

While it is true that the claim about Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson is two centuries old, the rumor didn't follow Mr. Jefferson into the presidency. The charge was made Sept. 1, 1802, in James Callender's newspaper, about 18 months into Mr. Jefferson's first term. And Mr. Callender was not known for his veracity.

After spending hundreds, if not thousands, of hours researching this topic for a book, we believe the story was a bit of political intrigue. The smear didn't hurt Mr. Jefferson or his party; the party went on to win in the congressional elections, and Jefferson won handily at the next presidential election. The sons of Sally Hemings may have believed that Mr. Jefferson was their father -- they had the old newspapers as source material. It points up the importance of fact-checking for newspapers.

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