

James Callender and Sally Hemings

Excerpted from, *THOMAS JEFFERSON – Accuracy vs. Revisionism – An Exposé*

by Dr. Catherine Millard © 2020

James Callender and Sally Hemmings

Among the calumnies heaped upon the author of *America's Declaration of Independence*, to defame and destroy the highly principled character of Thomas Jefferson, is the following:

The rewriting of Jefferson's impeccable moral character began in 1802, when a dishonest, enraged Scotsman by the name of James T. Callender publicized an allegation against Thomas Jefferson, that Sally Hemings was his concubine. A Scot who fled from England in the 1790's in order to escape sedition charges, Callender was a pamphleteer who had vented his journalistic rage upon the British Government, distancing himself from London. He was employed by the *Philadelphia Gazette*, an affiliate of the Republican Party, the nation's first opposition party founded by Thomas Jefferson, where he displayed his splendid journalist ability.

In 1797, Vice-President Thomas Jefferson made a visit to his printing office in Philadelphia. Unaware of Callender's total lack of scruples, Jefferson continued subscribing to his writings, even sending him \$50.00 when he was out of work. In 1799, James Callender was employed by the Republican *Richmond Examiner*, of which Jefferson's friend, Meriwether Jones, was editor. The Scot continued his invective against the Federalists in unabated fury. Callender was found guilty under the Sedition Act of 1798 and charged for libel against President John Adams. He was sentenced to \$200 fine and nine months' imprisonment in the Richmond jail. However, he continued, writing from his jail cell in Richmond.

After being inaugurated as third U.S. President on March 4, 1801, President Jefferson granted pardon to those convicted under the Sedition law – promising Callender a reimbursement of his fine. As government bureaucratic delays ensued, Jefferson generously paid part of the remission from his personal funds. The belligerent Scotsman, however, angered by the government's delay in repayment, and ungrateful for Jefferson's partial remission, promptly sought the position of Richmond Postmaster, with an annual salary of \$1,500, in recompense for his alleged services to the Republican Party. Callender's communications with James Madison, then Secretary of State, and his attempted contacts with President Jefferson, proved unsuccessful.

James Callender then resorted to damaging President Jefferson's reputation by calumny.¹ Breathing threats against the President, he acquired a position in Richmond on the *Federalist Recorder*, vilifying Jefferson with unfounded, false accusations concerning Sally Hemings, which were immediately seized by the Federalist



Front page sample of *The Recorder*, Vol. II, No. 62, in which James Callender initiated his calumnious attack on Thomas Jefferson in 1802. Callender's fraudulent allegation was in retaliation to President Jefferson's refusal to appoint him Postmaster of Richmond. Courtesy of the Virginia State Library and Archives.

press and republished throughout the nation to advance their cause. However, the pamphleteer never proved these spurious accusations, nor were there any journalists who visited Monticello to authenticate Callender's fictitious charges. No libel laws existing in those days, Callender precipitated his scheme of defaming Jefferson's character in order to destroy him.

It is reported that James T. Callender was constantly at odds with his fellowmen. The Federalist *Richmond Recorder's* readership nonetheless increased greatly after his calumnious attacks on Jefferson. A man who was often inebriated, his body was retrieved in the James River

in three feet of water, in July, 1803.

James Callender's Demise

After his demise, the *Richmond Examiner* published the following:

Callender had threatened to put an end to his existence, by drowning himself, for several weeks previous to his actual death... It may be inferred that he got excessively drunk for the express purpose of putting an easy end to his life.

A reputed historian wrote that, "almost every scandalous story about Jefferson which is still whispered or believed" has its origin in the calumny of Callender. Many others are of the same view. The notorious name of James T. Callender is therefore the source of this slanderous rewriting of U.S. history.

Calumny in Public Life – Jefferson's View

In a letter to Samuel Smith dated August 22, 1798, Jefferson writes his view on calumny in public life:

At a very early period of my life, I determined never to put a sentence into any newspaper. I have religiously adhered to the resolution through my life, and have great reason to be contented with it. Were I to undertake to answer all the calumnies of the newspapers, it would be more than all my own time, and that of 20 aides could effect. I have thought it better to trust to the justice of my countrymen, that they would judge me by what they see of my conduct on the stage where they have placed me, and what they knew of me before the epoch since which a particular party has supposed it might answer

some views of theirs to vilify me in the public eye. Some, I know, will not reflect how apocryphal is the testimony of enemies so palpably betraying the views with which they give it. But this is an injury to which duty requires everyone to submit whom the public think proper to call into its councils. I thank you, my dear Sir, for the interest you have taken for me on this occasion. Though I have made up my mind not to suffer calumny to disturb my tranquility, yet I retain all my sensibilities for the approbation of the good and just.

A 1998 Revival of Callender's Slander

The monstrous calumny to defame Jefferson, thereby discrediting his philosophy of self-government, and his reputation as the principal founder of American political thought, was vehemently revived in 1998. *Nature Magazine*, a British publication, reported this fallacy as truth in November, 1998. Revisionists throughout America immediately championed their cause through national newspapers, television and media. Accuracy in Media, however, a well-known and respected organization, published a rebuttal entitled: "In Defense of Jefferson." It is hereunder reprinted:

Accuracy in Media's – "In Defense of Jefferson"

Nature Magazine omitted facts when it claimed in its November issue that scientific evidence proved that President Thomas Jefferson fathered a child by his slave Sally Hemings. Reed Irvine, chairman of Accuracy in Media, reports that the January issue of *Nature* will admit that the magazine did not tell the whole story. The scientific journal will print a letter from one of the study's authors that says that genetic evidence shows that Jefferson was only one of many Jefferson men (25 of whom lived in the Monticello area) who could have fathered Sally's son, Eston. (The most likely candidate, according to historian Herbert Barger, is Jefferson's younger brother Randolph, a widower who often visited Monticello and was known to dance and play the fiddle with the slaves.) It remains to be seen whether the media and the numerous liberal historians who trumpeted the claims of Jefferson's paternity will follow Nature's lead in acknowledging reasonable doubt.

Both *Nature Magazine* (British) and *Science Magazine*² (American) published articles in their January, 1999 editions, quoting foremost DNA experts worldwide who validated the lack of evidence, pointing to Randolph Jefferson as the most likely candidate. DNA had been taken from Field Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's uncle. However, the American 20th century media deliberately ignored these scientific facts, intensifying their slanderous attack on Thomas Jefferson.

Peter and Samuel Carr & Sally and Betsy Hemings

Evidence incriminates the two nephews of Thomas Jefferson, Peter and Samuel Carr, his sister Martha's sons, whose father, Dabney Carr, was a beloved college friend. Carr's three sons and

three daughters became wards of Jefferson at the untimely death of their thirty-year-old father.

There is proof that Sally's, and her niece, Betsy Hemings' children were sired by Peter and Samuel Carr, from the communication between Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson's eldest grandson, and Jefferson's biographer, Henry S. Randall. A letter dated June 1, 1868 from Henry Randall to James Parton, another biographer of "the Sage of Monticello," describes their conversation as follows:

Walking about mouldering Monticello one day with Colonel Thomas Jefferson Randolph...he showed me a smoke blackened and sooty room in one of the collonades and informed me it was Sally Hemings' room. He asked me if I knew how the story of Mr. Jefferson's connection with her originated. I told him I did not...Colonel Randolph informed me that Sally Hemings was the mistress of Peter Carr and her niece Betsy the mistress of Samuel – and from these connections sprang the progeny which resembled Mr. Jefferson...

The Colonel said their connection with the Carrs was perfectly notorious at Monticello and scarcely disguised by the latter – never disavowed by them. Samuel's proceedings were particularly open...Colonel Randolph said that a visitor at Monticello dropped a newspaper from his pocket or accidentally left it. After he was gone, he (Colonel Randolph) opened the paper and found some very insulting remarks about Mr. Jefferson's 'mulato children'...Peter and Samuel Carr were lying not far off under a shade tree. He took the paper and put it in Peter's hands, pointing to the article. Peter read it, tears coursing down his cheeks, and then handed it to Samuel. Samuel also shed tears. Peter exclaimed, 'Ar'nt you and I a couple of ___pretty fellows to bring this disgrace on poor old uncle who has always fed us! We ought to be ___by ___!...'

Do you ask why I did not state, at least hint the above facts in my life of Jefferson? I wanted to do so, but Colonel Randolph, in this solitary case alone, prohibited me from using at my discretion the information he furnished me with. When I rather pressed him on the point, he said, pointing to the family graveyard, "You are not bound to prove a negation. If I should allow you to take Peter Carr's corpse into Court and plead guilty over it to shelter Mr. Jefferson, I should not dare again to walk by his grave: he would rise and spurn me." I am exceedingly glad Colonel Randolph did overrule me in this particular. I should have made a shameful mistake. If I had unnecessarily defended him (and it was purely unnecessary to offer any defense) at the expense of a dear nephew – and a noble man– hating a single folly. –

Ellen Randolph Coolidge's October 24, 1858 Letter

Further to the above evidence, on October 24, 1858, Ellen Randolph Coolidge, Jefferson's granddaughter, wrote to her husband, Joseph Coolidge, Jr., stating,

“no female domestic ever entered his (Jefferson’s)³ chambers except at hours when he was known not to be there, and none could have entered without being exposed to the public gaze.” She added that, “dusky Sally” was “pretty notoriously the mistress of a married man, a near relative of Mr. Jefferson’s, and there can be small question that her children were his...I will tell you in confidence what Jefferson (Thomas Jefferson Randolph) told me under the like condition. Mr. Southall and himself being young men together, heard Peter Carr say, with a laugh, that ‘the old gentleman had to bear the blame for his and Sam’s (Col. Carr) misdeeds.’ There is a general impression that the four children of Sally Hemings were all the children of Col. Carr, the most notorious good-natured Turk that ever was master of a black seraglio⁴ kept at other men’s expense. His deeds were as well known as his name.”

Dabney Carr – Father of Jefferson’s Nephews

Dabney Carr, Jefferson’s closest College friend, became his brother-in-law by intermarrying with his sister, Martha. As boys, they had studied together under a favorite oak tree at Monticello. A promise was made between them, that whoever died first, would be buried by the other at the foot of this tree. The untimely death of his beloved friend occurred when Jefferson was away from home. Upon his return, he discovered that Dabney had been buried at Shadwell. Jefferson promptly had his body disinterred and buried beneath their oak tree, which originated the graveyard at Monticello.

Jefferson’s description of Dabney Carr

I well remember the pleasure expressed in the countenance and conversation of the members generally on this debut of Mr. Carr, and the hopes they conceived as well from the talents, as from the patriotism it manifested...His character was of high order. A spotless integrity, sound judgment, handsome imagination, enriched by education and reading, quick and clear in his conceptions, of correct and ready elocution, impressing every hearer with the sincerity of the heart from which it flowed. His firmness was inflexible in whatever he thought was right; but when no moral principle stood in the way, never had man more of the milk of human kindness, of indulgence, of softness, of pleasantry of conversation and conduct. The number of his friends and the warmth of their affection, were proofs of his worth, and of their estimate of it.⁵

And again, in 1770, Jefferson writes to his friend, John Page,

He (Dabney Carr)⁶ speaks, thinks and dreams of nothing but his young son. This friend of ours, Page, in a very small house, with a table, half a dozen chairs, and one or two servants, is the happiest man in the universe. Every incident in life he so takes as to render it a source of pleasure. With as much benevolence as the heart of man will hold, but with an utter neglect of the costly apparatus

of life, he exhibits to the world a new phenomenon in life – the Samian sage in the tub of the cynic.

Dabney Carr’s untimely Death

Jefferson’s beloved friend, Dabney Carr, died on the 16th of May, 1773 at age 30. The following moving inscription was discovered among Jefferson’s papers after his death:

“Inscription on my Friend Dabney Carr’s Tomb

Lamented shade, whom every gift of heaven
Profusely blest; a temper winning mild;
Nor pity softer, nor was Truth more bright.
Constant in doing well, he neither sought
Nor shunned applause. No bashful merit sighed
near him neglected: sympathizing he
wiped off the tear from sorrow’s clouded eye
with kindly hand, and taught her heart to smile.

Mallet’s Excursion.

Send for a plate of copper to be nailed on the tree at the foot of his grave, with this inscription:

Still shall thy grave with rising flowers be dressed
And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast;
There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow,
There the first roses of the year shall blow,
While angels with their silver wings o’ershade,
The ground now sacred by thy reliques made.

On the upper part of the stone inscribe as follows:

DABNEY CARR
Son of John and Jane Carr, of Louisa County,
who was born _____, 1744.
Intermarried with Martha Jefferson, daughter of Peter
and Jane Jefferson, 1765;
And died at Charlottesville, May 16, 1773
leaving six small children.
To his Virtue, Good Sense, Learning, and Friendship,
This stone is dedicated by Thomas Jefferson, who, of all men
living, loved him most.”⁷

At his death, Dabney Carr’s six children, Peter, Samuel and Dabney, and their three sisters, became wards of Thomas Jefferson. They were welcomed into his family, his sister Martha depending upon her brother for their protection and affection.

Ellen Randolph Coolidge’s Letter Misquoted

It is interesting to note that, in spite of Ellen Randolph Coolidge’s 1858 well known, published letter, there would be a 20th century author who deliberately misquoted it to prove a false premise. This disinformation was brought to her attention by the President of the *Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society* for correction. Her response was,

“Your charge that I intentionally altered the text of Ellen Randolph Coolidge’s letter to her husband, Joseph, is flat wrong. Any mistake that appears in my work is just that – a mistake.”

The following rebuttal was published in the Fall, 2012, No. 12 edition of *Jefferson Notes*, a publication of the *Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society*:

“IT’S ODD -The Thomas Jefferson Society’s Rebuttal

In her 1997 book, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, Annette Gordon-Reed included as appendix E a typescript of an October 24, 1858 letter from Ellen Randolph Coolidge (one of Thomas Jefferson’s granddaughters) to her husband.

ODD that the typescript would have an altered sentence. The sentence by Ellen Coolidge referring to Jefferson’s bedchambers read that “no female domestic ever entered his chambers except at hours when he was known not to be there and none could have entered without being exposed to the public gaze.” Gordon-Reed’s version dropped “there and none could have entered without being exposed to,” and added the word “in.” So, the sentence by Gordon-Reed then read that “no female domestic ever entered his chambers except at hours when he was known not to be in the public gaze.”

ODD such a “mistake” could be made which comprised both the dropping of a ten word phrase and the addition of a new word. Coolidge’s intent is clear, which is that someone could not enter Jefferson’s bed chambers without being observed. Gordon-Reed’s altered version reversed the meaning Coolidge had intended.

ODD that Gordon-Reed would feel the need to prepare a typescript, when one was available in the files of Monticello. A correct typescript of the letter had also appeared in the May 18, 1974 *New York Times* as part of an article by Dumas Malone.

ODD that when this serious discrepancy was called to her attention by John Works, then President of the *Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society*, she responded that “your charge that I intentionally altered the text of Ellen Randolph Coolidge’s letter to her husband, Joseph, is flat wrong. Any mistake that appears in my work is just that – a mistake.” Gordon-Reed did not explain how the “mistake” occurred.

ODD that when the in-house Research Committee at Monticello issued their January 2000 Report, it included a photocopy of the hand written letter from Ellen Coolidge, but also included as a typescript Appendix E from the Gordon-Reed book, rather than the correct typescript Monticello had in its own files.

ODD that Gordon-Reed would address this issue in her subsequent book, *The Hemingses of Monticello* (page 698, n. 51), but not discuss the critical aspect of the discrepancy, i.e., could a domestic have entered Jefferson’s chambers without observation by the Jefferson family, the other slaves, or the many visitors to Monticello. In this book, she simply concludes that everyone knew about Hemings. So, Coolidge’s letter must have been just a...mistake.”

Historic Revisionism – “Just a Mistake”?

Annette Gordon-Reed’s reversal of the meaning intended by Ellen Wayles Randolph Coolidge’s letter to her husband reflects academic dishonesty, particularly in light of her published Biography asserting that she is “the author of *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings – An American Controversy* (1997), which examines the scholarly writing on the relationships between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.”

Webster’s Dictionary describes “scholarship” as “the systematized knowledge of a learned man (or woman), exhibiting accuracy, critical ability and thoroughness; erudition.” The removal of ten words from a scholarly writing of America’s history – thus reversing its meaning – exhibits a lack of accuracy, critical ability, thoroughness and erudition in her work. Gordon-Reed’s Biography also describes her as having “published *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (2008) which won the Pulitzer Prize⁸ in history”. The reader may wonder, under what historic scholarship criteria is this prize awarded? As Professor of History in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, the highest calibre of accuracy and integrity is expected of Gordon-Reed by her students and readers alike. Her refusal to correct a deliberate omission of ten words from Thomas Jefferson’s granddaughter’s letter is a clear indication of her intent to perpetuate a fallacy.

Furthermore, Gordon-Reed, together with David McCullough,⁹ (also awarded the Pulitzer Prize in American History) are on the Board of Trustees of Monticello, *The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc*; as well as Pulitzer Prize-winner, Jon Meacham, its Chairman, and author of *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (Random House, 2012) – endorsed by Annette Gordon-Reed. The front book jacket overview of Meacham’s book states, “Here, too, is the personal Jefferson, a man of appetite, sensuality, passion” – quite in keeping with Gordon-Reed’s portrayal of “the Sage of Monticello” via Madison Hemings’ 1873 fabricated interview, “Such is the story that comes down to me.” (Excerpted from, *THOMAS JEFFERSON – Accuracy vs. Revisionism – An Exposé* © 2020 by Dr. Catherine Millard.)

Footnotes

- ¹ calumny: trickery; slander; from *calvi*, to deceive. 1. Slander; a false accusation of a crime or offense, knowingly or maliciously made to hurt someone’s reputation. 2. Slander. Synonyms: traducement, aspersion, defamation, detraction, libel, backbiting, approbrium. *Webster’s Dictionary*.
- ² Science magazine is an academic journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and one of the world’s top academic journals.
- ³ Author’s text in parenthesis.
- ⁴ seraglio: the palace of a Turkish sultan or noble; a harem; a place where a Moslem keeps his wives or concubines. *Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*.
- ⁵ Randolph, Sarah N. *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*. Compiled from family letters and reminiscences, by his great-granddaughter. New York: Harper and Bros., Publishers, 1871, pp. 26, 27.
- ⁶ Author’s text in parenthesis.
- ⁷ Randolph, Sarah N. *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Harper and Bros., Publishers, 1871, pp. 27, 28.
- ⁸ The Pulitzer Prize originated with Hungarian-born Joseph Pulitzer (1847-1911), a journalist, who endowed Columbia University with two million dollars for the establishment of a school of journalism, and for the annual award of prizes – the Pulitzer Prizes – in American journalism and letters. The prizes are awarded by the trustees of Columbia who act upon the recommendations made by the Advisory Council of the *Pulitzer School of Journalism* at Columbia.
- ⁹ Honorary Trustee of *The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc*. (*Monticello*). Member of Yale’s secret society, “Skull and Bones” also called “The Brotherhood of Death.”