

# “To Follow Truth Wherever it May Lead” Dealing with the DNA Controversy at Monticello

“**K**now anything about DNA?” That’s been my standard opening line for conversations and presentations for the past 10 months.

In the time since DNA tests suggested that a Jefferson male chromosome was linked to at least one child of the slave Sally Hemings, I’ve learned a lot about DNA. And we at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s home near Charlottesville, Virginia, have also learned a lot about the handling of controversial issues.

Monticello’s controversial issue—the question of Thomas Jefferson’s paternity of slave children—was broadcast internationally over every prominent media outlet—television, newspapers, magazines, radio, and popular journals. The frenzied attention surrounding our controversy may be exceptional, but complex and emotional interpretive issues are not.

The larger context of “the Sally Hemings question,” however, is the story of slavery at Monticello. The issues of slavery and race, though prominent in American history, are often difficult to discuss and understand in any circumstance. But these topics are especially tough at Monticello. A large enslaved population lived and worked at the home of the author of the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson penned the immortal words “...all men are cre-

ated equal” and was a critic of slavery. But he was also a slave owner who wrote about perceived racial differences between blacks and whites, and who was pessimistic about the potential for racial harmony within a free society. Jefferson summarized his conflicted attitudes towards slavery in a letter written in 1820: “But as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self preservation in the other.”

The question facing cultural resource managers is not whether one’s institution has a controversial issue, but how the staff will deal with that issue.

The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation is the private, nonprofit organization that has owned and operated Monticello since 1923. Until the mid-1980s, slavery was the “S” word among interpreters at the Foundation. The African-American community was invisible, leaving visitors with the impression that Jefferson lived and worked alone on his majestic mountaintop.

In the mid-1980s, the staff developed a master plan that made commitments for presenting an accurate, scholarly, and, consequently, inclusive portrait of life at Monticello. Our premise was straightforward: Jefferson cannot be understood without understanding slavery, and Monticello cannot be understood without understanding its African-American community. Undergirding this premise was a commitment to vigorous, comprehensive research. Since then, the Monticello staff has delved into documentary evidence such as Jefferson’s voluminous writings and local records; physical evidence such as archeology and a systematic analysis of the house’s original fabric; and oral traditions, such as those recorded in interviews with over 100 descendants of Monticello slaves through our “Getting Word” project.

This research and our ongoing findings manifest themselves in various ways at Monticello and beyond. The 550,000 individuals who visit Monticello each year now learn about slavery at Monticello as an integral part of their tours of the

*Monticello is at the center of the DNA controversy. Photo courtesy Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation/L. Swank.*





Thomas Jefferson's life and career is memorialized at the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC. Photo courtesy National Park Service/Terry J. Adams.

house and gardens, and many of them take a special tour of slave-related sites. We also teach our visitors about the plantation through signage and marked foundations highlighting slave sites, and through exhibits, brochures, and the availability of related scholarly books and products in our museum shops, catalog, and Web site. Further, driven by an even more recent master plan and our ongoing commitment to

scholarship, we expect ultimately to recreate some of the slave quarters and workshops along Mulberry Row, which was the center of African-American plantation life during Jefferson's time. Beyond the mountaintop, we have published scholarly monographs on the topic, hosted four conferences, and developed curricula and school programs.

The latest scholarship about slavery at Monticello appears in our numerous course offerings, public programs, lectures, and Web site, as well as on films and videos, including several public television offerings focusing specifically on Jefferson and race. In addition, we have formed and strengthened relationships with people of all races with direct connections to Monticello. In 1992 and again in 1997, the Foundation hosted large homecomings of descendants of Jefferson's slaves, most of whom had never been to Monticello. In short, driven by scholarly research, our understanding of slavery and the Monticello plantation has enriched all of our programs, and the African-American presence and heritage are conspicuously established at Monticello, leading to a more complete picture of life at Jefferson's home.

Fifteen years of increased attention to interpreting slavery at Monticello, however, never received a frenzy of media attention. That changed on the evening of October 31, 1998, with the release of the DNA story in *Nature* magazine. Within 24 hours, Monticello hosted a press conference with Dr. Eugene Foster, the scientist who designed and executed the DNA test;

released a statement to the press on the study; posted on our Web site the statement and an online resource to information about the controversy; and prepared our guides to initiate discussion of the issue with our visitors.

What followed was a media blitz, which by Monticello standards was unprecedented, with 61 legitimate requests from journalists—to visit, film, and interview—in the next four days alone. Our goal for this period was to be supportive of all serious queries. We are not *naïve*: we are well aware that members of the media have varying agendas. But we believed—and still believe—that our best chance for getting the facts straight was to be honest, straightforward, proactive, and cooperative. We provided all the information we could, and overall, were pleased with the results.

After the initial rush to conclusions (“Jefferson Fathered Slave’s Last Child,” read the original, misleading headline) came another round of articles explaining that the study’s results were less conclusive than had earlier been reported. In any case, once the media turned their attention elsewhere, we at Monticello rolled up our sleeves and got to work on an independent assessment of the issue. Our premise was to treat the DNA story as a research question, applying the tenets of scholarship to it, and making it a part of our ongoing commitment to getting our history right through scholarly research.

We formed a diverse staff committee, including not only scholarly researchers and archeologists, but also hands-on interpreters. They were charged with evaluating the DNA story and all relevant evidence, to assess its impact on historic interpretation at Monticello, and to recommend a course of action. Their work was to be methodical, critical, scholarly, and comprehensive. We identified seven categories of information or evidence, including primary sources, oral history, archeology, and the DNA test itself. The committee conferred with DNA experts from Yale, MIT, Berkeley, the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, and other institutions, as well as with outside experts in history and with two advisory groups that counsel us regularly on scholarly and African-American matters. In the meantime, we have participated in academic forums on the topic at the University of Virginia, Yale, and elsewhere.

The final phase of the process lies in sharing our information and insights. What will follow is a plan to communicate our findings with multiple audiences, including our own staff, visitors, schol-

ars, and the media as well as to revise our interpretive programs at Monticello.

Allow me to conclude with a few observations about how to deal with interpretive controversies:

Remind yourself that interpretation is a work in progress. At Monticello, we learn as we go from our own mistakes and from the accomplishments of other programs. Research drives interpretation, and research will bring new information and insights.

Be scholarly! Our staff-developed, board-approved master plan charges us to base our interpretation on sound research. Presently, we have eight Ph.D.s at Monticello and six colleagues who have published one or more books with a university press. Doing academic research is not foolproof, but it offers the best chance to get your history right.

Be proactive, not reactive, about your difficult issues. To be passive or silent on a controversy is to lose—and to lose big and quickly. Take a broad view and develop a comprehensive program. Establish a larger context.

Get help. At Monticello, we have long benefited from the advice and perspective of our African-American Interpretation Advisory Committee. Our staff also meets one-on-one with individuals or small groups of people who have an informed opinion or a vested interest in specific issues. We seek out models

elsewhere and try to glean the “best practices” from sister organizations. And, be grateful for informed critics—I can name several feisty individuals who have helped push Monticello in the right direction over the last decade.

Don't expect a smooth ride. Controversial issues bring heavy baggage. You can expect unpleasant experiences and painful times, not a happy consensus. Controversy is a part of accurate history.

Get on with it. Take the plunge! It's better to tackle your issue now rather than later. If you raise a difficult subject for the purpose of getting your history right, and ground yourself with a scholarly approach, the results will be positive.

We don't claim to have “resolved” this issue, or to have smoothed over its emotional impact, or to have found the “right” way to discuss it with our visitors. We have plenty of critics who will tell us just the opposite. But we have learned much from the “DNA” controversy, and we already knew that difficult issues are a part of historical integrity. We will have other controversies to face. But, to quote Thomas Jefferson, “...we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead.”

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*Daniel P. Jordan is the President of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation.*

## *The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs*

A vibrant movement of African-American women activists emerged out of the late-19th century's climate of increased racial tension and violence. The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC) resulted in the merger of two organizations, the National Federation of Afro-American Women (NFAAW) and the National League of Colored Women (NLCW). In 1896, to more effectively accomplish their goals, these two organizations decided to unite their voices and create the NACWC, a single national network that could focus on the concerns of African American women. Through this forum, women working on similar issues in different regions of the country could share information and learn from each other's experiences.

Throughout the 100 years of its existence the NACWC has worked steadily to fulfill the mandate of

its motto, “Lifting As We Climb.” In the early years, the national program included establishing schooling and housing. The NACWC was an early advocate for the preservation of African-American history. One of its more significant contributions was its 1916 campaign to restore the home of Frederick Douglass. Additionally, political involvement in campaigning for anti-lynching legislation and women's rights set the NACWC apart from earlier African-American women's organizations which had focused on charitable and religious work. Through these contributions, the NACWC has significantly influenced the lives of many Americans.

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