoint, yes. Denying people freedom just because of their color is racism in the highest form, in my judgment. And that's represented by slaveholding.

■ **What do you say to the scholars who say that the union between Thomas Jefferson and Sally was not possible?**

Those historians don't know. They don't know what I know. And they are making their judgment on what someone else has written. They don't have the benefit of the oral transmission. They didn't have a grandfather

like mine who told me, who passed down to me, the custom, the history, and the story of our family. Our oral history has been, insofar as I'm concerned—has been certainly corroborated by many writings.

■ **Could you be wrong?**

No, no. No question about that. The historians who say "Oh, that couldn't have happened," they really didn't know Jefferson as well as they think. I've heard some say Mr. Jefferson's sex life was...was muffled, repressed. That's a lie. Jefferson was a very, very sexually active man. They forget that in 10 years of marriage, he had six children. That's quite a feat.

His wife died from childbirth. He, before that, was chasing after the wife of a neighbor of his, Betsy Walker. And then after his wife died in 1782, Mr. Jefferson was in France and he was smitten by Maria Cosway, broke his wrist while in love with her. That's hardly repressed sexual desire. And then Sally Hemings came along. And Sally, you know, was Martha Jefferson's half-sister. They had the same father. And Sally's mother, Elizabeth, was a mulatto. And so Sally was virtually a white woman who was very, very beautiful. She obviously resembled his wife. Jefferson's desire for her is quite understandable. He wouldn't have paid any attention to someone who was less beautiful than Sally. He would not have done that.

■ **When we look in the eyes of that man, we see the story of America. What, in the light of your story, are we to make of all this?**

In the light of my family story, Mr. Jefferson becomes even a greater man than we know. Because, you see, as the historians have presently sculpted his history, he was something of an impossibility. He was a god. And that makes his accomplishments, then, less human. But when you put into the equation the human side of Jefferson, and the fact that as a man he had the same frailties, the same desires, the same emotions that all

men have, then when you look at what Jefferson has accomplished in his lifetime and what still reverberates through the centuries, you say, "My God, this man was a giant."

■ **He's a hero?**

Absolutely, he's a hero. Absolutely. He's my hero. He's my hero. I say that with trepidation. I say that still with the...with the other side of me still nagging at me, yes. But I think he's a hero.

■ **Aren't you angry at him?**

In part, yes. I'm angry in part because of his philosophies with respect to race relations. And that's the only thing that I can really fault him on. I cannot forgive his slaveholding, not under any circumstances. No sir.

“So we have a partnership in this.”

■ **But the magic words of America that he wrote survive and have transformed all of us.**

Those words not only have transformed our lives as black people, but they still reverberate today in advancing the cause of democracy and freedom around the world. Those were amazing words which he wrote in a span of about three weeks. But black people helped him do that too because we put him in the position in which he could exercise his level of aristocracy, in which he could study the arts and the great philosophers. He didn't have to do the work. Black people did the work to allow him to accomplish what he's done. So we have a partnership in this. Absolutely.

■ **Could you tell the story of your history?**

Yes. We know that our oral history has been corroborated by several different writings, which of course we don't need, but many historians challenge us. First of all, we know from the writings of Sally's son—I've forgotten whether it's Madison or Eston Hemings—we know that she was pregnant in 1789 when she returned from France. The child was born in



[Sally Hemings Accusation.](#)

1790 and his name was Thomas. Many historians have argued that Jefferson's nephews were the fathers of Sally Hemings' children. But in Paris, there were no nephews there. There was only Mr. Jefferson and Sally Hemings. It was impossible for a nephew to have fathered Thomas Woodson. And 10 years later, Mr. Jefferson himself, in probably the only document written by him which acknowledges my great-great-great-grandfather—in an August 23, 1800, census—Mr. Jefferson identified a white male of the ages between 10 and 16 who's living at Monticello. And there was another male over the age of 45, and then there were 93 slaves. Well, the person over 45 was Mr. Jefferson. But who was the child who was 10 to 16? Ten years old at that time in 1800 was none other than Thomas Woodson, my great-great-great-grandfather. And then two years later, in September of 1802, James Callender wrote his infamous article. Now historians have cast aside that article as being libelous and so forth, but they've overlooked the very first paragraph. In that first paragraph of that writing, Callender correctly identifies Sally by name and status; he identifies her child by name, physical description, and age. Now, that is not libelous, and it is not someone's imagination. Those are facts. And no historian—no historian has contradicted the accuracy of that description and those facts.

■ **And didn't Jefferson give preferential treatment to the descendants of Sally Hemings?**

Oh yes, of course. The Hemings family—if you go down to the foot of the mountain in the visitors center, you'll see the Hemings family is the only family listed by name. But the Hemingses were related to Mrs. Jefferson. You see, her father, John Wayles, was also the father of Sally Hemings and had taken Sally's mother as his concubine. So the Hemings family and the Wayleses, who subsequently became Jeffersons, were very closely related, yes.

■ **Tell me about Sally. What was she like?**

She was a wonderful woman. Sally Hemings was bright. And you may say, "Well, how do you know that?" Well, we know that her son James was a chef. Now, Mr. Jefferson would not have entrusted his cooking to a dummy. But James was very bright. Robert, her brother, was a great cabinetmaker. Sally, we know, was tutored in French for nearly two years. I was in France when I was in the army and walked the very streets that she did, the Champs Élysées and others. I know the feeling of freedom there. This was in the '60s when I was there. And I also speak French. I know that you must have some degree of intelligence to be able to master French. Sally was sensitive. She knew who she was. She knew that her sister was ultimately the First Lady of America. She was very sensitive. She did not like slavery. She was free in France. And I don't mean to demean Mr. Jefferson, but the fact is that he was holding slaves in France, which was illegal. But it didn't appear to bother him one bit. Nonetheless, the relationship there was different. She had freedoms. She was introduced to society. She was tutored. She learned music. At that time, Sally Hemings was a cultured person.

■ **Do you feel like you own Monticello?**

I don't think I own Monticello. I do feel an affinity toward it. I feel....I remember when we had a reunion in '92 here and Cinder Stanton, the director of research, took our family out to Mulberry Row, and I really felt an unusual sensation as we walked among the ruins of the cabins. I don't know—I can't describe what the feelings were. I don't know whether they were empathy or they were anger, but I certainly felt something other than just realizing that this is where slaves were. Monticello is...yes, I do have feelings when I come here.

■ **Is it home?**

It's not home. Because I know that at that time we were not wanted. But nonetheless, I do have some emotional attachment to

Monticello. I had the same feelings when I was in the army. The army has a law school on the grounds of the University of Virginia. And I came here in 1963. I was a lawyer at the time, and I went to the law library to study. And when I went into the library and sat down, the kids got up and left, the students, in protest. I didn't recognize it at the time. But the second time it happened, I realized what they were doing. And I thought, you know, what irony. My great-great-grandfather founded this university. I have a right to be here even though the law said I shouldn't. But I felt I had the right to be there, yes.

■ **And even if he wasn't your great-great-great-grandfather, the words that he wrote....**

Still, I would have that right to be there.
Absolutely.

■ **Should he have slept with Sally?**

If Mr. Jefferson had imposed himself upon her by taking unfair advantage of his position, then I would say, yes, it would have been wrong for him to have slept with Sally. But I don't believe that that is what occurred. It is certainly not in our history, in our own family's history, that that happened. We've been told that it was an honest, loving, wholesome relationship that existed between the two of them. So I don't see that as being wrong.

■ **We're distracted by the "Did he?" "Didn't he?" —when in fact the institution of slavery would have permitted him to kill her....**

Well, that is partially true. You do have to focus on the larger issue. But understand from my perspective as a child, as a descendant, I have a different perspective about the relationship. I've heard some historians say, "Oh, it doesn't matter." It does. It does matter. It matters to quite a few of us. And so I do have a selfish interest in seeing that the relationship is observed in its proper

perspective. Yes.

■ **But without ignoring the horror of slavery.**

Oh, of course not. No, that can never be overlooked. It can never be minimized, the horror, the stigma, the fact, the act of slavery. I've read some of Mr. Jefferson's orders to his overseer while Jefferson was in Washington. And he had slaves out there in the Rivanna River trying to build a dam. They were trying to knock a mountain down. Jefferson...they say, "Oh, Mr. Jefferson was benevolent." That may have been, but he worked those people. He wrenched every ounce of energy that he could. He was...he may not have had them physically whipped for reasons of economics, because he needed them to work, but he worked them. Jefferson was not a very...he was not a milquetoast by any means, when it came to slavery. No sir.

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■ **You provided him with the leisure to write the Declaration of Independence.**

Yes, Jefferson's father held slaves as well. And then he inherited several from his father-in-law. But all of his life he's been surrounded by black people who have waited on him, who have supported him. And under those conditions, he was free to pursue his education and his writings. He didn't have to physically remove himself from those pursuits to do the mundane things in life because we did those for him. So, yes, we're partners with Jefferson. And that parallels America's development too. Black people from the 1600s have been in lockstep with colonists in America and we together have developed this great country.