

Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson

Questions to think about:

1. Why do you think the accusations made by Callender were ignored during Jefferson's lifetime and later by historians? Why do you think Madison Hemings' assertions were ignored?
2. Why do you think Callender's claims failed to hurt Jefferson politically? Do you think a similar scandal would hurt an American president or elected leader today? Why or why not?
3. Did Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson love each other? Is this a valid question to ask?
4. Were Madison Hemings and his siblings black or white?
5. Based on Madison Hemings' family history, how common was racial intermixing in 18th and 19th century Virginia?
6. Madison talks about two promises that were made to his mother. What were they?
7. What does Article IV Section II of the US Constitution have to do with Sally Hemings' children?
8. Should the DNA tests (and all that they imply) influence how we view Jefferson and his place in American history? If no, why not? If yes, how should they influence how we view him?

The following two primary sources both make the claim that Thomas Jefferson fathered children by one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. The first source was written by an embittered former political associate of Jefferson's, James Callender, in 1802. Callender was a journalist who had been hired by the Republicans to attack the Federalists in the run-up to election of 1800. For these verbal attacks Callender, a Scottish immigrant, was thrown in jail for violating the Alien and Sedition Acts. He was financially ruined, and when he was released from prison he tried to blackmail Jefferson, who was by then President of the United States, into giving him a well-paid government job. Jefferson refused to respond to the threat and so Callender "outed" Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings in a series of newspaper articles. Jefferson never publically responded to the articles and they did not hurt his political career. (For more on Callender see America Afire, pp. 207–08, 212, 218.)

The second source is an interview given by an elderly man named Madison Hemings to an Ohio newspaper in 1873. In the interview Hemings stated that he was Jefferson's son. Until very recently, most historians dismissed the claims of both Callender and Madison Hemings, along with a few other pieces of evidence that suggested that Jefferson had had a relationship (and children) with Sally Hemings. Then, in 1998, DNA tests were done on the descendants of Madison Hemings and the descendants of his brother Eston: these tests proved that these two men were direct decedents of Thomas Jefferson. Most historians now accept that most or all of Sally Hemings' children were fathered by Jefferson.

Before the DNA tests, many historians saw Jefferson's personal life (including whatever relationship he had with his slaves) as being of marginal importance for our understanding of him as a statesman. Indeed, this is the way that Jefferson himself would seem to have wanted us to view him: we have volumes upon volumes of his writings, including political and scientific tracts, personal letters written to friends, and in these Jefferson is generally very reticent about all aspects of his personal life. However, the DNA tests corroborate what Madison Hemings asserted: that Jefferson and Sally Hemings had a long-term relationship that began in the 1780s or

1790s and continued until Jefferson's death in 1826. Moreover, the relationship appears to have been monogamous.

Therefore, the DNA tests have prompted historians to reconsider their views of Jefferson. Historians have begun pouring over all of Jefferson's writings again, re-evaluating everything he wrote about freedom, independence, slavery, and race-relations in the light the DNA evidence. One response has been to re-cast Jefferson as the stereotypical exploitative white slave owner, but the reality seems to have been much more complex, as Madison's interview suggests. For instance, Jefferson asserted that enslaved African Americans were inferior to white Americans, but he also stated that he was not sure whether this was due to a natural difference between the races or whether the (apparent) inferiority was a result of Africans having been enslaved. At the same time, Jefferson also held more unsavory views. For example, he thought that beauty was linked to the lightness of one's skin color, and that blacks and whites should not intermarry or have children together.

For all the ink that has been spilt by historians in an attempt to understand Thomas Jefferson, the most that can be said with certainty is that his views on slavery and race-relations were complex – which is why historians would dearly love to know what Sally Hemings thought about her life with Jefferson. Unfortunately, she left no writings (that we know of). The closest that we can get to Sally and what her relationship with Jefferson was like, is the interview that her son, Madison, gave in 1873, along with a few other scattered clues. For instance, in his memoirs, an overseer who worked for Jefferson named Edmund Bacon recalled that it was his job to manage Jefferson's slaves but that his authority did not extend to Sally Hemings and her family. Bacon also recalled that when Harriet "ran away" from Monticello, Jefferson told him to pay her stage coach fare to Philadelphia and give her \$50.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the nature of the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings involves what happened after Jefferson died. Jefferson was deeply in debt when he died and most of his estate, including his hundred slaves, had to be sold to pay off those debts. However, the members of the Hemings family who were still at Monticello were not sold; they were given their freedom. Sally Hemings lived out her days as a free woman.¹

I have also included a family tree for the Hemings family, based mainly on the interview with Madison Hemings.

¹ Actually, she remained a slave. The state of Virginia had passed a law making it illegal for slave owners to free slaves who were over 50 years of age. The implication is that slave owners were freeing, or rather turning out, elderly slaves who could no longer work in order to save themselves the cost of providing for these older slaves. Sally was 53 when Jefferson died and so she could not legally be freed. However, she is listed as a free woman in a US census of the early 1830s. Presumably, then, Jefferson's heir, his (white) daughter Martha, abided by her father's wishes that Sally be allowed her freedom.

A. From James Callender, “The President, Again”, *Richmond Recorder*, 1 September 1802.²

It is well known that the man, *whom it delighteth the people to honor*, keeps, and for many years past has kept, as his concubine, one of his own slaves. Her name is SALLY. The name of her eldest son is TOM. His features are said to bear a striking although sable resemblance to those of the president himself. The boy is ten or twelve years of age. His mother went to France in the same vessel with Mr. Jefferson and his two daughters. The delicacy of this arrangement must strike every person of common sensibility. What a sublime pattern for an American ambassador to place before the eyes of two young ladies!

If the reader does not feel himself *disposed to pause* we beg leave to proceed. Some years ago, this story had once or twice been hinted at in *Rind’s Federalist*. At that time, we believed the surmise to be an absolute calumny. One reason for thinking so was this. A vast body of people wished to debar Mr. Jefferson from the presidency. *The establishment of this SINGLE FACT* would have rendered his election impossible.

... By this wench Sally, our president has had several children. There is not an individual in the neighbourhood of Charlottesville, who does not believe the story; and not a few who know it. ... Behold the favorite, the first born of republicanism! the pinnacle of all that is good and great! in the open consummation of an act which tends to subvert the policy, the happiness, and even the existence of this country!

‘Tis supposed that, at the time when Mr. Jefferson wrote so smartly concerning negroes, when he endeavoured much to belittle the African race, he had no expectation that the chief magistrate of the United States was to be the ringleader in shewing that his opinion was erroneous; or, that he should chuse an African stock whereupon he was to engraft his own descendants. ...

If the friends of Mr. Jefferson are convinced of *his* innocence, *they* will make an appeal of the same sort [that Callender had made during the Hamilton-Reynolds’ scandal].³ If they rest in silence, or if they content themselves with resting upon a *general denial*, they cannot hope for credit. The allegation is of a nature too *black* to be suffered to remain in suspense. We should be glad to hear of its refutation. We give it to the world under the firmest belief that such a refutation *never can be made*. The AFRICAN VENUS is said to officiate, as housekeeper at Monticello. When Mr. Jefferson has read this article, he will find leisure to estimate how much has been lost or gained by so many unprovoked attacks upon

J. T. CALLENDER

² As printed in: *Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson. History, Memory, and Civic Culture*, ed. by Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, 1999), pp. 259–60.

³ In 1797 James Callender accused Alexander Hamilton in print of having an affair with a young, poor woman named Maria Reynolds. Both Hamilton and Reynolds were married. (In fact, Reynolds’ husband knew about the affair and had demanded that Hamilton pay him off to keep quiet about it!) In 1797 Callender was still allied with Jefferson’s (Democratic-)Republicans against the Federalists. Hamilton was one of the leading Federalists and so there was a political motive to Callender’s accusations. When called upon to back up his accusations, Callender produced letters written by Hamilton in which Hamilton admitted to the affair. Hamilton then took the unusual step of publishing a pamphlet in which he admitted to the affair but said that it had not compromised his governmental duties and so (here I am paraphrasing) Callender should shut up about it. Hamilton survived the scandal, but his reputation was somewhat damaged. See also *America Afire*, pp. 123–26 and 183–85.

B. "Life among the Lowly, No. 1", *Pike County (Ohio) Republican*, 13 March 1873.⁴

I never knew of but one white man who bore the name of Hemings; he was an Englishman and my great grandfather. He was captain of an English trading vessel which sailed between England and Williamsburg, Va., then quite a port. My great-grandmother was a fullblooded African, and possibly a native of that country. She was the property of John Wales, a Welchman. Capt. Hemings happened to be in the port of Williamsburg at the time my grandmother was born, and acknowledging her fatherhood he tried to purchase her of Mr. Wales, who would not part with the child, though he was offered an extraordinarily large price for her. She was named Elizabeth Hemings. Being thwarted in the purchase, and determined to own his own flesh and blood he resolved to take the child by force or stealth, but the knowledge of his intention coming to John Wales' ears, through leaky fellow servants of the mother, she and the child were taken into the 'great house' under their master's immediate care. I have been informed that it was not the extra value of that child over other slave children that induced Mr. Wales to refuse to sell it, for slave masters then, as in later days, had no compunctions of conscience which restrained them from parting mother and child of however tender age, but he was restrained by the fact that just about that time amalgamation began, and the child was so great a curiosity that its owner desired to raise it himself that he might see its outcome. Capt. Hemings soon afterwards sailed from Williamsburg, never to return. Such is the story that comes down to me.

Elizabeth Hemings grew to womanhood in the family of John Wales, whose wife dying she (Elizabeth) was taken by the widower Wales as his concubine, by whom she had six children – three sons and three daughters, viz: Robert, James, Peter, Critty, Sally and Thena. These children went by the name of Hemings.

Williamsburg was the capital of Virginia, and of course it was an aristocratic place, where the 'bloods' of the Colony and the new State most did congregate. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, was educated at William and Mary College, which had its seat at Williamsburg. He afterwards studied law with Geo. Wythe, and practiced law at the bar of the general court of the Colony. He was afterwards elected a member of the provincial legislature from Albemarle county. Thos. Jefferson was a visitor at the 'great house' of John Wales, who had children about his own age. He formed the acquaintance of his daughter Martha (I believe that was her name, though I am not positively sure,) and intimacy sprang up between them which ripened into love, and they were married. They afterwards went to live at his country seat Monticello, and in course of time had born to them a daughter whom they named Martha. About the time she was born my mother, the second daughter of John Wales and Elizabeth Hemings was born. On the death of John Wales, my grandmother, his concubine, and her children by him fell to Martha, Thomas Jefferson's wife, and consequently became the property of Thomas Jefferson, who in the course of time became famous, and was appointed minister to France during our revolutionary troubles, or soon after independence was gained. About the time of the appointment and before he was ready to leave the country his wife died, and as soon after her interment as he could attend to and arrange his domestic affairs in accordance with

⁴ As printed in: *Sally Hemings*, ed. by Lewis and Onuf, pp. 255–58.

the changed circumstances of his family in consequence of this misfortune (I think not more than three weeks thereafter) he left for France, taking his eldest daughter with him. He had sons born to him, but they died in early infancy, so he then had but two children – Martha and Maria. The latter was left home, but afterwards was ordered to follow him to France. She was three years or so younger than Martha. My mother accompanied her as a body servant. When Mr. Jefferson went to France Martha was just budding into womanhood. Their stay (my mother's and Maria's) was about eighteen months. But during that time my mother became Mr. Jefferson's concubine, and when he was called back home she was *enciente*⁵ by him. He desired to bring my mother back to Virginia with him but she demurred. She was just beginning to understand the French language well, and in France she was free, while if she returned to Virginia she would be re-enslaved. So she refused to return with him. To induce her to do so he promised her extraordinary privileges, and made a solemn pledge that her children should be freed at the age of twenty-one years. In consequence of his promise, on which she implicitly relied, she returned with him to Virginia. Soon after their arrival, she gave birth to a child, of whom Thomas Jefferson was the father. It lived but a short time. She gave birth to four others, and Jefferson was the father of all of them. Their names were Beverly, Harriet, Madison (myself), and Eston – three sons and one daughter. We all became free agreeably to the treaty entered into by our parents before we were born. We all married and have raised families.

Beverly left Monticello and went to Washington as a white man. He married a white woman in Maryland, and their only child, a daughter, was not known by the white folks to have any colored blood coursing in her veins. Beverly's wife's family were people in good circumstances.

Harriet married a white man in good standing in Washington City, whose name I could give, but will not, for prudential reasons. She raised a family of children, and so far as I know they were never suspected of being tainted with African blood in the community where she lived or lives. I have not heard from her for ten years, and do not know whether she is dead or alive. She thought it to her interest, on going to Washington, to assume the role of a white woman, and by her dress and conduct as such I am not aware that her identity as Harriet Hemings of Monticello has ever been discovered.

Eston married a colored woman in Virginia, and moved from there to Ohio, and lived in Chillicothe several years. In the fall of 1852 he removed to Wisconsin, where he died a year or two afterwards. He left three children.

As to myself, I was named Madison by the wife of James Madison, who was afterwards President of the United States. Mrs. Madison happened to be at Monticello at the time of my birth, and begged the privilege of naming me, promising my mother a fine present for the honor. She consented, and Mrs. Madison dubbed me by the name I now acknowledge, but like many promises of white folks to the slaves she never gave my mother anything. I was born at my father's seat of Monticello, in Albemarle county, Va., near Charlottesville, on the 19th day of January, 1805. My very earliest recollections are of my grandmother Elizabeth Hemings. That was when I was about three years old.

⁵ That is, pregnant.

She was sick and upon her death bed. I was eating a piece of bread and asked if she would have some. She replied: 'No, granny don't want bread any more.' She shortly afterwards breathed her last. I have only a faint recollection of her.

Of my father, Thomas Jefferson, I knew more of his domestic than his public life during his life time. It is only since his death that I have learned much of the latter, except that he was considered as a foremost man in the land, and held many important trusts, including that of President. I learned to read by inducing the white children to teach me the letters and something more; what else I know of books I have picked up here and there till now I can read and write. I was almost 21½ years of age when my father died on the 4th of July, 1826.

About his own home he was the quietest of men. He was hardly ever known to get angry, though sometimes he was irritated when matters went wrong, but even then he hardly ever allowed himself to be made unhappy any great length of time. Unlike Washington he had but little taste or care for agricultural pursuits. He left matters pertaining to his plantations mostly with his stewards and overseers. He always had mechanics at work for him, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, coopers, &c. It was his mechanics he seemed mostly to direct, and in their operations he took great interest. Almost every day of his later years he might have been seen among them. He occupied much of the time in his office engaged in correspondence and reading and writing. His general temperament was smooth and even; he was very undemonstrative. He was uniformly kind to all about him. He was not in the habit of showing partiality or fatherly affection to us children. We were the only children of his by a slave woman. He was affectionate toward his white grandchildren, of whom he had fourteen, twelve of whom lived to manhood and womanhood. His daughter Martha married Thomas Mann Randolph by whom she had thirteen children. Two died in infancy. The names of the living were Ann, Thomas Jefferson, Ellen, Cornelia, Virginia, Mary, James, Benj. Franklin, Lewis Madison, Septemia and Geo. Wythe. Thos. Jefferson Randolph was Chairman of the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore last spring which nominated Horace Greeley for the Presidency, and Geo. Wythe Randolph was Jeff. Davis' first Secretary of War in the late 'unpleasantness.'

Maria married John Epps, and raised one son – Francis.

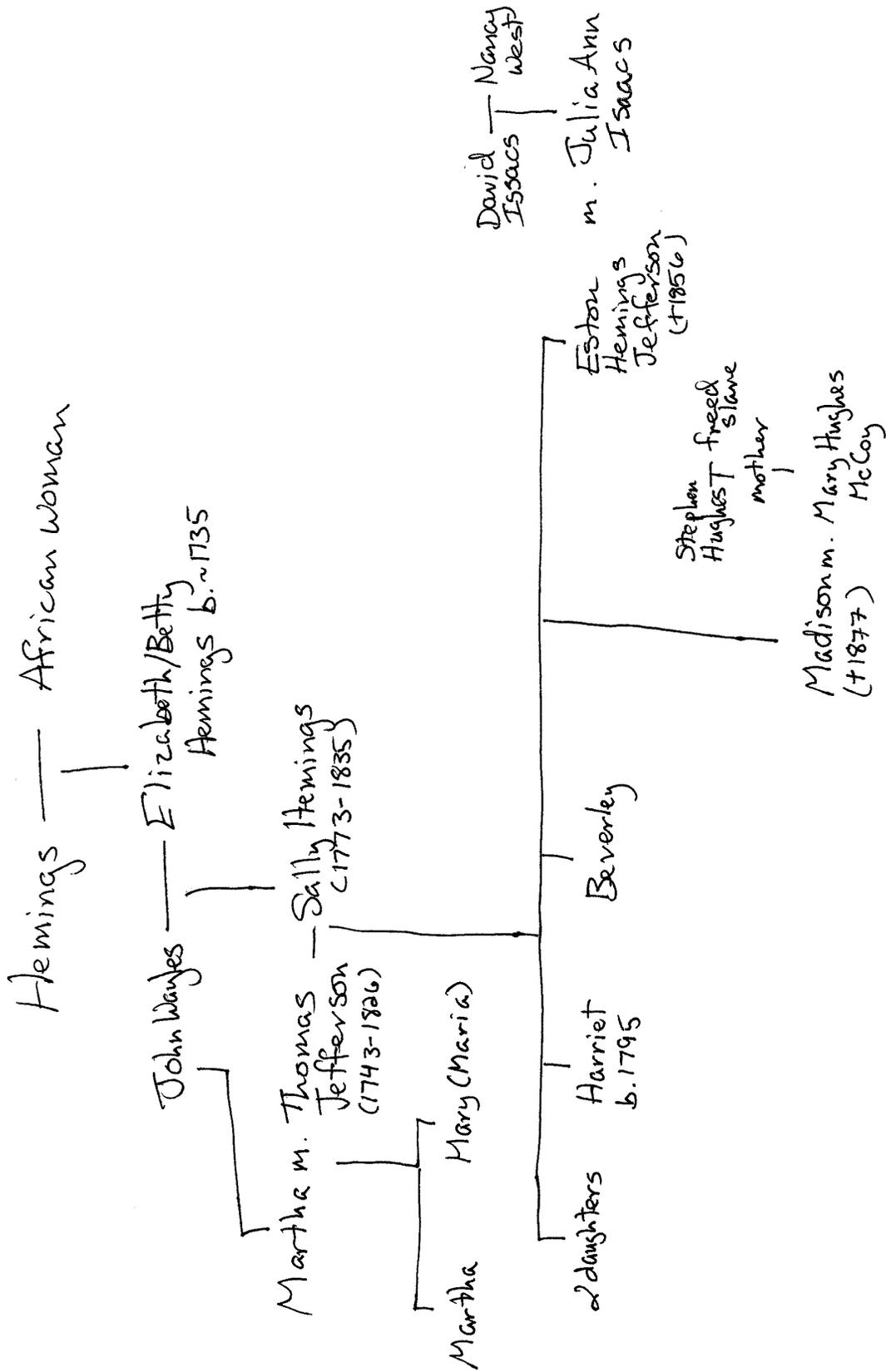
My father generally enjoyed excellent health. I never knew him to have but one spell of sickness, and that was caused by a visit to the Warm Springs in 1818. Till within three weeks of his death he was hale and hearty, and at the age of 83 years walked erect and with a stately tread. I am now 68, and I well remember that he was a much smarter man physically, even at that age, than I am.

When I was fourteen years old I was put to the carpenter trade under the charge of John Hemings, the youngest son of my grandmother. His father's name was Nelson, who was an Englishman. She had seven children by white men and seven by colored men--fourteen in all. My brothers, sister Harriet and myself, were used alike. We were permitted to stay about the 'great house,' and only required to do such light work as going on errands. Harriet learned to spin and to weave in a little factory on the home plantation. We were free from the dread of having to be slaves all our lives long,

and were measurably happy. We were always permitted to be with our mother, who was well used. It was her duty, all her life which I can remember, up to the time of father's death, to take care of his chamber and wardrobe, look after us children and do such light work as sewing, &c. Provision was made in the will of our father that we should be free when we arrived at the age of 21 years. We had all passed that period when he died but Eston, and he was given the remainder of his time shortly after. He and I rented a house and took mother to live with us, till her death, which event occurred in 1835.

In 1834 I married Mary McCoy. Her grandmother was a slave, and lived with her master, Stephen Hughes, near Charlottesville, as his wife. She was manumitted by him, which made their children free born. Mary McCoy's mother was his daughter. I was about 28 and she 22 years of age when we married. We lived and labored together in Virginia till 1836, when we voluntarily left and came to Ohio. We settled in Pebble township, Pike County. We lived there four or five years and during my stay in the county I worked at my trade on and off for about four years. Joseph Sewell was my first employer. I built for him what is now known as Rizzleport No. 2 in Waverly. I afterwards worked for George Wolf Senior. and I did the carpenter work for the brick building now owned by John J. Kellison in which the Pike County Republican is printed. I worked for and with Micajab Hinson. I found him to be a very clever man. I also reconstructed the building on the corner of Market and Water Streets from a store to a hotel for the late Judge Jacob Row.

When we came from Virginia we brought one daughter (Sarah) with us, leaving the dust of a son in the soil near Monticello. We have born to us in this State nine children. Two are dead. The names of the living, besides Sarah, are Harriet, Mary Ann, Catharine, Jane, William Beverly, James Madison, Ellen Wales. Thomas Eston died in the Andersonville prison pen, and Julia died at home. William, James and Ellen are unmarried and live at home in Huntington township, Ross County. All the others are married and raising families. My post office address is Pee Pee, Pike County Ohio.



Some additional information on the Hemings family tree:

The John Wayles of the family tree is the same John Wales mentioned by Madison Hemings. His name usually has the former spelling.

Most of the information on the family tree comes from Madison Hemings' interview. I have included some additional information about the family of Eston's wife. Eston inherited his father's red hair, fair skin, freckles, and talent for playing the violin. Eston married Julia Ann Isaacs in 1832. Julia Ann's father, David Isaacs, was Jewish. Her mother, Nancy West, was a free black woman. David Isaacs and Nancy West had a long-term monogamous relationship, but maintained separate homes. Their seven children were born from 1796 to 1819. In 1822 Isaacs and West were charged with fornication. Why then? Because they had decided to move in together (a move that might have forced the white community to accept their relationship).

The subsequent histories of the families of Eston and Madison are eloquent testimonies to the different opportunities that were available to white and black Americans in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. Around 1850 Eston, Julia Ann and their children moved to Wisconsin, where no one knew them. There the family adopted the surname Jefferson and lived as white Americans. Eston's descendants included a number of doctors and lawyers. Madison and his family continued to reside in Ohio, where they lived as African Americans. Madison's descendants included a number of small farmers, shopkeepers and domestic servants.