

Sally Hemings, an enslaved house servant

Reading Level: Middle School

Sally Hemings was born in 1773 to Elizabeth (Betty) Hemings, a slave. Laws at the time made Sally a slave since she was born to an enslaved mother. However, Sally was described as “mighty near white and very handsome, long straight hair down her back”.

In 1774, Betty Hemings was given to Martha, Thomas Jefferson’s wife. Sally and her ten brothers and sisters came to Monticello with their mother. How did Sally feel about being a slave at Monticello? Since she left no letters or journals, we don’t know her thoughts and feelings. Details of her life come from others’ letters and from Monticello’s records. In 1873, Madison Hemings, her son, was interviewed for a newspaper article. From his interview, historians also learned about Sally’s life at Monticello and with Thomas Jefferson.

When Sally was fourteen, she “crossed the ocean alone” aboard the *Arundel* with Mary, Thomas Jefferson’s youngest daughter. They traveled to France to meet Jefferson, who was in Paris to negotiate treaties of trade and friendship.

In Paris, Sally was dressed in “calico and Irish linen.” She learned to dress hair and stitch needlework and to become a ladies’ maid to Jefferson’s daughters. She explored the city with Mary and her older sister, Martha. She was even paid wages, about \$2.50 a month. Sally hoped to stay in France where French laws granted her freedom. But after two years in Paris, she returned to Monticello. There she took care of Jefferson’s chamber (his bedroom) and his wardrobe (his clothes). She gave birth to six children; two died in infancy.

Sally Hemings’s four children lived as free adults. William Beverly Hemings ran away in 1822. He ‘passed’ as a white man and lived in Washington, D.C. With Thomas Jefferson’s help, Harriet Hemings ran away to Philadelphia where she ‘passed’ as a white woman. Jefferson’s granddaughter wrote that her grandfather would “allow such of his slaves as were sufficiently white to pass for white men, to withdraw from the plantation; it was called running away, but they were never reclaimed”.

When Thomas Jefferson died, his will freed Sally’s remaining children, James Madison Hemings and Thomas Eston Hemings. Madison was a carpenter and Eston a musician and woodworker. Sally died in 1835, but a register of free blacks noted that she had been a “free people of color” since 1826.

