



## Scholars Overturn Case for Thomas Jefferson's Relationship with Slave Sally Hemings

by [Patrick Mullins](#) (June 2, 2001)

**Summary:** The Scholars Commission report pointed out that the original DNA report indicated only that a Jefferson male had fathered one of Sally Hemings's children; the available DNA could not specify Thomas Jefferson as the father.

[[www.CapitalismMagazine.com](http://www.CapitalismMagazine.com)] In April 2001, a "blue ribbon" commission of highly accomplished and nationally recognized scholars reported its findings after a year-long investigation of the evidence for a sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his house slave, Sally Hemings. The thirteen-member Scholars Commission agreed unanimously that the allegation of such a relationship is "by no means proven" and regretted that "public confusion about the 1998 DNA testing and other evidence has misled many people into believing that the issue is closed." With the exception of one of the thirteen commission members, the scholars' "individual conclusions range from serious skepticism about the charge to a conviction that it is almost certainly false."

In November 1998, the British scientific journal *Nature* published an article by retired pathologist Dr. Eugene Foster titled, "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child." The article reported Foster's discovery that descendants of Eston Hemings, the last of Jefferson slave Sally Hemings's children, shared a distinctive genetic marker with descendants of Thomas Jefferson's paternal uncle.

In its sensationalized reporting of this discovery, the media almost universally proclaimed that DNA testing had conclusively proven beyond a reasonable doubt the almost two-hundred-year-old allegation that Thomas Jefferson had a sexual relationship with one of his house slaves and fathered from one to seven children with her. Some historians jumped on the media bandwagon. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, the association which preserves and

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operates Jefferson's plantation home of Monticello, seemed to settle any lingering doubts on the subject in February 2000 when a committee of Monticello staff concluded that there was a "strong likelihood that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had a relationship over time that led to the birth of one, and perhaps all, of the known children of Sally Hemings."

In the wake of the *Nature* article and the Monticello report, a group of private citizens organized the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society and invited a group of established Jefferson scholars to reexamine objectively all of the available evidence on the Jefferson-Hemings controversy and report their independent findings to the public. The resulting Scholars Commission made a detailed presentation of its findings in a 565-page report, available online at the Heritage Society's website, [www.tjheritage.org](http://www.tjheritage.org).

**The Scholars Commission report pointed out that the original DNA report indicated only that a Jefferson male had fathered one of Sally Hemings's children; the available DNA could *not* specify Thomas Jefferson as the father.** Noting that as many as eight adult Jefferson males lived within a hundred miles of Monticello, the commission's majority shifted the likelihood of Eston's paternity to Thomas Jefferson's younger brother, Randolph.

Randolph Jefferson was known to fraternize with the Monticello slaves and is believed to have been present at Monticello at the estimated time of Eston's conception. Even oral tradition in Eston Hemings's family seems to point to Randolph rather than Thomas as Eston's father. It also appears that Sally's children were all born in the years when Randolph was a widower. He remarried in 1809, and Sally had her last child in 1808, despite the fact that Thomas Jefferson returned from the White House to live in Monticello full time in 1809.

One of the strongest pieces of circumstantial evidence for Thomas Jefferson's paternity of the Hemings children was that Sally conceived only when Thomas was present at Monticello. As the report pointed out, however, Randolph and other family members would have visited the plantation when Thomas was home, not when he was absent and the plantation was locked. Since the DNA test tied the Jefferson family only to Eston, it remains entirely possible that Thomas's Carr nephews were responsible for fathering at least some of Sally's other children, as credible testimony by Thomas's grandchildren indicated. Jefferson's overseer, Edmund Bacon, also

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alleged that he knew Sally's lover to have been a man other than Thomas Jefferson, further subverting the contention that Thomas and Sally had a thirty-two-year monogamous relationship producing six children. The Commission's report addressed and knocked down the other points in favor of Jefferson's relationship with Hemings presented in the Monticello report.

By presenting a compelling alternative explanation for the paternity of Eston and the other Hemings children, the Commission Report overturned the circumstantial case for Thomas Jefferson's paternity of any of Sally Hemings's children and shifted the onus of proof back to those who would insist upon the Founder's culpability.

Media coverage of the Scholars Commission's April 12 press conference was a mere trickle of pebbles compared to the avalanche of reports on the 1998 DNA findings and the 2000 Monticello report. It remains to be seen if the Scholars Commission report will receive academic acknowledgment broad enough to establish a new consensus on the Jefferson-Hemings controversy and undo the damage which the previous media sensation did to the American people's understanding of and respect for Thomas Jefferson.

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