



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on February 19, 2018

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Did Jefferson Have Dalliances?

From the print edition of The New American

Thomas Jefferson is certainly on the short list of the greatest of our Founding Fathers. He did not even want the fact that he was our third president on his tombstone. Instead, he believed other achievements, such as his authorship of the Declaration of Independence, were more important. Certainly, the words of the Declaration of Independence, in which he boldly proclaimed that our rights come not from government, but from God, are the foundation of our country.



But the ugly accusation that he fathered at least one child, and probably several, by one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, has damaged his historical reputation. This attack is certainly part of the broader assault upon the reputation of the Founders, which is designed to diminish support for the principles of limited government upon which the nation was established.

The charge is not new, however, going back to the days when Jefferson resided in the White House, when a man of questionable reputation, a known political enemy infamous for his vicious smear tactics, first leveled the accusation.

For decades, however, historians routinely dismissed the charge as baseless, but then in 1976, historian Fawn Brodie presented the case in her *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* that Jefferson began an affair with Sally while he served as America's minister to France in the 1780s, when Sally was still a young teenager. Brodie even argued that Jefferson was actually referencing Sally's smooth Mulatto contours in his 25 pages of notes from his 1788 tour of France and Germany. While Jefferson specifically used the term "mulatto" to comment on the soil of the hills and valleys of the two countries, Brodie insisted that it was code for his mixed-blood concubine.

While Brodie implied that Jefferson took young Sally with him to France when he assumed his ministerial duties, the facts are that he first went to France in 1784. Sally, on the other hand, did not arrive in France until 1788, when she accompanied Jefferson's nine-year-old daughter, Polly. Writing in his *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, Willard Sterne Randall explained why. She was sent to be a nanny for Polly, and Randall notes Sally was "worthless" in that role, being only 13 herself.

"When Jefferson used the term *mulatto* to describe soil during his French travels, Sally was still on a ship with Polly," Randall wrote. "If he had ever noticed her or remembered her at all, Sally had been only ten years old when Jefferson last visited Monticello hurriedly in 1784 to pack James Hemings [her brother] off to France with him." Jefferson had not even lived at Monticello in the two years prior to that, since shortly after his wife's death. "Unless Brodie was suggesting that Jefferson consoled himself by having an affair with an eight-year-old child, the whole chain of suppositions is preposterous."



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The Origins of the Smear Against Jefferson

Yet, this was the beginning of the affair, according to James Callender, the man who originated the smear. Callender enlisted in the new Republican Party launched by Jefferson to combat the political views of Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. Callender was among those jailed for violating the Sedition Act of 1798, which made it a crime to write or publish false or scandalous material about certain high-level government officials. When Jefferson became president in 1801, he pardoned those who had been convicted under the odious law.

But a pardon was not enough for Callender. He expected to be rewarded with a post mastership from Jefferson, but that did not happen. Whereas before, Callender had used his specialty of smearing political opposition against the Federalists, he now targeted Jefferson. In the Federalist newspaper *The Richmond Recorder*, published in September 1802, Callender wrote, "By this wench Sally, our president has had several children." Callender even claimed that one child, Tom, closely resembled Jefferson.

While Jefferson never publicly responded to the charges directly, in 1805 he did write Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith that he was "guilty" of only one charge made by his political opponents. He told Smith that he had attempted a courtship of a married woman before he married his late wife. Because of the romantic nature of the admission, it can be fairly presumed that Jefferson denied any other sexually related scandal, especially one involving his slave.

Callender had incorrectly asserted that Sally went to France "in the same vessel with Mr. Jefferson." Because of such inaccuracies, Callender's sleazy reputation, and his obvious motives for revenge, most professional historians largely dismissed the accusations until Brodie resurrected the story in 1976. Jefferson biographer Dumas Malone said it was amazing that any real scholar could give serious consideration to Brodie's thesis.

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But Brodie's charges were enough to lead *some* descendants of Sally Hemings and *some* descendants of Thomas Jefferson's *uncle* to submit to a DNA analysis. In a scientific DNA test of this nature, the samples must come from those in the direct male line, or male-to-male all the way from the person in the distant past to the present. *No DNA from Thomas Jefferson was possible, as he had no living direct male descendants.*

The 1998 DNA Testing

To overcome this problem, DNA samples were taken from a direct male descendant of Thomas Jefferson's uncle, Field Jefferson. Other samples were obtained from direct male descendants of Eston Hemings, Sally's youngest son, and others from direct male descendants of two of Thomas Jefferson's nephews, Peter and Samuel Carr. Finally, a DNA sample was taken from a direct male descendant of Thomas "Tom" Woodson, who Woodson's descendants had long contended was the child of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. However, Eston Heming's descendants had never made such a claim regarding Eston.

The conclusions were: (1) Eston Hemings was the child of a male member of the Jefferson family; (2) neither Peter nor Samuel Carr could have fathered Eston; and (3) Tom Woodson was *not* a descendant



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of Thomas Jefferson. The third conclusion appeared to remove doubt that the Callender accusation in 1802 — that Tom was Jefferson's child — was a lie. No one has disputed that Tom's mother was Sally, and Tom is believed to be the lone child Sally had while in Paris. However, the lack of any DNA connection to Jefferson appears to discount the Brodie allegation that Jefferson fathered a child with Sally while in Paris.

One of the Carrs had been rumored to have fathered Eston, but the DNA findings ruled out that speculation, as well.

What created the sensation, when the results were published, was that Eston was descended from a "Jefferson male," or someone related to Jefferson's paternal uncle, Field Jefferson.

The family of Eston Hemings had a long-running family story that they were descended from a Jefferson "uncle." Like many family stories passed down across the generations, they often contain some truth, mixed with some embellishment or misunderstanding. In this case, it was not possible for Field Jefferson to have fathered Eston, because Field had died several years before Eston's conception. Another paternal uncle of Thomas Jefferson had likewise died years earlier.

Unfortunately, the English journal *Nature* released the DNA findings in 1998 with the sensational title, "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child." Doctor Eugene Foster, who conducted the DNA tests, later wrote that he was "embarrassed by the blatant spin of the *Nature* article." Foster added, "The genetic findings ... do not prove that Thomas Jefferson was the father of one of Sally Hemings' children.... We have never made that claim. My experience with this matter so far tells me that no matter how often I repeat it, it will not stop the media from saying what they want to in order to try to increase their circulation.... I am angered by it."

Herbert Barger, a Jefferson family historian, wrote in 2000 that Dr. Foster was largely responsible for the false impression left by the article, which Foster actually wrote. (There is some dispute as to whether Foster approved of the inflammatory title.) It was Barger who had provided Foster the names of several descendants of Field Jefferson, and even some of the descendants of Sally Hemings. For example, Barger wrote that he sent Foster historical information related to Thomas Jefferson's brother, Randolph, "who lived about 20 miles away, his five sons, and other male Jeffersons who lived at or near Thomas Jefferson's home."

Despite this, Barger wrote, "None of the additional information I had provided him had been included in the article, which would have made it clear that Thomas was only one of eight or more Jeffersons who may have fathered Eston Hemings."

The Jefferson Foundation noted, "Dissenters have pointed to Jefferson's younger brother, Randolph Jefferson, as a candidate for paternity, a possibility that would fit the DNA finding." It should be reiterated that the DNA findings were *not* that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Eston Hemings, but instead that a "Jefferson male" was an ancestor of Eston Hemings.

Randolph Jefferson had earned a reputation for socializing with Jefferson's slaves, and was known to have visited Monticello approximately nine months before the birth of Eston Hemings.

Until 1976, the descendants of Eston had believed that they were descended from a Jefferson "uncle." While Randolph Jefferson was Thomas Jefferson's *brother*, not his uncle, this is the type of distortion that often occurs in family stories. Randolph was known at Monticello as "Uncle Randolph," because, of



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course, he was the uncle of Thomas Jefferson's acknowledged children by his late wife. According to Martha Jefferson, Randolph, her father's younger brother, was known as "Uncle Randolph," and he was always referred to that way in family letters.

Isaac Jefferson, a former slave of Jefferson, later recalled that Randolph "used to come out among the black people, play the fiddle, and dance half the night." Barger noted that three of Sally's children were given names of members of Randolph's family. While it is not proven that Randolph was Eston's father, it is clearly more likely than the conclusion that Thomas Jefferson was the father.

Media Reaction to the DNA Publication

Despite the scant evidence against Thomas Jefferson, media reports at the time pronounced him guilty as charged. US News Online said, "The evidence ... removes any shadow of doubt that Thomas Jefferson sired at least one son by Sally Hemings," while the *Washington Post* asserted the genetic testing "almost certainly proves our third president fathered at least one child by Sally Hemings." These reports were as typical as they were unproven.

Even the History Channel has made the bold claim that Jefferson fathered children by Sally Hemings, noting that she only conceived children when Jefferson was around. But since Jefferson was "around" when she conceived a child in Paris, and the DNA studies indicated no connection between that child and Jefferson, this would seem to be a weak argument.

Why would the media rush to convict Jefferson on such flimsy evidence? Part of the answer is no doubt that the media love sensationalist stories, which sell magazines and newspapers. After all, it is a bigger story to proclaim Jefferson fathered children by a slave woman than to say that he probably did not. Another reason is that the *Nature* article was rushed into print during the Clinton sex scandals. Henry Gee, a staff writer at *Nature*, said, "If President William Jefferson Clinton has cause to curse the invention of DNA fingerprinting [remember the famous blue dress of Monica Lewinsky], the latest reports show that it has a long reach indeed."

The argument from Clinton's defenders was that if such a revered historical figure as Jefferson could have fathered children by a slave girl, shouldn't Clinton get a pass for having had a sexual relationship in the Oval Office with an intern?

Finally, it appears that undermining respect for our Founding Fathers is a popular activity for many modern liberals, who desire to use such attacks to undermine respect for the system of government they left us.

Clearly, the advocates of the thesis that Thomas Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings' children must strain the evidence to reach the conclusion they have.

On the other hand, Jefferson's political opponent John Adams dismissed Callender's ugly accusations as "mere clouds of unsubstantiated vapor."

Noted historian Forrest McDonald, a devotee of the greatness of Jefferson's arch-nemesis, Alexander Hamilton, was once inclined to believe the rumors, but after carefully reviewing all the evidence, including the 1998 DNA findings, concluded, "I'm always delighted to hear the worst about Thomas Jefferson. It's just that this particular thing won't wash."

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