

Is It True? - Interracial Sex In Jefferson's Chesapeake | Jefferson's Blood | FRONTLINE | PBS

Interracial sex took many forms in British America. In those cases where the male partner was white and the female black--the typical pattern for most of the eighteenth century--it ranged from deep commitment on the part of the white man to his black partner and mulatto children to the most outrageous forms of sexual abuse. Jefferson's behavior probably fell somewhere in the middle. It makes little sense to assert that Jefferson raped Sally or that their relationship was the functional equivalent of a loving marriage. A more nuanced picture, as evident in many of the relationships previously described, is possible.

On the one hand, the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings, as with all slaveowner-slave relationships, was ultimately a forced embrace. Jefferson owned and controlled Sally Hemings. Sexual access to slave women was one of the prerogatives of ownership. The word used by Madison Hemings (as well as by Isaac Jefferson and James Callender) to describe his mother (and also his grandmother) was concubine, which in Samuel Johnson's eighteenth-century dictionary was defined as "a woman kept in fornication." The word means literally to lie together. When John Adams heard the allegation of Jefferson's liaison with a slave woman, he was not surprised, identifying it "as a natural and almost unavoidable consequence of that foul contagion in the human character-- Negro slavery." Modern notions of romance--seeing Hemings and Jefferson as America's premier biracial couple--should not be projected onto unions born of trauma, dependence, and constraint.

On the other hand, such a relationship did not have to be based solely on heartless domination; it might have involved a measure of affection. Even Thistlewood, whose sexual relations with slaves were often brutal and coercive, was ensnared in the complexities of a genuine, albeit severely asymmetrical, relationship. It is surely in the realm of possibility that a widowed, middle-aged white man (who had pledged to his wife that he would never remarry) could be attracted to a fair-skinned African American woman, who was almost certainly the half-sister of his late wife. Marriages to close relatives were common in early Virginia, and marrying or cohabiting with a former sister-in-law was probably not altogether rare.

The development of this relationship was all the more plausible in the mid- to late-1790s, as even Julian P. Boyd, the noted Jefferson scholar, acknowledged. A staunch advocate of Jefferson's upright moral character, Boyd described the possibility of an interracial liaison offensively and inaccurately as a "lapse": for him it had to be out of character and of short duration. Yet, even with this pejorative characterization, Boyd thought he "could make out a very strong case indeed, supported by many evidences, that if Jefferson ever suffered a lapse it was in the late 1790s when he returned to Virginia, bruised deeply and determined never again to occupy public office." Firmly believing that no "lapse" had occurred, Boyd was nevertheless willing to concede, "I could certainly present a mass of plausible evidence to show that, if he

ever did [engage in sex with Sally Hemings], this was the time and that habits of character in the face of powerful temptations might have been overridden." Even the Jefferson establishment was not as monolithic as sometimes portrayed on the question of an attraction between Jefferson and Hemings.

Sex between whites and blacks created, in Douglass Adair's words, "a tangled web of love and hatred, of pride and guilt, of passion and shame." Erotic activity brought whites and blacks close together, blurred the distinctions between them, and broke down barriers; but by threatening to close the gap between the free and the enslaved, and producing a group of people whose position was deeply ambiguous, it was also potentially explosive. It often arose in brutal and violent demonstrations of power, with white men asserting their sexual mastery and exerting their control over the bodies of black women. Some sexual encounters were marked by tenderness, esteem, and a sense of responsibility, but most were exploitative and unspeakably cruel--nothing more than rapes by white men of black women--a testament to the ugliness of human relations when people are treated as objects. Love and cruelty, affection and callousness, composure and frenzy--such were the contradictory strands that bound whites and blacks together sexually. This twisted emotional knot may well explain Jefferson's explosive condemnation of slavery, especially his description of the "whole commerce between master and slave" as the "perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions."

A contextual reading of interracial sex in the British Atlantic world has also emphasized that a tradition of interracialism often ran in families. Thus, the entangled history of the Hemingses, Wayleses, and Jeffersons was not unusual. Once an interracial union occurred, the progeny tended to follow the path of the parents. An English sea captain and an African woman gave birth to Betty Hemings; she in turn had six children with John Wayles; and those six in their turn tended to gravitate to white partners. In interracial families, "mulattoes" who found partners of a different complexion typically married or mated with whites rather than dark-skinned blacks. A progressive whitening occurred. Given the ways of a racist society, such a strategy is hardly surprising.

Furthermore, well-positioned slave women who crossed racial lines often did so to improve their children's chances of survival. Phibbah was one such slave in Jamaica, and Lettice aimed to be another. Sally Hemings had six known children, the first when she was twenty-two, the last when she was thirty-five. Apparently, she had enough influence over Jefferson to gain the freedom of all her children, the only case of an entire enslaved Monticello family achieving freedom.

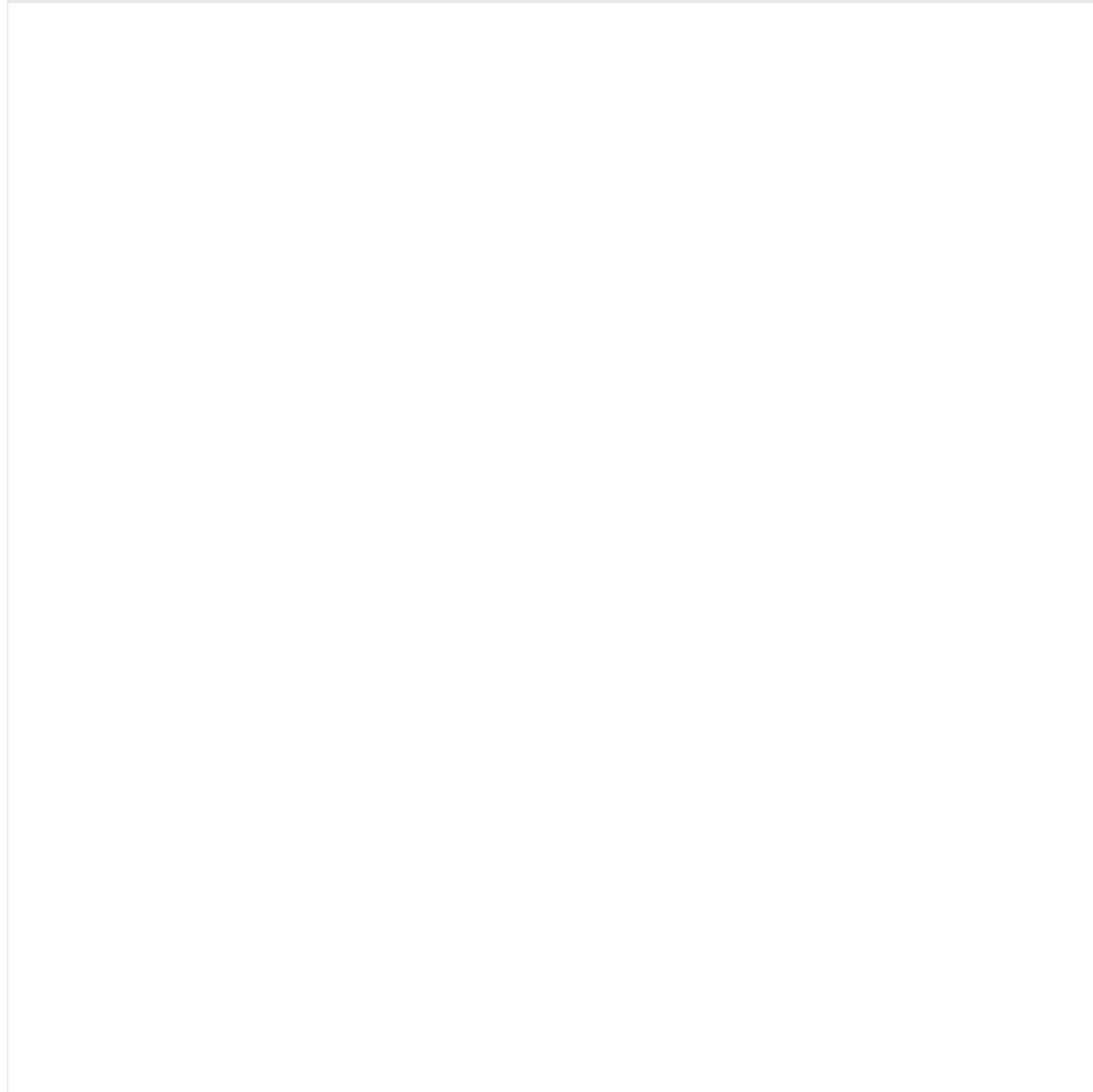
Sally Hemings had many of the attributes potential slave mistresses needed: she was beautiful, white in appearance, and worked as a domestic. Furthermore, like many another prime mover in an interracial family, she named her children after Jefferson's relatives and close friends. In addition, one of her sons, Eston Hemings, would later change his name to Eston Hemings Jefferson, presumably to indicate his belief in his paternity. Those who have questioned Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings because of

the significant gap in their ages need look no further than some of the relationships discussed in this essay. John Custis, Thomas Thistlewood, William Prestwood, and most spectacularly Thomas Cramphin prove that early modern slaveowners had sex and children well into their sixties, seventies, even eighties. That Jefferson apparently fathered Sally's children from age fifty-two to sixty-five is well within the bounds of feasibility. Bachelors such as Cramphin, the early Calvert, and Thistlewood were no doubt most tempted by the possibilities of sexual exploitation, but widowers, as the examples of Custis and Page indicate, were also prone to resort to black women, although there is always the example of Wythe to suggest otherwise.

Finally, although interracial sex in the early national Chesapeake was occasionally open, it more often involved covert and concealed intimacies--certainly much more so than in Jamaica or the Carolinas. In the Chesapeake community ideals seem often at odds with some individuals' practice. Jefferson may have had his own reasons for reticence, but he was hardly unusual for his place and times. He makes just one direct reference to Sally Hemings in all his massive correspondence: he merely notes that she had given birth. For this reason, the existence of interracial relationships is often difficult to prove.

In an earlier work, I accepted too readily the conventional wisdom that one of the Carr nephews fathered Sally's children. I have tried to rectify my own lack of care by subjecting the myth of Wythe's interracial liaison to close scrutiny. And demonstration of this myth needs to be recalled as Jefferson's culpability is pondered.

Ultimately, the DNA evidence, as E. A. Foster notes, "neither definitely excludes nor solely implicates" Jefferson in the paternity of Sally Hemings's children. The weight of evidence now tilts heavily in his direction and the burden of proof has dramatically shifted. The circumstantial evidence, as Winthrop Jordan, Fawn Brodie, Lucia Stanton, and Annette Gordon-Reed have previously noted--in some cases long ago--points its inexorable finger at him, but the mystery of the precise relationship and what it means for an understanding of the man and his legacy still remain.



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