FOREWORD

COMING TO THE TABLE

I remember my Great-Aunt Aggie telling my brother Frank and me, “Just because you’re related to Thomas Jefferson doesn’t make you any better than anyone else, so you just keep your mouths shut about it.”

I followed that rule for almost fifty years. In all the times we studied the founding fathers in school, from elementary right through high school, I never raised my hand and said I was related to one of them. I went to West Point, which Jefferson founded, and I never breathed a word to anyone that I was the sixth great-grandson of the founder.

Then came 1998. A DNA study was done on the descendants of Jefferson’s grandchildren through his long-time relationship with enslaved Sally Hemings, and the results were about to be announced. I called the op-ed editor of the *New York Times* and asked if he wanted an article about the controversy that was sure to come. What was remarkable about this is that I had written for the *Times* op-ed page for almost thirty years without telling anyone that I was a descendent of Jefferson. But when I told the editor at the *Times* that I would be writing my next piece as a sixth great-grandson of the man, all he said was, “We’d love that piece, Lucian.” No questions about the legitimacy of my claim. No demand to see documentation. They just took me at my word.

Well, I wrote the story for the *Times*, and the DNA results were announced, shocking the world of Jefferson biographers and historians: at least one, and probably all, of the descendants of Sally Hemings were also descendants of Thomas Jefferson.

A couple of months went by, and the *Oprah Winfrey Show* called from Chicago, asking if my sister Mary and I would be willing to go on the show with several of our Hemings cousins. It would be the first time we met each other. After we agreed, there were extensive pre-interviews done by Oprah staffers before the show. We were informed that we would be put up in a hotel separate from our cousins. The way they were treating the whole thing gave us the impression that the show would be controversial, even explosive. The

descendants of what was perhaps America's most famous slaveowner would be meeting the descendants of his most famous slave, and sparks would fly!

The show was something else altogether. Mary and I appeared on stage with Shay Banks-Young and her son Douglas, a preacher from Columbus, Ohio. In the front rows of the audience were perhaps ten more descendants of Hemings and Jefferson. Mary and I were on the show alone with Oprah for the first segment. After the commercial break, Oprah brought out Shay and Doug. We embraced and took our seats. There wasn't a confrontation. In fact, it was something more akin to a reunion. The meeting of Thomas Jefferson's two families was way more matter-of-fact than anyone, including Oprah herself, could have predicted.

We were all Jefferson's great-grandchildren, after all.

Toward the end of the show, Oprah whispered to me during a commercial break that she would be asking me the first question when we came back, and it would be a good one. Sure enough, it was. "So, Lucian, now that you've met your cousins, what are you going to do?"

The truth was, I had no idea. I looked over at Shay and Doug and the rest of my Hemings cousins. It was evident, even from the brief time we had spent together—and despite the fact that that time was on the biggest daytime television show in the nation—that we had far more in common than any of us could have predicted. Although we didn't know each other at all, the way that we had all been raised was almost unnervingly similar. All of our parents had made the same point to us again and again: just because we were related to Thomas Jefferson didn't make us any better than anyone else—and man, we were not to forget that!

We had also been told not to talk about being descendants of Jefferson at school, albeit for different reasons. Mary and I were told it would be unseemly, like we were bragging; however, Shay and Doug and our other cousins had been told that people either would not believe them or would make fun of them. Unfortunately, that was exactly what happened to several of our Hemings cousins who broke their family rules and spoke out not only in school but later in life, as adults. Their experiences were quite a contrast to mine with the *New York Times*.

So, I thought for a second about Oprah's question, and I said, "Why don't all of you come to the family reunion at Monticello with me next May." They didn't accept on the spot, but I could tell they were thinking about it. Later, all of the cousins on the Oprah show and about fifty more would go to the

reunion of Jefferson descendants at Monticello as my guests. They attended the family meeting of the Monticello Association, which took place during the reunion, and I made a motion that we members of the association welcome them into the family. The motion was defeated on procedural grounds, but the die was cast.

I would go on to invite my Hemings cousins to the Monticello Reunion for three more years, until finally the Monticello Association took a formal vote on whether to admit the Hemings into the family. The vote was ninety-five to six against admitting them. Five of those voting in favor of the Hemings were Truscotts: my brother, my three sisters, and me. The sixth vote was from our cousin Marla R. Stevens.

We stopped going to the Monticello Association reunions after that. Instead, we now regularly attend Hemings family reunions and events for the descendants of slaves, put on by the Getting Word Project and Coming to the Table.

The Monticello Foundation recently removed the qualifying words, “most likely” from its description of Jefferson’s paternity of Hemings’s children, and the foundation has fully acknowledged that the history of enslaved people at Monticello as just as important as the history of Jefferson himself.

My cousins Susan Hutchison and Shannon LaNier were instrumental with Coming to the Table in this transformation of Monticello and the way history looks at Jefferson as a founding father and as a man. I’m also proud of the role I played in revealing the story of slavery at Monticello to the world, and I’m proud to be a part of Coming to the Table.

We have come a long way.

In fact, little did I know on that day when I embraced my Sally Hemings cousins and invited them to Monticello, how far we still had to go.

A turning point on the road to reconciliation came in the year 2000, when several of my Hemings cousins, including Shay Banks-Young, and I were invited to the annual convention of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in New York. We were to be presented with humanitarian awards for our work on racial reconciliation. The main speaker that night was George W. Bush, who was then running for president. The CORE convention was a campaign stop for him.

Right after Bush spoke, I was invited to the podium. There to my right were Bush, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and New York Governor George Pataki. To my left were my cousins from the Hemings family. In front of me was a crowd

of people who looked to be half from Harlem and half from Wall Street. Suffice it to say, it was something of an out-of-body experience.

Following the speech I had written down, I briefly outlined what my Hemings cousins and I had done to try to break the ice with my white Jefferson cousins and with Monticello itself, which was still treating Jefferson's relationship with Hemings like it was radioactive. But then I quickly pivoted to why I was there that night: I was there because my mother and father had raised me right. I told the crowd that people asked me all the time why I was standing up for my Hemings cousins, and they frequently remarked that it "must take a lot of courage." But I responded to these people the same way: I told them it didn't take any courage at all. Plus, although my parents had both died by then, I knew that if I hadn't taken a stand, my mother would have reached down from heaven, snatched me up by my short hairs, and asked why not.

After the convention, we were invited to a reception in a suite atop the New York Hilton, where we were all staying. Finally, around 2:00 a.m., I left the reception and went back to my room. I was in a Hilton bathrobe getting ready for bed when I heard a knock. I opened the door to find Shay standing in the hall, also wearing a bathrobe. I invited her in, but she demurred, saying that she would only take a minute. So we stood there in the hallway of the Hilton in our bathrobes.

Shay told me that she and the rest of the Hemings descendants hadn't been able to figure me out until tonight. She said that they had thought I might have some kind of agenda in inviting them to the Monticello reunions. A few of them thought I might have plans to write about it in a book.

I didn't, but now I find myself writing the foreword to this collection of stories from *Coming to the Table*, a much better way to talk about the legacy of slavery than one story alone. The stories told and the connections made through *Coming to the Table* have waited far too long to be shared, but they are here now. This painful and disgraceful part of our nation's history is finally being brought out in the open by the descendants of slaves and slaveowners both.

But this story has always been bigger than one man having children with one slave, even if his name was Thomas Jefferson and hers was Sally Hemings. It's about the stain that slavery has left on this country and the legacy with which we must live even today. *Coming to the Table* has helped to extend that story beyond two families in Virginia to the experiences of slaves and

slaveowners throughout the nation. Moreover, *Coming to the Table* has helped to begin the process of reconciliation between the descendants of slaves and the descendants of slaveowners that will be necessary if this country is to move forward.

On that night in the hallway of the Hilton Hotel, Shay told me that they finally understood why I had taken the stand I took on behalf of the Hemings family. It was because of the legacy left to me by my mother and father. She took me around the shoulders in a big hug and said right into my ear, “Welcome to the family.”

You have to hope, don’t you, that one day everyone, the sons and daughters of slaves and slaveowners alike, will be like Shay and me in our bathrobes, embracing as family.

Lucian K. Truscott IV

SLAVERY'S DESCENDANTS