

Life Stage Information Sheet: Born into Slavery and Inherited by Jefferson

Sally Hemings's story began before her birth in 1773. Her mother, Elizabeth Hemings, was the daughter of an African slave and an English sea captain named Hemings. From Captain Hemings, Elizabeth and her future children received their surname. Captain Hemings made multiple efforts to purchase Elizabeth, but her owner, John Wayles, refused to sell the girl. As a result, Elizabeth grew up subject to Wayles's authority in every matter.

After the deaths of three wives, Wayles took Elizabeth to be his "concubine." Concubine, a term used by Betty's grandson, Madison Hemings, meant that he held her in a sexual relationship without the prospect of marriage or legal recognition. The pair produced six children named Robert, James, Thenia, Critta, Peter, and Sally. Therefore, Sally was born into a Virginia plantation culture where inter-racial and extra-marital relationships were common.

In 1773, just after Sally's birth, John Wayles died and Thomas Jefferson, Wayles's son-in-law, relocated the Hemings family to his plantation, Monticello. Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton in 1772, and by this marriage, he gained the legal rights to Elizabeth, Sally, and the rest of the Hemings family. Therefore, despite being Martha Jefferson's half-sister, Sally became a housemaid at Monticello. Sally was nine years old and present when her half-sister and mistress died in 1782.

After you read through the profile, consider these points about this stage in Sally's life:

1. What might Sally have thought about serving her half-sister?
2. Would Sally, at such a young age, have considered herself a slave despite having one white parent and three white grandparents?
3. How might her mother's long-term relationship with her owner have influenced what Sally believed her options were?

Life Stage Information Sheet: Travels to France and Consents to Return to Virginia

From 1787 to 1789, Sally Hemings had one great opportunity to seize her freedom when Jefferson sent for his daughter, Mary, and Hemings accompanied her as a nurse. As a fourteen-year-old, the occasion to visit Paris was more than most of her countrymen, free or enslaved, could boast. More importantly, her years in Paris represented the closest she came to freedom until Jefferson's death in 1826.

When she first crossed the ocean to act as a guardian for Jefferson's daughter, Sally was little more than a child herself. Upon arrival, Jefferson required Sally to be inoculated against smallpox, a dangerous and expensive procedure, which illustrated the importance of her health to Jefferson. As the primary draftsman of the preeminent statement of human rights, the Declaration of Independence, overt reminders of his slaveowner status embarrassed Jefferson, especially in abolitionist-minded France. While in Paris, Sally likely encountered people who deeply disliked the institution of slavery and this knowledge must have presented the idea for the young girl to seek her freedom.

French law stipulated that slaves brought to France could sue for their freedom in court. In most cases, enslaved people were successful in their lawsuits. Sally and her brother, James, who was serving as Jefferson's cook in France, knew enough abolitionists in Paris to bring a lawsuit for their freedom.

Before their departure back to Virginia, a sexual relationship began between Jefferson and Hemings. Sally became pregnant and a new component entered her formulation. If she returned to Virginia with Jefferson, she would be leaving the legal protection of France for the slave system of Virginia. Jefferson, and not her, would be protected by the law. In addition, due to *partus sequitur ventrem*, her child would also be considered a slave. According to a much later recollection by Sally's son Madison, Jefferson promised he would free her children if she returned with him. At the age of sixteen years old, Hemings had a great deal to consider. Would she gamble her and her unborn child's freedom by leaving Paris or would she leave behind her life in Virginia to attempt live freely in France.

After you read through the profile, consider these points about this stage in Sally's life:

1. Would you gamble for your freedom in Paris or gamble by taking Jefferson at his word to free your children?
2. How difficult would it be to make this decision for you, and an unborn child, at only sixteen years old?

Life Stage Information Sheet: Children with Jefferson

Whatever the circumstances of her decision to return to Virginia, Sally went on to have four children grow to adulthood. The child she carried home from France was either a stillborn or died shortly after birth. From 1790 until 1805, however, Hemings became pregnant five more times with four children, Eston, Harriet, Beverly, and Madison, surviving past their infancy.

Throughout the 1790s and 1800s, Jefferson spent much of his time in the centers of political power – New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. However, he was always at Monticello roughly nine months before the birth of Sally’s four children. Recent historical scholarship and DNA evidence have corroborated that Jefferson is almost certainly the father of Sally’s children.

Sally and the children she had with Jefferson were always “favored” slaves and never had to endure field labor or physical violence. Each of the children were apprenticed in a trade or taught specific tasks. The males, Eston, Beverly, and Madison, learned carpentry from their uncle, and Jefferson’s skilled enslaved carpenter, John Hemings. The boys also became skilled musicians and often played for Jefferson. Harriet learned the skills she would later need as a wife such as cooking, nursing, and sewing. In general, life was comfortable, but Jefferson never acknowledged the children as his own or demonstrated any affection toward them, as he did with his white grandchildren.

Sally gained notoriety and fame in 1801 following the publication of an article by James Callender that described Jefferson and Hemings relationship in graphic detail. From that point, visitors looked for signs of Jefferson’s connection with Hemings. The exposure risked humiliating Jefferson and made freeing the children much more difficult.

After you read through the profile, consider these points about this stage in Sally’s life:

1. With Jefferson’s promise that your children would be freed in combination with a comparatively comfortable lifestyle, how would you have responded if you were in Sally’s position?
2. If you were Sally, what would be your focus during your children’s adolescence? How might you have sought to improve their lives and protect them from the evils of slavery?

Life Stage Information Sheet: The Children Gain Their Freedom

Ultimately, Jefferson lived up to his promise and freed their children. The first two to leave Monticello were Eston and Harriet. At the ages of twenty-four and twenty-one respectively, Jefferson and his overseers simply allowed these two to leave. Jefferson's overseer later recalled that he brought Harriet to the train station with money and she headed north. The siblings were not legally freed, but, according, to their brother's later recollections, they both passed into white society and married white spouses. With seven white great-grandparents and three white grandparents, Sally's children could easily pass as white. In fact, guests frequently noted the light skin and features of Sally and her children.

The remaining children, Beverly and Madison, were freed in Jefferson's will after his death in 1826. They remained in Charlottesville until their mother's death and later moved to Ohio. Eston eventually married a free woman of color and passed into white society, while Madison alone maintained his family connections. In 1873, he wrote his memoirs that preserved the family history. In total, Beverly and Madison produced four sons who all fought on the Union side in the Civil War. Significantly, Jefferson had one white grandson fight for the Confederacy and four grandsons, considered white by their compatriots, who fought for the Union.

Due to a Virginia law that required legislative approval to free any enslaved person over fifty years old and the embarrassment Jefferson's family would have encountered, the former president's heirs simply gave Hemings "her time." While not officially liberated, she could live out her days away from Monticello in relative peace. Beverly and Madison stayed with their mother until her death in 1835, but she could not openly communicate with Eston or Harriet.

Even in freedom, the specter of slavery hung over formerly enslaved families. If the children wanted to merge into white society to avoid persecution, they had to leave behind their familial connections. If they chose, like Madison, to maintain their status as a freedman, then they risked racial prejudice from their neighbors. These men and women often fled Virginia for the northern states.

After you read through the profile, consider these points about this stage in Sally's life:

1. If you were Sally, what would you have wanted your children to do upon leaving Monticello? After all your experiences with slavery, how would you counsel them to act as they gained their freedom?
2. How do you think Sally would have reacted to Jefferson's death?