

Thomas Jefferson's Secret Life



Sally Hemmings
portrait by Barbara Kiwak



Thomas Jefferson

I was born in 1743 and I completed The Declaration of Independence in 1776 when I was thirty three years old. I passed away on July 4th 1826 at the age of eight three, exactly 50 years to the day of its signing. The phrase “All men are created equal and are endowed with certain inalienable rights, among these being life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” was something I had to struggle to include, as the founding fathers were very much opposed to it. I wanted this central truth to be more specific, “All men, women and children regardless of race, color or creed”. After much intense negotiation I had to settle for the former generic meaning although this pronouncement has long since been considered to be the most well-known sentence ever written in the English language. For the most part of my adult life I owned many slaves, one of which would eventually become my dearest confidant and lifelong companion. Her name was Sally Hemings. (1773-1835) Needless to say this was quite a contradiction. This is our story and I hope to shed light on it. Sally and I had six children together who were considered to be of mixed race, four of which survived to maturity. She was the second and last women I would ever love.

When my wife Martha and I were married she came to live with me at my beloved plantation home Monticello. Upon her father’s passing shortly thereafter, she inherited all his many slaves and a large property of some 1300 acres which comprised his plantation. Sally

Hemings was one of Martha's six young slave siblings who came to live with us along with their half white slave mother Elizabeth. They were actually Martha's half brothers and sisters being they had the same father. Although personal relationships between whites and blacks could not be acknowledged in those days Martha, loved these siblings dearly and did not want to be separated from them. For this reason they came to live with us. Sally eventually grew to be a beautiful, well-spoken woman who was the haunting image of my dear wife Martha who had passed away at the untimely age of thirty three. I loved Mrs. Jefferson deeply and I felt my life was over without her. Ironically, on her death bed, she made me promise never to remarry and as things turned out it was a promise I could not break, even if I wanted to and I did eventually want to. I am sure Martha would have wanted me too as well, given the circumstances which I will relate to you now.

In those days we cherished every moment of life and equally so those we loved, being as we all had much firsthand experience as to the fragility of life. We tried to have as many children as possible for that was the only way we could be assured of having a few survive to maturity and eventually be fortunate enough to have children and possibly grandchildren to protect and care for us in our later years. We lived at a period in time when the average life expectancy was in the mid-thirties due to many diseases which have long since been eradicated. Only two of Martha's and my six children lived to maturity and one died at the age of 25. Only our daughter Patsy survived me.

I was, in all sincerity, a spiritually minded and moral person. I believed in Divine Order and its resultant cause and effect. I was a devoted student of John Locke; one of the more prominent English metaphysicians who would later shape the life and spiritually advanced wisdom of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I believed slavery was a miscarriage of justice that would inflict retribution on many generations to come. Although I did own slaves I considered them to be my extended family for reasons I will discuss later. I never sold and thereby separated loved ones from each other. I knew this was the true meaning of "What God hath joined together let no man put asunder". It was a common practice among slave owners to break up families who were joined together by the bonds of love for financial gain. This was something I never allowed. If a slave were born at Monticello they stayed the rest of their natural life unless they decided they wanted to leave or if the general slave population wanted them to leave. At times some did want to be with others they loved who lived elsewhere. Every effort was made to facilitate such desires. It was a cruel world away from Monticello as slaves were routinely seized, captured and sold **by** opportunists who sought to gain from this inhuman and ungodly scourge upon humanity.

I always understood slavery was doomed to extinction and I was able to lay the groundwork for its eventual demise by means of the Constitution which I was given the responsibility of creating. For the first time in the history of humanity, freedom of speech, freedom to worship as one pleased and personal freedom in general were guaranteed by our Constitution

and became the law of the land. Can you imagine freedom guaranteed by law, although a blind eye was turned when it came to slavery as well as equality for women, both of which would eventually have to be reckoned with? Up to this point personal freedom was something that was spoken of by prophets and philosophers but was never written into the law of the land for the protection of its citizens. I knew at the time I authored this generic phrase in the constitution, it would take many generations before “all men were created equal” would be interpreted as “all men, women and children of all race, color and creed.” Yet, I had set in motion something revolutionary in the history of mankind and in doing so I became quite a controversial figure.

I accomplished much in my lifetime and the catalog of my achievements is stunning in breadth and depth. I was a lawyer, architect, violinist, inventor, a state legislator, a Governor, an Ambassador, a Secretary of State, a university president, a Vice President and the third President of the United States. As you already know, I was the principal architect of Declaration of Independence which was my crowning achievement. I wanted to end slavery but gave up the fight in order to be elected President. I was responsible for the Louisiana Purchase which doubled the size of the United States. After retiring from public service in 1810 I devoted much of my time to establishing the University of Virginia. President Kennedy would later pay homage to me when he described an event honoring a group of Nobel Laureates as “the most extraordinary collection of human knowledge gathered together at the White House since Thomas Jefferson dined here alone”. I was considered a polymath who also spoke five languages. In spite of all my wisdom, knowledge, experience and influential friends, when I passed on I was \$100,000 in debt.

Although Sally was in her teens when we began our thirty eight year relationship, I eventually grew to love her very deeply even though I was thirty years older than her. At the time I was living in France serving as the American Ambassador. The year was 1787 she made the voyage to help care for my young children by my wife Martha who had passed away in 1782. I arranged for Sally to be trained in all the fashions of the day, dressmaking, sewing, hair design and all niceties that France had to offer so that she might become an able governess to a proper young lady. In the process she became a proper young lady herself. Her brother James was already with me in France having come there to learn the art of creating French cuisine. I soon found myself in the uncompromising position of becoming attached to beautiful young women whom our society back home in Virginia considered to be a lowly slave girl. It should be understood as long as Sally and James were living on French soil they were free according to French law but they both chose to return to Monticello with me and resume their lives as so called “slaves”. This alone should attest to the fact that our lives were harmonious and intertwined with familial feelings. It was considered to be quite a privilege to live and work under the protection of such an honored statesmen as myself. I wanted to be able to declare my love for Sally and to experience the world with her but as a

future President of the United States who would hold many different positions in government throughout the years to come; it was absolutely out of the question. There was an unwritten law at that period in time which said it was permissible to have a slave mistress but it was not acceptable to acknowledge any sort of relationship or feelings of love which may have existed. I was therefore entangled in the hypocrisy of a doomed culture. I had to suffer its interminable punishment in order to fulfill my obligations to my country, one of which was to see that this sort of prejudice would come to an eventual end. I was sure I could be a continual force for change by accepting higher office and it was my destiny to do so. All through my many years in Washington my heart ached for my two families back in Virginia, one of which I could acknowledge and one I could not. The fact that Sally was three quarters white meant our children were seven eighths white, but the law was clear in as far as anyone who had a trace of African blood was considered a slave to be denied freedom regardless of the fairness of their skin. Sally herself could have easily passed for white. Nonetheless, the task of being Washington hostess on my behalf fell to my daughter Patsy, my daughter by my wife Martha. I would have loved to have Sally with me in Washington during my many years of service but it was simply not possible due to the prejudice that was engrained in our society at that period in time. When I retired from public service in 1810, I was able to enjoy my remaining years with Sally and our mutual and respective families.

The truth was, interracial marriage could never be a consideration and furthermore it was actually illegal in the state of Virginia where I lived. Even if it weren't illegal I believe if I ever dared to marry Sally I might have been executed by the diehard proponents of slavery who were quite a force to be reckoned with at the time. Hangings were frequent and sanctioned by the churches with regard to slaves who were considered to be without souls. They were relentlessly terrorized in order to keep them in submission. The primary motivation behind slavery was always to make a profit. Slaves were bought, sold and traded like cattle. They were routinely separated from loved ones on the premise that unhappy slaves worked harder than peaceful and contented slaves. I knew this was a horrible injustice against humanity. I also knew full well I was protecting my slaves from the predatory society that existed at the time. There was a harmony that existed at Monticello and my charges were quite content to live under the protection of such an influential person such as myself, one of high social position, integrity and morality. All were treated with kindness, understanding and compassion. Monticello was actually a "Safe House" where we were able to live in peace and dignity. All were happy to do their share but Monticello was never a profitable proposition being as humane treatment was not a viable means of competing in the free markets with other plantation owners who had the distasteful competitive advantage of extracting every last "drop of blood" from their slaves. In addition, we provided for our elderly which was always a costly affair. They were able to enjoy their remaining years with family members rather than being sold off to the highest bidder when they were no longer able to do a full day's work. Eventually most all of our slave population was related to Sally

or me in one way or another. They were either our children, grandchildren, or her siblings, either of which eventually had grown to maturity and had families of their own. So I suppose you might say we were one big happy family although truthfully current day historians do not realize it was this type of situation. It was something everyone knew and accepted at that time yet somehow the relevance of our interrelatedness was forgotten in the context of history. The same was true of the interrelated population of many of the other plantations, although many owners did not feel a kinship to their darker progenies simply because of the color of their skin. I could not allow myself to feel this way and more especially in light of my relationship with Sally. Visiting foreign dignitaries who did not understand our way of life were taken by surprise to see one or more of the servants who looked very much like me, but to those who understood our culture, it was quite a normal occurrence.

My being a Statesmen who held one high office or another over many years, required me to be frequently entertaining, which in turn required a large staff and incurred great expense for which I was rarely adequately reimbursed. There was a dignity and elegance which was possessed by all who lived at Monticello and I believe it had a great deal to do with my personal influence, one of courtesy and refinement coupled with kindness and Southern hospitality. I was often quoted as saying “All who lived on the mountain were my family” and I sincerely meant it more than anyone who was looking back in history could have readily realized. Everyone had a specific task to perform and was an integral part of a team effort which made Monticello a wonderful place to live and it was so, beyond one’s imagination. All were honored and respected for their individual contribution. It was only I who had the worry of financial matters and truthfully, it was a heavy cross to bear. Everyone else at Monticello was free of such burdens and the result was spiritual and racial harmony that most people will never experience in their lifetime. We all loved and respected each other. It was always my greatest desire to retire which I was eventually able to do in 1810. Up until then my life was a constant struggle to constantly try to adapt from the peace and tranquility of Monticello to the treachery, responsibility and inharmonious existence associated with governmental office.

After my demise at the age of eighty three, Monticello was designated a national monument in my honor. The year was 1826. By 1831 congress refused the necessary funding to maintain Monticello as anti-slavery sentiment was beginning to mount. At this point Monticello reverted to private ownership. The fact that I had owned slaves had branded me a hypocrite. It seems history has vindicated me to some degree as Monticello has once again become a national monument although to this day it is still privately funded. I can only say in my defense I have always believed “All men, women and children are created equal in God’s eyes” and I offer as proof my profound contribution to humanity namely “The Declaration of Independence.” This groundbreaking, extraordinary and historic document has been a model for freedom loving people throughout the world since its creation. Could I have been oblivious to its intent and eventual consequences? Freedom and equality for all of God’s

children was always my primary mission in life although it may not have seemed that way to those who do not understand the difficulty of living among the radical injustices of our times and the intolerable behavior that was so ingrained in our society.

To be a slave with valid identification papers stating who owned that particular slave was somewhat like having a passport in a foreign country. It established the slave's legal right to walk the streets without being set upon. It was considered a high crime to steal a slave from another slave holder. Slaves were also considered real property and one had to relinquish ownership if he were deeply in debt and his creditors were demanding payment. My eventual demise was a devastating blow to our slave population. Sally was one of five slaves I was able to free, including our sons Madison and Eston Hemmings. Two of our older children Beverly (a male) and Harriet had left Monticello a few years earlier. Being as my slaves were considered part of my assets I was unable to free them all and the remainder were sold off to satisfy my debts. This was a heartbreaking affair. I was devastated by the thought of these poor souls being sold and possibly being separated from their loved ones. I also worried a great deal how those who were freed would survive and adapt in such treacherous environment. They were not prepared for the cruel ways of the world which existed away from Monticello. Unfortunately at the time of my death I was deeply in debt and was unable to provide Sally and our children with an adequate amount of money to make an acceptable and safe life for them. Patsy, my sole surviving child by my wife Martha was left penniless as well. She also lived at Monticello with her eleven surviving children. Our wonderful way of life had come to a disastrous end. We had had an extended family within which all were valued for their unique contribution. I had hoped one day our country could experience the same moral and racial harmony. It was a paradise of peace, harmony, love and spiritual contentment and could be compared to a medieval fortress that protected its fortunate inhabitants from the continual onslaughts of the brutally unconscious society within which we all were forced to live.

Was I a slave to my responsibilities? I had a constant financial struggle to deal with plus the obligatory involvement in trying to keep our fledgling country on its intended course. After my retirement things were worse yet as there was little or no income available from my government service. This was a terrible emotional burden on me while all who lived at Monticello were free of any such problems. They lived a carefree and happy life and I did everything in my power to make it so. The fact that everyone was free from financial obligations and was protected from the unsavory and cruel world that existed away from Monticello was a tremendous freedom that very few people ever have the privilege of enjoying in their lifetime regardless of the time period they lived in. It was true freedom within which spirituality was able to blossom. It was a great experiment and it proved to me that God-centered people of all race, creed or color could live in harmony if they so desired.

Unfortunately, I was one of those who craved material possessions and was willing to sell myself into voluntary slavery in order to acquire and maintain them. Coupled with all my unavoidable responsibilities this materially minded mentality only added to my difficulties in life. If I could find any fault with myself it would be for the fact that I never realized this until it was too late to recover from the damage done to my peace of mind and tranquility. Surely, my possessions possessed me and thereby hindered me from adequately providing for my loved ones. The fact was my lifestyle always exceeded my income and this was an ongoing burden to bear. Of course it didn't help matters that I had an extremely large number of dependents who I never turned my back on no matter how difficult things became.

The greatest enduring happiness in my life was the fact that I was blessed with the love of a wonderful woman whom society judged to be inferior but, in reality, was extremely capable of being my guiding light in anything I attempted, including but not limited to the affairs of state in which I participated for the greater part of my long life. I had mentored her over the years and there came a point where she slowly and assuredly became my advisor and confidant. She was endowed with the wisdom born of societal oppression and unfulfilled desires. She longed to be by my side wherever and whenever I answered the call to duty yet this was this an impossibility that weighed heavily on us both. We had created a paradise within the midst of a world rampant with ignorance and prejudice. Our world was modeled after the "Declaration of Independence" which I had created, whereby all men, women and children were understood to be created equal. Yet to all outward appearances our little society seemed devoid of all the qualities I have described. The answer was quite a simple one. In order to understand the wonder of life at Monticello, one had to be spiritually advanced to the degree that would be capable of participating in this Shangri-La like environment. To the unsuspecting outsiders it seemed like an average plantation and what was not outwardly apparent was the spiritually based peace of mind and the resultant blissful life that emanated from the brotherly love and emotional freedom possessed by all who lived at Monticello. We had created a successful microcosm of the new world that I envisioned would eventually evolve from our young country's noble experiment, based on the expanded premise I would have loved to have been able to include in The Declaration of Independence, that "All men, women and children of all race, color or creed are created equal and therefore equally endowed by God with certain inalienable rights among them being life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

In retrospect and looking back into history from a vantage point of over two hundred years, what I have related to you may seem a bit barbarian and I am sure in many respects it was, but it must not be overlooked that we had what amounts to a large extended family, that provided much love to all involved. We actually could not have survived without mutual caring, cooperation and respect, something that seems to be painfully absent in your modern

day society. It was a team effort to run Monticello which was, in effect, was the family business. It was our sole means of survival. We had no government assistance of any kind, nor would we have taken it if it were available. It was a different time, a different world and a different way of life. After my political life came to an end we knew very little of the outside world and what we did know took weeks and months to learn and maybe that was the biggest blessing of all. Our world was a world within a world and it seemed the less contact we had with the outside world the happier we were able to be.

by Paul Martin

A note from Sally Hemings,

Mr. Jefferson and I have known..... had lived under the same roof....the same residence since I was three years of age. Ms. Martha is ...was my sister....half-sister. We have the same father, but that doesn't matter, not here. Mr. Jefferson is a wonderful man, very passionate, worldly, and very intelligent. He's written books, laws, and can convince people black is white if he wants to do so...fiercely passionate.

But he has this softness about him, a fear within him that he hides from all the world...but me. You would have to be with him when he's all alone. When no one is here to ask "world questions". At the right moment when the quiet is so still....if the breeze were to blow it would be as if a lion roared...in that moment, you look into his eyes and they glisten....color is gone....deep pools of fears and loss and...

alone-ness. It would break your heart. A lesser man would die from the pain...not Mr. Jefferson. He calls to me. I bring back the color to his eyes, the strength to his body and mind...give a safe place for his soul to be. He knows I will be here. I cannot leave him...even if I could, I would stay. He gave me that chance in Paris...to stay free...I came back. My children will live free. He gave his word. He is a man of his word.. his beautiful flowing words. What does it matter, what happens in the outside world. It does not come inside our Monticello... Here there is beauty, education, culture...all that will prepare my children for their own lives...outside...in the free world. This is my world...our world...our Eden. Here it is safe for Mr. Jefferson and me....it does not matter what is said out there...we are here...untouchable in this beautiful place. I see in his eyes the world as it should be....I live in those eyes...a secret moment in all time...our time.

by Ms. T. Valada Viars

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