

When a Saint Becomes a Sinner

Public affection for Jefferson is so strong that his legacy seems secure

By Joseph J. Ellis

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But the Eston match is really all that matters because, in conjunction with the circumstantial evidence that already existed, it proves beyond any reasonable doubt that Jefferson had a long-term sexual relationship with his mulatto slave. As one of those students of Jefferson who had previously questioned that conclusion, I think it is important that this near certain conclusion be announced to what Jefferson called "a candid world." Over its long history, the story of "Tom and Sally" has achieved the status of America's most enduring soap opera. We have now reached the final episode.

The salient question now seems to be: What difference does it make? For the several hundred Hemings descendants who have maintained that their oral tradition was more reliable than the oral tradition of the white members of the Jefferson family, and also more historically accurate than a substantial group of Jefferson scholars was prepared to acknowledge, this news is deliverance. It confirms the stories they have been passing along from generation to generation. Robert Cooley, one of the most outspoken Hemings descendants, once said he looked forward to a long talk with Mr. Jefferson in the hereafter. Cooley, who died last July, must be enjoying that conversation now.

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President William Jefferson Clinton also has a vested interest in this revelation. He launched his first-term inaugural parade at Monticello and hosted at the White House a special screening of the Ken Burns documentary on Jefferson. I happened to be present at the reception afterward when Clinton asked the assembled historical consultants: "Do you think the story of a sexual liaison with Sally Hemings is true?" When one of the historians responded in the negative, a look of disappointment streaked across the president's face. He was, we now know, at that very time involved in his own sexual liaison with Monica Lewinsky.

And he is now, of course, under scrutiny by the House Judiciary Committee for this dalliance and the subsequent coverup, and DNA evidence (i.e., the famous blue dress) also played a clinching role. The Foster study seems impeccably timed to arrive like a comet that has been winging through space for 200 years before landing squarely in the middle of the Clinton impeachment inquiry.

Witness for Clinton. Jefferson has always been Clinton's favorite Founding Father. Now, a sexually active, all-too-human Jefferson appears alongside his embattled protégé. It is as if Clinton had called one of the most respected character witnesses in all of U.S. history to testify that the primal urge has a most distinguished presidential pedigree. The dominant effect of this news will be to

make Clinton's sins seem less aberrant and more palatable. If a vote against Clinton is also a vote against Jefferson, the prospects for impeachment become even more remote.

Within the scholarly world, the acceptance of a Jefferson-Hemings liaison had been gaining ground over recent years. Now that it is proven beyond any reasonable doubt, the net effect is to reinforce the critical picture of Jefferson as an inherently elusive and deeply duplicitous character. We already knew that he lived the great paradox of American history. Which is to say he could walk past the slave quarters at Monticello thinking grand thoughts about human equality and never notice the disjunction. Now it would seem that his oft-stated belief in black inferiority and his palpable fear of racial amalgamation somehow coexisted alongside his intimate relationship with an attractive black woman. His public announcements and his private behavior apparently occupied wholly different and mutually exclusive compartments in his soul. The man who wrote "A Dialogue Between My Head and My Heart" in a letter to Maria Cosway, with whom he was intensely infatuated during his Paris years, apparently did not permit those different parts of his own personality to speak to one another.

If the scholarly portrait of Jefferson had already begun to depict him as inherently hypocritical, the popular perception has remained resolutely reverential. If the scholarly Jefferson has become a more controversial and problematic icon, the vast majority of ordinary Americans continue to regard him as the most potent symbol of American values in the entire gallery of national greats. He is on Mount Rushmore, the Tidal Basin, the nickel, and the \$2 bill. He is somehow central to our national sense of self. Lincoln said that America was founded on a proposition. Well, Jefferson wrote the proposition in 1776, in 35 magical words: *We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*

As one of his earliest biographers put it: "If America is right, Jefferson was right." Since his enshrinement in the Jefferson Memorial in 1943, he has levitated out of the historical muck and into a midair location that hovers over the political landscape like a dirigible at the Super Bowl, flashing inspirational messages to both teams. Not just an essential ingredient in the American political tradition, he has become the essence itself.

'American symbol. This mythological Jefferson has also become the one American hero who is also at home abroad. The values Jefferson has come to embody were the values of Polish dissidents in the Gdansk shipyards; the Chinese youths in Tiananmen Square; the Buddhist monks in Tibet. Wherever there is a struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, Jefferson is America's most accessible and effective ambassador. He translates more resonantly than any other American symbol.

Will these new revelations about his sexual connection to Sally Hemings undermine this apparently bottomless affection? Will Jefferson be knocked off the elevated pedestal on which we have placed him? My best guess is that he will survive this trial even more successfully than Clinton survives his. Jefferson's reputation, to be sure, has had its ups and downs. But his legacy, or what we

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take to be his legacy, has so thoroughly infiltrated the national ethos, has so fully insinuated itself into the creedal convictions of America's promise to itself and the world, that a diminution of Jefferson will be regarded, as he put it, as "treason against the hopes of mankind." If the American past were a gambling casino, everyone who has bet against Jefferson has eventually lost. There is no reason to believe it will be different this time.

Inherently elusive, Jefferson, we now know, lived the great paradox of American history

Indeed, Jefferson's legacy might appear more lustrous than ever before. For he is now thoroughly human, the American demigod made flesh who dwelt among us, the saint who sinned, the great man with ordinary weaknesses. As we approach the end of the "American Century," he has metamorphosed into the new role model for our postmodern temperament, if you will, a '90s kind of guy.

This new chapter in the Jefferson saga of renewed relevance can also develop quite naturally by spinning the Sally and Tom story as a tragic romance between two besmitten lovers prohibited from declaring their mutual affection by the racial strictures of the day. There is no historical evidence to support such an interpretation. But then there is no historical evidence to refute it, either. Several biographers, most famously Fawn Brodie, along with a larger group of novelists and poets, have already introduced this imaginative version of the story into the mainstream American culture, with

But the tests do not preclude the possibility that there were other offspring. Indeed, abundant historical evidence suggests that this is so. Beverly and Harriet Hemings very likely had Jefferson blood. After being granted only to Hemings's children—the two blended into white society in the Washington, D.C., area. Today, they may have hundreds of descendants who have never suspected that their ancestry is either African or presidential. Madison Hemings cannot be ruled out. Freed by Jefferson's will, he settled among blacks in Ohio, where he told an interviewer that his mother was Jefferson's daughter.

Tom, the boy conceived in Paris, still may have been Jefferson's son, even though there was no DNA match in his family line. The negative may have resulted from an unknown male—an illegitimate father—breaking the Y chromosome chain.

The link with Eston Hemings could easily have been missed. Freed with his brother Madison, he moved to Wisconsin, changed his name to Eston Jefferson, and gave everyone the impression he was white. One of his sons, John Jefferson—redecorated like the third president—was wounded at Vicksburg while serving as a lieutenant colonel in the Union Army. A century later, descendants working on the family tree kept hitting a dead end, running up against the name "Hemings." Not until they read Fawn Brodie's book did they sense they were kin to a slave and a president.

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Finally, some of Jefferson's most severe critics in recent years—Michael Lind and Conor Cruise O'Brien come to mind—have argued that the man from Monticello is an inappropriate icon for our more racially diverse and multicultural American society. From a strictly logical point of view, this makes eminent sense, since Jefferson's writings clearly reveal a prevailing presumption that America must remain a white man's country.

Now, however, Jefferson's life and his most intimate personal choices just as clearly reveal an interracial commitment that probably endured for 38 years. The Hemings descendants have sustained the story of their lineage for many generations because they are proud of their biological connection to Jefferson. While it will require a rather large stretch to transform Jefferson from a thinking man's racist to a multi-cultural hero, some commentators are sure to make the leap.

Perhaps a more historically responsible way to make a similar if slightly different case is to suggest that advancing technology has at least allowed us to open a window onto the covert and concealed interracial intimacies that have always been there but that many white Americans have preferred to deny. So now Jefferson surfaces again, not only offering aid and comfort to an embattled President Clinton but also making himself useful as a most potent guide into a fresh round of more candid conversations about the way we truly were and are one people.

Joseph J. Ellis, a professor of history at Mount Holyoke College, won a 1997 National Book Award for *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*.

With Gerald Parshall and Lewis Lord

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son's "concubine" and he and his siblings were the president's children. But Madison's Y chromosome line cannot be tested; one of his three sons vanished into white society and the other two had no children. (But one daughter had a son who became California's first black state legislator.)

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