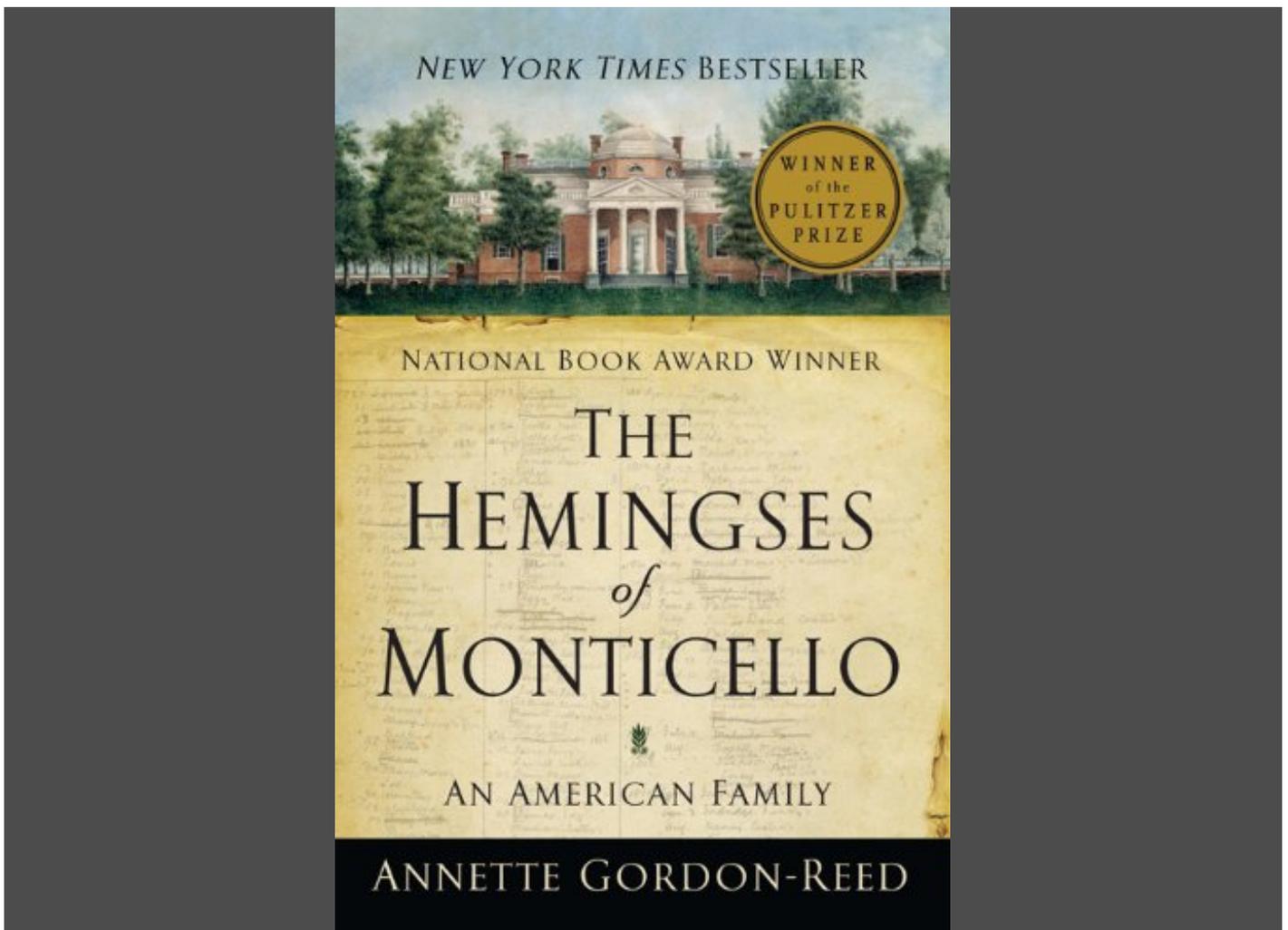


PDF | The Hemingses of Monticello:  
An American Family

by Annette Gordon-Reed



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Winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize: "[A] commanding and important book." —Jill Lepore *The New Yorker*

This epic work—named a best book of the year by the *Washington Post*, *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, Amazon, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and a notable book by the *New York Times*—tells the story of the Hemingses, whose close blood ties to our third president had been systematically expunged from American history until very recently. Now, historian and legal scholar Annette Gordon-Reed traces the Hemings family from its origins in Virginia in the 1700s to the family's dispersal after Jefferson's death in 1826.

#### **Amazon.com Review**

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life at Monticello. Much anticipated, this book promises to be the most important history of an American slave family ever written.

### About the Author

Annette Gordon-Reed is a professor of law at New York Law School and a professor of history at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*. She lives in New York City.

## Questions for Annette Gordon-Reed

**Amazon.com:** One stunning element to this story, for someone who might only know its bare outline, is that these families, so intimately related across the lines of race and slavery, were so even before Jefferson's union with Sally Hemings: Hemings was not only his slave, but also the half-sister of his late wife, Martha Wayles. (That fact alone could provide enough drama for a hundred novels.) Could you describe the family he married into?

**Gordon-Reed:** Well, it has been sort of a mystery. Relatively little is known about Martha Wayles and her family life before she married Jefferson, and even after her marriage. A historian, Virginia Scharff, will be writing on this subject soon. But John Wayles, the father of Sally Hemings, five of Sally's siblings, and Martha has been something of a cipher. I tried finding out about him when I was working on my first book, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*. I broke off the search because his life was not really the focus of the book, but I had to come back to him for this one. It turns out he was apparently brought to America as a servant, and was given a leg up in life by a prominent Virginian named Philip Ludwell. Martha's mother, also named Martha (it gets confusing) died not long after she was born. Then she had two stepmothers who died. The first had three daughters with John Wayles. After his third wife died, Wayles had six children with Elizabeth Hemings, the last of whom was Sarah (Sally) Hemings. Jefferson married a woman who had known a great deal of tragedy in her young life. She had lost her mother, two stepmothers, a husband, and child by the time she was 23, just unfathomable stuff from a modern perspective.



**Amazon.com:** Of course, one other source of drama is that Jefferson, at the same time that he was one of the greatest advocates for equality and freedom, also held slaves, including one he was joined so intimately with. How did he reconcile that to himself, if he did?

**Gordon-Reed:** I don't think this was something that Jefferson agonized about on a daily basis. This is not to say it wasn't important, but it didn't concern him the way it concerns us. I think the Federalists and the threat he believed they posed to the future development of the United States concerned him far more. Jefferson was contradictory, but we are, too. Who does not have intellectual beliefs that he or she is not emotionally or constitutionally capable of living by? I find it more than a little disingenuous to act as if this were something that set Jefferson apart from all mankind. It's always easier to spot others' hypocrisies while missing our own. He dealt with the conflict between recognizing the evils of slavery, to some degree, by fashioning himself as a "benevolent" slave holder and taking refuge in the notion that "progress" would one day bring about the end of slavery. It wouldn't happen in his time, but it would happen. That is not a satisfactory response to many today, but there it is.

**Amazon.com:** What was Jefferson's relationship with his children with Hemings like? What lives did they find for

themselves after his death?

**Gordon-Reed:** That was one of the most interesting things to research and ponder. There are a series of letters between Jefferson and his overseer at Poplar Forest, his retreat in Bedford County, where he spent a good amount of time during his retirement years. In those letters, he announces his impending arrival. He'll say things like "Johnny Hemings and his two assistants will be coming with me," and depending upon the year, the two assistants were his sons Beverley and Madison Hemings or Madison and Eston Hemings. Poplar Forest is 90 miles away from Monticello. That was a journey of days together. Then, when they got there, John Hemings, Beverley, Madison, and Eston would work on the house where Jefferson was staying, where they evidently stayed, too. They were there together, in pretty isolated circumstances, for weeks at a time. Jefferson, who fancied himself a woodworker, too, spent lots of time with John Hemings and, in the process, spent time with his sons, who were Hemings's apprentices. Madison Hemings remembers Jefferson as being kind to him and his siblings, as he was to everyone, but said he rarely gave them the type of playful attention he gave to his grandchildren. The phrase Hemings uses is that he was "not in the habit" of doing that. Yet, all the sons played the violin like Jefferson, and one who became a professional musician, Eston, used a favorite Jefferson song as his signature tune. We have little sense of his dealings with Harriet, the daughter. He sent her away from Monticello when she was 21 with the modern equivalent of about \$900 to join her brother, Beverley, who had left a couple of months before.

I think a very important, and telling, thing is that none of the Hemings children had an identity as a servant. The sons were trained to be the kind of artisans Jefferson admired the most, builders--carpenters and joiners--and the daughter spent her time learning to spin and weave. Women of all races and classes did that, even Jefferson's mothers and sisters. Harriet Hemings wasn't turned into a maid for his granddaughters, which would have been a natural thing for her but for her relationship to him. The Hemings children were trained to leave slavery without ever developing the sensibilities of servants. Beverley and Harriet left Monticello as white people, married white people, and pretty much disappeared, although they kept in contact with their nuclear family. When Jefferson died, Madison and Eston, who were freed in his will, took their mother and moved into Charlottesville. They were listed as free white people in the 1830 census, and as free mulatto people in a special census done in 1833 to ask blacks if they wanted to go back to Africa. They all said no. Not long after their mother died, Madison left Virginia for Ohio and Eston joined him later. At some point Eston decided that living as a black person was too onerous and moved to Madison, Wisconsin, under the name E.H. Jefferson. He had children by this time, and they all became Jeffersons. As all blacks who "pass" into the white community must do, in later years the family buried their descent from Jefferson. There was no way to claim him as a direct ancestor without admitting that they were part black, which would have cut off all the opportunities their children had as white people.

**Amazon.com:** Your title emphasizes Monticello, the rural retreat this family shared. What was the household on "the mountain" like for the Hemingses?

**Gordon-Reed:** Sally Hemings and her siblings along with her mother were personal attendants to the Jefferson family. They worked in the mansion most of the time. The next generation of Hemingses had more varied experiences. They became the artisans working on the plantation. We get some sense from Jefferson's legal white grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, that some of the other people enslaved on the mountain were jealous of the privileges that the Hemings had. Martin, Robert, and James Hemings were allowed to hire their own time and keep their wages. They traveled to Richmond, Williamsburg and Fredericksburg to do this. The only people Jefferson ever freed were members of the Hemings family. They were people who were treated as, and saw themselves as, something of a caste apart from other enslaved people.

**Amazon.com:** How much of the evidence for this history has been available for centuries, and how much has only become available to us in recent years?

**Gordon-Reed:** Except for the DNA evidence showing a link between the Hemings and Jefferson families, all of this

information has been available. I didn't discover or say anything in my first book that could not have been said or discovered by others, and I haven't found anything for this book that other people could not have found. It's always been there.

**Amazon.com:** And what are the limits of what we can know about these lives? What have you had to imagine, especially about Hemings and Jefferson's relationship, and how have you done so?

**Gordon-Reed:** Except for Madison Hemings, we don't have personal accounts from the Hemingses of their lives. Robert Hemings corresponded with Jefferson in the 1790s, but all of those letters are missing. We have descriptions of what Sally Hemings did from others' records--letters, census documents, things like that. As I say in the book, that's pretty much what we have to go on with Jefferson and his wife too, since we don't have any letters from her describing her life. Yet people use what we have to come to a conclusion about the nature of their life together. There's nothing wrong with that. I do the same thing for Jefferson and Sally Hemings. It's a combination of what people said about their lives, inferences from the actions they took, and a consideration of the context in which they were living. Some people have problems with the use of "inferences." I don't, so long as they are reasonable. In fact, I would trust the reasonable inferences from a person's repeated behavior through the years over what they say any day, because a people can say anything. I do believe that actions often speak louder than words. Contrary to popular belief, there are lots of actions on the part of Jefferson and Hemings that "speak" about the basic nature of their relationship.

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