WHAT CAN DNA TELL US ABOUT THOMAS JEFFERSON AND SALLY HEMINGS?

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

For more than 200 years, people have argued about whether Thomas Jefferson, one of the main writers of the Declaration of Independence, fathered children with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman at his Virginia estate. New research has used DNA from Jefferson's hair and samples from living descendants of both Jefferson and Hemings. Scientists recovered DNA from hair cut from Jefferson after his death in 1826. They then compared it with DNA from descendants of his known family and from descendants of Hemings' children. The results strongly indicate that Jefferson was the father of Eston Hemings. Further testing also found convincing evidence linking Jefferson to descendants of Madison Hemings. The research does not erase the difficult history of slavery or the unequal power between Jefferson and Hemings. Instead, it gives new evidence about a relationship that was denied or questioned for generations.

WHY IS THIS INTERESTING?

This story connects ideas about freedom and equality with the reality of slavery in the early United States. It also shows how history can change when new evidence becomes available. The DNA research has helped descendants understand their family history, while also forcing people to look more honestly at the contradiction between Jefferson's words and his life.

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

"Why did this evidence change the story of Jefferson's family?"

Source: Smithsonian Magazine

https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/did-thomas-jefferson-father-sally-hemings-children-after-more-than-decade-research-answer-finally-firmly-