

Tom and Strom:

History is Not Always Black and White

A Lesson Plan Project For
The National Endowment for the Humanities
Thomas Jefferson Institute

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All men are created equal, and are endowed with certain inalienable rights, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” With those simple words, Thomas Jefferson- scholar, scientist, architect, musician, and politician- captured the essence of what it is to be an American. But at the time Jefferson wrote those immortal words, he did not include all Americans, including women and Native Americans, and least of all, those he and many plantation owners depended upon for their wealth- slaves.

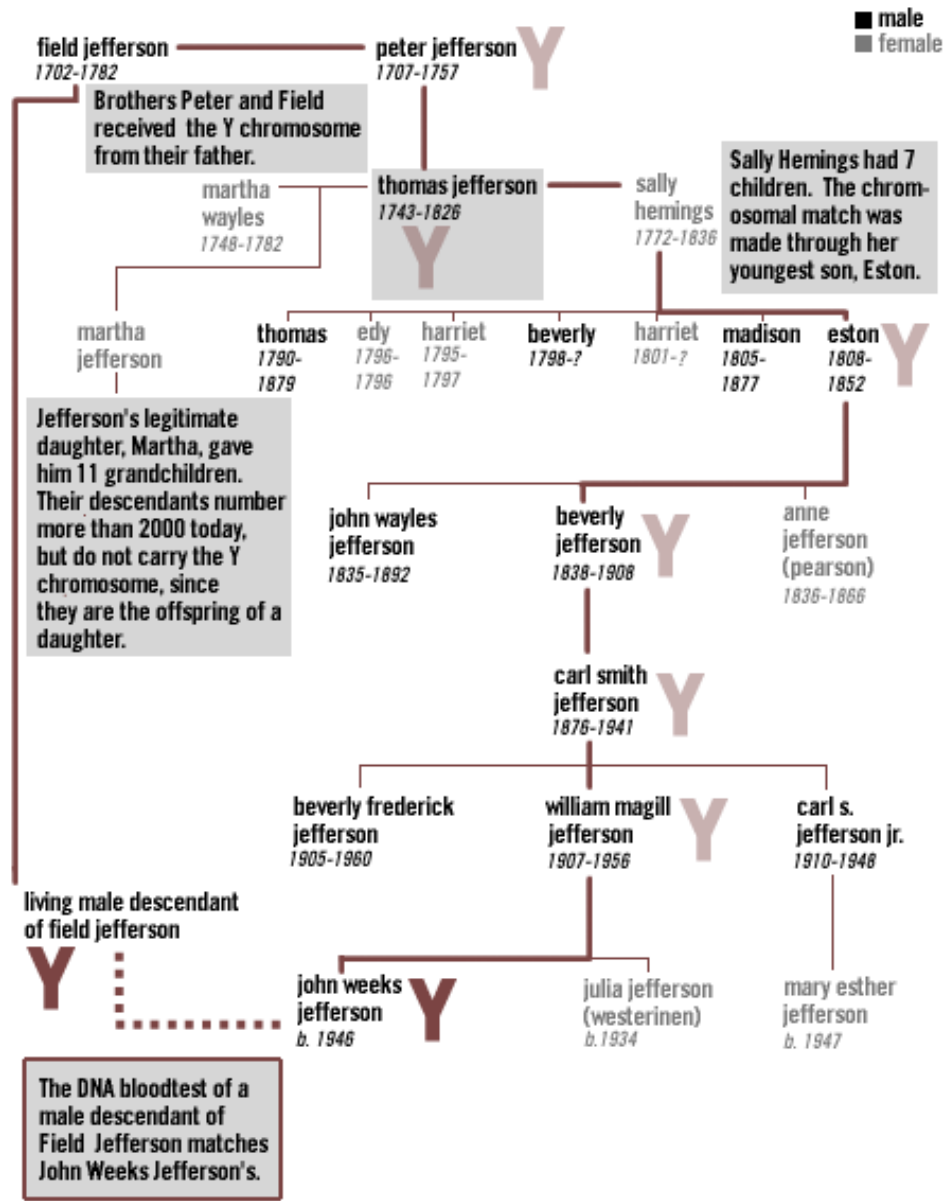


We have no idea what Sally Hemings really looked like, since we have no portraits of her. However, Isaac Jefferson, who was named after his Master, personally knew Sally and described her this way...

“Mighty near
white...very handsome,
long straight hair down
her back.”

--Isaac Jefferson

Since the rumor began, the white descendants of Jefferson and his daughter Martha have steadfastly denied that any affair had taken place between the Founding Father and the enslaved girl. Without substantial evidence, historians could only speculate on the validity of the rumor. But in 1998, the story exploded with fury as a scientific report confirmed that DNA testing concluded that it is more than likely that Jefferson had fathered at least one of Sally Heming's children. This DNA chart shows the lineage of the family to the present.



The news caused a storm of controversy as it forced Americans to finally face the obvious reality that our third President, the man who wrote that “all men are created equal,” yet still considered African-Americans inferior, had not only had an affair with a enslaved woman he technically owned, but had fathered children with her. When the story first broke in 1802, Jefferson did not confirm or deny it, a position he kept throughout all of his life. This led many to believe that the story was indeed true. With the publication of the article in 1998, it appeared that the story was at last confirmed.

In 2003, five years after the Jefferson DNA article, another storm arose regarding politicians, history, and race, this time in South Carolina...



This is the family of Senator James Strom Thurmond, who holds the unique distinction of being the longest-serving member of the U.S. Senate. Thurmond's career was meteoric. He was a lawyer, a judge, a governor, a Presidential candidate, and finally, Senator for over forty years. He was one of the most beloved and celebrated political leaders in the South. When he died in 2003, the nation had lost one of its most legendary- and controversial- leaders. For a very long time in his very long career, Senator Strom Thurmond was the leading political opponent of racial equality for African-Americans and integration of any kind.



Just days after his death, an elderly yet determined African American woman took center stage in a new and explosive political and racial bombshell. Mrs. Essie Mae Washington-Williams, a retired seventy-eight-year old schoolteacher living in Los Angeles, revealed to the nation that she was the illegitimate eldest daughter of Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina.



The year was 1925. Strom Thurmond was a strapping, well-educated twenty-two year old Army cadet when he began an affair with a sixteen-year-old African-American maid, Carrie Butler, who worked in his parents' house. The affair was highly secretive, for in those days, interracial relationships were not only taboo, they were illegal in the South.



The result of this affair was a baby girl named Essie Mae, who finally met her father at the age of sixteen. She was shocked to learn that he was white, and such a wealthy, prominent, and powerful man. Even more difficult was the fact that her father quickly rose to become one of the most ardent and vocal supporters of segregation in the South.



Gov. J. Strom Thurmond - Democratic National Convention - Philadelphia, Pa., - July, 1948.

When he ran for President in 1948, Strom Thurmond vowed to stop the admittance of the “nigger race into our theatres, swimming pools, and churches.” In the 1950s, he led the nation’s longest Senate filibuster to block passage of civil rights legislation. Yet during all this, young Essie Mae was going to college, marrying, and raising a family, all while keeping the secret that she was the biracial daughter of the South’s Sultan of Segregation. In private, however, for all of her life, Essie Mae kept in contact with her father through occasional visits. He gave her advice and financial support, although, Essie Mae writes, he was not a physically affectionate father. But she never did come out publicly until his death. Naturally, one might wonder why she kept the secret for seventy years.



“I had no reason to do anything before now,” said Essie Mae. “It would not have been an advantage to him or to me, and it would have hurt his career.” She described the disclosure as giving her "a great sense of peace." "I am not bitter. I am not angry." She also said that her disclosure shows the rich history of ancestry between blacks and whites." By the end of his career, the onetime proponent of segregation had slowly come around to accepting integration.

Essie Mae’s disclosure and the DNA article about Thomas Jefferson brought out many sensitive realities about racial history in America. One would think that with these revelations, the families of Jefferson and Essie Mae, not to mention the nation itself, could continue to heal its troubled past. But the next question to ask is, how did the families react to these revelations?



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After the publication of the DNA study, many of Jefferson's descendants, who form the Monticello Association, accepted the findings. But a large group of Jeffersons refused to acknowledge it. They wrote and gave a series of articles and interviews rebutting the DNA article, some saying that Jefferson had too much dignity to have an affair with a slave, some saying that it was Jefferson's brother who fathered the children, and some simply saying that this would ruin the reputation of a great Founding Father. Herbert Barger, who married into the Jefferson Family, wrote a lengthy piece in which he said, "*It cannot be PROVEN CONCLUSIVELY that Thomas was the father [of Sally Heming's children]. With all the circumstantial evidence I do not know how anyone can feel so adamant that Thomas had to be the father.*" The Monticello Association went one step further- they barred the descendants of Sally Hemings from attending annual meetings at Monticello. This has caused a deep rift within the family, and in the national scheme, it has highlighted how racial issues still affect the country.

"As J. Strom Thurmond has passed away and cannot speak for himself, the Thurmond family acknowledges Ms. Essie Mae Washington-Williams' claim to her heritage. We hope this acknowledgment will bring closure for Ms. Williams."

--Strom Thurmond Family

This statement was issued by the Thurmond Family lawyer just days after Essie Mae Washington-Williams disclosed that she was his daughter. The family did not dispute or debate her claims, but rather admitted it in a simple, short statement that, according to Essie Mae, makes her grateful to be able to claim her heritage. She has always maintained that she was not after a share in her father's estate, but she simply owed it to her children, to herself, and to the nation to bring the secret to light. Since then, three years ago, she has been getting to know the family from which she was kept apart for seventy-eight years.

Resources for Better Understanding

<http://www.strom.clemson.edu/strom/gallery/index.html/>

www.cnn.com/us/990/17/jefferson.reunion/http://www.monticello.org/plantation/hemingscontro/hemings-jefferson_contro.html

http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/bindon/ant275/presentations/Race_and_Health.pdf

<http://www.slate.com/id/2085087/>

<http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/12/15/thurmond..paternity/>

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/12/17/60II/main589107.shtml>

Gordon-Reed, Annette, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville University Press of Virginia, 1997, expanded ed, 1999)

Williams Washington, Essie Mae and Stadeim, William, *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond*, (Harper Collins, 2006)