

# The New York Times

## BOOK REVIEW

### The Master and the Mistress

By ERIC FONER

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Sometime around 1800, an anonymous American artist produced an arresting painting entitled “Virginian Luxuries.” It depicts a slave owner exercising two kinds of power over his human property. On the right, a white man raises his arm to whip a black man’s bare back. On the left, he lasciviously caresses a black woman. The artist’s identification of these “luxuries” with the state that produced four of our first five presidents underscores the contradiction between -ideals and reality in the early Republic.

No one embodied this contradiction more strikingly than Thomas Jefferson. In 1776, when he wrote of mankind’s inalienable right to liberty, Jefferson owned more than 100 slaves. He hated slavery but thought blacks inferior in “body and mind” to whites. If freed, he believed, they should be sent to Africa; otherwise, abolition would result in racial warfare or, even worse, racial “mixture.” Yet in his own lifetime, reports circulated that Jefferson practiced such mixture with his slave -Sally Hemings.

In 1997, Annette Gordon-Reed, who teaches at New York Law School and in the history department of Rutgers University, published “Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy.” Reviewing the evidence, she concluded it was likely that Jefferson had fathered Hemings’s children. But her main argument was that generations of Jefferson scholars had misused historical sources to defend the great man’s reputation. For example, they had dismissed as worthless the recollections of Madison Hemings, Sally Hemings’s son, who described his mother’s relationship with Jefferson to a journalist in 1873, while accepting at face value the denials of Jefferson’s white descendants that such a relationship existed. The book caused a sensation in the sedate world of Jefferson scholarship. Shortly after it appeared, DNA testing established a genetic link between a male Jefferson and Eston Hemings, Madison’s brother. Today, Monticello’s Web site discusses the controversy in a way that leaves the distinct impression of Thomas Jefferson’s paternity.

Gordon-Reed has now turned her attention to an even more ambitious pro-ject. In “The Hemingses of Monticello,” a work based on prodigious research in the voluminous Jefferson papers and other -sources, she traces the experiences of this slave family over three generations. Engrossing and suggestive, it is also repetitive (we are frequently reminded that the law does not necessarily reflect social reality) and filled with unnecessary pronouncements about human nature (e.g., “Youth in females has attracted men in all eras across all cultures”). Readers will find it absorbing, but many will wish it had been a shorter, more focused book.

Gordon-Reed’s account begins with Elizabeth Hemings, born in 1735 as the daughter of an African woman and a white sea captain; she bore at least 12 children, half with an unknown black man, half (including Sally) with her owner, John Wayles, Jefferson’s father-in-law. (This made Sally Hemings the half sister of Jefferson’s wife, Martha Wayles, who died in 1782, after which he never remarried.) The Hemings family went to Monticello as part of Martha’s inheritance. Individual members eventually found their way to Paris, New York, Philadelphia and Richmond, allowing Gordon-Reed to pre-sent a revealing portrait of the varieties of black life in Jefferson’s era.

When she died in 1807 at 72, Elizabeth Hemings left behind 8 living children, more than 30 grandchildren and at least 4 great-grandchildren. The most fascinating parts of Gordon-Reed's book deal not with Sally Hemings herself but with other all but unknown members of her extended family. Initially because they were related to Jefferson's wife and later because of his own connection with Sally Hemings, the family was treated quite differently from other slaves at Monticello. The women worked as house servants, never in the fields, the men as valets, cooks and skilled craftsmen. Jefferson paid some of them wages and allowed a few to live in Charlottesville or Richmond and keep their earnings. Because of their independent incomes, her sons were able to provide Elizabeth Hemings with goods unavailable to most slaves. As Gordon-Reed relates, archaeological excavations have revealed among her possessions pieces of Chinese porcelain, wineglasses and other products of the era's consumer revolution.

Their status as a "caste apart" from the other slaves did not diminish the Hemingses' desire for greater freedom. In 1792, at her own request, Jefferson sold Sally's older sister Mary to Thomas Bell, a local merchant, who lived openly with her and treated their children as his legal family. Three years later, Jefferson allowed their brother Robert to work out an arrangement with a white resident of Richmond to purchase and free him.

Less happy was the fate of Sally's brother James Hemings, who accompanied Jefferson to Paris, where he studied cuisine. During the 1790s, James asked for his freedom and Jefferson agreed, so long as he trained his successor as chef at Monticello. A few years later, James Hemings committed suicide. Gordon-Reed sensitively traces the career of this restless, solitary man, acknowledging that "we simply cannot retrieve" his inner world or why he took his own life. Unfortunately, when it comes to the core of the book, the relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, she is less circumspect.

In 1787, at the age of 14, Sally Hemings accompanied Jefferson's daughter Polly from Virginia to Paris, where Jefferson was serving as American minister. According to Madison Hemings's account, at some point she became Jefferson's "concubine." When Jefferson was about to return to America in 1789, according to Madison, Sally Hemings, pregnant and aware that slavery had no legal standing in France, announced that she was going to remain in Paris. To persuade her to accompany him home, Jefferson agreed to a "treaty" whereby he would free her children when they reached adulthood.

Most scholars are likely to agree with Gordon-Reed's conclusion that Jefferson fathered Hemings's seven children (of whom three died in infancy). But as to the precise nature of their relationship, the historical record is silent. Was it rape, psychological coercion, a sexual bargain or a long-term loving connection? -Gordon-Reed acknowledges that it is almost impossible to probe the feelings of a man and a woman neither of whom left any historical evidence about their relationship. Madison Hemings's use of the words "concubine" and "treaty" hardly suggests a romance. But Gordon-Reed is determined to prove that theirs was a consensual relationship based on love.

Sometimes even the most skilled researcher comes up empty. At that point, the better part of valor may be simply to state that a question is unanswerable. Gordon-Reed's portrait of an enduring romance between Hemings and Jefferson is one possible reading of the limited evidence. Others are equally plausible. -Gordon-Reed, however, refuses to acknowledge this possibility. She sets up a series of straw men and proceeds to demolish them — those who believe that in the context of slavery, love between black and white people was impossible; that black female sexuality was "inherently degraded" and thus Jefferson could not have had genuine feelings for Hemings; that any black woman who consented to sex with a white man during slavery was a "traitor" to her people. She cites no current historians who hold these views, but is adamant in criticizing anyone who, given the vast gap in age (30 years) and power between them, views the Jefferson-Hemings connection as sexual exploitation.

As a black female scholar, Gordon-Reed is undoubtedly more sensitive than many other academics to the subtleties of language regarding race. But to question the likelihood of a long-term romantic attachment between Jefferson and Hemings is hardly to collaborate in what she calls "the erasure of individual black

lives” from history. Gordon-Reed even suggests that “opponents of racism” who emphasize the prevalence of rape in the Old South occupy “common ground” with racists who despise black women, because both see sex with female slaves as “degraded.” This, quite simply, is -outrageous.

After this rather strident discussion, which occupies the best part of four chapters, Gordon-Reed returns to her narrative. She relates how in 1802 the Richmond journalist James Callender named Hemings as Jefferson’s paramour and how throughout his presidency news-papers carried exposés, cartoons and bawdy -poems about his relationship with “Yellow Sally.” Gordon-Reed makes the telling point that while Callender called Hemings a “slut as common as the pavement,” she was hardly promiscuous. She gave birth only at times when Jefferson could have been the father.

Neither Jefferson nor Hemings responded to these attacks. But whatever his precise feelings about the relationship, Jefferson certainly took a special interest in their children. Gordon-Reed notes that while other Hemings offspring were named after relatives, Sally Hemings’s sons bore names significant for Jefferson — Thomas Eston Hemings (after his cousin) and James Madison and William Beverley Hemings (after important -Virginians).

In the end, Jefferson fulfilled the “treaty” he had agreed to in Paris and freed Sally Hemings’s surviving children. He allowed their daughter Harriet and son Beverley (ages 21 and 24) to leave Monticello in 1822. Very light-skinned, they chose to live out their lives as white people. Jefferson’s will freed Madison and Eston Hemings as well as three of their relatives. The will did not mention Sally Hemings, but Jefferson’s daughter allowed her to move to Char-lottesvile, where she lived with her sons as a free person until dying in 1835. For the other slaves at Monticello, Jefferson’s death in 1826 was a catastrophe. To settle his enormous debts, his estate, including well over 100 slaves, was auctioned, destroying the families he had long tried to keep intact.

“The Hemingses of Monticello” ends at this point. Only in an earlier aside do we learn that Madison Hemings’s sons fought in the Union Army during the Civil War. One was among the 13,000 soldiers who perished at the infamous Andersonville prison camp in Georgia. I am glad to hear that Gordon-Reed is at work on a second volume tracing the further history of this remarkable family.

**Eric Foner is the DeWitt Clinton professor of history at Columbia University** and the editor of “Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World,” which has just been published.

