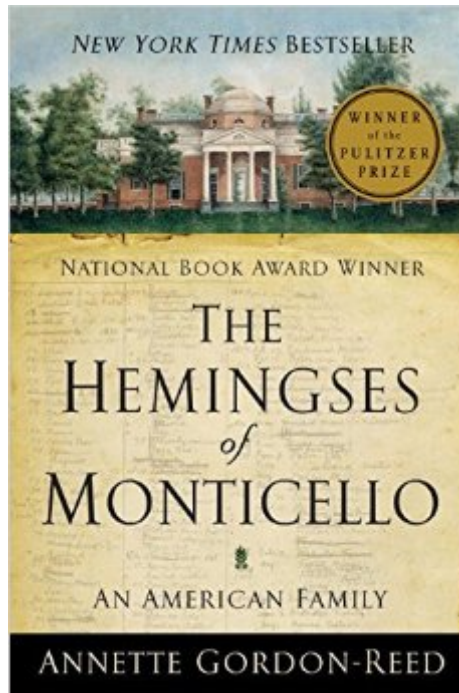


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The Hemingses Of Monticello: An American Family



Synopsis

Winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize: "A commanding and important book." —Jill Lepore, *The New Yorker* This epic work named a best book of the year by the Washington Post, Time, the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, and a notable book by the New York Times tells the story of the Hemingses, whose close blood ties to our third president had been systematically expunged from American history until very recently. Now, historian and legal scholar Annette Gordon-Reed traces the Hemings family from its origins in Virginia in the 1700s to the family's dispersal after Jefferson's death in 1826. 37 illustrations

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

My parents took me to Monticello as a young girl, and I have been fascinated with Thomas Jefferson ever since. I was even more intrigued when I read about his relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. Annette Gordon-Reed gives us a scholarly and extensive effort in her latest book, *The Hemings of Monticello*. This book is not just about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, but much, much more. Gordon-Reed starts with the Hemings matriarch. Elizabeth Hemings, the mother of Sally, had six children by John Wayles. Wayles was the father of Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha. When Wayles died, his estate (including many of his slaves) passed to Martha and Thomas Jefferson. In this way, the Hemings found themselves at Monticello. The story of Jefferson and Sally Hemings is pretty well known. They allegedly had six children together, four of who survived childhood. Oral history claims that in a "treaty" made between Jefferson and Hemings

while they were in France, he agreed to free any children he and Hemings had when they became adults. Jefferson did free all four children (two of them in his will). Three of the four passed into the white world once they left Monticello. What is ironic is that Heming's sons were said to look more like Jefferson and had more common interests (building and music) than his white grandsons. But much of this book belongs to Sally's older brothers, Robert and James. These two slaves were extremely close to Jefferson, and traveled extensively with him. James even accompanied Jefferson to Paris, where Jefferson paid to have him trained as a master chef. Both men were eventually freed by Jefferson in the 1790s. There is a surprising amount of information on many members of the Hemings clan.

Opening disclaimer: Annette Gordon-Reed is my faculty colleague at NY Law School, and I originally introduced her to Bob Weil, the editor at W.W. Norton who contracted with her to produce this book. As a result, I had an opportunity to read it in final galleys this summer prior to publication. What I have to say is naturally biased by my respect and affection for my faculty colleague. I went out on a limb to make the introduction after reading an early draft of Prof. Gordon-Reed's first book on Jefferson and Hemings, which was subsequently published by the University of Virginia Press and established her credentials as a historian of the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings. This book is a logical outgrowth of the earlier one. I think anybody interested in Jefferson or this period in American history owes it to themselves to read both books. The first is a critical dissection of the way historians had dealt (or avoided dealing) with the rumored Jefferson-Hemings connection, and is a masterpiece of investigative history. This new volume is a masterpiece of group biography, taking the Hemings as an interesting family, most of whose details were difficult to discover, and creating an engrossing account of their lives as part of the extended Jefferson community at Monticello. Jefferson began building his dream house there about the time he married Martha Wayles, and Elizabeth Hemings and several of her children came to Monticello as slaves as part of Martha's inheritance when her father died. Sally Hemings was a daughter of Elizabeth and John Wayles, Martha's father, and thus was the half-sister of Jefferson's wife. From there the complications of family interrelationships build and compound on each other.

"The Hemingses of Monticello" is part biography and part social comment. It is, most of all, a condemnation of slavery. The Hemings family, about whom there is comparatively little documented history, is utilized primarily as supporting actors to demonstrate both the logistics and psychological aspects of slavery. That said, the book is thoroughly researched and very readable. The author,

Annette Gordon-Reed (AGR), presents many fascinating glimpses into Thomas Jefferson's life and habits. Ultimately though, the primary focus of the book seems to be an attempt to define the presumed differentiation in Jefferson's relationships with, and nurturing of, his white children and grandchildren versus that of his presumed black children. The premise of the book is based on Jefferson's paternity of the Hemings children, which, though not scientifically certain, is believed to be likely. DNA testing conducted in 1998 established that an individual carrying the male Jefferson Y chromosome fathered Eston Hemings, the youngest of Sally Hemings children. Although there were approximately 25 adult male Jeffersons who carried this particular chromosome living in Virginia at that time, the study concludes that "the simplest and most probable" conclusion was that Thomas Jefferson had fathered Eston Hemings. A research committee formed by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation indicated a high probability that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Eston Hemings, and that he was perhaps the father of all six of Sally Hemings' children listed in Monticello records. AGR presents Jefferson's paternity of all of Sally Hemings children as an established fact, and then critiques his character on the basis of his perceived treatment of these children.

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