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CHAPTER 11

"The Memories of a Few Negroes"

Rescuing America's Future at Monticello

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For the better part of the entire month of November 1998, citizens of the United States of America were treated to, and participated in, an intense conversation about race and the history of slavery in America. The publication of the results of DNA tests that bolstered the thesis that the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, had fathered a family of children with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman on his plantation, presented the perfect occasion to talk about what has happened—was happening—between blacks and whites in America.

My interest in the results of these tests, and the public reaction to them, was quite high because I had recently published a book about Jefferson and Hemings that was extremely critical of the way American historians had presented this story to the world. I stated flatly that they had mishandled the issue for the more than 150 years they had been writing about it, casting the story as a mere slander against Jefferson's character, supported only by one fuzzy-minded female historian, a black female novelist with an axe to grind, and a black public too irrational to separate fantasy from reality.¹ Winthrop D. Jordan's balanced appraisal of the matter in his 1968 seminal work, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the*

Negro, 1550–1812, was far too lightly passed over by those who took it upon themselves to fashion Jefferson's image.²

My look at the historiography revealed two things: first, there never had been a systematic and fair consideration of the matter by those who could be called Jefferson scholars. Had they set out on that path, and been willing to go forthrightly where the evidence took them, they would most probably have come to the second conclusion that I reached: the weight of the evidence clearly suggested that the Jefferson-Hemings liaison was more likely historical fact than fiction. The DNA tests had the potential for showing, with a great deal more finality than is typical in historical debates, whether I was right or wrong about a truth that I thought could easily have been discerned.

Why didn't historians discern it? There is no one answer equally applicable to all who wrote on this subject. In some cases the problem seemed to have stemmed from a potent combination of adherence to white supremacy, class bias, and hero worship. Traditional Jefferson scholars were simply ill-equipped to see the humanity of blacks as equal to that of Jefferson and his white family. Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson—Sally Hemings's son and a former slave at Monticello, respectively—gave accounts that supported the existence of the relationship. Neither document was treated as of serious historical import. These men, when written of at all, were often presented as mental or moral cripples telling childish tall tales. Why was it necessary to ascertain if such people were telling the truth?

In sorting this matter out, one must also look to the near total identification with and inclination to protect the reputations of Jefferson and those members of his family who provided an alternative explanation for the paternity of Sally Hemings's children. The honor of Jefferson and the Randolphs was so important that they were to be given the benefit of every doubt—no matter how unreasonable. At the same time, the honor and dignity of Madison Hemings and his family were of little consequence. There was a lack of true empathy with black Americans' efforts during slavery to preserve their families in the face of the depredations of the slave system. Moreover, some historians failed to understand how deeply that loss and threatened loss of identity is felt by black Americans even until this day. In the unspoken cost-benefit analysis the question was

simple: whose interests do we most mind hurting, the Jeffersons' and Randolphs' or the Hemmingses'?

Given Jefferson's great importance to America the choice might seem obvious. But it is less clearly so when we consider the relationship that the Jeffersons and Randolphs bore to the Hemmingses. They owned them, and even they recognized that ownership as an aggression against the innocent. It is the normal impulse, when confronted with aggressors and victims, to reserve one's greatest concern for the victim. By this standard, evidence of one slave family's success in escaping the obliteration of their identity should have been treated with respect and care. Certainly, the interests of those who wrongly held them in slavery should not have been protected with such zeal and unquestioned vigilance. In this case, however, the identity of the slave family was pushed aside and portrayed as a grab for power and privilege by those presumed unworthy of the blood of an American icon.

No doubt a degree of professional inertia and deference to the cult of the Jefferson scholar—individuals who have supposedly "figured Jefferson out"—prevented a more clearheaded assessment of the Hemmings matter. For scholars writing near the end of the twentieth century, the basic outline of Jefferson's personal life had been set for well over one hundred years. Even if there was reason to suspect that the overall outline was probably dated, most historians were of the view that only a few, inconsequential items were likely candidates for revision. A Jefferson with Sally Hemmings as his longtime mistress could not be considered an inconsequential alteration to his life story. It would require, for those who doubted the truth of the liaison, a major reassessment of Jefferson and his life at Monticello.

Finally, account must be taken of the role that centuries of white supremacy played in the handling of this story. A central tenet of that doctrine is that whites must control the shaping of reality. Any reality offered by blacks that conflicts with the desires of whites is to be put down. As far as we have come, we have not yet rid ourselves of this feature of American life. There is little wonder why some historians may have reacted too strongly against (or blithely ignored) Madison Hemmings's attempt to state the truth of his life. That truth would have drastically altered the agreed upon truths of Jefferson's life.

James Callender may have written the first words specifically about Jef-

ferson and Hemmings, but as one who was at Monticello and who was intimately involved with Jefferson and Hemmings, Madison Hemmings's recollections about his life on the mountain are the Rosetta Stone of this story. As I wrote, I knew that if Madison Hemmings was truthful (and every bit of information I found and every avenue I pursued indicated that he was), almost all that had been written about Jefferson's private life and character would have to be reexamined. Jefferson the father, Jefferson the grandfather, Jefferson the racist, Jefferson the asexual man of letters—all aspects of him would look different.

If Jefferson's biographers had not seen the role that Sally Hemmings played in his life, what else hadn't they seen? It is not as if no one at the time noticed that Jefferson had a mistress and numerous children with her on his home ground. As Joshua Rothman has shown, Jefferson's neighbors knew and gossiped about Sally Hemmings and her children.⁹ The existence of this hole in the historical record is quite a commentary on the way history and biography have been practiced.

A black man and former slave's version of life at Monticello was squarely pitted against not only the cult of Jefferson, but also the separate and distinct cult of the Jefferson scholar. It is easy to understand what happened when Madison Hemmings's memoir was rediscovered in the 1950s and when Fawn Brodie published it in its entirety in 1974. The document, standing by itself, was more than just a challenge to a particular conception of Jefferson; it had to have been perceived as a challenge to traditional authority, particularly when Brodie took it up and treated it as a valid historical document. It could not have gone unnoticed that a white woman was using the words of a black man to say that a group of white males did not know what they were talking about. Two members of relatively powerless groups were contending for power in an arena from which their kind had been largely excluded. There is little wonder Brodie received the response that she did—and, it must be said, why it took others so long to say out loud that she was probably right and the others were probably wrong.

It simply is not the case that Brodie's excursions into psychobiography alone discredited *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* in the eyes of historians. To an extent generally unacknowledged, psychoanalysis, or at least psychological insights that derive from the principles of psychoanalysis, form the basis of a great many Jefferson biographies—of all biographies,

really. This would almost have to be so. Jefferson was silent about many things that are of natural interest to people—like what he did for female company during the forty-five years or so after his wife's death. As desiring, seeking, and attaining companionship is typically considered a normal part of life, there had to be some way of dealing with Jefferson's silence on this matter. One could deal with it by ruling the question an irrelevancy that bordered on the puritent, to shame people out of attempting to discuss the question openly. In the alternative Jefferson could be psychoanalyzed from across the years and found to have had no real interest in those pursuits after his wife's death. In either formulation Jefferson would be seen as beyond or above a relationship with Hemings.

Both postures were comfortable and easy. With Hemings, Jefferson's life is a much more complicated business. Monticello, the place of Jefferson's serene refuge—the one thing that seemed sure, safe, and understandable—looks vastly different, no doubt an almost unimaginable place to some. It was a place where a man's two families (of different races and vastly different social status) lived together in what must have been some version of harmony that he virtually willed into existence. Who was this man?

To a great extent that question was being asked and answered with increasing urgency since the 1960s, which saw the beginning of a reassessment of Jefferson. In *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side*, Leonard Levy assailed Jefferson for not being as much the champion of freedom of speech as had been thought. Certainly his racial views had come under sustained attack since the publication in 1968 of Jordan's *White over Black*, which contained a detailed discussion of Jefferson's infamous passages about black people in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. By 1993, with the publication of Peter S. Onuf's *Jeffersonian Legacies* on the occasion of Jefferson's 250th birthday, it was clear that the era of worshipping Jefferson as an unblemished icon was largely over.⁴

Nevertheless, the Hemings matter resisted the full revisionist spirit. Fawn Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, which accepted the Hemings story as true, was well received by the public. Ultimately, however, the book worked no basic change in the scholarly presentation of Jefferson's life. On the question of the domestic life of Thomas Jefferson, scholars of another era were given almost complete deference. While the reasons for skepticism about the story largely shifted—with the tendency

of more recent and less reverential scholars to focus on Jefferson's racism as the likely bar to the truth of the relationship—the basic hesitancy to treat the subject as a matter for serious inquiry remained. The two major studies of Jefferson's character published in the 1990s, one by Andrew Burstein, who was generally favorably disposed toward Jefferson and another by Joseph Ellis, who was less so, discounted the story in quite strong terms.⁵

After studying the matter closely for some years, it was apparent to me that the Jefferson and Hemings controversy had never really been about what could reasonably be deduced from historical inquiry. If it had been, it would not have taken until Fawn Brodie's biography of Jefferson in 1974 for a historian to say that the story was true. Certainly, the story that Jefferson's nephews, the Carrs, were the fathers of Hemings's children would never have taken hold to the extent that it did. In the absence of any systematic effort to gather evidence from the contemporary time, or to analyze closely the statements of contemporary witnesses, the conversation about Jefferson and Hemings seemed to turn largely on who had read the largest number of Jefferson letters.

For all these reasons, I knew that it would take something akin to divine intervention before Madison Hemings's statement, even supported as it was by an extensive amount of circumstantial and direct evidence, could be taken as historical fact. That should not be surprising, for assertions of blacks' equal humanity have often been treated as threats to the maintenance of white supremacy. One can always expect recalcitrance from some quarters, and that the recalcitrance will eventually be seen as a moral error when the passage of time allows for calm reflection. The apologies and attempts at reconciliation that sometimes follow often deepen the cynicism of blacks and their supporters, who cannot understand how so much damage could be inflicted for causes that were so comparatively trivial.

In a real sense, the Jefferson-Hemings saga amounts to an American version of the Dreyfus case, in which people have hitched their own individual hopes, fears, and anxieties to a story that was (is) at its most fundamental level really about a man, a woman, and the children they had together in the midst of a devastating social system that the man could have done more to help dismantle.

With all this in mind, I had been waiting for the results of the DNA test

for well over a year and a half before they were announced. During the question-and-answer period after a talk I had given about Jefferson and Hemings in Jefferson's own home territory, Charlottesville, Virginia, a woman raised her hand and announced that she and a colleague were putting together a DNA test that would settle the matter once and for all. We could, she said, have the answer in as short a time as six months. Their idea was to draw blood from the descendants of the relevant families—Heminges, Woodsons, Jeffersons, and Carrs—and then check their DNA to see what relationships, if any, existed between and among them. The introduction of science would complement the historical record in a way that could yield as definitive a result as would be needed to tell historians whether Jefferson was the most likely father of Hemings's children. We would have what we never have in history: scientific evidence of genetic links between individuals whom we believe from the historical record alone to have been related to one another.

The woman, it turned out, was Winifred Bennett, a resident of Charlottesville—and she was not kidding. The colleague she referred to was Dr. Eugene Foster, also of Charlottesville. It was Dr. Foster's test, and his article in the British journal *Nature* explaining the results of the test, that brought on the media frenzy in November. In a way, it seemed fitting that people from Charlottesville should weigh in on this matter, because that town had been the locus of another famous historical debate about identity: the mystery of Tsar Nicholas's supposedly long-lost daughter, Anastasia. DNA testing firmly established that Tsar Nicholas did not have a long-lost daughter. Or if he did, she was not Anna Anderson, the woman who lived in Charlottesville until the end of her life and who claimed along with devoted supporters that she was the child of Nicholas and Alexandra who had escaped the massacre of the Romanov family.

The prospect of bringing DNA evidence to bear on this matter was dizzying. It was, in truth, something I had fantasized about from the first time I learned of the remarkable strides that were being made toward understanding the intricacies of human genetics. Based on what I knew, I felt confident that science would one day provide an answer. Importantly, I understood that it would not require the exhumation of Jefferson's remains to do so. From time to time historians had suggested that we could never know whether Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings's children until we dug him up, but that solution was never realistic. It always

seemed (and seems) more designed to be obstructionist than anything else. What is accomplished by making the answer to a test—that one knows can never been taken—the sole determinant for resolving a historical controversy? It accomplishes the real objective whenever anyone engages in this type of tactic: it effectively takes resolution of the matter off the table, putting it beyond the realm of the possibility of an answer. *Did Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings have children together? That's just something we can never know.*

This approach was quite convenient for supporters of the status quo. Turning the story of Jefferson and Hemings into an unfathomable mystery that could never be resolved by the tools typically used by historians allows the historical consensus about the basic facts of Jefferson's private life to remain intact, no matter how much nonscientific—that is to say, historical—evidence could be amassed in support of an alternative vision of his private life. Scientists controlled the inquiry, and historians' work could never be good enough. This posture not only enshrines the conventional narrative of Jefferson's life, but has the added value of making the proponent of the scientific solution seem reasonable and broadminded, when in fact he or she is quite the opposite. *I'd be willing to accept this if only we had the right tools, which, by the way, I know we'll never have.* It also carries with it a built-in intimation of irresponsibility or mendacity on the part of those who believe that the conventional historical record as it stood could yield an answer.

But I knew that advances in technology would quickly overtake the "dig him up" ruse. If scientists could use genetic tests to track the existence of the genes of the early Africans throughout populations across the globe over thousands of years, surely there would come a time when it could be known whether the Hemings family and Jefferson family were genetically connected. Certainly that answer could come by the time the human genome is mapped during the first half of the next decade.

Despite my faith in the divine intervention of the god of science, and my firm belief, based on my own study of the matter, about what the results of the DNA tests would be—that there would be a genetic connection between the Jefferson and Hemings descendants, that there would be no connection among the Hemings and Carr descendants, and that there would be no connection between the Jefferson, Woodson, and Carr descendants—the idea of a scientific test of my convictions was, quite hon-

estly, unsettling. First, there was the prospect that my mistake would bring a torrent of recrimination inundating me and any other black who might in the future argue strenuously that black testimony was a trustworthy source of important historical fact. The Rosetta Stone would become the Hitler diaries, and people would never tire of telling (and hearing) the tale.

The other source of my discomfort was the knowledge that once the test results came in, and if they were as I thought they would be, the matter would be settled. There could be no more retreats into the safety of "on one hand, but on the other hand," or "we may never know." This would affect not only my own statements, but my reaction to what others said as well. If others continued to treat the matter as still an open question, how could I continue to moderate my voice when faced with what could only be interpreted as even greater contempt and lack of concern for the history and interests of black people? Decisions would have to be made.

I also knew that DNA evidence would be persuasive to many of those in the historical community who had been doubters. Having stated so adamantly that the historiography on Jefferson and Hemings was flawed, and having come to the conclusion in my own mind that the relationship probably existed, I found myself somewhat unprepared to face the reality of a world without serious opposition to my beliefs. A genetic test, well in advance of the time I thought it possible, forced the issue before I had time to sort through all the possible ramifications of an historically accepted Jefferson-Hemings relationship. I would also be forced to think more clearly about what I thought of the two people at the heart of this controversy.

When the results of the DNA tests were announced and they were completely in line with the information presented in my book, the question was posed quite starkly for me and many others: What do we think of Jefferson now? All American citizens, indeed any citizen of the world, who sees himself or herself as having a stake in Jefferson in any way will have to ask that question. One could begin to see the contours of this process taking shape in the media reporting on the DNA results. Reporters, pundits, and newspaper editorialists weighed in on the question as if it were a matter of the gravest concern. If Jefferson's stock had declined in the historical community because of his involvement in slavery

and some of his racist writings, the overwhelming evidence that he engaged in miscegenation seemed an occasion to argue even more strongly that he was damaged goods.

This sentiment seems to have been helped along because of the unfortunate fact that the DNA results were released near the approaching zenith of the President Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal. Some felt this was no mere coincidence. It was charged that the results were specifically timed to "help" Clinton, by pointing out at a critical moment that another American president—a beloved and respected one—had had problems of his own with a forbidden woman. Armed with the confirmation of Jefferson's indiscretion, Americans would go to the polls during the midterm election and vote for men and women who would turn back the effort to impeach the president who, after all, had only done what Jefferson had done.

In fact, the comparison was helped along because the historical commentary to Dr. Foster's article on the DNA results openly speculated that the findings might help President Clinton avoid impeachment. Jefferson and Hemings were swept up in the centrifugal force of the media's obsession with the Clinton scandal. The settling of a centuries-old controversy about one of the most important men in history—a controversy that raised profound questions about race, status, and the construction of historical reality—was treated by some as just another excuse for pundits to issue banalities about heroes with feet of clay.

Indeed, Jefferson had been set up for this type of treatment. Scholars had used assessments of his character as the primary shield to protect him from the truth of the liaison with Hemings. A person with a "good" character could not have been in such a relationship. To the extent that the DNA results combined with historical evidence proved that Jefferson *had* been in the relationship, the natural tendency would be to think that Jefferson had a "bad" character.

In practically every article, news report, or interview that dealt with the DNA test results in any depth the word *hypocrisy* appeared as a matter of course.⁹ Jefferson was denounced as a "hypocrite." This sentiment was voiced and written with a great amount of passion, passion that probably said more about those who made the charge than about Jefferson himself. The central item of hypocrisy in Jefferson's life, of course, was his ownership of slaves even as he voiced sentiments against slavery and wrote with

passion about the rights of man. But now there was something perhaps even more terrible to tell: while holding forth on the evils of miscegenation, Jefferson had been carrying on a long-term relationship with a black woman, Sally Hemings! It was difficult to say which part of the hypocrisy was so upsetting. Was it that Jefferson did not practice what he preached or that he preached what he did not practice? If the DNA test had turned out differently, would Jefferson have been more admirable because it would have shown that he made negative comments about race-mixing *and stuck to his guns*? Would people have breathed a sigh of relief because Jefferson's stated aversion to blacks was thorough, complete . . . and consistent?

As is often the case with discussions of this issue, one wonders what message was being imparted by these responses. How could descendants of slaves be expected to receive the news that a Founding Father's long-term sexual relationship with a slave would cause more expressed disappointment than his buying, selling, and making gifts of slaves? We know that Jefferson made women clean his house, cook his meals, and look after his children. Women harvested his crops while he sat writing letters and thinking great thoughts. When he died penniless, the majority of his female slaves were scattered to the four winds, losing family, home, and friends. All these actions—all these things done to black women—have been taken in and washed clean of their import for those who style themselves as the keepers of the Jefferson flame.

Yet, the knowledge that Jefferson became infatuated with a slave woman, entreated her to return to Virginia with him with promises of a life of privilege for her and freedom for their children, had children with her, and kept his promises about providing her with a life of relative privilege and giving their children freedom—that would put him beyond the pale—literally. There would be no way to wash him clean of the defilement. Conor Cruise O'Brien, in *The Long Affair*, his over-the-top condemnation of Jefferson, compared the Virginian's situation to that of colonial Englishmen who took up with African women or the women of all the other parts of the empire upon which the sun never set. They were said to have "gone native." They were no longer Englishmen, and, of course they were no longer white.⁷ Has Jefferson met a similar fate? Can he be the symbol of the spirit of America if he has been, in some sense, blackened by Sally Hemings?

However one answers that question, it is likely that for the foreseeable future Jefferson will remain a primary focus of attention for scholars and the public. His ideas and his life interest us, and the Hemings matter further fuels that interest. It is a point of commonality between blacks and whites. Despite all the talk about hypocrisy and living a lie, what one heard over and over in the discussions about Jefferson and Hemings was that the liaison made Jefferson seem more human. This was not just because it indicated that he could make a "mistake," but because it confirmed that he had human feelings and desires. Jefferson's sexuality, so long denied and truncated, became remarkably present. Not only did he have sex. He had it for a long time, fathering his last child at age sixty-five. Moreover, he did all this with the very symbol of carnality: a black woman.

Many people, no doubt, will think less of Jefferson specifically because of his sexuality. At the same time, there is evidence that the revelation of Jefferson's liaison with Sally Hemings has actually improved his image in the eyes of some Americans. Sociologist Orlando Patterson said as much when he announced that knowing that Jefferson had been involved with Hemings made him feel closer to him. Jefferson was, through his part-black children, a member of "the family."⁸

This is a difficult business because, at some level, when thinking about the matter, one has to decide just what Jefferson did with or to Hemings. While the Hemings affair may make Jefferson more accessible in some respects, it necessarily stirs complicated feelings. Was he a rapist? Could there have been love between the two of them? Should that matter to us? It matters now, it always has, and probably always will.

The traditional historical responses to the Hemings-Jefferson story suggest extreme discomfort with miscegenation. Exaggerated notions about the sexuality of black people (views that Jefferson himself clearly shared) particularly confounded those who viewed Jefferson as the model of probity in his private character. For them miscegenation is the opposite of probity. It is degeneracy by definition. If Jefferson was with Hemings, he may as well have been crawling around on all fours, baying at the moon. There could be no imaginative construction of the relationship (or of Hemings) that could save him from the fall. One can see the still powerful response that miscegenation invokes in the 1995 Merchant Ivory film *Jefferson in Paris*. The film treats the relationship as true, but its makers could barely bring themselves to allow the two characters to touch one

another on screen, although Nick Nolte's Jefferson touched and kissed the married, but white, Maria Cosway throughout the movie.

Ambivalence about miscegenation is not the only reason for finding the Jefferson-Henings affair offensive. There is the quite legitimate concern about the power differential that existed between a master in his mid-forties and a slave girl in her mid-teens. How could Henings, no matter what she may have *thought* she was doing, really have consented to the terms of the "treaty" her son said she entered into with Jefferson? In this view, at the very least Jefferson had used his superior power and knowledge to take advantage of a young slave girl. That the terms of the treaty were fulfilled does not negate the way the whole thing started. For some, the issue is clear. This was rape, pure and simple.

How do we view the fact that Jefferson did not give Henings her formal freedom? Was it an indication of blatant lack of regard for the woman with whom he had been involved for at least twenty years? Or were there other reasons rooted in the time and other aspects of Jefferson's personality that accounted for his failure in this regard? I believe the most probable answer is likely to trouble present-day sensibilities because it underscores Jefferson's patriarchal attitude, and his less than bold personal style. Jefferson believed that women should be under the protection (read *control*) of men. It was probably never in his contemplation to free Henings if it meant (and given the circumstances it would have meant) that she would have to leave Monticello and be under the control of another man. When one adds the extreme social opprobrium that would likely have attended his formal filing of a document to free her and a petition to the legislature of Virginia to allow her to remain in the state, one can see how Jefferson, never given to martyrdom, would have chosen the more expedient route. It may be overly romantic to think that things could have been otherwise. And yet, one wishes, as is often the case with Jefferson, for something better.

If Jefferson the lover of Henings presents problems, Jefferson the father of slave children takes us onto different, even more troubling terrain. What can one make of his attitude toward his offspring with Henings? The only direct evidence we have is Madison Henings's memoir in which he notes that Jefferson was not "in the habit" of showing him and his siblings "partiality" or "fatherly affection." Jefferson was kind to them, but he was "uniformly" kind to everyone.⁹

As were all the other slaves on his plantation, Jefferson's mistress and children were listed in his Farm Book as if they had no special meaning to him.¹⁰ However, the Farm Book is not a good guide to Jefferson's relationships with individual slaves. One could read it from cover to cover and never know that at the end of Jefferson's life, Burwell Colbert would receive his freedom, three hundred dollars, and a house, or that John Henings and Joe Fossett would receive similar bequests. We certainly would not know that Madison and Eston Henings would be singled out for their freedom.

Consider Jefferson's treatment in his Farm Book of the departures of Beverley and Harriet Henings. The notations beside their entries simply state that they ran away and lists the year. Beverley did not run away. He left according to the agreement that Jefferson made with Henings to induce her to return to Virginia. We have an even greater sense of the gap between the words Jefferson put on paper and the actions he took when we consider what happened to Harriet. Jefferson had his overseer give Harriet money and purchase a ticket on a stagecoach to take her north to freedom. She did not run away, as Jefferson wrote in his Farm Book. He helped send her away. There was, evidently, much more going on at Monticello than can be discerned from notations in this cryptic text.

When I read the microfilm of Madison Henings's memoir in the *Pike County (Ohio) Republican* to compare it with the transcription in Fawn Brodie's book I noticed several mistakes, but one in particular caught my eye. In at least one place where Brodie has Henings saying "our father" when referring to Jefferson, in the original document Henings actually referred to Jefferson simply as "father." I saw this as an important difference from an evidentiary point of view because it showed Henings's deep connection with the story he was recounting. Either he was telling the truth or I was reading the words of a deeply disturbed individual. There was nothing else in the memoir that suggested that the latter was true.¹¹

This difference is important for another reason. No matter how it may offend our present-day notions about family, it is clear that Madison Henings viewed himself as has having been a member of a family. Sally Henings was "mother." Jefferson was "father." Why would Madison Henings think of Jefferson as father, even as he spoke of Jefferson's disinclination to show open affection for the Henings children?

There are some possible answers. First, consider what Madison Henings knew about white men and the way they treated their children with

slave women. He knew that his grandfather, John Wayles, had died and left his children and mistress in slavery. He knew that his mother's life essentially consisted of looking after him and his siblings and attending to Jefferson's chamber and wardrobe. He knew, as others remarked upon, that his mother was treated as "much above" other slaves at Monticello. The promise of freedom was spoken of as something so certain that Hemings remembered that he and his siblings were "measurably happy" as children because they knew the promise would be fulfilled. How could he have been so sure? Most crucially, he knew that his father, unlike his grandfather, had given his children freedom as promised. Why wouldn't this be an important part of establishing his sense of a family connection to Jefferson? To Hemings, Jefferson was "father"—an imperfect one—but father, nevertheless.

Moreover, as I discovered while researching my book, the name of each of the Hemings children was significant. They had been named in the same manner that Jefferson's children with his wife had been named, the same way Jefferson named his grandchildren: for members of the Randolph family or for close friends. Certainly everyone in his community and family would have recognized the Randolph family names. Of course, everyone would know James Madison. Naming children in the eighteenth century, in black families and white, was a serious matter, a way to announce and preserve family origins and connections. The Hemings family was no different.

Was it mere chance that the Hemings boys were trained to a profession and an avocation, carpentry and the violin, for which Jefferson had a strong affinity? What of Beverley Hemings and his hot-air ballooning? Is it significant that Eston Hemings, the son who became a musician, made one of Jefferson's favorite songs a central part of his repertoire?

Madison Hemings would have known the answer to all these questions, but we cannot. It cannot be emphasized enough what a tragedy it is that the answers most likely will never be known, and that they will not be known for any reason that can be called a good one. What if instead of writing to Henry Randall to find out who Madison Hemings's father was, James Parton had put that question to Madison Hemings himself? There was a moment when a historian had the chance to rise above the prejudices of the day and let curiosity and open-mindedness, the lifeblood of history, give him the courage to take a chance. Hemings might have re-

sponded, and history would have been immeasurably richer for it. Similar moments of opportunity have existed from the very beginning, and the one who rose to the occasion—Fawn Brodie—was made the object of ridicule and scorn. What a lesson to be learned in all this!

It is true that we do not and will never have the details of what went on between Jefferson and Hemings and their children. This does not mean that we have nothing to go on. Perhaps the most persistent, and ultimately damaging, feature of the original debate over whether the relationship existed at all was the tight rein placed upon the historical imagination. One was simply not to let one's mind wander too freely over the matter. Brainstorming, drawing reasonable inferences from actions, attempting to piece together a plausible view of the matter were shunted into the category of illegitimate speculation, as grave an offense as outright lying. Yet, a good amount of history is necessarily based upon just this sort of methodology. Why the hesitancy about applying it to the Jefferson and Hemings relationship?

I suppose the answer stems from the knowledge that the public must eventually settle on some way to view Jefferson and Hemings. Jefferson's reputation depends upon how we think he conducted himself in this relationship. Given the enormous head start that Jefferson has in the public's affection, it is a safe bet that the terms of the settlement will be in his favor. When that happens, Jefferson will be even more powerful as a cultural touchstone than ever. Thomas and Sally, long the forbidden American myth, will become simply "the American myth."

There is no question that there is some anxiety about this prospect. The image of Jefferson and Hemings as multicultural heroes is fake. In the end, it will probably be left to novelists, playwrights, and poets, uncumbered by the need for footnotes, to get at the ultimate meaning of this story. That effort, done in the right way, will yield universal truths as important and real as any to be found in history books.

But historians must tell the story, too. While it is easy to think of the "larger issues" that Jefferson's relationship with Hemings raises, I suspect that the most difficult issues are the seemingly "small" ones. At the most fundamental level we now must face the question of how to accommodate the new knowledge into Jefferson's biography. There is no way to be a little bit pregnant on this score. The declaration of the new truths that must be stated are simple, and yet breathtaking, when one considers how

long and hard they have been resisted over these many years. There is no doubt that seeing these words in print will rattle some to their cores. Thomas Jefferson had thirteen children, six of whom lived to adulthood. Some of his children were white and some of them were black. He had four sons born to him, three of whom lived to adulthood. He had three daughters who lived to adulthood, not two. Jefferson did not live in celibacy for the forty-five years after the death of his wife of ten years, Martha Jefferson. He had a thirty-eight-year, apparently monogamous, relationship with Sally Hemmings, an enslaved black woman on his plantation, and fathered a child with her when he was sixty-five years old. There is no question that the lay of the land will change when historians write openly about this as part of our history, and not a simple legend. It is difficult to say what changes will occur, but at least we can embark on the project in a spirit of good faith that will allow us to improve on what was done before.

NOTES

The quotation in the title is from Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 187.

1. I am referring to biographer Fawn M. Brodie, author of *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York, 1974); and Barbara Chase-Riboud, author *Sally Hemmings: A Novel* (New York, 1979).

2. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968).

3. See Rothman, "James Callender and Social Knowledge of Interracial Sex in Antebellum Virginia," chapter 4 in this volume.

4. Peter S. Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville, 1993); Leonard Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).

5. Andrew Burstein, *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville, 1995); Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997).

6. See, for example, "The Destruction of Thomas Jefferson," *Port St. Lucie News*, 21 Nov. 1998; "The Big News Is of History—Not Sex," *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, 16 Nov. 1998; "Legacy of Slavery Breeds Hypocrisy and Corruption," *Houston Chronicle*, 15 Nov. 1998; "Self Evident Truths," *Chicago Sun Times*, 4 Nov. 1998; "DNA Test Finds Evidence of Jefferson Child by a Slave," *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1998.

7. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution* (Chicago, 1997).

8. "Jefferson the Contradiction," *New York Times*, 2 Nov. 1998.

9. "Memoirs of Madison Hemmings," Appendix A in this volume.

10. Edwin Morris Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, with Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings* (Charlottesville, 1987).

11. "Memoirs of Madison Hemmings," Appendix A in this volume.

