

Jefferson Vindicated

Fallacies, Omissions, and Contradictions in the Hemings Genealogical Search

by Cynthia H. Burton

Foreword by James A. Bear, Jr.

Reviewed by Richard E. Dixon

As with all legends, the Sally story has a thread of historical truth. Sally Hemings, a young slave girl on the Monticello plantation, accompanied Thomas Jefferson's youngest daughter on the sea voyage to France. She returned with Jefferson, his two daughters and her brother, and remained a slave until shortly after Jefferson's death. During that time, she bore four children who survived to adulthood. She never married and the fathers of the children remain unknown.

In 1802, a newspaper article claimed Jefferson had fathered "several" of her children, including a boy "Tom," then to be about 12 years old. This claim, unsupported by any direct evidence and the sources for the newspaper article never identified, has drifted about in the shadows of Jefferson's reputation until the 1998 DNA tests fueled the imagination of academics. References to this supposed paternity mainly appear in studies focused on other aspects of Jefferson's thought or numerous accomplishments. Surprisingly, there has been no detailed and systematic evaluation of all the evidence until *Jefferson Vindicated*.

Cynthia Burton is an experienced genealogist and was a researcher for the Scholars Commission during their year-long study. She has brought these skills to a systematic examination of the rumors, assumptions, and faulty logic that now complicates the historical thread.

Her thematic target is the uneven treatment of the paternity issue in an article in the September 2001 Special Issue of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly. Although it is premised on following a Genealogical Proof Standard, that study is riddled with the same type of unsupported assumptions that characterize the Monticello Report.

Burton is strongest in areas that are continually misunderstood or misrepresented. These include the so-called "conception period" of the Hemings children, and whether the layout of Monticello could have shielded a clandestine affair between Jefferson and Hemings. Burton debunks the reliability of the Madison Hemings interview, and the long held suspicion that Sally Hemings was half-sister to Martha Jefferson.

Although the DNA tests conclusively destroyed any evidentiary value in the 1802 newspaper attacks on Jefferson, those allegations remain the touchstone of the paternity legend. Without this false start, much of what is relied on by the paternity believers would be relevant of nothing. The paternity legend starts with a belief that Jefferson fathered children by Hemings. Once belief is established, the inductive process focuses on gathering bits of information that will prove it. This method premises historical truth on whether a genealogist senses that "it sounds right."

Burton's methodology is the correct one, to marshal the facts and then to connect the

dots. When a researcher of a legend follows this model, the result is still a legend.