
Jefferson's Secret Life

*Did the author of the Declaration of Independence take a slave for his mistress?
DNA tests say yes.*

By Barbra Murray and Brian Duffy

It begins in 1802 as an attack on America's high-minded president, the man who declared that all men are created equal. James Callender, a vengeful drunk and disappointed job seeker, accuses Thomas Jefferson of fathering illegitimate children by one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. Jefferson declines even to respond to the charge. But it becomes an unblotable stain. Political opponents and the Federalist press gleefully trumpet the alleged affair.

Decades pass and more evidence surfaces. A young man, descended from the beautiful slave woman in question, tells a newspaper in 1873 that Jefferson was his father. But a year later comes a refutation: A Jefferson biographer suggests that the woman's light-skinned children were sired not by the president but by two nephews. A hundred years on, another bombshell: A national bestseller asserts the Jefferson-Hemings liaison as fact and infers that they were genuinely in love. Defenders ridicule the allegation.

But it was not so easily dismissed. Schoolchildren with only the most casual acquaintance of history can usually be trusted to know only two things about Jefferson: That he authored the Declaration of Independence and that he was alleged to have had a long-running affair with Sally Hemings, the quadroon half-sister of his late wife, Martha.

Popular perceptions aside, the circumstantial case has grown more persuasive in recent years: Jefferson, who traveled widely and often, was found to

have been present at Monticello nine months before the birth of each of Hemings's children (except for the first, a son who apparently was conceived in Paris when Jefferson was the minister to France and Sally, at 16, was his daughter's servant). Coincidence? So skeptics would have us believe.

But new evidence appears to set the stage for the final episode of the Jefferson-Hemings epic. This week's issue of the British journal *Nature* presents the results of scientific tests that show a conclusive DNA match between a male descendant of Sally Hemings and another man who can trace his lineage to Thomas Jefferson's paternal uncle. Advances in the mapping of the so-called Y chromosome, which confers maleness on embryos, allow scientists now to consider DNA matches of the type reported by *Nature* as virtual proof positive of genetic linkage. The evidence here, in other words, removes any shadow of a doubt that Thomas Jefferson sired at least one son by Sally Heming (*see box*, "The history that lies in men's genes.")

It would be naive to assume the new evidence will settle the old debate over Jefferson and his legacy. But the confirmation of the Jefferson-Hemings affair could provoke a fresh examination of the American experience of slavery, and of relations between the races. Moreover, it may help reconcile the disparate perceptions of blacks and whites of their common heritage. "America lives in denial," says Clarence Walker, an African-

American history professor at the University of California—Davis. "This story has been part of black historical consciousness since the late 18th century." Walker recalls that when the story of Sally and Tom came up in a graduate-school discussion, his white peer dismissed it because Jefferson was a "man of the enlightenment."

The confirmation of the Hemings-Jefferson relationship will also play a pivotal role in dispelling the myth of separation between blacks and whites. "Jefferson's literal embrace of Sally, producing children, becomes almost symbolic of what the South was," notes Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology at Harvard University and author of the forthcoming book on slavery, *Rituals of Blood*. "What we have now is a powerful, symbolic blurring of the lines, with the most famous of the founding fathers intimately, biologically involved [with his black slave]."

Ultimately it was word of mouth among Hemings family members that kept the story alive. Nearly 50 years after Jefferson's death, Sally Hemings's penultimate child, Madison Hemings, confides in an obscure Ohio newspaper that Jefferson was his father and, in fact, sired all of his mother's other offspring. Another ex-slave from Monticello, Israel Jefferson, backs up the tale in a later account to the same newspaper. But Jefferson defenders will have none of it. Known among critics as an overly protective "Monticello mafia," they seek

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.

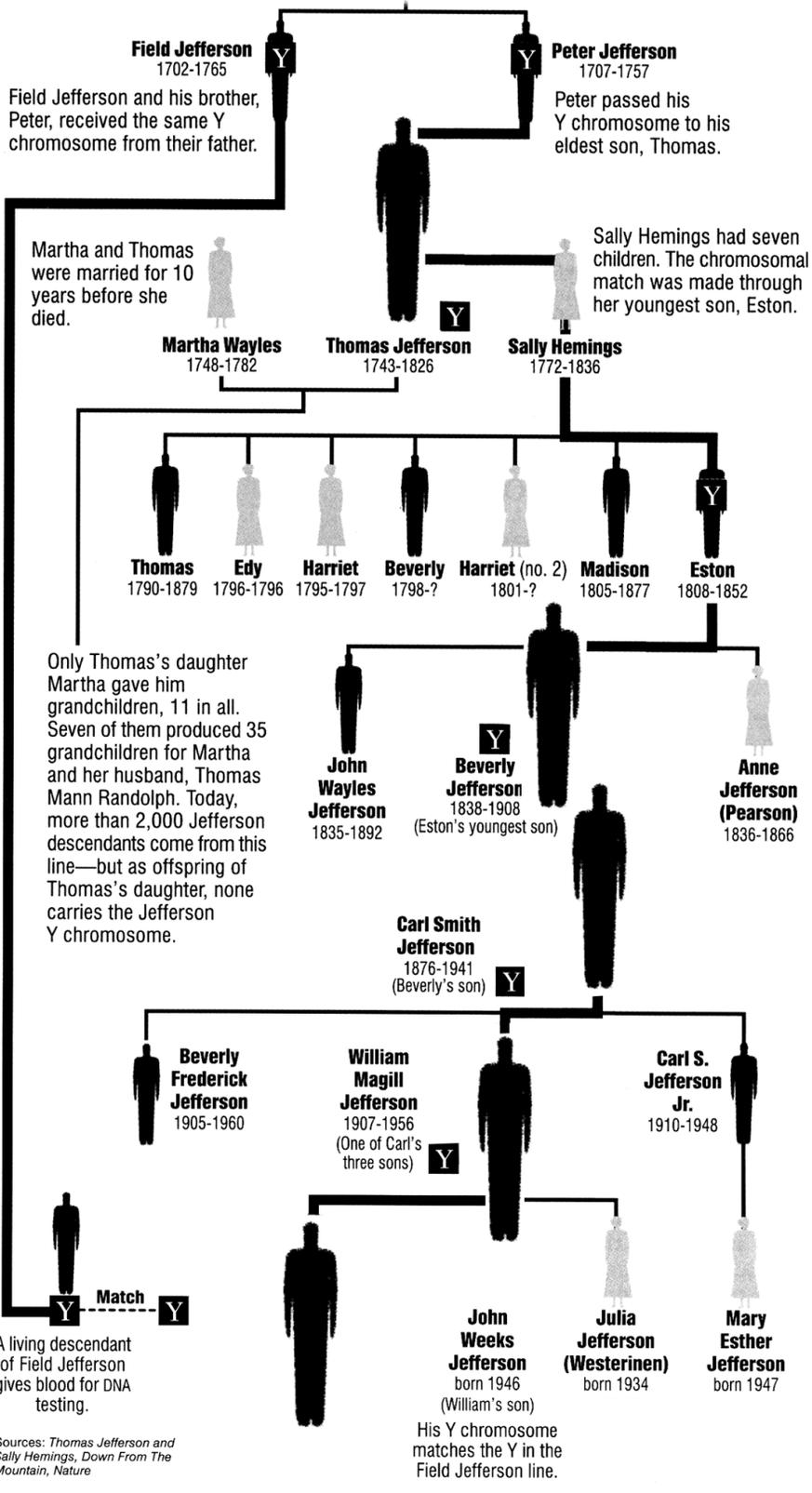
That was one part of the equation. But if he were to obtain a definitive Y chromosome match, Foster would need DNA from a male who had good reason to believe he was a descendant of Jefferson and Hemings. There was one obvious place to look: among the 1,400 members of the Thomas Woodson Family Association, 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-poohed 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.



Sources: Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, Down From The Mountain, Nature

The History That Lies in Men's Genes

The use of Y chromosome testing to verify the long-debated assertion that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one slave child is among the more dramatic consequences of a scientific discovery early in this century, one that helped gain a 1933 Nobel Prize for American geneticist Thomas Hunt Morgan. By studying fruit flies, Morgan found that recognizably different bundles of genes, which he called X and Y chromosomes, determine whether the insects are male or female. He soon recognized that the pattern holds in higher organisms, including humans. Inheritance of two X's, one from each parent, confers femaleness, while an X from mother and a Y from father produce a male.

By contrast, Y chromosomes carry a unique set of genes and, except for rare, random mutations, pass down unchanged through generations. They thus provide a deep view into the string of males in any man's ancestry.

Perfect match. The methods used to identify individual Y chromosomes have arisen only in the past 10 years or so. The key is identification of distinct genetic markers, sometimes called polymorphisms, which are typically stretches of "nonsense" DNA between the actual genes. They can vary widely from one man to the next. One or two markers can be identical purely by coincidence, but if many (scores are known) are identical, chances mount that two men have a recent, common ancestor. The British labs that performed the Jefferson tests compared 19 markers, all matched exactly those found in a descendant of Field Jefferson, the president's uncle, and a descendant of Eston Hemings Jefferson, Sally Hemings's youngest son. The researchers, who published their results in *Nature* [see Nov. 1998 issue], put the odds of a non-Jefferson match at less than 0.1 percent, based on their failure to find any Y chromosome that came close to matching the Jefferson pattern in 1,200 samples from unrelated men.

Even if no match were found among living men in the Hemings and Jefferson lines, or between some but not all subbranches of those lines, that would not exclude unions between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. The genetic trail could have been broken in subsequent generations if any of the mothers in the presumed chain actually had her son by a man outside the Jefferson line. Similarly, while people linked to Jefferson via a maternal link would probably carry some of his genes on other chromosomes, the Y chromosome test cannot show that.

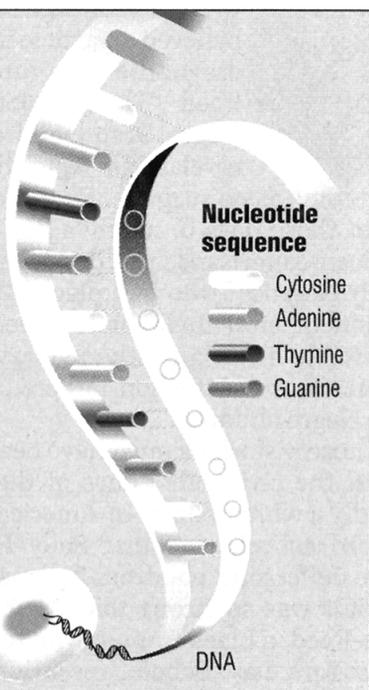
Study of Y chromosomes has brought other big payoffs for genealogists and geneticists. Members of a Jewish priesthood, the Cohanim, who by tradition must be sons of a priest and who date their ancestry back 3,300 years to Aaron, older brother of Moses, found their Y chromosomes to be so similar that they must indeed share a common ancestor from about that long ago.—*Charles W. Petit*

Passing on the Y chromosome

DNA tests on the Y chromosome reveal whether two men share a common male ancestor.

How the test is done

Researchers analyze variable "markers" known to identify different lines of Y chromosomes. Most commonly, the markers are repeated sequences of nucleotides—the "letters" in the DNA alphabet.



In people, the sex chromosomes are but one pair among 23 pairs of chromosomes in all, each packed with genes. Most chromosomes get shuffled in succeeding generations.

their homes. One even had fresh-baked brownies waiting for him when he turned up to draw blood.

Now it was time to test. Foster had 19 samples in all. A fellow pathologist at the University of Virginia extracted the DNA from the blood samples. Foster numbered and coded them, then stowed them in a bubble-wrapped envelope. Researchers at Oxford had agreed to test the samples. Foster flew to London, the samples secure in his carry-on. A bus from Heathrow air-

port deposited him at the ancient university town, and Foster delivered the samples to researcher Chris Tyler-Smith, whom Foster describes as his "main collaborator." First the two men placed the materials in a refrigerator. Then they toddled off to a pub for lunch.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history, albeit of a peculiar sort. According to Hemings's heirs, Jefferson fathered seven children by her, four boys and three girls. Foster's meticulously collected samples

were tested by three different Oxford labs using different procedures. The results fail to match the Field Jefferson line with the Woodson line, Hemings, or, interestingly, with the heirs of the Carr brothers. But the tests did establish a definite Y chromosome match on Eston Hemings, who was born in the second term of Jefferson's presidency.

What does that mean? That one can say with certainty that Sally Hemings bore Thomas Jefferson at least one son.

Holding out for an Icon

Character counts, the historians insisted

By Lewis Lord

For the black Americans who 44 years ago read and believed an article in *Ebony* magazine—the one headlined “Thomas Jefferson’s Negro Grandchildren”—the revelations from the DNA labs come as no surprise. *Ebony*, circulated in those days to nearly a half-million African-Americans, profiled several “elderly Negroes” who had placed a third president atop their family tree. “Many reputable historians,” the magazine said, “concede that Jefferson fathered at least five Negro children.”

Those historians must have been black. Until the civil rights days of the 1960s, hardly a white scholar in America was on record as believing that Sally Hemings bore Jefferson’s children. The pattern of denials was so strong that Annette Gordon-Reed, a black woman who teaches at New York Law School, recently wrote a much-acclaimed book—*Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*—meticulously dissecting the historians’ conclusions and the ways in which they were reached and articulated. The DNA results, she says, barely concern her. “It’s the historiography that’s offensive. You can’t use arguments that are dehumanizing to blacks to turn around a story.”

Foremost among the historical naysayers was Dumas Malone, a Mississippi-born and Georgia-raised Pulitzer winner who dismissed “the miscegenation legend” as “filth.” Malone placed Jefferson with Washington and Lincoln in “our Trinity of immortals.” The possibility of a “vulgar liaison,” he wrote, was “virtually unthinkable in a man of Jefferson’s moral standards.”

For nearly a century, the prime evidence of an affair was an account by Madison Hemings, Sally’s next-to-last child, who settled in Ohio. In an 1873 interview in Ohio’s *Pike County Republican*, Hemings reported that his mother told him that Jefferson fathered all of her children. Another former Monticello slave, interviewed by the same paper, agreed with Hemings’s richly detailed account.

But the ex-slaves’ memoirs hardly got outside Pike County. What kept the Tom-and-Sally story alive was a tradition of oral history in a scattering of black families across America, as one generation quietly and, in many instances, secretly told the next what had happened. Occasionally, as in the 1954 *Ebony* article, the story would emerge, then recede into the closet.

‘Amalgamation,’ Jefferson said,
‘produces a degradation’

The few historians who addressed the subject seemed determined to keep it there. In 1960, Merrill Peterson, in *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, found the Sally story sustained in part by the “Negroes’ pathetic wish for a little pride and their subtle ways of confounding the white folks.” Dumas Malone cautioned, “There is material here for the tragedian, but the historian must recognize that oral tradition is not established fact.”

Black vs. white. Malone, while discounting oral accounts by blacks, welcomed the testimony of Jefferson’s aristocratic white kin. He even embraced a pair of stories that conflicted with each other. Explaining why the Hemings children looked like Jefferson, the historian recalled that a grandson of the president once told an interviewer that their father was Peter Carr, a Jefferson nephew. A granddaughter, Malone also noted, identified Sally’s lover as Peter’s brother Samuel. (DNA tests... indicate that neither nephew was involved.)

For their chief argument, Jefferson’s defenders invariably turned to his character. Sex with a slave would be an abuse of power, one historian contended, and Jefferson was not an “abusive” person. To show that sex with a black was unlikely, scholars trotted out Jefferson’s pseudo-scientific views on race, among them: “Amalgamation produces a degradation to which no one... can innocently consent.” Still others concluded that the Sage of Monticello, once he was widowed at 39, had no interest in sex and was content to devote his remaining 44 years to architecture, laws, and literature.

The first white historian to suggest that a Hemings-Jefferson affair just might have happened was Winthrop Jordan, now at the University of Mississippi, whose 1968 book *White Over Black* made a relevant biological point. Taking a fresh look at Malone’s Monticello data, Jordan reported that “Jefferson was at home nine months prior to each birth.”

That helped clear the way for an event that transformed how millions of Americans viewed Jefferson. In a 1974 bestseller, UCLA historian Fawn Brodie used a blend of history and psychoanalysis to shape an argument that Jefferson and Hemings had a long and caring sexual relationship. Jefferson’s “slave family,” she suggested, represented “not a flaw in the hero but a flaw in society.”

Five years later, Brodie’s book, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, inspired a piece of Barbara Chase-Riboud fiction, *Sally Hemings: A Novel*, which, in turn, prompted programmers at CBS to envision a Tom-and-Sally television miniseries. Several Virginia historians, led by Malone, were outraged. The basis for such a miniseries, Malone wrote CBS, was a “tawdry and unverifiable story.” The network scrapped the project after Jefferson’s Virginia descendants joined the campaign to protect his name.

But the notion that Jefferson had a slave mistress no longer could be brushed aside. Even Malone, who had worked 43 years on a six-volume biography of the president, seemed to sense where the story was going. In 1984, two years before he died at age 94, the historian told the *New York Times* that what struck him as most speculative about Brodie’s account was not that Jefferson might have slept with Hemings but rather that he had carried on a love affair with her in Paris and later as president for years on end. A sexual encounter, on the other hand, Malone said, could be neither proved nor disproved: “It might have happened once or twice.”

When a Saint Becomes a Sinner

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

By Joseph J. Ellis

Well, now we know. More fastidious minds may linger over scientific details and statistical probabilities, and a few die-hard Jefferson worshipers will surely mount a spirited assault on the reliability of DNA evidence. The fact that there is not a match with the first of Sally Hemings's children, Thomas, may deflect some attention from the match with her last child, Eston.

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 possibility, 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.

'Tom and Sally,' America's most enduring soap opera, has reached its finale

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 earnest 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

(continued)

When a Saint Becomes a Sinner *continued*

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

considerable success. Given the strong pro-Jefferson currents that run relentlessly beneath the surface of our national mythology, the urge to make Jefferson and Hemings America's premier biracial couple could prove irresistible.

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.

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 allowed to run away—a privilege 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 Jeffer-

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.)

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—redheaded 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.

With Gerald Parshall and Lewis Lord