

# Jefferson's Daughters: Three Sisters, White and Black, in a Young America

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The remarkable untold story of Thomas Jefferson's three daughters-two white and free, one black and enslaved-and the divergent paths they forged in a newly independent America

Thomas Jefferson had three daughters: Martha and Maria by his wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson, and Harriet by his slave Sally Hemings. In *Jefferson's Daughters*, Catherine Kerrison, a scholar of early American and women's history, recounts the remarkable journey of these three women-and how their struggle to define themselves reflects both the possibilities and the limitations that resulted from the American Revolution.

Although the three women shared a father, the similarities end there. Martha and Maria received a fine convent school education while they lived with their father during his diplomatic posting in Paris-a hothouse of intellectual ferment whose celebrated salons are vividly brought to life in Kerrison's narrative. Once they returned home, however, the sisters found their options limited by the laws and customs of early America.

Harriet Hemings followed a different path. She escaped slavery-apparently with the assistance of Jefferson himself. Leaving Monticello behind, she boarded a coach and set off for a decidedly uncertain future.

For this groundbreaking triple biography, Kerrison has uncovered never-before-published documents written by the Jefferson sisters when they were in their teens, as well as letters written by members of the Jefferson and Hemings families. She has interviewed Hemings family descendants (and, with their cooperation, initiated DNA testing) and searched for descendants of Harriet Hemings.

The eventful lives of Thomas Jefferson's daughters provide a unique vantage point from which to examine the complicated patrimony of the American Revolution itself. The richly interwoven story of these three strong women and their fight to shape their own destinies sheds new light on the ongoing movement toward human rights in America-and on the personal and political legacy of one of our most controversial Founding Fathers.

"Beautifully written . . . To a nuanced study of Jefferson's two white daughters, Martha and Maria, [Kerrison] innovatively adds a discussion of his only enslaved daughter, Harriet Hemings."-The New York Times Book Review

Catherine Kerrison is an associate professor of history at Villanova University, where she teaches courses in Colonial and Revolutionary America and women's and gender history. She holds a PhD in American history from the College of William and Mary. Her first book, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South*, won the Outstanding Book Award from the History of Education Society. She lives in Berwyn, Pennsylvania.

Chapter 1

First Monticello

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1770

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A favorite tale, retold countless times at the Jefferson family hearth, was the story of Martha Wayles Jefferson's arrival at Monticello as a new bride. A beautiful young widow, Martha married Thomas Jefferson at her father's estate in Charles City County, just up the James River from Williamsburg, on New Year's Day in 1772. The beaming couple were well matched. At six feet two inches tall, Jefferson carried his lanky frame erect, towering over his bride. Although petite, Martha carried her slim figure with the elegance of a queen. She had auburn hair and hazel eyes that sparkled with wit and vivacity. Her groom was likewise fair, although his red hair was lighter and his eyes blue. Although no one ever described Jefferson as handsome, one of his earliest biographers said his face shone with "intelligence, with benevolence, and with the cheerful vivacity of a happy, hopeful spirit." A young lawyer and planter, Jefferson was just beginning his political career, having won his seat in the Virginia legislature barely three years earlier. With his prospects and the good-<sup>2</sup> humored temperament they each possessed, they were confident their future boded fair.

Immediately after the wedding festivities, Martha and her new husband left for the home Jefferson had only just begun building in Albemarle County, almost a hundred miles west. Although it had begun to snow as they set out, it was not heavy, so they were taken aback as the storm got progressively worse as they traveled westward. Forced to abandon both their carriage and the main road, they unhitched the horses and rode them for the last eight miles of their journey, trudging along the mountain track Jefferson knew so well, despite the two feet of snow that covered it.

Their destination that January night was a tiny one-<sup>2</sup> room building, today an appendage connected to Monticello by a long terrace, but then Jefferson's home, furnished only with a bed and books. "They arrived late in the night, the fires all out and the servants retired to their own houses for the night," their daughter Martha wrote, remembering the story her parents loved to tell during her childhood. Still, the groom was not entirely unprepared. They broke out a bottle of wine he had stowed away behind his books and lit up the night with their songs and laughter. It was the beginning of ten years of "unchequered happiness," as Jefferson would lovingly recall. On that night, with a beloved wife in his arms, he could lay out his hopes for the future for his family, plantation home, and successful political career.

Thomas Jefferson had chosen the location of his home carefully; he had been born at Shadwell, within sight of the mountain he would call Monticello. In his youth, he would walk its summit and sit there for hours, reading and plotting the future with his boyhood friend Dabney Carr. He and Carr made a pact to be buried at the very oak tree under which they had spent countless hours together. Peter Jefferson, Thomas's westward-<sup>2</sup> looking surveyor father, and Jane Randolph Jefferson, his elegant mother, shaped his vision of what he would build there. Their influence was unmistakable in the finished house, in which specimens of the New World from the Lewis and Clark westering expedition mixed with the art, plate, and silver of the Old.

Peter Jefferson was an up-<sup>¶</sup> and-<sup>¶</sup> comer in colonial Virginia. At his father's death in 1731, Peter had inherited lands in Goochland County, just west of where Richmond would be founded six years later. But he hankered after additional lands farther west. For the price of a bowl of arrack punch in a Williamsburg tavern, a family story goes, he bought four hundred acres on the Rivanna River, adjacent to land he already owned, thanks to a good friend. He named the new tract Shadwell, honoring his wife's home parish in England. His later career as a surveyor positioned him to see and claim the most desirable land first as Virginia settlers pushed west. By the time he died in 1757, he had amassed seventy-<sup>¶</sup> five hundred acres, more than sixty slaves, and a substantial inventory of horses, cattle, and hogs. Even so, his son was prouder still of his father's other accomplishments. For Thomas, Peter's chief legacies were the map he had drawn (which was published in 1757) after a grueling surveying expedition, the "first map of Virginia which had ever been made, that of Captain [John] Smith being merely conjectural." Jefferson noted dismissively in his memoirs: and that his father was one of the founders of Albemarle County, "the third or fourth settler, about the year 1737." For Thomas Jefferson, nothing in the Old World could compare to the natural beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the promise that lay beyond them to the west.

Jefferson's mother, Jane Randolph, came from a family that was wealthy and socially prominent in both England and Virginia. Jane's father had been born in Virginia but moved back to England in the course of a seafaring career. He later returned to Virginia in 1725, with a wife and two children, when little Jane was just five. Armed with wealth and plenty of family connections, Isham Randolph entered into the highly lucrative slave trade. It may bring us up short today to hear that his great-<sup>¶</sup> great-<sup>¶</sup> granddaughter characterized him as a man "whose name associated itself in his day with all that was good and wise," but Randolph's success as a slave trader, tobacco planter, and military man would have commended him to his contemporaries. Jane Randolph was proud of a lineage that she traced far back to England and Scotland. No hardscrabble backcountry farmers, then, the Randolphs built a lavish Virginia estate, known for its hospitality. There Jane learned how to supervise the labor of a plantation household, from setting a table to slaughtering hogs. She was also taught to dance a minuet, to embroider, and to preside over her husband's dinner table. From her, Thomas gained his appreciation of fine food and wine, beautifully bound books, and elegant furniture.

Peter Jefferson's genius in situating his house surely inspired his son's choice thirty years later, when he selected his site for Monticello eight miles due west. "To the south," a great-<sup>¶</sup> granddaughter reported of Shadwell, "are seen the picturesque valley and banks of the Rivanna, with an extensive peaceful-<sup>¶</sup> looking horizon view, lying like a sleeping beauty, in the east; while long rolling hills, occasionally rising into mountain ranges . . . stretch westward." The whole panorama, she sighed, presented "landscapes whose exquisite enchantment must ever charm the beholder." While one cannot see the Rivanna River from Monticello, the view from the plateau carved from the top of Jefferson's mountain likewise charms. To the east, the rolling valleys seem to stretch endlessly toward the Chesapeake Bay; a French visitor in 1796 believed that "the Atlantic might be seen were it not for the greatness of the distance." To the west, the Blue Ridge Mountains bear the color, in infinite variations, of their name. Summer fog sometimes scatters small clouds about the mountain, so that,

viewed from the valley below, the house seems set apart from the rest of the earth.

Slaves, many of them hired from neighbors, began the backbreaking work of leveling the top of the mountain in the spring of 1768. By the following year, the hilltop site of Thomas Jefferson's future home was ready for the cellar to be dug. Because the land lacked a water source, a well had to be dug through sixty-<sup>2</sup> five feet of rock. By 1770, the south pavilion, just twenty by twenty feet, in which Jefferson would honeymoon with his bride, had been completed. The following year, the dining room in the north wing had been built.

Scholars differ about some of the chronological details of the building of the house, since Jefferson did not keep a diary tracking its rise. But there is no doubt that it was to a construction site, rather than to a home, that Jefferson brought his new bride. He had hoped for "more elbow room" by the summer, he wrote to a friend in February 1771, eleven months before his wedding. The completion of the dining room by the end of that year may have relieved the Jeffersons from taking their meals in the tiny pavilion. But it would be two years before the first stories of the north wing and central block were completed and the south wing begun, another two years before the upper story of the central block was begun, and not until 1778 were the attics begun and completed. Yet even this litany of progress refers only to the outer shell of the house; finishing touches on the interior, the work of expert joiners, would not be completed until 1783. It is unlikely that these rooms bore even a simple plastered finish much before then.

Thus Martha Jefferson would live out her married life in a noisy, dusty construction zone-<sup>3</sup> except for the times she left Monticello. Indeed, it was only a matter of days after her first arrival that she and her husband left their new home for Elk Hill, the house she had shared with her first husband, Bathurst Skelton. After just two short years of marriage that produced a son, John, Bathurst died suddenly, leaving his twenty-<sup>4</sup> year-<sup>5</sup> old widow in possession of their house at Elk Hill. In the course of her married life with Jefferson, she would live a peripatetic existence: now with one sister or another in their homes, while her husband served as a representative of his county in the colonial assembly in Williamsburg or later as a Virginia delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia; at Elk Hill; in Williamsburg and Richmond as the governor's wife; or on the run, fleeing the British incursions deep into Virginia during the Revolution. To the extent that it is possible to track from the records, Monticello was her home for only a little over half of her married life.

But that nomadic existence was still in her future. By the end of June 1772, the couple had returned to settle in at Monticello. A scant nine months after her wedding, Martha Jefferson gave birth to their first child on September 27. Her formal name was Martha, after Martha's mother, Martha Eppes Wayles. But throughout her childhood, her parents would adopt the popular nickname of that era and affectionately call her Patsy. Her birth was a harbinger of hope for a new beginning for the young mother, whose only child from her first marriage, John, had died in 1771 at four years of age.

The infant Martha gave her mother some cause for worry at first, however. She was a sickly, underweight baby, and her life may well have been saved by the "good breast of milk" provided by a newly acquired slave, Ursula Granger. Martha had known Ursula, a

slave of a friend, and at Martha's request (she was "very desirous to get a favorite house woman of the name of Ursula," Jefferson wrote), Jefferson bought her and her two sons at an estate auction in January 1773. Shortly thereafter, he bought Ursula's husband, George Granger. The Grangers would take trusted positions in the Jeffersons' service: Ursula as supervisor of the kitchen and smoke-<sup>¶</sup> and washhouses, and George as the only paid black overseer on any of Jefferson's plantations. Well nourished, little Martha soon grew strong, but Ursula's own baby, Archy, born in 1773, died the next year.

That an enslaved woman, purchased to bring her invaluable housekeeping talents to the work in progress that was Monticello, was then put to work as a wet nurse to her owner's child was just one of the innumerable ironies of the workings of a slave society. The same system that declared Ursula unfree also relied on her, literally, to nourish and sustain itself. As it had developed in colonial Virginia, slavery became predicated upon a finely striated system of law and custom designed to make clear the separation between free and unfree. It had not always been that way. The arrival of the first Africans in Virginia in 1619 had not, in itself, signaled the beginning of a fully formed slave system. True, the English in Virginia had the example of the Spanish and Portuguese sugar plantations in the Caribbean and South America; and the Dutch would later establish a thriving transatlantic slave trade system that kept those plantations supplied with labor. But not all blacks in early Virginia were enslaved. Some were kept as servants, in temporary bondage. Others bought their freedom and moved to the Eastern Shore, where many purchased land, married, raised families, and hired or bought laborers of their own.

To meet their insatiable appetite for labor, white Virginians would make the transition gradually from white English servants to black slaves over the course of the seventeenth century. Time and again in these early years, the newly formed assembly in the provincial capital of Jamestown legislated what it meant to have white skin or black, to be free or enslaved. The representatives, called burgesses, debated such questions as: Are all men, black and white, permitted to carry guns? (No, only whites, 1639.) Are African women counted as tithable (that is, taxable) in the same way as all men, white and black, sixteen years of age and older? (Yes, 1643.) To clarify, are free African women taxable, as well as enslaved? (Yes, but white women remain exempt, 1668.) Is the child of an enslaved woman and an Englishman free? (No, the child takes the condition of the mother, 1662.) So then, the child of a free white woman and a free black man is free? (No, not quite; such children will be held in service until their thirtieth birthday. In addition, the mother must pay a fine of <sup>¶</sup> 15 sterling or herself be sold into servitude for five years, 1691.) May blacks and whites marry? (No, 1691 and 1705. To prevent such "abominable mixture and spurious issue," the white person will be jailed for six months and pay a fine of <sup>¶</sup> 10 sterling. And clergymen who conduct such ceremonies will be fined ten thousand pounds of tobacco-<sup>¶</sup> half of which goes to the informer.)

#### Other Books

Jefferson County Data Book, June, 1978.

<sup>¶</sup> <sup>¶</sup> <sup>¶</sup> <sup>¶</sup> <sup>¶</sup> . The following table shows the disposition of the 1976 graduating class of Jefferson County, as of the following October, in comparison with the State. The most noticeable differences are found in the lack of county graduates going on to ..."