**Thomas Woodson Jefferson – California Trail**

National Trails Intermountain Region – Historical Vignette Project

**SAMPLE**

The first appearance of Thomas Woodson in the documentary record is in a deed from 1807 in Greenbrier County, Virginia. When reunited more than a century and a half later, the descendants of the Woodson family learned that they each had preserved a family oral tradition, of which the basic understandings were uncannily identical. All understood that Thomas Woodson was the first child born to Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, a slave that Martha Jefferson brought to their marriage. The Woodson family also shared that Thomas had been sent away from Monticello, the Jefferson family plantation, sometime before he was a teenager and took the name of the family on whose farm he worked. Contemporary documentary evidence supports the notion that Hemings gave birth to a son named Tom about 1790 and that contemporaries believed he bore a striking resemblance to the country’s president, Thomas Jefferson. Newspaper accounts often called him “our young mullato [*sic*] president.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Besides the family oral tradition and the newspapers’ suggestions, no documentary evidence has been found of Thomas Woodson’s relationship to Hemings. The results of a DNA study conducted in 1998 does not support the Woodson family’s claim of his kinship to wither Hemings or Jefferson. The story of his background will likely remain a matter of debate among scholars. The Woodson family and the Getting Word project continue to pursue research into the family history.

Whatever his lineage, Thomas Woodson embarked on the overland journey to California with a unique set of skills, having been educated in the essentials of reading, writing, carpentry, cartography, music, and nautical crafts. If he was a part of Thomas Jefferson’s household, the experience exposed him to a number of notable visitors and undoubtedly contributed to his knowledge. He would have been between ten and twelve, for example, when Meriwether Lewis may have noticed him while spending time at Monticello as Jefferson’s private secretary.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Woodson’s status as slave or freeman, and the circumstances under which he left Monticello, are unclear. Oral history of his descendants suggest that he quarreled with Jefferson and, in 1802, was exiled to the plantation of John Woodson, a relative by marriage. Another family theory holds that Jefferson gave his son money that enabled him to quietly leave Monticello, perhaps to another state. Nevertheless, Thomas Woodson resurfaced in 1806, and lived in Virginia on a farm owned by the planter James Kinkaid in Greenbrier County. Jemima Price, his future wife, and her family had been relocated to the same area after the death of their owner in 1788. Price’s mother and sister were manumitted in 1803 and 1805, and Jemima appears to have lived as a free woman in the county, although no manumission papers were ever filed for her.[[3]](#footnote-3)

By 1806 Thomas had adopted the last name Woodson and married Jemima Price. Their first son was born that year at their home in a place called Brushy Ridge, near Lewisburg. According to his descendants, Thomas used the land to graze cattle. Around 1820 or 1821, the family made its way to Ohio, settled in Chillicothe, and rented a farm there for nine years.[[4]](#footnote-4) In 1830 they moved to Jackson County, Ohio, and along with a few others, bought land that became Berlin Crossroads. Constance Moore Richardson, Thomas’ six-times great-granddaughter interviewed by historian Shirley Ann Moore, theorizes that he started using the Jefferson surname as he moved farther west, making permanent use of the moniker when he arrived in California. Richardson surmises that the nature of his parentage was less a matter of speculation in the Far West, which presented Thomas with an opportunity to downplay his racial lineage. According to Moore’s oral history interviews with the Woodson family, they knew he went west, but they did not know what motivated him to do so.

Thomas outfitted in St. Louis and made his way to Independence in 1846, where he jumped off onto the trail, California bound. His party was led by William Henry Russell, but Thomas parted ways with that group before reaching the Kansas River. A fellow traveler wrote later that Thomas was just one of six single men that traveled with Russell’s party and suggested that was one of the reasons for his removal from the company.[[5]](#footnote-5) Woodson, or Jefferson by then, joined a new wagon train on 19 May 1846 under the leadership of Methodist minister James Dunleavy. The party did not have an official chronicler to record their journey and is perhaps the reason why few details are known about Thomas’s overland trek to California.

Thomas, who may have been educated as a cartographer, decided to draw his own map while trekking west. He started work on it as soon as he joined Dunleavy’s group, striving to detail all the streams of water and springs upon the road, as well as the daily distances, courses, and camps made by the party. He calculated the distances between points, counseled emigrants on the safest and most appropriate modes of travel, and provided a list of necessary provisions. When crossing the Salt Lake Valley, for example, his advice to travelers called attention to the fact that “water is more important than grass” and that the journey was “not entirely a pleasure trip.” He also recommended traveling in small parties. Thomas’s map, then, while still a work of cartographic precision, was not likely crafted for a geographical society. Given its content, it is more reasonable to assume that he drew it as a guide intended for emigrants concerned with the practicalities of overland travel—shelter, safety, and sustenance.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In many way, Thomas’s map championed western emigration on behalf of national expansion. That he accorded names to places not already named by other cartographers and, in some cases, assigned new names to some places that already had them, served as acts of claiming space in the name of European Americans and other immigrants. For example, his map was the first to name the Truckee River in present-day California. Jefferson urged the federal government to send exploring parties, declaring that “trappers and emigrants with women and babies, have done more towards this object than government.”

Although he advocated for western emigration, he eventually moved back to Ohio and resumed using the name Thomas Woodson. Exactly by what means and path he returned to Ohio is unknown. His wife Jemima died in 1868, and Thomas himself died eleven years later in Jackson County, Ohio. Among other reasons, like the nature of his relationship to Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, Thomas is remembered for his map. For many emigrants on the overland trail to California, his map turned the exotic into the familiar and offered reassurance to the traveler who was anxious about what they might experience on the trail. As an African American cartographer and guide book author, Thomas’s experiences during the overland trip differed markedly from that of the many enslaved men, women, and children who crossed the Plains with their owners in the years before the American Civil War.

1. https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/appendix-k-assessment-thomas-c-woodson-connection-to-sally-hemings. This site reprints articles from 1802 in the *Richmond Recorder* and the *Lynchburg Gazette*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shirley Ann Moore, *Sweet Freedom’s Plains:* *African Americans on the Overland Trails 1841-1869* Kindle Edition (Santa Fe: National Trails Intermountain Region, National Park Service, 2012), loc 1658. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Byron W. Woodson, Sr., *A President in the Family: Thomas Jefferson*, *Sally Hemmings, and Thomas Woodson* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001); and Fawn M. Brodie, “Thomas Jefferson’s Unknown Grandchildren *“American Heritage* 27, no.6 (October 1976): online reprint, accessed 12 July 2017, https://www.americanheritage.com/content/thomas-jefferson%E2%80%99s-unknown-grandchildren. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Moore, *Sweet Freedom’s Plains*, loc 1683. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Moore, *Sweet Freedom’s Plains*, loc 1700. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Moore, *Sweet Freedom’s Plains*, loc 1845. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)