

Interview with Professor Robert F. Turner **Chairman of the Jefferson-Hemings Scholars Commission**

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Let's begin with a little background. How did the Scholars Commission come into existence?

I was not personally involved in the creation of the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society (TJHS), but my understanding is that after the science journal Nature published an article in 1998 under the title “Jefferson Fathered Slave’s Last Child,” and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation issued a report concluding President Jefferson fathered one and perhaps all of Sally Hemings’ children, a group of Jefferson admirers came together and lamented that Jefferson was not getting a fair hearing. Someone suggested that they invite a “blue-ribbon jury” of senior scholars to reexamine all of the facts and issue a public report. In March 2000 I was one of several University of Virginia professors invited to a luncheon in Charlottesville to discuss the idea. I agreed to take part, on the condition that the inquiry would be completely independent of the TJHS or any other outside interference and that we would be allowed to select our own members. (They had already approached several others about joining the inquiry, but we excluded those on their list who we felt did not have sufficient academic credentials and added additional members.)

How much were you paid for your efforts?

No one on the Scholars Commission received so much as a penny in compensation. One of the board members of the TJHS had a friend (an elderly woman whose late brother had been a great Jefferson admirer) who voluntarily wrote out a check to cover our travel, lodging, photocopying, and related expenses during our inquiry. But several members of the group insisted on paying for their own travel and other expenses.

What was your relationship with the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society?

I first met some of the members at the March 2000 luncheon, and one of their members worked closely with me on administrative aspects of our inquiry to handle the financial side of things—paying for hotel rooms and group meals and reimbursing scholars for their airline tickets. (I preferred not to handle any money connected with the inquiry.) When I invited Professor Forrest McDonald to join the group, I was informed that one member of the TJHS—knowing that Professor McDonald was a strong Jefferson critic—was upset and suggested that perhaps limits should be placed upon the length of any “minority views” that might accompany our report. I responded that there would be no limitations on

any member's contributions, and if that were not acceptable I would immediately resign. To the best of my understanding, that was not an effort endorsed by the TJHS but merely a comment by one member that was informally relayed to me. In any event, it was not pursued further with me. When our summary Final Report (pages 3-21 in the book) was completed, I send a copy via an email addressed jointly to the President of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation (which the previous year had dropped "Memorial" from its name), the President of the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society, and the President of the Monticello Association (a group of Jefferson descendants who had expressed an interest in our work). It was I believe the evening before our April 12, 2001, press conference, that I finally met the TJHS president.

Are you telling us this is a ten-year-old study? Why did it take so long to get it published, and why should it be considered newsworthy today?

The initial study took place between March or April 2000 and April 2001. The delay in publication is entirely my fault, because my day-job involves the study of National Security Law and the demands on my time following the 9/11 attacks compelled me to put this project on a back burner. However, the book that has just come out includes both a number of corrections and other changes and a great deal of additional information. I have also added an editor's Postscript that examines how the initial report was received and some of the subsequent scholarship on the issue. My part of the book alone has been expanded nearly 30% and include hundreds of new footnotes and photocopies of several documents that were not in the original. Most importantly, the release of the book makes the finished report available to the general public for the first time.

Let's talk a little substance. Didn't those 1998 DNA tests reported in Nature establish that President Jefferson was the father of at least one of Sally Hemings' children?

No. Short of exhuming his body, there exists no known sample of Thomas Jefferson's DNA. The 1998 DNA tests reported in Nature involved DNA samples taken from descendants of President Jefferson's cousins, and the test used was only designed to determine whether an individual was a member of a group of potential fathers of a child—in this instance, a group of more than two-dozen adult Jefferson males known to have been in Virginia when Eston Hemings was conceived. Sadly, the scientific journal Nature, which first published the story, entitled their report "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child," leading people quite reasonably to assume they were referring to Thomas Jefferson as Eston Hemings' father. Dr. Eugene Foster, who planned and oversaw the DNA testing, published letters in Nature and the New York Times emphasizing that President Jefferson was only one of many possible fathers consistent with their DNA findings, but

much of the public and the academic community were misled by the initial reports into believing Thomas Jefferson had been confirmed by DNA tests as the father of at least one of Sally Hemings' children.

Within this group of Jefferson males, were there any other “serious suspects” besides President Jefferson for the paternity of Eston or other Hemings children?

Yes. Based upon the rather limited evidence that still exists, we found the strongest case to be against the President's much younger and considerably less cerebral brother, Randolph Jefferson, or perhaps one of Randolph's sons. We include in the book a photocopy of a letter from the President inviting Randolph (and, presumably, his five sons) to visit Monticello written about fifteen days before Eston Hemings is estimated to have been conceived and noting that Randolph's twin sister (with whom he was very close) had just arrived. Randolph had also been paid to deliver a load of seed to Monticello about that time. A photocopy of the letter in question appears on page 225 of the book.

*An oral history taken down in 1847 from a Monticello blacksmith named Isaac Jefferson and published in 1951 under the title *Memoirs of a Monticello Slave* documents that, when the President's brother, who lived only a few miles away, visited Monticello, he would “come out among black people, play the fiddle and dance half the night.” There are also reports that Randolph fathered children by other slaves, and a 2000 research report prepared by Monticello scholars concludes that all of Sally's known children may have been born between the death of Randolph's first wife and his remarriage to a very controlling woman. Randolph's five sons are also more likely candidates for Eston's paternity than the sixty-four-year-old President.*

Didn't the DNA disprove the story attributed to Jefferson's grandchildren that nephews Peter and/or Samuel Carr admitted to fathering children by Sally Hemings?

No. The 1998 DNA tests proved that neither Carr brother fathered Eston Hemings. Despite claims by paternity supporters that this refuted the claim of Jefferson's grandson that Peter and/or Samuel Carr had admitted to fathering children by Sally Hemings, the DNA tests said nothing about the paternity of Sally's older children. Dr. Foster readily conceded this point.

How and when did the story of a Jefferson-Hemings sexual relationship get started?

*That's an excellent question. On September 1, 1802, one of the most disreputable scandalmongers in American history, James Thomson Callender (who had once called George Washington a “traitor” and a “thief”), published an article in the *Richmond, Virginia, Recorder*, alleging that while in Paris Thomas Jefferson had*

begun a sexual relationship with his servant Sally Hemings—and a son was born of that relationship shortly after they returned to Virginia at the end of 1789. Callender asserted the child’s name was “Tom,” and his “features are said to bear a striking although sable resemblance to those of the President himself.” As our book documents, Callender was a self-confessed “liar” who claimed the lies he had written about President John Adams had made Jefferson President. He demanded “payment” in the form of an appointment as Postmaster of Richmond, threatening to turn his pen on Jefferson if the appointment were not forthcoming. When Jefferson refused, Callender vowed to exact “ten thousand fold vengeance” upon Jefferson. His first attacks alleged that Jefferson was an agent of the French government and an atheist, and then he raised the “Black Sal” allegation. Because of Callender’s reputation, the story was rejected even by Jefferson’s political enemies Alexander Hamilton and John Adams. (Adams previously and subsequently was a great Jefferson friend, but at the time his enemy because Adams blamed Jefferson for Callender’s lies during the incredibly nasty political campaign of 1800.)

Can you tell us a little about Sally Hemings?

That’s all I could tell you, because very little is actually known about Sally Hemings. We know the year she was born, that she traveled to Paris with Jefferson’s eight-year-old daughter Mary in 1787 and returned to Monticello with the Jefferson family at the end of 1789, that she was thought “handsome” and “mighty near white” by some who saw her, and a few other details about her. In our 2001 report we speculated that “[o]ne could probably write everything that we really know about her on an index card,” and while revising my Individual Views subsequently I decided to do just that (on page 69 of the book)—and it only took one side of the card. Jefferson made passing references to her in four of his more than 20,000 letters (each time along with other servants with no hint of any special relationship or affection), and while her brother James was mentioned more than 300 times in Jefferson’s extensive memorandum books, Sally was mentioned but 11 times—most of them on lists of servants and only a single listing after she returned from Paris. None of her children were mentioned more than once in these volumes. Each of Jefferson’s references to Sally and her children is discussed in our book.

But didn’t Jefferson take Sally Hemings to Paris with him in 1784 when he went to succeed Benjamin Franklin as America’s Minister to France? Isn’t that where the romance reportedly began?

No. Jefferson took Sally’s older brother James Hemings to Paris, in part so he could be trained as a French chef before returning to Monticello. When he learned that his two-year old daughter Lucy—whom along with five-year-old Mary he had left in the care of in-laws in Virginia when he traveled to Paris—had died of whooping cough, he insisted that Mary be sent to him immediately in the

care of a trusted older slave named Isabel Hearn. Unbeknownst to Jefferson, Isabel was suffering complications from recent childbirth, so his in-laws sent thirteen- or fourteen-year-old Sally Hemings to accompany Mary on the trans-Atlantic voyage. We know almost nothing about Sally's life in Paris (or at Monticello, for that matter), but the best guess is she didn't even live in the same part of town as Thomas Jefferson. Her apparent role was to serve as a ladies' maid to daughters Martha and Mary, who lived across town in a convent school that had quarters for servants. Letters from Paris schoolmates written to Martha after she returned to Monticello sent greetings to Sally, which reinforces the already logical conclusion that she resided with the daughters at the convent.

If they weren't lovers, how do you explain the "extraordinary privileges" Jefferson is said to have given Sally and her children?

This is another of the many "myths" about Sally Hemings that have developed over the years. Based upon a review of all surviving records, Sally Hemings was treated by Jefferson no better than any of her sisters or other members of the privileged Hemings family of house servants. Certainly, all of them were treated better than most other slaves, but the explanation was that they were descendants of Betty Hemings—the matriarch of Monticello house servants.

Indeed, our book included on page 82 a photocopy of an undated note Jefferson left for his overseer before leaving for Washington, D.C., instructing that his daughter Martha and her husband were to receive "everything the plantation will furnish," adding: "They are to have also the use of the house-servants, to wit, Ursula, Critta, Sally, Bet, Wormeley and Joe. So also of Betty Hemings, should her services be necessary." If Sally Hemings had actually filled the role of his de facto wife or mistress, surely her name would have been listed with that of her mother, Betty Hemings, for special treatment. Indeed, one might think that were Sally Hemings Jefferson's "lover," he would have taken her with him among the dozen slaves he regularly took to Washington—at least until the Callender story was published—but he never did.

As is discussed in Chapter Four of the book, in 1873 a Republican newspaper in Ohio published an account alleged to be the memoir of Sally's second youngest son, Madison Hemings. Noting the loving attention Jefferson paid to his "white" grandchildren, Madison is reported to have said Jefferson "was not in the habit of showing partiality or fatherly affection to us [one-eighth black] children." Monticello's senior historian, Lucinda Stanton—who asserts that the Jefferson-Hemings relationship did take place—nevertheless concedes: "Madison Hemings maintained that Jefferson 'induced' [Sally] to return with promises of 'extraordinary privileges' and freedom for her children when they reached the age of twenty-one. These 'extraordinary privileges' are not visible in the lists of Jefferson's Farm Book, almost the only source of her subsequent life at

Monticello.”

Didn't Jefferson free Sally and her children in his will or when the children turned 21?

No. During his lifetime Thomas Jefferson legally manumitted Sally's brothers Robert and James Hemings, and there is some evidence that as early as 1792 he freed two slaves who were not members of Betty Hemings' family. Sally's son Beverly left Monticello either shortly before or after his twenty-fourth birthday—marked in Jefferson's records as having “run away,” but quite possibly he was allowed to leave Monticello or at least not pursued when he left. (Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen Randolph Coolidge asserted that it was her grandfather's “principle” to allow slaves who were light-skinned enough to pass for white to “withdraw quietly” from Monticello and he made no effort to reclaim them.) We have reliable evidence that when daughter Harriett was twenty or twenty-one years of age Jefferson had her put on a stagecoach to Philadelphia with \$50 in cash. About three months before he died, Jefferson wrote a codicil to his will that provided for the freedom of all but two of the sons and grandsons of Betty Hemings who were still his legal “property,” and the other two achieved freedom within two or three years following his death. Sally's remaining sons Madison and Eston were included among those freed in his will, but they received by far the worst treatment of any of the freed slaves (receiving no money, no land, no house, and being required to work as apprentices under Sally's brother John until they reached the age of twenty-one).

If the paternity story wasn't true, why didn't Jefferson ever deny it?

Actually he did clearly deny it, despite a long-standing practice of not responding to personal attacks. Our book quotes several letters written by Jefferson before Callender's “Black Sal” story was published explaining that he had made a decision not to comment upon accusations made against his character. For example, in a May 26, 1800, letter to James Monroe, Jefferson explained: “It has been so impossible to contradict all their lies, that I have determined to contradict none; for while I should be engaged with one, they would publish twenty new ones. Thirty years of public life have enabled most of those who read newspapers to judge of one for themselves.” In May 1805, the “Black Sal” story was raised again along with a number of other accusations in the Boston Repetory. Shortly thereafter, in a letter to Navy Secretary Robert Smith that is included in our book, Jefferson enclosed a copy of another letter (whereabouts unknown) and commented: “You will perceive that I plead guilty to one of their [Federalist] charges, that when young and single I offered love to a handsome lady [Elizabeth Walker]. I acknolege [sic] its incorrectness. [I]t is the only one founded in truth among all their allegations against me.” He may of course have been lying, but Thomas Jefferson clearly did deny the Callender charge.

I am told that Monticello relied heavily upon a scientific “Monte Carlo” statistical study alleged to prove with 99-percent reliability that Thomas Jefferson was the father of all of Sally Hemings' children based upon a comparison of his trips to Monticello and her conceptions. Do you discuss this in your book?

Yes, it is addressed in detail in Chapter Five of our book. Candidly, not a single member of the Scholars Commission found this “study” to be in the least persuasive. It was published in the William & Mary Quarterly, and was premised upon material errors of fact (such as that the DNA tests used a sample of Thomas Jefferson’s DNA, which did not exist), and it incorporated assumptions—such as that Sally could only have had a single father for all of her children (her son Madison allegedly said Sally’s mother Betty had children by at least four men, and we simply have no serious evidence one way or the other on whether Sally was monogamous), and other candidates for paternity would have to have “identical arrival and departure dates” at Monticello as those of Thomas Jefferson (obviously, all that was necessary was that the father be present with Sally Hemings at the time of conception)—that only would seem to make sense if one were designing a study to reach a preconceived conclusion. The fact that members of the Monticello Research Committee (for whom the study was done) quoted the author of the study as exclaiming excitedly “I’ve got him! I’ve got him!” when he presented it to them, reinforced the perception that this was “junk science” designed to support a preconceived position. As the book discusses, an informal study involving prominent experts also found the statistical study fatally flawed.

Was the Scholars Commission study subjected to peer review?

During our year long inquiry, virtually every word written was circulated to a dozen very senior scholars (the other members of the Commission) for comment. Twelve of the thirteen professors on the Scholars Commission added their names to the official majority report (printed on pages 3 to 21 of the book), and the sole dissenter began his Minority Report by saying “With the report of the majority, I am in general agreement.” I respectfully submit that it is very uncommon for scholarly publications to receive this kind of careful review from distinguished scholars that has occurred in this instance.

Didn't Sally's children look just like Thomas Jefferson? How do you explain that if he wasn't their father?

The strongest “oral history” of a Jefferson slave having a strong physical resemblance to Thomas Jefferson has been handed down for generations by the family of Thomas Woodson, who after Jefferson’s death claimed to be the missing “Tom” in Callender’s story. Many people independently noted the strong resemblance between Woodson and President Jefferson over the years. But six different DNA tests of descendants of three of Thomas Woodson’s sons proved conclusively that he could not have been the child of Thomas or any other

Jefferson carrying the same Y chromosome.

However, President Jefferson's grandson "Jeff" Randolph told historian Henry Randall that in "one case" the resemblance between Thomas Jefferson and a child of Sally Hemings was so close, that "at some distance" or "in the dusk" the man, "dressed in the same way, might have been mistaken for Mr. Jefferson." The qualifying language suggests that the likeness may have been more in shape and posture rather than detailed facial features that would be apparent up close in good light, but we don't really know. Sally's children were all likely seven-eighths white and some of them were clearly sufficiently light-skinned to pass for white.

About twenty-five years after Jefferson's death, two Ohio residents who had known Sally's son Eston when he was in his early thirties visited Washington, D.C., where they saw a bronze statue of President Jefferson that reportedly reminded them of Eston. An Ohio newspaper described Eston as "of a light bronze color, a little over six feet tall, well proportioned, very erect and dignified"—which would indeed describe the statue in question. However, as to facial details, it should be kept in mind that this statue was made after Jefferson's death by a French sculptor who had never set eyes on Thomas Jefferson and worked entirely from a two-dimensional oil painting made when Jefferson was almost seventy-eight years of age. As we note in Chapter Seven (which includes a photo of the statue in question), several people who had known Jefferson declared that the statue was not a good likeness.

*Eston's general physical resemblance to Thomas Jefferson could easily be explained if he had been fathered by the President's brother Randolph (who was documented in *Memoirs of a Monticello Slave to have spent his nights at Monticello playing his fiddle and dancing "half the night" with his brothers slaves*) or any of Randolph's sons, all of whom were invited by Jefferson to visit Monticello shortly before Eston's most likely conception date. If Jefferson's nephews Peter or Samuel Carr had (as reported by grandson Jeff Randolph) fathered any of Sally's older children, they might easily have passed down physical traits from the Jefferson family, as their mother was Thomas Jefferson's sister Martha.*

Didn't the descendants of Sally's children pass down the story that Thomas Jefferson was their father for nearly two centuries?

No. This common assertion is not close to being an accurate statement. First of all, there are no known living descendants of Sally's eldest son Beverly or daughter Harriett. By far the strongest oral traditions have been passed down through several lines of descendants of Thomas Woodson—telling essentially identical stories in various parts of the country. The honesty and sincerity of Woodson's descendants are not in doubt—clearly they have been told a very

credible story about being descendants of a very famous American and they had no reason to doubt it—but in 1998 six different DNA tests of three sons of Thomas Woodson established beyond any doubt that Thomas Woodson could not have been Thomas Jefferson’s child. (The tests did not address whether Woodson was the son of Sally Hemings, and we took no position on that issue. That claim is neither supported by surviving Monticello records nor refuted by the DNA tests.) That leaves descendants of only two known offspring of Sally Hemings. The descendants of Madison Hemings have reportedly passed down essentially the same story Madison allegedly told anti-Jefferson newspaper editor Samuel Wetmore, that was published in 1873 in the Pike County (Ohio) Republican. Obviously, merely repeating for several generations allegations that appeared in a partisan newspaper story does not add to the credibility of the original story, which Chapter Four of our book reveals to be very problematic. The account attributed to Madison includes many clear errors of fact, and other allegations that are highly improbable given what we do know about those involved. Madison could not have known the truth of the most relevant parts of his story, as they occurred long before he was born, and he gives no source for his information.

That leaves us with Sally’s youngest son Eston, the only Hemings child to have been linked by DNA tests to a Jefferson father. But until the 1970s, the oral tradition passed down by Eston’s descendants was that he was not President Jefferson’s child, but rather the son of a Jefferson “uncle.” Jefferson’s last paternal uncle passed away three decades before Eston was conceived, but his much younger and less cerebral (to understate the case) brother Randolph was known as “Uncle Randolph” at Monticello because of his relationship to the President’s daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph—who was in charge at Monticello while her father was living in the White House. We reprint in Chapter Ten a letter from the President inviting Randolph to visit Monticello (his twin sister, whom he dearly loved, had just arrived for a visit) two weeks before Eston was likely conceived, and Randolph was documented by a slave memoir to have spent his nights at Monticello socializing with his brother’s slaves.

In summary, taken together, the oral traditions strongly support the conclusion that at least Eston Hemings was more likely fathered by brother Randolph than by President Thomas Jefferson. The claim of Thomas Woodson to be Jefferson’s son has been disproven by DNA, and the story attributed to Madison Hemings (discussed at length in Chapter Four of our book) is so filled with errors as to be worthy of little consideration in our search for the truth. That’s the extent of the oral history relied upon so heavily by many proponents of the paternity allegation.

What did you find to be the most important single piece of evidence during your inquiry?

That was probably a statement by Monticello overseer Edmund Bacon, who worked for Jefferson for most of his presidency and until shortly before his death, that he knew Jefferson was not the father of Sally's daughter Harriett. He was quoted as saying: "She was not his [Thomas Jefferson's] daughter; she was _____'s daughter. I know that. I have seen him come out of her mother's room many a morning when I went up to Monticello very early." Sadly, the publisher deleted the actual name and substituted the blank line. When this interview occurred Bacon was a wealthy man living far from Monticello without any apparent connection to the Jefferson family or any visible reason not to tell the truth. And he provides the only credible eyewitness testimony about Sally Hemings' apparent sexual life.

Why does it matter if Thomas Jefferson found love in the arms of an African-American woman after his wife died? Are you just opposed to interracial sex?

Speaking personally, if I learned Thomas Jefferson had found love in the arms of an African-American woman following the death of his wife Martha I would be delighted for both of them—except. The exception is that, when she went to Paris, Sally Hemings was an immature child whom Abigail Adams had described as "wanting more care" than Jefferson's eight-year-old daughter Mary and as being totally incapable of even being a responsible babysitter. Far more importantly, Sally Hemings was an enslaved young woman who probably had no concept of "consent" regarding sexual matters.

Shortly before Jefferson left for Paris, he wrote his only book, Notes on the State of Virginia, which included one of the most eloquent denunciations of human bondage in history. ("I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.") In particular, Jefferson denounced the sexual exploitation of slave women by their so-called "masters": "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. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. . . . If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present." And yet we are asked to believe that the man who wrote these words soon thereafter took as his "concubine" the young and immature Sally Hemings, the ladies' maid to his beloved daughters, and apparently entrusted his reputation and their love and respect for him to her discretion. Such behavior would be totally inconsistent with everything we know about Thomas Jefferson.

Do you have any idea why Jefferson did not free his slaves in his will, as

George Washington did?

Well, this has nothing to do with our inquiry, but it is nevertheless a valid question. I visit Monticello several times each year, and usually I hear the guides tell visitors that, unlike George Washington, Thomas Jefferson did not even free his slaves in his will. And that is generally true (I say “generally” because he did free five sons and grandsons of Betty Hemings in his will); but Section 54 of the Revised Virginia Code of 1819 on emancipated slaves read: “Provided, nevertheless, That all slaves so emancipated shall be liable to be taken by execution, to satisfy any debt contracted by the person emancipating them, before such emancipation is made.” Jefferson died more than \$100,000 in debt (millions by today’s standards), and his creditors had a legal claim on all of his “property” at the time of his death—including those human beings viewed by Virginia law at the time as chattel property. Had Jefferson attempted to give them their freedom in his will, the effort would almost certainly have been quickly blocked by his creditors.

After the reports that DNA tests had proven Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one of Sally Hemings’ children and Monticello scholars agreed, until your book came out many people assumed that only die-hard racists could continue to doubt the story. Were you concerned that you might be called horrible names once you concluded that the story was false?

I suspect we all recognized that was a risk, and among the criteria I sought in selecting members of the Commission were intellectual courage and a commitment to pursue the truth—in addition to demonstrated intellectual and academic achievement. I won’t pretend there have been no nasty emails, but far fewer than I expected when I saw the final vote.

I might add that there is more than a little irony in the suggestion that only “racists” or “white supremacists” could doubt this story, because when the story originated, the “die-hard racists” were on the other side of the issue. Let me read to you a couple of sentences from a book chapter written by University of Alabama Professor Joshua Rothman (a believer in the paternity story):

Callender detested African Americans and found the notion of sex across the color line repulsive. . . . Once he reported the Jefferson-Hemings story, he described Hemings herself in the most racist terms, calling her a “wench” and “a slut as common as the pavement,” accusing her of having “fifteen, or thirty” different lovers “of all colours,” and referring to her children as a “yellow litter.”

Similarly, Georgia Federalist Thomas Gibbons—another “source” relied upon by

pro-paternity scholars—had also never seen Sally Hemings. But this didn't keep him from describing her as "the most abandoned prostitute of her color" and described her children as "flat nosed, thick lipped, and Tawny."

In candor, Jefferson, too, entertained some racist thoughts (like virtually all of his white contemporaries in the south at the time); but he was what I call a "reluctant racist"; and these views did not stop him from opposing the evil institution of slavery. In a February 25, 1809, letter to Henri Grégoire, days before concluding his second term as President and returning to his beloved Monticello, Jefferson wrote:

Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to [the Negro] by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but whatever be their degree of talent, it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others. On this subject they are gaining daily in the opinions of nations, and hopeful advances are making towards their re-establishment on an equal footing with the other colors of the human family.

You said Jefferson opposed slavery. Can you give us an example?

Again speaking personally (because the Scholars Commission did not address this issue), when we consider the time period and circumstances in which he lived, I think Thomas Jefferson deserves far more credit on the issue of slavery than he usually receives. I'm working on a monograph on Jefferson and slavery that will address this issue at some depth. But it is worth noting that Jefferson authored a number of measures as a member of the Virginia legislature attempting to ban the importation of new slaves, permit slave-owners to free their slaves, and provide that children born to slaves after 1800 would be born free and "should be brought up, at the public expense, to tillage, arts, or sciences according to their geniuses." He included a powerful denunciation of slavery in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, only to see it removed when South Carolina and Georgia refused to sign if the controversial words were included. The editor of The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine wrote that the characterization of Paine

as “the first American abolitionist” was inaccurate, because “Thomas Jefferson . . . had urged the Assembly in Virginia to emancipate the slaves in the colony as early as 1769.”

Indeed, when the Thirteenth Amendment was being drafted thirty-eight years after Jefferson’s death, the authors intentionally modeled the text around words Jefferson had written in 1784 in an unsuccessful effort to prohibit slavery in the Northwest Territories. Jefferson had written: “That after the year 1800 of the Christian era, there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said states, otherwise than in punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been convicted to have been personally guilty.”

Life for freed slaves in Virginia during Jefferson’s lifetime was harsh, to say the least. In 1796, Jefferson manumitted Sally Hemings’ brother James, who had been trained in Paris as a French chef and was as prepared for freedom as virtually any slave at Monticello. Within three years, James had turned to alcohol and committed suicide. This, no doubt, reinforced Jefferson’s belief that freeing slaves who were ill prepared for the harsh life that would await them was no favor to them. In an August 25, 1814, letter to his abolitionist neighbor Edward Coles, Jefferson explained his view:

My opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed and clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen, and be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them, and our duties to them. The laws do not permit us to turn them loose, if that were for their good; and to commute them for other property is to commit them to those whose usage of them we cannot control.

*In his 1997 book *American Sphinx*, Professor Joseph Ellis expressed the opinion that Thomas Jefferson could have passed a polygraph test confirming his conviction that his own slaves “were more content and better off as members of his extended family than under any other imaginable circumstances.” I agree with that assessment.*

The questions above (which have been slightly revised and expanded) were posed to Professor Turner by members of the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society to be distributed at a press conference announcing the publication of *The Jefferson Hemings Controversy* at 1:00 PM on Thursday, September 1, 2011. They may be quoted by members of the media in connection with articles on this issue.

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