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Did Thomas Jefferson Father a Child With Sally Hemings?

By Kate Taylor

Posted Wednesday, May 8, 2002, at 12:28 PM PT

On Saturday, Thomas Jefferson's descendants [voted](#) against accepting descendants of slave Sally Hemings into the family organization, claiming there was insufficient evidence that Jefferson fathered any of Hemings' children. But didn't DNA tests prove that Jefferson was the father of at least one Hemings child?

No. The tests, conducted in 1998 by Eugene Foster, determined that there was a 99 percent chance that Jefferson or one of his close relatives was the father of Hemings' youngest son, Eston Hemings Jefferson. But they also suggested that Jefferson wasn't the father of Hemings' eldest son, Thomas Woodson, as generations of Woodson descendants claimed. Concluding that other Jeffersons were less likely to have had an affair with Hemings, the researchers said that the "simplest and most probable explanations for our molecular findings are that Thomas Jefferson ... was the father of Eston Hemings Jefferson, and that Thomas Woodson was not Thomas Jefferson's son."

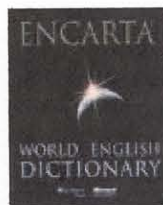
The Nov. 5, 1998, issue of *Nature* published Foster's report under a definitive-sounding headline—"Jefferson fathered slave's last child"—which Foster said was misleading. In a letter to the *New York Times*, Foster said it was regrettable that some media have reported that "all doubt had been removed" that Jefferson sired Eston Hemings, but he stuck by his study's conclusion.

The Jefferson family's rejection of Hemings descendants last weekend was based on a separate report commissioned by the [Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society](#), a group headed by one of the former president's direct descendants. The society asked 13 scholars (one of whom was a scientist) to evaluate the DNA and historical evidence for Jefferson having fathered at least one of Hemings' children. With one member dissenting, 12 scholars reached conclusions ranging "from serious skepticism about the charge to a conviction that it is almost certainly false." (Click [here](#) to read the full report.)

The scholars said there were "far more likely suspects" for the paternity of Eston Hemings, including Jefferson's younger brother Randolph and his five sons. Proponents of the theory of a Thomas Jefferson-Hemings affair point out that Hemings' pregnancies coincide exactly with Jefferson's visits to Monticello; the majority report said this could just as well be explained by other male relatives coming to visit when Jefferson returned home.

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Kate Taylor is a *Slate* editorial assistant.

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