

Has DNA testing proved that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one child with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings?



Photo by: weim

Viewpoint: Yes, the genetic and historical evidence strongly suggest that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one child with Sally Hemings (/knowledge/Sally_Hemings.html).

Viewpoint: No, the DNA testing is inconclusive and, at best, proves only that any of Thomas Jefferson's male relatives could have fathered a child with Sally Hemings (/knowledge/Sally_Hemings.html).

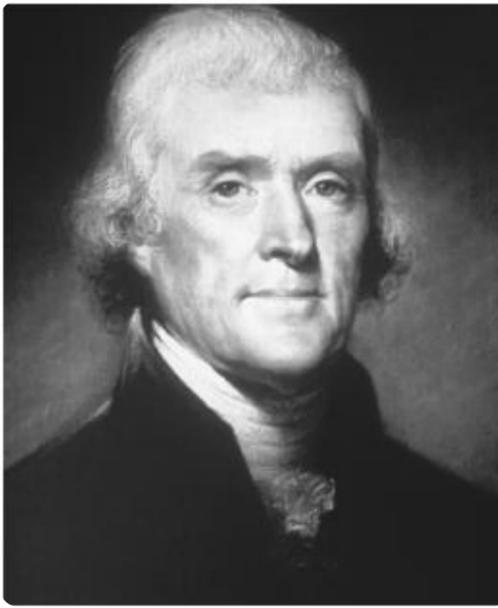
A perceptive analysis of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) by American historian Henry Adams emphasizes the contradictions and tensions between the philosophy, principles, and political practices of the third president of the United States. Although Jefferson's contributions to the early republic are well known, biographers have both praised and criticized his role in American politics. His private life has likewise been subjected to considerable scrutiny. No aspect of his life has been more hotly debated than the suggestion that Jefferson had a long-standing sexual relationship with Sally Hemings (1773-1853), one of his slaves, and was the father of her children.

John Wayles, Thomas Jefferson's father-in-law, may have been the father of both Sally Hemings and Jefferson's wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson (1748-1782). According to Monticello records, Sally Hemings had at least six children, but only four survived to adulthood: Beverly (born 1798); Harriet (born 1801); Madison (born 1805); and Eston (born 1808). Harriet and Beverly were allowed to leave Monticello in 1822. Madison and Eston were freed by Jefferson's 1826 will. Harriet, Beverly, and Eston apparently passed into white society. Jefferson never officially freed Sally Hemings. Jefferson's daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph (/knowledge/Martha_Jefferson_Randolph.html) probably gave Sally a form of unofficial freedom that allowed her to remain in Virginia with her sons Madison and Eston.

Details Emerge in Print

Rumors of the Jefferson-Hemings affair began to circulate among his neighbors, who commented on the striking resemblance between Jefferson and some of the slave children at Monticello. These speculations entered the written record in 1802 in a Richmond newspaper story by journalist James T. Callender, a man who undoubtedly harbored considerable enmity towards Jefferson. Callender asserted that Jefferson had for many years "kept, as his concubine, one of his own slaves," a woman named Sally, by whom Jefferson had "several children." Political enemies in the Federalist press continued to spread the Hemings story. Subsequently, both abolitionists (</knowledge/Abolitionism.html>) and pro-slavery Southern apologists (</knowledge/Apologetics.html>) used the Jefferson-Hemings story. An anonymous poem entitled "Jefferson's Daughter," which appeared in antislavery newspapers, charged that Jefferson's daughter by a slave had been sold for one thousand dollars. British aristocrats cited the Jefferson-Hemings story as a way of criticizing American democracy. After the Civil War, members of the Republican Party used the Jefferson-Hemings story as a symbol of the South and the Democratic Party.

Jefferson's defenders argue that it is impossible to imagine that Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States, would have engaged in a sexual relationship with one of



Thomas Jefferson ("*Thomas Jefferson*," portrait painting by Rembrandt Peale, photograph. © Bettmann/Corbis. *Reproduced by permission .*)

his slaves. However, many Americans also probably find it difficult to imagine Jefferson as a full participant in a system that Mary Boykin Chestnut (1823-1886) described in her famous *Diary from Dixie* as a "monstrous system, a wrong and an iniquity!" Mrs. Chestnut depicted Southern slave owners living like "the patriarchs of old ... in one house with their wives and concubines." It was common knowledge that the mulatto (</knowledge/Mulatto.html>) slave children on each plantation resembled the white children of that family. In a very telling insight, Chestnut observed that "any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds."

Interviews published in 1873 in a newspaper edited by Samuel F. Wetmore, a Republican Party activist, described the alleged Jefferson-Hemings relationship. Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson, another former Monticello slave, asserted that Jefferson was the father of all of Sally's children. On the other hand, Jefferson's daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph (/knowledge/Martha_Jefferson_Randolph.html) and her children, Ellen Randolph Coolidge and Thomas Jefferson Randolph, denied the possibility of a sexual relationship between Jefferson and Hemings on both moral and practical grounds. They insisted that Peter and Samuel Carr, sons of Jefferson's sister Martha, had fathered the children of Sally Hemings. According to biographer Henry S. Randall, when Jefferson's daughter Martha showed him a poem alleging his relationship to Sally Hemings, Jefferson simply laughed. Those who deny the relationship say this proves that Jefferson disavowed any intimate relationship with Hemings. However, remembering what Mrs. Chestnut said, it is possible that Jefferson was laughing at the naïveté of his daughter.

Fawn M. Brodie, author of *Thomas Jefferson, An Intimate History* (1974), accepted Chestnut's insights into the South's "peculiar institution" and made the liaison between Jefferson and Hemings the central theme of her best-selling biography. In addition to her use of psychological concepts, Brodie documented a pattern of correlations between the time of conception of Sally's children and Jefferson's return to Monticello after various absences. Brodie pointed out that during and beyond Jefferson's lifetime, social conventions required white men to engage in public rejection of miscegenation, or sexual relations, with black women, despite the evidence of mulatto children. Brodie's book stimulated much interest among general readers, but many Jefferson scholars rushed to rebut her conclusions about the relationship between Jefferson's public and private life. Speculations about the sexual relationship between Jefferson and Hemings were revived in the 1990s by studies of the Y chromosome (</knowledge/Chromosome.html>) of descendants of Hemings and the Jeffersons. Indeed, although DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) tests have not conclusively established whether or not Thomas Jefferson had a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings, analysis of the Y chromosome (/knowledge/Y_chromosome.html) of a descendant of Eston Hemings (/knowledge/Eston_Hemings.html) proved that neither of the infamous Carrs could have been his ancestor.

Studies of the Y Chromosome

In 1998 the British science journal *Nature* published the results of Dr. Eugene Foster's study of the Y chromosome (</knowledge/Chromosome.html>) of descendants of Eston Hemings (/knowledge/Eston_Hemings.html), Field Jefferson (Thomas Jefferson's paternal uncle), John Carr (paternal grandfather of Samuel and Peter Carr), and Thomas Woodson. Foster hoped that this DNA study, either alone or combined with historical evidence, would resolve the Jefferson-Hemings issue; that is, if the Y chromosome (/knowledge/Y_chromosome.html) of the Hemings descendants did not match the Jefferson Y chromosome (</knowledge/Chromosome.html>), Thomas Jefferson could be eliminated with a high degree of probability.

The DNA data proved, however, that Thomas Jefferson and a descendant of Eston Hemings (/knowledge/Eston_Hemings.html) had Y chromosomes that were "identical by descent." Historical and contemporary paternity testing (/knowledge/Parental_testing.html) can prove that a man *is not* the father, but it cannot absolutely prove that a man *is* the father. A background level of unanticipated and unexplained "non-paternity" is a problem in all paternity investigations, and the degree of uncertainty or "historical degradation" increases in a study involving many generations.

Interpreting the DNA Testing Results

The wide spectrum of reactions to the DNA evidence of Jefferson paternity can be seen as an important symbol of the tense history of racism in American society. Reports that the Y chromosome (/knowledge/Y_chromosome.html) study proved that Thomas Jefferson definitely was the father of Eston Hemings failed to explain the limitations of the study. The study proved that someone with the rare and distinctive Jefferson Y chromosome fathered Sally Hemings' youngest child, and the data eliminated the "usual suspects," i.e., the Carrs. The tests found no match, however, between the Jefferson Y chromosome and that of Thomas Woodson's descendants, who continue to believe that they are descendants of Thomas Jefferson. Although no other Jeffersons had previously been implicated as the fathers of Sally's children, after the DNA tests were published, genealogists noted that at least 25 adult male Jeffersons, including eight who lived within 20 miles of Monticello, could have fathered Eston Hemings.

It is interesting that the *Nature* article was published shortly before the United States House of Representatives voted to impeach President Bill Clinton. The Jefferson-Hemings story was debated in connection with the sexual indiscretions of William Jefferson Clinton. Those who opposed the impeachment and the investigation of Clinton's private life argued that other presidents, including Jefferson, had their own "sexual indiscretions." In an era in which the sex lives of

celebrities and politicians are the subject of constant media attention it is perhaps difficult to understand the attitudes prevalent during Jefferson's lifetime, when secrecy and discretion were the norm concerning sexual relationships, especially when racial issues were involved.

After the publication of Foster's DNA study, Daniel P. Jordan, president of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, which owns and operates Jefferson's home Monticello, appointed a committee to review all the scientific and historical evidence concerning the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. The committee report concluded that the "currently available documentary and statistical evidence indicates a high probability that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings, and that he was most likely the father of all six of Sally Hemings children." A dissenting report by one committee member argued that the historical evidence did not provide a definitive answer concerning Thomas Jefferson's paternity of Eston Hemings or Sally's other children.

In his *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson discussed a plan to free the children of slaves, but his words and deeds concerning the issue of slavery display remarkable ambivalence. On pragmatic grounds rather than on principle, Jefferson's failure to free all his slaves has been attributed to the fact that he had accumulated enormous debts during his life and all his property was mortgaged. Although it was Jefferson who wrote the immortal words "all men are created equal," he found it impossible to visualize a solution to the political and economic problems associated with the institution of slavery. Those who denied the possibility that Thomas Jefferson was the father of any of Sally's children hoped that DNA evidence would settle the question. Instead, the evidence has resulted in renewed controversy and has demonstrated that even in cases where the scientific evidence is clear, its interpretation remains ambiguous. Moreover, attempts to extrapolate from limited scientific evidence can result in exacerbating controversial issues.

—LOIS N. MAGNER

Viewpoint: Yes, the genetic and historical evidence strongly suggest that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one child with Sally Hemings.

The rumors that Thomas Jefferson fathered children by Sally Hemings (1773-1835), one of his slaves, began during his lifetime. Several families claim to be descendants of the pair. However, many Jefferson biographers and Monticello historians, some no doubt concerned about what they viewed as a blow to a founding father's reputation and reluctant to credit oral histories, continued to discount the rumors for 200 years.

Recently, however, DNA evidence has been presented that strongly links at least one of Hemings's children with the Jefferson family. Most historians now believe that the burden of proof has shifted, and that Thomas Jefferson was likely the father of at least one of her children, and probably all of them.

Genetic Evidence

In a 1998 article in the journal *Nature*, researcher Eugene A. Foster presented DNA evidence connecting the descendants of Sally Hemings's last child, Eston, with the Jefferson family. Foster analyzed the XY chromosome, which is passed down only in the male line. Among Thomas Jefferson's six acknowledged children, only Martha (1772-1836) and Mary (1778-1804) lived to maturity. So the Jefferson male line was represented by DNA samples from descendants of Field Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's paternal uncle.

The DNA pattern of the Jefferson XY-chromosome, or *haplotype*, is considered by geneticists to be quite rare. It was not seen in any of the samples taken from other "old-line Virginia families." Nonetheless, it matched with DNA from male-line descendants of Eston Hemings. Foster's team estimated that the probability that Eston's father was a Jefferson is greater than 99 percent. However, the results do not establish which Jefferson.

The resemblance of Sally Hemings's children to Thomas Jefferson was common knowledge among contemporary observers. Jefferson's grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, was quoted by biographer Henry S. Randall as saying "it was plain that they had his blood in their veins." Randolph told of a Monticello dinner guest startled by the similarity in appearance between the master of the house and the servant who could be seen over his shoulder. However, he denied that Thomas Jefferson was actually the father of Sally's children, calling the suggestion a "calumny."

Given the obvious family resemblance, those seeking to deny a relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson generally attempted to assign responsibility for her children to a close Jefferson relative. The man chosen was usually either Samuel or Peter Carr, the sons of Jefferson's sister, because both were frequent guests at Monticello. However, because Samuel and Peter Carr's father was not a Jefferson, neither could have been the father of Eston Hemings.

Eston Hemings could have been fathered by Thomas Jefferson's brother Randolph, one of his sons, or one of Field Jefferson's grandsons. However, there is no documented record that any of these men were at Monticello when any of Sally Hemings's six known children would have been conceived. Most of them lived more than 100 miles away. Although a few were occasional visitors, certainly none were at Monticello frequently enough to father six children there. Even contemporaries who denied Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings always picked one alternate candidate; none claimed that Sally Hemings was promiscuous or that the Hemings children had different fathers. The assertion that Sally's children were full siblings is supported by the apparent closeness of the family. They are known to have lived together at various times, and named their children after each other.

Tellingly, none of the other Jeffersons were advanced by contemporaries as a possible father of the Hemings children. Neither were they mentioned by historians in connection with the Hemings children until after the DNA results eliminating Samuel and Peter Carr were published.

Thomas Jefferson has been documented to have been at Monticello during the conception window of each of Sally Hemings's known children. Four of her six children were conceived within three weeks after he returned to Monticello from elsewhere. No evidence suggests that Sally Hemings was not at Monticello at these times. She is not known ever to have conceived a child during Thomas Jefferson's frequent absences, even when one of the other candidates for paternity was present.

A statistical study of Thomas Jefferson's pattern of presence and absence at Monticello with respect to her conceptions yielded a high probability that either Thomas Jefferson or someone with an identical itinerary was the father. Because none of the other men who shared the Jefferson haplotype ([/knowledge/Haplotype.html](#)) also shared his travel schedule, the evidence points strongly to Thomas Jefferson as the father of Sally Hemings's children.

The Account of Madison Hemings

Because we have no word from either Sally Hemings or Thomas Jefferson about their relationship, the most important documentary evidence is probably the 1873 memoir of her son Madison. The account was dictated to an Ohio journalist after Madison had been listed as Jefferson's son in the 1870 census. Madison Hemings told of his brothers Beverly and Eston, and his sister Harriet, saying they were all Thomas Jefferson's children, and that his mother had no children by

other men. Sally Hemings is known to have had six children, according to birth records kept in the Monticello Farm Book. These were the first Harriet (1795) who died as an infant, Beverly (1798), another short-lived daughter, unnamed (1799), the second Harriet, who survived to adulthood (1801), Madison (1805) and Eston (1808).

It should be noted that Madison's account makes no mention of a man named Thomas C. Woodson (1790-1879), whom some had believed was the first child of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. He is unlikely to have concealed the existence of an additional sibling, because he mentions the others who had slipped into the white world and would therefore have been reticent about their background. Madison's account does say that his mother began her affair with Jefferson in France when she was attending his daughters there, and returned to Monticello pregnant in 1789, but that this first child lived only briefly.

The Woodson family, like that of Madison Hemings, has a strong oral tradition of descent from Thomas Jefferson. They maintain that their forebear was the first son of the future president and Sally Hemings, and was sent to the Woodson plantation as a young boy. Accounts by Jefferson's political enemies do mention a son of Sally Hemings who looked like Jefferson and was named Tom. The newspaper *The Colored American* described Woodson in 1840 as "the son of his master." However, male-line descendants of Thomas Woodson do not share the same DNA haplotype as male-line descendants of Field Jefferson and Eston Hemings (or, for that matter, Samuel and Peter Carr). Neither is there any documentary evidence at Monticello that Thomas C. Woodson was in fact Sally Hemings's son, despite the existence of recorded birth dates for her other children. His parentage, therefore, remains a mystery.

Because Eston Hemings left Virginia and passed for white, his family did not preserve the descent from Sally Hemings in their oral history. Family members became aware of this part of their heritage only recently. However, earlier generations did pass down the knowledge that they were somehow related to Thomas Jefferson. In fact, while Eston Hemings was never known to have commented directly on his relationship to Jefferson, he did change his name to Eston Hemings Jefferson. The *Chicago Tribune* 1908 death notice of Eston's son Beverly described him as "a grandson of Thomas Jefferson." Sally Hemings's children Beverly and Harriet also left Monticello and entered the white world; none of their descendants, if any, are known.

Israel Jefferson, another former Monticello slave who took his master's name, corroborated Madison Hemings's story when speaking to a journalist in Ohio. The men were neighbors at the time; Israel Jefferson was about five years older than Madison Hemings.

Other Contemporary Accounts

Many stories of Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings were spread by his political enemies in the Federalist Party. In 1802, the journalist James Thomson Callender wrote in the newspaper *The Richmond Recorder*, "The PRESIDENT AGAIN. It is well known that the man, whom it delighteth the people to honor, keeps, and for many years past has kept, as his concubine, one of his own slaves. Her name is SALLY. The name of her eldest son is TOM. His features are said to bear a striking although sable resemblance to those of the president himself. The boy is ten or twelve years of age...We hear that our young MULLATO PRESIDENT begins to give himself a great number of airs of importance in Charlottesville, and the neighbourhood...By this wench, Sally, our president has had several children. There is not an individual in the neighborhood of Charlottesville who does not believe the story, and not a few who know it... The AFRICAN VENUS is said to officiate, as housekeeper at Monticello." Callender's story was repeated in many Federalist newspapers and gained wide circulation.

In a letter to a fellow Federalist, Thomas Gibbons of Georgia wrote that Jefferson lived "in open defiance of all decent rule, with a Mulatto slave his property, named Sally." Gibbon referred to the children of Jefferson and Hemings as Tom, Beverly and Harriet.

Not all those who made reference to Jefferson's unsanctioned domestic situation were his enemies. In his diary, Jefferson's friend John Hartwell Cocke (/knowledge/John_Hartwell_Cocke.html) wrote that many Virginia plantation owners had slave families. "Nor is it to be wondered at," he continued, "when Mr. Jefferson's notorious example is considered."

Thomas Turner, a friend of the Randolphs, the family of Jefferson's son-in-law, wrote in 1805 that the president and "black, (or rather mulatto) Sally... have cohabited for many years, and the fruit of the connexion abundantly exists in proof of the fact.... The eldest son (called Beverly,) is well known to many."

The Unique Status of the Hemings Children

According to Madison Hemings, his mother's duties were, "up to the time of father's death, to take care of his chamber and wardrobe, look after us children and do such light work as sewing &c." As for Sally's offspring, Madison said, "we were permitted to stay about the 'great house', and only required to do such light work as going on errands." In their teenage years they were taught trades. Harriet Hemings learned to spin and weave, while her brothers were taught woodworking. Eston and Beverly were also musicians.

All of Sally Hemings's children were freed by the age of 21. Madison Hemings said that this was the result of a promise Thomas Jefferson had made to his mother. The children of Sally Hemings represent the only case at Monticello



Descendents of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings pose for a group photograph at Monticello in 1999. (*Photograph by Leslie Close. AP/Wide World. Reproduced by permission .*)

of an entire slave family being freed. In fact, the only female slave freed during the lifetime of Thomas Jefferson was Sally's daughter Harriet, who left Monticello in 1822 at the age of 21. According to the recollections of former overseer Edmund Bacon, Jefferson directed him to provide her with carriage fare plus \$50. (Despite this unusual arrangement, Bacon still denied that Harriet Hemings was Jefferson's daughter).

Beverly Hemings left Monticello around the same time as his sister, and was not pursued. Upon Jefferson's death in 1826, Eston and Madison Hemings were freed in accordance with his will. Sally Hemings was never formally freed, but she too was allowed to leave Monticello after Jefferson died, and took up residence with her sons in Charlottesville. She remained there until her death in 1835.

The Weak Arguments Against a Jefferson-Hemings Relationship

The Jefferson-Hemings story involves race, sex and slavery. These are highly sensitive issues even in our time, let alone over the 200 years that the controversy over the paternity of Sally Hemings's children has percolated.

Many historians of the South have denied the possibility of a relationship between Thomas Jefferson and one of his slaves, saying that such a relationship would have been out of character. There is little evidence for such an assertion. One might as well argue that owning slaves at all would be out of character for the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence, but Jefferson was a man of his time and place. He was a Southern plantation owner, and he kept slaves. Sexual relations and even long-term relationships between plantation owners and slaves were not at all unusual.

In fact, both Madison Hemings and other contemporary sources inform us that Sally Hemings and several of her siblings were the children of Jefferson's father-in-law, John Wayles. Their mother, Betty Hemings, whose family filled most of the coveted house servant positions at Monticello, was also the daughter of a white man. So Sally Hemings was probably three-quarters white and the half-sister of Jefferson's wife, Martha, who died in 1782. Isaac Jefferson described her as "mighty near white...very handsome, long straight hair down her back." Thus arguments by some historians that Jefferson's cultural conditioning would not allow him to find a black woman attractive are also not particularly relevant.

We of the modern world must wrestle to understand a brilliant man who could write so stirringly of freedom while owning his fellow human beings. Jefferson was by no means among the worst of slaveholders. There is every indication that his treatment of his slaves was as good or better than was common among his peers. We cannot know upon what mix of love and power his relationship with Sally Hemings may have been based. Certainly its apparent length and the treatment of her family suggests a certain amount of affection.

Thomas Jefferson never acknowledged a relationship with Sally Hemings or her children. He never specifically denied the relationship either, at least in writing. A letter referring to unspecified "allegations against me" has been interpreted by some as a denial of the Hemings affair by some, while others view it as a reference to other matters. The only account of Jefferson's responding directly to being linked with one of his slaves came from his granddaughters, who told a story of their mother Martha Jefferson angrily showing the president a bawdy poem on the subject. He is said to have laughed.

—SHERRI CHASIN CALVO

Viewpoint: No, the DNA testing is inconclusive and, at best, proves only that any of Thomas Jefferson's male relatives could have fathered a child with Sally Hemings.

A long-standing legend suggests that Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States, fathered children by one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. Hemings, a light-skinned African American likely herself of mixed race, went to Paris with Jefferson when he served as ambassador to France. As the story has been passed down, she returned pregnant to Jefferson's Monticello plantation. Speculation about Hemings and Jefferson began soon after he returned to the United States, and later included accusations made by James Thomson Callender that Jefferson fathered Hemings's son, Tom, born in 1790, and other children of hers. Historians have written that Jefferson may have alienated Callender when he refused to appoint him postmaster in Richmond, Virginia, and that Callender's accusations were aimed at revenge.

Sally's last child, born in 1808, was named Eston. That Thomas Jefferson was also Eston's father has been rumored for almost two centuries. According to some historians, Eston bore a close resemblance to President Jefferson and easily entered white society in Madison, Wisconsin, as Eston Hemings Jefferson. These accounts have served over centuries as anecdotal "proof" that Thomas Jefferson was Eston's father.

There has also been a counter-tradition that either Peter or Samuel Carr, the sons of Jefferson's sister, could have been Eston's father.

The Search for an Answer

In the 200 years since Jefferson's time, science has developed ways of looking at deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) a molecule (</knowledge/Molecule.html>) often called the messenger of life, to discover the genetic "fingerprints" of inheritance. Recently, some scientists felt that advances in DNA testing could either establish Jefferson's paternity or exonerate him once and for all in the case of Sally Hemings's son, Eston.

In 1998, retired pathologist Eugene A. Foster and colleagues attempted to prove or disprove paternity in the Jefferson-Hemings debate by examining the XY chromosomes in the known male descendants of Thomas Jefferson, the Carrs, and others. To help with the effort, Foster enlisted Jefferson genealogist Herbert Barger, who helped identify Jefferson male descendants who were appropriate for testing.

Testing required identifying that part of the study participants' DNA that would reveal the configuration of their Y chromosome. Every male has two inherited sex chromosomes, the X chromosome from his mother and the Y chromosome from his father. The Y chromosome is passed unchanged from father to son. In their genetic study, Foster and his colleagues found that the Y chromosome in the Jefferson line was quite distinctive. Had it been common, conclusions would have been beyond reach and the Carrs, for example, could not have been excluded as candidates.

Their methodology contained a flaw, however. In testing living Jefferson descendants, they could not exclude from the data genetic traces of long-deceased male members of the Jefferson family, of whom there were many. All, including President Jefferson, could have passed along their Y chromosome to men in the subsequent generations.

The Published Findings

Study results were published in the British journal *Nature* on November 5, 1998, under the headline "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child." As the story reappeared in other popular media, the study results became simplified so as to suggest that it was an unequivocal fact that Jefferson fathered a child with Hemings. The study data, however, do not point to this conclusion.

According to Foster: "We ... analysed DNA from the Y chromosomes of: five male-line descendants of two sons of the president's paternal uncle, Field Jefferson; five male-line descendants of two sons of Thomas Woodson; one male-line descendant of Eston Hemings Jefferson; and three male line descendants of three sons of John Carr, grandfather of Samuel and Peter Carr. No Y-chromosome data were available from male-line descendants of President Thomas Jefferson because he had no surviving sons."

Foster and his colleagues found that the descendants of Eston Hemings Jefferson did have the Jefferson haplotype. "This haplotype is rare in the population, where the average frequency of a microsatellite haplotype is about 1.5 percent," wrote Foster. "Indeed, it has never been observed outside of the Jefferson family."

Thus, the findings of Foster and his colleagues suggest that Thomas Jefferson could have been Eston's father. At the same time, Foster confirmed that the Carr family haplotypes "differed markedly" from those of the descendants of Jefferson. This finding makes it certain that neither Samuel nor Peter Carr fathered Eston.

However, Foster and his colleagues noted that they could not "completely rule out other explanations of our findings" based in "various lines of descent."

They concluded that "a male-line descendant (</knowledge/Patrilineality.html>) of Field Jefferson could possibly have illegitimately fathered an ancestor of the presumed male-line descendant (</knowledge/Patrilineality.html>) of Eston. But in the absence of historical evidence to support such possibilities, we consider them to be unlikely."

The Evidence Falls Short

In response to the question of paternity, the answer is no, DNA testing has not proven that Thomas Jefferson had at least one child with Hemings.

The data merely suggest that a number of males related to Thomas Jefferson could have fathered Eston. In other words, Jefferson was not the sole guardian of his genetic makeup; the XY chromosome is a DNA "family fingerprint (</knowledge/Fingerprint.html>)" shared by some of his male relatives, any one of whom could have been the father of Hemings's son, Eston, or later fathered male descendants of Eston.

Because only living persons were tested, the Jefferson XY chromosome could have entered the lineage from several of Thomas Jefferson's contemporary male relatives or at any point in the almost 200 years since the rumor started.

Soon after the Foster article was published, *Nature* received letters, from scientists as well as nonprofessionals, disagreeing with the study results and, especially, disagreeing with the way they were reported.

In a letter to *Nature* that appeared in the January 1999 issue, David M. Abbey, MD, chief of medicine at Poudre Valley Hospital, Fort Collins, Colorado, and associate clinical professor of medicine at the Health Sciences Center at the University of Colorado, responded to the Foster study. "The DNA analysis of Y chromosome haplotypes used by Foster, et al to evaluate Thomas Jefferson's alleged paternity of Eston Hemings Jefferson is impressive," wrote Abbey. "However, the authors did not consider all the data at hand in interpreting their results. No mention was made of Jefferson's brother Randolph (1757-1815) or of his five sons. Sons of Sally Hemings conceived by Randolph (or by one of his sons) would produce a Y chromosome analysis (</knowledge/Cytogenetics.html>) identical to that described by Foster, et al." Abbey recommended that more data are needed to confirm Thomas Jefferson's paternity.

Could Jefferson's younger brother, Randolph, be considered an equal (if not better) candidate for being Eston's father? According to historian Eyler Robert Coates, records show that Randolph Jefferson was invited to Monticello in August 1807, about nine months before Eston was born in May 1808. Coates adds that Randolph had become a widower in 1806 and did not remarry until 1809; Coates speculates that Randolph was more likely in this period to be "susceptible to a sexual liaison." Of course, speculation over whether Randolph Jefferson, rather than Thomas Jefferson, was Eston's father is not a fact verifiable by science. He, like some other Jefferson males, was simply in the right place at the right time bearing the family XY chromosome.

Gary Davis, another letter correspondent, added in a letter to *Nature* (January 7, 1999), that "any male ancestor in Thomas Jefferson's line, black or white, could have fathered Eston Hemings. Plantations were inbred communities," wrote Davis, "and mixing of racial types was probably common . . . it is possible that Thomas Jefferson's father, grandfather or paternal uncles fathered a male slave whose line later impregnated another slave, in this case, Sally Hemings. Sally herself was a light mulatto, known even at this time to be Thomas Jefferson's wife's half sister."

Willard Randall, author of *Thomas Jefferson: A Life* and member of the God and Country Foundation, a group that seeks to safeguard the reputations of the founding fathers, said that at the time in question there were "20 to 25 men within 25 miles of Monticello who were all Jeffersons and had the same Y chromosome. Of them, 23 were younger than 65 year old Jefferson."

Shortcomings Are Acknowledged

Even the study's lead author, Foster, admits the evidence is not in any way conclusive about Thomas Jefferson's alleged relationship to Eston. After the controversy over his findings erupted, Foster said in a response letter to *Nature* (January 7, 1999): "It is true that men of Randolph Jefferson's family could have fathered Sally Hemings later children we know from the historical data and the DNA data that Thomas Jefferson can neither be definitely excluded nor solely implicated in the paternity of illegitimate children with his slave Sally Hemings."

As Abbey added, "a critical issue always facing science is confounding variables. It is the scientific standard to comment on such variables when presenting a study, and especially to note how such variables could impact results. It is surprising that the authors (in their original paper) did not even address other conclusions. Too, when the public is presented with authors disagreeing with the title of their own paper, and the press reports conflicting accounts as to the validity of the results, public confidence in the scientific process may be eroded (/knowledge/Erosion.html) and create unnecessary skepticism toward DNA research in general."

As reported in an article in the *Washington Post* (January 6, 1999), editors at *Nature* admitted that the headline was "unintentionally misleading" and confessed as well that more "alternative explanations" should have been included in their conclusions.

Foster was quick to point out the inconsistencies between the data, the conclusions, and the headline. In a follow-up letter in response to letters from Abbey and Davis, he reminded readers of their original objective: "When we embarked on this study, we knew the results could not be conclusive, but we hoped to obtain some objective data that would tilt the weight of evidence in one direction or another."

According to Jefferson historian and genealogist Barger, the evidence for Jefferson's paternity is not tilted in any direction by the data. In conclusion, the DNA XY chromosome testing shows only that Thomas Jefferson could have fathered Eston, but so could any of several of his male relatives. The science is inconclusive, putting the speculation about Jefferson and Hemings back into the category of gossip.

On April 8, 2000, the University of Richmond hosted an all-day symposium on the Jefferson-Hemings dispute. Although no publications came out of that symposium, the discussion was videotaped. The tape is at the University of Richmond. Eugene A. Foster, author of the *Nature* article, was among the participants.

—RANDOLPH FILLMORE

Further Reading

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KEY TERMS

DNA:

Deoxyribonucleic acid, the double-stranded, helix-shaped molecule (/knowledge/Molecule.html) whose sequences encode the genetic information of living organisms. DNA carries information that encodes an organism's traits.

XY CHROMOSOME:

The chromosome that determines male sex. A father passes his XY chromosome to his sons. Certain genes are located on the XY chromosome.

HAPLOTYPE:

The combination of alleles (alternative forms of the same gene) inherited from a parent.

User Contributions:

1 **Holly Andersen**
//dispute/Vol-

Jan 26, 2012 @ 1:13 pm 

Has any thought been given to extracting DNA from the bones of Thomas Jefferson? Certainly this has been done in the case of others, both famous and infamous, to settle similar disputes.

2 **Levertis Steele**
//dispute/Vol-

Jun 21, 2012 @ 8:20 pm 

"It was not of Jefferson's character to father children by a slave"! someone said. Of course a founding father, especially a President, would never do such a thin, would he? I am certain that many other founding fathers and statesmen did the same, and many probably took their secrets to their graves. Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, yet, he had slaves. Should that have been out of his character? (I am dittoing and paraphrasing someone.) Men are men whether they are founding fathers, other statesmen, paupers, in the nursing home, in the 1700's, or in the 2000's, or whatever. Still today many dignitarians are being caught "with their pants down," and many others never get caught. The Bible patriarchs did the same thing. Some were much worse. Abraham fathered a child by the help, and so did many others. What is new under the sun? Not one thing! Right this very minute, I bet, some of your worshipped national leaders are getting ready to meet their mistresses in France or somewhere. Look at what those secret service men did, and the word was that they had a long history of it. I wasn't surprised; were you? Such stories are as old as dirt, and found in all races. Anyone who thinks that such behavior is out of a public figures character has his head in the sand.

Because women are smarter than men, when it comes to infidelities, they almost never get caught. People have sinful natures, and it is a daily struggle to always do the right things. When my son was three years old, he yelled in anger, "Mama, I am sick and tired of being sweet!" Most people are not under the umbrella of ignorance. They know what human bengs are capable of.

Thomas Jefferson was a sinner like all of his critics and any other person who has red blood flowing through his/her veins. Nevertheless, he had some remarkable qualities and accomplishments, even serving in the highest office in America, the Presidency. Many other public official had illegitimate children outside of their marriages, but they did not get as much attention as the black woman and the President. It is funny how sins fall in a caste system. By the way, Jefferson was not nearly the only public official who fathered children by slaves. They were numerous, and many were quiet.

Shakespeare wrote, "What's done is done and cannot be undone." I agree/. It is past time for this mess to rest. Peace for everybody.

3 **annette**
//dispute/Vol-

Aug 25, 2012 @ 5:17 pm 

EXCELLANT DOCUMENTED REPORT...THANK-YOU ALOT OF QUESTIONS WERE ANSWERED...

4 **Taylor**
//dispute/Vol-

Feb 22, 2015 @ 3:15 pm 

Some people just don't want to concede the obvious. Thomas Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings children. It was not uncommon for a slaveholder to have relations with the slave women. Where do you think all the light colored blacks came from? Yes we know it happened and the awful thing is: we continue to hold on to the same evil prejudices that our forefathers had. Researchers and historians can spare their reputations by acceptance of the obvious.

5 **camille**
//dispute/Vol-

Dec 13, 2015 @ 6:18 pm 

thank you to whoever wrote this document. it was very helpful and has sparked a lot of questions

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Has DNA testing proved that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one child with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings forum (/forum/)

[Should statistical sampling be used in the United States Census > \(Should-statistical-sampling-be-used-in-the-United-States-Census.html\)](#)

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