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The roots of collective memory: Public knowledge of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson

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Abstract

Claims that Thomas Jefferson fathered the children of Sally Hemings, a slave at Monticello, have received support over the past 35 years from revisionist biographies, DNA testing and other evidence. The claims have also been communicated to the general public through novels, films and other popular media. Both those persuaded by the claims and those critical of them assume that collective memory of Jefferson has been changed importantly, and that a considerable portion of the American public accepts the changes, which also include a new focus on Jefferson's views and actions regarding slavery more generally. But collective memory at the individual level requires some degree of collective knowledge, and after reviewing the nature of memory of Sally Hemings at the cultural level, we explore the extent to which knowledge and belief about a Jefferson–Hemings liaison and Jefferson's paternity has spread through the American population. We also consider differences in knowledge by race, education, gender and birth cohort. As part of our investigation, we compare the extent of knowledge of Sally Hemings – and the degree to which it carries hints of uncertainty – with what is true for other names and events from the past, including the name of another woman associated with an even more famous American president.

Keywords

collective knowledge, collective memory, public opinion, slavery

During Thomas Jefferson's two terms as the third president of the United States (1801–1809), there were many allusions to his having as a concubine at Monticello a slave named Sally Hemings, with Jefferson said to be the father of one or all of her children. A newspaper column by James Callender in 1802 (1999[1802]) is most often cited as the starting point for public notice of such a relationship, but there was much else circulating informally during Jefferson's presidency, including humorous verse by both the poet William Cullen Bryant and the young John Quincy Adams, the latter to become the sixth US president. The ballad by Adams was published in a Philadelphia newspaper in 1802, and began:

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> Of all the damsels on the green
> On mountain, or in valley,
> A lass so luscious ne'er was seen,
> As Monticellian Sally ...

with eight more verses of similar content and tone (Brodie, 1974).

Rumors of the relationship subsided after Jefferson's retirement and then death, and until recently the claim of a Jefferson–Hemings liaison was treated as uncertain, of little importance and not likely to be resolved in any definitive way (Ellis, 1996). Moreover, by the middle of the 20th century, Jefferson's reputation seemed firmly established for the general public: he was widely known as the author of the sacralized Declaration of Independence, as one of the greatest of American presidents, and as a personage of remarkable and wide-ranging talents. The imposing Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC was initiated by Franklin Roosevelt in 1938 and officially dedicated by him in 1943, in recognition of Jefferson's role as a principal Founder of the republic. Even earlier, his image had been carved into Mount Rushmore, along with the faces of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. Jefferson's eminence as a thinker was enhanced still further in 1962 by a superlative from President John F. Kennedy.[1]

Changes at the cultural level

One example of the quasi-official collective memory of Jefferson during recent years was the entry in the 1975 edition of the *Columbia Encyclopedia*. It offered an outline of milestones in Jefferson's career, and noted how 'from boyhood he absorbed the democratic views of his western countrymen,' pointed to his actions 'to prevent the continuance of an aristocracy of wealth and birth,' and reminded readers of the 'individual liberty that he cherished' (p. 1457). Nothing in the entry of some 1600 words referred to Jefferson's role as a major slaveholder from his birth until his death, nor to his attitudes and beliefs with regard to either slavery or blacks, nor to his relations with individual slaves. (At about the same time, Edmund Morgan (1975) developed the striking thesis that it was the very existence of race-based slavery that supported and promoted the democratic views of Jefferson and his white countrymen toward one another across social class lines.)

The 2000 edition of the same encyclopedia repeated the 1975 entry about Jefferson almost exactly, though with the addition at the end of a single sentence stating that: 'In the 1990s long-repeated rumors that he had fathered a child or children by the slave Sally Hemings, his wife's half-sister, appeared to be supported by DNA testing, but the matter remained controversial' (p. 1457). The current (2009) internet version of the encyclopedia essentially repeats the previous 2000 entry, but this time notes that the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, which administers Monticello, has accepted the DNA results as almost certain, though adds a further qualification: 'Some admirers of Jefferson hold that his younger brother, Randolph, is the more likely father of Hemings's descendants.' As in the earlier editions, nothing is said about slavery at Monticello, or about Jefferson's views on slavery or race.[2]

At the level of the general public, prior to the 1980s it is likely that very few Americans would have heard or remembered anything about a long-term sexual relationship between Jefferson and one of his slaves, or his alleged paternity of her children, or indeed even much about Jefferson's personal dependence on slave labor.[3] The name 'Sally Hemings' only began to re-emerge for present-day Americans as a result of Fawn Brodie's biography, *Thomas Jefferson, An Intimate History* (1974), and then five years later the publication of *Sally Hemings, A Novel*, by Barbara Chase-Riboud (1979). Both books enjoyed popular success. Brodie's biography spent 13 weeks

on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Chase-Riboud's novel was a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection; according to the cover of the 1994 Crown Press edition, it had sold 1.6 million copies by then, and subsequent paperback edition sales must have continued to grow considerably through to the present. The novel is also in many US public libraries: 29 of 92 public libraries in Virginia own a copy of the book, and even in the state of Maine, far from Monticello, 14 public libraries out of approximately 50 possess a copy, though only four of these libraries own at least one volume of Dumas Malone's Pulitzer Prize winning multivolume biography of *Jefferson and His Time*, each volume having been published separately with its own title as a self-contained book between 1948 and 1982.

These recent treatments of a Jefferson–Hemings relationship led to considerable controversy among historian-biographers most directly concerned with Jefferson's reputation. Such a liaison was rejected as entirely untenable by Malone (1970, 1981), and also by Merrill Peterson (1960), author of an important study of Jefferson's image in American memory and of other books about the third president.

Within a few years, however, attention began to shift to a detailed analysis of evidence for and against a Jefferson–Hemings relationship by Annette Gordon-Reed (1997), a legal scholar, with emphasis on taking seriously accounts published in the 19th century by Sally Hemings's youngest son (Hemings, 1997[1873]) and by another former slave from Monticello, Israel Jefferson (1997[1873]). Their memoirs in Ohio newspapers stated that Sally Hemings had agreed to be Jefferson's concubine and that he was the father of all of her children. Such assertions had been dismissed earlier by Peterson as merely 'the memories of a few Negroes' (Peterson, 1960: 187; see also Gordon-Reed, 1999).

The possibility – indeed, presumed certainty – of a Jefferson–Hemings liaison was conveyed to the larger public by a fictional film portrayal that treated the relationship as not only real but romantic, and presented it in the form of imagined dramatic scenes and dialogue. The film, *Jefferson in Paris* (Ivory, 1995), included Sally Hemings as one of several key characters, and it dramatized a scene described in her son's memoir during which Jefferson is said to have promised to free her future children if she returned with him to Monticello. The film was followed by a made-for-television drama, *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* (Haid, 2000), which portrayed a Jefferson–Hemings liaison as both lengthy and highly romantic, along with vivid scenes of slave families at Monticello; it also included instances of slaves being harshly treated by some white Virginians, though not by Jefferson. Audiences that saw such portrayals were unlikely to realize that there is virtually no documentation of the actual nature of a Jefferson–Hemings relationship, and nothing whatever in writing about it by either Jefferson or Sally Hemings. (It is not known whether Hemings herself was literate (Gordon-Reed, 2008)). Malone and some other biographers of Jefferson had been distraught upon realizing that Chase-Riboud's novel might be brought to the screen, fearing that the public would accept a film or televised version as true history (French and Ayers, 1993: 436–8; Gordon-Reed, 1997: 182–3 especially).[4]

In the event, despite a star-studded cast and the screenwriter–director–producer team of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, *Jefferson in Paris* was not a success, grossing just under $2.5 million (Klady, 1996: 38). On the other hand, the opening episode of CBS's *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* was reported to have been watched by 19.3 million television viewers, making it the second-most-seen mini-series of the season, surpassed only by the 24.1 million viewers who watched *Jesus* (Kissell, 2000: 44). One other television account was a 1996 documentary by Ken Burns, though not one regarded as adequately reflecting objective historical scholarship (Lewis and Onuf, 1998).

The DNA testing and its aftermath

An important further development that was not fictional occurred in the form of a widely publicized article in the leading scientific journal *Nature* (Foster et al., 1998). The article reported DNA evidence that connected male descendants of Sally Hemings to Jefferson's own lineage. Equally important, the DNA evidence contradicted the main alternative explanations that had been offered by Jefferson's white descendents (Coolidge, 1997[1858]) and by earlier biographers (e.g., Miller, 1977; Randall, 1997[1868]) for the apparent physical resemblance of Hemings's children to Jefferson himself.[5]

Although the data in *Nature* could not pinpoint Thomas Jefferson as the progenitor of Sally Hemings's children, it has been joined to other supportive evidence about Jefferson and Hemings, especially the dates of her conceptions in relation to his presence at Monticello. These were first noted by Jordan (1968) and were recently analyzed more fully by Neiman (2000). Today it is likely that many American historians accept the Jefferson–Hemings liaison and Jefferson's parentage of her children as having been real (e.g. Wood, 2009: 514), though the exact nature of the relationship is unlikely ever to be known. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation now includes in its current edition of *Monticello: A Guidebook* the following statement: 'Because of genetic testing in 1998 and an ensuing review of other types of evidence, most historians today accept the truth of Madison Hemings's statement and believe that he and his siblings were Thomas Jefferson's children' (2008: 105).

However, there are still a number of individuals with kinship or other connections to Jefferson who strongly dispute the existence of a Jefferson–Hemings liaison (see, for example, Coates, 2001; Hyland, 2009). Moreover, a separate organization, the Monticello Association, owns the Monticello Burial Ground, which holds Jefferson's remains and those of his immediate white relatives; it continues today to allow burial there of Jefferson's lineal white descendants, but the descendants of Sally Hemings have not been permitted to join the Association, nor do they have the right to be buried in the Monticello Burial Ground. Thus a controversy that dates from at least 1802 continues at present among the living, and extends also to the burial of the dead.

The impact of information about Sally Hemings and Jefferson, including the DNA results, has undoubtedly extended beyond historians and Jefferson's descendants. Even members of the general public who did not read the historical or fictional accounts or watch the film or TV mini-series would nevertheless have had opportunities to learn about Sally Hemings. Our search of the LexisNexis database for articles mentioning her name in the five top-circulation US newspapers (*USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*) showed that articles, reviews and other mentions of Hemings followed the appearance of each new work or new development. Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran front-page articles reporting on the 1998 DNA tests; *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal* ran reports within their first few pages. The mean number of articles or other items per year mentioning Sally Hemings in the five newspapers increased dramatically between 1970 and 2009, with an average of one to two items per year appearing during the 1970s and 1980s, jumping to an average of 26 per year during the 1990s and 27 per year during the 2000s. In addition to the major newspapers, popular American magazines reported on the Jefferson–Hemings relationship as well, with articles appearing in *People*, *Time*, *TV Guide*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*, *Ebony* and *Essence*. (*People, Time* and *TV Guide* each have over 3 million readers; circulation for the other publications ranges from 1 to over 2.5 million.)

We should note also that the trajectory from Brodie's 1974 revisionist biography of Jefferson through the DNA testing and subsequent writings can be seen as parallel to, or even as part of, a rapidly increasing interest in the history and nature of slavery in the USA, as reflected in a content

analysis of newspapers and magazines (personal communication from Barry Schwartz, 2009). Furthermore, although much of the non-black public may think of slavery as a remote episode in the past, vivid reminders of its consequences can occur, as in the case of recent news about the mixed racial ancestry of Michelle Obama, the wife of the American president (Swarns and Kantor, 2009).

Of most relevance to the present article, historians Lewis and Onuf (1999) write that there is now 'a widespread belief among the *public* that Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings' children' (1999: 2, italics added). In the Introduction to their valuable collection of articles by a number of well-known historians, there are implications at several points concerning the extent of 'public opinion' about the Jefferson–Hemings relationship, though no direct evidence is provided or indeed was available. Disbelievers in a Jefferson–Hemings liaison are even more concerned about public acceptance of a relationship they consider to be both false and denigrating to Jefferson's reputation.[6] A website created by Herbert Barger, one of the most vigorous critics of proponents of a Jefferson–Hemings liaison, opens one internet posting with the following question and answer: 'Did Thomas Jefferson have children with a slave? Almost everyone in America thinks so, and has probably heard of the DNA testing ...' (Barger 2009). These assumptions by authors writing on both sides of the issue can benefit from empirical evidence on what the public does know and believe about Sally Hemings.

The present study

Public opinion about the past can be regarded as a form of collective memory, and both opinion and memory can be studied not only in terms of texts and symbols, but at the level of individuals who make up a collectivity, whether it is a small group like a family or a vast one like a nation.[7] Moreover, for collective memories to exist at the level of actual individuals would seem to require some amount of what can be called 'collective knowledge'. DiMaggio (1997: 263) has called on scholars to 'clarify the cognitive presuppositions behind their theories of what culture does and what people do with it ...', and both Confino (1997) and Kansteiner (2002) emphasize the need for greater attention to reception – the extent and distribution of knowledge related to a particular collective memory, and the meaning the memory holds for individuals – in collective memory studies. The knowledge of individuals may be of doubtful accuracy (for example, they may believe that John F. Kennedy was assassinated by Vietnamese pirates) and the event itself may or may not have taken place as indicated by other evidence (for example, that God parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape from their Egyptian pursuers). However, if individuals do not profess *any* knowledge of a past event, they cannot be said to participate in a collective memory of it: 'Collective memory is the outcome of processes affecting the information to which individuals have access, the schemata by which people understand the past, and the external symbols or messages that prime these schemata' (DiMaggio, 1997: 275). Thus, in this study we focused on the extent and nature of the knowledge of Sally Hemings that the American public had in 2009.

We included the name 'Sally Hemings' in a list of 11 terms from the past that were presented to a national sample of 992 Americans in 2009.[8] Respondents in this part of the survey were asked first, 'Have you heard of ____?' and then those who said 'Yes' were asked, 'Who is _____?'[9] The list had been constructed to represent different time points over the past century, with the earliest term ('the WPA') probably encountered directly by the oldest Americans in our sample during their own lifetime, and the latest term ('Mohammed Atta') within the experience of even the youngest members of the sample. Of course, Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson both lived long before the past century (Jefferson died in 1826 and Hemings in 1835), but the renewed interest in their

relationship dates from the late 1970s and especially from the 1990s, and in this sense it could also have been within the life experience of most American adults.[10] All the answers were later coded for 'correctness', and an independent check of agreement between two coders yielded 90% or better for all terms, and specifically 93% for the four categories of Hemings responses discussed below.

It was entirely acceptable for respondents to qualify their answer with words such as 'supposedly' or 'allegedly', as some 40% did. Our coding for correctness proceeded without regard to such qualifications, so that a response stating that Jefferson 'allegedly' fathered the children of Sally Hemings was coded as correct. Thus we had no need to make a judgment ourselves about the relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Indeed, had a respondent indicated total disagreement with claims about Jefferson's paternity or his liaison with Sally Hemings, we still would have scored the response as correct, though we did not discover any respondent who did this. Later, however, we will distinguish between answers that were qualified and answers stated as though factual.

What the survey indicated

Overall knowledge

Sally Hemings's name turns out to be much less well known to the American public than the other 10 terms from the past that we asked about, as shown in Table 1.[11] Knowledge of the other names on the list ranged from a low of 31 percent for 'Mohammed Atta' to a high of 86 percent for 'Woodstock', whereas Sally Hemings is considerably lower at 11 percent. We should probably not regard the relatively low percentage for Hemings as surprising, because the other 10 terms involved names and events that have received considerably more media attention than her name and also in most cases directly affected many more individual Americans. Knowledge of the name 'Sally Hemings' has depended to a considerable extent on reading, and even 'best-selling' novels reach only a small minority of the population. Films, television and newspaper reports have extended that reach a good deal further, but even the relatively successful television production dealing with Jefferson and Hemings could have been seen by only a minority of Americans and it had been broadcast almost a decade prior to our survey. The extent of knowledge of Hemings is not trivial

Table 1. Percentage of Americans able to identify each of 11 terms from the past*

Terms	Percent correct
Rosa Parks	79
Woodstock	86
The Tet Offensive	36
Joe McCarthy	46
Christa McAuliffe	40
Norman Schwarzkopf	62
Mohammed Atta	31
Battle of the Bulge	48
Village of Mylai	39
WPA	41
Sally Hemings	11

* Order shown here is the order presented to respondents. For each item, percentages show answers judged to be correct or partially correct, divided by all responses.

considering that her alleged liaison with Jefferson dates from almost 200 years ago, and that it does not connect to any major or recent event in American history as do the names of Mohammad Atta and Rosa Parks.

One might argue that for roughly one out of 10 Americans to know something about a relationship between a president and his slave that was some 200 years in the past is remarkable. We will also see later that the name of Sally Hemings is considerably better known today than that of another women whose identity was probably once much more familiar because of her connection to a more famous president. At the same time, it is clear that belief by the public in a Jefferson–Hemings liaison should probably not be considered 'widespread' without some attempt to indicate what that word is assumed to mean.

A more differentiated classification of responses

After reading a sample of answers about Sally Hemings, we broke the 113 responses that indicated some knowledge of her name into three broad categories, plus a residual category for all those remaining respondents who said they had not heard of her at all, could not recall who she was, or provided a clearly incorrect answer. (These results are shown by educational levels in Table 2.) Responses in the first category referred to Jefferson as the father of Hemings's children, which also implied a sexual relationship of some type between the two, and therefore provided the fullest identification of the name as viewed by most historians today, as well as being consistent with the results from the DNA testing. The second slightly smaller category referred to Hemings as Jefferson's concubine, or used some similar characterization, but made no mention of children; we treat this category as correct also, but not quite as completely so as were answers mentioning children fathered by Jefferson, because the existence of children is not implied by a relationship per se.[12]

The smallest and most heterogeneous category (partially correct) included mentions of Hemings simply as a slave or gave some other correct but incomplete response, and also included a few answers that were partly incorrect (for example, a response indicating that she was Alexander Hamilton's mistress). We did not separate these two types of partly inaccurate answers because neither subset was large enough to allow detailed analysis. However, relative to the large number of 'don't know' and completely incorrect answers, they indicated that a respondent had absorbed some information about Sally Hemings, so we treat them as partially correct, and for most purposes include them under 'correct' when we dichotomize the sample into correct vs. incorrect.

Table 2. Correct answers about Sally Hemings by education of respondents

Educational level	Number of cases	Correct responses only (%)	Correct plus partially correct responses (%)
0–8 years school	9	0	0
9–11 years school	35	0	3
High school graduate	253	3	4
13–15 years school	213	8	12
College graduate	284	10	11
Some graduate school or more	196	19	23

Tau-b for correct vs. partially correct, incorrect and don't know: .18, $p < .001$
Tau-b for correct & partially correct vs. incorrect & don't know: .17, $p < .001$

Of the large number of answers categorized as incorrect (89% of the total of 992 responses), 95 percent were from respondents who simply said 'don't know' when asked if they recognized the name of Sally Hemings. The rest (5%) gave an answer that we considered completely wrong. For the majority of these, 34 of 43 (e.g. 'early suffrage movement', 'writer or actress'), we did not find any particular explanation. However, in nine cases Sally Hemings was identified as an astronaut, and respondents probably had in mind 'Sally Ride', the physicist who in 1983 was the first American woman to enter space. A further brief analysis did not point clearly to any obvious correlates of the Sally Ride response, such as respondent gender or birth cohort.

Education

The most obvious source of knowledge about Sally Hemings, as of other terms in Table 1, is respondent education, which we take to represent not only formal schooling, but also greater exposure to books, serious newspaper and magazine reporting, and perhaps quasi-historical presentations such as the film and mini-series.[13] As anticipated, there is a highly significant relation between Hemings score and amount of schooling, as shown in Table 2, with most of the variation occurring between the two correct categories and partially correct, and between the latter and the residual category ('don't know' and incorrect answers).[14] The difference between the two types of correct categories, 'children and concubine', is slight and based on only a small number of cases.

Race

Earlier we stated that few Americans prior to the 1980s would have had any knowledge of claims about a Jefferson–Hemings liaison resulting in children. But this statement is too extreme for African Americans. Some of the descendants of Sally Hemings passed on an oral tradition of what they believed to be a lineal connection to Jefferson (Stanton and Swann-Wright, 1999), and in addition and probably as a result of these traditions, there have been occasional stories about supposed descendants of Jefferson in popular publications directed at African Americans. For example, 'Thomas Jefferson's Negro Grandchildren' appeared in *Ebony* in November 1954 (Bennett, 1954: 78–9), well before any of the recent revisionist books or films. Thus we had reason to expect that African Americans (self-identified) might be more likely than white Americans to recognize the name of Sally Hemings.

The results by race in Table 3 require careful examination, not only because they are complex but also because they take on greater meaning when compared with the effects due to race for the other 10 terms we asked about in our survey. On nine of the other items, whites show greater knowledge than do blacks ($p < .01$ in all cases); for example, 23 percent of whites were scored as

Table 3. Hemings response by race (self-reported)*

Response	White (%)	Black (%)
1. Children	5	7
2. Concubine	4	2
3. Partially Correct	2	7
4. DK or Incorrect	89	84
Total	100	100
(*N*)	(812)	(85)

χ^2 for total table: 7.89, df = 3, $p < .05$
Fisher's Exact Test for categories 1, 2 & 3 vs. 4: $p = .10$ (one-sided)
*Those not identifying as white or black are omitted.

correct or partially correct on Mohammed Atta, as against 9 percent of African Americans. Some of this difference can be attributed to black–white differences in educational levels, though reliable variation remains after education is controlled. More important is the one clear exception among the other 10 terms: African Americans are significantly more knowledgeable about Rosa Parks than are whites ($p < .001$). Thus, when a term is one that has greater meaning for black respondents, they show the greater degree of knowledge.

If we consider the three correct or partially correct categories combined vs. those answers that were entirely incorrect (categories 1, 2 and 3 vs. category 4), the race difference showing blacks more knowledgeable is of only borderline statistical significance ($p < .10$, one-sided). However, if we take the further necessary step of using logistic regression to control for education (white respondents have significantly more years of schooling than do black respondents, $p < .01$), and add gender and birth cohort as standard controls also, the effect due to race is more clearly reliable ($p < .02$).

As to the size of the difference by race, the overall greater knowledge for blacks as against whites is not as great for Sally Hemings as for Rosa Parks: 5 percent in the former case and 15 percent in the latter. Thus, the relative knowledge of Sally Hemings falls between that of Rosa Parks and that of the nine non-race related terms where whites show greater knowledge, suggesting that it draws on the black/white racial distinction with regard to what is of personal interest or attention, but not as clearly as does Rosa Parks.

Based on these several findings, we believe that the greater knowledge by African Americans in the Hemings case is real, though in some cases the responses are less precise in terms of identifying Jefferson's role.[15] There is also a suggestion in Table 3 that when blacks give what we consider a correct response (1 or 2), they are more likely to mention children than to mention only a sexual relationship. Of those giving one of the first two types of correct responses, 75 percent of black respondents mention children as against 47 percent of whites, a 28 percent difference. This fits the emphasis of media directed toward African Americans and of family traditions of connections to Jefferson. However, the difference is based on only a small number of black cases and is far from statistical reliability with the present sample, leaving the conclusion uncertain on this point.

Gender

We had a less definite hypothesis with regard to gender, but the results are quite plausible. Using the logistic regression that included education, race, gender and birth cohort (see Table 4), women are significantly more knowledgeable about Sally Hemings than are men ($p = .01$). This fits other evidence that women are more likely than men to read romantic novels like Chase-Riboud's: marketing of romance fiction heavily targets women, and representatives at several of the major romance publishing houses have indicated that their readership is mostly female (Radway, 1991). The top row of Figure 1 shows the covers of two editions of Chase-Riboud's novel, both of which are designed to appeal to romance-fiction readers. We also surmise, though we do not have direct evidence, that women may be more interested than men in romantic films such as *Jefferson in Paris*. As the examples shown in the bottom row of Figure 1 suggest, advertising for the film and for the CBS mini-series also targeted the part of the public interested in the romance genre. The gender effect on knowledge of Sally Hemings is about as large for blacks as for whites.

Birth cohort

In the analysis shown in Table 4, younger Americans are seen to be less knowledgeable than older Americans ($p < .01$), largely because of less knowledge by the youngest cohorts that reached adulthood after the 1990s. However, both a detailed cross-tabulation and a quadratic term added to the

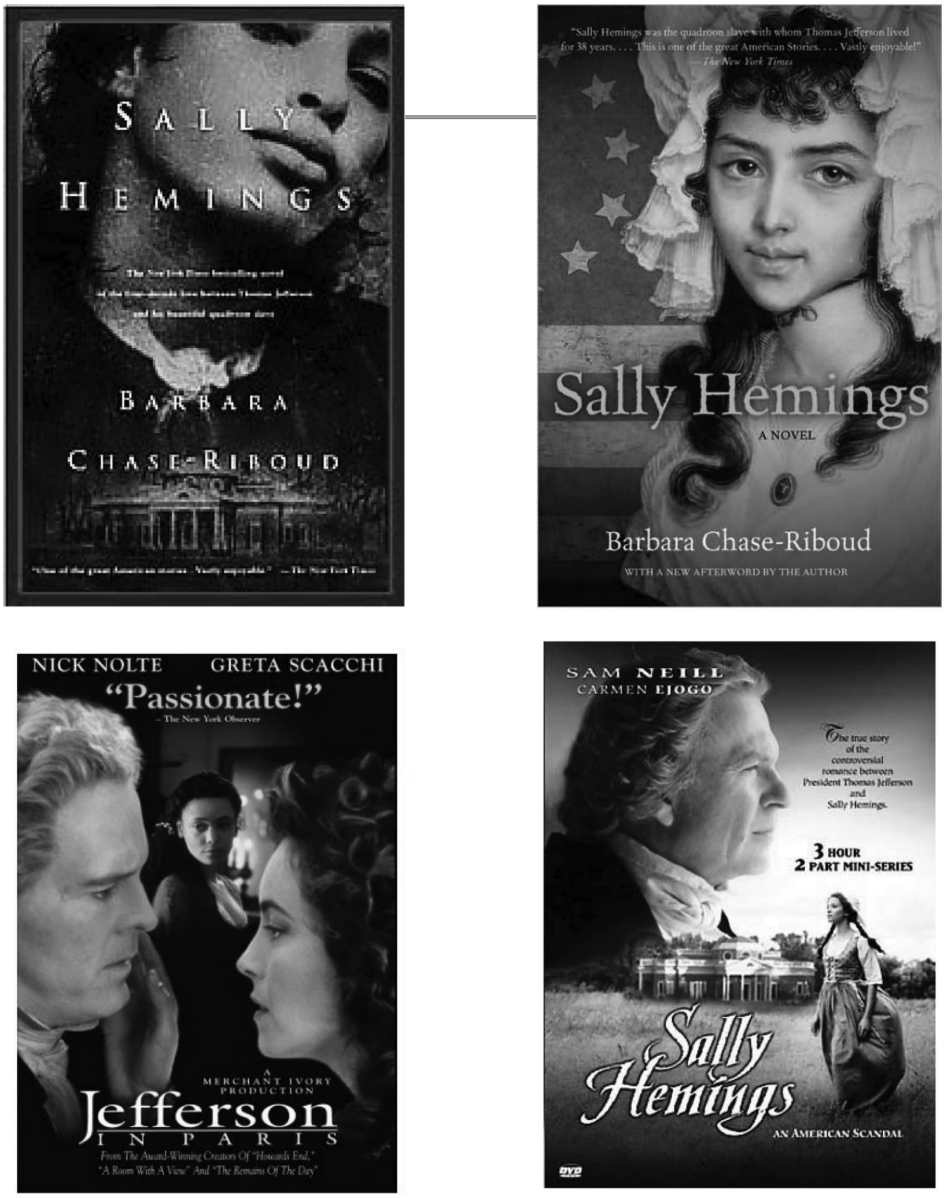

Figure 1. Images used to market Chase-Riboud's novel, *Jefferson in Paris* film, and *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* CBS TV mini-series

Clockwise from top left:

Book cover image: Barbara Chase-Riboud (author), *Sally Hemings: A Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999. Copyright © 1979 by Barbara Chase-Riboud.

Book cover image: Barbara Chase-Riboud (author), *Sally Hemings: A Novel.* Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2009. Copyright © 1979 by Barbara Chase-Riboud.

Videocassette and DVD image: James Ivory (director), Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (writer), Ismail Merchant (producer), *Jefferson in Paris* (motion picture). France: Merchant-Ivory Productions, 1995.

Videocassette and DVD image: Charles Haid (director), Tina Andrews (writer), Gerrit van der Meer (producer), *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* (motion picture/TV mini-series). USA: CBS, 2000.

Table 4. Correct Hemings responses by education, race, gender and birth cohort*

Predictor	Odds ratio	*p*	More knowledgeable
Education (6 categories)	1.89	.00	More educated
Race (White/Black)	2.28	.02	Blacks
Gender (Men/Women)	1.76	.01	Women
Birth Cohort (13 categories)**	0.91	.01	Born before 1980s

* Logistic regression, with correct and partially correct vs. incorrect and 'don't know'.
** If a quadratic term is added for birth cohort to test for non-linearity, it is significant at $p < .08$, suggesting that older as well as younger respondents are lower in knowledge, a result also visible in cross-tabulation.

regression ($p = .08$) suggest that the oldest cohorts, born before the Second World War, were also low in knowledge of Hemings. The first popular treatment of a Jefferson–Hemings liaison was the novel by Chase-Riboud published in 1979, while the most recent attention beyond scholarly writing was to the 1998 *Nature* article on the DNA evidence.[16] These two dates suggest that most knowledge of Hemings by the public should have been obtained during the 1980s and 1990s. We therefore do not expect the youngest respondents in our sample (roughly 18 to mid-20s) to be much aware of her, because they came of age after much of the media attention had ended. Similarly, the pre-Second World War cohorts were also probably less affected by the flurry of interest in a Jefferson–Hemings relationship, because they had been in or entered adulthood when Jefferson's fame as a statesman and intellectual figure was predominant in shaping collective memory of him. In an approximate way, these results are consistent with previous findings about a 'critical period' (adolescence and early adulthood) during which events are likely to have their greatest impact and therefore to be recalled most easily (Schuman and Rodgers, 2004). Thus we expected any relation to age to show up mainly for those in our sample in the middle birth cohorts, and this is what the evidence suggests, though we are not able to connect knowledge very precisely to a particular time point or birth cohort.

Other relationships

We also considered more complex relations involving interactions among the predictor variables just discussed (education, race, gender, birth cohort), though our sample size is on the small side for such an analysis. Since African Americans are more knowledgeable than white Americans about Hemings, and women are more knowledgeable than men, we expected and find that knowledge is greater among African American women specifically.[17]

Only in one instance was there a meaningful and somewhat promising trend: the greater knowledge that blacks show than whites about Sally Hemings appears mainly among respondents with at least a college education: a 16 percent difference, as against a mere 1 percent racial difference for those with less schooling. The finding cannot be said to be reliable with our present sample ($\chi^2 = 1.2$), but it fits the fact that information about a Jefferson–Hemings relationship appeared in magazines such as *Ebony* and also in books directed especially toward African Americans with greater education (e.g. the three page entry for 'Sally Hemings' in Appiah and Gates, 2005).

Qualified answers

Thus far we have considered responses about Sally Hemings only from the standpoint of whether they were coded as correct or not with regard to recent DNA and other evidence about a Jefferson–Hemings relationship and to what most historians are thought to believe at present. However, many

of the responses were stated in a way that suggested some qualification, whether deliberate or not, by the respondent. Of the 40 responses that could be classified as 'qualified,' 18 included the term 'supposed' or 'supposedly,' as in: 'She was a slave of Jefferson and supposedly bore him children.' Other forms of qualification were also employed, as shown below with the number of cases:

- apparently: 3
- allegedly: 3
- rumored: 3
- some think: 2
- reported(ly): 2
- 1 each for 'possibly', 'speculated', 'suspected', 'so they say', 'they figured', 'thought to be', 'probably', 'may also' and 'controversy over'.

Two contrasts that bring out the importance of these verbal qualifications are the answers about the names 'Christa McAuliffe' and 'Mohammad Atta' in Table 1. The identity of Christa McAuliffe was, of course, never an issue in the 1986 Challenger disaster, and it is therefore not surprising that there is not a single qualification in the 306 responses coded correct for her name. For Mohammad Atta the case is not quite so clear, for if he had survived the crash of the plane he piloted, he might have faced a trial in the USA, just as Khalid Shaikh Mohammed is slated to do. However, Americans have been given little if any reason to doubt Atta's role as a terrorist in the World Trade Center destruction, and of the 228 answers coded as correct for his name, only five indicated any qualification at all (four used the word 'alleged' and one the word 'perhaps'), and these seem mainly about how much Atta was the 'leader' of the terrorist group. Thus the qualifications introduced for 'Sally Hemings' are quite different from the stance taken toward either of the two comparison names, and can be said to allow for at least the possibility of doubt.

In further analysis using logistic regression, qualifications were offered more often in describing a Jefferson–Hemings relation by those with greater education, and were also used more frequently by whites than by African Americans. It is difficult to know the exact meaning of the qualifications for those who included them, or how strongly they were intended, but this is a finding that might usefully be pursued in future research about the Jefferson–Hemings relationship.

Another woman from American history: Ann Rutledge

Spurred by our study of Sally Hemings, we included in a later survey (the February and March national Survey of Consumer Attitudes, with 592 cases) a similar knowledge question about Ann Rutledge. She has been regarded by some historians as Abraham Lincoln's first and truest love, but by other historians as uncertain in relation to Lincoln or even as essentially mythical. In addition to her name having nothing to do with race or slavery, an important difference from the Jefferson–Hemings relationship is that the Rutledge–Lincoln story flourished in the 1920s and 1930s as a result of biographies of Lincoln by Carl Sandburg (1926) and others, as well as being prominent in early films, notably *Young Mr. Lincoln* in 1939 (Ford, 1939). Therefore, unlike Sally Hemings, we expected those who could identify Ann Rutledge to be from older cohorts, rather than younger or even middle age cohorts.

Despite the importance of Ann Rutledge's name in many biographies of Abraham Lincoln, far fewer Americans in 2009 could identify her name than that of Sally Hemings. Only five respondents out of 585 in our February/March national sample were able to make a reasonably correct identification of Rutledge. Another two responses could be coded as partially correct, and if the

two numbers are added together we get a total of just one percent of Americans who had anything relevant to say about Ann Rutledge. Hence the name of the woman believed by some to have been Abraham Lincoln's first and deepest love is recognized by many fewer Americans today than the name of Thomas Jefferson's slave whose identity returned to public knowledge only in recent years. Moreover, while Hemings is best known to younger, though not the very youngest, cohorts, Rutledge is best known to the oldest people in our sample, all of whom were born during or before the 1940s. Thus the two names present and reflect entirely different pictures in terms of generational knowledge.[18]

Conclusions

What can we learn about an alleged relationship 200 years ago between a famous American leader and his slave? Using the modern science of genetics, the relationship itself has now been documented with regard to a direct tie to that leader's lineage, and then with the use of modern statistical analysis of dates of conception and birth a closer connection to the leader himself has been further supported, though not irrefutably so if another Jefferson relative could be shown to fit the same evidence. A different but also relatively modern approach to assessing public knowledge – the sample survey – allows us to go from undefined statements about 'public opinion' to a much more delimited estimate of collective knowledge and therefore of the roots of collective memory about this same relationship. Indeed, in order to speak of the collective memory shared by members of a collectivity – whether explicitly or in the vague terms that are frequently employed – it is incumbent on us first to discover whether there is some degree of collective knowledge, no matter its accuracy in relation to the past.

Precision need not be claimed for our estimates in this study, but we can state with considerable confidence that roughly one out of 10 Americans knows something about the alleged Jefferson–Hemings relationship, with many but not necessarily all of such people believing it to be factual. Complete precision is theoretically impossible because knowledge itself – and memory as well – depends on exactly how inquiries are phrased and what cues are provided. For example, if we had started from general questions about Jefferson's attitudes or even about his children, we might have obtained little or no evidence concerning Sally Hemings. But if we had mentioned to respondents a Jefferson–Hemings relationship and asked if they remembered hearing about it at all, our estimate of knowledge would almost certainly have been higher, even discounting false replies. Our assessment of knowledge is anchored to the questions we asked, which provided respondents with a full name and asked them to identify it in some way. However, we were able to compare the identification of the name 'Sally Hemings' with the identification of each of 10 other names, so in an important sense we were able to control for the nature of the task respondents faced, and our conclusion is based on this comparison more than on the absolute percentage of answers scored as correct.

We can also be confident that knowledge about Sally Hemings is a function of educational level, broadly conceived, and we have persuasive evidence that in this particular case African Americans are more apt to be knowledgeable than white Americans, and that the same is definitely true of women as compared with men. As these relations suggest, the Americans most likely to be able to identify Sally Hemings are more educated women who are themselves African Americans. Finally, we have some evidence that knowledge of Sally Hemings is greatest among Americans who were reaching early adulthood when the Jefferson–Hemings relationship was being publicized in the form of revisionist biographies, novels and films, and then further bolstered by one of the wonders

of contemporary science, DNA testing. On the other hand, those few individuals in another survey who were able to identify the name of 'Ann Rutledge' were appreciably older, reflecting an earlier era when her reported relation to Abraham Lincoln was a prominent part of biographies and movies.

Of course, as the evidence enters American history textbooks and other resources like websites (see the entry about Sally Hemings, for example, at Wikipedia, n.d.), it should become better known to young people who are encouraged as part of their schooling to read about Jefferson, or about a related topic such as slavery in America. One of the indirect but important consequences of the Jefferson–Hemings collective memory is the interest it has stimulated in slavery at Monticello and in slavery in the USA more generally, including the manifold results of 'sex across the color line' (Rothman 2003). At the same time, a careful review of the words respondents used in their replies about Sally Hemings suggests that for nearly half of those who gave answers that we considered to be correct, there was at least some sense that there is not complete certainty that Thomas Jefferson was the father of her children.

Collective memories can certainly be studied in contexts other than individual minds and verbalizations. Some of the books cited in references here and many not cited can be thought of as vehicles carrying and promoting collective memories. Discussions back and forth by scholars interested in Jefferson, Hemings, Monticello, slavery and related matters also provide collective memories of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings and their probable relationship. As described earlier, encyclopedias are an important way in which collective memories are transmitted to many readers, and they are no doubt drawn on by those writing textbooks and popular books and articles that in turn become further vehicles for communicating such memories to other readers young and old. Mount Rushmore offers a still different kind of vivid collective memory to those who travel to that remote National Memorial in South Dakota, whether or not they know much about Jefferson. Regular tours of Monticello expose bus-loads of visitors to mentions of Sally Hemings by guides who to a greater or lesser extent are interested in discussing her.[19]

There is also more and more writing about Jefferson and slavery, much of it focusing on Jefferson's racial attitudes and beliefs. For example, Finkelman (1996) emphasizes statements and actions by Jefferson that reflect a crude form of racism, as well as his reluctance later in life to take any serious action that would lead toward substantial emancipation either at Monticello or nationally. He also argues against Wilson's (1992) attempt to characterize criticism of Jefferson's behavior as an example of 'presentism' – the application of present-day ideas and values anachronistically to the time and place in which Jefferson was born and lived. Finkelman compares Jefferson's thinking about both race and slavery unfavorably to that of George Washington and even more pointedly to that of Edward Coles, a younger neighbor and friend of Jefferson's – both living in approximately the same time and place.

Of course, we should keep in mind that none of this addresses Jefferson's other major achievements as president and his role in setting forth fundamental values of freedom of conscience and of the separation of church and state. Collective memory of Jefferson includes much more than is dealt with in this article. In addition, even if Jefferson was not capable of applying his equalitarian ideas to his black slaves, or to blacks generally, those ideas and his commitment to government by consent of the governed have been seen as providing the basis for crucial later developments in American thought and law by others (Rakove, 1999). For example, Maier (1997) describes how the Declaration of Independence contributed to ending slave systems in Northern states in the first decades after independence, and even prompted some moves toward a form of emancipation in the South, though on the assumption that freed slaves would be colonized outside the country.[20]

Standing back from the particular issue of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship, we believe that the goal of assessing collective knowledge is important to virtually all studies of collective memory. Whether one's focus is directly on the memories of groups of individuals, or primarily on cultural claims made in the form of speeches, texts or other symbols, it is difficult to study collective memory without making assumptions, explicit or implicit, about what the public or some part of a public knows. Thus studies of collective memory, both theoretical and empirical, require us to consider the nature and role of collective knowledge.

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Notes

1. At a dinner honoring 49 Nobel Laureates, Kennedy remarked: 'I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent and of human knowledge that has ever been gathered together at the White House – with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.' (Woolley and Peters, n.d.).
2. A separate brief entry under Monticello does mention that it was constructed with the help of Jefferson's 'slave artisans', but says nothing further about the approximately 200 slaves working at Monticello and other nearby plantations that Jefferson owned. The 1985 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* included in its five page biography of Jefferson several sentences concerning his beliefs about black inferiority, as recorded in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), but nothing about slavery or about individual slaves at Monticello. However, the current (2009) internet version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers more detail about Jefferson's likely liaison with Sally Hemings and it includes a lengthy sidebar on '"Tom and Sally": The Jefferson–Hemings Paternity Debate.' Thus it, and to a lesser extent the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, provide a record of important changes at the cultural level in collective memory of Jefferson.
3. There has been a substantial scholarly literature on slavery in the USA in recent years (e.g. Berlin and Hoffman, 1983), including some mentions of Jefferson's role as a slave-owner, but not much of this part of Jefferson's life has been included in more popular and pedagogical writing about him – the emphasis often being given instead to his eloquent condemnation of slavery as an institution. For example, the 1988 edition of Tindall's standard American history textbook focused more on Jefferson's opposition to slavery (Jefferson, 1787: Query XVIII) than on his justifications for it, which included inconsistent assertions about the sleep needs of black slaves, as well as a bizarre claim about 'the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species' (Jefferson, 1787: Query XIV).
4. CBS had optioned Chase-Riboud's book, and a screenplay for a TV series was being prepared even before the book's official publication in 1979. For a detailed account of the concerns and actions of Malone and others, see French and Ayers, 1993, Gordon-Reed, 1997, and more briefly Harden, 1979.
5. An account of the DNA findings appeared on the front page of the New York Times on 1 November 1998, and was reported on public television. How widely it circulated in ways reaching the public more broadly is difficult to determine, but the subjects of race, sex, DNA testing and Jefferson probably made for much greater interest than most scientific articles. The national newspaper *USA Today* printed at least 13 related articles over the next seven months. Moreover, the impact of the *Nature* report on relevant scholars appears to have been considerable, as captured by Lucia Stanton, a historian at Monticello: 'In November 1998, an assortment of historians hopped off the fence on to solid ground, joining a lonely band already there and joined by a few who had seemed firmly rooted on the other side' (2000: 139). For example, the

Jefferson biographer Joseph Ellis immediately moved from uncertainty to belief in the relationship (Lander and Ellis, 1998). Unfortunately, the *Nature* article itself went too far, carrying a misleading headline asserting that 'Jefferson fathered slave's last child', because the research only identified Jefferson's lineage, not Thomas Jefferson himself.

6. Although critics of the acceptance of a Jefferson–Hemings sexual relationship view it as an attack on Jefferson's character, it should be noted that writers such as Brodie, Chase-Riboud and Gordon-Reed do not view the relationship per se as negative, but tend to regard it as 'humanizing' Jefferson as an individual, and even as transcending to some extent his negative views of blacks. (According to most writers, Sally Hemings's racial background made her one-quarter black and three-quarters white. Any children by Jefferson would have been seven-eighths white, and therefore, according to Jefferson's (1999[1815]) own calculation, to be considered white, though they would remain slaves because slavery was based on the mother's status – *partus sequitur ventrem* (Gordon-Reed, 2008).)
7. Olick (2007: Chapter 2) would prefer to separate the study of memories at the individual level, to be called 'collected memories', from 'collective memory' as a sociological concept, but other major writers believe that individual and collective levels should be seen as indissolubly joined when conceptualizing and exploring collective memory (Schwartz, 2008: 11). Whatever the terminology, how much a representation of the past is known to ordinary individuals beyond its appearance in a text or other symbolic form is a legitimate and important investigation to undertake.
8. Our questions were included near the beginning of the University of Michigan's monthly telephone Survey of Consumer Attitudes (SCA) in August and September of 2009; no previous questions in the interview were connected to any of the names on our list. The SCA is based on probability samples of the population of the contiguous USA, with random selection of adults 18 years of age and older from households reached using random selection from landlines, with compensatory weighting for cellphones. Questions are asked by trained interviewers, who are carefully monitored by supervisory staff. More details on the survey are available at www.sca.isr.umich.edu/; first choose Survey Information, then Sample Design. The response rate for the RDD component of the survey was 48% in August and 46% in September using the AAPOR RR4 method of calculation; although lower than response rates obtained in earlier years, these rates are higher than those obtained by most surveys today. Considerable experience with predictions to Census data and other criteria indicates that the SCA yields estimates of adequate validity (at the website given above, choose Special Reports, then Surveys of Consumers: Theory, Methods, and Interpretation) – the more so in the present analysis where our focus is on comparisons and relationships, rather than on a precise point estimate. Groves (2006) and Keeter et al. (2006) find no necessary relationship between non-response rates and non-response bias, and research by Abraham et al. (2009) indicates that even when bias is present, it does not seriously affect bivariate or multivariate associations.
9. It might have been preferable to use the past tense when referring to Sally Hemings, but no respondent objected that she was from an earlier period and it is unlikely that this had any effect on answers; previous names on the list included some still alive and others not. We also doubt that there was any influence as a result of the order of words presented because the question was one about knowledge, not about more easily influenced opinions, and in addition nothing earlier in the survey alluded to Hemings or Jefferson.
10. Schuman and Rodgers (2004) provide evidence indicating that the Great Depression became a 'resurrected event' in the collective memories of young respondents when they experienced economic troubles in the late 20th century, many years after the original event.
11. If the results in Table 1 are weighted by Census data on education, age, gender and region, in order to adjust for coverage and other sampling limitations, all of the percentages in Table 1 would drop by 1 to

4 percentage points (for example, Hemings drops to 9.7%), but their relative sizes would change very little. If an additional weight for race were added, the Hemings percentage would increase by about 1 percent, almost restoring the number in the table. Since weighting has little effect on relationships between variables, unweighted data are used in the rest of our analysis to allow for simpler statistical statements.

12. 'Concubine' was the term used by her son, Madison Hemings (1997[1873]), to describe his mother's relation to Jefferson. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines 'concubine' as 'a woman who cohabits with a man without being legally married to him', a definition consistent with those in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and so far as we can tell, the term had the same meaning in Jefferson's time.
13. Quasi-historical because the film and mini-series, like the Chase-Riboud novel, build on factual information where available, e.g. Jefferson's service as Minister to France between 1785 and 1789, and they also draw on Madison Hemings's memoir for other information. Of course, all of the conversation and much else is entirely imagined.
14. Education is coded as a six category variable, with the scale running from 1 = 0–8 years of schooling; 2 = 9–11 years; 3 = high school graduate; 4 = some college; 5 = college degree; 6 = at least some graduate school.
15. Of the six answers by African Americans scored as partially correct, four were complete except for not identifying Jefferson (e.g. 'Well, she was the lady who bore children for one of our former presidents') and two recognized Hemings as a slave but without mentioning a liaison or children (e.g. 'slave that worked for Thomas Jefferson'). Of the 15 white respondents, seven identified Hemings simply as a slave, two gave the wrong political leader (Hamilton, Lincoln), and the others were a miscellany. If anything, the partially correct answers by black respondents seemed closer to being entirely correct than were the answers by white respondents.
16. The prize-winning 2008 non-fiction book by Gordon-Reed attracted attention among the educated public, but it was probably too recent to have had a widespread effect on most of our survey respondents in mid-2009. In addition, most people who know about it may do so through brief secondary accounts, since the book itself is more than 700 pages in length, including many detailed substantive endnotes.
17. This is an additive effect as a result of being both African American and female, though not one where the evidence suggests an additional unique increase in knowledge as a result of that combination. A test for a statistical interaction beyond the additive effects does not approach significance.
18. The Mann-Whitney U test for the difference in mean years of birth between those giving correct answers to Hemings only and those giving correct answers to Rutledge only is significant ($p < .05$), despite the small number of Rutledge cases. (Rutledge is also significantly better known to more educated respondents and there is a trend for women to recognize her name more than do men, but these findings held for Hemings as well.)
19. One of the present authors took such a tour in 2009 and found one guide quite open in assuming and discussing the relationship, while another was much more guarded and would have left her 30 or 40 visitors no more informed about Sally Hemings than when they arrived.
20. Some writers today (e.g. Gates, 2009; Wills, 2009), have agreed with Douglas's position in an 1858 debate with Lincoln that the word 'men' in Jefferson's famous pronouncement about equality was not intended to include black men, but this is probably incorrect. Maier replied in response to a question on this point: 'There's no doubt that Jefferson included black men in the phrase "all men are created equal" and thought they were endowed by their creator with the natural rights he lists. The proof is in the paragraph Congress excised ... It mainly blames George III for the slave trade but refers to slaves as men whose rights to life and liberty were violated in carrying them off to be sold as slaves' (personal communication, 24 October 2009).

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