

### Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture (Jeffersonian America)

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The publication of DNA test results showing that Thomas Jefferson was probably the father of one of his slave Sally Hemings's children has sparked a broad but often superficial debate. The editors of this volume have assembled some of the most distinguished American historians, including three Pulitzer Prize winners, and other experts on Jefferson, his times, race, and slavery. Their essays reflect the deeper questions the relationship between Hemings and Jefferson has raised about American history and national culture.

The DNA tests would not have been conducted had there not already been strong historical evidence for the possibility of a relationship. As historians from Winthrop D. Jordan to Annette Gordon-Reed have argued, much more is at stake in this liaison than the mere question of paternity: historians must ask themselves if they are prepared to accept the full implications of our complicated racial history, a history powerfully shaped by the institution of slavery and by sex across the color line.

How, for example, does it change our understanding of American history to place Thomas Jefferson in his social context as a plantation owner who fathered white and black families both? What happens when we shift our focus from Jefferson and his white family to Sally Hemings and her children? How do we understand interracial sexual relationships in the early republic and in our own time? Can a renewed exploration of the contradiction between Jefferson's life as a slaveholder and his libertarian views yield a clearer understanding of the great political principles he articulated so eloquently and that Americans cherish? Are there moral or political lessons to be learned from the lives of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings and the way that historians and the public have attempted to explain their liaison?

Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture promises an open-ended discussion on the living legacy of slavery and race relations in our national culture.



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