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EDITORIAL • May 9, 2002

Keeping up with the Jeffersons

What, exactly, accounts for the seemingly endless attempts to paint the author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States as a debauched adulterer who "visited" one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, on a regular basis and fathered at least one child by her? "Oral history," as detailed by this newspaper's Matthew Rarey? Genetic evidence? Scholarly research? Or could it be as simple — and pernicious — as a willful determination to sully the memory of one of America's founding fathers?

Let's review the facts.

Jefferson himself has never been proved to be the father of anyone other than his own two acknowledged children. What the DNA testing done by retired pathologist Eugene Foster in 1998 did reveal is that a male relative of Jefferson's — one likely candidate being his ne'er do-well nephew Randolph, though it could have been any one of 25 other male members of the Jefferson family alive during the time — probably fathered Sally Hemings' son, Eston and perhaps other children as well. But there is no evidence beyond conjecture, political rumor-monging — and the aforesaid "oral history" — that Jefferson himself was involved in any of this. A subsequent report by a doctoral candidate that attempted to build upon the 1998 "evidence" was, as noted by Mr. Rarey, ". . . widely criticized and dismissed for its shoddy scholarship, improbable assumptions and tampered documents." It has since been thoroughly discredited by a 13-member panel of history professors, which concluded unanimously last year that the conclusions of the report were unsubstantiated and "misleading."

The organization devoted to preserving and protecting the memory of America's third president has finally had enough. Last weekend, the Monticello Association, founded in 1913 to promote the memory of our third president, voted 67-5 to exclude the descendants of anyone other than the legitimate descendants of Jefferson from the association's rolls.

Is that mean-spirited? Or is it more like saying that if the Joneses have a family reunion, the Wilsons aren't going to get invited? The Hemings family may sniff racism at the refusal of Jefferson's lineal descendants or his estate to acknowledge the supposed family ties, but there's much more to this business than simple paternity. If Jefferson was, indeed, the father of Eston Hemings, it would mean that the third president was, in effect, the Bill Clinton of his era. It would mean that Jefferson exploited a woman in a subordinate position and fathered her illegitimate child. Not a legacy to be proud of — and unworthy of Jefferson's stated values enshrined in some of this country's founding documents.

It's encouraging, therefore, that the Monticello Association had the courage to stand up to the political correctness that would drag Jefferson's name through the mud. He may have been a founding father — but that doesn't make him Eston Hemings' father.

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