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DNA PROVES JEFFERSON'S PATERNITY / PRESIDENT, SALLY HEMINGS HAD AT LEAST ONE CHILD.

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After nearly two centuries of controversy, **DNA** evidence has confirmed that Thomas Jefferson, the revered third president of the United States, fathered at least one child by his slave-mistress, Sally Hemings.

Genetic tests of 14 male descendants of the **Jefferson** and **Hemings** families "seem to seal the case" that **Jefferson** was the father of **Hemings'** youngest son, Eston, according to a report to be published in this week's edition of the journal *Nature*.

Circumstantial evidence also points to the red-haired Virginia gentleman as the probable sire of Hemings' four or five other children, who were born over a span of 18 years, but positive genetic proof is lacking.

"For almost 200 years, there has been a dispute whether **Jefferson** and **Hemings** had a sexual relationship. This is now settled," Eric Lander, a leading **DNA** expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said in a telephone interview. "Jefferson clearly had a long-standing sexual relationship with Hemings."

The *Nature* report inevitably evokes parallels with President Clinton's affair with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky, among them the youth and subordinate positions of the women involved, and the roles of **DNA** and journalism in the scandals.

"From the day the story broke in a Richmond newspaper in 1802, 'Tom and Sally' has become the longest-running miniseries in American history," Lander and Jefferson scholar Joseph Ellis of Mount Holyoke College wrote in an essay titled "Founding Father" in *Nature*.

Of course, there are important distinctions. Jefferson's wife, Martha, died in 1782, seven years before Hemings first became pregnant at the age of 16, in Paris. Jefferson, then 45, was the U.S. ambassador there, and she was a maid for his 10-year-old daughter, Mary.

As Lander and Ellis pointed out, "There is a world of difference between a slave and master at the close of the 18th century, and a White House intern and a married man at the end of the 20th."

Sexual relations between white plantation owners and their slaves were commonplace in Jefferson's era, and the practice, while not openly endorsed, was quietly accepted as a natural aspect of life in the antebellum South. In fact, **Hemings** herself was the daughter of **Jefferson's** father-in-law, John Wayles, and thus his wife Martha's half-sister. She was one of 187 slaves Jefferson inherited from his and his wife's families. Three of her four grandparents were white.

Jefferson's grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, described Sally as "light-colored and decidedly good-looking," according to Lucia Stanton of the Monticello Research Department, an organization devoted to Jefferson lore. The slave Isaac Jefferson remembered her as "mighty near white . . . very handsome, long straight hair down her back," Stanton said.

That the author of the Declaration of Independence was a slave-holder and opponent of emancipation has long shadowed his reputation as one of America's founding fathers. There has also been a split between most, if not all, black and white historians on the truth of the **Jefferson-Hemings** connection.

African American writers generally have supported claims by **Hemings'** descendants of **Jefferson's** paternity. In her 1997 book, Thomas **Jefferson** and Sally **Hemings**: An American Controversy, Annette Gordon-Reed, an African American professor at the New York School of Law, made the case that the two were sexually involved.

"The notion of interracial children and sex is much more alive in black families than in white," Gordon-Reed said. "I think this will settle it for most people."

Until now, however, most white scholars considered the case for such a relationship "unpersuasive," Stanton said. One of the rare exceptions was the late Fawn Brodie, who wrote a major biography of Jefferson in 1974 in which she contended that he did father Hemings' children, reviving the controversy for a new generation of readers.

Ironically, the scholar who rejected the Hemings story most recently was Ellis, the Mount Holyoke historian, who won the National Book Award last year for his study *The American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*.

In an interview with a book reviewer in April, Ellis said the chance that the sexual relationship was true was "remote. . . . Based on six years studying Jefferson, I believe his deepest sensual urges were directed at buildings rather than women."

Ellis did not return calls asking why he changed his mind.

According to Ellis, Jefferson's daughter, Martha Randolph, and granddaughter, Ellen Randolph, repudiated the notion that the President dallied with a slave. Ellen said it was "morally impossible." Instead, the women suggested that either Samuel or Peter Carr, Jefferson's nephews, was the father. That would explain their "striking physical resemblance" to the President, Ellis wrote.

The resemblance was one of several pieces of circumstantial evidence pointing to **Jefferson's** possible paternity. In addition, **Hemings'** fourth child, Madison, declared late in life that his mother identified Jefferson as the father of all her children. And while it may have been coincidence, scholars have noted that Jefferson was in residence at Monticello, his Virginia mansion, each time Hemings conceived.

The genetic evidence reported in *Nature* was developed by Eugene Foster, a retired University of Virginia pathologist, who collected blood samples from 19 men and had them analyzed by a team of seven British and Dutch scientists at Oxford University in England.

Five of the samples were from living, male-line descendants of two sons of Jefferson's paternal uncle, Field Jefferson. Five came from relatives of two sons of Thomas Woodson, Hemings' first child, who took the name of his later slave-owner. One came from a descendant of Eston **Hemings Jefferson, Hemings'** last son, who adopted the President's name. Three were drawn from descendants of three sons of John Carr, grandfather of Jefferson's nephews,

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Samuel and Peter Carr. Five other samples were "controls," taken from Virginia families unrelated to **Jefferson** or **Hemings**, for comparison purposes.

In each sample, the scientists analyzed the Y-chromosome, a piece of **DNA** that is passed from father to son unchanged, except for an occasional mutation.

"**DNA** analysis of the Y-chromosome can reveal whether or not individuals are likely to be male-line relatives," the Foster team reported. "No Y-chromosome data were available from male-line descendants of President Thomas Jefferson because he had no surviving sons."

In their tests, the scientists discovered a rare variant in the Y-chromosome of the descendants of Field Jefferson, the president's uncle. The variant, which has never been observed outside the Jefferson family, also appeared in Eston's relatives, but not in the Carr brothers' progeny. The Woodson group also had a different variant.

"The simplest and most probable explanations for our molecular findings are that Thomas Jefferson, rather than one of the Carr brothers, was the father of Eston **Hemings Jefferson**," the Foster team declared.

"The probability of such a match arising by chance is low - safely less than 1 percent," Lander and Ellis wrote. "Together with the circumstantial evidence, it seems to seal the case that **Jefferson** was Eston **Hemings'** father."

Ironically, most past speculation has focused on Thomas Woodson - not Eston - as the **Hemings** child most likely to be **Jefferson's** son. The genetic evidence neither supports nor rules out this possibility, Lander said.

Thomas was born in 1790, shortly after **Jefferson** and **Hemings** returned from Paris. Eston was born 18 years later, six years after the Richmond newspaper first published the accusation of presidential philandering in 1802.

"The jury remains out with respect to Sally's other children, but the burden of proof has clearly shifted," Lander said. "The relationship must have preceded 1802."

Noting the similarities between Jefferson and Clinton, Lander wrote: "Now, with impeccable timing, Jefferson reappears to remind us of a truth that should be self-evident. Our heroes, and especially presidents, are not gods or saints, but flesh-and-blood humans, with all the frailties and imperfections that this entails."

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The **DNA** evidence is in: President Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one child by his slave mistress Sally Hemings. (A01)