

DOUBTS ABOUT JEFFERSON AND HEMINGS

THE DEBATE GOES ON

In November 1998, the scientific journal *Nature* ran a headline that would have seemed more at home in *The National Enquirer*: JEFFERSON FATHERED SLAVE'S LAST CHILD. The article was based on a study of DNA tests on descendants of Sally Hemings, a slave owned by Thomas Jefferson. It received widespread coverage in newspapers and magazines and on radio and television. Two months later, the geneticist Eugene Foster, who had led the original study, clarified his findings: He had not proved that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Sally's son Eston Hemings, merely that some undetermined Jefferson male was. The retraction received much less notice.

The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, an organization of the President's descendants, appointed a committee to examine the matter. The committee found "a high probability that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings." After this conclusion was announced, John Works, a dissident descendant, formed the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society to investigate the Hemings case further. (This controversy was discussed in an article by the Jefferson descendant Lucian K. Truscott IV in our February/March 2001 issue.) The Heritage Society appointed its own committee, and last spring, to virtually no public attention, that committee released its findings: The panel "agrees unanimously that the allegation is by no means proven," and except for one dissenter, the members' "individual conclusions range from serious skepticism about the charge to a conviction that it is almost certainly false."

The panel's members include such scholars as Lance Banning, author of several erudite and widely praised studies of Jefferson; Robert Ferrell, distinguished professor of history emeritus at Indiana University, who has written more than two dozen books about U.S. Presidents (including the definitive studies of Warren Harding's supposed African-American ancestry and out-of-wedlock child); and Harvey C. Mansfield, the William R. Kenan, Jr., Profes-

sor of Government at Harvard University.

Whatever one's views, it is hard to deny that, in the words of the report, "honorable people can and do disagree" about Jefferson and Hemings. The widespread attention paid to the matter has given Americans a closer understanding of interracial sexual relations under slavery, and that can only be good. At the same time, it's important for the public to real-

ize that the purported Jefferson-Hemings liaison remains a disputed possibility, not an established fact.

The report, which evaluates all the evidence commonly cited in support of Jefferson's paternity, can be read at www.geocities.com/tjshcommission. The earlier Memorial Foundation report is at www.monticello.org/plantation/hemings_report.html.

