

# The Hemingses Of Monticello: An American Family - Annette Gordon-reed

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Winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize: "[A] commanding and important book."-Jill Lepore, The New Yorker This epic work-named a best book of the year by the Washington Post, Time, the Los Angeles Times, Amazon, the San Francisco Chronicle, and a notable book by the New York Times-tells the story of the Hemingses, whose close blood ties to our third president had been systematically expunged from American history until very recently. Now, historian and legal scholar Annette Gordon-Reed traces the Hemings family from its origins in Virginia in the 1700s to the family's dispersal after Jefferson's death in 1826. In the mid-1700s the English captain of a trading ship that made runs between England and the Virginia colony fathered a child by an enslaved woman living near Williamsburg. The woman, whose name is unknown and who is believed to have been born in Africa, was owned by the Eppeses, a prominent Virginia family. The captain, whose surname was Hemings, and the woman had a daughter. They named her Elizabeth. So begins The Hemingses of Monticello, Annette Gordon-Reed's "riveting history" of the Hemings family, whose story comes to vivid life in this brilliantly researched and deeply moving work. Gordon-Reed, author of the highly acclaimed historiography Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy, unearths startling new information about the Hemingses, Jefferson, and his white family. Although the book presents the most detailed and richly drawn portrait ever written of Sarah Hemings, better known by her nickname Sally, who bore seven children by Jefferson over the course of their thirty-eight-year liaison, The Hemingses of Monticello tells more than the story of her life with Jefferson and their children. The Hemingses as a whole take their rightful place in the narrative of the family's extraordinary engagement with one of history's most important figures. Not only do we meet Elizabeth Hemings-the family matriarch and mother to twelve children, six by John Wayles, a poor English immigrant who rose to great wealth in the Virginia colony-but we follow the Hemings family as they become the property of Jefferson through his marriage to Martha Wayles. The Hemings-Wayles children, siblings to Martha, played pivotal roles in the life at Jefferson's estate. We follow the Hemingses to Paris, where James Hemings trained as a chef in one of the most

prestigious kitchens in France and where Sally arrived as a fourteen-year-old chaperone for Jefferson's daughter Polly; to Philadelphia, where James Hemings acted as the major domo to the newly appointed secretary of state; to Charlottesville, where Mary Hemings lived with her partner, a prosperous white merchant who left her and their children a home and property; to Richmond, where Robert Hemings engineered a plan for his freedom; and finally to Monticello, that iconic home on the mountain, from where most of Jefferson's slaves, many of them Hemings family members, were sold at auction six months after his death in 1826. As *The Hemingses of Monticello* makes vividly clear, Monticello can no longer be known only as the home of a remarkable American leader, the author of the Declaration of Independence; nor can the story of the Hemingses, whose close blood ties to our third president have been expunged from history until very recently, be left out of the telling of America's story. With its empathetic and insightful consideration of human beings acting in almost unimaginably difficult and complicated family circumstances, *The Hemingses of Monticello* is history as great literature. It is a remarkable achievement.

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