

Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson:  
History, Memory and Civic Culture  
Edited by Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf

Reviewed by Herbert Barger

I had requested to be present at a panel discussion of this book and was invited by Professor Peter Onuf, one of the authors. Upon arrival, I was denied a seat on the panel and told to seat myself in the audience and if I wished to say anything that the "open mike" at the end of the discussion was my conduit. I was an Assistant to Dr. E. A. Foster, and I was opposed to the panel's comments as they applied to the actual DNA findings. In my opinion, there seemed to be an overwhelming desire to demonstrate that DNA had proven Thomas Jefferson guilty of fathering slave children. This book conveys this image for the reader. Many statements in the book are absolutely inaccurate and have not been proven by DNA.

The very first page has a Jefferson-Hemings Family Tree that is outrageous in that it portrays Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings as the parents of Madison and Eston Hemings. A note states that Eston Hemings is "almost" certainly the son of Thomas Jefferson. The notes further state that descendants of Madison Hemings were not tested. This is true. However, my research had discovered the burial location of Madison's son, William. I had suggested to Dr. Foster, the Hemings, Dr. Daniel Jordan, Monticello President, and others that the DNA of William Hemings be tested against the Jefferson DNA and also against the Eston Hemings DNA. All have refused to move forward to develop this valuable resource.

The book suggests that some sort of long-term relationship existed between Jefferson and Hemings, but the theory that Jefferson fathered Tom (Hemings) Woodson was completely obliterated by the DNA test. There was no Jefferson/Woodson match as James Callender had claimed. Not only that, it was almost six years after Sally returned to Monticello that she had a first recorded child, Harriet I.

An assumption is made that if Jefferson wasn't guilty then some other white man on the plantation must be and the Carr brothers are mentioned. Thomas Jefferson inherited a mulatto named Sandy from his father, Peter. It is not too far removed to see that this man, possibly having Jefferson DNA and sandy or reddish hair, could have fathered the "yellow people" referenced in the stories. His male offspring, having the Jefferson DNA and physical traits, could have fathered Eston Hemings, who was the only Hemings tested. Dr. Foster's original plan was to "prove or disprove" the Carr brothers implication in this slave parentage. When there was no Carr match with any other of those tested, but there was a match to the Jefferson male line, Nature Journal "assumed" and wrote a false and definitive headline that it was Thomas Jefferson. Unfortunately, Dr. Foster had not given Nature Journal the family genealogy that I had given him, which showed the possible parentage of other Jefferson males.

Jan Lewis, one of the authors, hypothesized that Jefferson was evading the truth of his parentage by not directly denying the Callender rumors. Jefferson had written his Secretary of the Treasury, Levi Lincoln and Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith to admit to an indiscretion with

a married lady friend when he was young and unmarried, but that was the only rumor about him that he would admit to and he denied the others. Jan Lewis is also incorrect in stating that the Jefferson family told lies when they said the Carr brothers implicated themselves as fathers because DNA proved otherwise. It must be remembered that only the Eston line was tested. Since the Hemings refuse to test William Hemings (son of Madison), how are we to know that Madison is not one of those referred to by the Carr brothers?

This book does cite Dr. Foster's statement that the DNA evidence "neither definitely excludes nor solely implicates" Jefferson in the paternity of Sally Hemings' children. He has stated this in e-mails to me, in Nature Journal (January 7, 1999), the New York Times article of early 1999 and in other publications. But non-DNA literate "authorities" continue to assume that since Jefferson owned slaves he "must" have sired slave children.