



American Heritage People

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American Heritage People - Did Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson really Love Each Other?

Since the publication of Annette Gordon-Reed's book, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, many readers who encounter the author always ask one critical question about Jefferson and Heming's relationship: did they love each other? The author does not usually take this question lightly, since it touches at the core of America's racial history characterized by pain, especially when slavery is in the mix. The author, therefore, regards the mere asking of this question by readers as being tantamount to being in a minefield, with no possible escape route.

Answering a question such as the above requires the expertise of a historian. However, it is also not an easy feat for historians who must try to link the past to the present. In answering a question such as the above, a historian must ask himself what it is that the past shares with the present. For example, a historian is likely to point out that Jefferson and Heming's relationship is pretty strange, especially considering their status in life at that period. Jefferson was a senior statesman, while Hemings was a slave girl whose master happened to be Jefferson. The author observes that people suffer many acts of persecution today. There will always be that person who is subjected to hard work with meagre or no pay at all. Additionally, there are women and girls used as commercial sexual objects. However, these acts of persecution cannot compare to all that the slaves went through in America. Black people and their offsprings lived in slavery throughout their lives. Readers wonder how, under such extreme circumstances, a romantic encounter could have taken place between a slave girl and a senior statesman. Was it because of love? Readers do wonder.

Love, indeed, has many attributes, more so if that love has something to do with romance. The author observes that there have been numerous songs urging people to love. These



songs claim that love is the answer to every atrocious thing, be it war, famine, disease or racial discrimination, love will heal all the pain. On this premise, the author suspects that Jefferson's and Hemings' relationship had something to do with Jefferson's belief that his love for Hemings would somehow heal or redeem him. Why, then, was Jefferson in need of redemption? This was a man who had authored the Declaration of Independence. He served for two terms as U.S. president and under his leadership the size of the country's territory doubled. Jefferson also founded the University of Virginia. Most people know him as a strong advocate of religious freedom. Despite all positive attributes, Jefferson was a slaveholder and at one time asserted that blacks were mentally inferior to whites. The author claims that, "he publicly aired his suspicion that the mental capacity of blacks was inferior to whites" (Reed, pg. 2). The author observes that these earlier remarks, and the guilt of being a slaveholder while championing for freedom might have been Jefferson's motivation for loving Hemings with whom he had seven children. Perhaps he believed that loving Hemings would somehow exonerate him.

During the era of slavery, white males raped many black women. Since slaves had no legal status, there were no consequences for the perpetrators. The author observes that apologists of slavery might be uncomfortable admitting that love motivated Jefferson's and Hemings's relationship. However, the author is of the opinion that Jefferson must have loved Hemings, otherwise how does one explain the fact that Jefferson and Hemings stayed together for almost forty years. Was it lust, he could have sexually violated her, and discarded her since he had the power to do so. In any case, it is a common knowledge "rape and the threat of it blighted the lives of countless enslaved women" (Reed, pg. 2).

Jefferson's romantic relationship with Heming started way back when he was serving as an American minister to France. This was a giant risk considering the interracial relationships



were, and still are, frowned at by society in the United States. They discovered that it provided political fodder to his opponents. Additionally, Hemings' love for Jefferson might not be easy to establish, since she has never admitted it in public. However, the author urges the reader to keenly look at the story of their relationship in an endeavour to draw inferences. The reader can closer come to establishing Hemings' love for Jefferson when she chose to return with him to the United States, while she could stay in France and enjoy the freedom. Why else did she choose to return to a country which continued to treat her race inhumanely? This can only be explained by love.

The author finds it essential to point out that, Jefferson had access to many women who could have satisfied his sexual interests, instead he chose Hemings. Even after James Callender brought their relationship to light in 1802, and the subsequent attacks that greeted Jefferson in the aftermath of this revelation, Jefferson still continued to have children with Hemings. In fact, he named his children Thomas, Harriet, James and William - after important people in his life (Reed, pg. 3).

Hemings was not married to Jefferson though, for many years they were living together. Over this period they had seven children, four of whom saw their adult years. The author also observes that Jefferson kept his promise to Hemings concerning the emancipation of her and her children. The author wonders if this is not love, then what should people make of it? What more should people ask for from love under such extreme circumstances as slavery?



Reference

Reed, A. G. (2010). *Did Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson Love Each Other?* Retrieved from <http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/web/20081120-Hemings-Jefferson-Gordon->