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## Innovations: Jefferson-Hemings Revisited

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# Jefferson-Hemings Revisited

By *Peter Wood*

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That register of popular conceit, [Wikipedia](#), says it plainly: “Most historians now believe that the widower Jefferson took her as a [concubine](#), had six children with her, and an extended relationship for 38 years until his death.”

The “her” in question, of course, is Sarah “Sally” Hemings (1773-1835), and the Jefferson mentioned is Thomas, author of the *Declaration of Independence* and the nation’s third president. Wikipedia cites as its source a Web site [monticello.org](#), which includes a page [“Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: A Brief Account.”](#) And this “Brief Account” in turn relies on the January 2000 “Report of the Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.”

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The allegation is long-standing, dating back to an attack on Jefferson by a journalist, James T. Callender, in 1802, and repeated at various points during Jefferson's life. The Wikipedia version brooks no doubt and makes the barest mention of "skeptics"—mainly to note that the "results of the DNA study caused some former skeptics to change their minds to conclude that Jefferson fathered Hemings' children."

So is the history settled once and for all? Were the widely-reported 1989 DNA tests on descendants of Sally Hemings conclusive? Has the spate of books on the Jefferson-Hemings liaison persuaded the die-hard doubters?

In a word, no. A new book, *The Jefferson-Hemings Controversy: Report of the Scholars Commission*, edited by Robert F. Turner, brings together 13 well-known scholars who have each spent a year or more (some much more) examining every bit of evidence bearing on the case. Their conclusions vary, but only one of them credits the now-popular belief that Jefferson fathered Hemings's children. This is a dense scholarly work, released today (September 1), and though I've had a chance to browse it, cannot offer my own assessment of its findings. It includes a "Majority Report" signed by 12 of the scholars (including Lance Banning, James Ceaser, Robert Fareell, Charles Kesler, Harvey Mansfield, Alf Mapp, Jr., David Mayer, Forrest McDonald, Thomas Traut, Robert Turner, Walter Williams, and Jean Yarbrough, and a "Minority Report" signed by one, Paul Rahe.

I know about the book in advance because several of the contributors are members of the National Association of Scholars, although NAS had no role in the investigation or the publication.

The Majority Report concludes:

*In the end, after roughly one year examining the issues, we find the question of whether Thomas Jefferson fathered one or more children by his slave Sally*

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*it is our unanimous view that the allegation is by no means proven; and we find it regrettable that public confusion about the 1998 DNA testing and other evidence has misled many people into believing that the issue is closed. With the exception of one member, whose views are set forth both below and in the more detailed appended dissent, our individual conclusions range from serious skepticisms about the charge to a conviction that it is almost certainly untrue.*

Professor Rahe's "Minority Report" commences:

*With the report of the majority, I am in general agreement. I dissent only in believing it somewhat more likely than not that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Eston Hemings.*

The body of the book consists of 20 chapters, each of which picks up a separate thread of the evidence that other scholars used to advance the hypothesis that Jefferson fathered some or all of Hemings' children. They start with what for many has been dispositive: the DNA tests that show that some of Hemings' descendants are genetically related to known members of the Jefferson family. The hitch here is that the tests do not tie those descendants directly to Thomas Jefferson. The tests also "excluded the reasonable possibility that Thomas Woodson was the child of Thomas Jefferson or any other male member of the Jefferson family," (65). Thomas Woodson has long been identified as the child that Jefferson allegedly fathered with Sally Hemings during his time in Paris (1787-1789). The story goes back to Callender's 1802 allegation and was kept alive by the Woodson family. The DNA testing definitively shows it not to be true. (It is also not known for sure that Sally Hemings was Thomas Woodson's mother.)

The descendants of Sally Hemings' youngest son, Eston, however, are clearly related to the Jeffersons. The question is which "more than two dozen adult Jefferson men

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evidence is silent on that score. That impels attention to the numerous other lines of evidence: contemporary testimony, Jefferson's own statements, Madison's Hemings' 1873 "Memoir," alleged physical resemblances between Jefferson and Hemings' children, correlations between Jefferson's whereabouts and Hemings' pregnancies, and so on.

*The Jefferson-Hemings Controversy: Report of the Scholars Commission* looks like it will occasion some controversy of its own. The contemporary academy prides itself on providing a place for dissent, but faced with dissent from its own shibboleths, its record of giving the dissenters a fair hearing is none too good. In this instance, we are presented with a model for how scholars who stand outside an apparent "consensus" might go about expressing a responsible critique.

In the opening pages of the volume, the contributors allow that they began with "diverse opinions. Some were "avid admirers of Thomas Jefferson," others not. At least one "had for decades assumed the allegations of Jefferson-Hemings relationship were true," while others had "serious doubts." They worked separately and together, gathering evidence, challenging one another's assumptions, and preserving in their final report their full range of differences as well as agreements.

Was Jefferson the father of some or all of Sally Hemings' children? "We don't know" looks like a far better answer today than the blandly confident "of course" that currently holds sway.

Whether the Scholars Commissions' doubts will make much headway in reforming public opinion is something else. In a way, it has become important for many Americans to believe that Jefferson was a hypocrite for owning slaves and an abuser of his power and privilege, as evidenced by his fathering Hemings' children whom he never acknowledged. This is the larger narrative in which the Hemings story is the trump. Diminishing Jefferson answers a need among many Americans eager to

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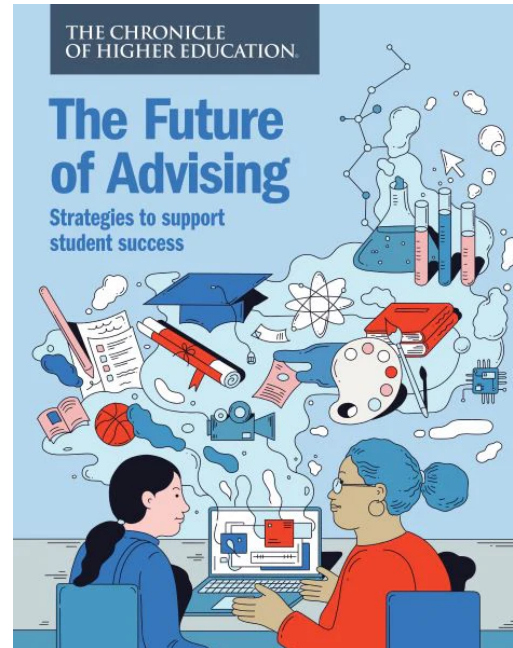
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The authors of *The Jefferson-Hemings Controversy* rightly stay away from this meta-controversy. They seek the facts of the particular case. But those facts surely have a bearing on who we are as a nation and, even after some 200 years, where we are going.

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