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## The Washington Post

### Paternity Hype Visits Monticello; [FINAL Edition]

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**Full Text** (1298 words)

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It was, without doubt, the most heavily covered science story of the year: Researchers found a genetic match between Thomas Jefferson's family line and a distant descendant of the last-born son of one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. More than 295 editorial and news citations have appeared in the Nexis database so far, along with eight pieces in the news weeklies and 31 broadcast transcripts, all based on the disclosure of the findings in the Nov. 5 issue of the science journal *Nature*, which was released at the end of October.

Much of the coverage demonstrated a remarkable flight from careful and skeptical reporting. All too often, the news stories, commentary and analysis transformed an intriguing but inconclusive scientific finding into a dead certainty. Several journalists went on to turn the DNA results into some sort of referendum on the current state of race relations and presidential politics.

Some outlets broke the news with appropriate qualifiers: "DNA Test Finds Evidence of Jefferson Child by Slave," wrote the *New York Times*; "Tests Link Jefferson, Slave's Son; DNA Study Suggests a Monticello Liaison," said *The Washington Post*.

But many accounts contained strong assertions that paternity had been "proven," "conclusively demonstrated" or "resolved." Examples include:

- + "DNA Link; Paternity Proved," the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*;
- + "Adulterer on Mt. Rushmore," the *Des Moines Register*, including the charge of "statutory

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+ "A boost for President Clinton in fighting impeachment . . . evidence proves Jefferson fathered at least one child by his slave," CNN.

National Public Radio's Nov. 1 account was typical. Correspondent Daniel Zwerdling announced: "The proof is finally in. The president not only did have an illicit sexual affair, he fathered at least one child with his lover . . . DNA testing has ended {that} debate." U.S. News & World Report even ran a genealogical chart that showed a direct line between Jefferson and the modern descendant of Eston Hemings.

What the Nature article did by reporting a link between the Jefferson family and kin of Eston Hemings was to add enticing new evidence to a long-running historical debate. Before those findings, historians could only point to circumstantial evidence implicating Thomas Jefferson rather than one of his male-line relatives. The new DNA match with one descendant strengthens that circumstantial evidence. With these findings the balance shifts, suspicions become probabilities.

But certainty still eludes us.

The best characterization of what has--and has not--been "proven" by the combination of circumstantial historical evidence and the DNA findings is found in the original Nature report, co-authored by retired pathologist Eugene Foster: "The simplest and most probable explanation for our molecular findings are that Thomas Jefferson, rather than one of the Carr brothers {sons of Jefferson's sister, not paternal-line carriers}, was the father of Eston Hemings . . . . We cannot completely rule out other explanations of our findings based on illegitimacy in various lines of descent."

After the hyperbolic coverage began flourishing, Foster wrote a letter to the New York Times calling it "regrettable that {our} statement has been transmuted into assertions that all doubt had been removed." The Nov. 9 letter also said, "The genetic findings my collaborators and I reported . . . do not prove that Thomas Jefferson was the father of one of Sally Hemings's children. We never made that claim. Nor do we believe that the Y-chromosome type we found in Hemings's descendant occurs only in the members of the Jefferson family . . . . this study could not prove anything conclusively . . . ."

The original Nature article contained ample warning signs. The Jefferson case, the magazine pointed out, has always depended on the oral history of putative descendants and charges first lodged by political opponents in 1802 that Jefferson fathered the first-born son of Hemings, Thomas Woodson.

Descendants of Woodson were shown in the Nature research to have no DNA match with Jefferson. Undaunted, U.S. News suggested that Jefferson might indeed be the father of Woodson, the DNA evidence having been lost through subsequent illegitimacy in the Woodson line. Jefferson defenders have used that same line of reasoning to explain away the presence of a Thomas Jefferson DNA match in the case of Eston Hemings. An additional qualifier is that Thomas Jefferson was 65 years old and Sally Hemings 37, rather than the 14-year-old ingenue of folklore, in the year that Eston was born.

Thomas Jefferson himself was not tested, only descendants of his paternal uncle, Field Jefferson. This fact troubles some forensic geneticists working professionally in DNA paternity cases.

What did the DNA match positively establish? The findings show a probability that the DNA of Eston shows a descent from some male in the Jefferson paternal line, rather than being a randomly occurring match from someone in the general population, which is put at a 100-to-1 chance. A simple analogy would be recovering from a victim a bullet that has distinctive rifle-

barrel markings enabling it to be traced. The research has shown that said rifle was owned by males of the Jefferson family. But who pulled the trigger?

The story broke the weekend before Election Day, and political as well as competitive forces appeared to drive the timing. Nature's editors typically give reporters a few days' advance notice on research reports that appear in the magazine, though stories about those reports are normally embargoed until the date of the magazine's publication--in this instance, Thursday, Nov. 5. But, under pressure from news outlets that heard rumors of the findings and feared getting scooped, Nature agreed to the early release date of Friday, Oct. 30. That allowed the weekend papers and the Monday editions of the news weeklies to cover the controversy.

Accompanying the findings in Nature was a commentary by Joseph Ellis of Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, explicitly comparing the alleged actions of Jefferson to those of the current president. Some critics questioned the timing of the Nature publication. "Just two days before the election, the (DNA) story gave the everybody-does-it line both pedigree and prestige," wrote columnist Charles Krauthammer. "Accident? Two days before that, a full-page ad appeared in the New York Times opposing Clinton's impeachment. Among the signers: the co-author of the article {Ellis} in Nature pronouncing the DNA data definitive, in which he noted wryly the Hemings report's 'impeccable timing.' "

Foster, too, was troubled by the Nature commentary. He told the Washington Times on Nov. 10, "They unnecessarily politicized something that was intended to be a piece of scientific work."

The consequences of the media rush to judgment are hardly benign. To enlist the facts of Jefferson as a sort of perverse character witness in our current seamy scandal is to subordinate the purposes of science to the dubious and shifting needs of politics. Just as troubling is the implication in some media reports that blacks in America should be somehow pinning their standing in America's destiny on the outcome of DNA tests.

By making science submit to our desires to satisfy our political or racial hopes, we ultimately damage the capacity to understand ourselves.

But beyond harm done to science, it is demeaning to Jefferson and Hemings to make their role in our shared destiny a matter of genetic contingency. What if today's (or, for that matter, tomorrow's) DNA facts had shown otherwise? Should African Americans be regarded as historically diminished? In fact, isn't our insistent preoccupation with the body, rather than concerns of the spirit and the character, precisely how we have impeded our racial understanding?

The contest over Thomas Jefferson's paternity will in all probability go on. But as that debate continues, may blacks and whites, searching for our common American bond, continue to seek kinship in Jefferson's ideals as earnestly as it has been sought in our genetics.

David Murray is director of research at the Statistical Assessment Service, a nonprofit science and public policy organization in Washington.

#### **[Illustration]**

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