

# Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson, Monticello, and the Importance of Words

by Frank Cogliano - June 22, 2018

In January 2000 the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation (the predecessor of today's Thomas Jefferson Foundation) issued a report concerning the allegation that Thomas Jefferson was the father of some or all of the children of Sally Hemings (<https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings-a-brief-account/research-report-on-jefferson-and-hemings>), an enslaved woman at Monticello. A special research committee produced the report. After reviewing the extant evidence relating to the connection between Hemings and Jefferson the committee concluded that there was "a high probability that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings, and that he most likely was the father of all six of Sally Hemings (<https://www.monticello.org/sallyhemings>)'s children appearing in Jefferson's records." Now, as the Thomas Jefferson Foundation opens a new space in Monticello's South Wing dedicated to Sally Hemings's life on the mountain, the Foundation is changing its language on the Hemings-Jefferson connection (<https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings-a-brief-account/monticello-affirms-thomas-jefferson-fathered-children-with-sally-hemings>), eliminating phraseology such as "high probability" and "most likely" in its language concerning the relationship. Rather, it is stating with certainty that Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings's children. As a scholar of Jefferson and Monticello I believe that this is a welcome and important development. I think the use of the language of probability in the original report inadvertently introduced a degree of uncertainty concerning Jefferson's paternity of Hemings's children. This fuelled an intense yet ultimately false "debate" over the matter for nearly two decades, as those committed to denying the connection between Jefferson and Hemings challenged the findings of the original research committee despite the breadth and depth of the evidence in favour of Jefferson's paternity of Hemings's children. This "debate" has created a false equivalence between those who accept that Jefferson and Hemings had a sexual relationship and those who refuse to accept the possibility of such a connection (and see it as an "attack" on Jefferson). To some extent we've been stuck in an endless "did they-or-didn't they?"— feedback loop which has taken our focus away from asking important questions about the lives of all the people – enslaved and free, women and men, black and white – who lived and worked on the Mountain. The acceptance of definitive, clear language by the

Foundation will help us do that. It will not satisfy those who are committed to denying the connection between Jefferson and Hemings, but it will signal to the hundreds of thousands who visit Monticello each year that evidence and scholarship matter.

Accepting that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings's children is not an "attack" on Jefferson. Nor is it giving in to some notion of "political correctness." Rather, it is an acknowledgment and acceptance of historical evidence. It does not diminish Jefferson's many accomplishments and achievements which are of world-historical importance. It also recognizes human beings and their lives are complex, messy, and sometimes contradictory. Since 1923 the Thomas Jefferson Foundation has been committed to twin goals: preservation and education. The preservation of Monticello – one of the world's most special places – is a fantastic achievement. Bricks and mortar make Monticello beautiful but education is why Monticello is so important. Thomas Jefferson understood the importance of scholarship: asking hard questions and going where the evidence leads. He understood that conveying scholarship to future generations – education – is vital to ensure a healthy republic. As its second century looms and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation seeks to recover the experiences of all those who lived and worked on the Mountain it is fulfilling its mission and living up to Jefferson's principles.

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