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Opinion

## **I'm a Direct Descendant of Thomas Jefferson. Take Down His Memorial.**

*Monticello is shrine enough for a man who wrote that "all men are created equal" and yet never did much to make those words come true.*

**By Lucian K. Truscott IV**

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When my brother Frank and I were boys visiting our grandparents at their home in Virginia, just outside of Washington, we used to heckle our grandmother until she would drive us into town so we could visit the Smithsonian museum on the Mall.

As we crossed the Potomac River on the 14th Street Bridge, the Jefferson Memorial stood off to the left, overlooking the Tidal Basin. I don't remember ever visiting the memorial, even though it was just a short walk from the museums. It was located on the Mall, along Jefferson Drive, naturally.

We were surrounded by the history of Thomas Jefferson when we made those visits to our grandparents. We would drive down to Charlottesville with our grandmother to visit our great-aunts and our great-grandmother — and they would take us up the mountain to Monticello and drop us off to play in the house and on the grounds. They treated Monticello like it was the family home, because in a way it was: They were great-granddaughters of Jefferson. They had been born and grew up only a few miles away at a family plantation, called Edgehill.

I guess that's why my brother and I, the great-grandsons, took the Jefferson Memorial for granted. We had his ancestral home as a playground. It was where all of our great-grandparents and great-aunts and great-uncles were buried, and where one day, we were told, we would be buried, too. We didn't need the Jefferson Memorial. Monticello was enough.

It's still enough. In fact, as a memorial to Jefferson himself, it's almost perfect. And that is why his memorial in Washington should be taken down and replaced. Described by the National Park Service as "a shrine to freedom," it is anything but.

The memorial is a shrine to a man who during his lifetime owned more than 600 slaves and had at least six children with one of them, Sally Hemings. It's a shrine to a man who famously wrote that "all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence that founded this nation — and yet never did much to make those words come true. Upon his death, he did not free the people he enslaved, other than those in the Hemings family, some of whom were his own children. He sold everyone else to pay off his debts.

In fact, some of his white descendants, including his grandson Thomas Jefferson Randolph, my great-great-great-great grandfather, fought in the Civil War in defense of slavery. My great-grandmother lived with him at Edgehill after she was born there in 1866. That is how close we are not only to Jefferson but also to slavery. When we visited her as children, there was only one dead man between my brother and me and Thomas Jefferson.

I am the sixth-generation great-grandson of a slave owner. My cousins from the Sally Hemings family are also the great-grandchildren of a slave owner. But the difference is that our great-grandfather owned their great-grandmother. My family owned their family. That is the American history you will not learn when you visit the Jefferson Memorial. But you will learn it when you visit Monticello: There's now an exhibit of Sally Hemings's bedroom in her cavalike living quarters in the south wing, a room my brother and I used to play in when we were boys.

A tour of Monticello these days will tell you that it was designed by Jefferson and built by the people he enslaved; it will point out joinery and furniture built by Sally's brother, John Hemings. Today, there are displays of rebuilt cabins and barns where those enslaved lived and worked. At Monticello, you will learn the history of Jefferson, the man who was president and wrote the Declaration of Independence, and you will

learn the history of Jefferson, the slave owner. Monticello is an almost perfect memorial, because it reveals him with his moral failings in full, an imperfect man, a flawed founder.

That's why we don't need the Jefferson Memorial to celebrate him. He should not be honored with a bronze statue 19 feet tall, surrounded by a colonnade of white marble. The time to honor the slave-owning founders of our imperfect union is past. The ground, which should have moved long ago, has at last shifted beneath us.

And it's time to honor one of our founding mothers, a woman who fought as an escaped slave to free those still enslaved, who fought as an armed scout for the Union Army against the Confederacy — a woman who helped to bring into being a more perfect union after slavery, a process that continues to this day. In Jefferson's place, there should be another statue. It should be of Harriet Tubman.

To see a 19-foot-tall bronze statue of a Black woman, who was a slave and also a patriot, in place of a white man who enslaved hundreds of men and women is not erasing history. It's telling the real history of America.