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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

An American Myth?

Wednesday, May 15, 2002; Page A26

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The Post's May 9 editorial attacking me over the Monticello Association's vote to exclude from membership the descendants of Sally Hemings actually reversed my emphatic position. When I said that the 74 to 6 vote by our family would "kill this forever so it doesn't keep coming up again," I was referring to the debate about admitting the Hemingses to the Monticello Association.

I did not predict that the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings issue would never again be debated. In fact, I hope it will be discussed until the world knows the facts.

Two years ago a blue-ribbon panel of more than a dozen senior Jefferson scholars from across the country -- several of whom have written books about Mr. Jefferson -- studied every aspect of the controversy for a year and issued a 550-page report with more than 800 footnotes. The scholars concluded unanimously that the Hemings case had not been proven, and, with a single mild dissent, that the relationship probably did not happen at all.

I am eager to see this issue debated to the fullest. Unfortunately, the leading scholars on the Hemings side have turned down invitations to engage with members of the panel. The scholars commission and more than 94 percent of Thomas Jefferson's descendants believe that the allegation that Thomas Jefferson fathered children by Sally Hemings is a myth.

JOHN H. WORKS JR.

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