

Jefferson Was Falsely Accused

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The respected British scientific journal, *Nature*, is suffering acute embarrassment over the articles it published in its November 1998 issue claiming that a study based on DNA analysis had proven beyond reasonable doubt that Thomas Jefferson had fathered a son by Sally Hemings, one of his slaves. In its January issue *Nature* ran three letters, including one from the principal author of the November article, pointing out that it had "overstated" the evidence of Jefferson's paternity.

The article was introduced with this statement by the editors of *Nature*: "The scandals involving American presidents are nothing new. In 1802 President Thomas Jefferson was accused of fathering a child by Sally Hemings, one of his slaves. A molecular genetics study in the November issue of *Nature* finally puts the affair to rest, establishing beyond reasonable doubt Thomas Jefferson's relationship to Sally Hemings's sons."

The article by Dr. Eugene Foster and others described a study of Y chromosomes from the male-line descendants of President Jefferson's paternal uncle, Field Jefferson and male-line descendants of two of Sally Hemings' sons, her alleged first-born, Thomas Woodson, and her last son, Eston Hemings Jefferson. Five male descendants of Jefferson's uncle, Field Jefferson, were used in this study because Thomas Jefferson had no sons to carry on the line. The chromosomes of the five descendants of Field Jefferson were found to share a distinctive characteristic.

That characteristic was not found in any of the five descendants of Thomas Woodson, proving that Thomas Jefferson was not his father. The allegation that Jefferson had fathered a son named Tom published by a Richmond newspaper in 1802 was what started the long-lived rumor that Jefferson was the father of all Sally Hemings' children. The descendants of Thomas Woodson have long believed that their ancestor was Thomas Jefferson's son, but Herbert Barger, the Jefferson family historian, says it is doubtful that Thomas Woodson was even the son of Sally Hemings. There was only one descendant of Sally Hemings' youngest son, Eston in the study. His Y chromosomes had the distinctive Jefferson characteristic. That was what *Nature* trumpeted as proving beyond reasonable doubt "Thomas Jefferson's relationship to Sally Hemings' sons."

The article itself was a tad more cautious. It allowed that there were other remote possibilities that someone other than the then 65-year-old Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston, but the authors said, "In the absence of historical evidence to support such possibilities, we consider them to be unlikely." But the title of the article threw all such caution to the wind. It read, "Jefferson fathered slave's last child."

This resulted in numerous articles based on the belief that Jefferson was guilty as charged. Historian Joseph Ellis wrote, "Our heroes—and especially presidents—are not gods or saints, but flesh-and-blood humans, with all the frailties and imperfections that this entails." Others were more critical, calling President Jefferson a hypocrite and perhaps even a rapist. One of the worst was written by Christopher Hitchens and published in *The Nation*. He suggested that Thomas Jefferson be described as "the slave-owning serial

flogger, sex addict and kinsman to ax murderers."

Richard Cohen, writing in *The Washington Post Magazine*, implied that Sally Hemings had become pregnant with her supposed first child, Tom, when she was only 14 or 15 years old. He didn't know that the *Nature* article had reported that the genetic evidence proved that Thomas Jefferson was not Tom's father. Mr. Cohen said he had always believed that Thomas Jefferson had fathered Sally's children and that it was "now a dead certainty." He said the Hemings story made President Jefferson "harder, meaner, selfish—an exploiter."

Messrs. Hitchens, Cohen, and others like them have not welcomed the news that the editors of *Nature* have admitted that Dr. Foster's article omitted facts that make it clear that the analysis of the chromosomes did not come close to proving that Thomas Jefferson fathered any of Sally Hemings' children. The crucial fact that Dr. Foster knew but did not include in his article was that Thomas Jefferson was only one of nine living Jeffersons who might have fathered Eston, passing on to him the distinctive Jefferson Y chromosome.

The most probable candidate, according to Herbert Barger, was Thomas Jefferson's forgotten younger brother, Randolph. He says Randolph's wife died around 1793 and he didn't remarry until 1810. He was a frequent visitor to Monticello, and a slave oral history described him as liking to play the fiddle and dance with Jefferson's slaves "half the night." Barger told Dr. Foster about Randolph and the seven other Jefferson men who could have fathered children by Hemings. A *Nature* editor claimed Dr. Foster did not share this information with them and that he approved the headline that declared without any qualification that President Jefferson was Eston's father.

Dr. Foster acknowledged in an interview with me that he had not informed the editors of *Nature* that Thomas Jefferson had a younger brother, five nephews and two cousins who could have passed the distinctive Jefferson Y chromosome on to the male children of Sally Hemings. He admitted that he had known of these other Jeffersons, but he said rather testily, "I don't believe I have to account for all the history."

Nature's admission that its article was flawed and misleading should be particularly embarrassing for historian Joseph Ellis, author of *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*. Persuaded by the Foster study, Ellis had switched from a critic of the Hemings story to a believer. He co-authored an article for *Nature* that accompanied the Foster article. His article called attention to many parallels between President Jefferson and President Clinton, but it omitted one of the most striking parallels that nearly all the media had overlooked. That is the allegation that Bill Clinton, like Thomas Jefferson, fathered a black son.

The mother making that claim is Bobbie Ann Williams. She was a prostitute at the time her son Danny was conceived, and she claims that Gov. Clinton was the only white client she had at that time. Carl Limbacher, who writes for NewsMax.com on the Internet, has interviewed her aunt, who cared for Danny for many of his 14 years. Limbacher reported that the family wanted President Clinton to take a paternity test. They believed that DNA would prove that the President is Danny's father. The *Star*, the supermarket tabloid that

first published Gennifer Flowers' claim that she had a 12-year affair with Clinton, became interested in the case and reportedly paid \$100,000 for exclusive rights to the story. It also paid to have a comparison made of the DNA of Bill Clinton and Danny Williams, using the printed profile of Clinton's DNA that was one of the documents that Ken Starr turned over to the House Judiciary Committee.

An independent laboratory informed the *Star* that the DNA showed no match. The *Star* and nearly everyone else assumed that closed the matter, but Limbacher discovered that the FBI refuses to say that the DNA profile that it submitted to the Office of the Independent Counsel is genuine or whether the numbers were altered to protect the President's privacy. The OIC, the Secret Service, and the White House press office have also been slow to answer that question. It appears that it may take an inquiry by a member of Congress or even a congressional committee to extract this information. Until it is disclosed, the question of whether or not Clinton is the father of a black child will remain as unresolved as the same question about Thomas Jefferson.

If true, this might do the president more damage than the perjury and obstruction of justice charges that have been lodged against him. According to a new edition of former Clinton consultant Dick Morris's book, *Behind the Oval Office*, in 1996 President Clinton announced new regulations requiring states to crack down on deadbeat dads because polling data showed that 80 percent of the respondents said they would be more likely to vote for him if he took action against fathers who don't pay child support.
