

## Another Historical Perspective: The Hemingses of Monticello

Thomas Jefferson is revered among our nation's founding fathers as the architect of the Declaration of Independence. He most famously authored the quintessentially American axiom *all men are created equal*, and yet he was one of many southerners who owned slaves for the entirety of his life. Perhaps foremost among the founders, the complexities and contradictions of his character and intellect continue to intrigue us today, defying any complete explanation and provoking fulsome debate. Any student of American history must engage with this debate. In her groundbreaking work *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, historian and legal scholar Annette Gordon-Reed brings a new perspective and depth to these attempts to reconcile a uniquely complex character. In this impressive work of scholarship she helps us to better understand a well-studied founding father; most impressively, she accomplishes this through a comprehensive and deeply felt examination of lives too long left unexamined.

As historian Gordon S. Wood observes, "Although Thomas Jefferson has democratic credentials... he was a slaveholder who failed to free most of his slaves" (1). Indeed, toward the end of his life, he did emancipate some of the men, women, and children he held in bondage, but not all of them. Those slaves whom he freed were largely members of the Hemings family, Jefferson's property by right of his

marriage to Martha Wayles. We are left to wonder at the moral and intellectual principles that led Jefferson to such perplexing and paradoxical half-measures.

In *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, Annette Gordon-Reed takes on this essential paradox of Jefferson's character but turns the focus from Jefferson and puts it fully upon the lives of the slaves he owned. Gordon-Reed tells us the story of the Hemings family, a family remarkable in many ways but also tragically typical of their times. Ultimately, it is a story deeply revealing of the place of race and of the institution of slavery in the early years of the nation.

Gordon-Reed provides an interesting alternative to the usual story about slavery students learn and discuss in school. She provides the reader with in-depth knowledge derived from primary documents such as Thomas Jefferson's *Farm Book*—a log or journal in which he meticulously recorded information about his slaves. She uses letters written by contemporaries Abigail and John Adams to describe the lives of Jefferson, his family, and his slaves in France, and she uses research by other scholars to construct a complex and provocative story about the Hemings family's life in Monticello. As a scholar with a strong basis in law, she also provides us with an interesting story of the origins and implications race law in America.

Depending on which lens is chosen to analyze this period and the historical actors involved, there are many mysteries to uncover and to reconsider surrounding the organization of class and race within this context. Although slavery involved the degradation of a people and established a foundation for the racism we still battle today, there were constant social negotiations we don't discuss as frequently as we

could. Annette Gordon-Reed does this admirably in *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. Learning about the lives of the Hemingses also allows us to think about Jefferson as a person who clearly had inner struggles with the decision to have slaves. Gordon-Reed provides a typically nuanced characterization of Jefferson's psychology, "Though he understood viscerally that slavery was wrong, he resigned himself to the institution and rationalized that emancipation was best left to future generations, his revolutionary generation having done its part by creating the United States of America...With the help of architecture and landscaping, Jefferson arranged his personal life to minimize his entanglement with African slavery" (112). He surrounded himself with slaves he was able to treat differently, and he helped shape a different reality with them (113). Equally significantly, however, Gordon-Reed's account allows us to understand how the Hemings family was able to carve their own history and fight against slavery.

Elizabeth Hemings accompanied Martha Eppes as her slave when Martha Eppes married John Wayles. From this union came the younger Martha Wayles, whom Jefferson would later marry. Martha's half siblings Robert, James, Thenia, Critta, Peter, and Sally Hemings were the children of Elizabeth Hemings and John Wayles. There is not much documentation about Elizabeth Hemings' duties, but it is believed that she was a nurse to Martha (77). "The laws of marriage united the Wayleses and Jeffersons. The law of property and slavery brought Elizabeth Hemings and all her children, present and future, into that union" (102).

The two Hemings family members that were the closest to Jefferson were Sally Hemings and James Hemings. For example, they are the two slaves that were with Jefferson in Paris. They had the opportunity to live in another country and were able to see what many other colonists did not have the opportunity to see. Living in Paris, they had the opportunity to gain their freedom. However, they returned to Virginia with Jefferson. According to Madison Hemings, Sally Hemings' son with Jefferson, Sally and Jefferson had a conversation about how she wanted to stay in France, and he wanted her to return. "To induce her to do so he promised her extraordinary privileges, and made a solemn promise that her children should be freed at age of twenty-one years" (326). She returned to Virginia with him. What is most interesting is the fact that they did not choose to leave Jefferson and his family while in France. In the end, Jefferson only freed five members of the Hemings family in his will: Burrell Colbert, John Hemings, Joe Fossett, Madison and Eston Hemings (647). "In this document Jefferson fulfilled the promise made to Sally Hemings thirty-seven years before in Paris. The emancipation of their two oldest children, Beverly and Harriet, had taken place in secret" (648). Sally had been living as a freed slave since Jefferson's death. Sally was not formally granted her freedom by Jefferson upon his death and would be legally freed by Martha Randolph (657).

The difficulty of reconstructing the hidden history of a slave family, particularly in comparison to a powerful and influential family such as the Jeffersons is evident in Gordon-Reed's work. And yet these families were not entirely distinct. It is a basic point made many times throughout her book that personal as well as sexual relationships often bound the enslaved to their masters, and this was clearly

the case with respect to Jefferson and the Hemingses. Although this is increasingly well recognized by the general public, this reality further complicates our contemporary notions of slavery and class during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. With respect to Thomas Jefferson's amorous relationship with Sally Hemings', Gordon-Reed writes, "Slave owners rarely acknowledged their sexual activity with slave women, and the women themselves effectively had no voice. So getting at the nature of the relationship between masters and their slave families is a delicate business" (106). Yet, at the time it was widely known and accepted that owners had sexual relationships with slave women in their communities (86).

Thus the fact that the Hemingses were related to the people who held them in bondage was in many ways typical. Gordon-Reed discusses the complexities of relationships and negotiations made among the Jeffersons and the Hemingses. "The Hemingses were not only part white; their white 'parts' came from the master's family. Naturally, the other slaves at Monticello might have assumed that this counted for something, influencing the way they and others saw the Hemingses, and the way the family saw itself" (29). Indeed, this complex familial relationship appears to have set the Hemingses apart from many of the other slaves.

Within the system of slavery existed a hierarchy often based on racial lineage and physical appearance. Reed-Gordon describes how Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson's eldest grandson, stated that the Hemingses were favored because of their "superior intelligence, capacity and fidelity to trust" (29). However, Gordon-Reed suggests that, "There is no cause to doubt that the Hemingses were indeed intelligent, but we should also consider what role their appearance and the

knowledge of their [multi-racial] genetic makeup may have played in his assessment of them. Randolph was likely influenced by the common view among whites that intermixture with white people eugenically improved black people..." (29).

In many ways the Hemings family carved their own space at Monticello – within the context of their lives as enslaved people. For example, the Hemings men did not work in the fields; they mostly spent their time in the main house. Martin, Robert and James also were allowed to come and go largely as they pleased, just as long as they were available to Jefferson when he needed them (135). "Each man had some degree of freedom within his enslaved status. All were allowed to travel by themselves, to learn trades, to hire themselves out to employers of their own choice, and to keep their own wages (115). As Gordon-Reed states, in a sense, Jefferson treated them as lower-class white males (115). Martin Hemings was able to control and minimize the encounter with other slave owners, as he made it clear that he would only work for Jefferson. "Hemings constructed himself along the lines of a contract employee of one person, rather than an enslaved man."(123) James Hemings would travel to France with Jefferson. There he would learn to speak French. He would be able to see the perspective of another culture in another country, which many colonists lacked.

On the other hand, Jefferson did not provide the same opportunities to the Hemings women. Gordon-Reed suggests that Jeffersons provided opportunities to the women that were gender appropriate by eighteenth century standards (116). "The women were exempted from work in the fields, even when everyone else had to go there during harvest time, they instead performed chores not unlike many

white women were doing—sewing, mending clothes, looking after children, and baking cakes” (116). The Hemings women were also considered to be notably beautiful and desirable (120).

Documentation of slavery from the perspective of slaves is very limited. Much of what is known about slaves is taken from documents written from the perspective of slave owners and other people. That does not mean that there is no access to the slaves’ perspectives. Such historical records exist, but they are uncommon. One of the reasons this is so is that many slaves did not know how to read or write. Perhaps more importantly, Gordon-Reed notes, “The things most real and important about slaves’ lives were things most hidden from the white world” (30).

Clearly the Hemingses living in Monticello serving Jefferson and his family were treated differently than most of the other slaves they lived with. They had different responsibilities and opportunities that other slaves did not have. As a result, other slaves saw this different treatment and understood that the Hemingses had advantages that they perhaps did not have. However, it is important to remember that mixed race slaves had to endure harsh treatment and lives, as did slaves that were not of mixed race (48). Jefferson provided the Hemings’ family with opportunities that he did not provide for other slaves. He also kept a few of them very close to him and trusted them immensely.

As a teacher, reflecting upon slavery is often difficult and painful. Students must understand that race once functioned in this country to permit one person to be held as property of another. And yet, as a teacher, it is exactly this violence and

evil in the world from which we typically attempt to shelter our students. Similarly as a nation, how can we come to terms with the painful legacy of this historical period without in some way resurrecting the traumas we have tried for so long to bury? In relation to Gordon-Reed's work we must also ask, "How does a scholar go about reconstructing a history that others have so often and for so long attempted to bury?" Gordon-Reed deserves the highest praise for the quality of the book she has written and for the depth of research that supports it. She reveals much about author of our nation's most democratic principles by telling us about the people he enslaved—by refusing to overlook a family too long overlooked by history. In the process she also provides an invaluable account of the place of race and of the institution of slavery in the early years of the nation. It is a book that will challenge the preconceptions of all who read it.

## Bibliography

Gordon-Reed, Annette. The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family. New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2008.

Wood, Gordon S. The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin. New York: Penguin Press, 2004.