

Mr. Jefferson's Private Life

DUMAS MALONE

THE ATTACHED letter of Ellen Randolph Coolidge is in the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia in a volume containing copies of her letters to Henry S. Randall and other papers relating to her adored grandfather, Thomas Jefferson. It was written to her husband, Joseph Coolidge, Jr., in Boston, while she was visiting her brother in Albemarle County, Virginia, and it has only recently been released for publication by her great-grandson, Harold Jefferson Coolidge. It bears particularly on certain allegations that had been made against the character of her grandfather, and it has immediate relevance since some of these allegations have been recently revived and widely circulated.

The story that the third President of the United States had a brood of children by one of his own slaves was first publicized in 1802. The distinction of having given it to the world belongs to an embittered journalist, James Thomson Callender, whose title as the most notorious and most unscrupulous scandalmonger of his generation, or indeed of any American generation, would be difficult to contest.¹ It was taken up gleefully by Jefferson's political enemies and occasioned much ridicule and obscenity. Rarely has a president been subjected to

¹There is an account of the breaking of this story, and of Callender's relations with his former benefactor, in my book, *Jefferson the President: First Term* (Boston, 1970), ch. XII.

such vulgarity and rarely have we had so sensitive a president. Nevertheless, Jefferson, following his consistent policy with respect to personal attacks, made no public response of any sort. Some years after he retired from public life he stated that the only answer he ever wanted to make to the slanders of his enemies was the tenor of his life. 'I should have fancied myself half guilty,' he said, 'had I condescended to put pen to paper in refutation of their falsehoods, or [had] drawn to them respect by any notice from myself.'² He sometimes encouraged supporters to defend his public conduct, but he guarded his personal privacy with a jealousy bordering on obsession. To him religion was strictly a private matter, and so were family relations of every sort. He once said that he rarely permitted himself to speak on religion and 'never but in a reasonable society.'³ Family matters he discussed only in the family circle, and it can hardly be regarded as accidental that his entire correspondence with his beloved wife has vanished from view. Presumably he destroyed it so that no prying eyes should see it. Papers relating to public affairs, on the other hand, were scrupulously preserved, though some of these were unfavorable to himself.

Following his triumphant reelection, political enemies of his, venting their desperation, revived Callender's charges and bandied them about, especially in Massachusetts. Early in his second term, in a private letter, he admitted one of these. He acknowledged the impropriety of his conduct, when unmarried, toward 'a handsome lady'—unnamed here but readily identified as Mrs. John Walker. At the same time he denied all the rest of these charges. The most sensational of them was that about Sally Hemings. Since he is not known ever to have referred again to any of these allegations, his granddaughter

²Jefferson to Dr. George Logan, June 20, 1816. P. L. Ford, ed., *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, X (New York, 1899), 27.

³Jefferson to Charles Clay, Jan. 29, 1815. A. A. Lipscomb and A. E. Bergh, eds., *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, XIV (Washington, 1904), 233.

may have known of neither his admission nor his denial. The communications he sent to a few close associates may all have been returned to him as he requested and then destroyed. One note did survive, but it was not published until 1916.⁴

In his *History of the United States*, Richard Hildreth referred in the early 1850s to the stories first publicized by Callender, including the one that Jefferson had a 'large family of unrecognized colored children.' This Federalist historian observed that these stories, never contradicted, had gained general credit.⁵ They had been kept alive in part by old political enemies and critics of American democracy, but chiefly by abolitionists, of whom Mrs. Coolidge, living in Boston, could hardly have been unaware. These bitter foes of slavery constantly contended that slave women were the victims of their masters' passions. And they presented Jefferson as a symbol of the brutalizing effect of the slave system on a high-minded man who himself opposed it. One of the stories, widely circulated in abolitionist circles and revived in our own day, was that a beautiful daughter of Jefferson's had been sold at auction. That Mrs. Coolidge was familiar with this in some form is shown in her letter.⁶

It should be viewed on this background. In bearing witness to the tenor of her grandfather's life she drew upon a memory that had been quickened by her return to the scenes of her youth while visiting her brother, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, at Edgehill. Her opinion regarding the paternity of the children of Sally Hemings reflected conversations with him at this time, but her account of them antedated by a decade Henry S. Ran-

⁴Jefferson to Robert Smith, July 1, 1805. *Thomas Jefferson Correspondence Printed from ... the Collection of William K. Bixby* (Boston, 1916), pp. 114-115. See also Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term*, pp. 219-223; *Jefferson the President: Second Term* (Boston, 1974), pp. 14-15.

⁵Richard Hildreth, *History of the United States*, V (New York, 1856), 455.

⁶See Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term*, app. II; and Merrill Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), pp. 181-187, with bibliographical references, pp. 482-483. The novel by William Wells Brown, *Clotel or the President's Daughter*, first published in 1853, was republished in 1969 (New York: The Citadel Press).

dall's report of similar conversations with him.⁷ The autobiography of Madison Hemings, son of Sally, which has been emphasized by those seeking to revive the miscegenation legend in our generation, was recorded by an unknown scribe some fifteen years after Mrs. Coolidge made this reference to his paternity.⁸

According to the episode reported of his own knowledge by Jefferson's grandson, one of his nephews admitted that he and his brother had embarrassed their uncle by their misdeeds. That is, they had had illicit relations with women of the Hemings family. There may have been some uncertainty as to which of them fathered Sally's children, but Ellen Randolph Coolidge and her brother had no doubt that one of them did.⁹ These grandchildren of the hospitable master of Monticello were undisposed to say so publicly, however, knowing full well that he would have been wholly unwilling to absolve himself by blaming one of his sister's sons.

ELLEN RANDOLPH COOLIDGE TO
JOSEPH COOLIDGE, BOSTON

Edgehill

24 October 1858

I am just from church, a church originally planned by Grandpapa, where I heard a good sermon from an Episcopalian Clergyman, a young man, the Rev^d Mr. Butler.

⁷Randall to James Parton, June 1, 1868, first printed in M. E. Flower, *James Parton* (Durham, N.C., 1951), pp. 236-239. In describing Jefferson's private life Mrs. Coolidge and her brother could draw on memories going back into his presidency, when their mother made it a practice to be at Monticello to greet him and to remain with her children as long as he was there.

⁸*Pike County Republican* (Waverly, Ohio, March 13, 1873); printed in Fawn M. Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson, An Intimate History* (New York, 1974), pp. 471-476. A full and thoroughly scholarly discussion of this is contained in an essay by the late Douglass Adair, dated 1960. This essay is included in a posthumous volume, edited by Trevor Colbourn, *Fame and the Founding Fathers* (New York: W. W. Norton for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, 1974), pp. 160-191. After scrupulous examination of all the evidence available to him, Adair concluded that the statement of the matter by Thomas Jefferson Randolph to Henry S. Randall was the most acceptable explanation of the miscegenation legend. He had not seen Mrs. Coolidge's letter.

⁹See note 13, below.

I have been talking freely with my brother Jefferson on the subject of the 'yellow children' and will give you the substance of our conversation, with my subsequent reflections.

It is difficult to prove a negative. It is impossible to prove that Mr. Jefferson never had a coloured mistress or coloured children and that these children were never sold as slaves. The latter part of the charge however is disproved by it's atrocity, and it's utter disagreement with the general character and conduct of Mr. Jefferson, acknowledged to be a humane man and eminently a kind master. Would he who was always most considerate of the feelings and the well-being of his slaves, treat them barbarously only when they happened to be his own children, and leave them to be sold in a distant market when he might have left them free—as you know he did several of his slaves, directing his executor to petition the Legislature of Virginia for leave for them to remain in the State after they were free. Some of them are here to this day.

It was his principle (I know that of my own knowledge) to allow such of his slaves as were sufficiently white to pass for white men, to withdraw quietly from the plantation; it was called running away, but they were never reclaimed. I remember four instances of this, three young men and one girl, who walked away and staid away. Their whereabouts was perfectly known but they were left to themselves—for they were white enough to pass for white. Some of the children currently reported to be Mr. Jefferson's were about the age of his own grandchildren. Of course he must have been carrying on his intrigues in the midst of his daughters family and insulting the sanctity of home by his profligacy. But he had a large family of grandchildren of all ages, older & younger. Young men and young girls. He lived, whenever he was at Monticello, and entirely for the last seventeen years of his life, in the midst of these young people, surrounded by them, his intercourse with them of the freest and most affectionate kind. How comes it that his immoralities were never suspected by his own family

—that his daughter and her children rejected with horror and contempt the charges brought against him? That my brother, then a young man certain to know all that was going on behind the scenes, positively declares his indignant disbelief in the imputations and solemnly affirms that he never saw or heard the smallest thing which could lead him to suspect that his grandfather's life was other than perfectly pure. His apartments had no private entrance not perfectly accessible and visible to all the household. 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. But again I would put it to any fair mind to decide if a man so admirable in his domestic character as Mr. Jefferson, so devoted to his daughters and their children, so fond of their society, so tender, considerate, refined in his intercourse with them, so watchful over them in all respects, would be likely to rear a race of half-breeds under their eyes and carry on his low amours in the circle of his family.

Now many causes existed which might have given rise to suspicions, setting aside the inveterate rage and malice of Mr. Jefferson's traducers.

The house at Monticello was a long time in building and was principally built by Irish workmen. These men were known to have had children of whom the mothers were black women. But these women were much better pleased to have it supposed that such children were their master's. 'Le Czar m'a fait l'honneur de me faire cet enfant.' There were dissipated young men in the neighborhood who sought the society of the mulattresses and they in like manner were not anxious to establish any claim of paternity in the results of such associations.

One woman known to Mr. J. Q. Adams and others as 'dusky Sally'¹⁰ was pretty notoriously the mistress of a married man, a near relation of Mr. Jefferson's, and there can be small ques-

¹⁰On J. Q. Adams's references to 'Dusky Sally,' see Malone, *Jefferson the President: Second Term*, p. 204.

tion that her children were his. They were all fair and all set free at my grandfather's death, or had been suffered to absent themselves permanently before he died. The mother, Sally Hemmings [*sic*], had accompanied Mr. Jefferson's younger daughter to Paris and was lady's maid to both sisters. Again I ask is it likely that so fond, so anxious a father, whose letters to his daughters are replete with tenderness and with good counsels for their conduct, should (when there were so many other objects upon whom to fix his illicit attentions) have selected the female attendant of his own pure children to become his paramour! The thing will not bear telling. There are such things, after all, as moral impossibilities.

The habit that the southern slaves have of adopting their master's names is another cause of misrepresentation and misapprehension. There is no doubt that such of Mr. Jefferson's slaves as were sold after his death would call themselves by his name. One very notorious villain who never had been the property of Mr. Jefferson, took his name and proclaimed himself his son. He was as black as a crow, and born either during Mr. Jefferson's absence abroad, or under some other circumstances which rendered the truth of his assertion simply impossible.

I have written thus far thinking you might chuse to communicate my letter to Mr. Bulfinch.¹¹ Now I will tell you in confidence what Jefferson told me under the like condition. Mr. Southall¹² and himself being young men together, heard Mr. Peter Carr say with a laugh, that 'the old gentleman had to bear the blame of his and Sam's (Col. Carr) misdeeds.'¹³

¹¹Thomas Bulfinch (1796-1867), one of the sons of the noted Boston architect, Charles Bulfinch, who was Mr. Coolidge's uncle. Thomas Bulfinch in 1858 dedicated his *The Age of Chivalry* to Mrs. Coolidge. This was a mediaeval counterpart to his popularization of classical mythology, *The Age of Fable*.

¹²Presumably Valentine Wood Southall, a county neighbor of about the same age as T. J. Randolph.

¹³Randall reports T. J. Randolph as saying that Sally was the mistress of Peter Carr, and her sister Betsey the mistress of Samuel Carr. The biographer may have reversed the names inadvertently. It is also possible that as between the two, Ellen Randolph Coolidge blamed Sam rather than Peter because of her higher opinion of the latter.

There is a general impression that the four children of Sally Hemmings [*sic*] were *all* the children of Col. Carr, the most notorious good-natured Turk that ever was master of a black seraglio kept at other men's expence.¹⁴ His deeds are as well known as his name.—I have written in very great haste for I have very little time to write. We sat down sixteen at my brother's table to-day, and are never less than twelve—Children, grandchildren, visitors, friends—I am in a perfect whirl. Yet this is the way in which I lived during all my girlish days, and then it seemed the easiest and most natural thing imaginable. Now I wonder how any head can bear it long. But Jefferson and Jane are the most affectionate parents and the kindest neighbors that I know.

¹⁴About fifteen years later someone sent T. J. Randolph a copy of a memoir of an ex-slave, Israel Jefferson, which appeared in the *Pike County Republican*, Dec. 25, 1873 (reprinted in Brodie, *Jefferson*, pp. 477-482.) In this Sally Hemings was described as Jefferson's concubine. In the last of three drafts of a letter of protest to the editor, Randolph said: 'To my own knowledge and the statement of other gentlemen made to me, 60 years ago, the paternity of these persons was admitted by two others.' (Papers of the Jefferson, Randolph, Taylor, Smith, and Nicholas Families, in University of Virginia Library.) Whether or not he was referring to other children in addition to those of Sally is not clear. This hitherto unnoticed letter deserves further attention. He could not bring himself to give the names of the 'two others,' but he gave an approximate date for their confession—1813 or 1814.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.