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Sally Hemings

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In 1802, James Callender, the notorious Scottish émigré who made a name for himself in the American political maelstrom of the 1790s by writing with extreme aggression about leading political figures of the day, wrote a story about the then-president Thomas Jefferson that would go down in history. Although rumors that Jefferson was “co-habiting” with an enslaved woman had been circulating in the 1790s – blind items and verbal gossip – Callender was the first to write openly about it in a newspaper and to use the name “Sally,” though he did not give her last name. He predicted in another piece about the president that the name “Sally” would go down in history with Jefferson’s. Although it may have seemed like hyperbole at the time, it turns out that Callender was right about this, as he was right about the basic substance of the Jefferson–Hemings story.

During the first part of the nineteenth century, Sally Hemings was likely the most famous enslaved person in America. She figured in the political battles from the beginning of Thomas Jefferson’s presidency in 1801 and remained a topic of discussion long after he left office in 1809. When the name “Sally” was mentioned in relationship to Jefferson, people knew who “Sally” was. In 1807, President Jefferson invited Native American leaders to the President’s House for dinner. Breaking with tradition, he invited the wives of the delegation to attend, which made it look like a social engagement among equals. The wives of the government officials were aghast. Louisa Adams, the wife of then senator John Quincy Adams, wrote in her diary: “Perhaps this is the first step toward the introduction of the incomparable Sally” (emphasis in original). The talk about Hemings was really talk about Jefferson; what did his connection to her say about him? One newspaper editor asked the question that seems to have been on many people’s minds about the long-term connection to Hemings: “Why have you not married some worthy woman of your own complexion?”

Given the racial and status hierarchy in the United States, and Jefferson’s prominence, there is no wonder that most of the focus on Hemings and Jefferson has been on Jefferson – how the relationship fit, or did not fit, into his life. There is no record, to date, of Hemings having anything to say about Jefferson to outsiders. The modern notion of interviewing a subject did not exist: who could go to Monticello and try to talk to her? James Callender did spend time in Richmond and Charlottesville gathering information about Hemings and Jefferson from residents, but he would not have dared to try to make contact with Hemings herself. Had he
been able to speak with her, it would be hard to trust what the rabidly racist Callender might have conveyed about the interaction.

Sally Hemings is often described as a blank slate upon which people write whatever they need or desire her to be: “slut” (as per Callender), lover, mistress, “substitute for a wife” (as per one of Jefferson’s friends), rape victim, or sex slave. Changing times and changing mores have shaped people’s understanding about her. During the initial firestorm that the Callender stories provoked, commentators used Hemings’s race to ridicule Jefferson’s attentions to her, suggesting that it was absurd for a man of his race and stature to be involved with such a person. Later in the nineteenth century, Hemings was used to decry the abuse of enslaved women in the South.

Things had changed enough by the early twentieth century that in a feature about their son Eston, the story of the Hemings–Jefferson connection could be described in a white newspaper as “romantic.” In 1968, the historian Winthrop Jordan, in his magisterial work *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550–1812*, wrote about Hemings and Jefferson in an even-handed fashion that disconcerted some who felt he should have debunked the story totally. But it was Fawn Brodie, in her 1974 biography of Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, who provoked the most intensely negative reaction. Brodie was the first Jefferson biographer to openly state that Hemings and Jefferson had had children together and to write as extensively as she could about Hemings. What incensed people most of all was her suggestion that Jefferson loved and needed Hemings. The book became an instant bestseller and has never been out of print.

Four years after Brodie’s biography, Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings*, a novel written from Hemings’s perspective, switched from the omniscient voice to the first-person voice of Hemings herself. Chase-Riboud made the crucial decision not to use what people take to be Black dialect during slavery when presenting Hemings’s inner monologue. As a result, Hemings appeared more real and understandable, which allowed readers of all types to have instant empathy with her. The book became an international bestseller.

As a novelist, Chase-Riboud was interested in portraying Sally Hemings’s humanity through a focus on Hemings as an individual, drawing on the particulars of her known biography to fashion a character who could be believable to readers. The time in which the novel appeared allowed this type of presentation. It is highly unlikely that *Sally Hemings* would be received in the same way today. At that moment, the Hemings–Jefferson story was seen largely through a racial lens. The open hostility toward the story, among at least some white historians, seemed rooted in anxiety about a “founding father” being involved in race mixing. After all, it was not until 1967 that the US Supreme Court, in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*, declared laws against interracial marriage unconstitutional. Virginius Dabney, a famous journalist and a Jefferson descendant, wrote an entire book attempting to refute Brodie’s history and, strangely enough given that it was fiction, Chase-Riboud’s novel. Dabney was so upset that he pronounced *Sally Hemings* “pornography,” even though the book merely hints at the sex between Jefferson and Hemings rather than describing it.

The racial lens through which the story was seen allowed Hemings and Jefferson to be portrayed as star-crossed lovers kept from a true union by the laws and prejudices of their time. As long as Jefferson scholars were passionate to the point of irrationality in their resistance to the story, there was reason to suspect that concerns about race mixing played a role in the response. When my book *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* was published in 1997, there appeared to be a large disconnect between the public and historians on the question of whether Hemings had had children with Jefferson. The general public, no doubt influenced by Brodie and Chase-Riboud, believed, or was prepared to believe, that the story was true, and most Jefferson scholars were still insisting it was not. My aim was not to prove or disprove the
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Sociology or biography?

It is a commonplace that historical issues are seen through the prism of the time in which the subject is addressed. Once the debate about whether Hemings bore children by Jefferson was resolved, the question shifted to thinking about the nature of the relationship. What had been, primarily, an issue about race and slavery became an issue about gender and slavery. Hemings and Jefferson as star-crossed lovers? What about the matter of consent? The law of slavery, which made Hemings Jefferson’s property, meant that she could not legally refuse to have sex with him. If she could not refuse, how could it be said that she had consented to him?

This question has taken on even greater urgency in what has been called the “Me Too” era. In the wake of revelations about the alleged sexual depredations of the movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, and the ensuing information about other powerful men who used their positions to abuse women, what are we to make of sexual relations between enslavers and the enslaved? The power Weinstein had over the women who came into his orbit was nothing like the power Jefferson had over Hemings. Although “Me Too” is a modern-day phenomenon, born of our current sensibilities, it is natural that this heightened awareness would prompt a closer look at Hemings and Jefferson.

A *Washington Post* story on the archaeological excavations that found what researchers at Monticello took to be one of the places Sally Hemings lived for a time drew a storm of protest because the article referred to Hemings as Jefferson’s “mistress.” Critics insisted that “mistress” implied that the woman involved had consented to the connection, even though the adjective “enslaved” before the word “mistress” apprises the reader of what the phrase means. Objections have also been raised to the word “relationship,” because some feel it suggests something positive, as if all “relationships” were necessarily good. In this new dispensation, Hemings should be described only as a rape victim or a “sex slave.”

The question of how to view the life of an individual enslaved woman requires thinking about the relationship between sociology and biography. Because the details of the lives of the vast majority of enslaved women are and will remain unknown, when making pronouncements about them, it makes sense to speak in sociological terms, referencing the experiences of the group. What happens, however, when information is actually known about a particular woman? Do we seek to explicate her life based upon known information, or do we resort to sociology, as if the experiences of the outside larger “group” should take precedence over the things that happened in the individual’s life? What is the purpose of historical research into the lives of individual enslaved people, if the answers to every question are to be found in our general knowledge about slavery overall?

Sally Hemings is not a complete mystery. We know a good deal about her that should have some bearing on our understanding of her connection to Jefferson and what we write about it. First, what we know: Hemings was the daughter of the enslaved Elizabeth Hemings, herself the daughter of an enslaved African woman and an English ship captain whose last name was Hemings. Sally Hemings’s father, John Wayles, was an Englishman brought to the United States as a servant who became a prosperous lawyer and planter. Wayles’s daughter, and Hemings’s half-sister, Martha married Thomas Jefferson. Hemings and her family were inherited by Martha and
Thomas when John Wayles died in the year Hemings was born, 1773. She, along with the rest of her Hemings-Wayles siblings and her enslaved half-siblings, came to live at Monticello when she was around three years old.

The Hemings siblings were installed as personal servants to Thomas and Martha, which suggests Martha’s level of comfort with her enslaved half-siblings. Robert Hemings, at age 12, replaced Jupiter Evans, aged 30, as Jefferson’s personal valet. The historian Deborah Gray White has noted that many white women in similar situations insisted that the children of their fathers, brothers, or husbands be sold or at least, put out of sight. The opposite happened at Monticello, and that would not have been lost on Sally Hemings. She grew up with male siblings who often left Monticello to hire themselves out and keep the money they made. The brothers understood, as we do, that the legal relationship to Jefferson remained despite all of this. But their capacity to move about had to make a difference to the inner lives of those young men, and to young Sally Hemings, who witnessed this and may have benefited from it. She had brothers who could do things that the other enslaved men on the plantation could not do. As for Hemings and her female siblings, they only did what can be described as “women’s work,” keeping house – sewing, knitting, tending to children. They did not go to the fields and were the only enslaved people spared from participating in the harvest. When Martha Jefferson was on her deathbed, her female Hemings half-siblings and their mother attended her along with Jefferson and another of her white sisters and one of Jefferson’s sisters. According to Hemings family lore, just before she died, Martha extracted a promise from Jefferson that he would never marry again. She also gave Sally Hemings a hand bell as a memento.

Of course, none of the things the Hemingses were allowed to do, or did not have to do, changed the basic nature of slavery in Virginia. But the things that happen to any individual family – even our own – do not matter in the grand scheme of things, however important and urgent they may seem to us. Human beings do not live their daily lives in the big picture, and historians writing about the lives of individual people should not pretend that they do. In thinking of a young Sally Hemings’s life, it is necessary to consider how her actual experiences at Monticello helped to shape her self-identity and what she would want and/or expect out of life. One thing Hemings would have learned early on is that genealogy mattered. Her connection to Jefferson’s wife made a difference in her family’s life. Looking at the matter sociologically, we would see that across the large swath of enslaved people who had biological connections to white people, those connections resulted in no change in their day-to-day lives. Either the connection meant nothing to their white relatives, or it meant something deeply negative. In Hemings’s case, however, her biological tie to John Wayles clearly meant something to Martha and Thomas.

Hemings learned something else early on, too. Her father was a white man, and her grandfathers had all been white men. Although we cannot be sure of the racial makeup of all of those enslaved at Monticello, it is very likely that Hemings was phenotypically different from the majority of other enslaved people on the plantation. This had no bearing on her legal status, and Virginia law kept her in the category of “mulatto,” meaning that she was not “white.” Modern-day considerations of Hemings should be wary of assuming that our conceptions of racial solidarity, developed over the near two and one-half centuries after Hemings was born, would have been in her mind. Her grandmother, mother, and sisters had all had children with white men. There would be no reason for Hemings to think that a Black man would be her partner.

At age 14, Sally Hemings experienced a life-defining change. She sailed to Europe in 1787, accompanying Jefferson’s youngest daughter, nine-year-old Mary (Polly). After spending time in the home of John and Abigail Adams in London, she went to Paris in July. There, she joined her brother James, who had come over in 1784 with Jefferson and his eldest daughter, Martha.
Sally Hemings had arrived in what was pre-Revolutionary France. Riots were taking place. People were marching, sometimes right outside her home, shouting about freedom and the new world that was to come. There is no reason to doubt that the Hemings siblings noticed this. The neighborhood where the Hemings lived had the largest concentration of people of color in the city, though the numbers were small. It is probable that after five years and about two and a half years, respectively, James and Sally Hemings made contact with some of the people of color in their neighborhood.

At some point, Sally Hemings’s relationship to Thomas Jefferson changed. In his recollections, their son Madison said, “During that time, my mother became Mr. Jefferson’s concubine.” It is common when discussing Hemings to say that she was 14 when this occurred. In my first book, I mentioned that it was a debate tactic, used by those who denied that Jefferson fathered Hemings’s children, to push her age as low as possible in order to make the idea so unpalatable that people would not believe the story. Today, after the ground has shifted, people continue to assert confidently that Hemings was 14, positing that as soon as she walked into the Hotel de Langeac, Jefferson assaulted her. Some write of this as statutory rape, thinking of the modern-day category, though the age of consent in Virginia during the 1780s was 10.

The truth is that we do not know, and will likely never know, when Hemings became Jefferson’s “concubine.” The sociological approach to the question focuses on the fact that Jefferson was, under Virginia law, the enslaver of Hemings. Under that law, he could have assaulted her upon her arrival at the Hotel de Langeac in Paris; therefore, he did. And we do not have to worry about being wrong about this specific fact, because saying that Jefferson assaulted Hemings when she was 14 expresses a fundamental truth about slavery: enslavers had the power to, and often did, rape the women they enslaved. In this formulation, Jefferson and Hemings are symbols of the institution of slavery, not individuals. The actual details of Sally Hemings’s life (the person who should most engage our sympathy) are subordinated to that larger truth about the vulnerability of enslaved women encoded in the institution of slavery.

The biographical approach recognizes that Hemings was enslaved but focuses on the specific things that happened to Hemings the individual. Given the scanty record, adherents to this approach must acknowledge the limits of the available information while assessing the value and meaning of the information that is known. We know that Abigail Adams, who saw Hemings when she arrived from the United States, thought she was 16 years old. Scholars have determined that the average age of menarche at this time was 15. Adams’s observation that Hemings was 16 suggests that she may have had physical attributes indicating she had gone through puberty, such as breasts. If she had, it would seem unlikely that she could have been having sex with Jefferson for over two years but did not get pregnant until the end of her stay. Perhaps she had miscarriages? But there is no evidence of that, and that possibility cannot be converted into a probability, let alone a certainty, for historical purposes. On the other hand, there is documentary evidence that Jefferson’s behavior toward Hemings changed markedly in 1789; behavior...
that is consistent with a show of a male’s romantic or sexual interest in a female. That year, when Hemings was 16, Jefferson began buying her clothing, even though she had her own money from the wages he was paying her.

The story of Hemings and Jefferson in France comes from their son, Madison Hemings. Only two people, or someone they had talked to, could have possessed the information that he relayed: his mother or his father. Although there is no reason to doubt that Madison Hemings talked to his father, it seems more likely that these details came from his mother. While we have no letters from Sally Hemings that tell us what she thought of her life, we do have the vision of her life that she imparted to her son. It was a vision that she felt it important to pass down to her family. Historians, myself included, have not made enough of this. Instead, we have focused on all the things we do not know about Hemings and all that we know about enslaved women as a group, and neglected to consider the importance of what she said to her son about her life.

Above all, the Sally Hemings of her son’s narrative is a person who believed that residence in France changed the dynamic between her and Jefferson. Law made her an enslaved person in Virginia. Law made her a free person in France. It did not make her Jefferson’s equal, but it gave her leverage that she did not have in Virginia. His decision to pay her and her brother betrayed his anxiety about their status and his capacity. If things were exactly as they had been in Virginia, he would not have felt compelled to do this. When Jefferson wanted to return to the United States and to drop his daughters and Hemings off with Hemings’s half-sister and his sister-in-law Elizabeth Eppes, Hemings balked. She was just getting comfortable there, had learned to speak French well, and did not want to be “re-enslaved.” Jefferson’s overseer, Edmund Bacon, remembered Hemings “often” talking about her trip to France. Bacon came to Monticello 16 years after Hemings returned from France and stayed until she was nearly 50. Madison Hemings’s recollections and Bacon’s statements make it clear that she looked upon her time in France fondly and considered those years transformative.

A point of context: Hemings was not alone in her feelings about going back to the United States. None of the young people living at the Hotel de Langeac wanted to return. Her brother James hired a tutor near the end of their stay to teach him proper French grammar, as if he was serious about mixing into French society. Patsy Jefferson spoke about renting rooms in her convent school while Jefferson dealt with his business affairs. William Short, Jefferson’s Virginian protégé, declined to return and indeed, stayed in Europe for many years. As for Polly Jefferson, Nathaniel Cutting, who saw the Hemingses and Jefferey in Le Havre just before they set sail, said that the young girl complained repeatedly that things were not being done the way they did them in Paris. The idea of remaining in France was on everyone’s mind but Jefferson’s.

Significantly, Hemings was pregnant, likely in the early stages. She understood that if she returned to Virginia, the child she was carrying would be enslaved, because the status of the child followed the status of the mother. That potential fate for her offspring evidently alarmed Hemings enough that she was willing to contemplate claiming her freedom in France. Could a 16-year-old have taken such a position? A sociological approach to the question would think of 16-year-olds in general and determine that such a person would be too afraid, too chastened by the power of slavery, to do so. The approach would also fixate on the likely bad outcomes, positing that they would have naturally deterred the person from the thought of remaining, rather than considering the personality and specific circumstances of the individual in question.

The problem with such an approach is that enslaved people escaped slavery under far more daunting circumstances than those Sally Hemings faced in Paris. They ran away knowing they would never see their families again. They ran with hounds in close pursuit, living in forests and swamps. Hemings and her 24-year-old brother had been working for wages for years, with ample opportunity to save and prepare for taking their leave of the Jeffereys. Both had opportunities...
to make friends who could have been helpful to them. The Jeffersons made friends during their stay. Why could not the Hemingses have done so? When Jefferson was in other towns away from Monticello, the enslaved people who worked for him made friends in the neighborhoods where they lived. There was a language barrier in France, but not an insurmountable one. Human beings, particularly young people in residence in a place for years and daily surrounded by people speaking another tongue, can learn a new language.

Sally Hemings presented herself as one who knew law and successfully used the law to negotiate with Jefferson. She made her return to Virginia contingent on his promising to provide a certain type of life for her at Monticello and that her children would be free when they reached the age of 21. Madison Hemings, when talking about the fact that his father fulfilled his promises, very interestingly refers to the “treaty” between his parents that put all of this in motion. He places his parents on an equal footing for purposes of negotiating the “treaty,” no doubt because he accepted the idea that the law in France gave his mother power that she would not have had in Virginia.

This was all extremely risky. Jefferson could have decided not to abide by his promises. He could have died with no assurance that his daughters would fulfill his wishes on the matter. And then there is the troublesome notion that Hemings “implicitly relied” on Jefferson’s promises. I have often noted the difficulty I had with this idea. Falling back on the sociological approach to the question, I thought of the dangers that enslaved people put themselves in if they trusted an enslaver. Here, too, however, the details of biography may provide an answer. Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson cannot not be usefully considered just one on one. They were part of a web of relationships between mothers, fathers, brothers, full siblings, and half-siblings that went back far beyond their time in France. They would have seen each other through the prism of those relationships. The sociology of slavery would tell us that those relationships meant nothing to the vast majority of people in similar situations. But the biographies of Hemings and Jefferson suggest that they meant something to them.

Once Hemings returned to Virginia, she had no legal leverage over Jefferson. He could do as he pleased. She spent the rest of her life taking care of Jefferson’s rooms and wardrobe, looking after her children, and doing “light-sewing” for her family. Although one of Jefferson’s enemies called her “pampered and spoiled,” it is likely that any positive treatment above the norm for an enslaved woman would be considered pampering. Another observer said that she was treated as “much above” other enslaved people, but that vague statement does not say how. Unlike other enslaved women, when Hemings was having her first child, a young girl was moved into her residence to help look after the child, while the children of other enslaved women were looked after communally. Jefferson’s records also show that every adult member of the enslaved community at one time or another sold vegetables or fruit to Jefferson or his family, save for Sally Hemings. This would suggest that she had access to money from Jefferson without having to sell anything to him or his family. The biggest evidence of favored treatment was, of course, the freedom of all four of her children when they were adults or approaching adulthood.

Conclusion

What do we make of all this? Sally Hemings’s version of the important events of her life, and her son’s depiction of his family life, do not comport with the designation of Hemings as a “sex slave.” Whatever generalizations from the sociology of slavery might tell us, Madison Hemings’s recounting of his biography clearly indicates that he saw his mother, father, and siblings as existing in a family. He calls Sally Hemings “Mother,” and he calls Jefferson “Father.” He draws a
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circle around this group of six, differentiating their circumstances from those of everyone else on the plantation, white and Black.

As for Sally Hemings, her primary identity was that of a woman who used an available tool, the law, to calculate and negotiate the terms of her connection to a man whom we know only through documents and our understanding, and natural abhorrence, of the legal role he played in her life. She knew him personally. The end result of Hemings’s calculation was that she could be with her family in Virginia and ensure that slavery, in her line, would end with her. What was a woman’s life in the eighteenth century other than being attached to a man (white women could be married) and hoping that he would treat her well and provide for the success of her children to the extent that he could? It was a gamble, to varying degrees, but always a gamble nevertheless. While some may be loath to make any comparison between the situation of enslaved women and free women, there is no reason to doubt that actual enslaved women compared their lot with those of free white women. As sentient beings, they saw what their oppressors had relative to their own deprivations. They knew the state of slavery versus the state of freedom.

At the same time, Sally Hemings knew a world in which the lives of all women were more circumscribed than those of males. She watched as her sister Martha, who was not equipped for childbearing, suffered with each pregnancy and eventually died from complications of childbirth. Because of the marriage contract, which created perpetual consent, Martha could not refuse sex to her husband and could not protect her own life. The “privilege” given to the Hemings brothers was to go out in the world and work for themselves. The “privilege” given to Hemings and her sisters was to be kept in the home doing things that only the wives of white farmers would be doing – and not poor white farmers, whose wives often did work in the fields.

Sally Hemings is a figure of history whose life deserves to be considered on its own terms. Making judgments or pronouncements about her life based upon our understandings about slavery in general, while ignoring the context of her specific world, does an extreme disservice to her and to the historiography of slavery. We have so few opportunities to train the microscope to look closely at the facts of an individual enslaved person’s life. As tempting as it is to see Hemings as a symbol and ignore her own and her family’s understanding of who she was, we risk replicating, albeit in a small measure, the denial of humanity that warped her life when she was alive.

Notes
1 James Callender, *The Richmond Recorder*, September 1, 1802.
3 *Richmond Recorder*, November 3, 1803.
5 Britni Danielle, “Sally Hemings Wasn’t Thomas Jefferson’s Mistress. She Was His Property,” www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/sally-hemings-wasn-t-thomas-jefferson-s-mistress-she-was-his-property/2017/07/06/db5844d4-625d-11e7-8adc-fca80e32bf47_story.html

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