

# Jefferson's Monticello gives Sally Hemings her place in presidential history

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by Philip Kennicott, *Washington Post*

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You cannot see Thomas Jefferson's Virginia mansion, [Monticello](#), from the small room burrowed into the ground along the south wing of his estate. When the door is closed, you can't see anything at all, because it is a windowless room, with a low ceiling and damp walls.

But this was, very likely, the room inhabited by Sally Hemings, the enslaved woman who bore six of Jefferson's children, a woman about whom little is known, who lived her life as Jefferson's property, was considered his concubine, was a source of scandal and a political liability, and yet who might be considered the first lady to the third president of the United States if that didn't presume her relationship to Jefferson was voluntary.

Last month, Monticello opened that room to the public, with a small exhibition devoted to the life of Hemings and the Hemings family. Reclaiming this space, which previously had been used as a public restroom, marks the completion of a five-year plan called the Mountaintop Project, which has seen significant changes to the beloved estate of the founding father.

Using archaeology and other evidence, Monticello curators have restored Mulberry Row, where enslaved people lived and labored, and made changes (including to the



**STEVE RUARK / THOMAS JEFFERSON FOUNDATION, MONTICELLO**

Bernard Hairston, center in red shirt, of Charlottesville, Va., touring the exhibit about the slaves at Monticello, focusing on Sally Hemings.

NPR

<https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/npr/2018/06/17/620311433/jeffersons-monticello-makes-room-for-sally-hemings/>

# Jefferson's Monticello Makes Room For Sally Hemings

As part of a restoration initiative to interweave Monticello's dynamic history, a new exhibit at Thomas Jefferson's Virginia estate gives humanity to an enslaved woman who bore six of his children.

[MICHEL MARTIN](#) | POSTED ON JUNE 17, 2018, 5:08 AM



*A new exhibition at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello estate in Charlottesville, Va., displays artifacts from Sally Hemings, in her living quarters. Jefferson fathered six of her children. // Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello*

Until now, the slaves who lived at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's Virginia estate, existed largely in the background.

On Saturday, Monticello unveiled new exhibits designed to amplify hundreds of people whose enslavement helped create and run the Founding Father's grandiose home.

One of the most well-known of these slaves was Sally Hemings. She's widely believed to have been mother to six of his children, although that fact was once fiercely [disputed by some](#).

As [NPR reported](#) last year, Christa Dierksheide, a historian for the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello, says it wasn't until the 1990s that Hemings' story was included in the history of Monticello, as the narrative upset the reputation of Jefferson, the man who wrote "all men are created equal."

Before Saturday, visitors could learn about Hemings and tour the living quarters of other slaves. Now, in the newly renovated space believed to be Hemings' room, Monticello sheds light on who she was as a human.

Gayle Jessup White, who helped launch the new exhibits, is a descendant of Sally Hemings' brother and, through another ancestor, of Thomas Jefferson. White says Hemings' room would've

been part of the main house, in a cellar-like area of what the museum calls the South Wing.

"It's not a recreation of what her room would've looked like at the time, but rather, a presentation of Sally Hemings as a fully-dimensional human being: a mother, a sister, a daughter, a world traveler," White says.

Like all of the enslaved people here, White says, Hemings was multi-dimensional. "That's the story that we want the public, our guests, to understand."

Previously, Monticello held two separate tours — one of the house and one of Mulberry Row, where the enslaved people lived and worked. In other words, visitors could decide whether to experience this darker side of history.

But by introducing new exhibits that are interwoven into one tour, Monticello acknowledges the dynamic experience helps complete its history.

"Going forward, guests will have a tour that is all-inclusive, that tells the story not only of Thomas Jefferson and his family but of the enslaved families as well," White says. "It's not just about Thomas Jefferson, it's about the people who made Thomas Jefferson's life possible. And that would've been the enslaved people who kept this plantation running."

Many Americans don't want to confront our country's ugliest period, she says. "But at Monticello we're giving humanity to people long forgotten. And the people to whom we're giving humanity are my people — they're my family."

*NPR's Elizabeth Baker and Martha Wexler produced and edited this story for broadcast.*

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## Monticello recognizes the rest of Thomas Jefferson's children

Our founding father, my 6th great-grandfather, had 6 children with his slave Sally Hemings

<https://www.salon.com/2018/06/16/monticello-recognizes-the-rest-of-jeffersons-children/>

**LUCIAN K. TRUSCOTT IV**

JUNE 16, 2018 12:00PM (UTC)

When my brother Frank and I visited our great aunts Mary Walker and Agnes Randolph at their home in Charlottesville in the early 1950s, they used to load us into the back seat of the family Buick and drive up the mountain to Monticello and drop us off for the day. My aunts had been born at Edgehill, the Randolph family plantation, just a few miles down the mountain. My aunts treated Monticello as the family home, and we were given the run of the place.

We played on our sixth great-grandfather's bed, we ran around upstairs in the unfinished bedrooms and played marbles in the Dome Room. We explored the cave-like work and storage rooms beneath the house, and we crawled out one of the upstairs windows onto the roof and playfully dropped pebbles on tourists as they passed by on the walks below.

If you took a tour of the place back then, you were unlikely to hear the word "slave." Tours made it sound like Jefferson built the place and was the only person living there.

The truth was far different. Jefferson owned as many as 600 slaves during his lifetime, and in the years after he retired to Monticello from the presidency, there were some 100 to 125 slaves living and working at his plantation every day.

Thomas Jefferson's slaves built Monticello. They cleared the land and felled every tree, they sawed and finished every board, they made and laid every brick, they forged and pounded every nail in that house. They planted and harvested his vegetable garden and crops. They made his life at Monticello possible. Without slaves, Thomas Jefferson would not have had the time in the day to write the Declaration of Independence. Without slaves, the White House wouldn't have been built. Neither would the Capitol building. In this and so many other ways, slaves are truly among the Founding Fathers and Founding Mothers of this country, and yet up there at Mr. Jefferson's house, it was as if they never existed.

Tours of the house and grounds at Monticello over the last couple of decades have recognized the lives and work of the enslaved community. I took a tour there a few years ago in mid-winter, with nearly a foot of snow on the ground outside. Our tour guide, William Bergen, had gone into the archives and came up with the number of slaves it had taken to cut and carry the firewood necessary to heat Monticello for a single day. He also pointed out the woodwork that had been done by John Hemings, the brother of Sally Hemings, in Jefferson's bedroom and library, and the furniture he had built that Jefferson designed.

Today at Monticello, the descendants of Jefferson's slaves will have their history formally recognized when a space where slaves lived will be opened to the public. The quarters that were occupied by Sally Hemings will be accessible, much as Jefferson's bedroom has been open to the public all of these years. The space was used for many years as a public restroom until archaeologists and historians at Monticello discovered that it had been the place where Sally Hemings had raised the children she had with Thomas Jefferson.

In conjunction with the opening of the Hemings quarters, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, which owns and operates Monticello, has issued a definitive affirmation that Thomas Jefferson fathered all six of Sally Hemings' children. They are removing qualifiers such as "most likely" from the foundation's previous position on Jefferson's paternity in favor of evidence including Hemings' family oral history, a DNA study carried out in 1998, a written history of Hemings' and Jefferson's son Madison published in an

Ohio newspaper in 1873, and evidence taken from Jefferson's own writings in his "Farm Book" confirming that he was present at Monticello each time Sally conceived.

The Foundation also took what I consider to be the extraordinary step of specifically refuting claims made in letters written by my fourth great-grandfather, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, and my great aunt, Ellen Randolph Coolidge, that Samuel or Peter Carr had fathered Sally's children. The Carr brothers were the sons of Jefferson's best friend Dabney Carr and Jefferson's sister Martha. They were raised at Monticello after their father's untimely death at age 30 and were present on the mountaintop for much of their boyhood.

The Monticello Association, comprised of the white descendants of Jefferson, took the position for more than 100 years that the Carr brothers fathered Sally's children, based on these letters, which were apparently written to cover up Jefferson's paternity. The 1998 DNA study took samples from Carr descendants. No Carr DNA was found in Hemings descendants, conclusively ruling out Peter and Samuel Carr as the fathers of Sally's children.

Thomas Jefferson Randolph lived at Monticello in the last years of Jefferson's life, was close to his grandfather and clearly knew the truth about Sally's children. The letters between him and Ellen Coolidge were lies written in order to cover up Jefferson's paternity, knowing they would become part of the historical record. The white Jefferson descendants in the Monticello Association were only too happy to use them to spread the lie perpetrated by the family. Most historians accepted this version of the story for the next hundred years.

In 1998, during an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show with my Hemings cousins, I invited them to be my guests at the family reunion at Monticello. In May of 1999, about 50 of them joined me and attended all of the family events, including a service at Jefferson's grave. Many white Jefferson descendants are buried there, including my brother and my parents, great grandparents, and great aunts and uncles. One day, I will be buried there alongside the rest of my family.

One of the things my Hemings cousins and I were seeking in attending the family reunions in 1999 and over the next several years was the right to be buried at Monticello in the graveyard, should any of the Hemings family express that desire. This became a key issue for the Monticello Association, and finally, in 2002, they took a vote on

formally admitting our Hemings cousins into the family. They voted 95 to 6 against the Hemings. Five of the six members voting “yes” to admit the Hemings were Truscotts.

My Hemings cousins and I no longer attend the Monticello Association family reunion each year in May, choosing instead to attend Hemings family events, which have been held there several times over the years. My Hemings cousins and I were invited to Monticello for the unveiling of Sally’s quarters this weekend. I will be unable to attend, but many of my cousins and the descendants of other slave families will be honored guests at the unveiling.

Monticello has laid to rest once and for all who fathered Sally’s children. The rest of my white Jefferson cousins can say what they want, but the place where Jefferson lived has recognized what our Hemings cousins have known for more than two centuries. Thomas Jefferson is their great grandfather, just as he is mine.

You can judge him morally as a slave owner and as a man, but the controversy is over. Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings’ children, and Monticello, where they lived and worked, is now as much the family home of my Hemings cousins and all the other slave descendants as it was mine when my Randolph great aunts used to drop off my brother Frank and me there for the day years ago.

Today Monticello is telling the world an uncomfortable truth about our history. It is a glorious day for Monticello, for our family, and for the greater family of all Americans.

## **LUCIAN K. TRUSCOTT IV**

Lucian K. Truscott IV, a graduate of West Point, has had a 50-year career as a journalist, novelist and screenwriter. He has covered stories such as Watergate, the Stonewall riots and wars in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. He is also the author of five bestselling novels and several unsuccessful motion pictures. He has three children, lives on the East End of Long Island and spends his time Worrying About the State of Our Nation and madly scribbling in a so-far fruitless attempt to Make Things Better. He can be followed on Facebook at The Rabbit Hole and on Twitter @LucianKTruscott.

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## Children Of Monticello

<https://www.americanheritage.com/content/children-monticello>

*In Virginia, a quarrel is going on about who can be allowed to lie in a family graveyard. Because the family is Thomas Jefferson's, the outcome of the dispute is important to every American.*

[Lucian K. Truscott IV](#)

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All graveyards are sacred ground, the one at Monticello no more sacred than any other. As an acknowledged descendant of Thomas Jefferson, I have the birthright to be buried in the family graveyard at Monticello near the spot where we buried my father last year and my mother the year before. Yet in the sadness of returning to Monticello time and again over the years to visit the graves of relatives or to bury one of them, even as I have grown older and become more aware of what an intimate and powerful place a family graveyard is, I have not until recently recognized how sad it is for a family with a history reaching back as far as my own, a family to which I am in fact related, not to have a graveyard of its own or the right to share ours. While my fifth great-grandfather and great-grandmother and great-uncles and aunts and my own parents are buried in a family plot visited by more than a half-million people a year, the family of Sally Hemings, with whom Thomas Jefferson had a relationship for 36 years after the death of his wife, has no known graveyard.

Much has been written during the last couple of years about the dispute over whether or not Jefferson fathered his slave Sally Hemings's children. That after 200 years Jefferson's relationship with Hemings remains a "controversy" says a great deal about how short a distance we have come, and it presents his descendants—on both sides of the family—with a challenge for the future. Two hundred years of argument among historians, descendants, and the public have come down to a halfacre of wooded ground on a gently sloping hillside at Monticello, and this is appropriate, because the story of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson has always been about blood and race and land.

Once consigned to a footnote in the history books or at best a few paragraphs in Jefferson biographies, the story of Hemings and him is by now well known, the subject of talk shows, documentaries, even a

mini-series. Yet as familiar as the story of the two may seem, we are only now beginning to agree on a new version of our history. Even as we explore a new understanding of Jefferson the Founding Father and Jefferson the man, the tensions within his family still swirl. The contemporary story of the argument within his family now matters as much as the 200-year-old story of Tom and Sally. This is not just a family squabble. That the stakes are very high is reflected in the story of the two most recent family reunions at Monticello. The last two years have left us with questions that we must answer at the 2001 reunion. When we meet this May, the decisions reached by my side of the family will reverberate far beyond the hotel banquet room in Charlottesville where speeches will be made and votes taken. We all are aware that the world is waiting and will be watching what we say and what we do, as we determine the future of that half-acre of hillside. Monticello is owned and operated by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation; the graveyard, though on the grounds, is independently owned by descendants of Jefferson and administered by their Monticello Association. I am the Jefferson descendant and member of the Association who invited the descendants of Jefferson and Hemings to be guests at the last two Monticello family reunions. I have been a member of the Monticello Association since reaching adulthood 35 years ago. But I didn't invite the descendants of Sally Hemings to be guests at the reunion until the controversy came to a full boil after the release of DNA findings two years ago—and until I met my Hemings cousins in person. When I walked into the studio in Chicago to do The Oprah Winfrey Show in November of 1998,<sup>1</sup> I sat between Oprah and my sister Mary and looked at the audience. The first two rows were filled with more than 25 of them, my cousins. I was overwhelmed by the family resemblance in many faces I was seeing for the first time in my life. I nearly lost it when my cousin Shay Banks-Young came into the studio with cameras running and hugged Mary and me. On the spot, I decided to invite my Hemings cousins to the reunion, and I did it, there on the Oprah show. I have spent the last couple of years trying to get the descendants of Sally Hemings recognized by my family as who they are: descendants of Thomas Jefferson.

**Last year, we buried our father next to his wife and a few feet away from his elder sister. I know where my ancestors are buried going all the way back to Mr. Jefferson himself. But what about Sally Hemings? Where is she buried?**

When my brother and sisters and I walked into the graveyard last May, we could see along its east fence the headstones of five generations of our family. Our great-great-grandfather William Lewis Randolph is buried there, close to our greatuncle Thomas Jefferson Randolph. Our great-grandmother Mary Walker Randolph is buried alongside our great-grandfather William Mann Randolph. (They were second or third cousins, a tendency to marry within the family running through several generations of Randolphs.) Our great-uncle Hollins Nicholas Randolph and his wife, Ginny, are buried in that row, and so are our great-aunt Mary Walker Randolph, whom everyone called Miss Moo, our great-aunt Agnes Dillon Randolph, and our great-aunt Carolina Ramsay Randolph. All of them were born and raised at Edgehill, the plantation near Monticello that Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson's son-in-law, inherited from his father. We buried our aunt Mary Truscott Bruce a few years ago, in 1998 we buried our mother, Anne Harloe Truscott, and last year we buried our father next to his wife and only a few

feet away from his elder sister. I know where my ancestors are buried, going all the way back to Mr. Jefferson himself. But what about Sally Hemings? Where is she buried?

Well, more than 200 years after slaves labored and were born and died at Monticello, the location of the slave graveyard is still unknown. The Monticello historian Cinder Stanton believes Sally Hemings's grave may be on a parcel of land near the University of Virginia Medical School. The lot was sold to Madison and Eston Hemings, Sally's sons, after they were freed upon Jefferson's death, and the 1833 Virginia census reveals that Sally was then still living with them in a house on the property. She is thought to have been buried behind the house, somewhere on the acre her sons owned. Freed slaves usually held no community-owned land that could have been used for a church or a graveyard and thus often buried their dead where they lived. If indeed Sally was interred behind her sons' house, her body today lies beneath the parking lot of a Hampton Inn.

The graveyard at Monticello should properly be called the Owner's Graveyard, or the Master's Graveyard, because the graves within the fence make no mention of, nor do they provide space for, the hundreds of slaves who were owned by Thomas Jefferson (and by his daughters) or these slaves' descendants. Sally is not buried there because none of the slaves or their descendants "enjoy" the same right I do. The graveyard became an issue two years ago, after the death of Robert Cooley, a fourth-generation great-grandson of Thomas Woodson, Sally Hemings's first son.

When Cooley died, his daughter Michele called the then president of the Monticello Association and asked permission to bury her father at Monticello. Robert Cooley had spent his lifetime working to get the descendants of Sally Hemings recognized as descendants of Thomas Jefferson, and it had long been his wish to be laid to rest at Monticello. The president of the Monticello Association sent a brief reply saying no.

I had known Robert Cooley; he had had a distinguished career as a civil rights attorney in Richmond, and when I learned that Michele's request had been turned down, it made me all the more determined to invite the Cooleys, and any other Hemings descendants who wished to attend, to be my guests at the 1999 reunion of the Monticello Association.

Some 35 of them accepted. When they walked through the gate to the graveyard on a warm Sunday morning in May, it was the first time, but certainly not the last, the descendants of Sally Hemings would participate in the annual service paying tribute to Thomas Jefferson.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that the cemetery at Monticello turned into a flash point in a 200-year-old controversy. At first, I blamed racism for the opposition of Monticello Association members to the Hemingses. But over the last two years, my opinion has changed. While racism explains the intransigence of a small percentage of members, it doesn't apply at all to the far larger majority. So if racism isn't to blame, what is?

A family's natural insularity explains part of it, and this is especially true about the graveyard, but solemn attachment to a place, even to a family burial ground, does not explain the visceral and largely negative reaction many in the Monticello Association have had to Hemings membership. Which is why

the history of how the Association has dealt with the issue of who is and isn't part of the Jefferson family is worth exploring.

All the Hemings descendants I have met—and over the last two years I have met hundreds—share a strong oral history, a powerful sense of family going back through the generations. As my cousin Shay Banks-Young has said to those who have questioned her being descended from Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, “No one has to tell me who I am descended from. I know who I am.” But as strongly connected as the Hemingses are to one another and to their shared history, neither they nor any other descendants of slaves from Monticello have had the same sort of intimate tie to the place that we whose ancestors are buried just down the hill from Mulberry Row, the dirt path where slave quarters once stood, have enjoyed.

For two centuries, the Hemings family history has been ignored and denigrated outright. Fifteen years ago, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation began to study the history of slave life at Monticello. This had been a serious curatorial omission: The routine at Monticello during Jefferson's time had been dominated by the lives of slaves. There were hundreds of days when the estate's population consisted of 3 or 4 white people and more than 100 slaves. By the time our Hemings cousins accompanied my wife and daughter and me to the 1999 reunion, the issue of whether or not to allow descendants of Sally Hemings to become members of the Monticello Association had already been simmering for a year. In 1998 it had been announced that there would be a DNA test seeking to prove or disprove the Hemings claim that Jefferson was the father of Sally's children.

Most people knew from the beginning that the results would not have the same finality as those in a conventional DNA test without intervening generations. But everyone also knew that if the test came back with positive results, it would provide powerful support to the Hemings families' claims.

The Monticello Association met in May 1998, when the test results were due to be released within six months, and Robert Gillespie, then the Association's president, announced that if the DNA tests were “authoritatively established, the Association will have no option but to allow membership” of the Hemingses. I was shocked by that negative choice of language. It could easily have been phrased differently—for example: “If the DNA results are at all positive, we shall be pleased to recognize descendants of Sally Hemings as descendants of Thomas Jefferson and welcome them into the association.”

The statement that the Association “will have no option” implied that the Association would be legally constrained by its constitution and bylaws to accept Hemings descendants as members. This made me wonder what exactly were the criteria for membership. So I looked up the constitution and bylaws, and sure enough, I found this on the first page: “ARTICLE III – Membership . . . Any lineal descendant of Thomas Jefferson who applies for membership, and annually pays dues as stated in the By-Laws of this Association, shall be a Regular Member of the Association. . . .” Only those 33 of the 93 words in that section of the article address membership criteria; the rest of the paragraph was largely concerned with the payment of dues.

Until Hemings descendants began applying, membership was confirmed or denied through a loosely run honor system. Members like myself have not been required to provide any documentation whatsoever, nor was I required to produce any when I registered my daughter as a “Regular Member” of the Association. After Lilly was born in 1994, I simply wrote “Lilly Randolph Truscott” on my annual dues

statement under “Births,” added her birthdate, and mailed in our dues. I realized that if I wrote “Daisy Truscott” on my next dues statement, one of our cats would become a member too.

Why are these stipulations so lax? The constitution and bylaws were amended by a ballot of all regular members in 1952 to entitle spouses of lineal descendants to burial in the Monticello graveyard. This was a year when black citizens of Virginia were excluded not only from private organizations like country clubs (or the Monticello Association) but from hotels, motels, and restaurants. Their children couldn't attend public schools with white children, nor could they attend Jefferson's University of Virginia. In 1953 it would have been inconceivable that a day would come when Hemings descendants might apply for membership.

Most of the members at the 1998 reunion weren't alarmed by the DNA tests. They maintained that one or both of the “Carr nephews” had fathered Sally's children. Samuel and Peter Carr were the sons of Jefferson's sister, Martha Jefferson Carr, and they were taken in briefly by Jefferson after their father died in 1773. Their reputation as passed down to me was that of “rascals,” and their proximity to Sally Hemings when they visited Monticello as young men is often cited to support the theory that one or the other or both of them fathered her children. Perhaps this explains why the executive committee felt confident enough to seek a legal opinion on membership of Hemings descendants in advance of the DNA results.

**Most members at the 1998 reunion weren't alarmed by the upcoming DNA tests. They maintained that one or both of the “Carr nephews” had fathered Sally's children.**

In November 1998 the journal Nature printed those results. A laboratory in Great Britain compared Y-chromosome blood samples from lines of the Thomas Woodson and Eston Hemings families with Y-chromosome samples from family lines of Jefferson's uncle, Field Jefferson. The Y chromosome is passed down virtually unchanged from father to son and so is an almost certain indicator of paternity. Descendants of Field Jefferson had been sought out because Thomas Jefferson and his wife, Martha, had no sons who survived to adulthood, and Thomas and Field shared the same Y chromosome from their common ancestors.

In the case of the Woodson family, there was no DNA match with Field Jefferson's descendants. But the lab did find a match for a male descendant of Eston Hemings, establishing that he at least was fathered by a “Jefferson male.” The DNA samples of the Hemings descendants also were compared to Y-chromosome samples from the descendants of the “rascally” Carrs. That test came back negative. The Jefferson male most likely to have fathered Sally's children was Thomas himself. By the time more than 30 Hemings descendants walked through the gates of the Monticello graveyard in May 1999, an American history Rubicon had been reached, if not crossed: Now it was impossible to consider the towering figure of Jefferson without also considering Sally Hemings.

The reunion that year was covered by a throng of reporters that rivaled the media mob outside the O. J. Simpson trial. Having Hemings descendants at the reunion alarmed many members, and the presence of so many TV cameras and reporters added tension. Most Association members on the lawn

were clustered tightly, warily glancing at the invaders. There were several regrettable incidents of outright hostility, when members made racist comments to Hemings descendants.

When the Association's Sunday afternoon "business meeting" was gavelled open, the first motion from the floor was to dismiss Hemings descendants and other guests from the meeting and have the membership immediately go into "executive session" to discuss the question of membership for Hemings descendants. Several members rose to oppose the motion. One of us pointed out that nobody had yet finished lunch, and it would be unseemly to banish people, including our own husbands and wives, not to mention the Hemingses, in the middle of a meal.

The motion was defeated by a comfortable margin, surprising me and most probably the outgoing president of the Association, Mr. Gillespie, who the afternoon before had told the press he was certain that many members opposed allowing Hemingses into the Association.

Several Hemings descendants then rose to address the Association. One of them, Mary Jefferson, startled several members when she said it was not only they who were considering the issue of membership; she and other Hemings descendants were considering whether or not this was the kind of organization they'd want to join.

Near the end of the meeting, Mr. Gillespie announced that the executive committee had met earlier and appointed a membership advisory committee to consider the criteria for membership and the issue of whether or not descendants of Sally Hemings were also descendants of Thomas Jefferson; the new committee would issue its report before the next May and the 2000 reunion. James Truscott, my uncle, was elected the new president of the Association, and he gavelled the meeting to a close as the media hordes descended to feed on its corpse.

In January 2000, before the membership advisory committee had really begun its work, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, which owns and runs Monticello, did a remarkable about-face and issued a report that concluded that "although paternity cannot be established with absolute certainty, our evaluation of the best evidence available suggests the strong likelihood that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had a relationship over time that led to the birth of one, and perhaps all, of the known children of Sally Hemings."

Shortly afterward, the membership advisory committee hastily convened and decided it needed more time to issue its report. My uncle James announced that the committee would issue an interim report that year but that both the committee and the Association would wait until 2001 to consider a final report.

Even so, by the time we gathered at Monticello last May, it seemed that a good deal of the advisory committee's work had already been done. The Foundation report had not been researched and prepared by historians unknown to the Association. Although they've shared a sort of church-state arrangement over the years, the officers and directors of the Monticello Association and of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation have enjoyed a close relationship. The current president of the Memorial Foundation, Dan Jordan, was made an honorary Association member some time ago, and the Foundation hosts the annual reunion reception at Monticello with the friendly cooperation of the Association.

Between invitations issued by the association and me, about 50 Hemings descendants and family members attended the annual reunion in 2000, along with more than 100 Association members and their families. The scene at the Saturday-evening reception at Monticello was remarkably different from that of the year before. There were no television cameras and only a few print journalists. Members and guests circulated through the house and grounds, chatting together and gathering near several bars that served, appropriately, wine from France and the state of Virginia. (Jefferson was

among the first enthusiasts of French wine in this country, setting an example by having his slaves plant a small vineyard of his own along the south-facing hillside just below Mulberry Row.) I looked across the lawn and saw a perfectly ordinary Monticello reunion.

Michie Tavern, just down the road from Monticello, has been the site of recent annual reunion dinners. In 1999 most members wolfed down a piece of fried chicken and a few bites of salad and then bolted for the door. Last year's dinner was relaxed, friendly, and long. It made me wonder what lay in store for the annual business meeting the next day. I had expected that the publication of the Memorial Foundation report would set off a flurry of countervailing arguments, but I was wrong. Only one member of the Monticello Association protested. John Works held a closed, invitation-only press conference to announce the formation of a separate foundation of his own, the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society, which was founded, I gathered from the reports of those who were allowed entry (I was excluded along with several Hemings cousins), to take issue with the report of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. Works had signed on to his foundation board several Jefferson scholars as well as a coterie of what can only be called anti-Hemings activists, and he had invited several of them to attend the business meeting of the Monticello Association.

My uncle James and the executive committee asked two of the authors of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation report to address us on how its findings had been reached. When Dianne Swann-Wright and Cinder Stanton, historians from the Memorial Foundation, finished speaking, they found themselves under a barrage of attacks—not from members of the Association but by invitees from Works's brand-new foundation. At least one of his guests accused Stanton of being a "liar," and the rhetoric ratcheted upward from there. Finally my uncle James called the proceedings to a close. From the back of the banquet room, one of the Association members rose to thank the Foundation historians for their hard work and their excellent presentation of their findings. There was an extended round of applause from members and guests, making the unstated point that the hostility expressed to Stanton and SwannWright was shared by few in the Association.

My uncle James then introduced White McKenzie Wallenborn, M.D., the only member of the Memorial Foundation committee to file a minority report in opposition to the full committee's report. Wallenborn took issue with the Foundation report almost across the board, nibbling away at its edges for nearly an hour, until finally he took on Dan Jordan, the Foundation's president, and his "suppression" of Wallenborn's minority report. Concluding his attack, Wallenborn acknowledged that Jordan had agreed to include his minority report along with the majority's and post it on the Foundation's Web site. Reassuring the members that he and Jordan were "still friends," Wallenborn then said, "Oh, by the way, let me read you one little comment. Now this is Dan Jordan talking to Ken Burns, just a few years before the DNA study: 'There are oral traditions that are in conflict. There are many blacks today who believe they are the descendants of this possible union of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. On the other hand, there is another oral tradition that would say that the paternity rested with others than Thomas Jefferson. And our belief is, as one of the contemporaries of Jefferson said, it would be morally impossible for that relationship to have occurred.'"

At the close of Wallenborn's remarks, I rose to ask a question: "You quoted Dan Jordan, and I think you quoted him approvingly, as saying that Jefferson's fathering Sally's children would have been a moral impossibility. Would it also have been a moral impossibility for Mr. Jefferson to have been a slave owner, for example?"

Wallenborn began stammering, citing the fact that George Washington and James Madison were also slave owners. I said my question wasn't about others; it was about Jefferson.

Wallenborn replied: "Jefferson was probably the best friend that the American slaves had at that time." He ran through a litany of Jefferson's equivocations about slavery over his lifetime, and I rose again to ask him, "Between the two, having an affair with a slave and owning slaves, which is the biggest and worst moral impossibility?"

"I couldn't answer that."

"Well, you just did," I said.

Eventually we heard from V. R. ("Shack") Shackelford III, the chairman of the membership advisory committee. He summarized the issues facing the membership committee and referred us to the written version of the interim report, which was made available after the meeting and can be read on the Web at [www.monticello-assoc.org](http://www.monticello-assoc.org).

The room fell silent as he closed his remarks: "In designing what sort of association we want to be, I suggest that it might be helpful to stand back from all of the details and consider how Thomas Jefferson himself might feel about the current debate. In considering his own ancestry, some of which was unknown to him, Thomas Jefferson noted that his family 'could trace their pedigree far back in England and Scotland, to which let everyone ascribe the faith and merit as he chooses.' Jefferson's thoughts on his ancestry leave us with the question of whether it is possible to have an association whose members can trace their pedigree far back to Thomas Jefferson to which everyone can ascribe the faith and merit as he or she chooses. Please help our committee answer that question. Thank you very much."

**At the end of the 2000 reunion, there seemed little left to wonder about. While the arguments over the "facts" will doubtless continue forever, the issue confronted by the members of the Monticello Association was clear.**

Shackelford's quotation of Jefferson seemed remarkable to me until I read the full text of the membership committee's interim report. It announced that a legal opinion had been sought the previous year by the outgoing Association president, Robert Gillespie. Gillespie had turned to Professor Denis J. Brion of the Washington and Lee University Law School. Brion, after 12 months' work, had not yet issued his new opinion, but already the membership committee was moving forward, considering the issues.

The primary justification Gillespie had used for denying Hemings descendants membership in the Association had been that "they do not enjoy the same paper trail we do." Which is to say, they cannot trace their heritage back to Thomas Jefferson because they cannot produce birth certificates naming him father of Thomas Woodson, Madison Hemings, or Eston Hemings, universally acknowledged as children of Sally Hemings. In addressing this issue, the membership committee recognized that there was a reason Thomas, Madison, and Eston did not "enjoy" that paper trail. Since the laws of slavery forbade slaves to learn to read or write, it was nearly impossible for them to record the births of their children. Although the membership committee has not yet announced its findings on this point, it seems unlikely that its members will make an argument that we are justified today in enforcing slavery laws in order to deny the descendants of slaves the ability to establish who they are.

And so, at the close of the 2000 Monticello Reunion, there seemed little left to wonder about. While the arguments over the “facts” and the “evidence” will doubtless go on for yet another two centuries, the issue confronted by the members of the Monticello Association was clear. In the absence of absolute “evidence”—incontrovertible DNA, or birth certificates, or a written admission of paternity by Jefferson—but in the presence of so much circumstantial and oral-history evidence, what is the right thing for us to do?

To me, it’s found in the gist of what Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence. If indeed all of us are “created equal,” then the only way to make judgments between us is by measuring what is fair and what is not. There is no disagreement that Jefferson’s wife, Martha, and Sally Hemings were half-sisters; both had the same father, John Wayles. So all the members of the Monticello Association are descended from Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings’s halfsister, Martha. That means that the members of the Monticello Association are cousins of every descendant of Sally Hemings, because we share a maternal great-great-great (etc., etc.) grandfather, Mr. Wayles.

This much about us descendants of slaves and descendants of slave owners is uncontested. Yet if we cannot agree absolutely about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, what is left for us to do? Two hundred years after the so-called controversy first raged, will we members of the Monticello Association act fairly and embrace our cousins, or won’t we?

I pray that we will be fair to our cousins and to ourselves and to our history and to the memory not only of Thomas Jefferson but of Sally Hemings, and that we will do the right thing. Standing together, we are ancient evidence of the lie at the heart of racism, because in the words of Thomas Jefferson, we were created equal.

We are Jefferson’s children. We are a family.