

Constrained to Silence
Thoughts on Thomas Jefferson's Private Life

Peg Downes
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By Ellen A. Brown
3001 Holly Hill Road
Hendersonville, NC 28792

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The first assignment for this class (MLA 500 – The Human Experience) called for writing a paper on the subject of freedom and slavery. My immediate response was to start thinking about Thomas Jefferson. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's name is always associated with the ideas of liberty and freedom. On the other hand, slavery was not abolished by Jefferson and the other founding fathers, many of whom owned slaves. Daunting as it is to try to do research into the life, attitudes and behavior of one of the most revered and popular Americans who ever lived, I have boldly persevered. I hope to extract something from the wisdom of many historians and biographers and offer here a fresh glimpse into Jefferson's complex personality.

Scholarship on Thomas Jefferson in recent years has become less worshipful and more balanced. This trend is welcome, especially considering the unresolved controversies that have always swirled around his private life. Without wishing to detract in any way from the long list of his virtues and accomplishments, there is some value in taking a close look at those aspects of his life about which he kept silent. The silence he maintained formed a protective wall around him that effectively guarded his secrets. The same wall, however, kept him isolated and emotionally insulated. His self-imposed silence was a constraint that may have left him lonely and sad, especially in his later years.

According to John Quincy Adams, Jefferson himself "told nothing that was not creditable to him, as if he had always been right." (Weymouth, p. 204) For many generations, historians, too, have seemed unwilling to admit of anything, which was unfavorable to his image, as if he had been incapable of human weakness or error. Perhaps the time has come for historians to break out of the restrictive taboos and to speak plainly about some of the secrets Mr. Jefferson may have been keeping.

Did Jefferson reflect back on his own life history and recognize any errors in judgment? Leonard Levy insists that, "regret and remorse are conspicuously absent from Jefferson's writings, as is reflective reconsideration of a problem. Something in his make-up, more than likely a stupendous ego, inhibited second thoughts." (Weymouth, p. 213) From the evidence, it

would seem that Jefferson, the author of freedom, discovered the necessity of maintaining a discipline of silence. According to Joseph J. Ellis, in his book entitled American Sphinx:

The enigmatic masks he eventually learned to wear were essential additions to his public persona precisely because he was by nature thin-skinned and took all criticism personally. (Ellis, p. 62)

Widowed early and never remarried, he must have sorely missed the companionship and intimacy that only a wife could have provided. There were many letters he wrote to close friends and to family members which convey fondness and affection, yet which stop well short of being passionate or unrestrained. Ellis writes of Jefferson's "psychological dexterity" which as he matured became "adroit at protecting his interior regions from intruders" (Ellis, p. 69). Dumas Malone, author of the most extensive (six volumes) Jefferson biography, had this to say about Jefferson's personality:

..to many, however, including some who have studied him most, his personality seems elusive. This is partly because he was a man of great personal restraint, who rarely revealed his deeper feelings even though he wrote incessantly. He guarded his private life with unusual jealousy. (Weymouth, p. 10)

The most controversial questions concerning Jefferson's personal life have to do with the allegations that he had a sexual liaison with one of his slaves at Monticello. Rumors about Jefferson and Sally Hemings became political headlines during Jefferson's first term as President, but were dismissed by many as a politically motivated smear. "Jefferson himself never wrote specifically about the charges concerning Sally Hemings, although most scholars contend that he denied the allegation indirectly." (Gordon-Read, pp. 1-2) Whatever may have happened between Jefferson and Sally, it is easy to understand why he kept so quiet. Miscegenation, however widespread it may have been among Southern slave holding families, was certainly not acceptable to polite society. The president did what any politician would do – he tried to shrug off the accusations and hope for the best.

One of the intriguing elements of the Sally Hemings scandal is the fact that Jefferson had been indulging in some scandal mongering of his own. Alexander Hamilton, as Secretary of the Treasury, had been accused of giving inside tips on government securities to James Russell. Russell, however, had not been receiving that sort of help at all. Russell had received \$1,000 from Hamilton as part of an agreement whereby Hamilton (already married to Elizabeth Schyler Hamilton) would have "access" to Russell's wife, Maria. Hamilton's concern for his reputation as

Secretary of the Treasury was such that he thought it worthwhile to prove his innocence by confessing his affair, "in a pamphlet that reaffirmed his financial integrity – and left the nation gasping in disbelief at his sexual candor." (Fleming, p. 15)

The Hamilton scandal had been stirred up by a muckraking newspaperman named James Callender, whom scholars have linked to Jefferson's supporters, if not Jefferson himself. It was this same man, Callender, who, feeling angry that President Jefferson did not reward him with a lucrative Post Office job in Richmond, wrote the damaging pieces about Sally Hemings.

To many young men of Jefferson's generation, fame and reputation were of tantamount importance. Alexander Hamilton, like so many of his peers, insisted on using his military title (General). This fondness for titles was widespread, especially in Southern culture, and lingered well into the nineteenth century. Jefferson did not have a military rank to boast of, but his reputation as the writer of the Declaration of Independence, Governor of Virginia, and Minister to France established him in many minds as one of America's most promising and aristocratic leaders. Ironically, the success of the American Revolution rested very much on the shoulders of men (i.e. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, etc.) from the elite of the Virginia gentry.

As Boynton Merrill writes:

...among the Colonial gentry there existed a social structure similar, in many ways, to that of English royalty. Its influences and attitudes lingered for many decades after the American Revolution. (Merrill, Forward)

As young men, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson had all studied the Essays of Sir Francis Bacon, in which Bacon set forth:

The five stage classification of fame...

On the bottom rung were fathers of the country, who 'reign justly and make the times good wherein they live.' Next came champions of empire, leaders who enlarge their country through conquest or defend her against invaders. Next came saviors of the empire, who deliver their country from the miseries of tyrants or the chaos of civil wars. Next came the great lawgivers, such as Solon, Lycurgus, and Justinian. Finally, at the summit, were founders of Empire, such as Cyrus of Persia and Julius Caesar of Rome – both great generals and wise legislators. (Fleming, p. 19)

This was an age in which a candle maker's son could become the Minister to France (Benjamin Franklin), a Corsican soldier could be crowned Emperor of France (Napoleon), and an ambitious young president could buy half a continent (Louisiana Purchase). Thomas Jefferson energetically pursued his many and varied interests (in science, horticulture, education, and

ethnography), spent forty years in public service to his country during its critical formative years, and gave careful thought to the words that would be inscribed on his tombstone. He cared about how he would be remembered by future generations. His concern about public opinion motivated him to limit his public speeches, to be very discreet about the handling of controversial matters and to express his written opinions only in letter form, one individual at a time.

Alexander Hamilton's son, Phillip, at nineteen, quarreled with one of Jefferson's supporters,

...a twenty-seven year old lawyer named George Eacker. Eacker had hailed President Jefferson as the rescuer of the Constitution and implied that General Hamilton was not averse to seizing power with a coup d'état. (Fleming, p. 19)

Tragically, that quarrel led to a duel in which young Hamilton was killed. And, it was only a few years later when Alexander himself was mortally wounded in a duel with Aaron Burr. It is easy for us to forget, after two centuries observing political campaigns that the first generation of American politicians was working in a brand new democratic system. Elections, political parties, campaigning and free speech were all experimental concepts and untested. No one could be certain that the American ideas could stand the test of time. Each of the founding fathers had a sense of history in the making, and each wanted to be seated in the front row, on the top rung of Bacon's ladder. Some had the wisdom, the good fortune and the political skill to become public icons, but some fell victim to their own vanity, impatience or lack of foresight.

Aaron Burr forfeited his place of honor in the history books by recklessly forcing the duel with Hamilton. Burr had to face a severe reaction against him for causing the death of such a brilliant lawyer and public servant (plus husband and father). Burr's vainglory coaxed him into further bad judgment and ignominy, however, when he launched his ill-fated attempt, in 1806, to head down the Mississippi with an army of men to capture New Orleans and set up a new republic.

Although Jefferson may have been able to hold himself above the fray and not get soiled by any personal involvement in duels or military coups, he was aware of scenes of ugly violence within his own family. In 1811, in Kentucky, two of Jefferson's nephews, Lilburne and Isham Lewis, brutally murdered a slave and buried his decapitated body in the fireplace. The crime might have gone unnoticed except for the unprecedented earthquakes and floods, which happened a

month or so after the crime. After the shocks from the earthquake had loosened the stones in the fireplace, a dog detected and retrieved the grizzly head of the victim. Lilburne was jailed and then released on bond, with several of his remaining slaves put up for security. He could not bear the shame nor the damage to his pride and reputation, so he opted to commit suicide. Isham was almost persuaded to commit suicide, too, but nothing went according to plan. Somehow Lilburne managed to release the trigger of his gun prematurely and shoot himself. Isham was arrested and would have been tried for two murders, but he escaped from his captors and disappeared into the West.

The Lewis family had migrated to Kentucky from Albemarle County in 1808, selling off most of their Virginia property and investing that money in Kentucky farmland. Unfortunately, the Lewis men had not learned how to be self-reliant or resourceful, but only knew how to live like aristocrats.

One such aristocratic family, that of Charles Lewis of Albemarle County, brother-in-law to Thomas Jefferson, having lost most of his patrimony, emigrated to the western frontier of Kentucky in 1808, taking little with them except their pretensions. There on the frontier, where others thrived, the Lewis family experienced heartbreaking misfortunes, and at last met ruin in an incredible climax of horror, bloodshed, and natural upheaval. (Merrill, Forward)

Back at Monticello, Jefferson learned of the events in Kentucky, most likely through his friend, Billy Woods, one of the Lewis' neighbors. Of course the former President did not issue any public statements to the press, but maintained his characteristic silence. Perhaps he was thinking of this tragedy when he wrote this passage about the moral erosion caused by slavery:

There must be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal...The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances... With the morals of the people, their industry is also destroyed. (Merrill, P. 330)

Jefferson may have considered several possible explanations for such aberrant behavior within his family, including the problems associated with slavery (above), the use of alcohol, and the likelihood of instability within his family. Another relative, Meriwether Lewis, of Lewis and Clark Expedition fame, was rumored to have suffered from depression and may have committed suicide. Jefferson's genetic suspicions may have centered on the Randolphs, his mother's family. He did not have much to say about his mother and may have felt troubled about her side of the family. Of course, there had been weddings between Randolph first cousins for generations.

If there was any inclination on Jefferson's part to offer comfort or assistance to his sister and her troubled family, pride and financial circumstances apparently prevented it. However sympathetic he may have been, as Col. Lewis sold homes and slaves and begged others to adopt and care for the Lewis grandchildren, Jefferson himself was strapped financially and could not have helped. The family relationships went through a further strain when the Lewises tried to swindle one of Jefferson's close friends, Craven Peyton, out of some property in Albemarle County.

Craven Peyton, the intended victim of the swindle, had for years treated the Lewis family with the greatest generosity, and had come to their rescue time after time...It was an almost unbelievable family tangle of greed and deception. (Merrill, p. 315)

In this one instance, Jefferson could not maintain his silence or refrain from taking sides. When Peyton asked him for his opinion on the facts, Jefferson responded,

...Not only the silence of C. L. Lewis on executing the deed to Peyton, but the import of the deed itself convicts him of gross fraud and disqualifies him from being a witness. (Merrill, p. 316)

The last decade of Jefferson's life was spent in the relative seclusion of his beloved Monticello. Surrounded by his daughter Patsy and his grandchildren, he spent his days riding his horse, Eagle, writing letters and greeting visitors. With ample time for reflection, he maintained an on-going correspondence with John Adams, his long time political rival. Both men,

...had their sights set on posterity's judgment, so perhaps the first things to keep in mind as we consider the eloquent correspondence of their twilight years is that they were self-consciously writing to us as well as to each other.. (Ellis, p. 239)

One of the most interesting topics of correspondence which came up between them was that of grief. Adams said that grief, as he saw it,

...was a crucial human emotion that "sharpens the Understanding and Softens the heart." Grief was to human achievement as the thorn was to the roses. Had Jefferson never noticed that the portraits or statues of all the great men of history showed their faces filled with furrows of grief? (Ellis, p. 247)

Jefferson's response to Adams was to say that,

...since there seemed to be an equal number of uses and abuses of grief, then perhaps they cancelled each other out and therefore rendered the entire subject superfluous. (Ellis, p. 247)

Jefferson had grieved deeply over the deaths of his wife and his daughters. Perhaps he never came to terms with the process of grief and never had a chance to heal. He found a way to compartmentalize his feelings and keep them under control. This capacity may have had its practical advantages, but it may also have prevented him from recognizing the needs of those around him or from admitting to himself that he had problems. His debts mounted steadily throughout his last years, but he did not do much about it. His family had to extend hospitality to scores of uninvited tourists each week, a stressful and expensive obligation for a household already in financial straits, but Jefferson apparently did nothing to discourage visitors. When friends or family would write and ask him favors, he was careful to respond without admitting of his debt problems. Some critics would point out that, at a time when he could least afford to, Jefferson allowed several slaves to go free.

...In his old age Jefferson was faced with the alternative of giving up Monticello or running his estates more efficiently with slave labor and cherishing each slave child born on his estates for its cash surrender value. Yet this was the same period that Jefferson put a young slave and potential bearer of more slave children [Harriet Hemings] on a stage coach to Philadelphia, an act contrary to Jefferson's expressed sentiments and detrimental to his financial and social well being. (Gordon-Reed, p. 30)

The explanation for Jefferson's behavior toward certain of his slaves may never be known beyond all doubt, but evidence is mounting, including DNA blood testing, that some of the slaves living at Monticello were indeed the offspring of Jefferson and Sally Hemings. The story seems plausible to me, although few historians have ventured very far out onto this thin ice. Annette Gordon-Reed, in her book Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy, has presented her evidence convincingly, demonstrating that many of the scholars who dismissed the story have been biased, hasty and careless. Perhaps her most eloquent

arguments are those that deal with the unwillingness of biographers to place any credence in slave history and Hemings family oral traditions.

If one gets past the assumption that Jefferson was...to noble, too loving a father, or too proud to indulge in such a disgraceful affair, the Hemings family story is really quite compelling. According to a story told by Madison Hemings (and published in 1873), Thomas Jefferson was his father. His mother, Sally, had gone to France with Polly Jefferson and had become Jefferson's mistress. She was several months pregnant when the Jeffersons prepared to return home to the United States, and she asked her master for her freedom. (Slavery was not legal in France, so Jefferson really had no right to insist that she return to Virginia as a slave). She made a bargain with him, that she would return on the condition that her child would be set free on his twenty-first birthday.

That baby did not live long after the birth, but several other children were born who survived, one of them being Madison Hemings, born in 1805. The Hemings children were all light skinned and bore a close resemblance to Jefferson himself, and to his grandchildren. Madison commented that Jefferson's

...general temperament was smooth and even; he was very undemonstrative. He was uniformly kind to all about him. He was not in the habit of showing partiality or fatherly affection to us children. We were the only children of his by a slave woman. He was affectionate toward his white grandchildren, of whom he had fourteen, twelve of whom lived to manhood and womanhood. (Gordon-Reed, p. 247).

The Monticello birth records have now been carefully examined, and the dates of birth for Sally's children (minus nine months) correspond neatly to those dates when Jefferson was known to have been at home. Also corroborated in the Monticello records are the facts, that Beverly Hemings (Madison's brother) left Monticello in 1822 - age 23, Harriet Hemings also left in 1822 - age 21, and Madison and his brother Eston were given their freedom (in Jefferson's will) when they reached the age of 21.

The Arts and Entertainment television channel aired a biography of Sally Hemings on October 26, 2000, which basically supported the story as told above. Apparently a DNA test was conducted in 1998 comparing the DNA for Hemings family male descendants with Jefferson family male descendants. According to this latest scientific evidence, Jefferson was very likely the father of the Hemings children. Joseph J. Ellis, as recently as 1997, has written

...unless the trustees of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation decide to exhume the remains and do DNA testing on Jefferson as well as some of his alleged progeny, it leaves the matter a mystery about which advocates on either side can freely speculate, and surely will. Within the scholarly world, especially within the community of Jefferson specialists, there seems to be a clear consensus that the story is certainly not true. Within the much murkier world of popular opinion, especially within the black community, the story appears to have achieved the status of a self-evident truth. (Ellis, p.p. 304-5)

If Jefferson did have a long lasting, intimate relationship with Sally Hemings, how did it happen? Was it possible that they had mutual respect for one another? Was Jefferson abusing his power and using her to satisfy his own needs and appetites? How did Jefferson feel about the scandals surrounding "dusky Sally?" How did Sally feel about her master? How did the Hemings children feel about their father? What did Patsy Jefferson Randolph know about the Hemings children? Did Patsy know that Sally's mother had been the mistress of Martha Wayles Jefferson's father? Did Patsy feel that Sally was almost like a sister? There are so many fascinating questions to ask.

The most significant detail, in my opinion, which helps this whole scenario hold together and make sense, was passed down through both families. As she lay dying, Martha Wayles Jefferson made her husband promise to never remarry. If Jefferson was stubbornly determined to keep that promise, then he faced a long, lonely and monogamous life. While in France he fell in love with Maria Cosway (a married woman) and carried on flirtations with some others, but he was careful to avoid attachments with eligible, marriageable ladies. We know that Jefferson grew tired and critical of life in Paris. He urged

...young men who were embarking on some version of the grand tour to become aware of the temptations and sexual traps they would encounter. The typical young traveler "is led by the strongest of all human passions into a spirit for female intrigue destructive of his own and other's happiness, or a passion for whores destructive of his health..." Paris, he warned, was one huge fleshpot. (Ellis, p. 85)

Considering his limited options (the promise to never remarry) and his distaste for affairs with married women, is it so hard to imagine that he may have gravitated to Sally? It would not have been hard to be discreet, and there would have been a limited risk of public scandal. As a reasonable man, this arrangement might have been an attractive choice. In ensuing years, Sally may have offered him companionable affection, which was otherwise in scant supply. For Sally, the relationship with Jefferson may have been pleasant and comfortable, despite the many layers of irony, especially knowing that he would keep his promise to set her children free.

Among Jefferson's grandchildren there was adamant denial of any imputations of wrongdoing, such as this comment from Ellen Randolph Coolidge, made in 1858, as she wondered...

...if a man so admirable to his domestic character as Mr. Jefferson, so devoted to his daughters and their children, so fond of their society, so tender, refined in his intercourse with them, so watchful over them in all respects, would be likely to rear a race of half-breeds under their eyes and on his low amours in the circle of his family? (Gordon-Reed, p. 258)

Although Jefferson did not readily admit of regrets, he must have had some, about the Indians, about slavery, and about his dreadful financial circumstances. He cared about the fate of the American Indians and must have felt sad about their treatment. He must have read the reports, in 1811, of the squirrels that swarmed the rivers, of the eclipse, of the river that ran backwards, and of the prediction by Tecumseh, that he would "stamp his foot, and the earth would tremble and their houses would fall to the ground." (Merrill, p. 248) Some people thought it was the second coming of the millennium. Tecumseh's eloquent words, spoken at the Treaty of Fort Wayne in September of 1809 must have touched Governor Harrison and his Commander in Chief:

Once, there was not a white man in all this country. Then, it all belonged to the red men; children of the same parents – placed on it by the Great Spirit, to keep it, to travel over it, to eat its fruits, and to fill it with the same race. (Boardman, p. 114)

Jefferson had the vision and skills to articulate a wonderful philosophy about freedom, which inspires and guides us through the course of history. His vision had its practical limitations, and it exacted a toll on the man who wrote,

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights; that among these are liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... (Declaration of Independence)

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