



The black first lady who wasn't

Stephen Matchett

WHILE there is a black first lady in the White House, it's not the first time the mother of a president's children is an Afro-American. After many decades of debate, DNA evidence confirms slave Sally Hemmings bore sons and daughters to the third president of the US, Thomas Jefferson.

New York historian Annette Gordon-Reed, in Australia to speak at a University of Sydney symposium on Jefferson, tells Hemmings's story and those of her children in two books. The second, *The Hemmingses of Monticello: An American Family*, won the US National Book Award for nonfiction last year.

According to Gordon-Reed, a black family in the White House, with a first lady who is descended from slaves, sends a powerful message to young blacks. "Michelle Obama is a political model for a different century of blackness," she tells the *HES*. "Young people who grow up with the Obamas in the White House will have a different view of black people. I hope young blacks' sense of what they can do will change and it will end blacks being denied opportunities."

The possibility of a black president and first lady could not have occurred to Jefferson and it must have still seemed impossible when Gordon-Reed was growing up in the 1960s and became the first black student to attend a previously segregated school in her Texas town.

It is only in the past decade that

scholars have all but universally accepted Jefferson and Hemmings had a relationship that began when she was 16 and he was 30 years older, a relationship that produced seven children.

It is easy to understand why anybody not an expert in the scholarship of slavery has trouble understanding that Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, including the revolutionary idea that all men are created equal, was willing to father children through many years by a woman who was his wife's half-sister and whom he owned as property.

Gordon-Reed says while Jefferson "knew enough to know slavery was wrong, he could never extricate himself from his way of life". From cradle to grave, his elegant existence — Hemmings lived at Jefferson's mountain-top mansion, Monticello — relied on slave labour. "The first person Jefferson saw at birth was a slave, so was the last person he saw on his deathbed."

Hemmings's life is largely unknown but Gordon-Reed shows she and her family were much better off than ordinary slaves. "They were a caste apart," she says.

Hemmings went to Paris with Jefferson when he was US ambassador and in Virginia her family enjoyed an ambiguous independence, learning skills and earning wages: advantages beyond the comprehension of the field hands who produced the wealth that built Monticello. Yet Hemmings and her children

remained slaves until they were freed at Jefferson's death: the only human property he let go.

But Gordon-Reed judges Jefferson according to the standards of his age and class. Despite his belief that although slavery was wrong, blacks were intellectually inferior to white people, she considers him one of the greatest Americans. "He's a very intelligent person who knows what the right answer is, but, as with all of us, we can't quite get there if it means we have to give up something: namely, Monticello," she said in an interview last year.

The story of the Hemmings family demonstrates the difficulty of assessing Jefferson and his world according to the moral absolutes of our age. Hemmings could have escaped while in Paris but she chose to stay as the price of returning to her family. And when her children got their chance to pass into white society, they prospered.

As Gordon-Reed puts it, "They got an almost four-decade head start on emancipation and were able to make the most of that."

But it took 180 years before the US could officially have a black first family. It was, as Barack Obama said on election night last November, "a long time coming". And while we can have no idea what Hemmings would have made of it, Gordon-Reed offers an educated guess: "Sally would be stunned."



Positive view: Annette Gordon-Reed considers Thomas Jefferson to be one of the greatest Americans, even though he was a slave owner

Picture: Bob Finlayson