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FOUNDING FATHERS**The Truth About Jefferson**

Were allegations about his relationship with Sally Hemings just another bit of Clintonian spin?

**BY ROBERT F. TURNER***Wednesday, July 4, 2001 12:01 a.m. EDT*

Five months ago, a Gallup poll asked Americans to identify the "greatest U.S. president." Thomas Jefferson received just 1% of the vote--about one-tenth the percentage who answered Bill Clinton and one-fourth the response for Jimmy Carter.

It was not always thus. Jefferson was long celebrated as one of the greatest men in history, but since the world was told he fathered children by one of his slaves his stock has dropped sharply. The saddest thing of all is that he's probably getting a bum rap. As today marks the 225th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the 175th anniversary of the death of Thomas Jefferson, its principal author, it seems a fitting time to set the record straight.

Jefferson's damaged reputation may have less to do with Sally Hemings than with a cultural struggle taking place in contemporary academia, as well as a bit of bad timing. As Joseph Ellis--historian, Pulitzer Prize winner and the point man among senior scholars in the assault on Jefferson--explained last year in the *William & Mary Quarterly*, Jefferson is "the dead-white-male who matters most," and the "most valued trophy in the cultural wars."

Prof. Ellis, readers may recall, made the papers again last month when the *Boston Globe* disclosed that for years he has lied to his students about serving in Vietnam. In fact, as he now admits, Prof. Ellis's military service was spent teaching history at West Point.

As recently as 1996, Prof. Ellis had concluded in his Jefferson biography, "American Sphinx," that the likelihood of a Jefferson-

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Hemings sexual relationship was "remote" and based upon "flimsy and wholly circumstantial" evidence. This is essentially the same conclusion reached by other leading Jefferson scholars since the allegation was first published in 1802. Prof. Ellis reversed his position in late 1998, with the release of DNA evidence that Nature magazine wrongly alleged proved Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one of Sally Hemings's children.

Here is where the unfortunate timing may have played a role. The new "evidence" was rushed to press in the middle of the congressional impeachment inquiry of Bill Clinton. Prof. Ellis actively opposed the impeachment effort, and he repeatedly used his new position to draw parallels in defense of Mr. Clinton.

In fact, the DNA evidence merely showed that Sally Hemings's youngest son, Eston, was likely fathered by one of more than two dozen Jefferson males in Virginia at the time. Eugene Foster, who organized the tests, acknowledged that the results did not point to the then 64-year-old Thomas Jefferson any more than to his much younger brother, Randolph, or for that matter any of Randolph's five sons.

Indeed, the less cerebral Randolph would seem to be a far more likely candidate for Eston's paternity than the aging president. Randolph is documented by a 19th-century slave account to have spent his evenings at Monticello playing his fiddle among the slaves and "dancing half the night," and there is evidence he fathered children by his own slaves. We know that Randolph, who lived only 20 miles away, was invited to Monticello only days before Sally Hemings likely conceived Eston.

Furthermore, the oral history passed down for generations by Eston's descendants claimed he wasn't Thomas Jefferson's child but the son of "an uncle." Jefferson's paternal uncles died decades before Eston was conceived, but the president's brother was widely known at Monticello as "Uncle Randolph" because of his relationship to the president's daughters.

Finally, all of Sally Hemings's known children seem to have been born between the death of Randolph's first wife and his remarriage at about the time Eston was born. About the same time as this remarriage, Thomas Jefferson completed his second term and returned to live full time at Monticello; the 34-year-old Sally conceived no more known children.

Three months ago, a distinguished group of more than a dozen senior scholars concluded a yearlong investigation of the Jefferson-Hemings issue with a 550-page report. The diverse group included highly respected Jefferson scholars and other historians. Forrest McDonald--a history professor at the University of Alabama, the

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author of "The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson" and one of several scholars in the group who were admitted critics of Jefferson--said that for nearly four decades he had believed Jefferson to be the father of Hemings's children. But after careful analysis of the evidence, he reversed his position, concluding "Thomas Jefferson was simply not guilty of the charge."

With but a single mild dissent, the scholars' conclusions ranged from "strong skepticism" about the allegation to a conviction that the charge was "almost certainly false." They demonstrated that most of the "evidence" cited to establish the relationship was either factually false (such as the charge that Jefferson freed all of Sally Hemings's children when they turned 21) or was explained on other grounds. For example, Sally and her children did receive "special treatment" at Monticello, but no more so than the many other descendants of Sally's mother, Betty Hemings. All but two of Betty Hemings's sons and grandsons living at Monticello when Jefferson died were freed in his will, and Sally's two sons received by far the least favorable treatment.

Sally Hemings was eventually freed by Jefferson's daughter and lived for several years in Charlottesville, Va. Yet there is no surviving account that she, or any of her children, ever said that she had been sexually involved with Thomas Jefferson until nearly 50 years after Jefferson's death, when an aged Madison Hemings was alleged by an anti-Jefferson newspaper editor in Ohio to have made the claim. Most of the relevant facts attributed to Madison Hemings occurred long before his birth. Meanwhile, several of his factual allegations--such as that Dolley Madison was present at his birth--can be established as false by available records.

In contrast, evidence on the other side includes the eyewitness testimony of Jefferson's highly respected overseer, Edmund Bacon, who noted that he had frequently seen a man other than Thomas Jefferson leaving Sally Hemings's room early in the morning when he arrived for work.



The scholars commission also disclosed that a key letter from Jefferson's granddaughter, used by revisionist historians to tie Jefferson to Sally Hemings, was altered in transcription, with 13 words in a key sentence changed to reverse its clear original meaning. The transcription was included in the appendix of Annette Gordon-Reed's highly acclaimed book, "Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings," which also suggested that the reason earlier generations of Jefferson scholars failed to give proper weight to Madison Hemings's alleged "memoirs" was because the historians were white and Madison was black.

In rejecting this conclusion, five of the scholars wrote that "the tendency of many people to embellish their own histories transcends racial lines." They noted: "Indeed, the sad reality is that people of all colors and races occasionally find it desirable to falsify their background. This fact was recently brought into focus brilliantly in

the book 'Stolen Valor,' which discusses hundreds of cases in which American men falsified claims involving alleged military service in Vietnam." The tragic revelations about Prof. Ellis merely emphasize the point.

Mr. Turner, the associate director of the Center for National Security Law at the University of Virginia, chaired the Jefferson-Hemings Scholars Commission, whose report can be found online at www.mindspring.com/~tjshcommission.



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