

In her quest to proclaim her family's roots, Michele Cooley-Quille is shedding light on a not-so-comfortable side of history.

A Daughter's Declaration

By Melissa Hendricks

Illustration by Sam Kittner



I have something special to tell you."

With those words, uttered one spring day more than 20 years ago, Robert Cooley III beckoned his three children into the master bedroom of their rambling Victorian home. Cooley was a remarkable man. He had earned two bronze stars in Vietnam and become Virginia's first African American federal magistrate and general district court judge. Now, Cooley told his children-- Lisa, 13; Michele, 12; and Robert, 9-- something remarkable about their own history. They were the great-great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren of Thomas Jefferson. They were descended from a man named Thomas Woodson, who was the oldest of five children born to a slave named Sally Hemings and fathered by Jefferson.

Michele is now a clinical psychologist at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, and she goes by her married name, Michele Cooley-Quille. The day she learned about her famous ancestor was a high point of her childhood.

"We were so excited," she recalls. "It's so exciting to realize part of the blood that runs through your veins was Thomas Jefferson's."

At school the next day, Michele Cooley exploded with the news. While her friends shared her enthusiasm, others were doubtful. How could an African American be a descendant of Jefferson? "I remember the expression on my teacher's face," says Cooley-Quille. "It was, 'Yeah, back to math.'"

WHEN COOLEY-QUILLE TALKS ABOUT this incident now, she expresses no bitterness. The teacher was ignorant, perhaps, but not racist, she says. She is seated in her office at Public Health, where she is an assistant professor of mental hygiene. The picture of dignified composure, she is a graceful woman with extra large eyes and flowing brown hair. At this meeting, she is nearly six months pregnant. She and husband Allen Quille, a Baltimore businessman, are expecting their first child.

"People have been exposed to the comfortable side of history. History has been that there were slaves and there were white people and they were separate. But it's not true," she asserts. "Now we need to get the covers off, to open eyes to reality. I don't think it does our country a service by showing half of history. You grow from challenge and having the truth."

Cooley-Quille is seeking membership to the Monticello Association, whose 700 members are descended from Thomas Jefferson and his wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson. She would also like to be buried in the cemetery at Monticello, which the association oversees.

"What I really want is equity rights and privileges," says Cooley-Quille, "for symbolic reasons. It represents final justice for what's been denied for generations, and it represents history being rectified."

Was Jefferson really the father of Sally Hemings's children? This question has been the subject of novels, screenplays, and heated debate dating back to 1802 when journalist James Callendar alleged that one of



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Jefferson's slaves had a "striking though sable resemblance to the president himself." Historians and descendants of Jefferson and Hemings on both sides of the debate cite historical data to support their point of view. But modern science recently added another chapter to this already intriguing tale. Last November, scientists reported that DNA studies indicated Jefferson was the father of one of Hemings children. However, far from closing the Hemings-Jefferson story, the DNA results have complicated it, and for Michele Cooley-Quille, raised more questions than they answered.

COOLEY-QUILLE DECIDED at age 10 that she wanted to become a child psychologist. "I always thought kids needed someone to listen to them," she says. She majored in psychology, and went on to earn master's and doctoral degrees in clinical psychology at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville--the venerable institution founded by "Mr. Jefferson."

Cooley-Quille defended her doctoral dissertation in the school's Rotunda, a few feet from a bust of the nation's third president. "It was a means of support," she says, convincing her, "I can do this. I have support here--visible support."

But she also affirmed something she had begun to sense years ago in seventh-grade math class--it was not a simple matter to be an African-American descendant of Jefferson. "I learned not to run around and wear a sign," she says. Mentioning her famous ancestor, she says, would inevitably lead to a ream of questions. "It was emotionally consuming."

Cooley-Quille is now a respected authority on preventing emotional and behavioral problems in children exposed to violence. "She has a real passion for improving the lives of kids," says Philip Leaf, a professor of mental hygiene who has collaborated with Cooley-Quille on several studies.

In the wake of last spring's violent rampage by two students at the Littleton, Colorado, high school, Cooley-Quille received calls from several journalists seeking her expert opinions. But those calls have been vastly outnumbered by media inquiries about her family history. She has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show, CNN, and CBS *This Morning*, and been interviewed by the BBC radio, to name a few. It's all been a bit overwhelming and surprising, she says. To Cooley-Quille and her relatives, this "news" is old news.

HISTORY IS A WEAVING TOGETHER of stories. One of these stories Michele Cooley-Quille learned at her father's side and through family photographs and documents. In her office one afternoon, she pulls several of these photographs from a drawer and splays them on her desk like playing cards. There is one of her mom and dad, handsomely dressed; her grandparents, and, going back in time, sepia photos of elegantly dressed great aunts and uncles in furs and button-down shoes. She also retrieves a hefty paperback book called the *Woodson Family Source Book*, which contains xeroxed copies of yellowing deeds, letters, newspaper clippings, and other documents--some dating back almost 200 years--that tell the Woodson story.

It began in 1787, when the 44-year-old Thomas Jefferson was minister to France. His wife, Martha, had died. His daughter Mary and a 14- or 15-year-old slave named Sally Hemings traveled from the Jefferson plantation at Monticello to Paris.

(Sally Hemings and her five brothers and sisters were the children resulting from a relationship between Martha's father and Elizabeth Hemings, his slave and mistress. Thus, the six Hemings children were Martha's half-siblings.)

In Paris, according to the Woodson account, Hemings was Jefferson's mistress and became pregnant. She

The Descendants of Thomas Woodson



Lewis Woodson, oldest son of Thomas's 11 children, a minister and abolitionist who wrote for *The Colored American*.



James Woodson, owner of several barbershops in Pittsburgh.

told Jefferson that she wanted to remain in France, where slavery was prohibited, but he convinced her to return to Virginia, promising to grant her children their freedom.

So Hemings returned to Monticello, and, in 1790, gave birth to a son, Thomas. Over the next two decades, Jefferson and Hemings had six more children, four of whom survived past childhood: William Beverley, Harriet, Madison, and Eston.

Like Jefferson, young Tom was tall and had reddish hair. When Jefferson was in the first of his two terms in office (1801- 1809), rumors began to spread among the Virginia gentry that young Tom was his son. Callendar then published his story. Attempts may have been made to kidnap Thomas; Jefferson's political enemies may have wanted to display the boy as a living exhibit of the president's indiscretions. Perhaps to spare the president embarrassment, Thomas was sent to live with a neighbor named Woodson. He changed his name to Thomas Woodson and a few years later married a woman named Jemima.

William and Harriet Hemings ran away from Monticello. Eston and Madison were freed by Jefferson's will in 1826, and later moved to Ohio. (In his will, Jefferson freed in all five of the 130 slaves at Monticello, all relatives of Sally Hemings.) Sally Hemings was freed by Jefferson's oldest daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph, after Jefferson's death. She died in 1836 at age 63 or 64.

Michele's story follows the trail of Thomas and Jemima Woodson. The couple moved to southern Ohio. Thomas worked as a carpenter, and was a charter member of an African Methodist Episcopal Church. He eventually helped establish the town of Berlin Crossroads, where he and Jemima are buried.

Thomas Woodson had 13 children, including eldest son Lewis. A minister, abolitionist, and orator, Lewis



Sophie Woodson Golden, perhaps born in Pittsburgh, mother of four children.



Samuel Henry Golden Jr., porter and driver for a company in Pittsburgh.



Ruth Golden Cooley, legal secretary, first African American to write a weekly column for the *Petersburg Progress*.



Robert H. Cooley III, decorated war veteran

appears sage and somber in a photograph, a handsome man with large features.

And so the story continues through the generations, sounding like the begat verses of the Bible. Lewis had a son named James, who had a daughter named Sophie, who married a Golden and had a son named Samuel. His daughter, Ruth, married civil rights lawyer Robert Cooley Jr. They had a son, Robert H. Cooley III.

As a youth in the 1940s, Robert Cooley learned to keep quiet about his family secret or risk getting teased or beat up. But as an adult, after he had married and had children, his interest in his heritage was rekindled. A distant relative named Minnie Woodson had begun compiling the stories of descendants of Thomas Woodson, material that would eventually be included in the *Source Book*. By now family members were scattered throughout the United States. It was a vast brood, as one would expect of a clan stemming from 13 children. Remarkably, relatives from many different branches of the family shared the same story about their famous forebear.

Cooley began publicizing his story, and seeking recognition of his family's heritage. In the spring of 1998, he was interviewed on a Sunday morning network news program. He told the interviewer that when he died he would like to be buried in the Jefferson family cemetery on the grounds of Monticello.

Two weeks later, Coole unexpectedly died of heart complications, a week shy of his 59th birthday.

Determined that his crusade would not die with him, the Cooley family elected Michele to carry on her father's mission. So Cooley-Quille telephoned Robert Gillespie, who was then the president of the Monticello Association, to request permission to bury her father at Monticello. Two days later, Gillespie

and lawyer, who sought recognition as a descendant of Thomas Jefferson.



Michele Cooley-Quille, Hopkins clinical psychology, asserting her rights as eighth generation descendant of Jefferson.

Photos courtesy Michele Cooley-Quille and Byron Woodson

phoned her back with an answer. Request denied.

UNCERTAINTIES, AMBIGUITIES, and contradictions are woven through the fabric of history along with the stories. And the matter of the paternity of Thomas Woodson and his siblings has its fair share.

Another version of events, favored by some of the descendants of Thomas and Martha Jefferson, is that one of the president's cousins, Peter or Samuel Carr, was the father of some or all of Sally Hemings's children.

In another version, the president's younger brother, Randolph, or one of Randolph's sons, was the father.

Enter Charlottesville pathologist Eugene Foster, who hoped that DNA could help untangle some of the knots in the Jefferson-Hemings story. Three years ago, while Foster was pondering how to study the question genetically, one of his colleagues called and asked whether he knew about a new molecular technique involving analysis of the Y chromosome.

The Y chromosome is passed from father to son, and thus is the molecular chain that hooks back solely through a family's male line. Until relatively recently, geneticists viewed the Y as a genetic wasteland containing few genes. But in the past 15 years, they have revised that impression. They discovered several genes on the Y. Further, they found that every so often throughout the Y chromosome, there were variations in the nucleotide sequence (the A, T, C, G codes) that were family-specific. These variations are known as polymorphisms, and they are passed down from father to son to grandson and so on, remarkably unchanged through the generations. So males within a direct line of inheritance generally share the same distinct pattern of Y-associated polymorphisms.

After learning about this new technique, says Foster, "my intellectual curiosity was piqued. I went into high

**Did Jefferson
father Sally
Hemings's
children? Nearly
200 years later
the debate
continues.**

gear."

Foster crafted a plan. He would sequence a selected portion of the Y chromosome from men in the Jefferson family line, as well as men descended from Jefferson's cousins, the Carrs. Finally, he would test the Y of men descended from Sally Hemings. A match of Y chromosomes would suggest a familial link.

But there was a roadblock. Thomas Jefferson and his wife had no sons, so there are no direct male-line descendants of the couple. Therefore, Foster turned to the direct male-line descendants of Field Jefferson, the president's paternal uncle. Since Field and Thomas Jefferson were descended from the same male line (Field's father was Thomas's grandfather), both men shared the same Y chromosome--assuming that both were legitimate children.

Foster contacted and drew blood from five male-line descendants of Field Jefferson and from three male-line descendants of John Carr, the grandfather of Samuel and Peter Carr. He also collected blood samples from several Hemings descendants: one from the Eston Hemings line and five from the Thomas Woodson line.

Then he delivered the samples to two teams of geneticists in England, and to another in the Netherlands. Each team used a different technique to analyze the Y chromosomes.

The DNA sequences from the Carr and Hemings descendants did not match. To Foster, the results established fairly conclusively that neither Carr brother was the father of Eston Hemings. There was a match between Eston's descendants and Field Jefferson's, indicating that Thomas Jefferson could have been Eston's father-- the likelihood that the match occurred by chance was at the very most one in 100, the geneticists concluded.

***"The good old
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-Jefferson to Caesar
Rodney Ford.
October 8, 1807

But there was more. When the researchers lined up the Y chromosome data of Thomas Woodson's descendants (Michele Cooley-Quille's line) beneath those of Field Jefferson's descendants, the pattern did not match.

Writing in *Nature* under the headline, "Jefferson fathered slave's last child," the scientists concluded that "the simplest and most probable explanations" for their findings were that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Eston Hemings Jefferson and was not the father of Thomas Woodson.

Several Jefferson descendants, genealogists, and scientists immediately attacked the results, and a heated debate played out in the scientific and popular media.

Some critics argued that the study did not rule out the possibility that a Jefferson other than Thomas, such as Thomas's brother Randolph, or one of Randolph's sons (who would have had the same Y chromosome as the president), was the father of Hemings's children.

And there was more, including claims of historical revisionism.

Foster and his colleagues responded that, indeed, the headline given to their study was "misleading"; neither DNA nor historical data can definitively establish paternity. But based on all the scientific and historical evidence (such as documents showing that Thomas Jefferson was at Monticello when Eston Hemings would have been conceived), they maintained that, in all likelihood, paternity rested with Jefferson.

To Cooley-Quille, the *Nature* report generated mixed feelings. "I feel vindicated that there was some sort of genetic linkage between Sally Hemings and Jefferson," she says. She admits that the absence of a match between the Woodson and Field Jefferson descendants is "disappointing."

But she also suggests several scenarios that could reconcile the historical and biological records. Illegitimacy or adoption somewhere along the family line could have introduced a new Y chromosome. Foster's group examined only five of 1,400 Woodson descendants. Perhaps if he had tested a different set, he would have found a match.

And indeed, Foster points out that he made several assumptions in drawing his conclusions. "Our study was based on the assumption that Jefferson was legitimate, and that his father and Field had the same father," he says.

What's more, Jemima Woodson was seven years older than Thomas. "It is conceivable that she had children from an earlier relationship," suggests Foster, which would have introduced a new Y chromosome into the line.

Foster hopes that further research will resolve the ambiguities. He recently obtained a blood sample from a descendant of William Woodson, one of Thomas Woodson's sons and a lineage whose Y chromosome he has not yet tested. He also learned that there may be male line descendants of Madison Hemings.

"It would be great if we could test them," says Foster. "It would really make the story even tighter. As it is, the whole business rests on one match, which [we] could say is chance.

"Scientific studies by themselves are not conclusive of anything," Foster adds. They are tools that can complement oral and written histories. In the future, says Foster, scientists may invent new tools that will answer questions about ancestry more rapidly and resolutely. "But now we're at a funny combination of history and science."

FROM WHAT MATERIALS SHOULD the tapestry



From what materials should the tapestry of history be woven? Hairy threads of DNA? Stories told? Or words written? Until relatively recently, historians rejected oral histories as unreliable. But that attitude is beginning to change.

of history be woven? Hairy threads of DNA? Stories told? Or words written?

Until relatively recently, historians rejected oral histories as unreliable. It was a loss for African Americans, who have a strong tradition dating back to slavery--and perhaps before--of passing down family history through storytelling.

But over time, many historians have given more credence to the oral tradition, according to research historian Cinder Stanton, of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, which owns and operates Monticello. She directs "Getting Word," the oral history of descendants of Monticello's slaves, and has interviewed more than 100 of those descendants. Historians have come to realize that people can stretch the truth in a letter as much as they can in an oral history, she notes.

Stanton's gut feeling: "Of course something could come up that would change things tomorrow. But based on everything we've heard and think we know, the most likely explanation was that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings's known children."

She continues, "The vast majority of historical questions can't be answered to a 99.9 percent probability factor. Here, people are trying to apply certainty to history. You can't. In the case of Jefferson, people want the smoking gun. There probably won't be one."

FOLLOWING THE NATURE REPORT, Cooley-Quille and her relatives continued to stand by their family story. Last November, she was a guest on the Oprah Winfrey show, along with a dozen other Hemings descendants and Lucian Truscott IV, a Monticello Association member and best-selling author who has the reputation of being something of a firebrand. On the show, Truscott invited Cooley-Quille and the other Hemings descendants to attend the next

annual meeting of the Monticello Association, which was planned for May. She and about 35 other members of the Hemings line accepted the invitation.

The association's annual meeting is usually a staid affair attended by 100 people. Topics on the agenda generally include landscaping and restoration matters, a budget vote, and election of new officers. But at this past year's meeting, twice the usual number of members made the trek to the estate in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It promised to be a good show.

The guests at the weekend-long event included three Hemings descendants who planned to apply for membership to the association: Cooley-Quille; Shay Banks-Young, a descendant of Madison Hemings; and Mary Westerinin, a descendant of Eston Hemings. Close behind came 200 reporters. The meeting offered all the enticing elements of a dramatic story: history, sex, scandal, race relations, even science. And reporters swarmed to the scene.

Following a weekend of social events and ceremonies, to which all the Hemings family members were invited, the annual meeting commenced on Sunday afternoon.

The event played out as part business, part circus. Association members had established a committee the day before to determine the criteria for membership and to ponder the issue of admitting Hemings descendants--putting off a final decision possibly for a year. (Until that point, members had been admitted on the basis of historical evidence including oral histories.) But there was time made for discussion of the issue at this meeting. When the time came, one member made a motion to request that nonmembers leave the room while the matter was discussed. Members rejected the motion by a vote of 33 to 20.

A handful of the members, says Cooley-Quille,

***"For here we are
not afraid to
follow truth
wherever it may
lead."***

-Jefferson to
William Roscoe,
regarding the
University of
Virginia

wanted to welcome the Hemings descendants immediately. Another few, she says, were opposed, apparently upholding strict bloodlines. They were not racists, declared one member, just "snobs."

But most people, it seemed to Cooley-Quille, wanted more information on which to base their decision.

Foster presented his DNA evidence. "It struck me how little many of the Monticello Association members knew about DNA testing," says Cooley-Quille. Many had believed that their own DNA could be tested to determine a blood link to Jefferson.

Cooley-Quille suggested at the meeting that the criteria the new Monticello Association membership committee established be applied to all past, present, and future members. The implication was that DNA testing could then not be used as a screening test for admission--since all current association members were descended from Jefferson's daughters, the Y chromosome test was not applicable. Association officials later assured Cooley-Quille that the standards would be uniform for all members and potential members.

The mood of the weekend's events, says Cooley-Quille, "varied from tension to excitement to humor to animosity." At one point, she managed to slip away from the microphones and cameras, and find her way to a set of stairs leading to Monticello's signature dome.

As she climbed the steep, tiny stairs, the din of the guests and reporters faded to a dull hum, and she found herself in an octagonal room with walls painted bright egg-yolk yellow. Sunlight streamed in through several large round windows, but surprisingly, the room was cool and comfortable.

Exhaling, Cooley-Quille took a moment to reflect on the significance of the place and its founder. "You get

a sense of the moment, being in a place rarely visited. It was a moment of calm and reflection.

"It provided for me a great sense of history and spirit," she says.

SINCE THE MEETING, the debate has continued. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, which is not connected to the Monticello Association, has established a committee of experts to weigh the scientific and historical evidence linking Hemings descendants to Jefferson. Foundation President Daniel Jordan puts a positive spin on the recent events. "We think overall it's been a great thing," he says. "It helped people talk about things. It's done more to encourage a dialogue on race than the presidential commission [on race]."

Back in her office a few weeks after the meeting, still reeling from the whirlwind of attention, Cooley-Quille is now pondering her next move. She still plans to apply for membership to the association, but she is not sure when.

She is well aware of the irony here. She's an African-American woman seeking a public connection to a man whose occupations included owning slaves. But she bears no grudges. "Democracy wouldn't be democracy without him," she says.

"I understand that when he died he was in arrears. He freed a few slaves--Sally's relatives only. But he owed money when he died. Do I have questions? Yes. If he were sitting here, yes, I'd want to know why he didn't do more. But I also understand the political ramifications of abolishing slavery."

The expectant mother says she'll pass along her family's story to her baby, due in September, who will also accompany her to the next annual meeting of the Monticello Association. "Having a strong sense of family is so important, and I think we undervalue it. It



gives a sense of how to operate in this world and how to operate positively," she says.

By some inclination of spirit or nature, Cooley-Quille has painted the baby's nursery a warm sunny hue-- very much like the shade of the walls in the Monticello dome room.

The author wishes to thank Beverly Gray for providing information for this story.

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