

Thomas (1790–1879) and Jemima (1783–1868) Woodson

Due to the social conventions and recordkeeping of the times, there is no documentary evidence that Thomas was the son of Thomas Jefferson, as the Woodson family has maintained for generations. But there *is* that child-sized gap in the Jefferson –Sally Hemings story: the child she became pregnant with while he was an ambassador to France. If one privileges written history above oral history, the child disappeared once the former president and his enslaved concubine returned from the City of Lights. According to historian Marie Jenkins Schwarz, “How long [Sally’s] first child lived remains unknown. Apparently, not long.” But using the term “unknown” might be taking a liberty. According to Byron Woodson’s book *A President in the Family: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and Thomas Woodson*, how long that first child lived is very well known: 89 years, and only after he had married a darker-skinned woman, moved to Ohio, become a wealthy property owner, helped found the town of Berlin Crossroads, raised eight educated children of his own, and led a network of Underground Railroad conductors.

An October 1840 article in *The Colored American* boldly proclaimed about Berlin Crossroads, “The colored people there cared more about education than the whites did. I have never found a more intelligent or enterprising farming family [than the Woodsons] in Ohio.” And the Woodsons’ offspring were not just rudimentarily educated. One, Sarah, became a nationally known teacher/activist. After graduating from Oberlin College, Sarah became the first black woman to teach in a United States college after securing a position at Wilberforce University, which was cofounded by her brothers Lewis and James. She later became principal of African American schools in both Ohio and North Carolina and became a force for the

nation's Temperance Movement. Two of Thomas and Jemima's granddaughters, Minerva and Valeria Woodson, also became educators. A third, Julia Ann, also got her B.A. from Oberlin. In addition, four of the Woodson sons became schoolteachers. Before Lewis Woodson founded Wilberforce, he founded the African Education Society in 1827 in order to facilitate the education of black children, who were not privy to state education funds until 1849. Thomas and Jemima's grandson Rev. Thomas Wesley Woodson also attended Wilberforce, eventually earning his doctorate from Morris Brown University before then becoming a trustee at Wilberforce. The Woodsons also helped found Randall Academy, the only black school in Jackson. Their son Lawrence was on the faculty. "All of the Woodsons were educated," says Ron Salmon, a local Berlin Crossroads historian. "Berlin was considered one of the most educated villages in the county and the black people in this area were considered smarter than any white man around." And this was a perception that predominated at the time as well. Another paper, *The Philanthropist*, quoted a neighbor as saying, "The Negroes are all that care about education around here."

The suspect spaces around Thomas' origin derive from historians' disputation of the Woodson family oral history, which maintains that, at the age of twelve, Thomas had a run-in with the Father of the Declaration of Independence and was sent to the farm of John Woodson, Jefferson's uncle by marriage. Thomas never returned to Monticello. Since, from that point on, he was known as Thomas Woodson as opposed to Thomas Hemings like Sally's other children, some claim that Thomas was actually the son of either John Woodson or his son. Either way, it was on this plantation where Thomas met Jemima, and fell in love. But even this was a sort of political act. By all accounts, Thomas was a light-skinned black at a time when light-skinned blacks were faced with one of the most tragic choices in American history. Like his brother

Eston Hemings and like his cousin Lewis Leach, Thomas could have chosen to reject his blackness, move away, and “pass” into white society. This would have been impossible with Jemima, though, who by all accounts was too black to fool anyone. As Woodson-descendant Byron Woodson puts it, Woodson “chose to live as an African American.” Thirty years later, Thomas’ son Lewis did the same, marrying a woman much darker than he was.

In 1820, Thomas and Jemima moved from Greenbriar County, Virginia, to Chillicothe, Ohio, where they again stepped out from the pages of history. The Woodsons’ experience in Chillicothe mirrors almost exactly the experience that Rev. Richard Allen had when he founded the African Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia. Like Allen, the Woodsons were originally members of the majority white Methodist Church in Chillicothe. But, also like the black congregation in Philadelphia, they were not allowed to sit in the pews on the main floor, but were relegated to the balcony pews—an area infamously known in antebellum church lore as “Nigger Heaven”—and were served communion last. Furious at the notion that God’s love for them could ever be second-best, the Woodsons and the rest of the black congregation left the Chillicothe Methodist Church in 1821 and, in a bold move for racial justice, founded Quinn Chapel A.M.E. Church with Reverend William Paul Quinn. To this day the Woodsons and the others are memorialized by name on a historical marker outside the church. This was the beginning of the Woodson family’s foundational work in Cincinnati’s Underground Railroad community. Three years after founding “the first A.M.E. Church west of the Allegheny Mountains” in Chillicothe, the same itinerant preacher who helped initiate the split, Moses Freeman, helped orchestrate another A.M.E. schism in Cincinnati. Five years later, the Woodsons purchased property in Jackson County, Ohio, partially to help offset the runoff of disfranchised blacks fleeing the Cincinnati Riots of 1829, as Lewis was cultivating his lifelong

belief in black-separatism, and had been researching a black Utopian community. Lewis was the secretary of an 1830 A.M.E. conference purposely located halfway between Chillicothe and Cincinnati, and four years later, Quinn and the famous Rebels of Cincinnati's Lane Seminary founded replicas of Lewis' African Education Society in 1836 in the Queen City before the Rebels went on to found Oberlin College's first antislavery administration. In addition, the two Woodson sons who died fighting Underground Railroad operators, John and Thomas, both served on the board of the Colored Children's Asylum, which provided for children in Cincinnati.

By 1850, Thomas was known to be one of the richest men in Jackson County. But there is, again, some mystery as to how he acquired his wealth. Before leaving Greenbriar County, he had been running cattle up into the Jackson County area, which is how he became familiar with it. Perhaps that was the source of his wealth. While working as a farmer in Chillicothe, Thomas began to buy property. Perhaps he was a savvy property investor. Salmons believed that the key to Thomas' wealth lay in connections he had made through his father. "Thomas Jefferson was friends with the governor of Ohio, so Woodson had to have connections and money to build churches and buy land in Chillicothe." In 1829, he bought the 160 acres in Jackson from Nathan Brown and moved there in 1831 with his family. By 1840, he owned 370 acres, and by 1850, Thomas had acquired seven separate parcels of land.

However Woodson acquired his wealth, he almost immediately set to aggrandizing not just himself, but all the blacks who came to Jackson. First, he and Jemima helped found the Jackson A.M.E. church so that none of their chosen brethren would ever again have to populate Nigger Heaven. But it was the Woodsons home for which they became most noted. The house was built in a distinctive "X" shape, and became renowned among escaping slaves along the

Underground Railroad, who were told when they arrived in Berlin to look for an X-shaped house. This is, in fact, how Berlin Crossroads got its name, as it was originally simply called Berlin, Ohio. Over time, the town acquired the name, Berlin X-Roads. Due to the secretive nature of their work, the actual identities of the conductors of the Underground Railroad is a matter of some conjecture, but a regional accounting of some notable members lists five of the Woodsons' sons, two Cassells, one Leach—the last name of Jemima's sister Fanny—and two Wilsons, Fanny's grandchildren. In addition, it is fairly common local knowledge that two of Thomas' sons, John and Thomas Jr., were beaten to death by slave catchers.

Jemima was predeceased by Thomas, but his obituary could undoubtedly be applied to both. He was a man “of excellent character, honest, kind, and benevolent. . . . the head of a numerous family, among whom are some of the best citizens of the county.”

## **Sources**

Much of this information was obtained through oral interviews conducted with Berlin Crossroads historian Ron Salmons and Woodson descendant Connye Richardson; the Woodson Sourcebook, a compilation of family oral history; Ohio History Central ([www.ohiohistorycentral.org](http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org)); and Salmons' Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/BerlinXRoads](https://www.facebook.com/BerlinXRoads)), a compilation of regional images, family papers, and documents.

## **Further Reading**

Cheek, William and Aimee Lee *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829–65* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989)

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Woodson, Byron *A President in the Family: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and Thomas Woodson* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2001)