

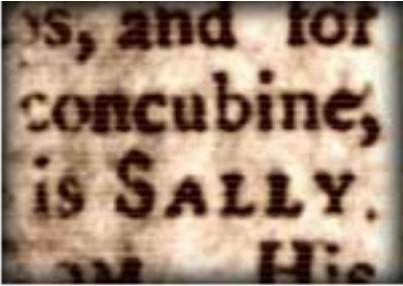
The History of a Secret

A chronology of how the Jefferson-Hemings story was long dismissed by historians as legend, lie, or worse.

I. THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE STORY

1802
(September 1)

James Thomson Callender, a Scottish-born journalist infamous for his character assassinations of the Founding Fathers and others, published the first public report on the Jefferson-Hemings relationship in the Richmond Recorder newspaper.



1802
(October 20)

James Thomson Callender responds to critics of his original March, 1802 Richmond Recorder story about Jefferson and Hemings.

1802

A number of popular rhymes, songs, and newspaper stanzas are written about Jefferson and Hemings and are widely circulated:

Of all the Damsels on the green/on
mountain or in valley/A lass so

luscious ne'er was seen/ As
Monticellan Sally
-(Published in the Philadelphia
literary magazine Port Folio)

Thou Sally, though my house shall
keep/ My widow'rs tears shall
dry!/ My virgin daughters--
see!they weep--Their mother's
place supply.
Oh Sally hearken to my vows!/
Yield up thy sooty charms--/My
best beloved! My more than
spouse/ Oh! Take me to thy arms.
-(Published in the Boston Gazette)

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1804

Thomas Jefferson is easily re-elected president. The Callender exposé is not significant in the campaign.

1805

Jefferson responds to a number of charges against him made by critics. The full reply was lost. All that survives is the cover letter sent to Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith which alludes to the contents of the full reply. Most historians believe that the relationship with Sally Hemings was one of the charges Jefferson meant to deny in the letter. This is the only evidence of a direct comment by Jefferson on the story that he fathered Sally Hemings's children.

1809

Jefferson retires from public office. He returns to Monticello and never again leaves Virginia.

1826
(July 4)

Jefferson, 83, dies shortly after 12 noon, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. He is eighty-three years old. By the terms of Jefferson's will, Sally's sons, Madison and Eston Hemings, were freed. Also freed by his will were: Sally's relative Burwell Colbert, who was Jefferson's personal valet; John Hemings, Sally's younger brother and the master carpenter at Monticello; Joe Fossett, Sally's relative and master ironworker at Monticello. Jefferson not only freed these five slaves who were blood relations of Sally, but

he also petitioned the Virginia legislature to allow them to remain in the state. Sally Hemings was not freed by Jefferson's will, however. She received her freedom two years after his death.

1827
(January 27)

Jefferson's slaves are sold in an executor's sale. One hundred and thirty slaves are sold at auction.

1832

Sally Hemings dies at age sixty-two.

1853

William Wells Brown publishes his first edition of Clotel; or The President's Daughter, one of the first African American novels published in the United States. It was widely believed to have been inspired by the Hemings family story.

1853

John Hartwell Cocke, a general in the War of 1812, an original board member at the University of Virginia, and a close friend of Jefferson's, writes in his journal about the prevalence of sex across the color line. Citing Jefferson's "notorious example," Cocke writes:

"Were [cases of interracial sex] enumerated. . . they would be found by the hundreds. Nor is it to be wondered at when Mr.
Jefferson's notorious example is



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Jefferson's notorious example is considered."

- 1856

Eston Hemings dies in Wisconsin.
- 1858
(October 24)

Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen Coolidge writes to her husband, Joseph Coolidge. The letter repudiates the claim that Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings's children, and endorses the idea that Peter Carr was the true father.
- 1858

Henry Stephens Randall publishes a three-volume biography of Jefferson, The Life of Thomas Jefferson in which he brands the Jefferson-Hemings story pseudohistory "invented by the Federalists."
- 1862

Captain Edmund Bacon, who was chief overseer of Monticello for twenty years while Jefferson was alive, offers his recollections of life at Monticello to a writer who seeks him out at his Kentucky home. Among other things, Bacon suggests that Jefferson was not the father of Sally Hemings's children. He alludes to Peter Carr as the father, writing:

"Mr. Jefferson freed a number of his servants in his will. . . He freed one girl some years before he died, and there was a great deal of talk about it. She was nearly as white as anybody and very beautiful. People said he freed her because she was his own daughter. She was not his daughter; she was - -'s daughter. I know that. I have seen him come out of her mother's room many a morning when I went up to Monticello very early. When she was nearly grown, by Mr. Jefferson's direction I paid her stage fare to Philadelphia and gave her fifty dollars. I have never seen her since and don't know what became of her. From the time she was large enough, she always worked in the cotton factory. She never did any hard work.
- 1868
(June 1)

Henry S. Randall, a Jefferson biographer and relative, writes to James Parton, who is working on his own Jefferson biography. Randall reports a conversation he had with Jefferson's oldest grandson many years earlier, in which the grandson tells Randall that one of the Carr brothers, Peter or Samuel, was the father of Sally Hemings's children.

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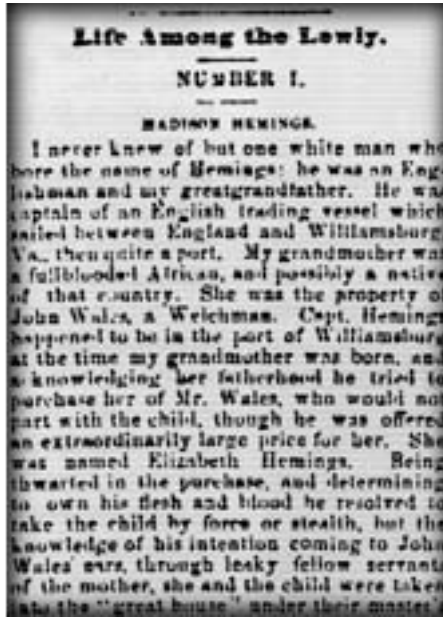
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1873
(March 13)

For a series of newspaper articles on interesting lives of blacks living in southern Ohio, writer S.F. Wetmore interviewed **Madison Hemings**. The account, published in the Pike County Republican would be largely ignored by historians until the 1960's. When it was "rediscovered," it was again widely repudiated by most Jefferson historians.



Watch a special video report on **Madison Hemings**.

1873
(March 18)

John A. Jones, the editor of the Waverly Watchman--a rival to S.F. Wetmore's Pike County Republican--**bitterly attacks** Madison Hemings's testimony as untrustworthy.

1873
(December 25)

Pike County Republican newspaperman **S.F. Wetmore** publishes **the memoirs of Israel Jefferson**, a former slave at Monticello who was friendly with Madison Hemings. Israel Jefferson corroborates

Madison's claims to having been the President's child.

1873
(December 25)

Thomas Jefferson Randolph, grandson of Thomas Jefferson, **angrily replies** to Israel Jefferson's testimony in the pages of the Pike County Republican.

1874

James Parton, a prominent nineteenth-century Jefferson biographer, publishes The Life of Thomas Jefferson. Relying on

information from Henry Randall, Parton discredits the Jefferson-Hemings story as a "Campaign Lie" spread by Jefferson's political enemies. Parton passed along Randall's claims that one of the Carrs fathered Sally Hemings's children. Of Madison Hemings, Parton writes: "There is even a respectable Madison Henings (sic), now living in Ohio, who supposes that Thomas Jefferson was his father. Has been misinformed. The record of Mr. Jefferson's every day and hour, contained in the pocket memorandum books, compared with the record of his slaves' birth, proves the impossibility of his having been the father of Madison Henings."

1877

1902
(august 1)

Madison Hemings dies at his home in Chillicothe, Ohio.

The Scioto Gazette, a Chillicothe, Ohio newspaper publishes a brief article, "A Sprig of Jefferson Was Eston Hemings," which describes Eston Hemings's remarkable resemblance to a Jefferson bronze statue in Washington D.C.

1902
(august 7)

Under the heading "Anna Hemings: Beautiful Octoroon," the Scioto Gazette published a follow-up to its previous week's article on Eston Hemings's resemblance to Thomas Jefferson. In **the article**, a local judge relates his impressions of Anna Hemings, Eston's daughter, who, the judge believed, was Thomas Jefferson's granddaughter.

1908

Following the death of one of Sally Hemings's grandsons, Beverly Jefferson of Madison, Wisconsin, the Chicago Tribune printed an obituary. The November 12, 1908 death notice did not mention Thomas Jefferson as Beverly's grandfather, but, that same day, a friend of Beverly's, A.J. Munson, wrote to the paper to correct the record:

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
November 12, 1908
Editor of the Tribune:

In the Tribune today is a notice of the death of Beverly Jefferson of Madison. His death deserves more than a passing notice, as he was a grandson of Thomas Jefferson, father of the doctrines of the democratic party. . . Beverly Jefferson was one of God's noblemen--gentle, kindly, courteous, charitable. He was friendly to everybody in his home city, and he will be missed there quite as much or more, perhaps, than any other citizen.

A.J. Munson

III. THE STORY "REDISCOVERED"

1952	Henry S. Randall's 1868 letter to James Parton resurfaces at Harvard as part of Parton's papers. The letter alleges that one of the Carr brothers, not Jefferson, fathered Sally Hemings's children.
1953	Jefferson's Farm Book , containing vital statistics on his slaves, is reprinted by University of Virginia professor Edwin M. Betts. Prior to this, the Farm Book had been lost, unnoticed among Jefferson items donated to the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1898.
Early 1950's	Madison Hemings testimony is "rediscovered" by James H. Rodabaugh at the Ohio State Historical and Archaeological society in Columbus, Ohio. It is passed to the author John Dos Passos, who then forwards it to Jefferson historians.
1954 (November)	Lerone Bennett publishes a popular account of the Jefferson-Hemings story in <u>Ebony</u> magazine. The article, "Thomas Jefferson's Negro Grandchildren," began provocatively: "Scattered across the nation living out their final years in total obscurity are a handful of elderly Negroes who can trace their ancestry to the most illustrious of America's founding fathers. They are the great-great grandchildren of the famous Virginia patriot, who authored the Declaration of Independence--Thomas Jefferson. In four generations, these proud Negro descendants of America's third President have made the long and improbable journey from the white marbled splendor of Monticello to the "Negro ghetto" in the democracy their forebear helped to found." The story, which reviewed the documentary evidence as well as interview living descendants, helped to revive popular interest in the story.
1956	Author J.C. Furnas publishes <u>Goodbye to Uncle Tom</u> , a best-selling book on slavery, in which he writes: "Jefferson was only one of many eminent and sometimes aristocratic slaveowners who left mulatto offspring for their admirers to deny or ignore." He also adds, in a note of great understatement: "I am aware that all Jeffersonians do not agree on this."
1960	Merrill Peterson , the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Professor of History at the University of Virginia, publishes <u>The Jefferson Image in the American Mind</u> , which makes the first scholarly use of Madison

...makes the most generous use of Madison Hemings's testimony. The book, which won the Bancroft Prize (the highest award in the historical profession), branded the Jefferson-Hemings story a "legend" that was neither verifiable nor credible. Peterson writes:

Upon the flimsy basis of oral tradition, anecdote, and satire, abolitionists avowed their belief in Jefferson's miscegenation. . . The legend would not have been born but for the Federalists; it would not have been revived but for the abolitionists. . . and when there was little but Jefferson's own history and the memories of a few Negroes to sustain it, the legend faded into the obscure recesses of the Jefferson image.

1960 **Historian Douglas Adair** drafts an essay, "**The Jefferson Scandals**," in order to respond to what he perceives to be the new popular belief in the truth of the Jefferson-Hemings story, which he brands "an ugly tale" and "a libel that has never died."

1961 **Historian Pearl M. Graham** publishes an article, "Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson," in the Journal of Negro History. She is one of the first to use the "rediscovered" Jefferson Farm Book to argue in favor of the relationship.

1968 **Professor Winthrop Jordan** publishes his monumental groundbreaking history, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812. In **the few pages** of the book that treat the Jefferson-Hemings story, Jordan argues that it was as consistent with Jefferson's psychology to have had the relationship with Hemings, as to not to have had it. This is the first time a historian of Jordan's stature has publicly endorsed the possibility of the relationship, even if he did not take a firm stand on the actual truth of the matter.

IV. THE MODERN ERA OF THE STORY

1972
(Autumn) **Fawn Brodie**, a lecturer in history at U.C.L.A., publishes "The Great Jefferson Taboo" in American Heritage magazine. The introduction to the article asks: "Did Thomas Jefferson, widowed at thirty-nine, take as a mistress Sally Hemings, the beautiful quadroon half-sister of his late wife?" Anticipating "inevitable controversy," the magazine breaks with its practice and publishes Brodie's extensive notes.

1974

Fawn Brodie, author of noted biographies on the Mormon leader Joseph Smith and the explorer Sir Richard Burton, publishes Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History. In one of over thirty chapters in the book, "Sally Hemings," Brodie discusses the slave girl as one of several important passionate romantic relationships in Jefferson's life. In an appendix to the book, Brodie attempts to dismantle the Jefferson "family denial" that one of the Carrs fathered Sally Hemings's children. ([Read an excerpt from the Brodie biography](#))



[Watch a special video report on Fawn Brodie](#)

[Reactions](#) to Fawn

Brodie's Jefferson biography were numerous, sometimes favorable, sometimes condescending, and often contentious.

1974

Journalist and historian Garry Wills reviews Fawn Brodie's Jefferson biography in The New York Review of Books. The [review](#) is personal and cutting, dismissing Brodie as "ignorant" with an "endless appetite" for "finding sexual references wherever possible." Wills seems most disturbed by Brodie's characterization of the relationship as one of romantic love; instead, he argues that Hemings was, at best, a "healthy and obliging prostitute."

1974

Historian Douglas Adair's essay "The Jefferson Scandals," originally written in 1960 and revised over subsequent years, is published after his death to help rebut Fawn Brodie's claims. In [the essay](#), Adair makes elaborate claims for a romance between Peter Carr and

claims for a romance between Peter Carr and Sally Hemings which produced all of Sally's children.

1975	Pre-eminent Jefferson scholar Dumas Malone and his assistant Steven H. Hochman, publish a journal article, "A Note on Evidence: The Personal History of Madison Hemings." The article attempts to dismantle a key pillar of the new claims about the Jefferson-Hemings relationship--Madison's testimony--by impugning the motives of S.F. Wetmore, who interviewed Madison in 1873.
1976	Fawn Brodie publishes her first major follow-up to her original research into the Jefferson-Hemings story. The article, "Thomas Jefferson's Unknown Grandchildren: A Study in Historical Silence," documents the lives of some of the descendants of Sally Hemings's sons, Eston and Madison.
1977	Historian John Chester Miller publishes <u>The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery</u> which reluctantly takes up the question "imposed" on him and others by Fawn Brodie: whether Jefferson made "the mulatto slave girl Sally Hemings his paramour." Miller finds the story too radically inconsistent with Jefferson's character and temperament. Following the lead of generations of Jefferson historians before him, Miller endorses the theory that one of the Carr brothers fathered Sally Hemings's children.
1979	Barbara Chase-Riboud, a poet and sculptress, publishes an historical novel, <u>Sally Hemings</u>, in which she blends documentary evidence for the Jefferson-Hemings relationship with a thoughtful imaginative reconstruction of conversations, events, and the psychological climate in which the two initiated and maintained a thirty-eight year romantic attachment. The book proved popular with the public--a best-seller and Book-of-the-Month Club selection-- but it drew heavy fire from Jefferson historians.
1979 (December)	The CBS television network "dropped all plans" for a mini-series based on Barbara Chase-Riboud's, <u>Sally Hemings: A Novel</u>. CBS bowed to concerted pressure from Jefferson historians and descendants who lobbied CBS privately, and then went public with their opposition: [CBS should] reconsider lending its name and network to mass media exposure of what can only be vulgar sensationism masquerading as history. - Merrill Peterson Letter to William Paley, Chairman of CBS January 16, 1979

[A Jefferson-Hemings television mini-series] will be a mockery of history. Scandal and sex can be exploited to great financial advantage. The public will always believe the story. You can never get it back. You can never stop it.

-Dumas Malone
February 13, 1979

The Washington Post

Watch a special video report on the killing of the mini-series.

1981

Virginius Dabney, a writer and Jefferson descendant, publishes, The Jefferson Scandals-A Rebuttal, an expanded version of a 1979 magazine article in which he attacked Fawn Brodie's Jefferson biography and Barbara Chase-Riboud's Sally Hemings novel. Dabney breathlessly marshalls whatever evidence he could find that he felt sufficiently damning to the interpretations and claims made by Brodie and Riboud. Read [an excerpt](#) from Dabney's book.

1984

Dumas Malone, the eminent University of Virginia professor and Jefferson historian, speaks to a New York Times reporter in one of the last interviews of his life. The ninety-two year-old Malone, who had considered stories about Jefferson and Hemings a nuisance, a lie, and a libel on a great president, makes a surprising comment that the two of them may have had a sexual encounter "once or twice."

Watch a special video report on Dumas Malone's view of Jefferson-Hemings.

1992
(October)

At the opening event of the University of Virginia's commemoration of Thomas Jefferson's 250th birthday, a new generation of Jefferson scholars convened a conference, "Jeffersonian Legacies," which was "ingeniously structured to promote genuinely fresh thinking about Jefferson and his legacy. The list of participants did not include many leading scholars with established reputations as Jefferson specialists who had already had their say." Though research was presented offering new insights into slave life at Monticello, little was said of Sally Hemings, except for a presentation of fifty years of dispute over various claims about the Jefferson-Hemings relationship.

1993

Historian Willard Sterne Randall publishes Thomas Jefferson: A Life, an attempted "reinterpretation" of Jefferson's political career, his beliefs on slavery, and other central aspects of Jefferson biography. On the the Jefferson-Hemings question, Randall writes, "I have no doubt that the

Hemings story, Randall is quick and sure in his repudiation:

Historians dismissed the Callender charges for nearly two centuries until Fawn Brodie dusted off a highly inaccurate and uncorroborated memoir by a man who described himself as Madison Jefferson, son of Jefferson and Sally Hemings.. . [Madison's testimony] is full of hearsay about events that the would-be former house slave could not have seen or known firsthand, if only because of his age, and must be put down as mere gossip about a great man published in the absence of journalistic standards, much less historical ones.

1995

Merchant-Ivory's feature film, "Jefferson in Paris," depicts a sexual relationship between Jefferson and Hemings. Though the film was not a great box office success, the reviews of the movie generally dismiss the Jefferson-Hemings relationship:

"Despite the certainty with which the filmmakers portray the affair, it is a story for which there has never been, and probably never can be, anything approaching proof." (Columbia University Professor of History Alan Brinkley, Newsweek, April 3, 1995.)

"What 'Jefferson in Paris' presents as vividly real, in a way only film has the power to, has long been viewed by most historians as a

possibility at best, or, very likely, pure invention." (Richard Bernstein, New York Times, April 10, 1995).

1996

Writer Conor Cruise O'Brien publishes The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution 1785-1800, which includes a closing note about the Jefferson-Hemings story:

"The time may come when **Madison Hemings's story** can be put to the decisive test. In the meantime, it would be prudent for historians and biographers to refrain from dogmatic statements concerning that story. . . In the present state of knowledge, it is prudent to suspend judgment on this matter.

1996

History Professor Joseph J. Ellis publishes a landmark re-appraisal of Jefferson, American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson, which won the 1996 National Book Award. In the book's Appendix, Ellis offers "**A Note on the Sally Hemings Scandal**," which acknowledges the important "symbolic" truth of the story for mixed-race America, but remains deeply skeptical about its truth. He concludes:

Within the community of Jefferson specialists, there seems to be a clear consensus that the story is almost certainly not true. . . After five years mulling over the huge cache of evidence that does exist on the thought and character of the historical Jefferson, I have concluded that the likelihood of a liaison with Sally Hemings is remote.

1997

Law professor Annette Gordon-Reed publishes Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy which systematically evaluates some 200 years of claims and counter-claims about the Jefferson-Hemings relationship. Although she stops short of fully promoting the truth of the story (she believes DNA evidence might offer the only possibility for certainty), she is unequivocal in her criticism of historical scholarship on this question over the years:

It is my belief that those who are considered Jefferson scholars have never made a serious and objective attempt to get at the truth of this matter. . . The failure to look more closely into the identities of the parties involved, the too ready acceptance and active promotion of the Carr brothers story, the reliance upon stereotypes in the place of investigation and analysis, all indicate that most Jefferson scholars decided from the outset that this story was not true and that if they had anything to do with it, no one would come to think otherwise. In the most fundamental sense, the enterprise of defense has had little to do with expanding people's knowledge of Thomas Jefferson or the other participants in the story. The goal has been quite the opposite: to restrict knowledge as a way of controlling the allowable discourse on this subject.

V. POST-DNA

1998
(November 5)

Dr. Eugene Foster et. al publish an article in the scientific journal Nature, "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child," which presents the first scientific proof of Jefferson paternity of at least one of Sally Hemings's children. Foster's findings also give the lie to more than a hundred years of historians' claims that one of Jefferson's nephews, Peter or Samuel Carr, fathered Hemings's children. DNA testing excluded both of the Carrs from the list of possible fathers:

To throw some scientific light on the dispute, we have compared Y-chromosomal DNA haplotypes from male-line descendants of Field Jefferson, a paternal uncle of Thomas Jefferson, with those of male-line descendants of Thomas Woodson, Sally Hemings' putative first son, and of Eston Hemings Jefferson, her last son. The molecular findings fail to support the belief that Thomas Jefferson was Thomas Woodson's father, but provide evidence that he was the biological father of Eston Hemings Jefferson. . . The simplest and most probable explanations for our molecular findings are that Thomas Jefferson, rather than one of the Carr brothers, was the father of Eston Hemings Jefferson. . .

Watch a special video report on the aftermath of the DNA findings.

1999
(March)

In quick response to Foster's published DNA test results, professors Jan Lewis and Peter Onuf organized a conference at the University of Virginia to allow "historians to reflect upon and begin attempting to explain the significance of the liaison between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings." The organizers described it as a forum for a number of academics who had assumed the truth of the relationship before the DNA but had "not bothered to publish their thoughts."

2000
(January)

The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation issues the "Report of the Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings." **The report** endorsed the findings reported in Dr. Foster's 1998 Nature article.

Although paternity cannot be established with absolute certainty, our evaluation of the best evidence available suggests the strong likelihood that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had a relationship over time that led to the birth of one, and perhaps all, of the known children of Sally Hemings.

2000
(February)

More than twenty years after CBS executives were pressured by Jefferson historians to drop plans for a mini-series on Jefferson and Hemings, the network airs, "Sally Hemings: An American Scandal." Though many quarrelled with the portrayal of Hemings as unrealistically modern and heroic, no major historian challenged the series' premise that Hemings and Jefferson had a thirty-eight year romantic relationship that produced children.

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