The Press and the Hemings-Jefferson Story from 1802 to 2001

What follows is an essay by the journalist and professor James Hill looking at the Hemings-Jefferson affair from the perspective of how the press treated the story over the years, from its first breaking to the DNA tests of recent times. If you want to know more about the story, or if you are interested in the role of newspapers in dealing with an issue like slavery over time, this essay is for you.

How did newspapers cover the story in 1802 compared to coverage in the 1840s or during Reconstruction or in the Civil Rights Movement or in 2001? Newspapers have always shaped and reflected public opinion, and looking at the scandal surrounding Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings tells us much about the public's view of slavery and its legacy over time.

Questions to consider in reading this essay include the following:

1. Why do you think Jefferson refused to talk about the charges?
2. Are you surprised that the press raised the issue in 1802 but said relatively little about it during the peak of anti-slavery fervor in the 1840s?
3. What do you think about the DNA tests? Do the results make Jefferson "guilty?" Do they make him appear to be a criminal?
4. Do you feel sorry for Sally Hemings and her children, or do you feel that she was loved and made the best of the circumstances?
5. Why do you think that Jefferson never freed any of his slaves, except for a few, during his lifetime? Do a little research on Jefferson's attitude toward slavery in explaining your answer.

The Press and the Sally Hemings-Thomas Jefferson Story: 1802-2001
By James Hill, Professor of Journalism, California State University-Northridge

Thomas Jefferson was in the second year of his presidency when he was rocked by a scandalous charge that would haunt him for the rest of his public life, and shadow his legacy long after his death. A newspaper story accused the third President of the United States of keeping one of his Monticello slaves as a concubine and fathering at least one of her children. The story was written by a cantankerous journalist, James Thomson Callender, notorious for digging up dirt on politicians he hated. Jefferson was at the top of his list.

It was late summer, 1802, and Callender must have known he was writing the biggest story of his life when he reported that President Thomas Jefferson had been sleeping with a slave. But even a muckraker of Callender's determination could not have foreseen the staying power that the story would have.[1] For nearly 200 years, journalists, researchers and other writers have resurrected the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings story again and again. Racism, support for the enslaved and later freedmen, issues of African-American identity, and attempts to rationalize a 20th century political scandal involving another president, all emerged from the journalism about the alleged Jefferson-Hemings affair. It happened during three periods: The first decade of the 19th century, the Abolitionist era, and the late 1990s.

I.

The issue was compelling from the start: Did the author of the Declaration of Independence father children by his black slave, Sally Hemings? What does this story tell us about Jefferson? About slavery in the early national era? About the role of the press in the politics of slavery?

The tale first saw print on September 1, 1802, when the *Richmond Recorder* ran Callender's exposé. Thomas Jefferson, wrote Callender, had long maintained a sexual relationship with one of his slaves:

It is well known that the man, *whom it delighteth the people to honor*, keeps and for many years has kept, as his concubine, one of his slaves. Her name is Sally. The name of her eldest son is Tom. His features are said to bear a striking though sable resemblance to the president himself.[2]

The derisive tone did not decry a standard out-of-wedlock escapade--that a political leader had an affair and fathered offspring. Jefferson was a single man at the time of Callender's article--widowed for almost exactly 20 years. His wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson, died September 6, 1782, after suffering complications from the birth of the couple's seventh child. On her deathbed, she made her husband promise he would never marry again--a vow he kept.[3] Callender never mentioned such context or background. To him, it apparently didn't matter.

Callender exploited racist views of blacks to denigrate Jefferson and undermine his presidency. In his newspaper articles, Callender called Hemings a "wench" and a "slut as common as the pavement." He mocked her oldest son, allegedly fathered by Jefferson, as "President Tom."[4] She was, he wrote, an "African Venus."[5] Missing is any concern over sexual abuse of slaves by their masters. Missing is any mention or moral question that such an affair could be rape. Missing is any concern at all for Sally Hemings.

Callender's journalism centers on loathing of miscegenation. For Callender, Jefferson-Hemings was a scandal in black, white, and the resulting shades of brown. He believed his readers would share his sense of racial outrage: "Jefferson before the eyes of his two daughters," wrote Callender on September 28, 1802, "sent to his kitchen, or perhaps to his pigstye, for this mahogany coloured charmer."[6] Callender himself was reportedly disgusted that whites would ever mix with blacks, and was said to have a leading role in attempts to shut down dances frequented by white men looking for black women.[7]

Many editors of the day repeated Callender's bigoted story line because of its ability to damage Jefferson rather than as a means for attacking slavery. The underlying issue appears to have been the inferiority of a black slave juxtaposed to the Caucasian pedigree of President Thomas Jefferson. In this perspective, whites are lowered in status by an association with blacks, but blacks are never elevated in return. Editors reprinted Callender's story or carried the allegations in their own coverage of the Jefferson Administration. Newspapers in Boston and Philadelphia added their racially charged observation that Jefferson's two daughters were likely "weeping to see a negress installed in the place of their mother."[8] The editor of the (Lynchburg) *Virginia Gazette* challenged Jefferson for crossing the racial divide: "Why have you not married some worthy woman of your own complexion?"[9] To the *Palladium*, Hemings was a "sable damsel."[10] The *Boston Gazette* called her "A negro-wench," and ridiculed inter-racial sex: "Black is love's proper hue for me (Jefferson), And white's the hue for Sally" (sung to the tune of Yankee Doodle Dandy).[11] The *Philadelphia Port Folio* called Hemings "Sooty Sal" in the printed lyrics of another Jefferson-bashing tune.[12]

These Federalist publishers were clearly motivated by political rivalry, like the *Gazette of the United States'* Bronfon. Because of that, they missed the chance to score political points critical of slavery. Instead, they seemed to revel in the racist imagery of Callender's story.

In *The Federalist Press and Slavery in the Age of Jefferson*, historian John Kyle Day notes Federalist anti-slavery critics sought to drive northern voters from Jefferson rather than striking a blow against slavery itself.[13] He says their tone expressed sarcasm rather than moral condemnation. If Federalists were genuine antislavery political reformers, they should have expressed moral outrage at Jefferson's sexual exploitation of his slave Sally Hemings, argues Day. When Federalist periodicals did comment upon the Hemings scandal, the tone was more of

sarcastic humor and bitter jest than any public outrage and/or moral condemnation of Jefferson's treatment of Hemings. This is not surprising, writes Day, since the Federalist press gave scant support to women in general, and a slave woman in particular.[14] Regardless of the motives or goals in attacking Jefferson, Federalist editors likely shared Callender's disgust with miscegenation. If not, they would have found his articles offensive, counterproductive, and refused to print them.

The racist attitudes become more apparent when the Hemings allegation is contrasted with another charge leveled against Jefferson at about the same time. As the Hemings scandal unfolded, Jefferson was pilloried for his youthful attempts in 1767 to seduce Betsey Walker, the wife of his friend John Walker. Both the language and the tone of the accusation are telling and veer sharply from the racist disrespect heaped on Sally Hemings. Refined and white, Betsy Walker was accorded care and respect. Callender referred to her as a paragon of innocence. He applauded her for repulsing Jefferson's advance "with the contempt it deserved."[15] Jefferson is scorned in both stories. But, the Betsey Walker scandal is powered by her dignified whiteness; the Sally Hemings story, driven by a black woman's less-than-human lowliness.

Jefferson had defenders among Republican editors, but even they failed to attack Callender's racism. Instead, they attacked his character and his alcoholism, or picked apart his allegation with logical retort. Meriwether Jones wrote in the *Richmond Examiner*, "Is it strange therefore, that a servant of Mr. Jefferson's at a house where so many strangers resort, who is daily engaged in the ordinary vocations of the family, like thousands of others, should have a mulatto child? Certainly not...."[16]

Callender's attack-style journalism earned him many enemies. George Hay, a son-in-law of James Monroe, once assaulted Callender, beating him with a club.[17] Callender died under unusual circumstances in July 1803, his body found in about three feet of water in the James River. There were rumors of foul play, and it's possible he committed suicide.[18] But a coroner's inquest determined the death was accidental drowning while drunk.[19]

Racial innuendo trumped civilized discourse in the Callender articles--underscored by the fact that Jefferson's attitudes on slavery were never presented, although they were a matter of record long before 1802. It is well documented that Jefferson struggled with the nature and morality of racial slavery. In *A Summary View* (1774), he proclaimed, "The abolition of slavery is the great object of desire in these colonies...." Two years later, he proposed as part of the Constitution for Virginia that, "No person hereafter coming into this country shall be held within the same under any pretext whatever."[20] In *Notes From Virginia*, Jefferson appeared torn between benevolence and racial stereotype, as he lamented: "This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people."[21] In one of his most quoted passages, Jefferson seemed anguished: "...Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just ... the almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest (with slaves)."[22]

Jefferson owned some 200 slaves on his estates in Albemarle and Bedford, although the number fluctuated.[23] At Monticello, Jefferson used slave labor extensively in his fields, at a small nail factory, and in the building of his main house. Jefferson struggled with debt for many years, and saw slaves as valuable property. In one ten-year period, he sold or gave away 167 slaves.[24] Jefferson tried to accommodate slaves who wanted to be sold, especially to keep their families together, and he tried to avoid selling slaves against their wishes.[25] But in his will, Jefferson freed only five slaves, including John, Madison, and Eston Hemings.[26]

At this point, it's important to learn more about Sally Hemings. She was one of six mixed-race children of John Wayles and his slave Elizabeth (Betty) Hemings. Wayles had taken the slave as his lover after his third wife died. Wayles' white daughter, Martha, married Thomas Jefferson, and the six Hemings slaves went to live with her on Jefferson's Monticello estate. This made

Jefferson's wife and Sally Hemings half-sisters, sharing the same father.[27] It might explain why all the Hemings slaves worked in skilled, desirable jobs at Monticello and reportedly received preferred treatment.

Sally Hemings traveled to France in 1787, in a further example of possible favoritism. She went as the personal servant of Jefferson's daughter Mary (Maria). Jefferson was serving as U.S. Ambassador to France at the time and wanted his daughter near him. It was in France, between 1787 and 1789, that Jefferson and Hemings allegedly began sharing a bed.

Hemings eventually had either six or seven children. At least four survived to adulthood: William Beverly, Harriet II, James Madison, and Thomas Eston.[28] It is still disputed whether a first son, identified in Callender's original story as "President Tom," was born in 1790.[29] It is unclear if he existed, died in infancy, or grew to adulthood. Oral history of the African-American Woodson family says Tom did exist but was sent to another plantation at the age of 12, where he took the name Thomas Woodson.[30]

Thomas Jefferson never made a direct, public denial of the charges that he kept Sally Hemings as a concubine. Apparently, he found the miscegenation charge too vulgar to warrant a response.[31] He may also have felt it was tactically unnecessary to reply--Jefferson easily won re-election as president in 1804. Another factor could have been James Callender's death in 1803. Without the aggressive journalist pursuing him with further stories, Jefferson may have determined his silence was the best tactic in quieting the scandal for good.

II.

During the early abolitionist era, scant reference to Jefferson appears in anti-slavery newspapers. Jefferson had retired from public life, when his second term as president ended in 1809. He died at his Monticello estate July 4, 1826. William Lloyd Garrison's anti-slavery newspaper, *Liberator*, contains one flattering reference in 1831, its second year of publication.[32] A letter, signed "Cephus," praises the former president's writings against slavery: "We beg of you to read what has been written by one of your own selves, Jefferson, even half a century ago. And although it is supposed to be familiar to all who have reflected on this subject, we think it cannot be repeated too often to your children."[33]

Jefferson was briefly mentioned in the African-American press through the serialized version of a novel written by former slave William Wells Brown. The series ran in *The Weekly Anglo-African*, from December 1860 to March 1861. The heroines of the fictional story are two mulatto women, whose father was Thomas Jefferson, and whose mother was a slave. This was loosely based on the Callender story of Sally Hemings, but the story line was different, and the name Hemings was never used. Jefferson is not a character in the novel; Brown mentioned him only four times in his 250-page novel, in each case simply reminding the reader that Jefferson fathered the two young protagonists. The original book was titled *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter*, and was published in 1853. Brown was in London at the time and wrote the book for British readers, hoping to rally them to the anti-slavery cause.[34]

The Jefferson-Hemings story reappeared, in detail, as an issue in 1873, and touched off an editorial spat between two newspapers, one supporting the freedmen, and the other critical of rights for the freed slaves. The *Pike County (Ohio) Republican* printed an interview with Madison Hemings, who was by then an elderly man.[35] He told Editor S.F. Wetmore that his mother was the black slave Sally Hemings, and that his father was Thomas Jefferson:

When Mr. Jefferson went to France, Martha was a young woman grown, my mother was about her age, and Maria was just budding into womanhood. Their stay was about eighteen months. During that time my mother became Mr. Jefferson's concubine, and when he was called back

home, she was *enceinte* by him ... She gave birth to four others, and Jefferson was the father of all of them.[36]

The *Pike County Republican* clearly departs from the Callender journalism 71 years earlier. In 1873, the Jefferson-Hemings story was finally told from a black perspective--the narrative of a former slave--and was intended to fight racism, not cater to it. According to historian Annette Gordon-Reed, Wetmore was sympathetic to African Americans and hoped the Hemings saga would build public support for the freedmen. This would have strengthened the Republican Party in a county that was heavily Democratic.[37]

The editor of the rival Ohio newspaper, the *Waverly Watchman*, John A. Jones, challenged the Madison Hemings story with racist ridicule that harkened to the days of James Callender. "It sounds much better for the mother to tell her offspring that "master" is their father than to acknowledge to them that some field hand, without a name, had raised her to the dignity of mother."[38]

The issue was important to two small Ohio newspapers, but why did it fail to catch on in the larger northern press? There are several possibilities. First, the Jefferson-Hemings tale was one of miscegenation, a subject that still evoked strong negative reaction among whites, even those who favored rights for the former slaves. Northern publishers who supported rights for the freedmen may have thought it foolish to draw attention to such a contentious aspect of race relations. The stature of Jefferson was also at stake. He remained an icon for Republicans, who may have shied from any story that dragged his reputation through the mud. Or, the major newspapers may have felt there was no political traction in the story. After all, it was originally reported in 1802 to deny Jefferson a second term in office, and it failed.

III.

It would take 101 years before the Jefferson-Hemings story again stirred major conflict. In 1974, it emerged in the pages of *Thomas Jefferson, An Intimate History*, written by University of California, Los Angeles Professor Fawn M. Brodie.[39] She argued that the story of sexual liaison between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings was likely true. Brodie presented both figures as vulnerable and all too human--Jefferson not only fathered one or more of Hemings' six or seven light-skinned children, but he maintained a loving and probably monogamous relationship with her for 38 years.

Many Jeffersonian scholars disagreed. Garry Wills called it "psychologically implausible" for the founding father to have an affair with one of his slaves, that Jefferson stayed "above the squalor and horror of the slavery that existed below him."[40] In his review of Brodie, Historian Joseph J. Ellis called the Hemings allegation "a tin can tied to Jefferson's reputation."[41]

Ellis had been an especially strong critic of Brodie's work. He called her conclusion that Jefferson and Hemings had a loving relationship "an utter fabrication."[42] In an appendix to his 1997 book *American Sphinx*, Ellis refers to Brodie's historical technique as "psychiatric paraphernalia," and says of the Jefferson-Hemings affair, there is a "clear scholarly consensus that the story is almost certainly not true."[43] Ellis would soon change his position on the alleged affair, as new evidence emerged.

Brodie's work sparked new inquiries by African Americans. In 1997, attorney Annette Gordon-Reed closely examined the circumstantial evidence linking Jefferson and Hemings, in *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, An American Controversy.* She also examined other possibilities, including the Jefferson family oral history. It held that Hemings' children were fathered by Samuel and/or Peter Carr, the sons of Thomas Jefferson's sister, Martha. Gordon-Reed's keen legal reasoning sorted through evidence that was compelling but ultimately inconclusive in proving a

sexual liaison between Jefferson and his slave. In a year's time, however, the story would change.

On November 5, 1998, the journal *Nature* published a genetic study that stunned historians and others familiar with the Jefferson-Hemings controversy. It proclaimed near certainty that Thomas Jefferson fathered one of Sally Hemings' children. Dr. Eugene Foster, a retired pathologist from Charlottesville, Virginia, compared the DNA of male Jefferson descendants with that of male descendants of Sally Hemings.

The molecular findings fail to support the belief that Thomas Jefferson was Thomas Woodson's father, but provide evidence that he was the biological father of Eston Hemings Jefferson.... The simplest and most probable explanation for our molecular findings are that Thomas Jefferson, rather than one of the Carr brothers, was the father of Eston Hemings Jefferson, and that Thomas Woodson was not Thomas Jefferson's son.[44]

The *Nature* study was paired with a news editorial titled *Founding Father*. Biomedical researcher Eric S. Lander and historian Joseph J. Ellis addressed social concerns that were ignored in James Callender's original reporting: "Was it, as his contemporary critics charged, a tale of lust and rape? Was it, as several twentieth-century scholars and novelists have suggested, a love story rooted in mutual affection? Or was it something in between?"[45]

Ellis and Lander also linked Jefferson-Hemings to the political scandal of President William Jefferson Clinton and Monica Lewinsky and did so only months before the Clinton impeachment hearings.

Both presidents seem to have engaged in politically reckless conduct; in Jefferson's case, fathering Eston six years after allegations appeared in the national press. And both offered evasive denials to the charges.... Our heroes--and especially presidents--are not gods or saints, but flesh and blood humans, with all the frailties and imperfections this entails.[46]

Obscured in the news coverage was the DNA study's impact on the original allegation of James Callender. The DNA analysis proved conclusively that "President Tom" (Thomas Hemings Woodson) was not fathered by Thomas Jefferson. It had taken 196 years to prove it, but James Callender was wrong.

This was disappointing news for one African-American family. As the DNA tests were being arranged, Byron W. Woodson, Sr., was expanding on centuries of black oral history linking Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. In *A President in the Family, Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and Thomas Woodson*, he made a strong circumstantial case that slave Thomas Hemings Woodson (Callender's "President Tom") was in fact fathered by Thomas Jefferson, when he and Sally Hemings were in France. This would make Woodson, Sr., and his African-American family direct descendents of Jefferson. According to Woodson, it was a point of considerable importance and pride to the Woodson family. But, he would be disappointed in 1998 and feel slighted by the press, when DNA tests failed to find a genetic link between the slave Thomas Hemings Woodson and Thomas Jefferson.

Media coverage of the *Nature* DNA article hit major U.S. newspapers November 1, 1998, several days ahead of *Nature's* November 5th article. *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and other major newspapers ran the story on page one. "DNA Study Shows Jefferson Fathered His Slave's Child" headlined the *Los Angeles Times*:

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the fledgling United States, almost certainly fathered a child with a slave mistress at his Monticello plantation, scientists who analyzed genetic material collected from his living descendants have concluded.[47]

The banner on the *Washington Post* also bluntly declared the Jefferson-Hemings mystery had been solved: "President Jefferson fathered child with slave, tests show."

Genetic testing shows that Thomas Jefferson almost certainly fathered a child with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, according to scientists who argue that their results come as close as possible to solving one of history's most enduring and contentious mysteries.[48]

The New York Times' page one story ran with the more accurate headline, "DNA Test Finds Evidence of Jefferson Child by Slave."

DNA tests on the descendants of Thomas Jefferson's family and of Jefferson's young slave, Sally Hemings, offer compelling evidence that the nation's third President fathered at least one of her children, according to an article in the scientific journal *Nature*.[49]

Columnist William Raspberry used the DNA findings to lampoon Special Prosecutor Kenneth Star, who was investigating President Bill Clinton on the Monica Lewinski affair. In a mock interrogation, Raspberry placed Jefferson under the grilling of the prosecutor:

Star: Do you own slaves? Do you know whether or not you own slaves? Perhaps I could refresh your memory with these bills of sale.

Jefferson: Ignorance is preferable to error.

Star: I'll take that as a "yes." Now isn't it a fact that you own a particular slave whose name is Sally Hemings? And isn't it a fact that you have had a longstanding sexual affair with her?

Jefferson: When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary...

Star: For heaven's sake, man, answer the question. Just tell us the truth.[50]

Woodson wrote in his book he was "shocked and surprised by both the reported result and the manner in which the release was unfolding."[51] He had provided DNA for the genetic study and was angry he was not informed of the result before the media went public with the story. He also attacked Joseph J. Ellis' *Nature* editorial, which was quoted widely in the press.

The New York Times printed Ellis' message on its front page:

Our heroes--and especially presidents--are not gods or saints, but flesh and blood humans." This message was outed in spectacular form two days before the congressional election, the results of which were expected to influence President Clinton's ability to survive the Monica Lewinsky scandal ... the president's operatives were pulling out all the stops to save the president's job...[52]

African Americans and their reaction were now a major part of the Jefferson-Hemings story--the opposite treatment they received from James Callender and the 19th-century press. *The Washington Post* ran the story "Mixed Feelings Over Jefferson Affair: Blacks Feel Vindicated by Evidence, Upset That Rumors Were Doubted for So Long."[53] *The New York Times* followed two days later with "DNA Results Confirmed Old News About Jefferson, Blacks Say."[54]

Nearly 200 years earlier, James Callender's story line was racist. Now, the complex racial heritage of America was the dominant theme in the press' coverage. "Like a lot of other African Americans, we've always known that our racial heritage is mixed," said Ms. (Laura S.) Washington, the editor and publisher of T*he Chicago Reporter*, a newsletter about race and government, "The only difference is, it's one of our most famous founding fathers the country is talking about now."[55]

Time magazine reported on the sensitive issue of passing for white in America. It noted the Woodson family identified itself as black but had always believed it was descended from Jefferson. Descendants of Eston Hemings, now genetically linked to the Jefferson family, considered themselves white and had never seen Jefferson as their ancestor. "The story of how the Hemings family diverged onto opposite sides of the color line says much about "passing," a social practice that shakes more than a few family trees and forces one to question the validity of neat racial categories."[56]

There were still disbelievers, in spite of the DNA evidence. As *Nature* pointed out, the genetic study concluded Eston Hemings was fathered by someone in the male line of Jeffersons and could not "completely rule out other explanations of our findings based on illegitimacy in various lines of descent ... But in the absence of historical evidence to support such possibilities, we consider them unlikely."[57] An editorial in *Natural Science* seized on this, and criticized what it considered inaccurate reporting that pointed a finger only at Thomas Jefferson.

As Gary Davis of the Evanston Hospital commented in a letter to Nature:

...Any male ancestor in Thomas Jefferson's line, white or black, could have fathered Eston Hemings. Plantations were inbred communities ... it is possible that Thomas Jefferson's father, grandfather or paternal uncles fathered a male slave whose line later impregnated another slave, in this case Sally Hemings.[58]

Kansas City Star columnist Robert P. Sigman called the *Nature* article a "leap beyond data." The headline "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child" was "not an accurate summation of the story.... And it was factually wrong."[59]

Media Monitor's Reed Irvine and Cliff Kincaid tallied more than 200 news stories on the DNA study and criticized journalists for "numerous articles that believed Jefferson was guilty as charged." They referred to a January 7, 1999, *Nature* article that clarified Thomas Jefferson was one of nine Jeffersons with the distinctive DNA who might have been the father of Eston Hemings.[60]

The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation announced in February 2000 that a committee of Monticello staff concluded there was a "strong likelihood that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had a relationship over time that led to the birth of one, and perhaps all, of the known children of Sally Hemings."[61]

The Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society asked a number of Jefferson experts to take a new look at the DNA evidence. They reported their findings in April 2001: "The thirteen-member Scholars Commission agreed unanimously that the allegation of such a relationship is "by no means proven" and regretted that "public confusion about the 1998 DNA testing and other evidence has misled many people into believing that the issue is closed."[62]

Conclusion

Throughout the history of the alleged Jefferson-Hemings affair, journalists accurately reflected the racial attitudes the issue exposed. The original journalism on the Jefferson-Hemings controversy had its roots in racism and was highly conducive to attack-style reporting. The story was vituperative and centered on the common belief at the time, that whites could be damaged by too close an association with blacks. Coverage of the story, though limited, expanded to humanize blacks in the abolitionist era. The journalism of the period accurately reflected the racial discourse--sentiments of abolitionists versus those critical of rights for the freedmen. The journalism of the 1990s used the prism of Jefferson-Hemings to explore mixed-race heritage that sprang from slavery in America, with strong emphasis on the reaction of African Americans.

The alleged Jefferson-Hemings liaison now rests at an impasse of science and journalism, with enough evidence to report that the master and his slave probably had one, and enough wiggle room to report they probably didn't.

Questions to Ponder

1. Was the Jefferson-Hemings story more a product of early 19th-century racism or of the era's journalism?
2. Discuss the evolution of the way in which Sally Hemings and her children were portrayed throughout the controversy.
3. Did the reporting of the late 1990s reopen an old wound or advance the discussion of race in America?
4. What is the impact of the Jefferson-Hemings story on Thomas Jefferson's legacy?
5. How has DNA been used to help resolve or address other issues in American life?