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THOMAS JEFFERSON AND ANTISLAVERY

The Myth Goes On

by PAUL FINKELMAN*

THOMAS JEFFERSON is certainly the most popular saint of American civil religion. His closest rival is Abraham Lincoln.¹ But Lincoln was merely our greatest president. He burst on the scene like a comet, saved the Union, ended slavery, and then was martyred. Jefferson was ever so much more: coauthor of the Declaration of Independence, president, father of the University of Virginia, philosopher, cofounder of the nation's oldest political party, patron of the Lewis and Clark expedition, scientist, naturalist, spiritual godfather of religious liberty in Virginia, and the architect and owner of that great house full of furniture, art, scientific instruments, natural curiosities, gadgets, and other treasures that continue to fascinate Americans.² The virtual deification of Jefferson is ingrained in the general public, sustained by popular biographers and scholars, supported by the mass media, and bolstered by recent presidents—a Democrat, William Jefferson Clinton, who began his trek to the White House at Monticello, and a Republican, Ronald Reagan, who urged Americans to “pluck a flower from Thomas Jefferson’s life and

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¹ For a variety of reasons, however, Jefferson may be more popular. Lincoln is, after all, barely acknowledged throughout much of the Old South, while Jefferson is nationally admired.

² For a discussion of Monticello and its original furnishings, art, and eclectic, fantastic collection of the thousands of things that Jefferson put together, see Garry Wills, “The Aesthete,” *New York Review of Books* 40 (12 Aug. 1993): 6–10. As Wills notes, “When all the goods from a lifetime of buying were stuffed into it, the house must have resembled the most crowded parts of John Soane’s famous museum-house in London. It is hard . . . to imagine what it would have been like to pick one’s way through the jumble of Jefferson’s collected prizes.” The house was cluttered with French paintings and sculpture, twenty-eight Windsor chairs, an Indian headdress, mastodon bones, a “mounted moose, and elk antlers” (*ibid.*, p. 7).

wear it in our soul forever."³ Both conservatives and liberals look to Jefferson as an icon and a role model.⁴

Jefferson's image in America would be almost perfect,⁵ were it not for slavery. But, alas, Jefferson owned slaves throughout his adulthood and freed only a handful during his life and in his will.⁶ After the Revolution he did nothing to help America solve what was clearly its most serious social and political problem. In the words of David Brion Davis, "After his return to America" in late 1789, "the most remarkable thing about Jefferson's stand on slavery is his immense silence."⁷ He failed ever to come to terms with the institution on either a personal or political level.

I

Jefferson, Critical Historiography, and the Problem of Presentism

Because of Jefferson's status as an icon, it is difficult to scrutinize any aspect of his career or personal life without appearing to assault the very core of American society. As Gordon S. Wood has perceptively observed, "Most Americans think of Jefferson much as our first professional biographer James Parton did. 'If Jefferson was wrong,' wrote

³ Ronald Reagan quoted in Joyce Appleby, "Introduction: Jefferson and His Complex Legacy," in Peter S. Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville, 1993), p. 1. In January of this year, Republican George F. Allen began his term as governor of Virginia with a breakfast at Monticello.

⁴ In the 1930s the Communist party even claimed Jefferson, asserting that their brand of Marxism was "Twentieth Century Jeffersonianism." This association with the third president is not, apparently, true for the politically correct left of the current era. In presenting my work on Jefferson to scholars at the Smithsonian, I was criticized by a young historian for bothering with Jefferson at all. This recent graduate, who is presumably interpreting American history for the general public, accused me of "doing 'Great Man History' from the other side."

⁵ In 1963 Leonard W. Levy single-handedly demolished Jefferson's reputation as a great civil libertarian in *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (1963; Chicago, 1989). Despite the overwhelming evidence that Levy marshaled, biographers of Jefferson have by and large ignored his work. The third president remains, in the public image and much of the scholarly world, an icon of liberty, despite evidence to the contrary. Thus, in the face of Levy's persuasive evidence that Jefferson's civil libertarian reputation was overblown, Alpheus T. Mason concluded "as a libertarian theorist, Jefferson is without peer" (*ibid.*, p. xviii).

⁶ All the slaves he freed were members of the Hemings family and were his relatives by marriage. The children of Sally Hemings may also have been his blood relatives, fathered by his nephews or by Jefferson himself. On the Hemings controversy, see Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory, 1943–1993," in Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies*, pp. 418–56. In 1836 two English ministers noted that "the slave who was the Mother of Jefferson's children, and who was left in bondage, or if liberated, was unprovided for, had her humble abode" only a short distance from Jefferson's home. Commenting on the late president's grave, they wrote: "The granite column may stand for ages; but on the brass tablet to be inserted, it might be engraven that he was literally the *Father* of some of his own slaves" (F. A. Cox and J. Hoby, *The Baptists in America; A Narrative of the Deputation From the Baptist Union in England, to the United States and Canada* [New York, Boston, and Utica, 1836], pp. 41–42).

⁷ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1975), p. 179.



In Sir Moses Ezekiel's statue for the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson holds to his heart the Declaration of Independence and stands atop the Liberty Bell. This detail of Ezekiel's model was photographed in the sculptor's studio in Rome.

Moses Ezekiel Scrapbook, Virginia Historical Society

Parton in 1874, ‘America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right.’’⁸ The historian who questions Jefferson, it would seem, implicitly questions America.

Wood also notes that “[d]uring the past three decades or so many people, including some historians, have concluded that something was seriously wrong with America. And if something is wrong with America, then something has to be wrong with Jefferson.”⁹ His argument implies that those who find something wrong with Jefferson may be doing so because they find something wrong with modern America.

Wood offers a sophisticated analysis of the importance of Jefferson to the way Americans understand their own past. It is a small step to a less subtle conclusion that those historians who criticize Jefferson do so not because he merits the criticism, but rather because such criticism bolsters their presentist political agendas. Thus, Douglas L. Wilson, in a gushing appraisal of Jefferson in the *Atlantic Monthly*, rails against “presentism” and its application to Jefferson. He complains that people

⁸ Gordon S. Wood, “The Trials and Tribulations of Thomas Jefferson,” in Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies*, p. 395.

⁹ *Ibid.*

who view Jefferson harshly are unfairly applying modern sensibilities to an eighteenth-century man.¹⁰

Leonard W. Levy encountered such a response when he published his now classic work, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side*. Levy showed that Jefferson as a politician was unable to live up to his reputation, largely created by his biographers, as a great civil libertarian. The book was unfairly and inaccurately attacked by Jefferson's biographers, who could not accept any criticism of their hero. Reviewers condemned Levy for testing Jefferson "against the standards of the ACLU" and for complaining that Jefferson did not fit with the "prevailing standards" of the 1960s.¹¹ It is worth noting that Jefferson's biographers had long proclaimed him to be a civil libertarian along modern lines and that Levy in fact only tested Jefferson against the standards of Jefferson's own era and against Jefferson's own words.

Today, as Peter S. Onuf has recently observed, "[t]he most heated current controversy" among scholars "centers on Jefferson's slaveholding."¹² This concentration is certainly not new. Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers have provided an important discussion of how historians—especially what Fawn Brodie called the "Jefferson Establishment"—have dealt with Jefferson's relationship to Sally Hemings.¹³ Oddly enough, except for the most die-hard of the Jefferson Establishment, the issue of Sally Hemings seems to have faded. This alteration may be a function of changing attitudes about sex. There is nothing shocking anymore about an American president having a mistress. The shift may also have come because historians working with traditional sources can never resolve the issue, and thus the debate has run out of steam. If, however, it could be shown that Jefferson did father Sally Hemings's children—say through DNA testing of the remains of Jefferson and the Hemings offspring¹⁴—then the debate would take a new turn. Jefferson's character would be questioned on two new grounds. The first question that would arise could never be conclusively answered: Did he

¹⁰ Douglas L. Wilson, "Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue," *Atlantic Monthly* 270 (Nov. 1992): 62. Wilson is the George A. Lawrence Professor of English at Knox College. Curiously, Wilson goes out of his way to show how "modern" Jefferson was. Wilson notes that he believed in exercise, ate little red meat, and was "something of a health-food prophet" (p. 65).

¹¹ Levy details this criticism in the preface to the 1989 paperback edition of *Jefferson and Civil Liberties*, pp. xi–xxxvi (quotations on pp. xxiii–xxiv).

¹² Peter S. Onuf, "The Scholars' Jefferson," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 50 (1993): 675.

¹³ French and Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson," pp. 427–28.

¹⁴ I remain agnostic on the issue of Jefferson's paternity of the children of Sally Hemings. I believe, however, that it is time to exhume Thomas Jefferson and the children of Sally Hemings and run a DNA test. Such a procedure would remove all doubts on this score. If testing could be done to determine how President Zachary Taylor died, it should certainly be done to resolve this issue, which has captured the popular imagination and the energies of so many scholars.

take advantage of his position as a master to coerce Hemings into his bed? Second, and perhaps even more compelling, what does it say about Jefferson to know that he enslaved his own children?

Although the debate over Jefferson and Sally Hemings may be less pressing, the debate over Jefferson's relationship to slavery has become even more important. Was Jefferson an opponent of slavery? Did he "hate" the institution, as Gordon Wood has argued?¹⁵ What did he do, and what might he have done, about slavery? How have Jefferson's biographers dealt with Jefferson and slavery? Was he, as almost all his biographers maintain, a lifelong opponent of slavery who did everything within his power to end his own relationship with the institution and to help put it on the road to its ultimate extinction?

For many Jefferson biographers, any discussion of slavery that challenges the idea of an antislavery Jefferson raises the question of presentism. They complain that any criticism of Jefferson's relationship to slavery unfairly applies modern sensibilities to an eighteenth-century man. Thus, Alf J. Mapp, Jr., in his popular biographies of Jefferson, ignores most of Jefferson's lifelong relationship with slavery but goes out of his way to argue that "judged in the context of his times, Jefferson is relieved of the charge of hypocrisy," and that "[i]t is extremely naive for us to judge him in the context of our time."¹⁶ The implication is that any criticism of Jefferson and slavery is simply taking him out of the context of his times.

Coming to terms with Jefferson and slavery is not easy. To consider that he might not have opposed slavery seems to shake our confidence in this icon of our founding. As Onuf has correctly observed, however, "it would be a mistake to emphasize the presentism" of the debate over Jefferson and the peculiar institution.¹⁷ The question is not how Jefferson measures up to modern concepts of race and slavery but, rather, how he compares to three other standards: first, the portrayal of him offered by most of his biographers; second, the ideology and goals he set for himself; and third, the way his contemporaries dealt with slavery in the context of Jefferson's ideals.

Behind the argument over presentism is the attitude among many Jefferson scholars that if Jefferson was not perfect, then his entire image

¹⁵ Gordon S. Wood, "Jefferson at Home," *New York Review of Books* 40 (13 May 1993): 6.

¹⁶ Alf J. Mapp, Jr., *Thomas Jefferson: A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity* (Lanham, Md., New York, and London, 1987), pp. 406–7; Alf J. Mapp, Jr., *Thomas Jefferson, Passionate Pilgrim: The Presidency, The Founding of the University and The Private Battle* (Lanham, Md., New York, and London, 1991), p. 367.

¹⁷ Onuf, "The Scholars' Jefferson," p. 675.

will be destroyed. Levy encountered this outlook in his discussion of Jefferson's authoritarian inclinations toward the civil liberties of his opponents. Indicative of this view was the position of Julian P. Boyd, one of the nation's most significant Jeffersonian scholars. He could not even bring himself to read Levy's manuscript before it went to press. Instead, he declared that if Levy's "view was right," then Boyd "had wasted his best years in the wrong profession." Similarly, today's Jefferson scholars cannot come to terms with Jefferson's views on slavery and race. Thus, Gordon Wood has written: "In our present climate the fact that Jefferson was a racist slaveholder seems to defile and discredit all of his great liberal and democratic achievements." Wood was not endorsing this position but merely recognizing it. This is not the case with Douglas Wilson, however, who rhetorically asks, "How should we remember the leading figures of our history? By their greatest achievements and most important contributions or by their personal failures and peccadilloes?"¹⁸ Wilson implies that anyone who critically explores one aspect of Jefferson's life must be seeking to destroy the whole edifice of Jefferson. His argument also suggests that Jefferson's lifelong failure to confront slavery, either as a politician or as a private citizen, was merely a peccadillo.

Although Jefferson's defenders are quick to challenge the style and motivation of historians with a different view, they are nevertheless surprisingly open about their own self-conscious attempts to protect *their* Jefferson. Thus, Merrill D. Peterson defended the idea that when discussing Jefferson, "the historian's obligation to historical truth is compromised, in some degree, by his sense of obligation to the Jefferson symbol." Because Jefferson held "such an important place in the symbolical architecture of this nation," Peterson argued that "objectivity must not be allowed to empty the symbol of meaning for 'Jefferson's children.'"¹⁹ Peterson's point is clear. Jefferson personifies an "image," a "vision" of America. Tamper with Jefferson, and you tamper with that image.

Biographers of Jefferson argue that it is "presentist"—and therefore illegitimate—to judge a historical figure by contemporary values and goals. Certainly the craft of history is not served by applying today's standards to Jefferson or any other eighteenth-century figure. Such an analysis may tell us a great deal about our own culture but tells us very

¹⁸ Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties*, p. xii; Wood, "Jefferson at Home," p. 6; Wilson, "Jefferson and the Character Issue," p. 62.

¹⁹ Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), p. 447.

little about Jefferson and his age. It is important, however, to understand Jefferson's relationship to slavery and race *on his terms* and by the standards of his own era. A frank acknowledgment that understanding Jefferson affects how we understand our own world is not a presentist assessment of Jefferson. It is merely a recognition that history matters—something about which, presumably, all historians can agree.

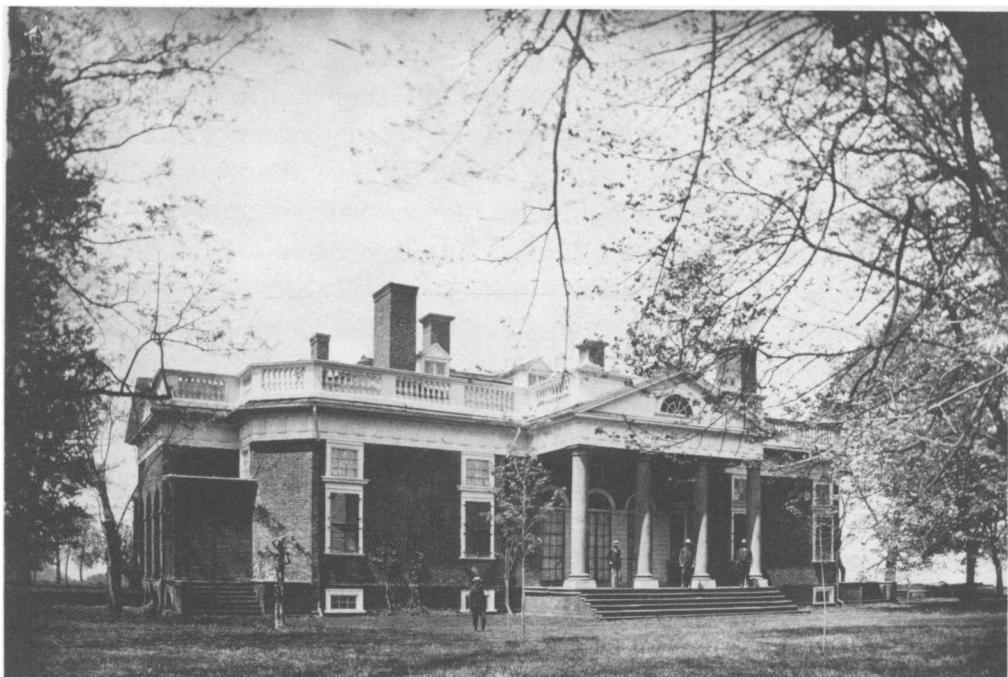
Thus, to understand Jefferson's relationship to slavery and race, we must not impose late twentieth-century values on a man of the eighteenth century. Rather, we must examine Jefferson on his own terms and on the terms of his own age. In doing so, the test of Jefferson's position on slavery is not whether he was better than the worst of his contemporaries, but whether he was the leader of the best; not whether he responded as an average southerner and as a planter, but whether he was able to transcend his sectional background and economic interests to implement the ideals he articulated. Furthermore, we must test Jefferson by the standards that Douglas Wilson, Dumas Malone, and a host of others have imposed. In a sense, it is they who have set the agenda by arguing that he believed "slavery was morally wrong and forcefully declare[d] that it ought to be abolished," that he "strongly favored emancipation," that he "regarded [slavery] as fundamentally cruel," that he had an "abhorrence of slavery," an institution he "was resolved to destroy."²⁰

Popular biographers of Jefferson follow in the footsteps of his scholarly biographers, often with unrestrained exaggeration or misrepresentation. Willard Sterne Randall, in a recent popular biography that has been thoroughly demolished by serious scholars,²¹ assures us that "Jefferson's opposition to slavery was well known." Similarly, Randall argues (with no evidence or citation) that Jefferson "favored gradual emancipation" but that his plan was rejected by a legislative committee that he chaired.²² Alf J. Mapp, Jr., romantically declares that in the years

²⁰ Wilson, "Jefferson and the Character Issue," p. 66; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, vol. 1: *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston, 1948), pp. 264, 266; John Chester Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977), pp. xi, 1.

²¹ See, for example, Peter S. Onuf, "Peerless Tom," *New York Times Book Review* 143 (26 Sept. 1993): 26. In her intelligent and extremely witty review, Jan Lewis writes that Randall's book "bears a superficial resemblance to a serious work of scholarship" but that "this slapdash book is not so much the 'authoritative biography' that its publisher proclaims as a student term paper that has metastasized to grotesque proportions" (Jan Lewis, "Pieces of A President," *Washington Post Book World* 23 [22 Aug. 1993]: 10).

²² Willard Sterne Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life* (New York, 1993), p. 301. In fact, Jefferson never proposed such a design; rather, as chairman of the committee that was charged with revising the law of Virginia, he absolutely refused to allow such a plan, written by others, to be considered by the state's legislature. For Malone and Randall, it was necessary to misstate



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The burden of debt resulting from Jefferson's luxurious life-style forced his heirs to sell Monticello in 1831. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, created in 1923, initiated twentieth-century efforts to restore the house, shown here as it appeared in May 1917.

before the Revolution no one in the House of Burgesses "was more sensitive than Jefferson to the anomaly of their position as slave-owners contending for liberty as a God-given right." Mapp later maintains that Jefferson "repeatedly proposed the gradual abolition of slavery," although he provides not a single shred of documentation for this position while overlooking contrary evidence. Mapp asserts that Jefferson's attitude on slavery was "far too liberal for most of his contemporaries" but ignores those contemporaries who in fact were far more advanced than Jefferson on issues of slavery and race.²³

Jefferson's record in order to prevent a breach of the wall surrounding his secular sainthood. See Paul Finkelman, "Jefferson and Slavery: 'Treason Against the Hopes of the World,'" in Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies*, pp. 194-97.

²³ Mapp, *A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity*, pp. 53, 407. In his first volume on Jefferson, Mapp notes that William Byrd II believed that blacks were "naturally as intelligent as the Caucasian" but that apparent intellectual differences "were the result of culture" (*ibid.*, p. 167). In his second volume, however, Mapp argues that "Jefferson's estimate of the abilities of blacks coincided with that of most educated white men of his day" (*Passionate Pilgrim*, p. 367). Mapp does not explain why the "liberal" Jefferson was unable to reach a conclusion about equality that was at least as progressive as Byrd's.

Speaking for the defenders of the traditional view of an antislavery Jefferson, Merrill Peterson asserted, “All of Jefferson’s values and goals dictated the extermination of slavery.”²⁴ It is neither presentist nor unreasonable to investigate the extent to which Jefferson lived up to his “values and goals.”

Jefferson was a great leader. It is therefore all the more important to see, and distinguish, where that greatness flourished and where it failed. Understanding Jefferson and finding value in his life and work is not an all-or-nothing proposition. We hold no other figure in American history to such a standard. Abraham Lincoln, who did more for human freedom than any other sitting president,²⁵ nevertheless is accepted by scholars and the public as a man with faults and warts.²⁶ Indeed, Lincoln’s greatness is so apparent because he was so human, with limitations, fears, and anxieties. Similarly, those who admire John Adams and correctly see him as perhaps the most intellectually complex Founder nevertheless admit his many failings and flaws.²⁷

Of all our major American leaders, only Jefferson is carved in marble, larger than life, and either perfect or a shattered statue. Jefferson’s biographers have set this standard. Because they know that slavery is wrong, they have tried to shape Jefferson into their image of a properly liberal opponent of slavery. They wish to make a lifelong slave owner, a man who sold numerous slaves to support his extravagant life-style, into a proto-abolitionist so that Jefferson will fit into their presentist conceptions of what Jefferson believed and felt. Thus, scholars and popular biographers proclaim, as Peterson did, that “all of Jefferson’s values and goals dictated the extermination of slavery.”²⁸ They then are forced to ignore contrary evidence and thus paint a false picture of Jefferson or to explain away his views and actions in ways that undermine their otherwise credible accounts of his life.

²⁴ Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (New York, 1970), p. 998.

²⁵ In his pre-presidential career Ulysses S. Grant was critical in bringing freedom to millions of Americans.

²⁶ See, for example, Paul Finkelman, “Civil Liberties and the Civil War: The Great Emancipator as Civil Libertarian,” *Michigan Law Review* 91 (1993): 1353–81.

²⁷ Unfortunately, no biography of Jefferson has treated him as honestly as Joseph J. Ellis has recently treated John Adams in his brilliant *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 1993).

²⁸ Peterson, *Jefferson and the New Nation*, p. 998.

II

Jefferson and Slavery

Many other scholars, especially William Cohen, David Brion Davis, Winthrop D. Jordan, Robert McColley, John Chester Miller, and William W. Freehling, have made the case that Jefferson was not in fact antislavery and that he did little to end the institution.²⁹ Significantly, popular biographers and some scholars ignore this literature.³⁰

It is clear that Jefferson found slavery distasteful, at least on some levels. Gordon Wood asserts that he "hated slavery."³¹ It is hard to imagine how someone as intelligent, wealthy, and well connected as Jefferson could "hate" an institution and yet be unable to do anything about it or at least take some risks to try to do something about it.

²⁹ William Cohen, "Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery," *Journal of American History* 56 (1969-70): 503-26; D. B. Davis, *Was Thomas Jefferson an Authentic Enemy of Slavery?* An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 18 February 1970 (Oxford, 1970); Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, esp. pp. 166-84; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968); Robert McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia* (Urbana, 1964); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 1: *Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York, Oxford, and Toronto, 1990). In his book Freehling completely reverses his earlier apologetic view of Jefferson in "The Founding Fathers and Slavery," *American Historical Review* 77 (1972): 81-93. Miller, for all his attacks on Jefferson, was never able completely to accept that Jefferson was not somehow, in some way, a secret abolitionist. Thus, he asserted at the beginning of his important book on the subject that Jefferson "was resolved to destroy" slavery (Miller, *Wolf by the Ears*, pp. xi, 1).

³⁰ Randall, whose book has extensive notes and a bibliography and who thus appears to have produced a work of scholarship, does not list Cohen's article or Davis's book as a source. Although he does have Miller, Jordan, and McColley in the bibliography, he does not cite them in his notes, and his few discussions of slavery do not indicate that he is aware of the arguments these scholars have made. Mapp has only Jordan and Miller in his bibliography and cites neither of them in his two discussions of slavery in his first book. He similarly ignores this literature in his second volume, *Thomas Jefferson, Passionate Pilgrim*. Elizabeth C. Langhorne, *Monticello: A Family Story* (Chapel Hill, 1987) ignores all secondary work on this subject and explains that Jefferson could not free his slaves because of his debts and because it was against the law (p. 253). Although Langhorne has extensive discussions of some of Jefferson's bondspeople, the terms *slave* and *slavery* do not appear in her index. Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Baton Rouge and London, 1987) cites David Brion Davis, John Chester Miller, and Winthrop Jordan in his few discussions of Jefferson and slavery. Cunningham accepts Jefferson's racism in a way that earlier biographers did not, although he writes it off to Jefferson's being a "product of his age in his views on race" (p. 62). Yet Cunningham persists in painting Jefferson as an opponent of slavery. He does not confront the persuasive critique of Jefferson by Cohen and Davis. Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson*, American Presidency Series (Lawrence, Manhattan, and Wichita, 1976) dismisses any discussion of Jefferson's private life, which presumably includes his role as a slaveholder, as "irrelevant to his qualities as a public man" (p. 179). McDonald, however, acknowledges the importance of slavery to the founding of the republic, makes no attempt to paint Jefferson as an antislavery icon, and points out, as other biographers do not, that even while he was in the White House Jefferson purchased slaves. McDonald notes that the meaning of "liberty" to Jefferson "can scarcely have been a conventional one, since Jefferson owned several hundred human beings during his lifetime" (*ibid.*, p. 30).

³¹ Wood, "Jefferson at Home," p. 6.

Consider the other things Jefferson hated. He hated the British empire and helped start a revolution to sever his ties with it. He hated religious intolerance and drafted "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," which the Virginia General Assembly eventually passed.³² He hated primogeniture and entail and proposed legislation to end them. He hated ignorance and proposed a system of public education, even though he (correctly) doubted it would pass. He hated cruel punishments (at least for whites) and successfully initiated a complete reform of Virginia's criminal code for white people.³³ He hated the Sedition Act of 1798 and deftly arranged to have the state of Kentucky promulgate his denunciation of the law.

Jefferson's "hatred" of slavery was a peculiarly cramped kind of hatred. It was not so much slavery he hated as what it did to his society. This "hatred" took three forms. First, he hated what slavery did to whites. Second, he hated slavery because he feared it would lead to a rebellion that would destroy his society. Third, he hated slavery because it brought Africans to America and kept them there. None of these feelings motivated him to do anything about the institution.

The Effect of Slavery on Whites

Jefferson's most famous outburst against slavery is found in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which he argued that slavery had an "unhappy influence on the manners of our people."³⁴ The designation "our people" here does not seem to include blacks. A careful reading of this famous paragraph shows Jefferson's concern was for the effects of slavery on the master class. He was afraid that slavery would corrupt white Americans.

At first glance, he seems to have had some concern for the slave. Thus he wrote: "[T]he whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other." This sentence suggests that Jefferson may have been concerned about

³² Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *The Portable Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1975), p. 251.

³³ This code did not apply to blacks, for whom Jefferson proposed harsher laws. Thus, "except for the privilege of knowing that their corpses would not rot on gibbets, the slaves profited little from the enlightened humanitarianism" in Jefferson's draft code. His revision tightened the slave code, increased penalties for slave criminals, and "retained most of the inhumane features of the colonial slave law" (Miller, *Wolf by the Ears*, p. 20; Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p. 174). The legislature eventually rejected some of the more vicious aspects of Jefferson's proposed criminal code for slaves.

³⁴ William Peden, ed., *Notes on the State of Virginia*, by Thomas Jefferson (Chapel Hill, 1954), p. 162.

the effect of slavery on the slave. As an eighteenth-century revolutionary, he was certainly opposed to both despotism and “submissions.” The rest of this paragraph, however, says nothing about the slave and concentrates only on how slavery corrupts the master class.

Our children see this, and learn to imitate it. . . . If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undraped by such circumstances.³⁵

Jefferson’s analysis is on target here, as far as it goes. And, as David Brion Davis suggests, it is impossible to imagine “many planters in any country” writing in this vein.³⁶ This passage surely illustrates Jefferson’s understanding of the inherent danger of slavery to republican society. Yet his remedy for this danger was curious.

Jefferson did not suggest that a parent should free his slaves or even sell them. No, the parent should only keep his temper when his own children are present. Jefferson “hated” slavery because it made whites into tyrants. In all this diatribe he had nothing to say about the “smaller slaves” who faced the wrath of an immature child, nor did he seem concerned with the physical and emotional dangers adult slaves might face from the passions of an adult owner. Jefferson’s only concern here was for his own race and for what slavery might do to its members. Despite his concern, his remedy was hardly one at all.

Jefferson also hated slavery because it made whites dependent on black slaves. Like others of his generation, he was particularly sensitive to the danger of dependency.³⁷ Jefferson depended on his slaves as much as he believed they depended on him. He could not survive without his bondsmen and bondswomen, and he knew it. Forrest McDonald wryly notes that “by all accounts Jefferson himself agonized a great deal”

³⁵ Ibid. It is worth noting that this paragraph probably reflects Jefferson’s own fears of what slavery might be doing to him, a subject beyond the scope of this essay. Slavery must have constantly challenged Jefferson’s self-control.

³⁶ Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p. 171.

³⁷ For an important analysis of dependency in the revolutionary era, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), pp. 43–77. On white southern men’s fear of dependency in the nineteenth century, see Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York and Oxford, 1991), chap. 2.

about slavery, but “agony or no, he retained his slaves and lived in splendor off their labors.”³⁸

In his famous statement on the subject, Jefferson wrote, “[W]e have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”³⁹ Historians have traditionally—and correctly—read this declaration as an indication of Jefferson’s fears about a slave revolt. On another level, however, this statement may also shed light on Jefferson’s “hatred” of slavery. Jefferson surely knew that if he freed his slaves, they would have no reason to revolt. Thus, on some level he may have understood that “self-preservation” was more than merely avoiding a slave rebellion.

The self-preservation of Jefferson’s way of life also depended on slavery. Here the image of the wolf is suggestive of the dangers to republican values caused by the peculiar institution. The wolf may also have been the wolf of gluttony and greed. Jefferson was compulsively acquisitive. This behavior violated republican principles, but Jefferson seemed incapable of resisting the temptation to acquire things. Slavery and the wealth it produced fostered this behavior. Without his slaves Jefferson could not have purchased his wine, his paintings, and his furniture or built Monticello to house them all. Garry Wills points out that while in France “Jefferson went on a buying spree” that “was staggering in its intensity. At times it must have looked as if he meant to take much of Paris back with him to his mountain ‘château.’” When he left France, he shipped eighty-six large crates back to the United States. His treasures included “sixty-three oil paintings, seven busts by Houdon, forty-eight formal chairs, Sèvres table sculptures of biscuit, damask hangings, four full-length mirrors in gilt frames, four marble-topped tables, 120 porcelain plates, and numberless items of personal luxury.”⁴⁰ In the 1790s Jefferson sold some fifty slaves to pay the debts that grew out of his luxurious life-style. “Self-preservation” for Jefferson was at least in part economic. He was dependent on slaves and he did not like it, but he did not dislike it enough to do anything about it.

Along the same lines, support for slavery may have been necessary for Jefferson’s political self-preservation. John Chester Miller observed that Jefferson always believed he had to “choose between the preserva-

³⁸ McDonald, *Presidency of Jefferson*, p. 22.

³⁹ Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, 22 Apr. 1820, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (10 vols.; New York and London, 1892–99), 10:157–58. Researchers at the Jefferson papers project have discovered that the original letter used the word “ear,” not “ears.” I am grateful to Lucia C. Stanton, director of research at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, for pointing this out.

⁴⁰ Wills, “The Aesthete,” p. 6.

tion of his political ‘usefulness’ and active opposition to slavery.”⁴¹ This conclusion of course assumes that Jefferson wanted to oppose slavery. Other successful Virginia politicians took more positive stands against slavery.⁴² At the national level Jefferson also owed his political success to the peculiar institution. Without the electoral votes provided by the three-fifths clause, he would not have defeated John Adams in 1800.

Jefferson often stated he wanted slaves to be freed, but he always conditioned his emancipatory goals on the removal from the country of free blacks. Thus, late in life he wrote that he favored “a general emancipation and *expatriation*” if it “could be effected.”⁴³ If that removal had actually occurred, he would have lost his slaves’ labor and the luxuries it provided, while his beloved South would have lost the enormous political leverage the three-fifths clause gave it in the House of Representatives and the electoral college. These possible consequences help to explain why Jefferson placed impossible conditions—such as expatriation—on any scheme to end slavery.

Jefferson’s Fear of Slaves

His second “hatred” of slavery was based on what he feared the slaves would do to the master class. His writings are filled with his apprehensions about slave revolts. In 1797, with the image of Haiti fresh in his mind, he told a fellow Virginian that “if something is not done, & soon done, we shall be the murderers of our own children.”⁴⁴ But he was incapable of recognizing what that “something” might be. During his presidency Jefferson did all he could to undermine the black republic in Haiti, including offering aid to Napoleon in his futile effort to reconquer the island and reimpose slavery. The existence of a free black republic just off the American coast, combined with the Gabriel conspiracy, unnerved Jefferson.⁴⁵ By 1820, he could only bemoan the danger of holding the wolf by the ear. Four years later he acknowledged that removing blacks from America would increase the “happiness and

⁴¹ Miller, *Wolf by the Ears*, p. 279.

⁴² Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p. 170, notes that Governor James Wood of Virginia was also the vice-president of the Virginia Abolition Society, while Governor Beverley Randolph praised the Pennsylvania organization.

⁴³ Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, 22 Apr. 1820, in Ford, ed., *Writings of Jefferson*, 10:157–58.

⁴⁴ Thomas Jefferson to St. George Tucker, 28 Aug. 1797, in *ibid.*, 7:168.

⁴⁵ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill and London, 1993), pp. 151–72.



Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection; Colonial Williamsburg photograph

Although slaves provided for Jefferson's every need at Monticello, his racist assumptions prevented him from recognizing their talents, skills, intellectual abilities, or culture. *The Old Plantation* depicts a slave celebration about 1790.

safety" of white Americans, although he refused to endorse the American Colonization Society because he thought it was impractical.⁴⁶

In 1814 Jefferson wrote his neighbor, Edward Coles, that emancipation would come "by the generous energy of our own minds; or by the bloody process of St. Domingo." In this same letter, however, he urged Coles not to act on his own generous impulse to free his slaves. "I tremble for my country," he wrote in the *Notes*, "when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference!"⁴⁷ Slavery surely had a profound effect on Jefferson. Here was the scientist of Monticello, worrying about the "wheel of fortune" and "supernatural interference." Here was Jefferson the deist worried about a wrathful, Calvinist God, punishing the people of America for the sin of slaveholding. Surely

⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson to Jared Sparks, 4 Feb. 1824, in Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (20 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1903–5), 16:9.

⁴⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, 25 Aug. 1814, in Peterson, ed., *The Portable Jefferson*, p. 545; Peden, ed., *Notes*, p. 163.

Jefferson hated an institution that could make him so fearful and his country so sinful. But he could never act to remove the cause of his fears or take steps to eliminate the sin from his life or that of his nation.

Jefferson's Racism and His Hatred of Slavery

The third element of Jefferson's hatred of slavery resulted from his profound racism. He had little empathy for those who allowed themselves to be reduced to "degrading submissions." He assumed their inferiority, based on their race. Absurdly, he suggested blackness might come "from the colour of the blood."⁴⁸ Jefferson collected fossils, kept track of the weather, and carefully observed plants, animals, soil, and people. Surely he was capable of making the casual observation—or serious scientific investigation—necessary to prove or debunk his theory on the color of human blood.⁴⁹ His suggestion that blacks might inbreed with the "Oran-ootan" was laughable; his assertion that black men preferred white women was empirically not supportable.⁵⁰ The reverse was more likely the case, as he certainly knew. Many white men, including his late father-in-law, maintained sexual liaisons with female slaves.⁵¹

He found the very appearance of his slaves offensive. He could hardly stand the "eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race." He surely "hated" the slave, whom he could not even look at as an individual. In his slaves he saw only a monotony of color and countenance, punctuated by "a very strong and disagreeable odour."⁵²

Jefferson hated slavery because he hated the slave and the Negro and because he hated what slavery did to white people. In the end, however,

⁴⁸ Peden, ed., *Notes*, pp. 162, 138.

⁴⁹ On Jefferson as a scientist, see Silvio A. Bedini, *Thomas Jefferson: Statesman of Science* (New York and London, 1990), esp. pp. 89–124.

⁵⁰ Peden, ed., *Notes*, p. 139. On the intersection of sex, psychology, and southern masters, see Nell Irvin Painter, "Of Lily, Linda Brent, and Freud: A Non-Exceptionalist Approach to Race, Class, and Gender in the Slave South," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76 (1992): 241–59. Painter's analysis may go a long way in explaining Jefferson's writing on this subject. See also Cashin, *A Family Venture*; and Catherine Clinton, "'Southern Dishonor': Flesh, Blood, Race, and Bondage," in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830–1900* (New York and Oxford, 1991), pp. 52–68.

⁵¹ Most serious Jefferson scholars, including Dumas Malone, assert that Jefferson's father-in-law was the father of Sally Hemings. At a conference on Jefferson held at the University of Virginia in October 1992, a researcher from Monticello noted that there is no better evidence for John Wayles fathering Sally Hemings than there is for Jefferson fathering her children. When I asked if this meant that Jefferson also fathered Hemings's children, the researcher replied, "No," because "we must give Mr. Jefferson the benefit of the doubt."

⁵² Peden, ed., *Notes*, pp. 138–39.

he could do little about it except express his fears about the institution's ill effects on the master class and the problem of self-preservation. What he never understood was that only by striving for justice might he achieve "self-preservation." Thus, his hatred of slavery was unproductive and limited to complaints about how it affected whites, to frightened letters to close confidants, and to occasional pious pronouncements about the evils of the institution. With this understanding of Jefferson's "hatred" of slavery, it is possible to scrutinize the way historians and biographers have dealt with the problem of Jefferson and slavery.

III

Jeffersonian Scholars on Slavery

Three quite separate aspects of Jefferson and slavery reveal the way biographers have often shaped the historical record to protect the "correct" image of Jefferson. The first is Jefferson's public role in opposing slavery; the second is his private relationship with the peculiar institution; the third is his racial ideas.

The Public Jefferson

The image of Jefferson as a proto-abolitionist who did everything in his power to end slavery remains strong in the academy and is fueled by some Jeffersonian scholars and biographers writing for the general public. Examples of this assessment include Dumas Malone's multivolume biography of Jefferson, Adrienne Koch and William Peden's Modern Library edition of his works, Merrill Peterson's biography of Jefferson, Douglas Wilson's reverential article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the popular biographies by Willard Randall and Alf Mapp.⁵³

Despite the carefully documented work of some distinguished historians who focus on slavery and race relations,⁵⁴ many scholars and the overwhelming majority of Americans cling to the belief that Jefferson opposed slavery and would have ended it and freed his own slaves if only it had been possible to do so. Wilson praises Jefferson as a man "who was born into a slaveholding society, whose family and admired friends

⁵³ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (6 vols.; Boston, 1948-81); Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1944); Peterson, *Jefferson and the New Nation*; Wilson, "Jefferson and the Character Issue"; Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*; Mapp, *A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity*; Mapp, *Passionate Pilgrim*.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Jordan, *White over Black*, pp. 429-81; Cohen, "Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery," p. 503; Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, pp. 164-212; McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*; Freehling, *Road to Disunion*.

owned slaves," but who "decide[d] at an early age that slavery was morally wrong and forcefully declare[d] that it ought to be abolished." He maintains that Jefferson "went against his society and own self-interest to denounce slavery and urge its abolition."⁵⁵ Wilson neglects, however, to provide any evidence for these conclusions while ignoring the vast amount of documentation that undercuts them.

Moreover, Wilson conveniently fails to tell his readers that Jefferson lived in a society—revolutionary-era Virginia—in which many of his neighbors and friends, including George Washington, publicly and privately acted on their antislavery views. Indeed, even if Jefferson had "forcefully declare[d] that [slavery] ought to be abolished" (which he in fact did not do), he would hardly have been unique in the revolutionary-era South. In South Carolina Colonel John Laurens, for example, jeopardized his political career by strenuously urging the legislature to support a program whereby slaves would be freed and enlisted in all-black regiments while masters would be recompensed by Congress. Laurens believed this policy would benefit "those who are unjustly deprived of the rights of mankind" while simultaneously helping the Patriot cause. At the same time Laurens made plans to liberate his own slaves. His tragic death, in the last skirmish of the war, prevented him from acting, but his father, Henry, carried out the plan of manumission.⁵⁶ As a war governor and a wartime state legislator, Jefferson was silent on the question of emancipating and enlisting slaves. Moreover, on the personal level, unlike hundreds of Virginia masters, he did not enlist any of his own slaves in the Continental Army, and thus he denied them the opportunity to fight for their freedom as well as for his.

Dumas Malone argues that Jefferson's "personal activities against the institution of slavery were greatest in the period of the American Revolution, when he vainly proposed a plan of gradual emancipation for his own commonwealth," and that "he strongly favored emancipation."⁵⁷ In fact, while in the legislature, he never did propose this plan. When others wanted to do so, he stopped them.

Merrill Peterson tells us that Jefferson "set his heart on the eradication of slavery." But, as chairman of the committee to revise Virginia's laws, Jefferson refused to propose either a gradual emancipation scheme or a bill to allow individual masters to free their slaves. Peterson says on

⁵⁵ Wilson, "Jefferson and the Character Issue," pp. 66-67.

⁵⁶ Donald L. Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics, 1765-1820* (New York, 1971), pp. 118-22; James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington*, vol. 4: *Anguish and Farewell (1793-1799)* (Boston, 1972), p. 116; McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*.

⁵⁷ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, vol. 3: *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty* (Boston, 1962), p. 207; Malone, *Jefferson the Virginian*, p. 264.

this issue that Jefferson chose to "let it lie rather than risk the loss of all power of accomplishment by untimely advocacy of so arduous a cause." This analysis assumes that Jefferson wanted to do something about slavery. There is simply no strong evidence for such a conclusion. He not only failed to lead on this point, but he also discouraged others from proposing gradual emancipation. When his colleagues approached him with draft legislation that would have brought gradual emancipation to Virginia, he declined to add it to the proposed revisions because it was "better that this should be kept back" and only offered as an amendment.⁵⁸ This statement suggests that Jefferson did not propose any bill on emancipation—even one allowing for voluntary manumission—because he was a hard-headed politician unwilling to lose a vote. A few years later, however, with Jefferson gone from the scene, the Old Dominion easily adopted a law allowing private manumission. Other Virginians, more committed to freedom than Jefferson, readily accomplished what he refused to attempt.

Peterson's overall discussion of Jefferson's legislative record further undercuts his analysis of Jefferson's failure to support any legislation either to end slavery or at least to allow private manumission. Peterson rightly praises Jefferson for attempting, however unsuccessfully, educational reform.⁵⁹ This record shows that, on issues that truly mattered to him, Jefferson was willing to risk defeat. On slavery, however, he was not willing to run a risk. Jefferson's sympathetic biographers make excuses and offer explanations for why he could not do what his biographers "know" in their hearts he wanted to do. The evidence, on the contrary, suggests that what is in the hearts of Jefferson's biographers was not very much in the heart of Jefferson himself. Throughout his career, when confronted with a chance to work toward public emancipation or private manumission, Jefferson backpedaled.

If the test of greatness for a politician is the willingness to lead a nation or state to what is right, even when it is unpopular, then Jefferson as a Virginia legislator and wartime governor fails the test on slavery. His occasional mumblings about the evils of slavery pale in comparison to the eloquent attacks on the institution by Chancellor George Wythe, who, in addition to his role as a leading Virginia jurist, had been Jefferson's mentor at William and Mary. In *Hudgins v. Wrights*, Wythe single-handedly tried to abolish slavery through judicial interpretation.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Peterson, *Jefferson and the New Nation*, pp. 152–53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 145–49.

⁶⁰ *Hudgins v. Wrights*, 11 Va. (1 Hen. & Mufn.) 134 (1806). For a discussion of the case, see Robert M. Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (New Haven and London, 1975), pp. 51–55; and Finkelman, "Jefferson and Slavery," p. 197.



RUN away from the subscriber in *Albemarle*, a Mulatto slave called *Sandy*, about 35 years of age, his stature is rather low, inclining to corpulence, and his complexion light; he is a shoemaker by trade, in which he uses his left hand principally, can do coarse carpenters work, and is something of a horse jockey; he is greatly addicted to drink, and when drunk is insolent and disorderly, in his conversation he swears much, and in his behaviour is artful and knavish. He took with him a white horse, much scarred with traces, of which it is expected he will endeavour to dispose; he also carried his shoemakers tools, and will probably endeavour to get employment that way. Whoever conveys the said slave to me, in *Albemarle*, shall have 40 s. reward, if taken up within the county, 4 l. if elsewhere within the colony, and 20 l. if in any other colony. from
THOMAS JEFFERSON.

Virginia Historical Society

In September 1769 Jefferson advertised the escape of a thirty-five-year-old slave named Sandy. Skilled as a shoemaker, the mulatto had run away with the tools of his trade and a white horse.

Douglas Wilson rhetorically asks how a white man born in a slave society could oppose slavery. Wilson's point, I suppose, is that we should admire Jefferson because he theoretically opposed slavery while owning slaves. Wilson might better have asked how Jefferson, who studied under George Wythe, could have been so unable to act on his supposed opposition to slavery.

The best Jefferson could offer was an occasional private thought on the subject. In a letter to James Madison, Jefferson once outlined a program for manumission in Virginia, but he took no steps to make the proposal public, much less implement it. His private suggestions that Virginia somehow, sometime, end slavery, are wimpy and trivial compared to his mentor's direct assault in *Hudgins v. Wrights* or the actions of St. George Tucker, a member of Virginia's highest court, who wrote and published a tract advocating abolition in Virginia and providing a detailed plan for gradual emancipation in the commonwealth.⁶¹

⁶¹ St. George Tucker, *A Dissertation on Slavery: With A Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of It, in the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1796). For a discussion of Jefferson's proposal to Madison, see Finkelman, "Jefferson and Slavery," pp. 198–99.

The popular biographers retell the stories of Malone and Peterson with even less sophistication. Randall declares that when Jefferson was appointed as chairman of the committee to revise the laws of Virginia, his “opposition to slavery was well known.”⁶² What Randall has done is to conflate opposition to the importation of slaves with opposition to slaveholding.⁶³ His confusion on this issue is indeed profound. He somehow believes that because Jefferson had proposed an abolition of the importation of slaves, “he did not need to write a separate law banning slavery.”⁶⁴ Alf Mapp is even more confused. He declares that Jefferson attempted to condemn slavery in the Declaration of Independence, when in fact he only attacked the slave trade. Apparently forgetting what he wrote in his first book on Jefferson, Mapp later asserted that Jefferson “wrote into the Declaration of Independence a pledge to abolish the importation of slaves.”⁶⁵ This analysis is also inaccurate, because the proposed clause contained no pledge of any kind.

Mapp asserts that “Jefferson repeatedly proposed the gradual abolition of slavery,” but he never explains how or why he reaches this erroneous conclusion.⁶⁶ Randall excuses Jefferson for failing ever to propose emancipation by declaring that by 1786, “revolutionary fever had cooled to the point that no prominent Virginia politician would risk his friends, his office, or his influence to speak up for the slaves.”⁶⁷ Randall fails to note the passage of the 1782 law that allowed private manumission in Virginia or the thousands of slaves freed under that law in the next two decades. This bill, of course, went through the legislature while Jefferson was absent. Furthermore, Randall is blissfully unaware of the opposition to slavery by St. George Tucker and George Wythe during that period. So too will be the popular audience that reads his book.

⁶² Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, p. 301.

⁶³ Peter Wallenstein deals at length with this confusion in his essay on George Mason elsewhere in this issue.

⁶⁴ Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, p. 301.

⁶⁵ Mapp, *A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity*, p. 406; Mapp, *Passionate Pilgrim*, p. 366. I do not doubt the sincerity of Jefferson’s distaste for the slave trade, but his attack on the trade—or rather his attempt to blame the king for the trade—was hardly a “pledge” to end it. Many slaveowners thought the trade was immoral, cruel, dangerous, and generally a bad policy but still had no objections to slavery itself. Many Virginians, including Jefferson, would benefit financially from an end to the trade, which would increase the price of their bondspeople.

⁶⁶ Mapp, *A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity*, p. 407.

⁶⁷ Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, p. 302. Mapp notes that Jefferson “had to defer his efforts for gradual emancipation of the slaves” (Mapp, *A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity*, p. 123). Mapp fails to note that Jefferson had in fact never made such an effort.

The Private Jefferson

In addition to explaining why Jefferson never publicly fought slavery, his biographers must explain away his private relationship to it. The private Jefferson was surely better than many masters, but he was hardly a model. As a slave owner Jefferson sold scores of bondspeople—at least fifty in the early 1790s alone—all the while protesting that he had “scruples about selling negroes but for delinquency or on their own request.”⁶⁸ In contrast, George Washington refused “either to buy or sell slaves, ‘as you would do cattle at a market.’”⁶⁹

Jefferson is noted for advocating a progressive and fair administration of justice. He accomplished a major reform of Virginia’s criminal code. For his slaves, however, punishment could be swift, arbitrary, and horrible. For the crime of “delinquency” the notoriously thin-skinned Jefferson permanently banished offenders from friends and family. His determination to sell “delinquent” slaves was calculated to create terror in others. He directed that one slave be sold to “negro purchasers from Georgia” or some “other quarter so distant as never more to be heard of among us.” This removal should appear to the other slaves “as if he were put out of the way by death.”⁷⁰

Douglas Wilson had the question right: “How could the man who wrote that ‘all men are created equal’ own slaves?” Wilson in fact never answers his question. Instead, he denies the validity of the inquiry: “Thus the question of why Jefferson didn’t free his slaves only serves to illustrate how presentism involves us in mistaken assumptions about historical conditions—in this case that an eighteenth-century slaveholder wanting to get out from under the moral stigma of slavery and improve the lot of his slaves had only to set them free.”⁷¹ Anyone familiar with late eighteenth-century America knows that it was a period when thousands of individuals set their slaves free, when a number of states outright abolished the institution, and when nearly every major reformer in America and Europe *except* Thomas Jefferson actively opposed slavery. To ask why Jefferson did not free his slaves is not presentist; rather, it is to ask why the man from Monticello was unable to achieve the same high standards set by the man from Mount Vernon and thousands of others.

⁶⁸ Thomas Jefferson to John W. Eppes, 30 June 1820, in Edwin Morris Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson’s Farm Book . . . , Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society*, 35 (Princeton, 1953), p. 45.

⁶⁹ Miller, *Wolf by the Ears*, p. 107.

⁷⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, 8 June 1803, in Betts, ed., *Jefferson’s Farm Book*, p. 19.

⁷¹ Wilson, “Jefferson and the Character Issue,” pp. 66, 69.

During his life Jefferson freed only three slaves. The last of these, Harriet Hemings, ran away in 1822, and Jefferson apparently thought it easier to emancipate her than chase after her. This was hardly the act of a benevolent master. Nor were the manumissions of Robert Hemings in 1794 and James Hemings in 1796.

Jefferson freed Robert Hemings in 1794 only after the slave paid Jefferson £60, which his future employer, George Frederick Stras, advanced. This was a manumission in only the most technical sense. Jefferson did not grant Hemings his freedom for his faithful service or out of political conviction; Jefferson sold Hemings his freedom for £60, which was his fair market value. Malone, writing about Robert Hemings, asserted that Jefferson only freed a slave when "that individual was prepared for freedom in his opinion."⁷² But this was hardly such a case. It was Stras, not Jefferson, who believed Robert Hemings was ready to be free. Jefferson apparently agreed to give up Hemings only because he was convinced that Stras had already "debauched" the slave by treating him as a free person, and thus he reluctantly allowed Hemings to purchase his own freedom with money borrowed from Stras.⁷³

In 1796 Jefferson reluctantly emancipated James Hemings. Using this member of the Hemings family as another example of Jefferson's judicious manumission policy, Malone writes that, while in Philadelphia, Jefferson "signed an agreement to free him after he had returned to Monticello and stayed there long enough to teach somebody else how to cook—presumably in the French manner."⁷⁴ Merrill Peterson describes the event as a bargain that favored Hemings, who "won his freedom upon fulfilling the pledge to teach his art [of cooking] to a worthy successor."⁷⁵ The successor was his brother Peter. Most of the popular biographers repeat this analysis. These descriptions of what happened hide the reality of this transaction.

James Hemings had lived with Jefferson in France as well as in various parts of the North. Hemings was unquestionably free under French law, as well as the law of some northern states to which he had been taken.⁷⁶ While in Philadelphia Hemings apparently asserted this freedom. Jefferson was clearly reluctant to let James Hemings go, but in a declaration, dated 15 September 1793, Jefferson promised to manumit him. The language of the document is defensive and apologetic.

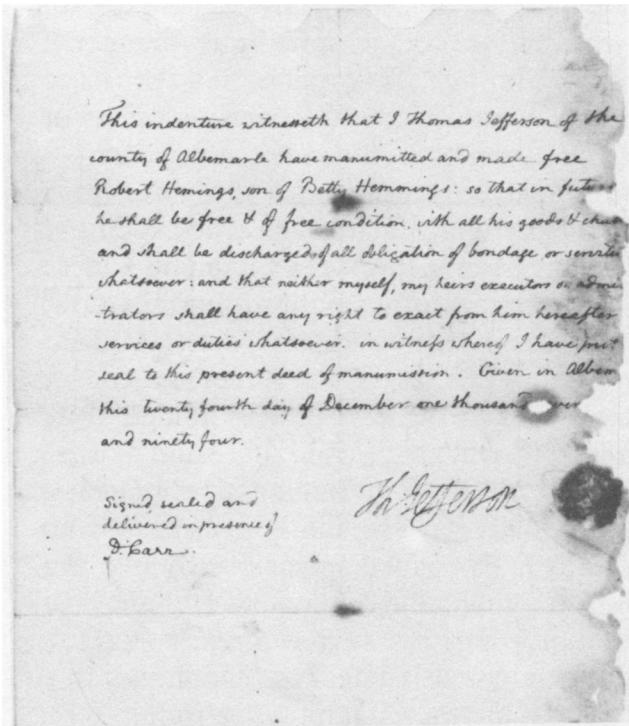
⁷² Malone, *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty*, p. 208.

⁷³ Ibid.; James A. Bear, Jr., "The Hemings Family of Monticello," *Virginia Cavalcade* 29 (1979-80): 80-81.

⁷⁴ Malone, *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty*, p. 209.

⁷⁵ Peterson, *Jefferson and the New Nation*, p. 535.

⁷⁶ Paul Finkelman, *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (Chapel Hill, 1981), pp. 37-38, 41-45.



*Robert Hemings's Manumission Document (#5589),
Manuscripts Division, Special Collections Department,
University of Virginia Library*

During his lifetime, Jefferson manumitted only three slaves, all of them members of the Hemings family. He freed Robert Hemings in 1794 after the slave paid Jefferson £60, which his future employer, George Frederick Stras, advanced.

Having been at great expence in having James Hemings taught the art of cookery, desiring to befriend him, and to require from him as little in return as possible, I do hereby promise & declare, that if the said James shall go with me to Monticello in the course of the ensuing winter, when I go to reside there myself, and shall there continue until he shall have taught such persons as I shall place under him for the purpose to be a good cook, this previous condition being performed, he shall be thereupon made free, and I will thereupon execute all proper instruments to make him free.⁷⁷

This is not the language of a benevolent manumission; it is the language of a contract between Jefferson and a suspicious and hostile party.⁷⁸ Indeed, the very existence of the document undermines any notion of benevolence. Had he been willing voluntarily to free Hemings, he could have done so without signing an agreement for future manumission. Jefferson would have simply taken Hemings back to Monticello,

⁷⁷ Declaration, 15 Sept. 1793, in Betts, ed., *Jefferson's Farm Book*, pp. 15–16.

⁷⁸ It is likely that opponents of slavery in Philadelphia, perhaps members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, were advising Hemings. They might even have threatened to help him sue Jefferson.

had him train another cook, and then freed him. But Jefferson did not do that, because it is clear that he was unwilling to lose this valuable piece of property named James Hemings. Only in response to outside pressure did Jefferson agree to the manumission. He did so without grace or acknowledgment that Hemings had served him well for many years.

Like Wilson, Dumas Malone argued that freedom was not in the best interest of Jefferson's slaves. "To have emancipated the whole body of his slaves, depriving himself thereby of his entire labor force and a large part of his property while turning them loose in an inhospitable world, would have been neither practicable nor kind," he wrote.⁷⁹ Malone never considered whether Jefferson's slaves would have agreed, or whether they would have happily accepted freedom and joined their former master in the "ordeal of liberty." Moreover, Malone and Wilson ignored the examples of hundreds of other southerners—led by George Washington, Robert "Councillor" Carter, and John Laurens—who voluntarily freed their slaves during the nation's first few decades.⁸⁰ Was Washington unkind? Was Carter impractical? Clearly not.

The popular biographers are, as we might expect, even less adept at dealing with this issue. Alf Mapp declares that Jefferson "would not free his own slaves so long as he lived because the laws of Virginia then exiled freed slaves."⁸¹ This statement is inaccurate, misleading, and begs the question. It is inaccurate because under Virginia's manumission law of 1782, masters could free their slaves, and those slaves could remain in the state. This act was in force until 1806.⁸² Between 1782 and 1806 Jefferson could have freed hundreds of people who could have remained in Virginia. Moreover, after 1806 manumitted slaves could have left the state. Mapp implies that being "exiled" from Virginia was worse than remaining a slave in the Old Dominion. Surely the thousands of slaves who ran away from the South during and after the Revolution disprove that notion. Moreover, Mapp's argument ignores Jefferson's lifelong assertions that emancipation and expatriation had to be combined.

Mapp's declaration is misleading because it implies, but of course does not say, that he freed them *after* "he lived." Conveniently, Mapp fails in his first volume to discuss Jefferson's will or the mere handful of slaves he did free. In his second volume, Mapp notes that Jefferson used

⁷⁹ Malone, *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty*, p. 208.

⁸⁰ For a discussion of Washington, see Flexner, *George Washington: Anguish and Farewell*, pp. 122–25. For other examples of Virginians who opposed slavery in the late eighteenth century, see Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, pp. 169–71.

⁸¹ Mapp, *A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity*, p. 407.

⁸² "An Act to Authorize the Manumission of Slaves," *Laws of Virginia, 1782*, chap. 61, reprinted in Paul Finkelman, *The Law of Freedom and Bondage: A Casebook* (New York, 1986), p. 109.

his will to manumit "five slaves who had acquired skills that would enable them to support themselves." Mapp fails, however, to discuss the huge number of slaves the former president did not free.⁸³ His summation begs the question, because had Jefferson wanted to free his slaves, he had numerous opportunities throughout his life to do so. He might have allowed his male slaves to enlist in the revolutionary armies. He took slaves to Paris and Philadelphia but carefully avoided freeing them in either place. He might easily have sent his slaves to a number of other free jurisdictions in his lifetime. Not only did he not do so, but he discouraged others from doing so as well.⁸⁴

If Mapp is misleading, Randall distorts the record beyond all recognition, in what appears to be a clumsy effort to protect the image of his subject. In a paragraph that begins with a discussion of Christmas 1789, Randall writes:

Over the next few years, Jefferson was to begin to emancipate these devoted slaves, one at a time: Sally Hemings's brother Robert first, then James Hemings. He evidently had decided that the time was not ripe to openly defy the slave system all around him and reopen the debate over emancipation at a time when the new government was so unstable.⁸⁵

It is hard to imagine who or what Randall is writing about. Jefferson manumitted Robert Hemings in 1794 and James in 1796. He freed no other slaves until the 1820s. Thus, the "devoted slaves, one at a time" turn out to be only two. It is even harder to imagine what any of these actions had to do with "defy[ing] the slave system," "reopen[ing] the debate over emancipation," or the new government. Private manumission had been legal in Virginia since 1782, and others in the commonwealth were in fact publicly discussing abolition. Indeed, at this time white opponents of slavery in Virginia were active and open. Finally, the "new government" was of course the national government; but manumission was strictly a state issue, and the Virginia government was certainly stable at this time. Moreover, the state government allowed private manumission.

In his final comments on James Hemings, Randall provides more misinformation in an attempt to put Jefferson's failure to manumit his

⁸³ Mapp, *Passionate Pilgrim*, pp. 350–51. Mapp also fails to note that the only slaves Jefferson ever freed were members of the Hemings family. It appears that family ties—and a substantial amount of white ancestry—had far more to do with Jefferson's decision to manumit slaves than any skills they might have had.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, 25 Aug. 1814, in Peterson, ed., *The Portable Jefferson*, p. 544.

⁸⁵ Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, p. 494.

slaves in a better light. James Hemings had wanted to remain in Philadelphia in 1793, but Jefferson compelled him to return to Monticello, where he was required to teach his brother Peter to cook in the French style. In 1796 Jefferson finally emancipated James Hemings. Hemings had gained his own freedom by helping to rivet the chains of bondage more firmly on his brother. After his manumission, James Hemings returned to Philadelphia but found it difficult to recreate the life he had built three years earlier before his forced removal to Monticello. He returned to France, came back to America, and wanted to go to Spain, but he could not afford the passage. In 1801 the newly elected president asked Hemings to come to Washington as his cook, but Hemings absolutely refused to work for his former master. James Hemings did spend about six weeks at Monticello, where most of his family lived. Depressed and something of an alcoholic, he committed suicide later that year.⁸⁶

This is surely a tragic tale. We can only speculate how the story would have turned out if Jefferson had freed Hemings in France, or in Philadelphia in 1793, when he had a solid community and network of friends. We can also wonder how Hemings would have fared if his family had also gained its freedom in 1796, so that he could have faced the world with the support of his relatives. We can never know what psychological burden Hemings bore by having to teach his brother to be Jefferson's cook, thus ensuring that the master of Monticello would never free him. We only know that in the end, the result was devastating.

Randall distorts the account of James Hemings in an attempt to vindicate Jefferson's refusal to free his slaves. Following the lead of Malone, Randall writes that Jefferson "considered it irresponsible, indeed cruel, to turn loose his slaves until they were self-sufficient and prepared to remain free." He then misrepresents the tale of James Hemings to support this contention, writing that Jefferson "had freed his favorite chef, James Hemings, who then drifted from job to job, became an alcoholic, begged to be allowed to return to Monticello, and finally committed suicide."⁸⁷ As we have seen, however, Jefferson had asked Hemings to come to Washington with him; it was Hemings who refused the offer. James Hemings had not "begged" to return to Monticello; and if he had wanted to remain there as Jefferson's servant, he could have. Jefferson had freed Hemings under protest, giving him the awful choice between remaining with his family and having his freedom. Jefferson had

⁸⁶ The best account of James Hemings is found in Langhorne, *Monticello: A Family Story*, pp. 104–8. Some of the information presented here is also based on files at Monticello.

⁸⁷ Randall, *Thomas Jefferson: A Life*, p. 591.

always been willing to help Hemings, if Hemings returned to a subordinate position under Jefferson.

Malone, Wilson, Mapp, and Randall might have compared Jefferson to his young and idealistic neighbor, Edward Coles, who took all of his slaves to Illinois and freed them. Similarly, they might have looked at Robert Carter. In the 1790s—when Jefferson was marketing his slaves to pay for his supply of books, Bordeaux, and other luxuries—“Councillor” Carter manumitted more than five hundred slaves, providing them with land and housing.⁸⁸

Malone writes that when Jefferson “freed a particular slave, that individual was prepared for freedom in his opinion, and had a good place to go to.”⁸⁹ This sentence implies that Jefferson granted manumissions with some frequency, and voluntarily, which was clearly not the case. Another biographer writes that at his death Jefferson emancipated “his ablest and most faithful slaves.”⁹⁰ These scholars tend to be rather vague, however, on just how many “able” or “faithful” slaves were actually freed during his life or at his death. This fuzziness is not surprising, because the numbers are so embarrassingly small. These authors fail to note that of some 200 slaves, at his death Jefferson found only five—all male members of the Hemings family—to be “able and faithful” enough to deserve freedom. It would almost be better for Jefferson’s reputation if he had freed none of his slaves in his will—then at least we might plausibly argue he was consistently opposed to manumission, or that he forgot. But Jefferson did not forget to manumit all his slaves. He just did not do it.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, 1972), p. 70; Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), p. 59; Mary Beth Norton, Herbert G. Gutman, and Ira Berlin, “The Afro-American Family in the Age of Revolution,” in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, Perspectives on the American Revolution (Charlottesville, 1983), p. 176.

⁸⁹ Malone, *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty*, p. 208.

⁹⁰ Peterson, *Jefferson and the New Nation*, p. 1007.

⁹¹ Some scholars have argued that Jefferson could not free his slaves because of his debts. This assertion begs the question. Throughout his life Jefferson was profligate. He bought and bought and bought. Had freeing slaves been even a mildly important goal, he might easily have cut back on his consumption and lavish life-style. That he did not suggests where his priorities lay. Even with his debts, Jefferson might have arranged to have his slaves hired out to pay what he owed, with the understanding that once the debts were cleared, the slaves would be freed. Only a month before Jefferson died, Herbert Elder, a master in Petersburg, provided in his will that his slaves be allowed to work to meet the debts of the estate, after which they could choose freedom in Liberia or remain slaves in Virginia. Thirteen of Elder’s fourteen slaves chose freedom on the continent of their ancestors (see *Elder v. Elder’s Ex’or*, 31 Va. [4 Leigh] 252 [1833]). Under Virginia law, a creditor had a claim against any emancipated slave if the estate lacked sufficient assets to settle the debts of the deceased (“An Act reducing into one, the several acts concerning Slaves, Free Negroes and Mulattoes,” enacted 2 Mar. 1819, sec. 54, 1 *Revised Code of Virginia* 421 [Richmond, 1819], p. 434).

The small number of slaves Jefferson emancipated in his will contrasts with other Virginians. Washington freed all his slaves in his will. John Pleasants manumitted his own slaves during his lifetime and undertook time-consuming, expensive, and personally painful lawsuits to secure the freedom of the slaves once owned by his father and brother, Jonathan and Robert Pleasants.⁹² In 1785 Joseph Mayo, an obscure planter from Powhatan, "astonished some of [Jefferson's] acquaintances" by bequeathing freedom to some 150 slaves. Seven years after Jefferson's death, his kinsman John Randolph of Roanoke died. Unlike Jefferson, Randolph freed his hundreds of slaves in his will and also provided money to purchase land for them.⁹³

Wilson and other scholars maintain that Jefferson could not free his slaves because of "the tangle of legal restrictions and other obstacles faced by the eighteenth-century Virginia slaveholder who might have wished freedom for his slaves."⁹⁴ This is utter nonsense. In 1782 Virginia passed a law allowing manumitted slaves to stay in the state. This act remained in force until 1806. Under this law, a master could free healthy, adult slaves without any restrictions. The same legislation allowed for the manumission of children, superannuated slaves, and those who lacked a "sound mind and body," provided that they were "supported and maintained by the person so liberating them."⁹⁵ This was not a "tangle of legal restrictions" but a straightforward law allowing owners to free slaves and allowing those former slaves to remain in the commonwealth. Over the twenty-three years that this law was in effect, Jefferson could have freed virtually all of his slaves. If he had emancipated only the adult, able-bodied ones, he could have gradually extricated himself from his status as a master. Furthermore, he could have allowed those slaves to remain in Virginia, perhaps working for wages on his lands.

After 1806, masters could still free their slaves, but the former bondspeople had to leave the state within twelve months.⁹⁶ Moreover, for the entire period of Jefferson's adult life, there were no restrictions on

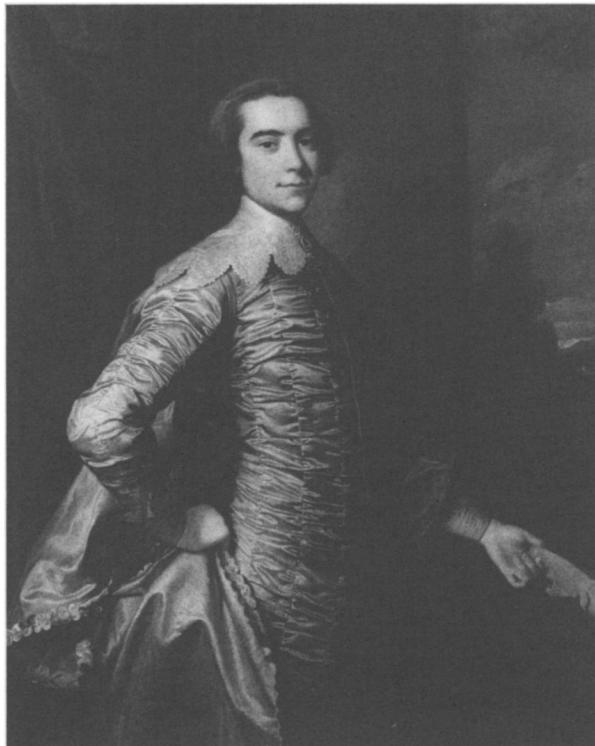
⁹² *Pleasants v. Pleasants*, 6 Va. (2 Call) 319 (1799); Finkelman, *Law of Freedom and Bondage*, pp. 116–23. Pleasants had to sue a variety of relatives who had inherited the slaves and did not want them freed.

⁹³ James Currie to Thomas Jefferson, 5 Aug. 1785, in Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (25 vols. to date; Princeton, 1950–), 8:342–43; Miller, *Wolf by the Ears*, p. 107; Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* (Indianapolis, 1964), p. 189; Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, p. 59.

⁹⁴ Wilson, "Jefferson and the Character Issue," p. 69.

⁹⁵ "An Act to Authorize the Manumission of Slaves," *Laws of Virginia, 1782*, chap. 61, reprinted in Finkelman, *Law of Freedom and Bondage*, p. 109.

⁹⁶ "An Act to Amend the Several Laws Concerning Slaves," *Laws of Virginia, 1805*, chap. 63, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 111.

*Virginia Historical Society*

After a convoluted spiritual journey through no fewer than five faiths, Robert Carter (1728–1804) of Nomini Hall in Westmoreland County manumitted more than 500 slaves. Carter sat for portraitist Thomas Hudson dressed for a London masquerade in the costume of a gentleman of the court of Charles I.

freeing slaves in Pennsylvania, New York, and all of New England. Later in his life Jefferson had the option of sending his manumitted slaves to Liberia. Hundreds, even thousands, of Jefferson's fellow Virginians took advantage of the 1782 law, the openness of neighboring jurisdictions, or the American Colonization Society to free their slaves. That Jefferson failed to do so is not a function of the laws of Virginia, but rather of his own hatred of free blacks, his utter inability to understand the humanity of his slaves, and his unrestrained spending habits.

Jefferson and the Problem of Race

Most defenders of the faith simply do not want to face Jefferson's racial views. Douglas Wilson, for example, says Jefferson cannot be blamed for "doubting the possibility of integration" because most "other Americans" could not envision it either.⁹⁷ He quotes from *Notes on the State of Virginia* to argue that Jefferson's reasons for opposing an integrated society "are the same reasons often cited by black separat-

⁹⁷ Wilson, "Jefferson and the Character Issue," pp. 69, 72. I assume Wilson here construed "other Americans" as white citizens. In fact, there is a great deal of evidence that black Americans were quite willing to risk freedom and strive for integration.

ists": "'[D]eep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; [and] the real distinctions which nature has made.'"⁹⁸ Wilson simply ignores Jefferson's cruder comments that blacks were "inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind," that they had a "disagreeable odour," and that black women might mate with the "Oran-ootan." He ignores Jefferson's pseudoscientific observations on the color of the blood of blacks and his absurd assertions that they need "less sleep" than whites, although Jefferson noted a few sentences later "their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labour." Jefferson's explanation for this characteristic reveals his true views of blacks: "An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course." For Jefferson, blacks were barely human, an animal-like species that lacked "forethought," that "participate[d] more of sensation than reflection," who were "in reason much inferior" and "in imagination . . . dull, tasteless, and anomalous." Unlike true human beings, they lacked the "tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation."⁹⁹

This view of blacks was not merely theoretical. One of the great human tragedies of Jefferson's relationship to slavery occurred when he died and manumitted five of his male slaves. One of those freed was Joseph Fossett. Revealing his total inability to see slaves as people with human feelings, Jefferson did not free Fossett's wife and eight children, who were subsequently auctioned off "to at least four different bidders."¹⁰⁰ This might be seen as a perverse kind of cruelty, to free Fossett but not his family. But, as we have seen, Jefferson believed that blacks lacked the ability to love the way white people did; "They are more ardent after their female," he noted, "but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient."¹⁰¹ Had Jefferson thought about his action at all, he would doubtless have concluded that Fossett would get over the loss of his wife and that the wife and children would get over the loss of Fossett and each other. "Their griefs," after all, were "transient."¹⁰²

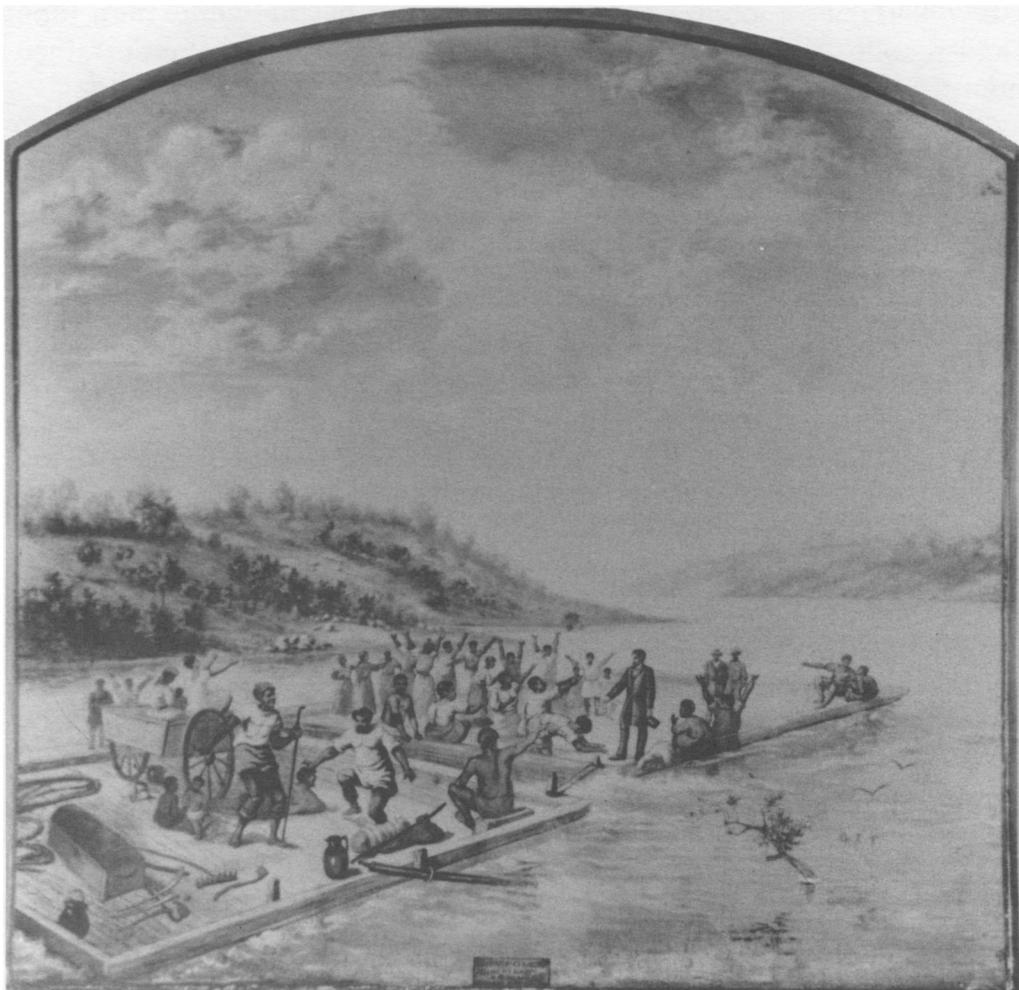
⁹⁸ Wilson, "Jefferson and the Character Issue," p. 72.

⁹⁹ Peden, ed., *Notes*, pp. 138–43.

¹⁰⁰ Lucia Stanton, "'Those Who Labor for My Happiness': Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves," in Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies*, pp. 147, 169.

¹⁰¹ Peden, ed., *Notes*, p. 139.

¹⁰² Fossett spent the next decade heroically trying to put his family back together. In 1837 he manumitted his wife, five children (including two born after Jefferson's death), and four grandchildren.



Courtesy of the Illinois State Historical Library

In 1814 Jefferson tried to dissuade his idealistic young neighbor, Edward Coles, from setting his slaves free. Six years later, Coles and his bondspeople left the Old Dominion for Edwardsville, Illinois. On two flatboats in the Ohio River just south of Pittsburgh, Coles told his slaves that he was emancipating them. This depiction of the announcement, painted about 1885, hangs in the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois.

Wilson suggests that had Jefferson "lived long enough to meet the ex-slave Frederick Douglass or hear the searing eloquence of his oratory, he would have recognized intellectual gifts in a black man that were superior to those of most whites."¹⁰³ Wilson does not reveal what kind

¹⁰³ Wilson, "Jefferson and the Character Issue," p. 72. In the *Notes* Jefferson wrote that blacks were not equal to whites in musical ability. Mapp countered: "Jefferson had not had the opportunity to hear the composition of W. C. Handy, Scott Joplin, or Duke Ellington" (Mapp, *A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity*, p. 171).

of Ouija board he used to contact Jefferson to ascertain this fact. We do know, however, that Jefferson privately rejected the possibility that Benjamin Banneker could have written the almanac he published or that Phyllis Wheatley could write decent poetry. Jefferson found all evidence of black accomplishment inconclusive or unpersuasive.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, although slaves provided for his every need at Monticello, he could not see their talents, skills, or intellectual abilities.

A comparison of Jefferson with Benjamin Franklin illustrates this point. They were colleagues on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence, and both served in the new nation's diplomatic corps. Both were philosophers, inventors, and scientists. Both owned slaves, although Franklin's holdings were negligible compared to Jefferson's, and Franklin manumitted his slaves during his lifetime.

On the significance of race they differed. As early as the 1770s Franklin asserted that Pennsylvania's free blacks were "improvident and poor," but, unlike Jefferson, he did not attribute their condition to race. Rather, Franklin thought their position was a result of their lack of education. "They are not," he wrote, "deficient in natural understanding."¹⁰⁵ Jefferson, however, believed that in ability to "reason" blacks were "much inferior" to whites and were "inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind."¹⁰⁶ As early as 1758 Franklin had proposed a school for free blacks. At the end of his life, this former slave owner was president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Jefferson, on the other hand, opposed both emancipation and black education. He doubted blacks were capable of understanding higher mathematics and asserted they were incapable of producing poetry or music. He believed that even those who had "been liberally educated" were unchanged by the experience.¹⁰⁷

A comparison with Washington, who freed all his slaves in his will, underscores how much out of step Jefferson was with the leaders of his era on black equality. As early as 1774 Washington argued that "custom and use" made blacks "tame and abject slaves." He understood that slavery, not some innate characteristic of race, made blacks seem less than equal to whites. On his own plantations he proved this conclusion to be so. By 1789, all five of his farms had black overseers.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Finkelman, "Jefferson and Slavery," p. 186.

¹⁰⁵ Albert Henry Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (10 vols.; New York, 1905-7), 6:222, quoted in Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), p. 479.

¹⁰⁶ Peden, ed., *Notes*, pp. 138, 142-43.

¹⁰⁷ Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, p. 774; Peden, ed., *Notes*, pp. 139-40. Generally, see Miller, *Wolf by the Ears*, pp. 255-57.

¹⁰⁸ Flexner, *George Washington: Anguish and Farewell*, pp. 113-25 (quotation on p. 114);

It would be “presentist” to expect Jefferson to have had the same racial views as enlightened, educated Americans have today. But it is not presentist to think that Jefferson should have been able to join Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and many of his European friends who attributed the condition of blacks—slave and free—to social factors rather than to race.

In sum, Jefferson’s views on race are embarrassing, not just by the standards of our age but by the standards of his own age. Moreover, his pseudoscientific proclamations helped foster the subsequent development of proslavery science, which led to scientific racism. Jefferson helped invent racism as an intellectually credible viewpoint. As Winthrop Jordan noted, Jefferson’s statements about race “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.”¹⁰⁹ The very importance of Jefferson to the founding era—and the power that Peterson calls the “symbol” of Jefferson—helped make racism respectable in antebellum America. Racism might have developed without his support for it in the *Notes*, but it is nevertheless a legacy of Jefferson.

IV

Distorting the Record to Preserve the Image

The protectors of Jefferson’s image have usually relied on interpretations of events, letters, and writings to shape Jefferson into a properly enlightened opponent of slavery. On at least one significant occasion, however, editors of his works consciously removed from public view part of a letter because it undermined their concept of who Jefferson was. In 1944 Adrienne Koch and William Peden published the first popularly available edition of Jefferson’s papers, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Most of the correspondence in this volume is reprinted in full. One important exception is Jefferson’s famous letter to Edward Coles.¹¹⁰

In 1814 Jefferson’s neighbor, Edward Coles, wrote the Sage of Monticello, asking for his support and encouragement. Coles had grown up on the mother’s milk of liberty in the shadow of Monticello. Jeffersonian notions of natural rights, life, liberty, and equality were

Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, N.Y., 1984), pp. 234–35.

¹⁰⁹ Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 481.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, 25 Aug. 1814, in Peterson, ed., *The Portable Jefferson*, p. 544; partially printed in Koch and Peden, eds., *Life and Selected Writings of Jefferson*, pp. 641–42.

second nature to him. He had gone to Jefferson's alma mater, read *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and accepted at face value Jefferson's literary attacks on slavery. Coles asked the former president to endorse his plan to take his slaves to Illinois and set them free.

In the first half of his response, Jefferson praised Coles and what he was planning to do. Coles represented the future generation that Jefferson always said would bring an end to slavery. He reiterated this belief to Coles: "I had always hoped that the younger generation . . . would have sympathized with oppression wherever found, and proved their love of liberty beyond their own share of it." Coles's letter was a "welcome voice" from this group and made Jefferson think "the hour of emancipation is advancing, in the march of time."¹¹¹ In their volume Koch and Peden ended the letter here. This conclusion left the reader with the impression that Jefferson favored what Coles was doing and endorsed it.

The deleted material—more than half of the original letter—contains an attack on the Haitian revolution, arguments against miscegenation, racist comments about blacks, and Jefferson's advice to Coles not to emancipate his slaves. Jefferson counseled his neighbor against manumission because slaves "of this color we know" were "as incapable as children of taking care of themselves." Emancipated slaves were "pests in society by their idleness, and the depredations to which this leads them." Jefferson further feared their "amalgamation with the other color." He could not endorse the plan Coles laid out. Instead, he urged his disciple to continue to care for his slaves. "I hope my dear sir," the author of the Declaration of Independence wrote, "you will reconcile yourself to your country and its unfortunate condition."¹¹²

It is possible that Koch and Peden self-consciously saw themselves as protecting an image of Jefferson consistent with the wartime goals of America's opposition to fascism.¹¹³ More likely, they deleted the portion of the letter because it did not comport with their understanding of how Jefferson *must* have been. They had a notion of who Jefferson *really* was, and they simply rejected other evidence.

That, it seems to me, is the problem for most Jeffersonian scholars. They have created a mythical man—someone who in Peterson's words

¹¹¹ Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, 25 Aug. 1814, in Peterson, ed., *The Portable Jefferson*, p. 544. This correspondence is brilliantly analyzed in Davis, *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, pp. 180–83.

¹¹² Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, 25 Aug. 1814, in Peterson, ed., *The Portable Jefferson*, p. 546.

¹¹³ For a discussion of the reinvention of Jefferson as part of the war effort, see French and Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson," pp. 419–21.

went up to Mount Olympus.¹¹⁴ They have further burdened him with an “image” that carries with it our conception of America itself. Two and a half centuries after his birth, it is time to look at Jefferson for what he was: a person with virtues and faults. His greatest failing lay in his inability to join the best of his generation in fighting slavery and in his working instead to prevent any significant change in America’s racial status quo. When we understand that about him, we can better understand something about ourselves and our country’s past. We can then have a greater appreciation of Jefferson’s many virtues and the power of his ideas because we will see them in the context of his own humanity.

¹¹⁴ Peterson, *Jefferson Image*, p. 447.