

## **Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings and the Question of Equality in the United States**

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### **Abstract**

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*This article tells the truth about Thomas Jefferson; his complicated legacy and relationship with his slave Sally Hemings and how the third President of the United States felt about equal rights and freedom rights, particularly as these issues related to black people. The truth will certainly change how people think about how the revolutionary founding father viewed Black American slavery. It is also appropriate to acknowledge that something intimate happened between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, especially as this contact profoundly affected her status at Jefferson's Monticello plantation, in Virginia; and the children she would bear with Jefferson. Indeed, even with his intuitive intelligence, Jefferson put politics ahead of the humanity of his slaves at Monticello. This is to say that Jefferson wanted to keep the issue of equality out of politics. Furthermore, Jefferson wasn't particularly involved in the personal lives and activities of his mulatto children; nor did he deftly address the issue of equality.*

*Jefferson's apparent indifference to his slaves, perhaps, proved that he was nothing more than a racist with scathing views of race, which sparked considerable angst and animosity among his slaves. This point must not be understated. Jefferson also failed to recognize the dignity and humaneness of black people, in general; nor did he care about interacting or knowing his slaves on a deeper level. So was Jefferson guilty of unintentional negligence? Or was he predisposed to be a white supremacist? To this end, the issue of racial equality is critically addressed in this article, because racial inequality hasn't diminished with time. Moreover, the failure to discuss his relationship with Sally Hemings and the issue of equality for black people at the inception of the United States made Jefferson a hypocrite – that is, by our standards today.*

*The perplexing story of Jefferson and Hemings highlights the historical injustices of African Americans, especially as they have had to face racism, marginalization, discrimination, lynching, disenfranchisement, and death, as well as systematic oppression. It would seem to be no exaggeration to say that Jefferson was unfair in the treatment of his slaves. But, perhaps, Sally Hemings reminded Jefferson of the specialness and humanity of people of color. Hemings certainly survived against all odds. The larger and more important question is this: Did Hemings accept the situation with Thomas Jefferson, which was foisted on her as his slave? And did Hemings love Jefferson, her people, and her children from their illicit relationship? In a sense, this early political history of love and hate is sometimes forgotten, because of the "mutability of the past." Therefore, more research should be given to this topic. In the final analysis, the issue of racial equality in the United States should be given the attention it truly deserves.*

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### Introduction: Notes on the Issue of Racial Equality

Imagine if we were transported back in time to the beginning or founding of our nation, and you had the opportunity to ask Thomas Jefferson exactly what he meant by *equality* and the specific words that he wrote in the *Declaration of Independence* – that all men were created equal – given that Jefferson was a slave owner, and reportedly “had six children by his mulatto mistress, Sally Hemings, who was his wife’s half-sister.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it turns out that, for many years while he lived, the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson carried on an illicit affair with his black slave, Sally Hemings, as recent genetic DNA tests were consistent with descendants of Eston Hemings, their son, who was born on May 21, 1808. The relationship between Jefferson and Hemings affirms what legal scholar and political historian and Harvard Professor Annette Gordon-Reed has so insightfully written about in her ground-breaking book, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*. For example, Gordon-Reed cogently writes:

Significantly, biographies and articles that purport to debunk the Jefferson-Hemings liaison do not even tell readers the essential facts of the lives of Sally Hemings and her children that give rise to evidence that the story might be true. In some instances, when the writers do try to recount the facts, they make major errors. Thus, the normal and necessary process of accumulating and weighing evidence largely has been circumvented. The evidence must [therefore] be considered as a whole before a realistic and fair assessment of the possible truth of this story can be made.<sup>2</sup>

Infuriated, perhaps, by the interracial liaison and even the knowledge, some of Jefferson’s white descendants have tried to vehemently deny this relationship, even with the conclusive DNA evidence. But according to Gordon-Reed, “this is a rescue mission, not a search for historical truth, and they [some white descendants] don’t care whose reputation gets hurt in the process – as long as it’s not Thomas Jefferson’s.”<sup>3</sup> Even more important, Afrocentric scholars have verbally attacked Jefferson for his hypocrisy, as he owned many black slaves. Professor of history Brenda E. Stevenson tells us that “Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the declaration of Independence, owned more than 100 slaves at the time of the Revolution and more than 200 at his death in 1826, most of whom were sold [at auction] to pay his debts.”<sup>4</sup> So what does this say about Jefferson and his notion of *equality*? No one should be proud of Jefferson’s position on *chattel slavery*, as he often talked about the inviolable dignity of human beings, save blacks in bondage. Jefferson, of course, felt that black people were inferior, even as he advocated and persuasively wrote about liberty, justice, freedom and the equality of *all* men. Further, there was no excuse for Jefferson’s deeply-seated, staunch racist beliefs, as he carried on with his black mistress or slave, Sally Hemings, “mother to his [mulatto] children,” and “lover of more than thirty years.”<sup>5</sup> Historian Jon Meacham, in his Pulitzer Prize winning biography, *Thomas Jefferson: the Art of Power*, put it this way:

The emotional content of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship is a mystery. He may have loved her, and she him. It could have been, as some have argued, coercive, institutionalized rape. She might have just been doing what she had to do to survive an evil [slave] system, accepting sexual duty as an element of her enslavement and using what leverage she had to improve the lot of her children. Or each of these things may have been true at different times.<sup>6</sup>

So was Jefferson aware even of the truth and concept of *equality*? Indeed, his inability to do the right thing for his slaves showed that he was not necessarily supportive of justice and *equality* for black people in the culture at large at that time. And what about the terrible injustices he reaped upon black men and women at his Monticello plantation? To be sure, Jefferson was perhaps clueless about the irreparable harm he caused his black slaves. In essence, Jefferson’s “behavior [was] shaped in accordance with practical circumstances and [personal] goals rather than ideological objectives.”<sup>7</sup> In a nutshell, Jefferson’s equivocal position on slavery and *equality* seemed to reflect his abject hypocrisy on both the issues of *slavery* and *equality*. Moreover, did Jefferson even care about the human rights and dignity of black people? Probably not. Human rights, of course, are those “rights that belong to an individual as a consequence of being human.”<sup>8</sup> No doubt, white supremacists (at that time) believed that black people were sub-human, who deserved to be enslaved and exploited. Therefore, we must ask: Was Sally Hemings exploited by Jefferson? Or was she treated equally? Perhaps not. After all, she had to deal with Jefferson’s demands as a slave master. Presumably, Sally Hemings’ quiet protestations were barely acknowledged by Thomas Jefferson.

This is important to understand because as professors Eric S. Lander and Joseph J. Ellis have written:

Nothing in the vast historical literature, sheds any light on the character of the relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings. 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? These questions are open to endless interpretation, but in a broader sense, the findings give blacks and whites alike an opportunity to confront a largely secret, shared history.<sup>9</sup>

What is significant is the fact that despite sometimes espousing a free, aspirational world, where men (and later women) could be treated with respect in terms of the brotherhood of mankind, *black slaves* were not included in this so-called enlightened discussion – that is, in terms of all people beings truly (created) equal. Additionally, Jefferson never spoke out against social injustices and *racial inequality* against black people, so it became obvious that he was selling the notion that *everything* he did toward his slaves was proper and righteous. But nothing could have been further from the truth. Jefferson mostly deflected questions about Sally Hemings; but he was obsessed with her and particularly agitated when she refused to return with him to Monticello when he served as U.S. minister or ambassador to France. So Jefferson missed cues that Sally Hemings was pregnant with his child, and extremely unhappy, particularly with all the strange political nuances and talk about freedom she heard in Paris, France. Indeed, Hemings grew bolder in expressing her displeasure with being his (Jefferson's) slave. After all, she tried to leave him and stay in France as a free woman. According to Meacham, "Jefferson was unaccustomed to encountering resistance to his absolute will at all, much less from a slave."<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Jefferson was more concerned with how he could *cajole* and *manipulate* Sally Hemings. But Meacham tells us that:

She [Hemings], not he [Jefferson], was in control. It must have seemed surreal, unthinkable, even absurd. For the first time in his life, perhaps, Jefferson was truly in a position of weakness at a moment that mattered to him. So he began making concessions to convince Sally Hemings to come home to Virginia.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, Sally Hemings was emotionally connected to the man (Jefferson). But for Hemings, it was also a matter of dignity. Nevertheless, she eventually acceded to Jefferson's wishes, because she was promised her freedom, along with the children she would bear with Jefferson: "Beverly, Harriet, Madison... and Eston – three sons and one daughter,"<sup>12</sup> and two others who died in childbirth. Still it is unfathomable that Hemings would return to Monticello, to be Jefferson's slave again, even with "extraordinary privileges" solemnly "pledged to her;"<sup>13</sup> but she did. Was it because she suffered from some kind of *Stockholm Syndrome*? Or was there sincere love and passion between Jefferson and Hemings? Of course, Sally Hemings was "bound by love for her suffering [black] people – and Jefferson – but [she was] denied acceptance by Jefferson's family."<sup>14</sup> More importantly, how exactly can *anyone* get used to being a slave? It is not enough to just point at the time and circumstances – that is, to think that human bondage (of any kind) was/is acceptable. Perhaps Jefferson didn't give it a second thought. But there is a larger issue at hand in regards to *equality*. Further, the "Jefferson-Hemings affair casts new light on the president's tortured position on [black] slavery and his public stand against racial mixing – echoing the country's unresolved issues of race relations and racial identity,"<sup>15</sup> particularly as it concerned the *equality* of his black slaves. It is worth noting that black slavery has always been a touchy and controversial issue in American culture as it has polarized our country along racial lines. So was it easy for Jefferson to ignore the pain and suffering of his own slaves?

If *anyone* should have repudiated slavery and manumitted all of his slaves, it should have been Thomas Jefferson. But this was not to be. According to historian Willard Sterne Randall, Thomas Jefferson "evidently had decided that the time was not ripe to openly defy the slave system all around him and reopen the debate over emancipation at a time when the new government was so unstable."<sup>16</sup> But this assumption on the part of Randall is only an excuse. And why didn't he acknowledge his relationship with Sally Hemings? Jefferson could have escaped from *politics* entirely – to be exclusively with Hemings. But he had presidential aspirations. And he wouldn't let *anyone* stand in his way from becoming President of the United States, as he struggled to keep things together at Monticello – and his hold on Sally Hemings, which was (perhaps) at times cringe worthy. And even before he died in 1826, Jefferson was hesitant to put "the name Sally Hemings in his will," as "it would have exposed a truth for which, as far as he knew, white America would never forgive him."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it should have been clear to Jefferson that serious changes needed to be made at Monticello in regards to the enslavement of other human beings. After all, Jefferson was supposedly "a slave-holder who opposed slavery."<sup>18</sup>

This nagging inconsistency and concern about Jefferson was perhaps infuriating for Sally Hemings and exasperating for others. Beyond that, Thomas Jefferson, the revered third American President, and architect of our national creed, and some of his fellow Founding Fathers believed in the ideas and principles of freedom, citizenship, and equality. But *equality* for whom? According to Professor Kathleen DuVal of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Americans came to define *equality* during the 1790s and earlier 1800s, and even “citizenship as the right of all white men, non-white men and [later] all women [who initially] were explicitly excluded.”<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, *equality* and *citizenship* meant different things to different people during Thomas Jefferson’s life time.

### The Inception of American Equality and Equal Rights

Jefferson was also all about securing “the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,”<sup>20</sup> but not when it came to giving particular human rights and freedom rights to black slaves. For Jefferson, *equality* and other “such ambiguities and unacknowledged truths were part of life.”<sup>21</sup> Or so he (Jefferson) thought. So what then is *equality*? Generally, *equality* is “an ideal of uniformity in treatment or status by those in a position to affect either.”<sup>22</sup> So in a diverse democracy, this sentiment is always a good thing. Professor Barry R. Gross also tells us that “there are two ways to write about *equality*. One may think long and hard about the many different often incompatible meanings of equality, the desirability of achieving human equalities in one form or other, and the impediments to that achievement. Or one may simply not think about it at all.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, should we even mention the latter of these two ways of addressing *equality*? And why is *equality* really necessary? Furthermore, *equality* might be interpreted to mean the absolute state of treating human beings the same and equal in all aspects of life in a respective society; however, it must be stated again that the *equality* Jefferson and other American Framers referred to was not initially considered for *everyone*. Afrocentrist Professor Molefi Kete Asante of Temple University writes in his provocative book, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero: “George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were slave owners, inter alia, who did not believe in the equality of African [Americans];”*<sup>24</sup> and this fact cannot be ignored or omitted from history. In other words, Jefferson was a *racialist* and *non-egalitarian*, who dismissed or ignored the issue of *equality* entirely. Of course, this is a descriptive fact about Thomas Jefferson. So can acknowledging the truth about Jefferson be excused (by us today) on the grounds of misinterpretation, or different values and moral standards? Professor Asante goes on to point out that, “one can claim ignorance, one can argue that their good points outweigh their bad points, and so on; but the fact is that [our Founding Fathers] believed in the inferiority of African [Americans].”<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, we must ask the question: Should all American citizens today “be introduced to this factual information in order to make proper assessment and judgments” about the past?<sup>26</sup> Indeed, should we not mention, in discussing *equality*, the “racist heritage of the founding fathers?”<sup>27</sup> According to noted documentary filmmaker, Ken Burns, “we-the-people” must come to terms (if we are to be true to ourselves) with the human frailties and ambiguities of our past and elected leaders and representatives. That is, we should not hide the truth from Americans, or try to *sugar-coat* the hypocrisy of our founding heroes.<sup>28</sup> Burns goes on to note that: “We, as Americans, want-need-an honest, complicated past that is unafraid of controversy and tragedy, but are equally drawn to those stories that suggest an abiding faith in the human spirit and especially the unique role this extraordinary country seems to have in the positive progress of mankind.”<sup>29</sup> We must also be cognizant that black “slavery, not only induced Americans to embrace liberty ardently but also nourished the American notion of democracy, while *racism* [my emphasis] encouraged equality among whites.”<sup>30</sup> Toward this end, Journalist Benjamin Schwarz states that “the equality and unity of white Americans of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, [cultures] and classes were built largely on a common hatred and fear of black Americans.”<sup>31</sup>

Essentially, this means that black slaves were thought of as less than human, barbarous, and savages to earlier whites in America, so they were summarily denied those constitutional rights guaranteed and enjoyed by most whites. Even the idea that black people are human beings today is a relatively recent phenomenon. Furthermore, “under [black American] slavery, African-Americans had no power to hold their white [slave] masters accountable. [And] although [black] slaves were usually treated as valuable property, some [white] slave masters abused their power,”<sup>32</sup> by having their slaves severely beaten, if they would run away. Thomas Jefferson was even guilty of this terrible transgression, especially with his black slaves that tried to escape to freedom by running away.

Jefferson's biographer, William Cohen, in a titillating and scathing 1969 article, entitled "*Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery*," writes:

In early September 1805, James Hubbard, a stout Negro [black man] who worked in the [Monticello] plantation nail factory, ran away, but was soon apprehended and returned. About five years later he escaped again. A year passed before Jefferson learned that Hubbard was living in the area of Lexington and dispatched Isham Chisolm to retrieve the bondsman. It was too late, however; Hubbard had departed only a few days earlier for parts unknown. When Chisolm returned empty-handed, Jefferson offered him a bonus of twenty five dollars to go after the man a second time. This time Hubbard was caught and brought back in irons, and Jefferson reported: "I had him *severely* flogged in the presence of his old companions...." He then added that he was convinced that Hubbard "will never again serve any man as a slave, the moment he is out of jail and his irons off he will be off himself." Before Jefferson could implement plans to have him sold out of the state, Hubbard disappeared again.<sup>33</sup>

This extended quote in Cohen's article is important and necessary, because contrary to popular beliefs, African Americans or black people were not particularly happy, or grateful to be slaves –that is, to be in miserable bondage – even in forced servitude for our third President, Thomas Jefferson. In fact, such a notion is absolutely absurd, because the historical record does not support this inconceivable view. Therefore, we must ask this question: Should Jefferson be vilified in the pantheon of American heroes for his role as a slave owner, or viewed as a hypocrite for being a particularly aggressive racist?<sup>34</sup> As mentioned, Jefferson is known for writing eloquently about justice, liberty and the equality of men, but such glorious words were reserved, as mentioned, for *only* white, male citizens at that time. Even more important, Jefferson's ideas and words today, especially about the so-called inferiority of black people, in his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* should be considered "blatant, scientific racism."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Jefferson proposed at the 1776 Virginia legislature "new restrictions and penalties applying to free Negroes and to 'miscegenation' involving white women."<sup>36</sup> Yet, he never mentions his illicit affair with Sally Hemings in his writings. Jefferson, of course, was full of terrible contradictions, because he was proposing such harsh penalties and measures for black people, but not for himself. To say the least, it is sad and ironic, because "the entire body of Jefferson's writings show that he never seriously considered the possibility of any form of racial coexistence on the basis of equality, and that, from at least 1778 until his death, he saw colonization as the only alternative to slavery."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the many alternatives to slavery suggested by Thomas Jefferson never materialized. The bottom line is: Jefferson and most of his contemporaries "talked the talk, [but] most of them never got around to walking the walk."<sup>38</sup> Although the Founding Fathers aspired to the highest ideals and principles of *equality* and freedom in forming a national creed for our country, they failed – in many ways – to live up to those standards. As Burns has written:

Most other societies have seen themselves as an end unto themselves. We Americans still quest, relentlessly. We see our growth as a country central to its survival. We are saying to all who would listen that we are willing to learn. And we have taken the narrow phrase of Jefferson's that all men were created equal – that is to say, all white men of property – and [expanded] it to include blacks and other minorities, women, handicapped people, gays, etc. Our genius as a people has been in continually enlarging the ideas we have inherited from those giants who went before us.<sup>39</sup>

Equally important, in such a thoroughly diverse culture and ethnic society such as ours, the ideal of *equality* is no longer an *elusive* concept. Which is to say that all Americans should be able to equally benefit from the riches of our democratic society – not just a privileged few. This notion, of course, supports a *real* "majoritarian model" of democracy. Furthermore, we must recognize that the U.S. Constitution is a work in progress, because we can change it through the amendment process. Essentially, "the Constitution as it now stands is the work not just of Founding Fathers but of many kinds of people, over many generations. Both abolitionists and feminists – overlapping categories in the nineteenth century – [which] played their part in bringing the Constitution into the shape in which we have it today."<sup>40</sup> Keep in mind that if the Constitution was not a *dynamic* political document that we can adapt for the times, perhaps black people would still be in some type of slavery, like during the times of Jefferson and Reconstruction. Fortunately, the Thirteenth Amendment (after the Civil War) finally abolished black American slavery. Sadly, this is a part of our *ugly* history that we should *never* be proud of; but nor should we forget (through some kind of *mutability*) that such a past did indeed exist in our country – the United States of America.

Nor should we dismiss the fact that our Constitution as originally written, considered or counted blacks as only three-fifths (a person) of the free population, solely for White Southerners could gain more representation in the new Congress or the New Government. To be sure, white male landowners were also thinking about their bottom lines in terms of spending money on taxes. In other words, they wanted to save on taxes by reporting their slaves as less than a whole person. Professor of history Jack N. Rakove put it this way:

The three-fifths clause, then was neither a co-efficient of racial hierarchy nor a portent of the racist thinking of the next century. It was rather the closest approximation in the constitution to the principle of one person, one vote – even if in its origins it was only a formula for apportioning representation *among*, as opposed to *within*, states, and even if it violated the principle of equality by over-valuing the suffrage of the free male population of the slave states.<sup>41</sup>

For Thomas Jefferson, the three fifths clause was a *prosaic* issue, because he believed that the human traits of whites were superior. Indeed, Jefferson's racist thinking proved *intractable* and unyielding. According to journalist Britni Danielle, "Despite fathering Hemings' children, Jefferson argued against race mixing because black people were "inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind."<sup>42</sup> This attitude raises concerns that Jefferson was nothing but a white supremacist. Or was he? More important, perhaps, is the fact as far as his slaves were concerned, Jefferson had a "plantation mentality," as he orchestrated what was happening at Monticello – good or bad. Invariably, "for four decades, Jefferson kept meticulous records of every dollar he spent and the activities of the [black] people he held as slaves – the fee for hiring a midwife to birth an enslaved woman's child, the cost of sending someone on an errand. But Jefferson rarely wrote of Hemings, possibly in an attempt to cloak her role in his life."<sup>43</sup> In this respect, historians and scholars have been more than a little mystified about Jefferson's position about *racial equality*, given that he argued against the idea of slavery, in principle. But in reality, Jefferson was fallible, and no different from the other white slave masters of the time. Never mind that he didn't even want to give the appearance of *fairness* to all of his slaves. Not surprisingly, Jefferson was more concerned about his own self-worth more than *anything* else, as can be ascertain from what has already been written. Having said all this, we must ask if Jefferson was totally accepting and tolerant of black people. Probably not. Moreover, was Sally Hemings an embarrassment to him?

### **Racism and Discrimination after Jefferson**

It should be pointed out here that "the Thirteenth Amendment" as mentioned [which prohibited or barred slavery], "like the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of the *Equal Protection of the Law*, [which laid] dormant, [offered] no effective protection against racial discrimination,"<sup>44</sup> as was the case even during the times of Jefferson. Hence, the whole concept of *inequality* took hold in the minds, perhaps, of white male land-owners, and white supremacists, particularly in their misguided and racist beliefs about black people. Indeed, these white Americans didn't care even about the impact of *racism*. So we can perceive that the intractable problem of providing racial equality has always existed in America, because of white supremacy and racial discrimination. Later, unfortunately, and even more important, the formulation of certain ingrained "political principles have not been able to make black and white Americans truly one people [as we] cannot wash away the color-line which remains the fundamental and most obdurate problem of American life."<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, the very foundation of our history and nation was founded upon the ideologies of racism, prejudice, inequality, and discrimination. Or in essence, white supremacy. Black people lived under the worst of circumstances, because Jefferson and those of his *ilk* had the upper-hand with a force of arms. Further, Thomas Jefferson, and others with a racist philosophy, built on the ideas of racial "separateness," allowed them to justify their poor treatment of black people, or their slaves, despite words to the contrary. Indeed, why didn't Jefferson and other slave-owners move forward with something like the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment, which only happened in 1865 after the Civil War? To his credit, Jefferson's subconscious mind, perhaps, never stopped churning in regards to the *racial equality* issue and superficial notions about what he should have done about his black slaves. Again, freeing his slaves immediately would have been the logical and right thing to do. Manumission, however, was not necessarily on Jefferson's mind; but this was no excuse. Furthermore, Jefferson didn't have a clear idea about *equality* for black people, nor was he committed to making things more equitable going forward for his slaves. Therefore, the slaves at Monticello didn't have an eye toward a promising future. But the indefatigable spirit of his black slaves, in general, couldn't be defeated, as they found a way to survive. Furthermore, it is not an understatement to say that Jefferson's disingenuous approach to *racial equality* amounted to a *lie*.

According to Joseph Ellis, in his “stirring and *elegiac* biography,” *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, “he [Jefferson] was living a lie.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps Jefferson lost all perspective when he tried to assert dominance over Sally Hemings and all of his black slaves at Monticello. And maintaining his slaves was unbecoming for a man of his stature. More than anything, black slaves only wanted to live a better life; but it was a nightmare for many of them, a sort of *purgatory* on earth. Of course, there were very specific restrictions for people of color; and the political voices of his black slaves at Monticello were mostly silent. This kind of unfair treatment was unacceptable under *any* circumstances. And Jefferson never enjoyed the high ground on the issues of *slavery* and *equality*. Finally, the bloodshed and human misery of black slaves wasn’t something to laugh at, or dismiss. Eventually, and when it was all said and done, “Prohibiting racial discrimination became the principal strategy of the American legal system for achieving *equality* for blacks... and yet, for purely historical reasons, the development of those laws would be unimaginable apart from the struggle of blacks for equality in America.”

<sup>47</sup> As O’Brien reminds us:

Modern America is, and has been for more than a quarter of a century, a post-racist society, juridically and institutionally, and in the ethos of all its establishment: political, social, financial, academic, [and scientifically]....<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusions

There is no denying that the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings occurred. It was not an *aberration*, or some idle speculation. As far as Sally Hemings was concerned, the opportunistic Jefferson kept secrets from her, and withheld personal information about their relationship to the nation that might have negatively affected his reputation, especially if their affair got out to the wider public at that time. Jefferson, nonetheless, got more than he bargained for with Sally Hemings. She remained defiant even as she was vulnerable and succumbed to Jefferson’s desires. Of course, it is probably hard to process the intensity of feelings Hemings had for the great man. Was she then, flattered by Jefferson’s attention? Perhaps. Hemings’ itinerant childhood in Paris, where she learned how to read and write both French and English, and where she served Thomas Jefferson as the United States ambassador (or U.S. minister from 1785-1789) to France, perhaps, made her an easy sexual target, because of her budding young womanhood. And Hemings was understandably wary of Jefferson’s eventual sexual entreaties, particularly during those trying times for her. But Hemings always tried to make the best of things, resigning herself to such a new, frustrating life and the circumstances that she found herself in. From her mother, Sally Hemings had learned that she was the half-sister of Jefferson’s dead wife Martha Wayles; so she was a distant relative, and closely interlinked with Thomas Jefferson’s family. Therefore, was Sally Hemings submissive in their relationship? Was she even flirtatious around Ambassador Jefferson, or a willing participant in her sexual seduction? Probably not. In the end, Hemings learned how to adapt to Jefferson’s overtures and promises, even as she learned about his racist beliefs about black people. So was she treated the way she wanted to be treated – as an equal? Probably not.

In a probing movie about the relationship between Jefferson (played by Sam Neill) and Hemings (played by Carmen Ejogo), called *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*, later entitled *Sally Hemings: An American Love Story*, the idea that Jefferson supported *equality*, even for Sally Hemings was totally missing, or glossed over from this controversial film. Indeed, how can *anyone* understand Jefferson’s apprehensive racist thinking and trepidations toward Sally Hemings? Journalist Britni Danielle put it this way:

Romanticizing Hemings and Jefferson’s so-called relationship minimizes the deadly imbalance of power that black people suffered under before the Civil War. It also obscures our collective history as a nation that moved from being built on the blood, bones and backs of enslaved African Americans and indigenous people, to being the imperfect, hopeful and yet still unequal country we are today.<sup>49</sup>

When it is all said and done, the controversy of Jefferson and Hemings’ relationship isn’t going away, despite what others think to the contrary; and scholars and historians will continue to dissect and keep this issue in front of the public. Finally, Thomas Jefferson did not take a stand or fight against his “slave-master” mentality. This is to say that Jefferson had an obligation to rid America of slavery; but he never took *any* definitive actions to do so. In this regard, Jefferson failed miserably. But whether he did *anything* toward real *equality* is still debatable today. Unfortunately, the *erstwhile* life of Thomas Jefferson was also about the so-called inherited deficiencies he thought about black people, which was farcical in itself. And for some reason, Jefferson did not have the skills to intuitively make the right decision toward the humans he enslaved.

In essence, Jefferson did not believe in *racial equality*, because he thought that people of color (or black slaves, who were human beings like himself) were only suited for *servitude*. Most regrettably, and during Jefferson's lifetime, black slaves were never on an equal footing with white Americans. Hence, it should come as little surprise about how Jefferson felt about *equality*. In so many words, we cannot ignore Thomas Jefferson's blatant hypocrisy, because he wanted his cake, and to eat it too – so to speak – that is, he wanted two separate American people with white Americans always on top, and blacks subservient. This raises concerns that Jefferson didn't really care about the rights of black slaves, as he probably thought that it was a non-issue for him. So was Jefferson correct in his understanding of what was really going on with his own black slaves, like with Sally Hemings? Jefferson made huge contributions in forming our great nation; however, he certainly had different, *separatist* ideas about *race*. He also valued consistency, control, and order more than anything else in his life, even if it meant downplaying *equality*.

Although much has changed since the days of Jefferson and Hemings, our nation is still struggling with the issues of *inequality* and *equality* for black people. Even today, in the twenty-first century, the issue of *racial equality* is hard to achieve, mostly because white supremacists don't want people to believe that it is actually a *real* problem. Jefferson, unfortunately, preferred to avoid the pertinent facts about the humanity of his slaves, rather than face the truth; whereas Sally Hemings was particularly unrelenting in standing for something in terms of fighting for *racial equality* and against black slavery. And according to Harvard Professor Annette Gordon-Reed, "Sally Hemings helped shape her [own] life and the lives of her children, who got an almost 50-year head start on emancipation, escaping the system that had engulfed their ancestors and millions of others. [And] whatever we may feel about it today, this was important to her."<sup>50</sup> In the final analysis, *equality* is "the founding creed of U.S. society, but equality among all the races and between [ethnic groups] has proved easier to legislate than to achieve in practice."<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, we are still living in a society that tolerates *inequality* and discrimination against black people, and others. And the degradation and marginalization continues (today) throughout the United States. But the real issue is whether we can truly come together as a nation. Or will we be mired in racial conflict over *equality* forever? Or perhaps this question will remain unanswered? All the same, we haven't resolved the issue of *racial equality* in the United States, and our past – that is, American Slavery – the *black holocaust*.

## Notes

1. Kathleen T. Hill and Gerald N. Hill. *Real Life Dictionary of American Politics: What They're Saying and What It Really Means* (Los Angeles: General Publishing Group, 1994), p. 356. For whatever reasons, Jefferson gave Sally Hemings his keen attention, and she became a big part of his life, much to the chagrin of some of his family members.
2. Annette Gordon-Reed. *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. xv. Historian Willard Sterne Randall, for example, desperately tries to exonerate Jefferson and debunk the relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, without providing any evidence to support his assumptions. What Randall writes is pure speculation, which is not history. See Willard Sterne Randall. *Thomas Jefferson: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), pp. 476-477.
3. Dennis Cauchon, "Group Flags Younger Jefferson as Father: Says DNA Test Results Have Been Misinterpreted," *USA Today* (January 7, 1999), p 3A.
4. Brenda E. Stevenson. *What is Slavery?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p.97. Unfortunately, Jefferson was in a bad position when it came to managing his monetary affairs and finances, even though, according to Britni, "he owned 607 men, women and children at Monticello to do his bidding." See Britni Danielle, "Sally Hemings Wasn't Thomas Jefferson's mistress she was his property," *op.cit.*, p. 2.
5. Linen Notes to DVD Movie, *Sally Hemings: An American Love Story* (Echo Bridge Home Entertainment, 2009). In other words, Jefferson wasn't ready to commit or provide his slaves with the means to obtain their freedom or emancipation; because for him, this action wasn't a big thing.
6. Jon Meacham. *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013), p. 217. Hemings was cautiously optimistic about getting her freedom, along with her four children, who lived. Jefferson, however, didn't inspire confidence that he would do *anything* to free his black slaves while he lived.

7. Andrew Heywood. *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (New York: Worth Publishers, 1998), p. 336. Jefferson was unrepentant about the management of his slaves, because he sold them, as mentioned in this article, to pay off his debts. If he truly struggled with the notion of *equality*, he would have freed his slaves, like founding father Benjamin Franklin did.
8. Mark A. Stevens, editor, "Equality" *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia* (Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2000), p. 777. While it may seem appalling that Jefferson professed superiority based on race, given his relationship with Sally Hemings, he grappled with the thorny issue of *racial equality* all his life. But Jefferson did not have a sense of urgency in regards to providing *racial equality* for his black slaves.
9. Eric Lander and Joseph J. Elis, "Founding Father," *Nature*, Vol. 396 (November 5, 1998), pp. 13-14. According to Journalist Britni Danielle, Sally Hemings "wasn't Jefferson's mistress; she was his property. And he raped her." See Britni Danielle, "Sally Hemings wasn't Thomas Jefferson's mistress she was his property," *op.cit.*, p. 1.
10. Meacham, "Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power," *op.cit.*, p. 218. Ultimately, Jefferson was able to cajole Sally Hemings into going back to the plantation in Virginia at Monticello – that is, to leave and return from France. Make no mistake, Hemings was in a really bad spot in Paris.
11. *Ibid.* So was Sally Hemings a *marionette* or mindless automation, who danced or acquiesced to *any* of Jefferson's demands or wishes? Or did she have to mimic acceptable human behavior – to get along with Jefferson; no doubt her lover.
12. *Ibid.* Of course, Sally Hemings "knew that she could stay in Paris, where she would be free; slavery was illegal in France" – Or was she just following her heart? See Jill Lepore, "President Tom's Cabin," *The New Yorker* (September 22, 2008), p. 11. [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/22/president-toms-cabin\(10/17/2017\)](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/22/president-toms-cabin(10/17/2017)), p. 1-14.
13. *Ibid.* It certainly caught Jefferson by surprise when she decided initially to stay in Paris, France, but she returned, because Sally Hemings "implicitly relied" on Jefferson's promises." See Annette Gordon-Reed, "Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson and the Ways We Talk About Our Past" *The New York Times* (August 24, 2017), p. 4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/books/review/sally-hemings-thomas-jefferson-annette-gor...> (10/17/2017), pp. 1-5.
14. Liner Notes to DVD Movie, *Sally Hemings: An American Love Story*, *op.cit.* Keep in mind that "some argue that he [Jefferson] "loved" Hemings," but he *never* granted her freedom. See Britni Danielle, "Sally Hemings wasn't Thomas Jefferson's mistress she was his property," *op.cit.*, p.2. Jefferson, after all, was a fallible human being, not perfect. People continue to try to *extrapolate* about how Jefferson felt by the way he treated his black slaves.
15. Leef Smith, "Tests Link Jefferson, Slave's Son," *Washington Post* (November 1, 1998), p. A1. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp/srv/digest/nat001>, pp. 1-4. It should be pointed out that Jefferson "freed only five people in his will. Beverley and Harriet Hemings simply left Monticello as white people with no formal emancipation." See Annette Gordon-Reed. *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), p. 657.
16. Willard Sterne Randall. *Thomas Jefferson: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), p. 494.
17. Annette Gordon-Reed. *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), p. 657. Jefferson was aware that the issues of *equality* and *slavery* were dangerous for him politically; and he wasn't willing to risk his political career and the presidency for the sake of his love for Sally Hemings and feelings for his black slaves. And unfortunately, "racial equality" was not at the center of the American conversation in the late 1700s and early 1800s. And probably there would have been widespread shock and condemnation by the white community had he admitted his affair with Sally Hemings.
18. Mark Stevens, editor, "Jefferson Thomas," *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia* (Massachusetts: Merriam Webster, Inc., 2000), p. 841. Jefferson supposedly fought against slavery; but he achieved no results in this regards, even when he was elected President in 1801. As President of the United States, he had the opportunity to thoroughly abolish or eliminate slavery, but he did not.
19. Kathleen DuVal, "A Nation Forged In Discord," *The Wall Street Journal* (June 1, 2017), p. A15. Jefferson always had his reservations about the humanity of black people, so he was an *ineffective* representative for them.

20. *Ibid.* There was always a racial undercurrent with almost all his political and social actions, mostly because Jefferson really didn't have a grand vision about *racial equality* and other racial matters. He certainly didn't make positive changes for all his black slaves, as they lived a precarious existence.
21. Meacham, "Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power," *op.cit.*, p. 455.
22. Stevens, editor, "Equality," *op.cit.*, p. 537.
23. Barry R. Gross, "Equality and Partiality and Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action," *Society*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January/February, 1993), p. 94.
24. Molefi K. Asante. *Malcom X as Cultural Hero and Other Afrocentric Essays* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1993), p. 87.
25. *Ibid.* Worse, however, was the fact that such racist stereotypes were common in the United States at the founding of the United States, and drafting our Constitution.
26. *Ibid.* We must also consider the political ramifications made by our founding fathers, in terms of slavery, which negatively affected black people.
27. *Ibid.* It should be noted here that, "Acknowledgment of the right to equality often must be coerced from the advantaged by the disadvantaged." It is also improbable that slave-owning founders would have taken issue with keeping their own slaves, as their reasoning, perhaps, especially about *equality*, was essentially morally impoverished. See Mark Stevens, editor, "Equality," *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia* (Massachusetts: Merriam Webster, Inc., 2000), p. 537.
28. Ken Burns, "What Thomas Jefferson Means Today," *USA Weekend* (February 14-16, 1997), p. 5.
29. *Ibid.* The truth of the matter is that blacks, as humans, have gone through terrible suffering in the Americas; but as steadfast human beings, they have been able to survive with heart and might – and common decency.
30. Benjamin Schwarz, "What Jefferson Helps to Explain," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 279, No. 3 (March 1997), p. 66.
31. *Ibid.* Unfortunately, some white Americans still see black people as backward, and frighteningly savage, especially those white supremacists who are culturally ignorant about racial politics and policy, and not ready for *freedom and equality*.
32. Larry Tomlinson and Alan Balboni. *A Critical Inquiry Into American Politics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 1993), p. 192.
33. William Cohen, quote by Conor C. O'Brien in "Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 278, No. 4 (October 1996), p. 66. With Jefferson's slave Hubbard, it was a life decision, or an escape, tit-for-tat game of cat-and-mouse; because short of death, Hubbard would continue to run away, again and again; and even if he was beaten relentlessly and savagely by Thomas Jefferson's overseer.
34. Cohen, "Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist," *op.cit.*, p. 68. In this regard, we must question Jefferson's notion of human rights, and his feelings about black people, in general. To be sure, Jefferson didn't have a "noble-calling" to erase *inequality* when he had a chance as President. And for white males in power, who owned slaves, it was how black people could be exploited for their personal gain.
35. Burns, "What Thomas Jefferson Means Today," *op.cit.*, p. 7. *Racism* is something that is irksomely wrong with humans, and may never be eliminated. Further, *equality* wasn't an important concept to Jefferson, all things considered. Indeed, Jefferson's ideas for equality were never clearly spelled out.
36. Cohen, "Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist," *op.cit.*, p. 64. Bear in mind that Jefferson didn't believe in the *mixing* of so-called races, as he thought it was an *abomination*; but he made an exception with his own affair with Sally Hemings. Jefferson even argued against assimilating with blacks in white society.
37. Cohen, "Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist," *op.cit.*, p. 66. Jefferson's argument of "black colonization" was certainly a weak effort, because they (black slaves), or many of them were born in the United States, but not granted citizenship at that time. Further, the idea of relocating black people, born in the U.S., was a preposterous proposition.
38. Burns, "What Thomas Jefferson Means Today," *op.cit.*, p. 6. Jefferson certainly wasn't waiting for the legacy of his life and Presidency to be written; nor was he sitting around deciding on how many of his black slaves he was going to manumit; or that Jefferson saw them even as human beings.

39. *Ibid.* In this regard, it should be noted that it would be decades later before the end of black slavery took place in the United States. So were white colonists – later American citizens – ready to fight to the death for the freedom of black slaves? Probably not.
40. Cohen, “Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist,” *op.cit.*, p. 72.
41. Jack N. Rakove. *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Alfred A Knoph, 1996), p.74.
42. Britni Danielle, “Sally Hemings wasn’t Thomas Jefferson’s mistress. She was his property,” *The Washington Post*, Outlook (July 7, 2017), p. 2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/sally-hemings-wasn-t-thomas-jeffersons-mistress...> (10/17/2017), pp. 1-3. Make no mistake, humans have always been “mixed” genetically, but *white supremacists* have refused to believe this evolutionary fact.
43. Krissah Thompson, “For decades they hid Jefferson’s relationship with her. Now Monticello is making room for Sally Hemings,” *The Washington Post*, Life Style (Feb 19, 2017). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/for-decades-they-hid-jeffersons...> (10/17/2017), pp. 1-6. As President, Thomas Jefferson was juggling the demands of his office and as master of Monticello; and he was unequivocal about what he wanted. Sally Hemings didn’t demand any time from the man, however.
44. Leonard W. Levy, Kenneth L. Karst, and Dennis J. Mahoney. Selections from the *Encyclopedia of the American Constitution, Civil Rights and Equality* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), p. 107.
45. Benjamin Schwarz, “What Jefferson Helps to Explain,” *op.cit.*, p. 72. It was unfortunate that the controversial issue of *equality* was dismissed by most of the slave-holding founders, as many *never* took constructive and necessary steps to assiduously move forward on *equality*, and manumission, or ending slavery.
46. Jill Lepore, “President Tom’s Cabin: Jefferson, Hemings, and a disclaimed lineage,” *The New Yorker* (September 22, 2008), p. 6. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/22/president-toms-cabin...> (10/17/2017), pp. 1-14. More than anything else in the world, Jefferson’s reasons for enslaving human beings was unfathomable, as there was no constitutional freedom for black slaves. Therefore, Thomas Jefferson’s actions did not match his words.
47. Kenneth L. Karst, “Brown v. Board of Education,” in *Civil Rights and Equality* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), p. 17. Despite words to the contrary, Jefferson’s slaves at Monticello were regimentally controlled, and didn’t have free reign of the plantation, with the possible exception of Sally Hemings and her family.
48. Conor C. O’Brien, quoted in “Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 278, No. 4 (October 1996), p. 68. It has always been evident that a separate-but-equal policy or doctrine doesn’t work in a diverse Democracy such as the United States.
49. Danielle, “Sally Hemings wasn’t Thomas Jefferson’s mistress. She was his property,” *op.cit.*, p. 3. Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings, as presented in this aforementioned movie presents more than complications about family and feelings for her and his black (or mulatto) children; or his reluctantly beloved offspring? Some of the scenes in this movie seem contrived and perfunctory, however, even the bedroom scene in Paris when Jefferson invited himself to Sally Hemings bedroom. Was it all about lust or love?
50. Annette Gordon-Reed, “Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson and the Ways We Talk About Our Past,” *The New York Times* (August 24, 2017), p. 5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/books/review/sally-hemings-thomas-jefferson...> (10/17/2017), pp. 1-5. Perhaps, in the end, Jefferson had little time to regret his contradictory writings and notions about race. More importantly, could Sally Hemings really interject her personal opinions and feelings about Jefferson, her lover?
51. Stevens, editor, “Equality,” *op.cit.*, p. 537. The question is whether “preferential treatment” should be given to “those historically treated unequally.” See same reference source. Even in hindsight, Jefferson did not usher in a new era in race relations.

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