

## Focus

A SUPPLEMENT OF

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subscription@portlandobserver.comDeadlines for  
submitted material:Articles: Friday by 5 P.M.  
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1999 The Portland Observer

## Television

CONTRIBUTED STORY  
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

In January 2000, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation issued a one-inch thick report stating that an exhaustive historical and forensic investigation "indicates a high probability that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings, and that he most likely was the father of all six of Sally Hemings' children..."

The report supported what DNA tests had already suggested, and what descendants of the slave Sally Hemings had been saying for nearly 200 years: that the famed Founding Father and author of the Declaration of Independence had a long-term sexual relationship with his slave that resulted in six children, four of whom lived to adulthood.

But with the paternity of the Hemings children all but confirmed, the controversy is far from over. As the Monticello Association prepares to readdress the Jefferson-Hemings issue at its May 6-7 annual meeting, FRONTLINE presents "Jefferson's Blood," a documentary produced by Thomas Lennon and narrated by author Shelby Steele airing Tuesday, May 2 at 10 pm. on PBS (check local listings). Moving back and forth between Jefferson's 18<sup>th</sup> century world and the present day, the film recounts both the history of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship and the modern-day repercussions of that relationship for the late presidents' descendants—both black and white.

Through interviews with historians and Jefferson's 21<sup>st</sup> century progeny, "Jefferson's Blood" examines how the issue of the president's paternity continues to divide families and spark national debate. The film also explores how Jefferson's lifelong denial of his "shadow family" illustrates America's continuing struggle with issues of race and identity.

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"Jefferson represents a classic white problem," author Steele says in the documentary. "How to live with an

## Jefferson's Blood



Shay Banks Young, a descendant of Sally's son Madison, places flowers at Jefferson's grave.

PHOTO BY TORE BERGSAKER/  
CORBIS SYGMA

open evil (slavery) and yet maintain a sense of one's own decency."

"Jefferson's Blood" traces the racial divide among Jefferson's kin to the present day, where descendants both black and white continue to grapple with issues of race, identity, and family. Viewers meet the Cooper sisters, descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. The sisters, raised as white, only recently learned of their mixed racial origin and connection to the late president. This discovery, however, has left the Cooper Family deeply divided, with some members eager to learn more about their black heritage and others content to leave the past buried.

FRONTLINE, for example, speaks with the Rev. Thomas Woodson and Byron Woodson, two members of the vast Woodson clan that has been vocal in seeking admittance to the Jefferson cemetery for black Hemings descendants. Both Woodson men believe they are descended from a slave rumored to be Sally Hemings' first child by Jefferson. Family lore, they say, tells how this child quarreled with Jefferson and

(Please see 'Jefferson' page 8)

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