

other explanations for the several children Hemings had that were obviously fathered by white men, some of whom bore a striking resemblance to Jefferson. A year after Madison Hemings's Ohio interview, James Parton's *Life of Thomas Jefferson* purported to solve the Hemings mystery by laying the paternity of her white offspring off on Jefferson's philandering nephew, Peter Carr, son of Jefferson's sister. Others blamed another notorious Carr, Samuel.

'Jefferson's embrace of Sally is almost symbolic of what the South was'

The parentage question. Thus it was that there were two parallel universes of thought on the Jefferson-Hemings question. Among the Jefferson specialists, the question of his parentage of *any* Hemings offspring was answered, almost universally, in the negative. Among the multifarious Hemings heirs and in the wider black community, meanwhile, there was no doubt but that the man from Monticello had fathered children with Hemings. "Those of us who are descendants have 100 percent certainty—you cannot modify 100 percent certainty," says Hemings descendant Michele Cooley-Quille, who comes from the Thomas Woodson branch of the family.

After the 1974 publication of *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* by historian Fawn Brodie, mainstream white America began to buy into the story's veracity. But among the academic elite, the 1974 bestseller ignited a furious debate. Brodie's arguments, while highly persuasive, were not conclusive, and many Jefferson scholars refused to embrace them.

That's pretty much where matters stood. Until now. In fact, had it not been for Gene Foster, that's probably where matters might have stood, period. Dr. Eugene A. Foster, technically retired after a distinguished career as a pathology professor at the Tufts University School of Medicine and the University of Virginia, is a genial bear of a man, 6 foot 4, the strong, silent type. Foster jokes that he is only "technically" retired because he keeps himself busy with a constant

stream of "projects of interest." One of those, as it happened, was Thomas Jefferson. Which is not altogether surprising, since Jefferson's presence is felt everywhere in Charlottesville, where Foster lives with his wife, Jane, a retired instructor of French. But Foster got onto Jefferson in a roundabout way. At dinner one evening back in 1996 with a family friend, the conversation turned to the subject of Anastasia, the daughter of the last Romanov czar, Nicholas. Specifically, the talk centered on how DNA had been used to determine whether a deceased Charlottesville woman, Anna Anderson, was the Romanov daughter Anastasia, as she claimed. Winifred Bennett, the Fosters' friend, proposed that the same methodology might be used to resolve the Jefferson-Hemings mystery. The reverberations from Fawn Brodie's book were still echoing in Charlottesville. Gene Foster was intrigued.

'There arose two parallel universes of thought, one white, the other black'

He started poking around. A biology professor at the university passed along word of recent advances in mapping techniques for the Y chromosome. That was fine, but where to get samples to test? Foster would have to find male-line Jefferson descendants. But Jefferson's only legitimate son died in infancy. (Jefferson's wife, Martha, gave birth to six children, but only two lived to adulthood.) That left Foster with only two Jefferson male lines to research: that of the president's brother, Randolph, and of their paternal uncle, Field Jefferson. The Randolph line looked promising at first. But it turned out that the line of direct male descendants had expired sometime in either the 1920s or 1930s.

Foster turned to the Field line. First he sought out Herbert Barger, a respected Jefferson family genealogist. Barger agreed to help. By early 1997, Foster had the names and phone numbers of seven living descendants of Field Jefferson. He fired off letters to all of them. Only one wrote back. So Barger intervened on

Foster's behalf, and five of Field's descendants agreed to cooperate, allowing Foster to draw blood samples.

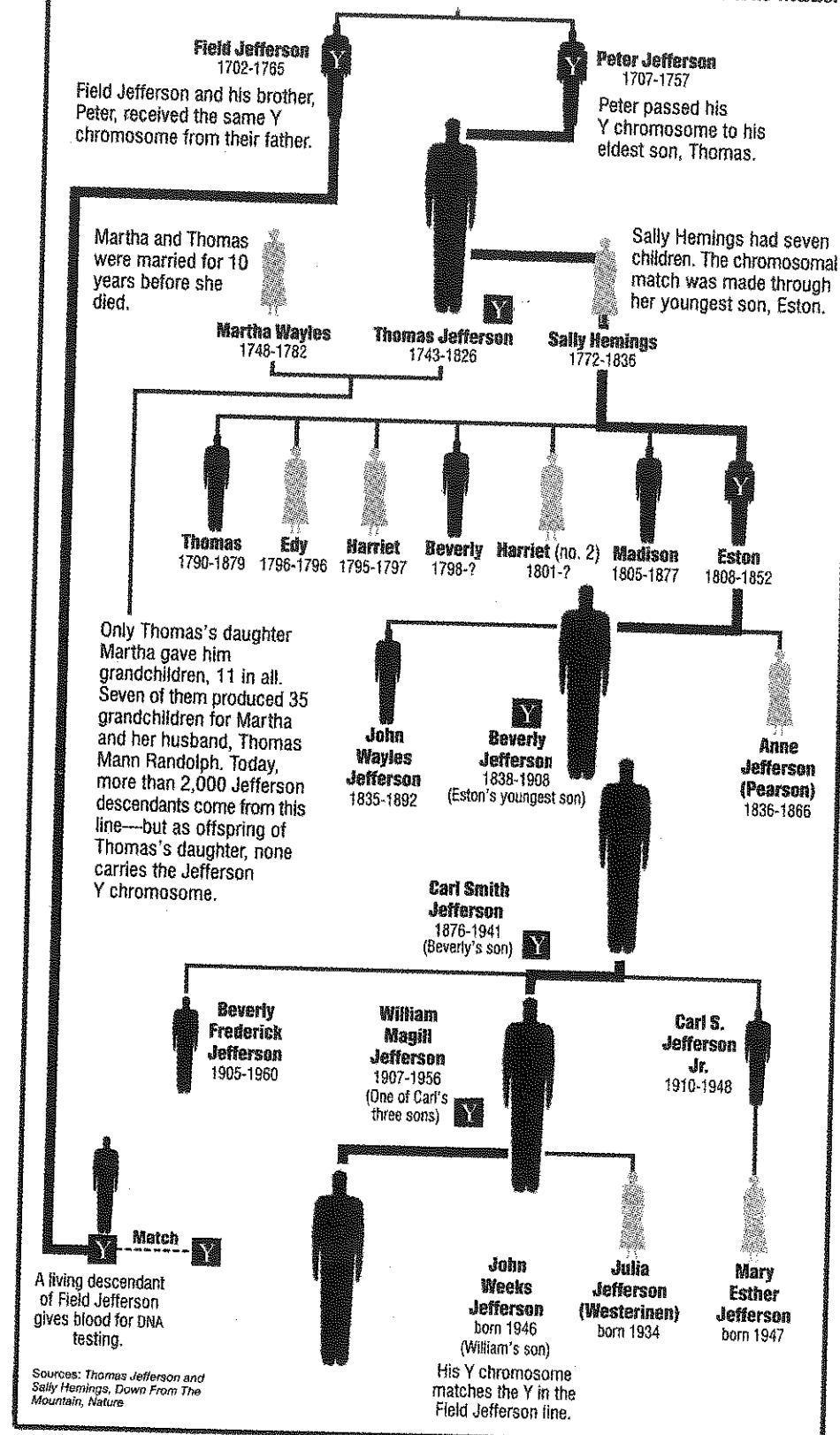
That was one part of the equation. But if he were to obtain a definitive Y chromosome match, Foster would need DNA from a male who had good reason to believe he was a descendant of Jefferson and Hemings. There was one obvious place to look: among the 1,400 members of the Thomas Woodson Family Association, an organization of African-Americans scattered across the country. The group is named for Hemings's first son, Tom, the child apparently conceived in Paris. Byron Woodson agreed to cooperate with Foster. But then his father, Col. John Woodson, put a stop to it. He didn't want to be messing around with subjects like illegitimacy, he said.

The Woodsons had maintained for nearly two centuries that they were descendants of Jefferson, but other branches of the family pooh-pooed the claim. Foster pressed. If they were to come up without any evidence linking the Woodson line to Jefferson, he told the colonel, "they'll say you knew that all along. But if we come up with evidence that, in fact, Jefferson was the father..." Foster let the sentence drop. The colonel relented. The Woodsons, he said, would cooperate with Foster's study. Five Woodsons eventually gave blood.

Closing loopholes. But there was more to be done. The philandering Carr boys could not be dismissed out of hand. Jefferson's distinguished defenders would dismiss any paternity evidence that didn't address that question. Foster tracked down three male descendants of the Carrs. They, too, gave blood. There remained one other line of male descendants to track down, and here Foster got lucky. Eston Hemings was Sally Hemings seventh and last child and Foster identified a lone male descendant. The man readily agreed to participate. Next Foster wanted some "control" samples. These were drawn from male descendants of several old-line Virginia families. The idea was to eliminate potential similarities in the Y chromosome tests due to geographic proximity. Foster was amazed by the cooperation. These were people, he said, "who had nothing to gain." And yet they welcomed him into

Tracking the Jefferson Y chromosome

Only males carry the Y chromosome. All direct descendants in a line share the same or nearly the same Y chromosome. Here's how the match was made.



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