

# The Jefferson-Hemings Controversy

*Report of the Scholars Commission*

Edited by  
**Robert F. Turner**

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of our beloved colleagues*

*Professor Lance Banning  
Hallam Professor of History  
University of Kentucky  
(January 24, 1942–January 31, 2006)*

*and*

*Professor Alf J. Mapp, Jr.  
Eminent Scholar, Emeritus and Louis I. Jaffe Professor of History, Emeritus  
Old Dominion University  
(February 17, 1925–January 23, 2011)*

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 PROFESSOR ALF J. MAPP, JR., PROFESSOR DAVID N. MAYER,  
 PROFESSOR FORREST McDONALD, AND PROFESSOR THOMAS TRAUT

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# Preface

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For more than two centuries there have been rumors and allegations that Thomas Jefferson had a long-term sexual relationship with an enslaved woman named Sally Hemings. They originated from the pen of a disreputable journalist named James Thomson Callender in October 1802 and were picked up by Federalist editors and abolitionists in the United States and abroad. Most serious Jefferson scholars and many of Jefferson's political enemies dismissed them, in part because the notorious Callender lacked credibility and in part because the charge seemed so out of character for Jefferson. But the story resurfaced with the 1974 publication of Fawn Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate Biography* and became more believable in the 1997 book by Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*.

Perhaps the most decisive development in the case was the publication in the prestigious British science journal *Nature* in November 1998 of results of a DNA study linking Sally Hemings' youngest son to a Jefferson father. In January 2000 the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation—owner of Jefferson's home at Monticello and long a protector of the former president's reputation—issued its own report concluding that President Jefferson fathered at least one and perhaps all of Sally Hemings' children.

Still, not everyone was convinced, and a group of doubters came together and established the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society. Their first act was to seek a blue-ribbon re-examination of all of the evidence for and against Thomas Jefferson's paternity of one or more of Sally Hemings' children. They approached a diverse group of senior scholars with a simple request: carefully examine all of the evidence, draw your own conclusions, and issue a public report. The Heritage Society played no role in the actual investigation, and no member of the Scholars Commission was compensated in any way for his or her efforts in this process. This volume is the final product of that "Scholars Commission" inquiry.

After a year-long investigation involving individual research and group meetings in a hotel near Dulles Airport outside of Washington, D.C., summary majority and minority reports were drafted and approved by group members. In addition, members of the Commission were invited to express their personal views with individual statements concurring or dissenting from the majority report. In the pages that follow, the official Majority Report—adhered to by twelve of the thirteen members of the Commission—appears first, followed by the Minority Report. It should be emphasized that the statements of individual views that follow the official summary report are attributable only to the members whose names appear at the front of each such statement.

In an effort to provide some historical context to the reception given the report and relevant subsequent developments, the editor has attached a Postscript at the end of the volume. The views expressed therein are his alone, and the Postscript is not a part of the

official Report of the Scholars Commission. Members of the Scholars Commission are listed with their academic institutions for purposes of identification only, and the views expressed herein are those of the individuals involved and should not be attributed to any university, organization, or other entity.

Copies of the majority and minority reports and supplemental statements of individual views were distributed at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on April 12, 2001. Members were then given additional time to expand and revise their individual statements, with the expectation that a book version of the Scholars Commission Report would appear the following year. Regrettably, publication was delayed because the professional duties of the chairman of the commission and editor of this volume involved the study of international terrorism and other aspects of national security law. As might be imagined, the demands on his time following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks left little time for extracurricular endeavors.

We are pleased finally to make this volume available. It does not pretend to be the final answer to the controversy, but we hope it will be useful in assisting interested readers to understand the relevant facts and issues and to identify points of disagreement between experts.

Robert F. Turner  
Charlottesville, Virginia  
February 14, 2011

# Acknowledgments

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Being asked to chair the Scholars Commission (SC), and to work with such a distinguished group of scholars, was among my most memorable and cherished professional activities. I want to thank the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society (TJHS) and its members for giving me this opportunity, and all of my distinguished colleagues on the SC for their outstanding work in our shared search for the truth. I also owe each of them my profound apology for the long delay in finally getting this volume in print.

Sadly, because of my delay in getting the final manuscript ready for publication, two of the most active and distinguished members of the Scholars Commission passed away before the book was published. Professors Lance Banning and Alf Mapp attended all of our meetings and took an active part in bringing this work to fruition. Both were extraordinary human beings and superb Jefferson scholars. We have dedicated this volume to them, but I wanted to add a personal note to emphasize my own deep indebtedness to both of them. I like to think that although they are no longer among us, their contributions will live on for years to come through their writings and the work of their students. May they rest in peace with the knowledge that the world was a better place for their presence here.

I would be remiss if I did not thank several individuals who contributed to bringing this volume to fruition. Marilyn Yurk provided the guidance of a professional editor, as did Becky Gildersleeve. Carolyn Andersen provided valuable research assistance at a critical time.

I am also most grateful to Dr. Keith Sipe, Linda Lacy, Tim Colton, and their colleagues at Carolina Academic Press—who provided encouragement and a variety of other assistance in transforming the manuscript into a finished book. They patiently tolerated the numerous delays in the process caused by the post-9/11 increased demands on my time. I have worked with them on several other volumes over more than two decades, and they have never failed to exceed all reasonable expectations.

Additional acknowledgments for assistance with my own personal contributions to this volume appear at the end of the Introduction to my *Individual Views*.<sup>1</sup>

RFT

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1. See pages 50–53.

# Members of the Scholars Commission

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## **Lance Banning**

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University of Kentucky

Professor Banning held the John Adams Chair in American History at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and served as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at the University of Edinburgh. Two of his award-winning books (*The Jeffersonian Persuasion* and *Jefferson and Madison*) were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in History.

## **James Ceaser**

Professor of Government and Foreign Affairs  
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Professor Ceaser is the author of *Reconstructing America* and has taught at Harvard University, the University of Montesquieu, the University of Basel, and Marquette University.

## **Robert H. Ferrell**

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Professor Ferrell was educated and has also taught at Yale University. He is the author or editor of more than forty books, and was described as “the dean of American presidential historians” by the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

## **Charles R. Kesler**

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Professor Kesler is Director of the Henry Salvatori Center at Claremont McKenna College and former chairman of its Department of Government. He has written extensively on the American founding and American political thought, and is co-editor of a widely-used edition of *The Federalist Papers*. He is the editor of *The Claremont Review of Books*.

## **Alf J. Mapp, Jr.**

Eminent Scholar, Emeritus and Louis I. Jaffe Professor of History, Emeritus  
Old Dominion University

Professor Mapp is the author of *Thomas Jefferson: A Strange Case of Mistaken Identity* (a Book-of-the-Month Club featured selection), *Thomas Jefferson: Passionate Pilgrim*, and has authored or edited more than another dozen books. A reference source for *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *World Book*, his numerous awards include Commonwealth of Vir-

ginia Cultural Laureate and a medal from the Republic of France's *Comite Francais du Bicentenaire de l'Independence des Etats-Unis*.

**Harvey C. Mansfield**

William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government  
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Professor Mansfield has taught at Harvard for nearly four decades, chaired the Department of Government for several years, and is the author or editor of a dozen books, several of which address the era of the Founding Fathers. A former Guggenheim Fellow and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, he served as President of the New England Political Science Association and on the Council of the American Political Science Association.

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Professor of Law and History  
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Professor Mayer holds both a law degree and a Ph.D. in History, and is the author of *The Constitutional Thought of Thomas Jefferson* and numerous book chapters and articles concerning Thomas Jefferson. He earned his Ph.D. under the supervision of Professor Merrill Peterson.

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University of Alabama

Professor McDonald has also taught at Brown University and was the James Pinckney Harrison Professor of History at the College of William & Mary. A former Guggenheim Fellow, he is the author of *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson* and numerous other books, and his many awards and prizes include Thomas Jefferson Lecturer with the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**Paul A. Rahe**

Charles O. Lee and Louise K. Lee Professor in Western Heritage  
Hillsdale College

Professor Rahe was educated at Yale and Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He served as Chair of the University of Tulsa Department of History for several years, has also taught at Yale and Cornell, and is the author of the highly-acclaimed, three-volume set, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution*. He has received numerous academic prizes and held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Center for the History of Freedom, and the Institute of Current World Affairs.

**Thomas Traut**

Professor of Biochemistry & Biophysics  
School of Medicine  
University of North Carolina

Professor Traut is Director of Graduate Studies and a former Ford Foundation and National Institute of Health Fellow. He is the author or coauthor of more than seventy publications, and shares his interest in Jefferson with his playwright wife, Karyn, who researched the Jefferson-Hemings relationship for seven years in preparation for her play *Saturday's Children*.

**Robert F. Turner** (Chairman)

Cofounder (1981), Center for National Security Law  
University of Virginia School of Law

Professor Turner holds both professional and academic doctorates from the University of Virginia School of Law, and is a former Charles H. Stockton Professor of International Law at the U.S. Naval War College and a Distinguished Lecturer at West Point. He has taught both in Virginia's Department of Government and Foreign Affairs and the Law School, and is the author or editor of more than a dozen books. A former president of the congressionally established U.S. Institute of Peace, he has had a strong professional interest in Jefferson for more than four decades.

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Professor Yarbrough is a former National Endowment for the Humanities Bicentennial Fellow. She has lectured at the International Center for Jefferson Studies, is a consultant to the *Jefferson Papers* project, and serves on the editorial board of both the *Review of Politics* and *Polity*. Her numerous publications include *American Virtues: Thomas Jefferson on the Character of a Free People* and "Race and the Moral Foundation of the American Republic: Another Look at the Declaration."