

# President Tom's Cabin: Jefferson, Hemings, and a disclaimed lineage.

By Jill Lepore

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*For Annette Gordon-Reed, the real scandal wasn't what Jefferson did; it was what historians did, in scanting the evidence for it.*

In 1852, when Harriet Beecher Stowe finished "Uncle Tom's Cabin," she wrote to a congressman, Horace Mann, who happened to be Nathaniel Hawthorne's brother-in-law, to beg a favor. Might he know how to get a copy of her book to Charles Dickens? "Were the subject any other I should think this impertinent & Egotistical," Stowe wrote, making of demurrals a poor cloak for presumption. But she had reason to expect Dickens's sympathy. A decade earlier, upon completing an unhappy tour of the United States, Dickens judged the country "the heaviest blow ever dealt at liberty." Seeing slavery at first hand left him sick. "I really don't think I could have borne it any longer," he confessed, after riding a train whose passengers included a mother and her weeping children, sold away from their father by a fiend whom Dickens satirized as yet another American "champion of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

It would be going too far to say that Charles Dickens had it in for the original champion of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Still, he rarely missed an opportunity to throw a dagger in Thomas Jefferson's general direction, slurring, in his American novel, "Martin Chuzzlewit" (1844), that "noble patriot . . . who dreamed of Freedom in a slave's embrace."

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Discerning readers knew which patriot he meant. Dickens was quoting the Irish poet Thomas Moore, who visited the United States soon after a scurrilous Scots journalist named James Callender published, in the September, 1802, *Richmond Recorder*, long-standing rumors that Jefferson, who was President at the time, had fathered children by one of his slaves: "Her name is SALLY." Moore, inspired, wrote a poem—

The weary statesman for repose hath fled

From halls of council to his negro's shed,

Where blest he woos some black Aspasias' grace,

And dreams of freedom in his slave's embrace!

—onto which Dickens, appalled, tacked an epilogue: "and waking sold her offspring and his own in public markets."

James Callender drowned himself in the James River in 1803, but even unstable scandalmongers sometimes get a story straight. Thomas Jefferson did own a woman named Sally, Sally Hemings, and her children looked just like him. Writing four decades after Callender, Dickens did no more than add a seedy detail—the sexually sated author of the Declaration of Independence pocketing a tidy sum by peddling his own progeny lends the story an Oliverian twist—but even this wasn't entirely Dickens's invention. In 1838 or 1839, the London *Morning Chronicle*, where Dickens worked as a reporter, picked up a story that had been reprinted in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. An eyewitness claimed to have seen one of Jefferson's children on the auction block at the most infamous slave market in America: "the DAUGHTER of THOMAS JEFFERSON SOLD in New Orleans, for ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS."

Dickens probably believed this to be true. It was not. After Jefferson's death, on July 4, 1826, his slaves were sold at auction. But that auction did not include Sally Hemings's children, as Annette Gordon-Reed records in her commanding and important book, "The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family" (Norton; \$35). Jefferson freed two of Hemings's three surviving sons, Madison and Eston, in his will; the other son, Beverly, had already left Monticello. Hemings had a daughter, too, Harriet, who left Monticello in 1822, when she was twenty-one. "Harriet. Sally's run," Jefferson wrote in his "Farm Book," where he kept track of his human property, a population that needed minding, since Jefferson was one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia. Harriet didn't exactly run. "She was nearly as white as anybody, and very beautiful," recalled one of Jefferson's overseers, who also said that Jefferson ordered him to give fifty dollars to the girl, and paid for her ride, by stage, to Philadelphia. A widely circulated rumor, reported by another literary English rambler, Frances Trollope (Anthony Trollope's mother), in her 1832 "Domestic Manners of the Americans," turns out to be well-founded: "When, as it sometimes happened, his children by Quadroon slaves were white enough to escape suspicion of their origin, he did not pursue them if they attempted to escape."

But if the report that Jefferson's daughter had been pawned off to the highest bidder wasn't true, it still made a good story. At least, that's what William Wells Brown thought when he wrote "Clotel; or, The President's Daughter," the first African-American novel, published in 1853, a year after "Uncle Tom's Cabin." That year, Stowe toured England, where she met Dickens, and where Brown, who was living in London, rallying British sympathy for the American abolitionist movement, managed to get a glimpse of her. Brown knew a thing or two about what Stowe, in her Dickensian subtitle, called "Life Among the Lowly." Stowe's novel opens in Kentucky; Brown was born there. He worked for a Mississippi River slave trader, dyeing the hair of gray-haired slaves black, so that they might fetch a better price. His sister was sold away. In 1833, he and his mother tried to run; they were caught. His mother was sold down the river. The following year, Brown finally escaped, alone. In 1847, two years after the celebrated abolitionist Frederick Douglass published the story of his life, Brown told his own not entirely unvarnished tale, "Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself." After Stowe's novel made publishing history (it sold ten thousand copies in its first week), Brown decided to try his

hand at fiction. What better plot than the shocking story that had animated the pen of Dickens himself?

Brown's characters are different from Uncle Tom, Eliza, and Topsy, but they're no less didactic, and his novel, like Stowe's, follows their desperate fates, trial heaped upon tribulation, like so many ice floes crashing into the banks of the Mississippi. *Clotel* makes her escape by disguising herself as a swarthy gentleman. Captured, she is imprisoned in a "negro pen" in Washington, D.C. She flees, but, crossing a bridge from Washington to Virginia—"within plain sight of the President's house"—she is once again trapped. With a last look toward Heaven, she leaps into the Potomac. "Thus died Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson," writes Brown, toward the end of a novel in which he included a chapter titled "Truth Stranger Than Fiction."

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It has taken a very long time for historians to regard this story seriously, or even to begin to bother to sort out fact from fiction. Just why was the subject of Gordon-Reed's 1997 tour de force, "Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy," a book that was as much a painstaking investigation of the documentary record as a devastating brief on standards of evidence in historical research. For Gordon-Reed, a legal scholar, the real scandal wasn't what happened between Jefferson and Hemings but how willing earlier generations of Jefferson biographers had been to ignore the implications of evidence right in front of them, even documents like Jefferson's "Farm Book," but, especially, testimony about things said and done by the Hemingses themselves. Behind the Jefferson-Hemings affair, Gordon-Reed wrote, lay yet another buried family tie: Sally Hemings was the half sister of Jefferson's wife, Martha Wayles. Taking a lawyer's view of the case, Gordon-Reed pieced together the evidence and weighed it. She presented a strong case in support of the claim that Jefferson fathered Hemings's children, and freed them, or let them go when they reached the age of twentyone, because Hemings had extracted from him, in 1789, at the beginning of their decades-long affair, a promise that he would do exactly that.

Gordon-Reed's "Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings" was published the same year as Joseph Ellis's stirring and elegiac biography "American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson," in which Ellis asserted—intuited, actually, since there is no evidence for this—that Jefferson, who had got his wife pregnant six times in ten years, had never slept with the very beautiful Sally Hemings (who reportedly resembled his wife, a woman Jefferson adored), because "for most of his adult life," and, presumably, especially after his wife died (when Jefferson was thirty-nine), "he lacked the capacity for the direct and physical expression of his sexual energies." The man was a statue. "American Sphinx" won the National Book Award.

A year later, Eugene Foster, a retired University of Virginia pathologist, published in *Nature* the results of DNA tests he had undertaken, working with scientists in Oxford, Leicester, and Leiden. Foster tested the blood of the descendants of Field Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's uncle;

Eston Hemings, Sally's youngest son; and Thomas Woodson, who some believe was Sally's eldest child. (The Y chromosome passes down through males virtually unaltered, but Jefferson's only son by his wife died in infancy, which is why Foster had to find his Jeffersonian Y elsewhere.) The tests cast doubt on one relationship and proved another. Thomas Woodson's descendants don't have the Jefferson Y. Eston Hemings's do. This doesn't prove that Eston, let alone Sally Hemings's other children, were fathered by Thomas Jefferson. It proves only that Eston's father was a Jefferson. Alas, there just wasn't another Jefferson handy, there at Monticello, and with a Y in his pocket, each time Hemings conceived. Ellis, in later editions of his biography, graciously conceded the argument. "Prior to the DNA evidence," he wrote, "one might have reasonably concluded that Jefferson was living a paradox. Now it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that he was living a lie." Dissenters persist, citing the circumstantial nature of the evidence. But today most historians agree with the conclusion of a research committee convened by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, at Monticello: Jefferson "most likely was the father of all six of Sally Hemings's children."

Lost in the DNA-driven consensus, however, was Gordon-Reed's point. It ought never to have taken a lab test to bolster a claim deducible from the documentary record. For a conference at Monticello and the University of Virginia in 1999, Gordon-Reed revisited the case:

It is true that we do not and will never have the details of what went on between Jefferson and Hemings and their children. This does not mean that we have nothing to go on. Perhaps the most persistent, and ultimately damaging, feature of the original debate over whether the relationship existed at all was the tight rein placed upon the historical imagination. One was simply not to let one's mind wander too freely over the matter. Brainstorming, drawing reasonable inferences from actions, attempting to piece together a plausible view of the matter were shunted into the category of illegitimate speculation, as grave an offense as outright lying.

Deductions and inferences can be wrong. But they're not illicit; they're how history, at its best, makes sense of a senseless world.

In Gordon-Reed's new book, "The Hemingses of Monticello," her single most revealing source is the memoir of Madison Hemings, printed by a newspaperman named S. F. Wetmore in an obscure Ohio paper called the *Pike County Republican* in 1873. (Wetmore likely first heard about Hemings from a census-taker in a neighboring county who, in the 1870 census, noted next to Madison Hemings's name, "This man is the son of Thomas Jefferson." Four months after Wetmore published Hemings's story, a Jefferson biographer named James Parton, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, summarily dismissed it: "Mr. Hemings has been misinformed.")

Parton believed that Hemings was either a fraud or a fool. He did not seek him out; he did not consider what he said. He disregarded him. Gordon-Reed attributes such dismissals to a number of stereotypes: historians saw Hemings as an angry ex-slave with delusions of grandeur, a feeble-minded, childlike pawn. Parton probably did see Hemings this way. But it is also true that

Madison Hemings's credibility had already been damaged, long before James Parton came along, by every nineteenth-century writer, black and white, who made use of the Jefferson-Hemings legend. Callender poked a hole. Dickens left a dent. William Wells Brown dealt a blow. Abolitionists wanted, urgently, desperately, to end slavery. Their aim was to arouse sympathy. They told very many stories. Picturing white men preying on black women was their stock-in-trade. Stowe went further: she turned black men into feckless, sexless children. (That's one reason, but just one, that James Baldwin eviscerated "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in "Notes of a Native Son"; another was Stowe's failure to address "the only important question" about slavery: "What it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds.") Purveying hackneyed stories at the expense of black men's humanity came at another cost: who would believe Madison Hemings? (It didn't help that Wetmore, in a shout-out to Stowe, titled the column in which he printed Hemings's memoir "Life Among the Lowly.") Answering slavery with sentimentality carried a price, too: who could imagine Jefferson's daughter doing anything but dying?

For decades, on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, the gavelling off of Thomas Jefferson's children was a story that was either too awful to be true or too useful to be proved false. Sally Hemings lived in Charlottesville until her death, in about 1835. Eston Hemings, a violinist who later in life went by the name "Eston Hemings Jefferson," died in Wisconsin in 1856. Madison Hemings, a carpenter, farmer, and father of nine, lived until 1877. An enterprising investigator might have looked any of them up, long before 1873, except . . . what if their stories weren't as poignant as what he wanted to print?

Charles Dickens didn't have much use for the supplicating author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." It galled him when her work was compared to his. But what he really found infuriating was when she pried into the private lives of public men. "Wish Mrs. Stowe was in the pillory," he cursed, when Stowe reported, in *The Atlantic*, on Byron's romance with his half sister. (Dickens, who conducted an adulterous affair for thirteen years, tried mightily to keep it secret.) For all his contempt for that "noble patriot . . . who dreamed of Freedom in a slave's embrace," he seems never to have smeared Jefferson by name. Parton apparently shared his gentlemanly reticence. To dismiss Madison Hemings, Parton marshalled no more than a mysterious allusion to a letter that he had in his possession, written by yet another biographer, Henry Randall, in 1868. In an interview, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson's grandson, told Randall that Sally Hemings "had children which resembled Mr. Jefferson so closely that it was plain that they had his blood in their veins," but this, Randolph implied, was because they were the children of Peter Carr, Jefferson's nephew. (Randolph's sister, Ellen Coolidge, alleged that Jefferson's other nephew, Samuel Carr, was the father.) "The father of those children was a near relation of the Jeffersons," Parton wrote, "who need not be named."

Privacy is very much worth respecting, but not when one man's desire for it destroys another man's credibility. This isn't just about Jefferson and Hemings. It's about Parton's assumption that Randolph, a white man, must have been telling the truth while Hemings—listed on that census as "mulatto"—was, at best, "misinformed." Gordon-Reed, in her first book, began by

establishing the authenticity of Madison Hemings's memoir. Then, instead of taking Parton's witnesses at their word, she cross-examined them. If Randolph didn't have something more scandalous still to hide, why admit that he was related to the Hemingses? Jefferson was away from Monticello about two-thirds of the time; the Carr brothers were nearly always close at hand. The births of Hemings's children always followed Jefferson's visits by nine months. "Why could not Peter Carr or Samuel Carr get Sally Hemings pregnant when Thomas Jefferson was not at Monticello, not once in fifteen years?" Gordon-Reed asked. (The DNA results vindicated her. Foster tested the Carr Y, too. It didn't match the Hemings blood.)

Gordon-Reed rested her case. Then she set about writing history. In "The Hemingses of Monticello," she uses Madison Hemings's memoir as the foundation for an elaborate reconstruction of an American epic, a century-long saga of the Hemings family, in slavery and freedom. She reasons from analogy. She speculates. She asks her reader to trust her knowledge of human nature. There's no denying that a brick, here and there, could do with more mortar. Arguments from human nature can be persuasive, but when the wind blows they tend to totter. For one thing, "human nature" has a history; Enlightenment meditations on the subject, like David Hume's 1739-40 "A Treatise of Human Nature," surely influenced Jefferson's views on race. (Hume wondered if blacks were less than fully human—"There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation"—because they could not make deductions.) For another, arguments from human nature are only as subtle and perceptive as the people who make them. Most of us are easily duped. "Error, Sir," Laurence Sterne wrote in "Tristram Shandy" (one of Jefferson's favorite books), "creeps in thro' the minute holes, and small crevices, which human nature leaves unguarded."

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One measure of the boldness of Gordon-Reed's reading of the evidence is Kevin J. Hayes's "The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson" (Oxford; \$34.95), a wideranging and thoughtful biography of the sage of Monticello, by way of the books he bought and read. Hayes's study, like Gordon-Reed's, is the product of exhausting and illuminating research. But Hayes appears to have decided, early on, that Sally Hemings and her children had no role in, or influence on, the life and mind of Thomas Jefferson. In almost seven hundred pages, during which Hayes frequently comments on Jefferson's private life—his Paris flirtation with Maria Cosway, for instance—the essence of what he has to say about Sally Hemings has to do with Callender's 1802 report in the *Richmond Recorder*: "The story he published remains a part of the historical discourse and continues to fascinate the popular imagination."

This kind of thing is discouraging. I guess I always figured that a man who carries on a secret, decades-long affair is not unaffected by the experience, whether or not there's a memorial to him on the Washington Mall. It doesn't define him. It doesn't mean we should disinherit him. But it

might have kept him up nights. If Gordon-Reed's challenge is met, Thomas Jefferson is a man in need of a new biography. But first it's the Hemingses' turn.

"The Hemingses of Monticello" tells a family story, across the generations. Harriet Hemings had seven white great-grandparents; she was, in the idiom of the time, an "octoroon." She was also, because of a precedent-defying seventeenth-century Virginia statute, Thomas Jefferson's property. In 1655, a woman with an African mother and an English father successfully sued for her freedom by relying on English precedent, in which children inherit status from their father. Not long after, the House of Burgesses, eager to avoid another legal challenge, turned English law upside down, answering doubts about "whether children got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman should be slave or free" by reaching back to an archaic Roman rule, *partus sequitur ventrem* (you are what your mother was).

Generations passed. There was much begetting. In about 1735, Gordon-Reed recounts, an Englishman named Captain Hemings had sex with an enslaved "full-blooded African" whose name has not survived. She gave birth to a daughter. Hemings tried to buy the child, but her owner refused to sell, curious to see how the girl would turn out. Hemings hoped to steal her; he failed. In 1746, the girl, Elizabeth Hemings, was transferred to the plantation of an Englishman named John Wayles, when he married Martha Epps. (Hemings, who was about eleven years old, was part of the marriage settlement.) Wayles married three times; his first wife bore him a daughter, Martha, in 1748. After the death of his third wife, Wayles did not marry again. But, as Gordon-Reed relates, he did start having sex with Elizabeth Hemings, by whom he had six children, including a daughter, Sally, born in 1773. In 1772, Martha Wayles married Thomas Jefferson. After John Wayles's death, the following year, Elizabeth Hemings and all of her children went to live at Monticello. In 1782, when Sally Hemings was still a child, Martha Jefferson died. Mrs. Jefferson, on her deathbed, extracted from her altogether bereft and nearly unmoored husband a promise that he would never remarry. In 1789, when sixteen-year-old Sally Hemings was living with forty-six-year-old Jefferson in Paris, she became pregnant. Madison Hemings said that the child "lived but a short time." Woodson's descendants claim that the boy grew up to be Thomas.

Gordon-Reed argues that Hemings made a deal with Jefferson. She knew that she could stay in Paris, where she would be free; slavery was illegal in France. She decided to return to Virginia because she missed her family. And Jefferson promised her that he would free all of her children when they reached the age of twenty-one. Maybe Hemings loved Jefferson; maybe he loved her, too. (In 1974, Fawn Brodie wrote a history supposing this to be the case, and more than one romance novel assumes the same.) Gordon-Reed knows that this question is important, since Jefferson and Hemings are more than people—they're symbols, too. But symbols get you only so far. "The romance is not saying that they may have loved one another," Gordon-Reed writes. "The romance is in thinking that it makes any difference if they did."

Jefferson, the architect of our freedom, could not reckon slavery's toll. "The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other," he wrote in the early seventeen-eighties. "The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances." Neither could Jefferson imagine his life, or the Union, freed of slavery, without bloodshed. "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever."

Moral impotence is a muffled, crippled agony. American sphinx? American Achilles.

Sally Hemings bore her last child in 1808, when she was about thirty-five. In 1815, the aging former President (who never admitted, publicly, anyway, that he was the father of Hemings's children) wrote a letter in which he wrestled with a matter—a "mathematical problem"—that had long vexed him. Just how many "crossings" had to happen before a child with a full-blooded African ancestor could be called "white"?

Let us express the pure blood of the white in the capital letters of the printed alphabet . . . and any given mixture of either, by way of abridgment in MS. letters.

Let the first crossing be of  $a$ , a pure negro, with  $A$ , a pure white. The unit of blood of the issue being composed of the half of that of each parent, will be  $a/2 + A/2$ . Call it, for abbreviation,  $h$  (half blood).

The letter goes on for a while. Suffice it to say:  $b$  is the second crossing,  $q$  is a "quarteroon,"  $c$  is the third crossing.

Let the third crossing be of  $q$  and  $C$ , their offspring will be  $q/2 + C/2 = a/8 + A/8 + B/4 + C/2$ , call this  $e$  (eighth), who having less than  $1/4$  of  $a$ , or of pure negro blood, to wit  $1/8$  only, is no longer a mulatto, so that a third cross clears the blood.

To Thomas Jefferson, Harriet Hemings and her brothers were  $e$ . What more they meant to him probably does depend as much on your view of human nature as on the documentary record. After Harriet Hemings took a stagecoach to Philadelphia in 1822, she travelled on to the nation's capital, where her brother Beverly lived as a white man. "She thought it to her interest, on going to Washington, to assume the role of a white woman," said Madison Hemings, the only one of Sally Hemings's children to remain part of the African-American community. *She thought it to her interest*. He seems never to have forgiven her. "I am not aware that her identity as Harriet Hemings of Monticello has ever been discovered," Madison said. Finding her now would be difficult. "Harriet married a white man in good standing in Washington City, whose name I could give but will not."

Truth isn't always stranger than nineteenth-century fiction, but usually it's less melodramatic. Thomas Jefferson's daughter, if she was his daughter, didn't leap to a watery grave. As late as



the eighteen-sixties, years after “Clotel” was published, she was still alive, pursuing whatever liberty, and happiness, she could find, within plain sight of the White House, after all.

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- Also read "President Tom's Cabin: Jefferson, Hemings, and a disclaimed lineage." By Jill Lepore. The New Yorker, September 22, 2008. [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/02/22/president-toms-cabin](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/02/22/president-toms-cabin). (Click here for a cached version.) Thursday: - Read Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and "Second Inaugural Address." - Also read Thoreau, from "A Plea for Captain John Brown." - Also, RRE 3 due. Week 6 (Tues Sep 30; Thurs Oct 2). Tuesday, December 7 Reading and discussion: Jill Lepore, "President Tom's Cabin: Jefferson, Hemings, and a Disclaimed Lineage," The New Yorker, September 22, 2008. William G. Hyland Jr., In Defense of Thomas Jefferson: The Sally Hemings Sex Scandal (New York, 2009): 1-12, 76-93. (ER) \*Revised paper number three and the first draft returned to you are due at the beginning of class.