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# The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory

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*The Strange  
Career of Thomas Jefferson  
Race and Slavery in American Memory,  
1943-1993*

SCOT A. FRENCH AND EDWARD L. AYERS



For generations, the memory of Thomas Jefferson has been inseparable from his nation's memory of race and slavery. Just as Jefferson's words are invoked whenever America's ideals of democracy and freedom need an eloquent spokesman, so are his actions invoked when critics level charges of white guilt, hypocrisy, and evasion. In the nineteenth century, abolitionists used Jefferson's words as swords; slaveholders used his example as a shield. Deep into the twentieth century, white segregationists summoned Jefferson as the defender of local rights and limited government; advocates of black equality even more effectively summoned Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>1</sup>

The debates over Jefferson's legacy have become increasingly complex since 1943, when Americans proudly celebrated the 200th anniversary of his birth. Ambivalence and qualification now surround most writings on Jefferson, the willful innocence of the 1940s and 1950s yielding to skepticism and cynicism. Jefferson's life has come to symbolize America's struggle with racial inequality, his successes and failures mirroring those of his nation. The quest for a more honest and inclusive rendering of the American past has placed a heavy burden on Jefferson and his slaves. Generation after generation of Americans has sought some kind of moral symmetry at Monticello, some kind of reconciliation between slavery and freedom, black and white, past injustice and present compensation.

Those who have debated the Jeffersonian legacy on race and slavery since

1943 have spoken in vocabularies that sometimes seemed unintelligible to one another. Some have employed the cautious language of professional scholarship, in which written documentation serves as the true measure of the past. Others have placed their faith in oral tradition, finding in the words of former slaves and their progeny a kind of truth banished from the written record. Still others have insisted that we enter *imaginatively into* places where no record can take us, beginning with what we know with some certainty about Jefferson and Monticello but not stopping there.

At issue in these struggles is the cultural authority to shape the public memory of the American past. Audiences seem unsure about who has greater credibility: those who claim to speak from the disinterested perspective of the documentary record or those who lay claim to a more authentic oral tradition. The authority of white male scholars has been continually and increasingly challenged by women and African-Americans, both inside and outside of the academy. The authority of professional historians has been repeatedly tested by journalists, novelists, playwrights, and descendants of Monticello's slaves, with the question of whether Jefferson fathered children with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, recurring as the major issue of contention. The struggle over cultural authority—taking on different forms in each decade since 1943—has become part of the Jefferson legacy on race and slavery.

## I

On April 13, 1943, a crowd of five thousand people gathered on the blustery shores of the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., to witness the dedication of the new Thomas Jefferson Memorial. A towering likeness of Jefferson gazed out from the rotunda as President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered a brief speech from the steps below. "Today, in the midst of a great war for freedom," Roosevelt began somberly, "we dedicate a shrine to freedom. To Thomas Jefferson, apostle of freedom, we are paying a debt long overdue." The significance of the occasion was not lost on Dumas Malone, a forty-nine-year-old historian who had just begun work on a multivolume biography of Jefferson. The Jefferson memorial, Malone observed in *The Saturday Review*, "signifies in a tangible way his recognition as a member of our Trinity of immortals." Exactly two hundred years after his birth and more than a century after his death, Jefferson had finally joined George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in the pantheon of American demigods.<sup>2</sup>

The bicentennial celebration of 1943 offered twentieth-century Americans an opportunity to reacquaint themselves with Jefferson and his world.

Americans were urged to learn as much as they could about Jefferson, whose democratic creed posed a sharp contrast to the "slave philosophy" of Hitler. With Americans enlisting Jefferson in the fight against Hitler, liberals saw an opportunity to attack racism on the home front. Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, sought to prick the conscience of white America in his 1944 opus, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. White Americans knew that blacks ought to be treated as equals, Myrdal argued, but they were paralyzed by fear and ignorance. As the author of the Declaration of Independence and a slaveholder, Jefferson felt that dilemma more acutely than anyone. Myrdal portrayed Jefferson as an open-minded social scientist, grappling with the Negro problem of his day. In his scientific treatise, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson theorized that the "real distinctions" between blacks and whites were produced by nature, not by the conditions of slavery. "But he is cautious in tone, has his attention upon the fact that popular opinions are prejudiced, and points to the possibility that further scientific studies may, or may not, verify his conjectures," Myrdal wrote. "This guarded treatment of the subject marks a high point in the early history of the literature on Negro racial characteristics." Myrdal believed that social scientists of the twentieth century could pick up where Jefferson left off by demonstrating the environmental basis for racial distinctions. Once whites realized that segregation itself made blacks different, they would lift the remaining barriers to assimilation and live up to the American creed so eloquently espoused by Jefferson.<sup>3</sup>

Dumas Malone, the leading Jefferson scholar of the postwar era, fought the battle against southern white reactionaries on another front. Born in Mississippi and raised in Georgia, Malone abhorred the provincialism associated with the South in the early twentieth century. Malone cited Jefferson as the most conspicuous example of the great southern statesmen who loved their home region but who ruled the nation with an expansive, cosmopolitan outlook. "It is the largeness of these men that most impresses me," Malone wrote. "And it is certainly worthy of note that the leadership of Virginia and the South was most conspicuous when it was least sectional in view." The decline of southern leadership in the antebellum era coincided with "a narrowing of the Jeffersonian philosophy, an accentuation of its local emphasis and a repudiation of its larger implications." Love of locality became an "hysterical insistence on the theoretical rights of the states"; the flexible philosophy of Thomas Jefferson became the "rigid doctrine" of John Calhoun.<sup>4</sup>

Malone refused to concede Jefferson to southern segregationists who used

Jefferson to defend an unjust status quo. The Jefferson whom Malone admired was a fearless advocate of change who invoked states' rights to protect freedom of expression, not to defend slavery or racial subjugation. "There can be no question of the liberalism of the mind of Jefferson," Malone wrote. "In his own day, he was often described as a revolutionary, and his record of opposition to the vested interests of his time is clear." Unlike the civil rights activists of the twentieth century, however, Jefferson "favored a high degree of local control" and "feared the consolidation of power" in the national government. Malone attempted to strike a balance between these two positions in his own personal philosophy. Rather than condemn his fellow white southerners, Malone preferred to educate them, offering Jefferson as an example of enlightened southern leadership and Reconstruction as an example of what could happen when southerners failed to act responsibly.<sup>5</sup>

Malone saw history as an exercise in empathy. He did not hide his admiration for Jefferson, nor did he conceal his sympathy for white southerners of the antebellum era. He was less sympathetic toward the northern abolitionists and others whose "doctrinaire idealism" stirred sectional animosities. Malone applauded what he called the "pro-Southern" trend in American historiography, which had been dominant since the turn of the century. "Nothing irritates me more than the tone of moral superiority which was once assumed by Northern writers in connection with the great sectional controversy. I am glad to say that the participants in that struggle, on both sides of the line, are now generally regarded as human beings." Malone found nothing insidious in what others might call compensatory history; prosouthern historians were simply restoring balance to what had been a distorted view of the American past.<sup>6</sup>

C. Vann Woodward, the leading southern historian of the postwar era, was less enthusiastic about this prosouthern historiography, with its "distortions and perversions, of the past." In 1954, Woodward delivered a series of lectures at the University of Virginia in which he argued that segregation was a relatively recent phenomenon, not the time-honored tradition that southern apologists made it out to be. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, as his lectures were titled (and whose title we have borrowed), demonstrated that history was far more contingent, that stateways had changed folkways, even in the tradition-steeped South. Woodward, while a powerful advocate of racial justice, placed himself rhetorically in the center of the debate between segregationists and civil rights activists, arguing that a balanced view of the past was essential to an informed debate. "It has been my

experience that impatient reformers are as surprised and incredulous as foot-dragging conservatives when confronted by some of the little-known history of Jim Crow," he wrote.<sup>7</sup>

Woodward dedicated his widely acclaimed lectures to "Charlottesville and the hill that looks down upon her, Monticello," an affectionate reference to Jefferson and his lofty ideals. Woodward noted that the lectures "were given before unsegregated audiences and they were received in that spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness that one has a right to expect at a university with such a tradition and such a founder." In summoning the spiritual guidance of Jefferson to challenge the racial hierarchy that Jefferson himself had bequeathed, Woodward bridged the gap between an older generation of Jefferson admirers and a younger generation of critics. Woodward sought to use whatever leverage he could get from the hallowed memory of Thomas Jefferson, southerner. While he was far more activist than Dumas Malone, Woodward shared with the older scholar a progressive vision of race relations in which white southerners had an important role to play. Jefferson was too useful to discard, too potent a symbol to concede to the states' rights advocates.<sup>8</sup>

## II

In 1954, the same year that Woodward gave his Charlottesville lectures, *Ebony* magazine published an article entitled "Thomas Jefferson's Negro Grandchildren," in which readers learned about "a handful of elderly Negroes" who traced their ancestry to Jefferson. By far the most widely read publication among African-Americans, with a circulation of nearly half a million, *Ebony* generally spoke in moderate tones to a self-consciously respectable black audience. It was all the more telling, therefore, when the magazine abandoned its generally conciliatory posture and offered a bitterly ironic view of the Jefferson legacy. "In four generations," the unnamed author wrote, "these proud Negro descendants of America's third President have made the long and improbable journey from the white marbled splendor of Monticello to the 'Negro ghetto' in the democracy their forebear helped to found."<sup>9</sup>

Most of the "colored descendants" profiled by *Ebony* traced their roots to Sally Hemings, whose relationship with Jefferson reportedly began when she accompanied his daughter Maria to France in 1787. The partisan use of the stories did not diminish their standing as fact in the eyes of the *Ebony* author, who suggested that stories about Jefferson and his "slave concubines" were widely known and widely accepted within the academic com-

munity. "Many reputable historians concede that Jefferson fathered at least five Negro children and possibly more by several comely slave concubines who were great favorites at his Monticello home."<sup>10</sup>

While some historians may indeed have accepted the story as true, the leading Jefferson scholars of the day—all of whom were white—dismissed the charge as inconsistent with Jefferson's character. To their frustration, however, professional historians did not completely control public discussion of the past. Certain stories stubbornly refused to wither under their scrutiny. Most people, after all, took their view of history not from the monographs published by historians, but from dimly remembered schoolbooks, oral tradition, and whatever happened to come before them in newspapers or mass-market magazines.<sup>11</sup>

Douglass Adair, a white historian who had spent nine years editing the *William and Mary Quarterly*, worried over the renewed appeal of the Hemings story. The *Ebony* article, he wrote, "with its sensational modernized mixture of fact and fiction, is calculated to remind its Negro readers of one of the ugliest features of Negro-white relations in American history. Its printing is designed to stir up, to quote a phrase of Jefferson's, 'ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained.'" The appeal of the story was not limited to black militants; a white segregationist named W. E. Debnam had also revived the story to illustrate the dangers of integration. His book "is sold today in drugstores and newsstands all over the South," Adair wrote. "It has been widely reviewed and praised in southern newspapers." Adair did not deny the historical reality of miscegenation; few, if any, scholars did. Rather, he questioned the evidence used to implicate Jefferson and the motives of those who raised the subject in the racially charged atmosphere of the 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

Adair drafted a lengthy rebuttal entitled "The Jefferson Scandals," in which he argued that the Hemings story was being revived by militants, black and white, for its "usefulness as a weapon in current twentieth-century politics." In his view, the historically accurate Thomas Jefferson patiently recreated by careful scholars, the Thomas Jefferson who acted as an example of caution and good will in race relations, was in danger of being supplanted by a licentious and hypocritical Thomas Jefferson, dragged into politics once again. Adair claimed he could prove, using newly discovered documentary evidence, that Jefferson was not the father of Sally Hemings's children. Sifting through account books, letters, memoirs, and oral histories, Adair concluded that it was probably one of Jefferson's nephews, Peter Carr, who fathered the children. "The account of Jefferson and Sally Hemings, when one knows all the facts available in the

new documents, is not a history that either whites or Negroes can use against each other with good conscience in our contemporary political battles.”<sup>13</sup>

Adair sent a copy of his manuscript to Malone and others for comment. “It’s been a damned hard thing for me to write,” Adair confessed in a cover note to John Cook Wyllie, the University of Virginia librarian, “and I’m so closely involved that tho’ I think the technical side will hold up O.K. I’m very unsure about the tone.” Wyllie urged Adair to focus on “the history of the Jefferson menage” and leave the “contemporary politics” out. “I saw the *Ebony* article, and forgot about it. The Debnam book I never heard of, despite your implication that its widespread dissemination throughout the South is a primary reason for your writing.” Adair agreed to revise the manuscript, but it remained unpublished until 1974, after his death, a private expression of a liberal scholar’s fear that extremists would distort the past to achieve their divisive aims. The professional historians to whom Adair turned did not deem the present-day proponents of the Hemings story worthy of the recognition a scholarly rebuttal would give them.<sup>14</sup>

Still, the story refused to go away. In 1961, an amateur historian named Pearl M. Graham attempted to beat the professionals at their own game by mobilizing documentary evidence and adding footnotes—but that was a game the professionals could always win. Graham’s scholarship, published in *The Journal of Negro History*, was superficial and her language intemperate: she praised Jefferson on the same page that she compared his ideas on race to Hitler’s. Historians ignored the piece; even a scholar who did not reject the Hemings story out of hand later dismissed the article as “pseudo-scholarly.”<sup>15</sup>

At about the same time, Merrill Peterson, who would soon succeed Malone in the Jefferson chair at the University of Virginia, published an award-winning book called *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*. Peterson surveyed the ever-shifting ways in which Jefferson’s legacy had been used and abused from his death until the bicentennial celebration of 1943. While not giving much attention to race, Peterson did pause to discuss the Sally Hemings case. In his view, “no serious student” of Jefferson gave the story credence. Peterson traced the genesis of the story, in part, to the “Negroes’ pathetic wish for a little pride and their subtle ways of confounding the white folks, the cunning of the slave trader and the auctioneer who might expect a better price for a Jefferson than for a Jones, the social fact of miscegenation and its fascination as a moral theme, and, above all, the logic of abolitionism by which Jefferson alone of the Founding Fathers was a worthy exhibit of the crime.” While noting that several recent books and



articles had presented the story as true, Peterson concluded that the Hemings affair had long ago “faded into the obscure recesses of the Jeffersonian image.”<sup>16</sup>

And there it remained throughout most of the 1960s, obscured by the Jefferson scholars who continued to shape the popular image and by the cultural boundaries that distinguished black consciousness from white. Black civil rights leaders, who were well aware of the Hemings story, saw no advantage in publicizing it, preferring to focus on the Jeffersonian ideals of freedom and democracy. In the academy, by contrast, the liberation struggle inspired scholars to take a closer look at the relationship between racism and slavery, using Jefferson as a representative figure. Meanwhile black activists were becoming increasingly disillusioned with white liberals who, like their hero Jefferson, seemed to say one thing and do another. In 1965, Malcolm X blasted the hypocrisy of Jefferson, calling him an “artful” liar. “Who was it wrote that—‘all men created equal’? It was Jefferson. Jefferson had more slaves than anybody else.” Malcolm saw no reason for black people to admire slaveholders like Jefferson. “When I see some poor old brainwashed Negroes—you mention Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and Patrick Henry, they just swoon, you know, with patriotism. But they don’t realize that in the sight of George Washington, you were a sack of molasses, a sack of potatoes. You—yes—were a sack of potatoes, a barrel of molasses, you amounted to nothing in the sight of Washington, or in the sight of Jefferson, or Hamilton, and some of those other so-called founding fathers. You were their property. And if it was left up to them, you’d still be their property today.” Where Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders portrayed Jefferson as a well-meaning white man caught on the horns of a moral dilemma, Malcolm X saw only a white slaveholder caught in a web of deceit.<sup>17</sup>

Other black social critics joined in the chorus of condemnation. Ishmael Reed, a poet and activist, questioned the sincerity of Jefferson and his white liberal disciples in a *New York Times* op-ed piece entitled “Gliberals.” Referring to the leading liberal politicians of the 1960s, Reed wrote: “The Stevensons, Kennedys, and Humphreys are able to flit from one position to another without the modifying transitions, because they say it so pretty. Honeyed words, swiftly delivered like cats scurrying up a wet fence; liberally seasoned with anecdotes, catchy syntax, Biblical quotations, Shakespeare; writing techniques introduced by early political writers like Thomas Jefferson, the founding Gliberal, a slaveowner who insisted that the Bill of Rights be added to the Constitution.” As white liberals came under attack for their gradualism, their patron saint suffered accordingly.<sup>18</sup>

In a 1972 article entitled "Mr. Jefferson and the Living Generation," Malone defended Jefferson against the charge of hypocrisy. "Contradictions there were, as indeed there are in all of us," Malone wrote, "but I am most impressed with his equilibrium—or, to use a musical rather than a physical term, with his polyphony." Malone defended the gradualism of Jefferson and his faith in the future. "To the fiery revolutionaries of our own time he probably seems a tame and timid creature. But no contemporary of his perceived more clearly the inevitability of change and the necessity that institutions keep pace with it." Unfortunately, Malone himself could not keep pace with the changes that were taking place in his own time. What Malone considered a balanced picture of Thomas Jefferson seemed increasingly unbalanced to his critics.<sup>19</sup>

## III

As the civil rights movement, the New Left, and feminism pushed questions of moral commitment to the fore, the private life of Jefferson took on greater significance. Both professional historians and the general public seemed more interested in issues of consistency across the boundary between public and private than they had before. With varying degrees of sophistication, writers turned to psychology to bridge that gap, to explain apparent inconsistencies, to suggest causes for otherwise inexplicable behavior. Such a strategy quickly led to reevaluations of Thomas Jefferson and his tangled relationship with his slaves.

In 1968, Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black* offered a thoughtful analysis of Jefferson and race. Jordan looked at Jefferson's writing on race unflinchingly, with the eye of someone who had studied some of the most inhumane things human beings had ever written about one another. He discussed the evidence of the Sally Hemings affair—noting that "despite the utter disreputability of the source, the charge has been dragged after Jefferson like a dead cat through the pages of formal and informal history"—only to declare that its truth did not matter much one way or another. Jordan went farther than earlier students, however, in emphasizing the recurring themes of miscegenation, black sexuality, and psychological repression in Jefferson's life and thought. Moreover, Jordan laid a considerable burden at his subject's feet: Jefferson's comments on black inferiority "constituted, for all its qualifications, the most intense, extensive, and extreme formulation of anti-Negro 'thought' offered by any American in the thirty years after the Revolution." Jordan turned Myrdal's Jefferson on his head.<sup>20</sup>

Fawn Brodie came at Jefferson's personal life from another angle. Brodie, a biographer and UCLA lecturer, had experimented with psychological models long before they became popular; her 1943 biography of Joseph Smith, written in this mode, led to her excommunication from the Mormon church. In the late 1960s, Brodie turned her attention to Thomas Jefferson, who was then—in her words—"under bombardment" from critics like Jordan. Brodie felt Jordan had overstated the racism of Jefferson; her Jefferson was far more ambivalent about racial differences, his comments on black inferiority offered as "a suspicion only." Still, those words were enough, she lamented, to destroy his "heroic image among black students and even some radical whites." Brodie also worried about the impact of the Hemings story on Jefferson's heroic image. She suggested that the Hemings story need not be considered a charge against Jefferson or a threat to his heroic stature. "It could be that Jefferson's slave family, if the evidence should point to its authenticity, will turn out under scrutiny to represent not a tragic flaw in Jefferson but evidence of psychic health. And the flaw could turn out to be what some of the compassionate abolitionists thought long ago, not a flaw in the hero but a flaw in society." By making these points in a lecture at the University of Virginia and an article in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Brodie was venturing into the lion's den, hoping to declaw her opponents before they attacked her.<sup>21</sup>

While Brodie continued to praise the work of Malone and Peterson, she made it clear that she was looking for something they had apparently overlooked in their otherwise exhaustive biographies. In a review of Peterson's biography, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation*, Brodie noted the absence of "any kind of probing into Jefferson's inner life for sources of his ambivalences toward blacks, which might explain his increasing apathy toward slavery." Here was a clue to her own evolving thesis: perhaps Sally Hemings held the key to Jefferson's thinking on slavery. In April 1971, Brodie delivered a paper entitled "The Great Jefferson Taboo" at the Organization of American Historians, with Peterson and Jordan serving as critics. According to *The Journal of American History*, Peterson "was especially critical of the psychological evidence presented by Brodie"; Jordan, by contrast, "stated that he had already been 60 percent on what might be called the Brodie side of the argument and described himself as having upped the percentage to eighty pro after reading her paper. He was impressed with the psychological evidence." The large audience—some 200 people—attested to scholarly interest in the topic; the publication of the paper, complete with footnotes, in *American Heritage* attested to its popular appeal.<sup>22</sup>

Brodie became increasingly critical of what she called "the Jefferson Es-

tablishment." In a 1971 article entitled "Jefferson Biographers and the Psychology of Canonization," she suggested that Malone and Peterson had succumbed to the impulse to sanctify without knowing it. "Both biographers teach at the University of Virginia, live virtually in the shadow of Monticello, and walk each day in the beguiling quadrangle Jefferson designed 150 years ago. Jefferson is so much a 'presence' in Charlottesville, and so omnipresent a local deity, that one cannot help wondering if this in itself does not exercise a subtle direction upon anyone who chooses to write about him." Brodie charged that the Jefferson biographers had focused almost exclusively on his public life, leaving his private life untouched. "There is important material in the documents which the biographers belittle; there is controversial material which they flatly disregard as libelous, though it cries out for careful analysis. And there is what one may call psychological evidence which they often ignore or simply do not see." Brodie concluded "that something is at work here that has little to do with scholarship," something that called for "speculation and exploration" and perhaps even Freudian analysis. Jefferson's male biographers could not seem to accept the possibility that Jefferson engaged in affairs of the heart outside of marriage; perhaps a female biographer could restore Jefferson's masculinity and accept the possibility that he had a sexual relationship with one of his slaves.<sup>23</sup>

Brodie seemed more intent on demystifying "the Jefferson establishment" than on debunking Jefferson, whom she clearly admired. She suggested, once again, that an intimate relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings could be seen in a positive light. Perhaps Jefferson, a lonely widower, "had turned to the 'dashing Sally' for solace" and she, in turn, found him attractive. "None of this has to be described as 'ruthless exploitation of the master-slave relationship.' And there is no man to whose character it could be genuinely unbecoming. He had then been for years a widower." Jefferson need not have been condemning his children to slavery, Brodie added, since they were, by his own definition, white.<sup>24</sup>

Brodie was not the only historian to criticize the Jefferson biographers as a group in the early 1970s. Eric L. McKittrick wrote that while "the view from Jefferson's camp, in the work of Peterson and Malone, is full as any such view can be," their perspective as biographers did not allow for alternative views. "If your host literally cannot imagine Thomas Jefferson as other than all that is finest and best not only in a gentleman but in the entire American tradition itself," McKittrick asked, "how can you?" McKittrick noted that Malone examined—and dismissed as unproven—the Hemings story in an appendix to his fourth volume. "If decorum and literal justice were to go hand in hand, we might leave it at that. Jefferson the

individual has been 'cleared,' if that is the word. But what if, in the interest of speculation, such constraints were waived? It might then occur to us that the question of Sally Hemings went well beyond individuals, revealing about an entire society matters that are crucial to our understanding of the most portentous social fact of the age, black slavery." Like Jordan, McKittrick concluded that it "hardly mattered" whether Jefferson had a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings. What mattered was the psychosocial context in which Jefferson grappled with the related issues of slavery and miscegenation. "It is the psychosexual dilemma of an entire society, reflected in that undergone by the most eminent citizen of Virginia and one of the most enlightened men of his time."<sup>25</sup>

Brodie published her much-anticipated biography, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, in 1974. Supplementing documentary sources with Freudian psychoanalysis, she concluded that Jefferson enjoyed a long-term, loving relationship with Sally Hemings, fathering several of her children. The book received favorable reviews in many publications, infuriating Malone and other Jefferson scholars, who considered its evidence inconclusive, its methodology questionable, and its thesis implausible. Supporters of Malone depicted Brodie as a woman obsessed with sex, a marginal historian who had made a "scholarly specialty of oddballs." Supporters of Brodie, on the other hand, depicted Malone as a hagiographer, a conservative defender of the national self-image.<sup>26</sup>

While Brodie discussed relationships between Jefferson and several women in his life, reviewers concentrated on the Hemings "scandal," shifting the focus from gender to race. *The New York Times* reviewer, Alfred Kazin, called it a "fascinating and responsible" book, "the most suggestive account we have of whatever there is to know about this slave, who belonged to Thomas Jefferson in all senses of the word." Kazin was impressed with the documentation offered by Brodie, but he seemed even more impressed with her imaginative reconstruction of events. Several letter writers took issue with Kazin, saying that he accepted the Brodie thesis without considering the more sober and scholarly views of Malone and Peterson. Kazin responded that the "understandably general and persistent" disbelief in the Hemings story represented a form of denial by white Americans, many of whom did not want to believe that Thomas Jefferson could have such a relationship with one of his black slaves. "I have the greatest respect for Dr. Malone," Kazin wrote, "but it is obvious that miscegenation itself affronts him even as a 'legend.'"<sup>27</sup>

Murat Williams, a white civil rights activist from Charlottesville, also commented upon the reluctance of "orthodox" Jefferson scholars to accept

the possibility of a miscegenous relationship between Jefferson and Hemings. Writing in *The Daily Progress*, Williams argued that the truth or falsity of the Hemings story mattered less than the larger truths it revealed about racial attitudes and race relations in America. From the positive reviews of the Brodie book, Williams sensed that "justice was being done on a larger scale—not necessarily in the case of Jefferson, but rather in the case of all those Americans who are the sons and daughters of miscegenation. I felt that a veil was being lifted and that a barrier was being removed. All around us we in Virginia see the living evidence of miscegenation, but what kind of pretense are we guilty of to treat it as unmentionable?" Williams called the "indignant" reaction of "senior biographers" to the Hemings story an insult to "people of mixed blood."<sup>28</sup>

Malone was "surprised and pained" by the charges of racial insensitivity. "To me the story would be no more credible (and no more creditable) if the supposed object of Mr. Jefferson's amours had been white," he wrote in response to the Williams column. "So far as I am concerned," he added later, "the question of race is entirely irrelevant." On this matter, Malone agreed with Brodie: the issue was gender, not race. "From my understanding of his character, temperament, and judgment I do not believe that he would have done that with a woman of any sort. If I find the story unbelievable it is not because of Sally's color."<sup>29</sup>

Malone rarely mentioned Brodie or her book by name; as a highly respected scholar, he preferred to stay above the fray. Occasionally, however, he spoke out publicly against her. In May 1974, he wrote an op-ed column for *The New York Times* entitled "Jefferson's Private Life," in which he made public a letter written in 1858 by Jefferson's granddaughter, Ellen Randolph Coolidge. In the letter, Jefferson's granddaughter argued that he could not possibly have carried on a relationship with Sally Hemings at Monticello without raising the suspicions of his family. She suggested that the Hemings children allegedly fathered by Jefferson were actually fathered by his Irish workmen or his nephews, Peter and Samuel Carr. Here was a theory that could not be "dismissed lightly," Malone argued.<sup>30</sup>

A few months later, Virginius Dabney, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and historian from Richmond, asked Malone for a public statement on the Brodie thesis, saying he wanted to quote Malone and the other leading Jefferson scholars in a Charter Day speech at the College of William and Mary. Dabney had personal ties to Jefferson and the University of Virginia: his fifth-great-grandmother was Martha Jefferson, sister of Thomas; his father was once the "one and only" professor of history at the university; and

he earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees at the school. More significantly, he and Malone were old friends; they kept in close touch by mail throughout the Brodie controversy. Dabney wanted to go public against Brodie, but he lacked the stature to do it alone. "For me to say Brodie is nuts would mean little or nothing," he wrote to Malone in October 1974, "unless I could quote you, [Julian] Boyd [editor of the *Jefferson Papers* at Princeton], Peterson, and Adair. That would be a blockbuster!" Dabney also asked Malone to comment on *Burr*, a novel by Gore Vidal, in which Washington and Jefferson "are made out to have been the most despicable pair of incompetents and phonies ever heard of." Dabney cited the nation's upcoming Bicentennial celebration as a reason to respond quickly. "Since nobody has made any effective answer to Brodie and Vidal, and this is the beginning of the Bicentennial, it seems appropriate to me for someone to point out the disservice that these writers are performing in attacking the very people to whom we are indebted for the Bicentennial."<sup>31</sup>

Malone supplied Dabney with a three-page statement in which he called the Brodie thesis "highly objectionable." Jefferson was no "plaster saint," according to Malone, "but this author, in her obsession with sex, has drawn a distorted picture. In her zeal to demonstrate that Jefferson's sexual activity continued after his wife's death—until almost the end of his long life—this determined woman runs far beyond the evidence and carries psychological speculation to the point of absurdity." Malone took issue with the claim that Brodie had humanized Jefferson, saying her book "can be regarded as an attempt to drag an extraordinary man down to the common level—to show that he was no better than anyone else. That would be a perversion of the doctrine of equality." Malone closed with a metaphor. "Fawn Brodie and Gore Vidal cannot rob Washington and Jefferson of their laurels, but they can scribble graffiti on their statues. It is unfortunate that dirty words are so hard to erase, and it is shocking that the scribblers should be so richly rewarded."<sup>32</sup>

Dabney thanked Malone for his help with the speech, which "was received astonishingly well. I've never been so congratulated in my life." Malone asked Dabney if he had heard anything from Brodie or Vidal. "I haven't had time to hear from Brodie or Vidal," Dabney replied, "assuming that they pay any attention at all." Brodie apparently read about the speech in *Time* magazine; she responded angrily in a letter to the editor, calling the "graffiti" quote "a slap against black people." Dabney called the Brodie letter "extremely silly" and privately assured Malone that her charges could easily be answered if he chose to do so. "I have kept up with the references

in *Time*," Malone replied, "and gain the impression that we are doing all right. I shall not give Mrs. Brodie the satisfaction of having a reply from me."<sup>33</sup>

Both Malone and Brodie were honored for their Jefferson biographies in 1975. He won the Pulitzer Prize for the first five volumes of his Jefferson biography; she was named "Woman of the Year" by *The Los Angeles Times*. Both were elevated to the status of celebrities. He was quoted along with Andy Warhol, Marilyn Chambers, and Jane Fonda in a tongue-in-cheek *New York Times* article on celebrity views of cottage cheese; she was teamed with Mary Tyler Moore and Helen Reddy at the *Los Angeles Times* awards ceremony. Yet both felt the sting of criticism from their peers, the professional historians and intellectuals who reviewed their books.<sup>34</sup>

The most daring critique came from Garry Wills, who suggested that Brodie—and, by extension, Malone—had glossed over the true nature of the Jefferson-Hemings liaison. Wills described a sexual relationship based on convenience, not love. He compared Hemings to a prostitute who was compensated by Jefferson for her services. "She was apparently pleasing, and obviously discreet. There was less risk in continuing to enjoy her services than in experimenting around with others. She was like a healthy and obliging prostitute, who could be suitably rewarded but would make no importunate demands. Her lot was improved, not harmed, by the liaison." Wills said the attempt to document a loving relationship between Jefferson and Hemings required "heroic feats of misunderstanding and a constant labor at ignorance. This seems too high a price to pay when the same appetites can be more readily gratified by those Hollywood fan magazines, with their wealth of unfounded conjecture on the sex lives of others, from which Ms. Brodie has borrowed her methods." Wills drew a line between what he considered well-founded conjecture and Brodie's uninformed speculation.<sup>35</sup>

Dumas Malone and his allies insisted they were not worried about Jefferson; his reputation was secure from attacks well informed or otherwise. "A bit of chipping around the edges of the alabaster isn't likely to be noticed," Edwin M. Yoder Jr. wrote in the conservative *National Review*.<sup>36</sup> Rather, they feared a lowering of scholarly standards. As they saw it, revisionists like Brodie valued ideology above accuracy. Julian Boyd, the editor of the *Jefferson Papers*, unleashed a blistering attack on Brodie and her supporters in a letter to the editor of the Princeton alumni newsletter.

Mrs. Brodie's despairing, ambivalent, indecisive and guilt-ridden Jefferson may be soothing to those who so eagerly embrace the concept of collective guilt, who project our views of the rights of women and blacks



into the past, and who cast the new abolitionism, the new sectionalism, and the new attitudes toward sexual liberation into molds manufactured in our own time and in our own image, certainly not out of apodictic materials provided by the past. This, too, is understandable, but it assuredly is not scholarship, and the resultant Jefferson—unless I have wasted thirty of the best years of my life in studying all his recorded actions—is only an imaginative creature and, in my view, a rather repulsive one.<sup>37</sup>

Malone agreed that “the thing most to be deplored and feared” about the Brodie book was its disregard of historical standards of evidence. “That any real scholar could give serious consideration to such a book,” Malone wrote to Boyd in a moment of exasperation, “is beyond my comprehension.”<sup>38</sup>

Friends of Malone detected politics at work behind the popular acceptance of the Brodie thesis. “I wish that this matter might fade away but I suspect that there is more back of the promotion of Mrs. Brodie than meets the eye,” Curtis Nettels, a history professor at Cornell, wrote to Malone. Dabney was more explicit. “*Ebony*, the black imitation of *Life*, is spreading the Hemings canard all over their bicentennial issue, and the blacks hereabout are reading it gleefully,” he wrote to Malone. “We may as well resign ourselves to the fact that nothing anybody ever says, or proves, on this subject will shake their confident belief that TJ sired those mulattoes.” Indeed, *Ebony* published an article entitled “The Dilemma of Thomas Jefferson” in its August 1975 issue, calling him “the slavemaster who railed against slavery, the miscegenator who abhorred race-mixing, the man of reason who spent a lifetime draped in the hairshirt of his own unresolved contradictions.” The article quoted Fawn Brodie in the first paragraph.<sup>39</sup>

The popularity of the Brodie thesis reflected a changing attitude toward the American past and the people who shaped it. A new generation of historians began to question the motives and morality of men such as Thomas Jefferson, whose revolutionary ideology came to seem self-serving and sharply delimited. The eighty-three-year-old Malone sensed the shifting attitude. If Jefferson were to return, he sadly commented on the eve of nation’s bicentennial, “the thing he’d notice most about the country today is the lack of faith, the widespread disillusionment, and the cynicism.”<sup>40</sup>

Malone insisted that only a careful consideration of the entire record of Jefferson’s life could allow us to understand any part of it. To him, that larger understanding emphasized Jefferson’s democratic thought more than his failures on slavery; it ruled out any kind of sexual relationship between Jefferson and a slave on the basis of the consistency of Jefferson’s character. For Malone, the political and personal ideals Jefferson embodied would

have been violated, mocked, had he condemned his own children to slavery or banishment.

The people on each side of the debate assumed the worst about the other. Advocates of the Hemings story gave little credit to the scholarly biographers, making the academic works appear far more brittle and apologetic than they were. Critics of the Hemings story, in turn, ascribed petty and prurient motives to its proponents, making their charges appear less thoughtful and well intentioned than they were.

#### IV

The bicentennial anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1976 sent Americans in search of their nation's origins; for many, the home of the author of the Declaration of Independence seemed a natural destination. What visitors to Monticello found was a shrine to Thomas Jefferson, the architect of freedom; there was barely a mention of slavery, barely a hint that hundreds of black people had once lived, worked, and died there. The place in history assigned to slaves and slavery at Monticello was not lost on the relatively few black people who visited in the 1970s. Thomas A. Greenfield, a professor from historically black Virginia Union University, took Monticello to task in *The Crisis* for the guides' habitual use of the passive voice when it came to the work slaves performed: "Doors *were installed*," "food *was brought*," "nails and bricks *were all made* right here on the estate," and so on. Architectural features, Greenfield charged, received more attention than the people who built and worked with the elaborate machinery at Monticello, hiding the fact "black people were responsible for the construction, the operation, and the long-term survival of Monticello." Understandably, most black Americans continued to avoid the shrine in droves.<sup>41</sup>

When *Ebony* asked three black leaders whether blacks should celebrate the bicentennial, Jefferson appeared (though not always by name) in all three answers. Baptist church leader Dr. Joseph H. Jackson urged black Americans to follow the example of Benjamin Banneker, the black mathematician who demonstrated to Jefferson, through hard work, that he was qualified to "participate fully as a scientist and as a man of talent." Jackson believed this and other "lessons from the past" would lead and inspire black people "to participate in this historic celebration of the present." Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., the head of the National Urban League, saw the bicentennial as an opportunity to remind Americans "of the hypocrisy of many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence," but added that the Declaration

"really was a revolutionary document, still relevant to our concerns and needs." Editor and historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., argued against the bicentennial celebration, calling for "national repentance" and "national action" instead. "Since Thomas Jefferson said goodbye to his slaves and went off to Philadelphia to write the Declaration of Independence, playing with freedom has become a national passion in America." Ever since, there had been only "betrayal of one of the greatest dreams mankind has ever known," "evasion," "mirage," "illusion," "nightmare."<sup>42</sup>

*Ebony* treated the Sally Hemings story as evidence of Jefferson's hypocrisy, contrasting his words against "race-mixing" with his deeds as a "miscegenator," his words against slavery with his deeds as a slaveholder who refused to free even the slave woman he loved. And it was love, according to author Carlyle C. Douglas, who cited the Brodie biography as his source. "Though nothing of a personal nature that Jefferson may have written about Sally Hemings has ever come to light (most of his biographers agree that much of his most personal correspondence was either destroyed or remains suppressed by his descendants), it seems clear that his relationship with Sally Hemings was closer in nature to a love affair than the casual debauchery of slave by master." Jefferson's feelings for Sally Hemings only heightened his dilemma, only intensified his hypocrisy.<sup>43</sup>

The rhetoric heated up on the other side as well. Dumas Malone, completing the final volume of his Jefferson biography, sought to debunk the 1873 memoir of Madison Hemings, whose mother Sally reportedly told him he was the son of Thomas Jefferson. In a journal article entitled "A Note on Evidence," Malone and his research assistant, Steven Hochman, dismissed the Hemings memoir as a piece of propaganda. Malone wrote that the Hemings memoir "reminds us of the pedigree printed on the numerous stud-horse bills that can be seen posted around during the Spring season. No matter how scrubby the stock or whether the horse has any known pedigree," owners invented an exalted lineage for their property. Horses could not know what was claimed for them, "but we have often thought if one of them could read and would happen to come across his pedigree . . . he would blush to the tips of his ears at the mendacity of his owner."<sup>44</sup>

John Chester Miller, whose 1977 study *Wolf by the Ears* was sharply critical of Jefferson's record on slavery, revealed just how much was at stake in the Hemings debate in his own strongly worded rebuttal. If the Sally Hemings story were true, he wrote, Jefferson "deserves to be regarded as one of the most profligate liars and consummate hypocrites ever to occupy the presidency. To give credence to the Sally Hemings story is, in effect, to

question the authenticity of Jefferson's faith in freedom, the rights of man, and the innate controlling faculty to reason and the sense of right and wrong. It is to infer that there were no principles to which he was inviolably committed, that what he acclaimed as morality was no more than a rhetorical facade for self-indulgence, and that he was always prepared to make exceptions in his own case when it suited his purpose." Not even a deep and sincere love for Sally Hemings could "sanctify such an egregious violation of his own principles and preachments." David Brion Davis, author of a brooding and magisterial history of antislavery in Jefferson's era, agreed with Miller that "the consistency between Jefferson's words and deeds is precisely the point at issue," but argued that the evidence in the Hemings case was "highly inconclusive." Davis saw more important inconsistencies in Jefferson's record on slavery and suggested that Jefferson overcame whatever pangs of guilt he might have felt. "The absurdity of history's contradictions is matched only by humanity's capacity for rationalization and self-deception," he wrote.<sup>45</sup>

One important book went farther. Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery—American Freedom* suggested that the entire debate had been framed incorrectly. The supposed inconsistency and conflict between white democracy and black slavery was no inconsistency at all. In an elaborate and subtle argument, Morgan tried to show that the planter statesmen of eighteenth-century Virginia were able to envision broad-based white political rights precisely because slavery had solved the problem of a dangerous working class. With slavery holding the vast majority of the working poor in bondage and with race safely dividing poor white from poor black, men such as Jefferson felt free to adopt the most democratic ideals, to speak in the most democratic idiom. Morgan's Jefferson did not appear tormented or contradictory, but ruthlessly consistent. His was the most harrowing vision of all.

v

The debate over Jefferson and race took on renewed vitality in January 1979 when Malone and company learned of plans by CBS to develop a television miniseries based on the forthcoming book, *Sally Hemings: A Novel*. The author of the book, Barbara Chase-Riboud, did something no one had done before: she imagined the alleged affair between Jefferson and Hemings from the viewpoint of the female protagonist. In long interior monologues, Chase-Riboud explored the doubts and fears of the slave rather than the inconsistencies of the master. The author accepted the re-

ality of the Hemings story and turned to fiction to supply what document-based history could not. Word of the novel distressed the Jefferson scholars, who did not want to see the story revived in any form. Still, it was word of the proposed miniseries, not the novel, that jolted them into action.<sup>46</sup>

According to an article in the *Hollywood Reporter*, a copy of which found its way to Malone, the miniseries would tell "the real-life story of the 35-year affair between Thomas Jefferson and his mulatto mistress," as depicted in the novel by Chase-Riboud. Distressed by the advance publicity, Malone and his allies decided not to wait until production of the miniseries or publication of the book to act. They mounted a letter-writing campaign aimed at stopping the miniseries and establishing the fictional content of the book. "I believe that CBS would render the American public a great service by abandoning the idea for a series based on a tawdry and unverifiable story," Malone wrote to Robert A. Daly, president of the CBS Television Entertainment Division. "If you *do* go ahead with the project, I would urge you to make it absolutely clear that you are presenting fiction." Malone claimed to speak for countless others who shared his concerns. "I do this not only on my own account, but in behalf of all persons who are concerned with the preservation and presentation of the history of our country." In a similar letter to CBS chairman William S. Paley, Merrill Peterson urged the network to "reconsider lending its name and network to mass media exposure of what can only be vulgar sensationalism masquerading as history." Peterson worried that a miniseries based on a novel based on the conclusions drawn by Brodie would "occupy the shadowy realm of 'docudrama' where it is impossible to distinguish between fiction and fact." He had little faith that television, commercial or public, would do justice to Jefferson. "I hope you will understand my concern," Peterson wrote plaintively. "I care very much for historical truth and also for the good name, reputation, and influence of Thomas Jefferson." The two goals, he believed, were not incompatible.<sup>47</sup>

Malone also objected to the way that Viking Press was characterizing the Chase-Riboud novel in its 1979 catalog, treating the "love story" as if it were undisputed fact. "Over three decades their passionate, complex love affair endured and flowered," the promotional blurb declared. "While most documents related to that passion were carefully destroyed by Jefferson's white family after his death, enough remained to substantiate the basic facts of the case. Using this historical premise and data, Barbara Chase-Riboud has fashioned a dramatic—and unashamedly romantic—novel." Malone dashed off a letter to the president of Viking Press, saying he was "appalled" by the promotional blurb. He called the assertion that family

members had destroyed records “unsupported” and “utterly irresponsible.” He also challenged the claim that existing documents substantiated the story. “To be sure, you are publishing a work of fiction,” he wrote, “but it seems to me that you should make no claim that it has historical foundation.” Alan D. Williams, the editorial director of Viking Press, apologized to Malone for “what might have been called catalog hype for the sales conference.” He promised that “the statement about the non-destroyed or undestroyed documents re Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings” would not appear on the jacket of the book, but he gave no indication that Viking Press would stop stressing the historical foundations of the novel.<sup>48</sup>

On February 11, 1979, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published a front-page, tongue-in-cheek story about the book, the miniseries, and the “tremors” emanating from Monticello and Charlottesville. The newspaper identified the leading critics of the miniseries as Malone, Peterson, Dabney, and Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., president of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation—“Jefferson’s first line of defense.” Two days later, *The Washington Post* reported on efforts by “several of Virginia’s more prominent historians” to “protect the good name” of Jefferson. The story quoted Malone, Dabney, and Robert Rutland, the editor of the James Madison Papers at the University of Virginia. “What bothers the Virginia historians,” the *Post* reported, “is their fear that one woman’s symbolism, as transmogrified by Hollywood writers, will become the definitive biography of Jefferson for the millions of Americans who learn their history from television.” Malone was quoted as saying that a “gullible public” would believe the televised version of the novel, no matter how romantically it was presented. “What’s the use of us trying to get history straight?” he asked.<sup>49</sup>

The hostile response of Malone, Peterson, and other Virginia historians to the popular revival of the Hemings story generated something of a backlash on the editorial pages of *The Cavalier Daily*, the student newspaper at the University of Virginia. “The Virginia historians seem less interested in scholarship than in the frenzied defense of their hero from imagined slurs,” wrote Howard Brody, a doctor who had recently moved to Charlottesville. He accused the Virginia historians of ignoring the oral tradition passed down by Madison Hemings and focusing instead on “denials arising within the Jefferson family.” An editorial in the student newspaper questioned the objectivity of the “local Jeffersonian scholars, who seem to view the book’s publication and potential television adaptation as a personal affront.” There was something unseemly, the editorial writer observed, about the way in which these supposedly detached scholars were defending their subject. “Chase-Riboud’s work certainly is unscholarly; the author admits she gives

'free rein to her imagination' in recreating the love affair. But historians who say they hate to witness criticism of an old, familiar friend like Jefferson run the risk of appearing equally unscholarly." The editorial called for a more dignified response, one based on erudition rather than emotion.<sup>50</sup>

As the controversy escalated, Malone became increasingly uncomfortable with his role as a public defender of Jefferson; he refused to grant television interviews and only reluctantly agreed to speak with the print media. "I am a little sorry that this matter has received so much publicity," he wrote in March 1979 to Harold J. Coolidge, a Jefferson descendant who had participated in the earlier campaign against Fawn Brodie. "While every effort should be made to dissuade CBS from producing a mini-series, we don't want to give any more publicity to Sally Hemings and the forthcoming book than we have to." Dabney voiced similar concern. "The question is whether CBS will think this publicity makes it all the more desirable that they produce the mini-series. We'll just have to keep our fingers crossed." By April, CBS officials seemed to be distancing themselves from the project, saying they had "a commitment from an independent producer for a 'treatment' of the Jefferson story," but that they were "under no obligation to accept the treatment when and if delivered." In a letter to Harold Coolidge, CBS vice president E. K. Meade Jr. acknowledged the concerns of the Jefferson descendants and Jefferson scholars who opposed the miniseries. "As to the apprehensions you express and the objections of such eminent historians as Dumas Malone and Virginius Dabney, let me say that we are well aware of the controversy surrounding this particular work on Jefferson. More to the point, we assure you that those views will receive the most conscientious consideration in determining what, if any, decision we make in the matter." Unlike Warner Brothers, whose legal affairs director cited other "authorities" on the subject, CBS seemed ready to defer to the authority of the Jefferson scholars and Jefferson descendants who opposed the miniseries.<sup>51</sup>

Some critics who opposed the miniseries had no problem with Chase-Riboud or her book. "She is a poet, she calls her work fiction, and her agent says it is 'symbolic' of race relations in America," wrote Barbara Stanton, an editorial writer for the *Detroit Free Press*. "Race has been an open sore with us for more than three-and-a-half centuries; and it is the ordained function of a writer to poke our sores where they hurt, until we do something about them." Others considered the novel no less objectionable than the miniseries. In an article coauthored by Jon Kukla, assistant director for publications at the Virginia State Library, Dabney accused Chase-Riboud of manipulating historical fact to serve her own present-day

purposes. "Her novel tells of an enslaved, black female being oppressed and intimately exploited by white, male America disguised as Thomas Jefferson." *Sally Hemings* was no love story; it was an angry polemic.<sup>52</sup>

Chase-Riboud denied that her book was a veiled attack on Jefferson or white America. "There isn't a bitter or angry word in the book," she told Flora Lewis of *The New York Times*. "Lots of people found rage in it, but it isn't mine. It's their rage which they're projecting." Chase-Riboud said the book was about "the metaphysics of race" in a "mulatto country," not about the plight of blacks in a white country. "'Sally' is by no means a black experience book," she said. "There's no such thing as 'black experience' except in relation to 'white experience.' I don't think we'll even be using those terms much longer." While the book received positive reviews in *The Black Scholar* and *The Journal of Negro History*, it was not universally applauded by blacks. The *Baltimore Sun* reported that "the black activists" were upset with Chase-Riboud "for suggesting that a white plantation owner and a black slave could have enjoyed a 38-year love affair."<sup>53</sup>

Chase-Riboud told interviewers that she found herself relating to her material not as a black person but as a woman. "I don't know who had the worse life. A woman was treated as property if she were white or black." She acknowledged that a streak of feminism ran through the book, "but I didn't introduce it purposely, it just came in the story of one woman and all her labels." Chase did not seem disturbed that she had been labeled a black activist or a feminist by critics of her novel; she said she had gained a sense of herself "without labels" while living in Paris, just like Sally Hemings some two hundred years before.<sup>54</sup>

When Chase-Riboud returned to Charlottesville in June 1979 to promote her book, she attempted to turn the tables on the Jefferson scholars, challenging them to prove that the affair between Jefferson and Hemings did not happen. "They just say that it couldn't have happened but they have to have the data to back it up," she told the local newspaper. "They just don't have it." Chase-Riboud said she hoped her book would inspire "younger" historians to "take up the investigation of, not just this incident, but other aspects of American history. We have been shown the straight, wide, white road of American history, and that's not necessarily the way it was." She said she thought the public was ready for her point of view, "especially as it in no way diminishes Jefferson's genius but increases the sense of his humanity."<sup>55</sup>

Apparently, the CBS executives disagreed. In December 1979, Dabney happily informed Malone that CBS had "dropped all plans" for the mini-series. His source was Frank McCarthy, "the Richmond-born Hollywood



producer who turned down the idea himself years ago, and now sends glad tidings that CBS has lost all enthusiasm." Dabney did not know why CBS had decided to abandon the miniseries, but he was pleased nonetheless. "Enough damage has been done by Brodie and Chase-Riboud without TV also," he wrote. Malone congratulated Dabney on his efforts. "It seems to me that you deserve more credit for this fortunate result than anybody else." Still, Malone worried that the Hemings story might be revived by someone else. "As you say, we must keep our fingers crossed. Eternal vigilance will be necessary."<sup>56</sup>

In March 1980, Dabney wrote to Malone with "disturbing news" about a report he had seen in the *Amsterdam News*, the "Negro-owned" newspaper in New York City. Far from being a box-office flop, the Chase-Riboud novel had apparently sold 30,000 copies in hardcover, and a paperback edition was on the way. "I have seen an ad for the Avon paperback," Dabney wrote to Malone, "and it is lurid in the extreme." The publisher promised to promote the book "with a 30-second TV commercial to be seen by thousands of viewers in major markets, backed by print advertising in the June issue of *Cosmopolitan*." Meanwhile, another television network reportedly was reviving plans for a miniseries based on the Sally Hemings novel. Dabney saw little hope of changing the promotional strategy of Avon Books—"All they are interested in is making money, and who cares about the facts?"—but he did hold out hope for killing the miniseries. "CBS was talked out of the plan they had, and possibly this can be done with ABC." Dabney said he would ask Frank McCarthy, the Hollywood producer, for advice on how best to proceed.<sup>57</sup>

McCarthy confirmed that another network—actually NBC—was reviving plans for a miniseries based on the Chase-Riboud novel. He suggested that Malone enlist a member of the University of Virginia Board of Visitors to write a letter to the president of NBC, but Dabney insisted that Malone continue to lead the fight. "I am sure that you are the most important person of all to write the letter of protest because of your great prestige and the respect in which your views are held; and I should think Merrill Peterson should be enlisted for the duration." Malone cringed at the thought of writing another letter. "Let me say in the first place that I have no assurance that it would ever reach the president of NBC or be read by him. I never had the slightest acknowledgment to the letters I wrote to the CBS people. I must confess that I am completely worn out with this particular controversy and want to pass the buck if I can possibly do so." Malone asked Frank L. Hereford, Jr., the president of the University of Virginia, and Frederick Nolting, the head of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation,

if they would be willing to write official letters of protest, but both declined. "I am as appalled as you at the prospect of what a national television network might do to the Hemings story," Hereford explained, "but I am a little reluctant to get in touch with anyone at NBC myself as President of the University. While we ought to encourage sound scholarship and scrupulous attention to the facts, in a case such as this, it worries me that any representation I might make would be taken to mean that the University is trying to act as a censor." Nolting, likewise, wanted to keep Monticello out of the controversy. "He is trying to find the name of somebody close to the president of NBC whom he can approach on a personal ground," Malone informed Dabney. "The point is that he does not want to involve the Foundation."<sup>58</sup>

While Malone was eager to pass the buck, Dabney was determined to fight to the finish. He informed Malone that he was writing a 35,000-word minibook on the Jefferson scandals for Dodd, Mead and Company. "Of course this will be no effective rebuttal to Brodie's Book of the Month and Chase-Riboud's *Literary Guild* selection and the vast amounts of publicity both works have received. But it seems desirable to have something on the record in hard covers." Published in 1981, *The Jefferson Scandals: A Rebuttal* allowed Dabney to repeat many of the points he had already made in newspaper and magazine articles. It also allowed him to challenge Brodie's claim that Malone and Peterson were members of a Jefferson Establishment, based in Charlottesville and dedicated to the "canonization" of Jefferson. Dabney stressed the diverse backgrounds of the two scholars, who were born, raised, and educated outside of Virginia. He said they were attracted to the University of Virginia by "the superb collection of Jefferson materials in the university's Alderman Library and at Monticello," not by their devotion to Virginia or Jefferson. Far from uncritical, they had written "scathingly" of Jefferson's conduct "in connection with the trial of Aaron Burr for treason and in ramming the embargo legislation through Congress." Malone and Peterson were united with other professional historians in their rejection of the Hemings story, Dabney acknowledged, but they were hardly canonizers or members of a Jefferson Establishment.<sup>59</sup>

Reviews of *The Jefferson Scandals* were decidedly mixed. *The New Yorker* called Dabney a "well-known journalist and historian" who "courteously yet firmly" presented the verifiable facts. *The New York Times* called him "a respected journalist with a long and strong record as a civil rights advocate," who, "despite a slight tone of protesting too much, is reasonable in his research." Others were more critical. *Commentary* reviewer Peter Shaw complained that Dabney "approached the subject as an apologist rather

than a disinterested historian" and that he tended to "substitute a tone of sarcasm for a careful exposition of the flaws in Mrs. Brodie's book." In his zeal to defend Jefferson against the charge of miscegenation, Dabney missed "the broader implications of Sally Hemings's presence at Monticello—a matter of far greater import than the titillating question of her relationship to Jefferson." Dabney also shirked his responsibility by failing to explore the role of professional historians in promoting popular acceptance of the book. "The historians were obviously clear in their own minds about the factitiousness of Mrs. Brodie's account," Shaw wrote. "But they also knew that Mrs. Brodie had made something of a feminist issue out of her case. She had represented herself as entering a male bastion of Jefferson studies and bringing to a specifically feminine appreciation of 'feeling' and 'nuance.' To attack a book making such a claim in 1974 was to invite nothing but trouble." Shaw said historians were also reluctant, for similar reasons, to criticize Chase-Riboud's "novelization" when it came out in 1979. "At that point, to attack a novel that was at once a cry of outrage against male oppressors and an apotheosis of Sally Hemings as Jefferson's most intimate companion hardly made for an attractive prospect." Shaw concluded that the "true" Jefferson scandal lay in the "abrogation of scholarly responsibilities" by professional historians who held their tongues for fear of a feminist backlash.<sup>60</sup>

The debate over the Sally Hemings novel and television series taught Chase-Riboud something about the claims people made to the American past. "I have learned it is one thing to write a book and explore a character. But I have also learned about the presumed rights to interpret American history, even fictionally. Some people think this is a one-race, one-culture, one-sex country, or at least theirs is the only outlook. But I think they got more upset when they learned the vast public would see this story on television."<sup>61</sup>

In 1981, Malone himself was asked to serve as a consultant on a mini-series about Jefferson, an eight- to ten-hour production "ala *Masada* or *Roots*." The producer, Clifford Campion, pitched the miniseries as "an opportunity to get the story of this great man out to the public." Malone was intrigued, but he had strong reservations about the mini-series format: "I am somewhat appalled by the prospect of a treatment of Jefferson's entire career since it took me a generation and six volumes to cover it." Malone would not consider lending his name to the miniseries unless he could review the contents and reject what he considered specious. Campion, for his part, was not about to let a scholar decide what should or should not go into a television movie. "A responsible producer lives and dies by his

research support," he wrote. "Furthermore, the rules of docu-drama require accuracy and integrity. By the same token, I, as any producer in Hollywood, must have the latitude to express what might have happened given a set of facts and circumstances." Malone eventually begged off from the project, saying he could not sell his name. "You would not want me to do that."<sup>62</sup>

In 1984, two years before his death, Malone made a startling concession in an interview with *The New York Times*. "Gesturing with his big hands, Dr. Malone said that what struck him as most speculative and unhistorical in the Brodie version was not that Jefferson might have slept with Hemings but rather that he had carried on the affair with her in Paris and later as President for years on end. A sexual encounter, on the other hand, could neither be proved nor disproved, he conceded, adding, 'it might have happened once or twice.'"<sup>63</sup>

## VI

In the early 1980s, the board of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation—the nonprofit organization that owns and operates Monticello—decided to delegate more responsibility to professionals. Daniel P. Jordan, a Virginia Commonwealth University professor of history who had studied with Merrill Peterson at the University of Virginia, took over as director in 1985. Jordan wanted Monticello to become less of a monument and more of an educational center. He began to build a larger staff, with departments of research, restoration, and education. Using information about Monticello slave life gathered from ongoing archaeological excavation and in-house research on the Hemings family, the staff attempted to give slavery a more prominent place in tours, the gift shop, and the new Visitors Center. Displays were created to acknowledge the presence and celebrate the skills of slaves at Monticello. House guides were instructed to discuss slavery during at least three (now four) of the nine stops on the tour; they were also urged to use anecdotes about members of the Hemings family, particularly John and James, and to avoid sounding defensive when answering questions about Sally. The education department developed a teacher resource packet on plantation life and an ambitious unit called "Finding Isaac Jefferson: A Monticello Slave."<sup>64</sup>

Despite the attempts of Monticello staff to provide a fuller and more balanced view of Jefferson and slavery, some visitors suspected the full story remained untold. They would often unnerve the guides—especially those who prided themselves on their candor—by suggesting that the subject of

Sally Hemings was still taboo. Yet, the subject *was* sensitive, even if it was no longer taboo. Some guides found the subject of miscegenation distasteful, especially when it involved Jefferson; others felt that to mention an unproven charge gave it a legitimacy it did not deserve. Officially, Monticello acknowledged the popular appeal of the story, but sided with the Jefferson scholars who discounted it. The first visitors' guide to Mulberry Row, prepared by research director Lucia Stanton in the late 1980s, discussed the Hemings story and its origins with matter-of-fact directness:

Sally Hemings' name became linked to Jefferson's in 1802, when an embittered journalist published the allegation that she was Jefferson's mistress and bore him a number of children. This story, which Jefferson privately denied, continues to capture the public imagination. Although it is impossible to prove either side of the question, most Jefferson scholars discount the truth of such a liaison.<sup>65</sup>

The newly professionalized Monticello administration, self-consciously adopting the cautious standards of scholarship, hoped the pamphlet would finally put the charges of evasion to rest.

When African-American civil rights activist and politician Jesse Jackson visited in 1990 with three of his children, however, he told the local newspaper that the description of the Hemings relationship in the Mulberry Row pamphlet was inadequate, far too defensive, in fact, "a real propaganda sheet. I mean it's a very opinionated paragraph." To call the journalist "embittered," Jackson charged, "is a very political, prejudicial statement." Jordan responded that "since the story can't be proven, Monticello cannot arbitrarily proclaim it to be true."<sup>66</sup>

Jackson did not want the Hemings story to be featured as evidence of the hypocrisy and cruelty of Jefferson, the motive white scholars had so often attributed to African-Americans who publicized the story. Rather, Jackson saw the Hemings story as an example of the dilemma facing Jefferson and other white slaveholders who shared his racial beliefs and moral opposition to slavery. Jefferson's "exalted treatment" of Sally Hemings and her siblings reflected his *uneasiness with slavery*. While Jefferson "couldn't make the political break with the institution," Jackson was quoted as saying, "he made the personal break." The Mulberry Row pamphlet did nothing to ease his suspicion that Monticello was hiding the truth about Sally Hemings. What the Monticello staff saw as a balanced statement on the Hemings relationship, Jackson saw as "an attempt to pour sand over history."<sup>67</sup>

Despite its efforts to address the subject of slavery more openly, Monticello still seemed defensive on the subject of race. Several critics com-

plained that Monticello viewed the past from a white perspective, and thus ignored the perspective of the blacks, both as historical figures and as present-day visitors. Leni Ashmore Sorensen, a local historical interpreter, argued that blacks were “invisible” at Monticello. “The continuing embarrassment over Sally Hemings and the various myths that have grown up around her seem to have paralyzed any effort to build a strong black interpretation into the program at Monticello,” she wrote in *Off the Fence*, a local alternative newspaper. Noting the dearth of black administrators, guides, and researchers at Monticello, Sorensen argued that the museum missed “the encouragement and potential public support to grapple with the facts, the mythology and the impact of miscegenation in America.”<sup>68</sup>

Mark Bograd, a white anthropologist at the National Museum of Natural History, also objected to the way in which slavery was presented at Monticello. From his point of view, Jefferson’s moral opposition to slavery, so often stressed at Monticello, was “beside the point,” even “offensive.” The whole “wolf by the ears” approach focuses on “the moral discomfort of these slaveowners,” defines “the experience of slavery from their perspectives, not from the perspectives of those they owned. Tourists are being told about metaphysical quandaries when they should be told about the physical reality of slave life.” Bograd asked what critics had been asking since the 1960s: “Why do we need to purify our heroes, to justify or explain belatedly their actions when they do not meet with contemporary standards?” Such evasions at the shrines of the founding fathers “suggest a shallow faith in the greatness of these men. Are their achievements and images unable to take the tarnish of slavery?”<sup>69</sup>

Apparently. In 1990, the columnist George Will named Jefferson the “Person of the Millennium,” declaring that Jefferson “is what a free person looks like—confident, serene, rational, disciplined, temperate, tolerant, curious.” Jefferson, Will proclaimed, expressed the “American idea” not “only in stirring cadences, but also in the way he lived, as statesman, scientist, architect, educator.” Slaveholding went unmentioned.<sup>70</sup> A new film shown at the Monticello Visitors Center describes slavery as a “shadow” over Jefferson’s legacy, but is followed with former president Jimmy Carter explaining that Jefferson could not have “survived” as a “farmer” without slavery. Viewers who might be disturbed by the fact that Jefferson was a slaveholder are consoled by the message that Jefferson planted the seeds for liberation movements around the world, including the civil rights movement. The minute or so devoted to slavery is counterbalanced with more than half an hour on other aspects of Jefferson’s life. None of the slaves who

spent their lives on Monticello is mentioned by name. The film's focus on Jefferson's political ideas and public life is intended to complement the display on slave life at the Visitors Center, but viewers must make that connection themselves.<sup>71</sup>

It is not clear what visitors think about Jefferson, race, and slavery, or how deeply all the debates, articles, and books have penetrated. The administrators at Monticello do not find many angry notes in their suggestion box, nor do many of the tourists who trek to Charlottesville confront their guides or write letters of complaint when they get back home. Still, enough ask questions about Sally Hemings to suggest that the story has a firm hold on the American imagination.

A kind of schizophrenia surrounds Jefferson. On the one hand, opinion-makers, when the occasion seems to demand, sing the praises of Jefferson without reservation, celebrating the architect of freedom, and many people apparently agree. On the other hand, the public seems fixated on Sally Hemings, the subject of popular plays, novels, and even juvenile fiction. It is almost as if the public Jefferson and private Jefferson have gone their own separate ways, each embarked on a strange career of his own.<sup>72</sup>

The 250th anniversary of Jefferson's birth in 1993 inevitably calls for a reassessment of the man and his legacy. As was true with the recent bicentennials of the Revolution and Constitution, such reassessments are likely to be both inspired and provoked by celebratory and commemorative public events. The contrast between the current round of festivities and the somber and understated World War II commemoration could not be more striking. Monticello and a consortium of other historical organizations have planned more than two hundred activities spread out over more than a year. Many of these observances undoubtedly will evoke the usual patriotic hoopla. But it is a remarkable sign of these times that Monticello and the University of Virginia—the institutions most closely associated with Jefferson—have taken advantage of the anniversary to demonstrate their critical engagement with Jefferson's most problematic legacy, his record on race and slavery.

In 1943, on the bicentennial of Jefferson's birth, the university contented itself with installing some glass display boxes in its library. A much more elaborate program is now underway in commemoration of Jefferson's 250th birthday. The first major event, an ambitious academic conference, was scheduled for October of 1992, partly to permit the publication of this volume in April 1993 and partly to avoid overlapping with Monticello's

larger celebration. A public television crew captured the events at the university, creating a verbatim record and collecting footage for future documentaries.

The Jeffersonian Legacies Conference was largely the work of Peter Onuf, who recently succeeded to Merrill Peterson's position in the history department. Having established his reputation not as a student of Jefferson himself, but as a student of Jefferson's era, Onuf hardly embodied the image of the "Jefferson establishment." As conference organizer, he struck a distinctly nonreverential air: sessions would consider the full range of Jefferson's legacies. As the brochure for the conference declared, "Our intention is to honor Thomas Jefferson by taking his ideas and his career seriously. But the conference will also explore the more ambiguous and, in the case of slavery and race relations, even tragic dimension of his legacy. Only by such an honest and open-ended accounting can the Jeffersonian tradition in American public culture be sustained and renewed." By and large, the scholars who were recruited to the conference were well known not so much for their specific knowledge of Jefferson as for their broader studies of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Merrill Peterson, retired from the university and hard at work on his study of the image of Abraham Lincoln in the American mind, chose to play only a limited role. It was time for another generation to reckon with the Jeffersonian image.

When conference participants convened in Charlottesville, a certain wary excitement provided the dominant tone. Few considered themselves Jefferson scholars in the distinguished tradition of Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson. The days when biographies of great men ruled the academy had long passed. If many of these academicians clearly admired Jefferson, they were leery of becoming either banal and uncritical celebrants or anachronistic and ahistorical critics. Not surprisingly, complexity, ambiguity, and unanticipated consequences recurred as the conference's leitmotifs. It is perhaps also not surprising that positions on race and slavery became the measure of how "honest" speakers, sessions, the conference, the university—establishment America—were.

Despite the explicitly critical themes of the conference, the notion of a "Jefferson establishment" continued to cast a long shadow in the public perception. A member of the audience asked civil rights activist Julian Bond, who gave a glowing tribute to the power of Jefferson's words, whether the history department had given him any trouble about his comments. Even the academics half-jokingly commented on the risks of saying anything negative about "Mr. Jefferson" in Charlottesville. Yet the actual situation was quite different—perhaps, on race and slavery, even the re-



verse. No one stood up to defend Jefferson; those who insisted on putting his slaveholding in context took pains to make sure their comments were not taken as veiled defense of the indefensible. With the "establishment" thus neutralized, many of the discussions—especially the one on race and slavery—seemed unfocused and adrift. Instead of generating lively debate, Jefferson's record on race produced little more than the sounds of muffled agreement.

The press had a difficult time reckoning with this situation. The reporters who came to Charlottesville were looking for a story, a plot line that would sustain interest in the proceedings. Most of them focused on race and slavery, the issues that were sure to provoke the most debate. The Charlottesville *Daily Progress* began its preview of the six-day conference with this provocative question, "How did a slave-holding aristocrat, who believed blacks were inferior, come to inspire the civil rights movement and freedom-seeking revolutions through the world?" The reporter, Jim Denery, portrayed the invited scholars as myth-busters, out to destroy one-dimensional images of Jefferson. He noted that several of the papers prepared for the conference dealt with slavery. "There will be some sparks," he quoted Onuf as predicting, "because this situation hits close to home."<sup>73</sup>

*The Washington Post* was far more droll about the conference, portraying it as a scholarly sideshow to the 1992 presidential campaign, a public discussion of "the character issues" that still haunted "one of our greatest presidents." In a breezy article entitled "Thomas Jefferson, Tarnished Icon?" feature writer Joel Achenbach parodied the kinds of questions that twentieth-century scholars were asking of the nineteenth-century president. "Was he a hypocrite? Self-indulgent? A deficit spender? Did he take a slave, Sally Hemings, as his mistress? (*Sally*, they call her around here, as though she might walk in the door.)" The writer poked fun at the irreverent tone of the conference, quoting the words of one "dyspeptic professor," then declaring: "What tough times these are for icons!"<sup>74</sup>

After attending two days of seminars and lectures, Achenbach concluded that the Jefferson conference was not as radical or subversive as one might think, given its emphasis on race and slavery. "For the most part Jefferson has been lauded and praised; Jefferson scholars are hardly a spittle-spewing, stink-bomb-throwing bunch. But inevitably they have to deal with the not trivial problem of his attitudes toward blacks, women, Native Americans and just about anyone else who was not part of the white, male, property-owning elite." Achenbach characterized the scholars assembled for the conference as "a rather conservative group," hemmed in by the cautious standards of their own discipline. "An academic conference can be a tedious

affair," Achenbach wrote. "There is a proliferation of nuance; scholars never met a nuance they didn't like. When things get slow, when the contextualization gets thick, it is easy to see the appeal of the screaming diatribe. It's exciting!" Achenbach proceeded to paraphrase the comments of Rhys Isaac, a white scholar who scolded his fellow conferees (most of them white) for ignoring the Jeffersonian legacy of inequality: "What about blacks? Women? Native Americans? What about the fact that we still haven't achieved reasonable equity among these groups?" Achenbach contrasted the present-minded concerns of Isaac with the more historically contextualized views of Gordon Wood, who called Jefferson "a man of his time—let's not ask him to be something he wasn't." Achenbach himself adopted the cool pose of the self-aware liberal, able to face the past without preaching or posturing: "The record shows that Jefferson had beliefs that are abhorrent to modern sensibilities," he wrote, suggesting that the record could—and should—speak for itself.<sup>75</sup>

The *Richmond Times Dispatch*, the only major newspaper to cover the much-hyped Saturday conference entitled "Jefferson, Race, and Slavery," focused on the dramatic appearance of a Hemings family descendant, Robert H. Cooley III, who informed the assembled scholars that the Hemings story was "not a story. It's true." Cooley offered himself and his family as "living proof that Jefferson had an affair with his slave," the newspaper reported. Cooley complained that the oral tradition of his family was not good enough for Monticello, which insisted upon documentary evidence. "We couldn't write then," he explained. "We were slaves." Cooley suggested that Jefferson's white children destroyed any records of his relationship with Sally Hemings after his death. "I doubt if there was any shred of a record remaining." The *Times-Dispatch* reporter contrasted the certainty of Cooley with the quibbling of the scholars, who "discussed the question" but provided no definitive answers. The only panelist to take a strong position on the matter was Bernadine Simmons, the community affairs director for a Richmond television station. She was quoted as saying that it was not difficult to imagine "a relationship between Thomas Jefferson and a comely quadroon on his plantation," despite the lack of definitive evidence. Both Simmons and Cooley spoke with the cultural authority of African-Americans speaking on African-American history, something the white scholars on the panel were loathe to challenge.<sup>76</sup>

The day after the panel discussion, both the Richmond and Charlottesville papers ran an Associated Press story about new archaeological evidence that tended to confirm the "strong connection" between the Jefferson family and the Hemings family. "After 13 years of digging around three Jefferson

houses," the wire service reported, "William Kelso is considering more seriously the often-discounted stories that the United States' third president had children with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves." Both newspapers found it newsworthy that the chief archaeologist at Monticello, the last bastion of the Jefferson establishment, was willing to reconsider the plausibility of the Hemings story, based on new evidence. The Jefferson establishment no longer seemed able—or willing—to present the public with a pristine image of the founding father.<sup>77</sup>

It was left to Julian Bond, a black activist and veteran of the civil rights movement, to answer the question that the local newspaper had used to frame the conference: How did a slave-holding aristocrat, who believed blacks were inferior, come to inspire freedom-seeking revolutions throughout the world? Bond showed how Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence could be invoked to transcend—or overlook—Jefferson's bigotry. In Bond's interpretation, the true Jeffersonian legacy was the best one, the one that surmounted his own parochialism, racism, and slaveholding. It was, ironically, an interpretation reminiscent of Dumas Malone's, in which the real Jefferson is the one we want and need. Those who claimed descent from Jefferson and Sally Hemings spoke, too, from a hopeful vision, one in which a white man and a black woman transcended the social and cultural boundaries that separated them and bequeathed a proud, if complex legacy to their progeny.

When Thomas Jefferson died, he could not know with any certainty that his enduring legacy would be found in his noblest words rather than in his worst example. The inscription Jefferson wrote for his tombstone testified to his determination that he be remembered not for his entanglement in slavery but for his ideals of liberty and enlightenment. And he has been. But a different outcome on the battlefields at Antietam or Gettysburg might have rendered Jefferson's slaveholding and his racial theorizing more relevant to the twentieth century than his words in the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson's legacy might well have been other than the legacy we choose to remember in 1993.

#### NOTES

We would like to thank the following people at Monticello for answering our questions and for providing us with documents related to the evolving interpretation of race and slavery at the historic home of Thomas Jefferson: Daniel P. Jordan, executive director; Libby Fosso, public relations; Elizabeth Taylor, head guide; Cinder Stanton and Kristin Onuf,

research; and Linda Lisanti, education. We would also like to thank our colleagues in the Corcoran Department of History and all those who participated in the Jeffersonian Legacies Conference. We are especially grateful to Peter Onuf, James Lewis, Charles Miller, Lee Quinby, Peter Kastor, and Michael Ackerman for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Our closest advisors, Ruhi Grover and Abby Ayers, encouraged us and inspired us throughout this project. Finally, we would like to thank the late Dumas Malone for trusting us with his papers.

1. The classic account is Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960).

2. *The New York Times*, April 14, 1943, pp. 1, 16; Dumas Malone, "The Jefferson Faith," *Saturday Review*, 26 (April 13, 1943), p. 4. The black newspapers of Richmond and Baltimore did not cover the event.

3. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944; reprint, New York, 1962), p. 90.

4. Dumas Malone, "The South in American Achievement," undated manuscript, Malone papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. For a published version of this thesis, see "The Geography of American Achievement," *The Atlantic*, 154 (December 1934), pp. 669-79.

5. Malone, "The Jefferson Faith," p. 6; Malone to John T. Caldwell, president of the University of Arkansas, Dec. 20, 1958. Malone loathed the idea of activist scholarship. Commenting on August Meier's dissertation, "Negro Thought on the Race Problem in America in the Age of Booker T. Washington," Malone wrote: "What most impressed me about this work, besides its thoroughness, was the balanced judgment of the writer. Dealing as he has with a very controversial topic, he showed the utmost fairness. He does not approach this problem as a propagandist but as a genuine scholar." (Malone to the American Council of Learned Societies, March 11, 1958.) Malone did not, however, object to political activism by scholars. As a member of the University of Virginia faculty in the early 1960s, Malone agreed to sign an ad pledging to boycott a segregated theater. "We wanted the list to be headed by some of the most distinguished members of the faculty," recalled Professor Paul Gaston, who helped to organize the boycott. "There weren't many in that category we could persuade to sign, but we knew we could count on probably the most distinguished—Professor Dumas Malone, the Jefferson scholar. I called him and asked him if he would have his name at the head of the list. And he said he would, but he felt a little hypocritical about that. And I said, 'Why, Dumas?' And he said, 'Well, you know, Elizabeth and I never go to the movies.' But I persuaded him, so his name went on the list, and several years later, he called me up and he said, 'Paul, Elizabeth and I want to go to the movies. Are we still boycotting?'" (Excerpted from "Sitting in in the Sixties," lecture by Paul Gaston, Charlottesville, Virginia, 1985.)

6. "The Way of the Scholar," undated manuscript (1934-1935?), Malone papers; "The South in American Achievement," undated manuscript, Malone papers.

7. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1974), pp. xv-xviii. Woodward sided much more closely with the civil rights movement than he let on. In 1953, he agreed to write a monograph on the origins of the Fourteenth Amendment for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, which was seeking historical evidence to buttress its argument in the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. In agreeing to help, Woodward stressed that he would have to work within the constraints of his discipline, which adhered to strict standards of evidence and frowned upon advocacy. "You see, I do not want to be in a position of writing a gratuitous history lecture for the Court. And at

the same time I do not want to get out of my role as historian." John A. Davis, who headed the research task force, assured Woodward that he would have full autonomy: "Your conclusions are your own. If they do not help our side of the case, in all probability the lawyers will not use them. If they do help our argument, the present plan is to include them in our overall summary argument and to file the whole work in an appendix. No matter what happens, your work will be of real educational value to the men who must argue before the Court." Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York, 1975), pp. 623-24.

8. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

9. "Thomas Jefferson's Negro Grandchildren," *Ebony*, 10 (November 1954), p. 78.

10. *Ibid.*

11. This became obvious to W. Edward Farrison, a black English teacher at North Carolina College, who interviewed several Hemings family descendants for a 1954 article on the origins of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, a nineteenth-century novel based on the Hemings story. After surveying a variety of documentary sources, none of them conclusive, Farrison noted "the quiet stream of family history" that originated with Sally Hemings herself: "In September, 1948, in their modest home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I talked at length with three sisters who were obviously far from being full-blooded Negroes, each of whom was more than sixty-five years of age, and who traced their lineage directly to Sally Hemings through her daughter Harriet, who was born in May, 1801, and whose father those sisters had been told was Thomas Jefferson. They had also been informed that Jefferson had once taken Sally Hemings to France 'to nurse his eight-year-old daughter.' Neither of those sisters had ever heard of Callender, Jefferson's plantation records, Mrs. Abigail Adams' letters, or any of the other references to Jefferson which I have cited. They had heard of Brown but knew practically nothing about any of his books." W. Edward Farrison, "The Origin of Brown's *Clotel*," *Phylon*, 15 (1954), p. 354.

12. Trevor Colbourn, ed., *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair* (New York, 1974), p. 167.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 169.

14. Douglass Adair to John Cook Wyllie, Aug. 28, 1960; Wyllie to Adair, Sept. 15, 1960, miscellaneous Adair papers ("The Jefferson Scandals" [1960]), Alderman Library, University of Virginia. Malone himself made an oblique reference to the Hemings story in a 1956 *New York Times Magazine* article: "In later years, political enemies spread wild stories, but there is no evidence that [Jefferson] was ever corrupted by the exercise of arbitrary power under a system he always deplored. His relations with his slaves were marked by no cruelty or sensuality. He was a responsible master in the best patriarchal tradition."

15. Pearl M. Graham, "Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson," *The Journal of Negro History*, 44 (1961), pp. 89-103; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), p. 465n.

16. Peterson, *Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, pp. 186-87.

17. Malcolm X, *On Afro-American History*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1990), pp. 39-40; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1964), p. 88.

18. *The New York Times*, March 31, 1973, p. 35.

19. Malone, "Mr. Jefferson and the Living Generation," *The American Scholar*, 41 (1972), pp. 587-98.

20. Jordan, *White Over Black*, pp. 465, 481.

21. Fawn M. Brodie, "The Political Hero in America," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 46 (1970), pp. 57-60.

22. *The Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1970; Jack P. Greene, "The Sixty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians," *Journal of American History*, 58 (1971), p. 703.

23. Fawn M. Brodie, "Jefferson Biographers and the Psychology of Canonization," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2 (1971), p. 161.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

25. Eric L. McKittrick, "The View from Jefferson's Camp," *The New York Review of Books*, 15 (Dec. 17, 1970), pp. 35-38.

26. For "oddballs" quote, see Edwin M. Yoder Jr., "An Unshaken Hero," *National Review*, 26 (May 10, 1974), p. 542.

27. *The New York Times Book Review*, April 7, 1974, pp. 1-2; *ibid.*, May 12, 1974, p. 42.

28. Murat Williams, "Beyond the Story of Sally Hemings," *The Daily Progress* (Charlottesville, Va.), May 11, 1975.

29. Malone to the editor of *The Daily Progress*, undated, Malone papers.

30. "I generally avoid direct reference to her work in order not to exaggerate its importance," Malone to Edwin M. Yoder Jr., Oct. 11, 1976. *The New York Times Book Review*, May 5, 1974, p. 2; Malone, "Jefferson's Private Life," *The New York Times*, May 10, 1974, p. 31.

31. Virginius Dabney to Malone, Oct. 12, 1974. In the same letter, Dabney revealed that he had nominated Malone for a Pulitzer Prize. Noting that journalists sat on the board of trustees, Dabney said: "I find that ten of them are my personal friends, and I trust that will not ruin your chances. You should have had this and other awards years ago." Dabney himself won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1948.

32. Malone to Dabney, Nov. 18, 1974, Malone papers.

33. Dabney to Malone, Feb. 14, 1975; Malone to Dabney, Feb. 12, 1975; Dabney to Malone, Feb. 14, 1975, Malone papers. *Time*, 105 (March 3, 1975), 67; Dabney to Malone, Feb. 28, 1975; Malone to Dabney, March 3, 1975, Malone papers.

34. For coverage of the Pulitzer Prize awards, see *The New York Times*, May 5, 1975, p. 1. For cottage-cheese story, see *The New York Times*, Aug. 6, 1975, p. 24; for coverage of the "Woman of the Year" ceremony, see the *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1975, section II, p. 1.

35. Garry Wills, "Uncle Thomas's Cabin," *The New York Review of Books*, 21 (April 18, 1974), pp. 26-28.

36. Edwin M. Yoder, Jr., "An Unshaken Hero," *National Review*, 26 (May 10, 1974), p. 542.

37. Julian P. Boyd, letter to the editor of the Princeton University *Alumni Weekly*, undated copy, Malone papers.

38. Malone to Boyd, July 23, 1974.

39. Curtis Nettels to Malone, Feb. 17, 1975; Dabney to Malone, Dec. 13, 1975, Malone papers. Carlyle C. Douglas, "The Dilemma of Thomas Jefferson," *Ebony*, 30 (August 1975), p. 61.

40. *The New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1975, p. 27.

41. Thomas A. Greenfield, "Race and Passive Voice at Monticello," *The Crisis*, 82 (April 1975), pp. 146-47; for a letter seconding his opinion, see the November 1975 issue, p. 370.

42. Douglas, "The Dilemma of Thomas Jefferson," *Ebony*, 30 (Aug. 1975), pp. 61-64, and "Should Blacks Celebrate the Bicentennial?" pp. 36-41. Also see O. C. Bobby Daniels, "The Bicentennial: Contradictions in American Democracy," *The Black Scholar*, 7 (1976),

pp. 2–6; Joseph Carpenter, “The Bicentennial and the Black Revolution: Is it a Myth or a Reality?” *Negro History Bulletin*, 39 (1976), pp. 496–99.

43. Douglas, “The Dilemma of Thomas Jefferson,” *Ebony*, 30 (August 1975), p. 62.

44. Dumas Malone and Steven H. Hochman, “A Note on Evidence: The Personal History of Madison Hemings,” *Journal of Southern History*, 61 (November 1975), pp. 523–28.

45. John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977), p. 176; David Brion Davis, “Self-Evident Truths?” *The New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 13, 1977, p. 9.

46. Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings: A Novel* (New York, 1979). Chase-Riboud dedicated her novel “to the enigma of the historical Sally Hemings.”

47. Dumas Malone to Robert A. Daly, Jan. 18, 1979, Malone papers. Merrill Peterson to William S. Paley, Jan. 16, 1979. Malone asked Julian Boyd and Virginius Dabney to write letters to CBS as well. “There seems to be a possibility that we can stop the series,” Malone wrote to Dabney, “but even if we cannot stop it, we can certainly insist that it be presented as fiction.” Malone to Dabney, Jan. 23, 1979, Malone papers.

48. Viking Press Catalog, 1979, p. 49; Malone to Irving Goodman, Jan. 19, 1979; Alan D. Williams to Malone, Jan. 24, 1979.

49. *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, Feb. 11, 1979, p. 1; *The Washington Post*, Feb. 13, 1979, p. C-1; *The Cavalier Daily*, Feb. 23, 1979, p. 2; *The Cavalier Daily*, Feb. 19, 1979, p. 2. Most press accounts of the controversy poked fun at the reaction of the Virginia historians: “Now, several historians in Virginia are fuming over the latest ‘attack’ upon the beloved native son.” *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1979, section 2, p. 1.

50. *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Feb. 11, 1979, p. 1; *The Washington Post*, Feb. 13, 1979, p. C-1; *The Cavalier Daily*, Feb. 16, 1979, p. 1; Feb. 23, 1979, p. 2; Feb. 19, 1979, p. 2.

51. Malone to Harold J. Coolidge, March 8, 1979; Dabney to Malone, March 11, 1979; E. K. Meade Jr. to Coolidge, April 5, 1979, Malone papers.

52. *The Detroit Free Press*, April 1979; Virginius Dabney and Jon Kukla, “The Monticello Scandals: History and Fiction,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 29 (Autumn 1979), p. 53.

53. *The New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1979, p. C-15; *The Black Scholar* 11 (1980); *The Journal of Negro History*, 65 (1980), p. 275; *The Sun* (Baltimore, Md.), July 10, 1979, p. B-1.

54. *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1979, section 2, p. 6; *The New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1979, p. C-15.

55. *The Daily Progress*, June 27, 1979, p. B-1.

56. Dabney to Malone, Dec. 2, 1979; Malone to Dabney, Dec. 5, 1979, Malone papers.

57. Dabney to Malone, March 14, 1980, Malone papers.

58. Dabney to Malone, March 22, 1980; Malone to Dabney, April 16, 1980; Frank L. Hereford, Jr., to Malone, April 3, 1980; Malone to Dabney, April 16, 1980, Malone papers.

59. Dabney to Malone, March 14, 1980, Malone papers; Virginius Dabney, *The Jefferson Scandals* (New York, 1981), pp. 113–19.

60. *The New Yorker*, 57 (Aug. 17, 1981), p. 107; *The New York Times*, Aug. 11, 1981, p. C-11; *Commentary*, 72 (Nov. 1981), pp. 100–102. The view of Dabney as a strong civil rights advocate was not shared by Paul Gaston, a University of Virginia professor who participated in the movement. In a 1979 review of Dabney’s memoirs, *Across the Years*, Gaston commented on Dabney’s “inability to accept—and therefore seriously probe—the most important transformation of southern society, the black liberation movement. There is no hint in his memoirs that he sees similarities between that movement and the struggles

for liberty of his white ancestors, including Thomas Jefferson. As an authentic patrician he is happy that 'our black citizens' are treated better than they once were, but he cannot truly admire the black and white people who made that circumstance possible." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 78 (Summer 1979), pp. 401-2.

61. *The Washington Post*, June 15, 1979, p. B-6.

62. Clifford Campion to Malone, Aug. 12, 1981; Malone to Campion, Oct. 23, 1981; Campion to Malone, Nov. 23, 1981; Malone to Campion, Dec. 11, 1981. Malone would have been paid handsomely for his name—between \$25,000 and \$40,000 for each two-hour segment. Roger Donald to Malone, Sept. 29, 1981, Malone papers.

63. *The New York Times*, July 4, 1984, p. C-9.

64. Some staff members say pressure for these changes came from the bottom up, with varying degrees of resistance. Others say the administration responded to pressure from outside, sometimes without a clear sense of purpose. A full history of the changes at Monticello is beyond the scope of this article.

65. "Mulberry Row: The story of Monticello's plantation industries and workers, both slave and free, with a self-guided tour," published by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1990.

66. *The Daily Progress*, Nov. 25, 1990.

67. *The Daily Progress*, Nov. 25, 1990, p. 14.

68. Leni Ashmore Sorensen, "Are We There Yet?: Black Presence at Local Historic Museums," *Off the Fence* 1 (Fall 1991), pp. 1, 8-9.

69. Mark Bograd, "Apologies Excepted: Facing Up to Slavery at Historic House Museums," *History News*, 47 (1992), pp. 20-21.

70. George Will, "Winner of Person of the Millennium is . . ." *Daily Progress*, Dec. 16, 1990.

71. "Thomas Jefferson and the Pursuit of Liberty," videocassette of film shown at Monticello Visitors Center, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc., 1991.

72. Garry Wills, "Uncle Thomas's Cabin," pp. 26-28; on "humanizing" Jefferson, see the introduction of Granville Burgess, *Dusky Sally*, a play (New York, 1987), p. xiii.

73. *The Daily Progress*, Oct. 4, 1992, p. 1.

74. *The Washington Post*, Oct. 17, 1992, p. D-1.

75. *Ibid.*, pp. D-1, D-4.

76. *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Oct. 18, 1992, pp. A-1, A-10.

77. *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Oct. 18, 1992, p. A-10.