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Sally Hemings Takes Center Stage

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MONTICELLO, Va. — Sally Hemings takes center stage in Monticello on Saturday when the Thomas Jefferson Foundation opens an exhibit in a space where she is said to have lived for some time. Her story is told through the recollections of her son Madison Hemings, the third of four children she and Thomas Jefferson had who lived to adulthood. His memoir, published in an Ohio newspaper in 1873, gives vital information about the Hemings family genealogy, his mother's life and the course of his own history.

As part of a major renovation of the plantation's southern wing, visitors will for the first time see Sally Hemings depicted as a central figure in life on the mountain. It's significant that the source of information about her will come from the words of an African-American man. Madison Hemings helps us define his mother's life, and also the life of his famous father.

This is a remarkable turn of events. For centuries, historians denied Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings. This exhibit has been a long time coming, but better late than never.

At the heart of Madison Hemings's recollections is a dramatic moment in 1789 that occurred between his parents while they were abroad in France when Jefferson served as a diplomat. That's when, according to Madison Hemings, his mother became "Mr. Jefferson's concubine," and became pregnant. Sally Hemings was happy in Paris, where she and her brother James had a chance for freedom. When Jefferson planned to return to the United States, she refused to leave. To persuade her, Jefferson promised the 16-year-old "extraordinary privileges" at Monticello if she complied. He also made a "solemn pledge" that any children she had would be freed when they became adults.

We can't know whether Sally Hemings was serious about staying or bluffing. In prerevolutionary Paris, where Virginia's laws did not automatically apply, she would have been able to sue for her freedom. Such petitions were regularly granted. In the end, she "implicitly relied" on Jefferson's promises and returned home. The terms of this "treaty," as Madison Hemings called it, were fulfilled. And his narrative explains why he and his three siblings, Beverley, Harriet and Eston, were able to live their adult lives in freedom almost 40 years before the formal end of slavery.

Madison Hemings's memoir also provides valuable insights into the life and personality of Jefferson, a man pivotal in shaping American history and, thus, the course of world history. It stretches from slavery in colonial times through the antebellum period, considers the years of the Civil War and touches on the experiences of free blacks in the early 19th century.

Yet it has never received the attention it deserves. The reason is obvious: Madison Hemings's statement that Jefferson was his father made the entire document anathema to most historians — so much so that they dismissed parts of the text that were benign or that could confirm other known information.

So a document that would otherwise have been devoured by scholars desperate to find any tidbit of information about Jefferson was ignored, except as a statement to refute or ridicule. White historians were determined not to listen to Madison Hemings, a historical figure who said things they did not want to hear. I was stunned as I wrote about the historiography of the Hemings-Jefferson story in my first book to see how easy it was to pull the string and unravel the tapestry of this insistence on ignoring what Madison Hemings was saying about Monticello.

We are in a different place on the Hemings question today, as the scholarly consensus has shifted and the foundation has embraced, without equivocation, Jefferson's paternity of Sally Hemings's children. In fact, some of their descendants will gather on Saturday at Monticello for the opening of the exhibit, which I was asked to review. Still, Madison Hemings's recollections discomfit some people for reasons other than what he says about his parentage. The uneasiness is because the discussion between his parents about the terms of Sally Hemings's return to Monticello can only be described as a "negotiation," a term the exhibit also uses.

His mother, empowered by French law and, very likely, her knowledge of Jefferson's personality, bargained for a particular kind of life for herself at Monticello and for the freedom of her children. She believed that Jefferson would keep his promises, although she knew that when they returned to Virginia, he did not have to. There are many examples of enslaved people negotiating with enslavers, and there are other instances of Hemingses bargaining with Jefferson. Yet many people are afraid that describing the very rare instances of enslaved African-Americans "negotiating" with white enslavers, people who held near absolute power over them, will allow slavery apologists to minimize its depredations.

Sally Hemings's and Thomas Jefferson's fame requires that they be seen as symbols: she as an archetype for all enslaved women (and, therefore, utterly powerless), he as a stand-in for all who enslaved other human beings (and, thus, all powerful). To fend off people who doubt that slavery was indeed an evil institution, we are required to depict in the most general terms the vagaries of their individual lives and personalities, the quirks of their particular circumstances in their time, things that good history normally attends to: *The law says this. So, therefore, this must have happened, or that could never have happened.*

Madison Hemings did not see or write of his parents as symbols but as human beings living in a specific context. Sally Hemings's negotiation with Thomas Jefferson, in a place where the law was on her side on the question of freedom, does not drain a single drop from the evil of slavery. Nor does Thomas Jefferson's willingness to participate in this transaction absolve him of the moral crime of holding people in bondage. In fact, it mattered a great deal that Sally Hemings was the half sister of his deceased wife; this connection influenced the way he treated Sally Hemings and her family, a course of dealing he did not extend to other people enslaved on the mountain.

The law, the family connection and the personalities all provide insight into how these two people, in extraordinary circumstances, handled each other. Historians are supposed to notice and analyze details and make distinctions. Why bother researching if we are unwilling to allow ourselves to be surprised, informed and disabused of preconceptions about how a situation must have unfolded?

And then there is the question of family. People often tell me they think it's ridiculous that Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson and their children could be a true family. It is so far removed from what they think a family should be — an institution where the mother and father are "equal," where the children are acknowledged by the father and receive his attention and patrimony — that it makes no sense to think of them as such.

But Madison Hemings, a product of a 19th-century slave society, clearly believed that he and his siblings and parents were a family. He used the terms "father" and "mother" and "the family," and he drew a circle around them, speaking of the ways in which their lives were different from that of other African-Americans at Monticello.

While Madison Hemings said that Thomas Jefferson was "uniformly kind," but "not in the habit" of being demonstrably affectionate to him and his siblings, his memoir shows how the parents were expected to treat each other and how the children's lives were to proceed. They had a life together, however bizarre that life may appear to us today. His memories go far beyond the depiction of his mother as just a sex slave of 38 years, who also happened to have borne children.

The Sally Hemings exhibit will spark a conversation about the woman whom we will never really know, and the strange family of which she was a part. That's what it is designed to do. Even so, it will encourage visitors to think more broadly about other enslaved African-Americans at Monticello. The lives of Sally Hemings and her children offer a counterpoint to those outside of their circle. We see what slavery took from others on the mountain when Madison Hemings says that his siblings were "measurably happy" as children because they knew they would not be slaves all their lives, and because they were always allowed to be with their mother.

While in Paris, Sally Hemings gambled that she could return to her family in Virginia, raise her children, see them go off into freedom, and live a life taking care of the rooms and wardrobe of the man who promised her he would make this life possible. Her story is fascinating, but visitors should never forget the lives of hundreds of other enslaved African-Americans who knew they could not rely on Thomas Jefferson.

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