AP U.S. HISTORY SUMMER ASSIGNMENT 2017

DUE BEFORE 11:59PM ON MONDAY, AUGUST 7TH

History is more than just a list of facts and dates; it is, instead, a kind of storytelling. As Harvard historian Jill Lepore persuasively suggests, history “is the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story accountable to evidence. In the writing of history, a story without argument fades into antiquarianism [i.e., a mere love of the past],” while “an argument without a story risks pedantry [i.e., excessive concern with minor details].”

Advanced Placement U.S. History is a survey of what has happened during the history of the United States. It is also an introduction to the way college students and professional historians write “the story of America.” My goals are to prepare you for college-level work and for success on the AP exam in May. To achieve both, you’ll need to become increasingly independent and sophisticated in your ability to read, interpret, and write about history.

In preparation for the year ahead, spend part of your summer actively reading the following essays from Lepore’s The Story of America: Essays on Origins (2012):

- “Here He Lyes”
- “A Pilgrim Passed I”
- “President Tom’s Cabin”

Each chapter will teach you something about American history. For example, in “Here He Lyes” you’ll learn about John Smith and the founding of Jamestown, and in “President Tom’s Cabin,” you’ll learn about Thomas Jefferson’s scandalous affair with Sally Hemmings, his slave. However, what’s important about each essay is not what Lepore tells you about the past, but rather what she argues is significant about these moments in American history, as well as what each chapter reveals about the process of “doing history.”

ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS:

Use the analysis questions on the back of this handout to guide your reading, and then answer each in a paragraph 7-10 sentences in length (3 paragraphs total).

Each paragraph should include specific references to the text; however, do not quote directly from the essays. Instead, paraphrase by restating the main ideas of the passage in your own words. To avoid plagiarism, use as few words from the original text as possible.

Submit your written answers to these questions on Monday, August 7th by 11:59pm on Turnitin.com. Login instructions, as well as the course ID and password, will be available on my website during the summer break, so check back sometime in July.

Finally, it should be noted that I will collect your actively read essays on the first day of class: Tuesday, August 15th. This, along with the analysis questions, will be your first grade for the fall semester.
ANALYSIS QUESTIONS:

1. In "Here He Lyes," Lepore illustrates how historians build arguments from primary sources (i.e., documents from the historical period being studied), and she also reveals how and why histories change over time. How and why did historians' assessment of John Smith and Jamestown change over time? What lessons are we to learn from this story about how to read primary sources?

2. In “A Pilgrim Passed I,” Lepore compares Samuel Morison and Nathaniel Philbrick, two scholars who wrote about the Pilgrims. According to Lepore, how are the two similar, how are they different, and, based on these differences, what makes Morison the better historian?

3. In “President Tom’s Cabin,” Lepore summarizes the history of the Jefferson-Hemmings controversy. Once again, her story centers on the way historians build arguments from available sources, but it also highlights something more. What else do historians use to craft their arguments? Focus your answer on what Lepore says about Annette Gordon-Reed and Joseph Ellis.
Buried somewhere under the marble floor of the largest church in London lie the remains of Captain John Smith, who died in 1631, at the age of fifty-one. On a brass plaque, his epitaph reads,

Here liyes one conquered, that hath conquered Kings,
Subdu'd large Territories, and done Things
Which to the world impossible would seem
But that the Truth is held in more esteem.

In other words: he wasn't a liar. Ah, but don't believe it. The year before he died, Smith published *The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine John Smith, in Europe, Asia, Africke, and America*, in which a discerning reader will learn to expect that when the captain, wearing full armor, has his stallion shot out from under him, he'll mount a dead man's horse before his own has hit the ground, and reload his musket while he's at it. Even his mishaps prove his valor: who could have survived so many sea-fights, shipwrecks, mutinies, deserted islands, musket wounds, betrayals, prisons, and gashes gotten while jousting, except a man whose coat-of-arms depicted the severed, turbaned heads of three Turkish army officers he defeated in back-to-back duels in Transylvania and
whose motto—emblazoned on his shield—sounds like the title of a James Bond film set in Elizabethan England: vincere est vivere. To conquer is to live.¹

In 1631, while Smith lay on his deathbed, a Welsh clergyman named David Lloyd published The Legend of Captaine Jones, a lampoon of Smith's True Travels. A later edition includes, by way of preface, a spoof of Smith's well-known epitaph:

Tread softly (mortals) on the bones
Of the worlds wonder Captaine Jones:
Who told his glorious deeds to many,
But never was believ'd of any:
Postcrity let this suffice,
He swore all's true, yet here he lies.²

That Captain John Smith, even before he died, was widely believed to be a liar is of more than passing interest, especially since he was also, arguably, America's first historian. In True Travels, Smith claimed to have defeated armies, outwitted heathens, escaped pirates, hunted treasure, and wooed princesses—and all this on four continents, no less, including a little island in North America that would one day be known as the birthplace of the United States: Jamestown, Virginia.

"I am no Compiler by hearsay, but have beene a mall Actar," John Smith wrote. He was an adventurer, and he was a historian. He recounted his adventures in Virginia not only in True Travels, but also, first, in a letter printed without his permission in 1608 as A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Happned in Virginia; next, in an essay on the Virginia Indians published in 1612 as A Map of Virginia and bound with a longer account of the founding of Jamestown, The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia; and, once more, in The Generall Historie of Virginia, printed in 1624.

John Smith was born in Alford, Lincolnshire, in 1580. He left England at the age of sixteen "to learne the life of a Souldier." He fought the Spanish in France and in the Netherlands, sailed to Scotland, and returned to England to live like a hermit in the woods, reading books and practicing to be a knight: "His studie was Machiavells Art of warre, and Marcus Aurelius; his exercise a good horse, with his lance and Ring."³ In 1600, he crossed the Channel again. After adventures in France, including a duel near Mont-St.-Michel, he tried to sail from Marseilles to Italy but was thrown overboard. Rescued by pirates, he sailed the Mediterranean and learned to fight at sea. In 1601, he joined the Austrian army to fight the Turks in Hungary, mainly because he regretted having "see[n] so many Christians slaughter one another." He was promoted to captain. Wounded in a battle near Bucharest, in which thirty thousand men died, Smith and a handful of survivors were captured and sold for slaves, like beasts in a market place." He was sent to Istanbul, to serve his owner's mistress. But she fell in love with him. Eventually, he escaped. After making his way through Russia and Poland, and fighting in Morroco, Smith returned to England in the winter of 1604-5.⁴ In December 1606, when he was twenty-six, he sailed to Virginia, with a fleet of three ships, the Godspeed, the Susan Constant, and the Discovery.

Smith had three Turks' heads on his shield, but he wasn't the only Jamestown adventurer to have traveled through the Ottoman Empire.⁵ William Strachey, who became secretary of the colony in 1609, had been in Istanbul in 1607. George Sandys, the colony's treasurer, had traveled, by camel, to Jerusalem and had written, at length, about the "Mahometan Religion." To these men, the New World beckoned as but another battlefield for the Old World's religious wars; they went, mainly, to hunt for gold to fund wars to defeat Muslims in Europe.⁶

For much of the voyage to Virginia, Smith was confined below decks, in chains, accused of plotting a mutiny to "make
himself king." In May 1607, Smith and 104 other colonists settled on the banks of a river they named the James, in honor of their king, on land named after his predecessor, Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen. On board ship they had carried a box containing a list of men appointed by the Virginia Company to govern the colony, "not to be opened, nor the governors knowledge until they arrived in Virginia." When at last the box was opened, it was revealed that Smith, still a prisoner, was on that list. On June 10, 1607, he was sworn as a member of the governing council. In September 1608, he was elected its president, effectively Virginia's governor. By his telling, he was also its only hope.

Far from being the first Europeans to settle on land that would one day become the United States, the English were Johnny-come-latelies. The Spanish settled at San Augustine, Florida, in 1565; by 1607, they were building Santa Fe. In 1975, Yale historian Edmund Morgan famously dubbed Jamestown a "fiasco": "Measured by any of the objectives announced for it," Morgan reckoned, "the colony failed." The English landed, and "for the next ten years they seem to have made nearly every possible mistake and some that seem almost impossible." They chose a poor site: on the banks of a brackish river. They had a lousy plan: build a fort, and look for gold. They brought the wrong kind of settlers: idle and indolent English gentlemen, who spent their time bowling in the streets. (Smith counted one carpenter, two blacksmiths, and a flock of footmen; the rest of the settlers he wrote off as "Gentlemen, Tradesmen, Servingmen, libertines, and such like, ten times more fit to spoyle a Commonwealth, than either begin one, or but helpe to maintaine one.") They made enemies easily: especially the Powhatan Indians, even though they relied on them for food, having harvested little of their own. Mostly they died. Except for the year Smith was in charge, from the fall of 1608 to the fall of 1609, when he told its half-dead men, "he who does not work, shall not eat," they starved. It wasn't the land that was the problem. "Had we bee in Paradice it selfe (with those governors)," Smith complained, "it would not have bee much better." After October 1609, when Smith returned to England (ostensibly, to recover from an injury but, really, he was more or less kicked out), Jamestown went to hell. In the winter of 1609-10 alone, five hundred colonists were reduced to sixty. A hair-raising account of those months, written by the colony's lieutenant governor, George Percy, the eighth son of the earl of Northumberland, paints this scene: "many, through extreme hunger, have run out of their naked beds being so lean that they looked like anatomies, crying out, we are starved, we are starved." In the end, they ate each other. Percy writes, "one of our Colline murdered his wife. Ripped the Childe out of her woame and threwe it into the River and after Chopped the Mother in pieces and salted her for his food." Telling the story of the husband showering his wife with salt, another settler wondered: "Now whether shee was better roasted, boyled or carbonado'd, I know not, but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of."


Kelso was writing within a tradition of Jamestown boosters who triumph in the colony's eventual success. By the 1620s, in
spite of a mortality rate that remained as high as 75 or 80 percent, the Virginia economy was booming. Hence, the American dream: arrive empty-handed, work hard, and get rich.

Just as cock-eyed, anachronistic, and overblown is a debunking tradition that damn s Jamestown as the birthplace of the American nightmare: with corporate funding from wealthy investors (the Virginia Company), steal somebody else’s land (the Powhatans) and reap huge profits by planting and harvesting an addictive drug (tobacco, whose sales were responsible for the boom), while exploiting your labor force (indigent Britons and, after 1619, enslaved Africans).

American dream or American nightmare, the bare facts about Jamestown can be dressed up and pressed into the service of either of these narratives. And they have been. One abolitionist, writing in 1857—Jamestown’s 250th anniversary—argued that Americans ought to ignore 1607 and instead pay attention to the divided nation’s twin, Cain-and-Abel, founding moments: the Pilgrims’ 1620 landing in Plymouth and the arrival of the first Africans to Jamestown in 1619. “Here are the two ideas, Liberty and Slavery—planted at about the same time, in the virgin soil of the new continent; the one in the North, the other in the South. They are deadly foes. Which shall conquer?” To antebellum Northerners, Jamestown set in motion forces that would lead to Civil War. To organizers of Jamestown four hundredth anniversary, what started in their town was America itself.

For a very long time, the question that animated every history of Jamestown was the very one that most troubled John Smith: “howe it came to passe there was no better successse.” In other words, why did things go so badly? The debate over that question, in the 1970s and 1980s, in the shadow of Vietnam, was one of the most vigorous in all of early American historical scholarship, at least as vigorous as, and more important than, the earlier and continuing argument over the causes of the witchcraft outbreak in Salem in 1692, a debate that has never really crawled out from under the shadow of McCarthyism. The too-many-gentlemen theory is pretty compelling—in Smith’s shorthand, “miserable is that Land, where more are idle then well employed”—but for years historians marshaled evidence in support of a range of provocative explanations, from salt poisoning and contaminated wells to the Little Ice Age and an epidemic of apathy and, finally, to the colonists’ sheer, stubborn preference for planting tobacco, to sell, instead of corn, to eat. But during Jamestown’s four hundredth anniversary, historians turned this unanswered question upside down, asking, not why Jamestown at first failed but why, in the end, did it succeed? Thus did the Jamestown quadricentennial snatch victory from the jaws of a man who ate his wife.

“To call Jamestown a failure, let alone a disaster,” Kelso wrote, “is to oversimplify.” Kelso’s evidence for his claim was what he’d found: Jamestown Fort. Before Kelso came along, archaeologists had concluded that the remains of the fort the settlers built in the spring of 1607 had long since been washed away by the James River. Kelso was sure its foundation lay under ground, and not under water. Beginning in 1994, when he was hired as the head archaeologist of the Jamestown Recovery Project, Kelso oversaw the painstaking rediscovery of the fort’s footprint, one of the most exciting finds, ever, in American historical archaeology. Within and around the fort’s footprint, Kelso’s team dug up not only human remains, landscape lines, and building foundations, but also a treasure of artifacts: beads, armor, pottery, and tools, each with a story to tell. The jawbone of a dog, with lead shot in it; a butchered turtle; thimbles; a suit of armor, thrown down a well, piece by piece; even a fancy silver “ear picker,” a kind of combination Q-Tip and toothpick. What story these artifacts tell is less
clear (wouldn’t it have been better to pack a few more hoes for the voyage, and not so many ear pickers?). Kelso argued that the archaeological record tilt toward proving that Jamestown’s first settlers weren’t nearly as hapless as John Smith made them out to be; after all, they built a very good fort, very quickly: “There is evidence that some of the immigrants worked hard.”

“The truly remarkable thing about Jamestown is that it somehow survived,” the historian Karen Kupperman argued in 2007, in The Jamestown Project. Kupperman mainly measured the colony against both earlier and later English settlement efforts in North America, including Roanoke, England’s first attempt to establish a foothold in the New World, on the outer shoals of what is now North Carolina. Settled in 1584, Roanoke was deserted three years later, and it’s anyone’s guess what happened to the ninety men, seventeen women, and eleven children who were left behind when the governor, John White, sailed to England for help; when he returned, in 1590, they were gone. Compared to Roanoke, Kupperman pointed out, Jamestown is a stunner.

Kupperman’s argument, that Jamestown wasn’t really that bad, required her to explain why it looks so bad. Resolutely, she blamed the sources, “which consist largely of complaints, special pleading, and excuses sent by colonists to their patrons in England.” They made everything sound worse than it was. And the devil of it is, some of these kvetchers were actually colorful writers, which, Kupperman warned, has led historians to make a fatal error: reading their accounts “to mine them for pithy quotes.” Again with the wife-eating man!

John Smith liked to blame whiners, too. “Ingenious verbalists,” he called those who came to Virginia, while he was in charge, only to find themselves shocked by what they saw, because they found not English Cities, nor such faire houses, nor at their owne wishes any of their accustomed dainties, with feather beds, and downe pillows, Tavernes and alchouses.” Such men, he said, were those who would call Virginia, under his inspired leadership, “a misery, a ruine, a death, a hell.” But that was what Smith said about Virginia before he left. Only after he returned to England did he begin to see that what was going on in Jamestown was impossible to discover from so far away, investors having need of twisting the story this way and that, like so many corporate executives, in a world without a Securities and Exchange Commission (although by 1624 a royal commission had begun investigating the Virginia Company for mismanagement). No matter how many men ate their wives, Smith wisely concluded, reports in England would make “the Company here thinke all the world was Oatmeal there.”

The question of whether John Smith was a liar is inseparable from the question of whether Jamestown was a failure. They don’t map onto one another exactly, but it usually works like this: if Smith told the truth, Jamestown was a disaster, except when he was in charge. It’s possible to both believe Smith and see Jamestown as a success, but that requires quite a bit of squinting. Generally, if, like the Virginia Company, you’d like to think that everything in Jamestown was oatmeal, it helps if you are willing to say that Smith was either ill informed or stretching the truth, although, most often, those who discredit Smith aren’t as gracious as that. Their assessments have a more of a liar-liar-pantaloons-on-fire quality. (As it happens, and for the record, they were: the injury that sent Smith back to England was a severe burn he sustained to his thighs and groin when his gunpowder bag, laying in his lap, caught the spark of a tobacco pipe and exploded.)
This liar-disaster situation was a bind, and Smith knew it. He wrote, in 1616, that he fully expected to “live or die the slave of scorne and infamy.” And he did. As David Lloyd’s Legend of Captaine Jones would have it, Smith made up most of what he wrote, or at least exaggerated, brazenly. Nevertheless, in the colonies, and especially in the early United States, The Legend of Captaine Jones was entirely forgotten and, despite lingering doubts about his credibility, Smith, no longer lampooned, became a romantic hero of the nineteenth-century American South, his exploits celebrated—and lavishly embroidered—in songs and on stage, in antebellum productions that implausibly but invariably paired him, romantically, with Pocahontas, who, only fourteen when Smith left Virginia, in 1609, had actually married a colonist named John Rolfe, in 1614.

This distortion of historical fact Henry Adams could not abide. Appalled by the myth of Smith’s romance with Pocahontas, Adams earned his reputation as a historian by destroying the captain’s. In an 1867 essay in the North American Review, Adams’s very first piece of historical criticism (in 1870, he would be named professor of history at Harvard), he pointed out the discrepancies in Smith’s different accounts of his rescue by Pocahontas, a story he told differently every time he told it and one that, after all, sounded not a little suspicious the first time. Worse, Smith didn’t even mention the rescue until after Pocahontas’s visit to London, in 1616, when she was received as a foreign dignitary. Only in 1617 did Smith boast that Pocahontas had once “hazarded the beating out of her owne branes to save mine,” after her father, Powhatan, had ordered his men to kill him. In his 1624 Generall Historie, Smith added still more detail: “being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death.” Smith’s work, he concluded, contained “falsehoods of an effrontery seldom equaled in modern times.”

In offering this exposé, Adams claimed to have been motivated solely by his zeal to establish the “bald historical truth,” but, privately, he confessed that he considered his essay “a rear attack on the Virginia aristocracy.” Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Adams, who despised the South, delighted in defeating a founding father of the Old Dominion. Equally pleased was John Gorham Palfrey, a Harvard professor and New England booster who had persuaded Adams to write the essay in the first place, allegedly telling him that “a stone thrown at Smith would be as likely to break as much glass as a missile heaved in any other direction.” He was right. Smith’s reputation as a man of his word and, especially, as a historian, was shattered (and Palfrey’s project, to promote New England as the birthplace of America, and 1620 as its birthday, greatly advanced). Smith had his defenders, to be sure, including Edward Arber, who edited an eleven-hundred-page compilation of his writings in 1884 and who argued, “wherever we can check Smith, we find him both modest and accurate.” But far more common was the kind of dismissal offered by J. Franklin Jameson, in his 1891 History of Historical Writing in America, in which he concluded, after reading Smith, that “what was historical was not Smith’s and what was his was not historical.” In effect, Adams and Jameson relegated John Smith’s works to the (lowly) rank of literature and demoted Smith himself from historian to mere writer. After that, about the nicest thing any American historian was willing to say about John Smith was an aside offered by Samuel Eliot Morison, in 1930, who called him “a liar, if you will; but a thoroughly cheerful and generally harmless liar.”

After that, three things happened: it was discovered that much of what Smith wrote was actually true; historians began
to care more about the art of lying, anyway; and Smith was rehabilitated as an astute, if biased, ethnographer.

In 1953, the historian Bradford Smith published a biography whose aim was to check John Smith's word against that of his contemporaries and, working both with newly discovered sources in England and, more importantly, with a Hungarian scholar named Laura Polanyi Striker, B. Smith concluded that J. Smith was a man of his word. A quixotic, self-aggrandizing Elizabethan gallant and knight-errant: Yes. But a fraud? No. Inspired by Bradford Smith's biography, Philip Barbour, a linguist and former intelligence officer, scoured archives across Eastern Europe, where he was able to corroborate an astonishing number of details in Smith's True Travels. All kinds of additional research—including a successful re-creation, by the Boy Scouts of Graz, Austria, of a mountaintop torch-message system that Smith had described but which had never before been tested—only further supported the captain's credibility.

Meanwhile, many historians came to the generous assessment that Smith was, at heart, a man of letters, engaged in what the literary critic Stephen Greenblatt once labeled “self-fashioning.” Then, too, scholars of a more anthropological cast of mind, and an interest in the Powhatans, claimed Smith as one of early America's best ethnographers. After all, compared to his contemporaries, Smith was a keen observer, although it’s worth remembering that most of what he saw, in Transylvania as much as in Jamestown, was altogether new to him, stranger than strange, and he wasn’t always able to make sense of it. Two historians, James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, once tried to imagine how Smith might have reported what he could see from the pressroom at Yankee Stadium, some summer afternoon:

Being assembled about a great field of open grass, a score of their greatest men ran out upon the field; adorned each in brighty

hood jackets and breeches, with letters cunningly woven upon their Chestes, and waringe hats upon their heads, of a sort I know not what. One of their chiefs stood in the midst and would at his pleasure hurl a white ball at another chief, whose attire was of a different colour, and whether by chance or artifice I know not the ball flew exceeding close to the man yet never injured him, but sometimes he would strike at it with a wooden club and so giving it a hard blow would throw down his club and run away.

In other words, you can count on Smith for abundant detail, and admirable accuracy, but he’s fairly likely to leave out what you most want to know: “Yankees 10, Red Sox 3.”

At the age of twenty-nine, John Smith returned to England. He spent most of the rest of his life, another twenty-two years, writing. “Envy hath taxed me to have writ too much, and done too little,” he complained. He never took up another profession. He never married, or had children (facts perhaps best explained by his pantaloons having once been set on fire; his wound has a decidedly Toby Shandy quality to it). He was restless. He wanted, urgently, to participate in more northern settlements—he gave “New England” its name—but the Puritans didn’t want him along. Instead, he had to settle for giving them armchair advice, a role he hated: “it were more proper for mee, To be doing what I say, then writing what I knowe.” His last work, published posthumously, is an impassioned essay with a desperate title: Advertisements for the unexperienced Planters of New-England, or any where. Smith’s advice—bring your women (just don’t eat them), and don’t forget to plant corn—was taken, and may well have saved New England from Jamestown’s early misery, but Smith himself died poor and scorned. As Adams put it, using the very language so often
used to describe early Virginia, Smith’s career turned out a failure, and his ventures ended disastrously.  

And Jamestown? Was it, too, a failure and a disaster? Or was it, instead, the birthplace of the American dream? This question outlived its usefulness a very long time ago. By considering the world that Jamestown made, and ignoring the world that made Jamestown, it hides more than it reveals. John Smith was more medieval than modern, closer to a Crusader than to a Founding Father. Neither he nor Jamestown can bear the burden of the national need for a tidy past. (Neither can Plymouth.) What happened in Jamestown is a story of vaunting ambition and staggering success in the face of surpassing cruelty and rank catastrophe. It is a story of some lessons painfully learned, and others not learned at all. Here are two. The world isn’t made of oatmeal. And to conquer isn’t the only way to live.

Samuel Eliot Morison, the last Harvard historian to ride his horse to work, liked to canter to Cambridge on his gray gelding, tie it to a tree in the Yard, stuff his saddlebags with papers to grade, and trot back home to his four-story brick house at the foot of Beacon Hill. “Ours was the horsey end of town,” he once wrote, of the place where he was born, in 1887, and died, in 1976. Morison has been called the greatest American historian of the twentieth century. With that, as these things go, not everyone agrees. He spent nearly all his career at Harvard; he entered as a freshman in 1904 and retired, an endowed professor, in 1955. Summers he spent sailing: he loved nothing so much as the ocean. “My feeling for the sea,” Morison said, “is such that writing about it is about as embarrassing as making a confession of religious faith.”

Morison wrote more than fifty books and won two Pulitzer Prizes, but he is probably best remembered for his biography of Christopher Columbus, whose voyages he retraced, in 1939 and 1940, by yacht. When the resulting book was published in 1943, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was so impressed that he agreed to allow Morison to join the navy as a sailor-historian: for the remainder of the war, Lieutenant Commander Morison fought the battles about which he would later spend
twenty years writing, in fifteen dense, salt-sprayed volumes, as the History of United States Naval Operations in World War II. He left the navy, in 1951, a rear admiral.

Besides the sea, Morison wrote about two things especially well: colonial New England and historical writing. In a 1931 essay called “Those Misunderstood Puritans,” he fought hard against the notion that “the fathers of New England were somber kill-joys.” For this myth, Morison blamed the Victorians, who cast the Puritans as prudes in order that they might feel, by comparison, broad-minded. As Morison pointed out, with characteristic clarity, relying on the nineteenth century to understand the seventeenth is a rather grave chronological error. Time moves forward, not backward. “The right approach to the Puritan founders of New England is historical, by way of the Middle Ages,” he explained. “They were, broadly speaking, the Englishmen who had accepted the Reformation without the Renaissance.”

Reading Morison, you can almost hear yourself agree with him, even when you don’t. That was Morison’s gift. Except that it wasn’t a gift. Morison cared about writing, but he had to work hard at it, and he railed against members of his profession unwilling to exert the same effort. In a twenty-five-cent pamphlet printed in 1946 as History as a Literary Art: An Appeal to Young Historians, Morison complained: “American historians, in their eagerness to present facts and their laudable concern to tell the truth, have neglected the literary aspects of their craft. They have forgotten that there is an art of writing history.”

They had forgotten, that is, an American literary tradition begun by “the earliest colonial historians,” and, above all, by William Bradford, the governor and first chronicler of Plymouth plantation. In 1620, Bradford crossed what he called “the vast and furious ocean” on board the Mayflower, a 180-ton, three-masted, square-rigged merchant vessel, its cramped berths filled with forty other religious dissenters who, like Bradford, wanted to separate from the Church of England, and some sixty rather less pious passengers who were in search of nothing so much as adventure. Bradford called these “profane” passengers “Strangers,” but to modern sensibilities they can feel more familiar than, say, William Brewster, who brought along a son named “Wrestling,” short for “wrestling with God.”

The colony William Bradford helped plant on the windswept western shore of Cape Cod bay was tiny, and it shrank before it grew; by 1650, its population had not yet reached a thousand. Plymouth colony was Bradford’s colony. Between 1627 and 1636, he was elected governor every year. Passionate, self-taught, and bold beyond measure, it was Bradford who called his people “pilgrims.” He was also a poet, if not a very good one:

From my years young in days of youth,  
God did make known to me his truth,  
And call’d me from my native place  
For to enjoy the means of grace.  
In wilderness he did me guide,  
And in strange lands for me provide.  
In fears and wants, through weal and woe,  
A Pilgrim passed I to and fro.

Bradford wrote his history, he said, “in a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things.” He might as well have been describing how he lived his life. But Bradford was more than plain and simple: he was contemplative. Cotton Mather once wrote of him, “He was a person for study as well as action,” something that might equally be said of Samuel Eliot Morison who once, interrupted at his desk by the incessant barking of a neighbor’s dog, went outside and shot it.
Bradford began writing his history in 1630, the year the Englishman John Winthrop founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony, just to the north of Plymouth. Winthrop's colonists are more commonly called "Puritans," because they wanted to purify the Church of England, but the Pilgrims were Puritans, too—and "nobody more so," as Morison once put it. The distinction between Pilgrims and Puritans is a nineteenth-century invention; in truth, their doctrinal differences were slight. Still, the rivalry between the two colonies was intense, and to Plymouth's disadvantage. By 1641, more than twenty thousand colonists had settled in Massachusetts, entirely dwarfing the "Old Colony." (In 1691, Plymouth became part of Massachusetts.)

Governor Bradford, in other words, had more than barking dogs to distract him: not just Winthrop's colonists to the north, but Indians everywhere, pigs run amok, and Quakers in Rhode Island mocking ministers in the pulpit. Try as he might, Bradford just couldn't find the time to catch his past up with his present. He died in 1657, at the age of sixty-seven, his history unfinished. Maybe because Bradford's history ends abruptly, in 1647, most Americans' sense of what happened to the Pilgrims vaguely trails off, too, sometime after the Wampanoag Indian Massasoit taught them to plant corn and joined them for the first Thanksgiving, but long before Plymouth and those same Indians went to war. Go to war they did. In 1675, Massasoit's son Metacomet, known to the English as "King Philip," launched a war against Plymouth and, eventually, against Massachusetts and Rhode Island and Connecticut, too. The bloody carnage known as "King Philip's War" nearly put an end to the Puritan experiment.

In *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (2006), a best-selling popular history, Nathaniel Philbrick called William Bradford's history "the greatest book written in seventeenth-century America." (With that, as these things go, not everyone agrees.) Despite its title, Philbrick's book wasn't really about the Mayflower. The voyage is nearly over by the end of chapter 1, although not over soon enough for Bradford's distressed wife Dorothy, who had left her three-year-old son behind in Holland and who, in sight of land, fell—or more likely threw herself—over the gunwales, and drowned. And, unfortunately, by the time the Pilgrims go ashore, readers have learned more about things like the Mayflower's sounding leads ("the deep-sea or 'dipsy' lead, which weighed between forty and one hundred pounds and was equipped with 600 feet of line, and the smaller 'hand-lead,' just seven to fourteen pounds with 120 feet of line") than about its passengers' religious convictions ("A Puritan believed that everything happened for a reason"). It's not that the ship doesn't matter. It does. But with every sway and pitch of its decks, readers are lulled into believing that the people on board, swaying and pitching in winds we can feel, clutching at ropes we can touch, were just like us. They were not.

Philbrick, a former all-American sailor and Sunfish-racing champion from Nantucket, seemed, at first glance, to be following in Morison's wake. Waves slashed through all his earlier books, whose titles sound like the names of sea shanties: *The Sea of Glory, Away off Shore, Second Wind, In the Heart of the Sea.* Like Morison, Philbrick, who was trained as a journalist, found most history books written by professors a chore to read. Of his decision not to use footnotes or to refer to works of scholarship in his text he explained, "I wanted to remove the scholarly apparatus that so often gets in the way of the plot in academic history." So

Sam Morison never met a footnote he didn't like. Still, his relationship to academic history was a complicated one. At Harvard, he was neither a natural nor a beloved teacher. He never held office hours; he made his students come to class in cost and tie; he refused to teach Radcliffe girls (he considered
them frivolous by which he meant, presumably, that they were not men). He liked to lecture, in his youth, in riding breeches and, in later years, in his navy uniform.\textsuperscript{16} “Even before he became an admiral you felt as though he were one, and you were a midshipman,” recalled his former student, Edmund Morgan.\textsuperscript{17}

But Morison believed, ardent, that there was something about the hurly-burly of university life that made people more honest, and more accountable, and less likely to get things wrong. In a 1948 review in the \textit{Atlantic Monthly} of a book by the historian Charles Beard, who had left Columbia thirty years before to live on a dairy farm, Morison suggested (terribly cruelly, since Beard was on his death bed at the time) that Beard’s work had suffered from his isolation: “You get more back talk even from freshmen than from milk cows.”\textsuperscript{18}

Maybe if Nathaniel Philbrick had had to answer to freshmen, he would have learned to be a little bit more skeptical of his sources. The first half of Philbrick’s book stars William Bradford and relies, appropriately, on Bradford’s history or, rather, on Samuel Eliot Morison’s invaluable edition of Bradford’s history. So much did Morison admire Bradford, so much did he despise the myth of the Puritans, so much did he want Americans to read better history, that he spent five years meticulously preparing an edition of Bradford’s history “that the ordinary reader might peruse with pleasure as well as profit.”\textsuperscript{19}

Working closely with his lifelong secretary, Anthea Card, to whom he read Bradford’s every word aloud, Morison altered the original’s antiquated spelling and cleared the text of notes and scribbles made by everyone from Bradford’s biographers to his descendents, material that had been injudiciously included, and mistakenly attributed to Bradford himself, in earlier printed editions. To every trace of ink on the manuscript’s pages, Morison applied his magnifying glass. Where earlier抄ists had Bradford concluding, “the light here kindled hath shone to many,” Morison pointed out that the light actually shone “unto” many; a splotch that looked as though Bradford had crossed out the “un” turned out to be, on closer inspection, “merely an inadvertent blot from the Governor’s quill pen.”\textsuperscript{20}

Published in 1952 as \textit{Of Plymouth Plantation}, Morison’s definitive edition of Bradford went through dozens of printings.

Not long after Bradford’s death, Massasoit died, too; so ended an era of uneasy peace. Inheriting his father’s position in 1662, Philip tried to halt English encroachment. When that failed, he began preparing for war. In January 1675, a Christian Indian named John Sassamon warned Plymouth’s governor, Josiah Winslow, of Philip’s plans. Sassamon was soon found dead. In June, Plymouth executed three of Philip’s men for Sassamon’s murder. Within days, Wampanoags began attacking English towns.

In proportion to population, King Philip’s War was one of the most fatal wars in American history. Over half of all English settlements in New England were destroyed or abandoned. One in ten colonists was killed. Thousands of Indians died; those who survived, including Philip’s nine-year-old son, were shipped out of the colonies and sold into slavery. Because it was, for both sides, a holy war, King Philip’s War was waged with staggering brutality. New England’s Indians fought to take their land back from Christians; mocking their praying victims: “Where is Your O God?” One, having killed a colonist, stuffed a Bible into his victim’s gutted belly. Puritans read such acts as a sign of God’s wrath, as punishment for their descent into sinfulness; not only had they become, over the years, less pious than the first generation of settlers, but they had also failed to convert the Indians to Christianity. Asked the Boston minister Increase Mather, “Why should we suppose that God is not offended with us, when his displeasure is written, in such visible and bloody Characters?”\textsuperscript{21}

Reading those scarlet letters, Puritans concluded that God was commanding them to defeat their “heathen” enemies by
any means necessary; for the English, all restraint in war, all notions of “just conduct” applied only to secular warfare; in a holy war, anything goes. Ministers urged their congregations to “take, kill, burn, sink, destroy all sin and Corruption, &C which are possessed enemies to Christ Jesus, and not to pity or spare any of them.” Such a policy, as ever, breeds nothing if not merciless retaliation. As a Boston merchant reported to London, the Indians, in town after town, tortured and mutilated their victims, “either cutting off the Head, ripping open the Belly, or skulping the Head of Skin and Hair, and hanging them up as Trophies; wearing Mens [sic] Fingers as Bracelets about their Necks, and Stripes of their Skins which they dresse for Belts.”

In his recounting of the war, Philbrick placed at center stage a militia captain named Benjamin Church. Born in Plymouth in 1639, Church fought in many of King Philip’s War’s bloodiest engagements, including the “Great Swamp Fight” in December 1675, in which English forces killed thousands of Narragansett women, children, and old men hiding in a makeshift fort in the middle of a Rhode Island swamp. Most died after the English set the fort on fire. (Wrote one Boston poet: “Here might be heard an hideous Indian cry, / Of wounded ones who in the wigwams cry.”) In August 1676, after Philip was shot, it was Church who ordered the body drawn, quartered, and decapitated and had the head placed on a spike that Church marched to Plymouth, after which the colony declared a special day of Thanksgiving to give thanks to God for this signal victory. On top of a stake in the middle of town, Philip’s head remained, rotting, for decades.

Philbrick explained his choice of William Bradford and Benjamin Church as his two main characters this way: “Bradford and Church could not have been more different—one was pious and stalwart, the other was audacious and proud—but both wrote revealingly about their lives in the New World. Together, they tell a fifty-six-year intergenerational saga of discovery, accommodation, community, and war.” The problem is that Benjamin Church did not write revealingly about his life in the New World. In fact, he didn’t write about it at all. In 1716, a Boston printer published a book called Entertaining Passages relating to Philip’s War . . . with some account of the Divine Providence towards Benjamin Church. Its title page lists its author as Church’s forty-two-year-old son, Thomas, who was just a baby at the time of the war. In the text, too, Thomas is named as the author, although a brief preface allows that, in drafting the manuscript, Thomas consulted his father’s notes and that the elder Church “had the perusal of” his son’s manuscript and found “nothing a-miss.” And why would he? Entertaining Passages paints Church not only as the hero of every battle he ever fought but as the Puritans’ voice of reason and restraint, as the man of conscience who attempts, in vain, to halt every atrocity: when Mohegan Indians allied with his forces want to torment a captured Nipmuck with fire and knives, Church “interceded and prevailed for his escaping torture”; at the Great Swamp Fight, Church, badly injured, valiantly hobbles to his commanding officer and begs him to stop the attack, only to be rebuffed.

This as-told-to, after-the-fact memoir is, hands down, the single most unreliable account of King Philip’s War, one of the best-documented military conflicts of the colonial period. Over four hundred letters written by eyewitnesses in 1675 and 1676 survive in New England archives, along with at least twenty-one different printed accounts, written as the war was happening, or very shortly thereafter. There is, in other words, no shortage of better evidence.

Even though Entertaining Passages was compiled forty years after the war had ended and may well have been entirely written by Church’s son (who, at the very least, edited his father’s “notes” considerably), Philbrick used it without
reservation or caution. Like footnotes, these facts apparently got in the way of Philbrick's plot. That Church is a "persona," Philbrick reluctantly conceded, on the second-to-last page of his book, where he insists: "that Church according to Church is too brave, too cunning, and too good to be true is beside the point."

This is about as reasonable, and as indefensible, as writing a history of the Vietnam War relying extensively and uncritically on an "autobiography" of John Kerry written in decades after the war's end by Kerry's daughter Vanessa. As Samuel Eliot Morison liked to say about such things, "Very suspicious!"

If Morison cared about professional standards, he nonetheless held himself well above the academic fray. He was uninterested in historical debates; he hated academic fashions: "Somewhere along the assembly-line of their education, students have had inserted in them a bolt called 'points of view,' secured with a nut called 'trends,' and they imagine that the historian's problem is simply to compare points of view and describe trends. It is not.

Although he was once elected its president, and duly served, Morison almost never attended meetings of the American Historical Association. When he once did show up, he walked through a crowded hotel mezzanine, dazed academics parting before him like the Red Sea. Reaching the end of the room, he turned around and walked back, and back and forth again.

A friend came up to him and asked, "Sam, what are you doing?"

"Doing?" Morison replied. "Doing! Why, what do you think I'm doing? Mixing!"

Morison also complained about what he called a "chain reaction of dullness": professors who write "dull, solid, valuable monographs" train graduate students to write dull, solid, valuable monographs, and, before you know it, the only history people read is written by journalists. Morison didn't resent this—to the contrary, he urged his students to learn from the best journalists, and the best novelists, too—but it worried him. He at one time went so far as to support altogether Orwellian calls by members of the American Historical Association requiring that historians be licensed, like doctors, and subject to grand jury prosecution "if they misused the past."

History isn't brain surgery. Even when it's done badly, it's not deadly. Still, it can knock you down. Philbrick rested his argument, or, rather, the arc of his plot, on his reading of Benjamin Church. "The great mystery of this story," Philbrick wrote, "is how America emerged from the terrible darkness of King Philip's War to become the United States." The answer? Church: "Out of the annealing flame of one of the most horrendous wars ever fought in North America, he forged an identity that was part Pilgrim, part mariner, part Indian, and altogether his own." Church, for Philbrick, is the un-American, the ancestor of everyone "from Daniel Boone to Davy Crockett to Natty Bumppo to Rambo." He went further: by believing that "success in war was about coercion rather than slaughter," Philbrick argued, Church "anticipated the welcoming, transformative beast that eventually became — once the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were in place — the United States."

Huh? Is this the same Benjamin Church who, the year before he fell off his horse and died, a battle-weary "old soldier," had his son write a history recalling his glory days as a reluctant and principled Indian fighter by way of both enhancing his reputation and reconciling himself to a war that many Puritan New Englanders, like him, had since come to feel pretty badly about? In him we see the birth of a nation? The regret, in Entertaining Passages, breaks your heart. It was meant to. But it is evidence of remorse, not of restraint (and, even if it weren't, what restraint has to do with declaring
American independence is bewilderingly unclear. In one chapter, Thomas Church tells the story of his father finding an old Indian man in the woods, after the war’s end:

The Captain asked his name, who replied, his name was Conscience, Conscience, said the Captain (smiling), then the War is over; for that was what they were searching for, it being much wanting.\(^{35}\)

This, of course, is an allegory, not an experience. It is Church, father and son, abdicating the slaughter, four decades after it was all over. It reveals a great deal about how New Englanders remembered the war, but it’s about the shoddiest evidence you can think of for telling the story of how they waged it, and a hopelessly leaky boat in which to try to sail to 1776 and 1787.

Those poor, misunderstood Puritans. Time still moves forward, not backward, and relying on the eighteenth century to understand the seventeenth is still a grave chronological error.

“The place of the Pilgrim Fathers in American history can best be stated by a paradox,” Morison once wrote. “Of slight importance in their own time, they are of great and increasing significance in our time.”\(^{37}\) To them we look, in vain, to see ourselves. In this we are not alone: as Morison’s colleague Perry Miller astutely observed, the Puritans, at the end of King Philip’s War, made the same mistake: “They looked in vain to history for an explanation of themselves.”\(^{38}\)

The way Morison wrote about King Philip’s War, and especially about Indians, is distressing at best. In his 1956 book, *The Story of the Old Colony*, Morison boasted, “Whenever there was trouble with the Indians, Plymouth men were up in front, shooting!”\(^{39}\) But even if he never fathomed New England’s Algonquians, and never really tried to, Morison made close study of people like William Bradford, placing him, as best as he could, in his proper time and place. In preparing *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Morison crafted an edition that would be,

as he put it, “modern (not modernized).”\(^{40}\) It would not do, Morison knew, to try to update William Bradford. Better to understand him “by way of the Middle Ages.” Of the vast gulf separating seventeenth-century New Englanders from himself, Morison wrote with grace and eloquence: “The ways of the puritans are not my ways, and their faith is not my faith,” he confessed. “Nevertheless they appear to me a courageous, humane, brave, and significant people.”\(^{41}\)

For all his ambivalence about academic history, Morison was first and foremost a scholar. (During one of the nation’s many bouts of anti-intellectual insanity, Morison—for God’s sake, *Morison*—was targeted; in the early 1950s, just after he retired from the navy, he was labeled a “Harvard Red-ucator” and listed among Harvard’s Communist-sympathizing “Ego-tistical, Arrogant, Eggheads.”)\(^{42}\) Yet, just after Morison’s death, his colleague Bernard Bailyn observed, “There is no ‘Morison school.’”\(^{43}\) Because he wrote more for the public than for his fellow historians, Morison had few academic disciples, and if the chain reaction of dullness continues unbroken, decades after Morison’s death, Morison is as much to blame as anybody.

In 1776, Benjamin Church, or at least his son Thomas, looked back at King Philip’s War and decided that it was possible to be both victorious and virtuous in the kind of war the colonists had fought against the Indians—a people at a vast technological disadvantage, fighting a holy war, with almost nothing left to lose. But it wasn’t possible. At least, nothing in the evidence from 1675 and 1676 suggests that it was. And pretending that Benjamin Church found “Conscience” in the woods of Plymouth in that winter of war, rather than understanding why, at the end of his life, he came to wish he had, doesn’t make it any more possible centuries later.

The ways of the Puritans are not our ways. Their faith is not our faith. And their wars are not our wars.
12
PRESIDENT TOM'S CABIN

In 1852, when Harriet Beecher Stowe finished *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she wrote to her congressman, Horace Mann (who happened to be Nathaniel Hawthorne's brother-in-law), to beg a favor. Might he know how to get a copy of her book to Charles Dickens? “Were the subject any other I should think this impertinent & Egotistical.” Stowe wrote, making of demurral a poor cloak for ambition. (Stowe’s mealy-mouthed “affectation of humility” was the least of what Dickens would grow to despise about her; what really blew his stack was when she pried into the private lives of public men: “Wish Mrs. Stowe was in the pillory,” he cursed, when Stowe reported, in the *Atlantic*, on Byron’s romance with his half-sister, just the sort of exposé that led Dickens, who conducted a secret, adulterous affair for thirteen years, to burn his papers.) But Stowe had reason to expect Dickens’s sympathy with her antislavery screed. A decade earlier, the English novelist, upon completing an unhappy tour of the United States, judged the country “the heaviest blow ever dealt at liberty.” And in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), he sneered that “noble patriot,” Thomas Jefferson, “who dreamed of Freedom in a slave’s embrace.” Dickens was quoting from the Irish poet, Thomas Moore, who visited the United States in 1803, the year after rumors that the then-president had fathered children by one of his slaves became public, by way of the *Richmond Recorder*, in which a scurrilous Scots journalist named James Callender alleged that Jefferson “keeps, and for many years past has kept, as his concubine, one of his own slaves. Her name is Sally.” (Callender drowned himself in the James River in 1803, but even smarmy, unstable scoundrels sometimes get a story straight.) Moore had written: “The weary statesman for repose hath fled / From halls of council to his negro’s shed, / Where blest he wooes some black Aspasia’s grace, / And dreams of freedom in his slave’s embrace.”44 Onto this, Dickens tacked a coda: “and waking sold her offspring and his own at public markets.”

The sexually animated author of the Declaration of Independence pocketing a tidy sum by peddling his own progeny lends an Oliverian twist to what was already a seedy story. It is not, however, true. After Thomas Jefferson died, on July 4, 1826, his slaves were sold at auction, but not Sally Hemings’s children, as the legal scholar Annette Gordon-Reed chronicled in *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, in 2008. Four of Sally Hemings’s children were alive when Jefferson died; two had already left Monticello; Jefferson freed the other two in his Will.

Dickens may have been taking licenses; more likely, he genuinely believed Jefferson had sold his own children. There were plenty of places he could have gotten this impression. In 1838, the abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, reported that Jefferson’s children, twelve years after their father’s death, still toiled in bondage. An eyewitness claimed to have seen one of them on the auction block at the most infamous slave market in America: “the daughter of Thomas Jefferson sold in New Orleans, for one thousand dollars.” This rumor picked up by the London *Morning Chronicle*, isn’t true, either. But Sally Hemings did have a daughter. Her name was Harriet. She left Monticello in 1822, when she was twenty-one. “Harriet, Sally’s
run," Jefferson wrote in his "Farm Book," where he kept track of his human property, a population that needing mining, since Jefferson was the second-largest slaveholder in Virginia. But Harriet didn't run. "She was nearly as white as anybody, and very beautiful," remembered one of Jefferson's overseers, who also said Jefferson gave him fifty dollars to give to the girl, and paid for her ride, by stage, to Philadelphia. A widely circulated rumor, reported by yet another literary English rambler, Frances Trollope (Anthony Trollope's mother), in her 1832 Domestic Manners of the Americans turns out to be right: "when, as it sometimes happened, his children by Quadroon slaves were white enough to escape suspicion of their origin, he did not pursue them if they attempted to escape."

Truth notwithstanding, the false report—that Jefferson's daughter was pawned off to the highest bidder—made a good story, or, at least, that's what William Wells Brown thought when he wrote Clotel; Or, The President's Daughter, the first African American novel, published in 1853, a year after Uncle Tom's Cabin. Brown knew a thing or two about what Stowe, in her Dickensian subtitle, called "Life among the Lowly." Stowe's novel opens in Kentucky; Brown was born there. He worked for a Mississippi River slave trader, dying the hair of gray-haired slaves black, that they might fetch a better price; he had seen his own sister carried away to be sold at auction; he had tried to escape with his mother in 1833 and succeeded, the next year, only by leaving her behind. In 1847, two years after the celebrated abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass published the story of his life, Wells told his own not entirely unvarnished tale, The Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself. When Stowe's novel made publishing history (it sold ten thousand copies in its first week), Brown was living in London, rallying British sympathy for the American abolitionist movement. Mostly, he lectured. But drumming up support by writing a novel suddenly seemed a fine idea. And what better plot than the shocking story that had animated the pen of Dickens himself?

Brown's characters are different from Uncle Tom, Eliza, and Topsy, but they're no less didactic, and his novel, like Stowe's, follows their desperate fates, trial heaped upon tribulation, like so many ice-floes crowding the Mississippi. Clotel, sold at auction, makes her escape by disguising herself as an Italian gentleman. Captured, she is imprisoned in a "negro pen" in Richmond. She flees but, crossing a bridge from Virginia to Washington—"within plain sight of the President's house"—she is once again trapped. With a last look toward heaven, she leaps into the Potomac: "Thus died Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson," writes Brown, at the close of a novel in which he had included a chapter titled "Truth Stranger Than Fiction.

It took a very long time for historians to take this story seriously or even to begin to bother to sort out fact from fiction. Just why was the subject of Gordon-Reed's 1997 tour-de-force, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy, a book that was as much a painstaking investigation of the documentary record as a devastating brief on standards of evidence in historical research. For Gordon-Reed, the real scandal wasn't what happened between Jefferson and Hemings. The real scandal was how far historians, and especially the clan of Jefferson biographers, had been willing to go to ignore evidence right in front of them, documents like Jefferson's "Farm Book," even, but, especially, testimony about things said and done by the Hemingeses themselves, as if what the Hemingeses said and did didn't matter, as if their testimony couldn't possibly be true. Taking a lawyer's view of the case, Gordon-Reed pieced together the evidence, weighed it, and delivered a summation: Jefferson fathered those children. And he freed them,
or let them go when they reached the age of twenty-one, because Sally Hemings had extracted from him, in 1789, at the beginning of their thirty-eight-year affair, a promise that he would do exactly that.

Gordon-Reed’s *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* was published the same year as Joseph Ellis’s elegiac biography, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* in which Ellis had asserted—intuited, actually, since there is no hard evidence for this whatsoever—that Jefferson who, as is well documented, had been an ardent lover of women, and who had gotten his wife pregnant seven times in ten years, had never slept with the very beautiful Sally Hemings (who greatly resembled his wife, her half-sister, a woman Jefferson adored), because, the day his wife died (when Jefferson was thirty-six), he had lost interest in sex, altogether and forever, to the point of impotence.” The man was a statue.*American Sphinx* won the National Book Award.

A few months later, Eugene Foster, a retired University of Virginia professor of pathology, published in *Nature* the results of DNA tests he had undertaken, working with scientists in Oxford, Leicester, and Leiden, on Hemings and Jefferson blood. Foster tested the descendants of Field Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson’s uncle, and of Eston Hemings, Sally Hemings’s youngest son. (The Y chromosome passes down through males virtually intact, but Jefferson’s only son by his wife died in infancy, which is why Foster had to find his Jeffersonian Y elsewhere.) The link proved a relationship: Eston Hemings’s male descendants have the Jeffersonian Y. This doesn’t prove that all of Sally Hemings’s children, or even Eston, were fathered by Thomas Jefferson. It proves only that Eston’s father was a Jefferson. Alas, there just isn’t another Jefferson handy, there at Monticello, and with a Y in his pocket, during the months Hemings conceived. Ellis, in preface to the paperback edition of his biography, graciously conceded the argument. “Prior to the evidence,” he wrote, “one might have reasonably concluded that Jefferson was living a paradox. Now it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that he was living a lie.” Sally Hemings’s children were all but certainly Thomas Jefferson’s.

Lost in the DNA-driven consensus, however, was Gordon-Reed’s point. It ought never to have taken a lab test to bolster a claim deducible from the documentary record. At a conference at Monticello in 1999, Gordon-Reed revisited the case:

It is true that we do not and will never have the details of what went on between Jefferson and Hemings and their children. This does not mean that we have nothing to go on. Perhaps the most persistent, and ultimately damaging, feature of the original debate over whether the relationship existed at all was the tight rein placed upon the historical imagination. One was simply not to let one's mind wander too freely over the matter. Brainstorming, drawing reasonable inferences from actions, attempting to piece together a plausible view of the matter were shunted into the category of illegitimate speculation, as grave an offense as outright lying.

Deductions can be wrong. But they're not illicit: they're how history, at its best, makes sense of a senseless world.

Gordon-Reed’s single most revealing source was Madison Hemings’s memoir, printed by an Ohio newspaperman named S. E. Wetmore in an obscure newspaper called the *Fike County Republican*, in March 1873. (Wetmore first heard about Hemings from a census taker in neighboring county who, in his 1870 census, noted next to his name: “This man is the son of Thomas Jefferson.”) Five months after Wetmore published Hemings’s story, James Parton—he of “Mrs. Eaton's
knocker"—writing in the *Atlantic*, summarily dismissed it: "Mr. Hemings has been misinformed."

Parton believed that Hemings was either a fraud or a fool. He did not seek him out; he did not consider what he said; he did not even bother to refute him. He disregarded him. Gordon-Reed attributed this error to a number of stereotypes: Parton saw Hemings as an angry ex-slave, a "darker with delusions of grandeur," a feeble-minded, childlike pawn of a politically motivated white man. Parton probably did see Hemings this way. But it is also true that Madison Hemings's credibility had already been damaged, long before James Parton came along, by every nineteenth-century writer, black and white alike, who made use of the Jefferson-Hemings legend. Callendar poked a hole. Dickens left a dent. William Wells Brown dealt a blow. Abolitionists wanted, urgently, desperately, fanatically, to end slavery. Their aim was to arouse sympathy. They told very many stories. Picturing white men preying on black women was their stock and trade. Stowe went further: she turned black men into feeble, sexless children. (That's one reason, but just one, why James Baldwin eviscerated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *Notes of a Native Son*; another was Stowe's failure to answer, or even to address, "the only important question" about slavery: "what was it that moved her people to such deeds?" Hawking hackneyed stories at the expense of black men's humanity came with a cost: who would believe Madison Hemings? (Nor did it help that Wetmore, in a shout-out to Stowe, titled the column in which he printed Hemings's memoir "Life among the Lowly.") Answering slavery with sentimentality carried a price, too: who could imagine Jefferson's daughter doing anything but dying?

This wasn't only James Callendar's fault, or Harriet Beecher Stowe's, or James Parton's. Journalists, novelists, historians: everyone had a hand. For decades, on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, the gaveling-off of Thomas Jefferson's children was a story either too awful to be true or too useful to be proven false. Sally Hemings lived in Richmond until 1836. Eston Hemings lived twenty years more. Madison Hemings only died in 1878. An enterprising investigator might have looked up any of them up, long before 1873, except... what if their stories weren't as poignant as what he wanted to print?

Instead of taking Parton's witnesses at their word, Gordon-Reed questioned them. Parton alluded to a letter he had in possession, written by yet another biographer, Henry Randall, in 1868. In an interview, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson's grandson, told Randall that Sally Hemings "had children which resembled Mr. Jefferson so closely that it was plain that they had his blood in their veins," but this, Randolph insisted, was because they were the children of Peter Carr, Jefferson's nephew. This was enough to satisfy Randall, and Parton, too. But Gordon-Reed asked, in her cross-examination of the evidence: If Randolph didn't have something still more scandalous to hide, why admit that he was related to the Hemingses? She also eliminated Carr, and also his brother, by pointing out something that Randall and Parton, had they bothered to look, could have discovered. To Monticello, Jefferson came and went (he was gone at least two-thirds of the time); the Carr brothers were nearly always near-to-hand. "Why could not Peter Carr or Samuel Carr get Sally Hemings pregnant when Thomas Jefferson was not at Monticello," asked Gordon-Reed, "not once in fifteen years?" (The DNA results subsequently vindicated her. Foster tested the Carr Y, too. It didn't match.)

Gordon-Reed rested her case, and set about writing history. She reasoned from analogy. She speculated. She asked her reader to trust her knowledge of human nature. Arguments
from human nature can be persuasive, but, when the wind blows, they tend to totter. For one thing, "human nature" has a history. Enlightenment meditations on the subject, like David Hume’s 1739–40 Treatise of Human Nature, influenced Jefferson’s views on race. (Hume thought that blacks were “naturally inferior to the Whites,” and even inhuman: “There, scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation.”) For another, arguments from human nature are only as subtle and perceptive as the people who make them. Most of us are easily duped. “Error, Sir,” Laurence Sterne wrote in Tristram Shandy (Jefferson’s favorite novel), “creeps in thro’ the minute holes and small crevices which human nature leaves unguarded.” It was Ellis’s confidence that he understood Jefferson’s character, after all, which led him to his impotence theory.

Harriet Hemings had seven white great-grandparents; she was, in the idiom of the time, an “octoaroon.” She was also, because of a precedent-defying seventeenth-century Virginia statute, Thomas Jefferson’s property. In English law, children inherit their status from their fathers. Relying on that law, a woman with an African mother and an English father successfully sued for her freedom in Virginia in 1653. Not long after, the House of Burgesses, eager to avoid another legal challenge, turned English law upside down. In 1662, two years after the founding of the Company of Royal Adventurers to Africa—that is, just when the British were beginning to dominate the slave trade—Virginiens answered doubts about “whether children got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman should be slave or free” by reaching back to an archaic Roman rule, partus sequitur ventrem (you are what your mother was).

Generations passed. There was much begetting. About 1735, an Englishman named Captain Hemings had sex with a “Full blooded African Woman,” a slave, whose name has not survived. She gave birth to a daughter. Hemings tried to buy the child, apparently to free her, but her owner refused to sell; he was curious to see how the girl would turn out. Hemings tried to steal her; he failed. In 1746, the girl, Elizabeth Hemings, came to be the property of an Englishman named John Wayles, when he married Frances Epps. (Eleven-year-old Hemings was part of the marriage settlement.) Wayles married three times; his children by his first wife included a daughter, Martha, born in 1750. After the death of his third wife, Wayles did not marry again. But he did start having sex with Elizabeth Hemings, by whom he had six children, including a daughter, Sally, born in 1773. In 1772, Martha Wayles married Thomas Jefferson. After John Wayles’s death in 1773, Elizabeth Hemings and all of her children came to live at Monticello. In 1785, when Sally Hemings was nine, Martha Jefferson died. Mrs. Jefferson, on her deathbed, extracted from her altogether bereft and nearly unmoored husband a promise that he would never remarry. Four years later Jefferson drafted a bill passed by the Virginia legislature decreeing that “a marriage between a person of free condition and a slave, or between a white person and a negro, or between a white person and a mulatto, shall be null.” In 1789, when sixteen-year-old Sally Hemings was living with forty-three-year-old Jefferson in Paris, she became pregnant (she later either miscarried or lost the child during or soon after childbirth).

Gordon-Reed argued that Hemings made a deal with Jefferson. (Madison Hemings called it a “treaty.”) She knew she could stay in Paris, where she would be free; slavery was illegal in France. She decided to return to Virginia because, as most people would, she missed her family. And, crucially, Jefferson promised her that he would free all her children when they reached the age of twenty-one. Maybe Hemings loved Jefferson; maybe he loved her, too. (In 1974, Fawn Brodie wrote
a history supposing this to be the case, and more than one romance novel assumes the same.) Gordon-Reed knew that this question is important; since Jefferson and Hemings are more than people, they’re symbols, too. But symbols only get you so far. “The romance is not in saying that they may have loved one another,” Gordon-Reed wrote. “The romance is in thinking that it made any difference if they did.” Nothing redeems slavery.

Jefferson, the architect of our freedom, could not reckon slavery’s toll. “The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unrelenting despotism on the one part, and degrading submission on the other,” he wrote in 1780, the year his wife died. “The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.” Jefferson could not abide slavery. Neither could he imagine his life, or the Union, without it. And he knew its end would not come without bloodshed. “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.”

Moral impotence is a muffled agony. American sphinx? American Achilles.

Sally Hemings bore her last child in 1808. In 1875, the aging former president—who never admitted, publicly, anyway, that he was the father of Hemings’s children—wrote a letter in which he wrestled with a matter—a “mathematical problem”—that had long vexed him. Just how many generations had to pass before a child with a full-blooded African ancestor could be called “white”?

Let us express the pure blood of the white in the capital letters of the printed alphabet, and any given mixture of either, by way of abridgment in MS. Letters.

Let the first crossing be of $A$, a pure negro, with $A$, a pure white. The unit of blood of the issue, being composed of the half of that of each parent, will be $A/2 + A/2$. Call it, for abbreviation, $b$ (half blood).

The letter goes on for a while. Suffice to say: $b$ is the second crossing, $g$ is a quadroon, $c$ is the third crossing.

Let the third crossing be of $g$ and $C$, their offspring will be $g^2/4 + 2g\cdot C/4$, call this $c$ (eighth), who having less than 1/8 of $A$, or of pure negro blood, to wit $1/8$ only, is no longer a mulatto, so that a third cross clears the blood.

To Thomas Jefferson, Harriet Hemings was $c$. What more she meant to him probably does depend as much on your view of human nature as on the documentary record. After Harriet Hemings took a stagecoach to Philadelphia in 1822, she traveled on to the nation’s capital, where her older brother, Beverly, lived as a white man. “She thought it to her interest, on going to Washington, to assume the role of a white woman,” said Madison Hemings, the only one of Sally Hemings’s children to live his life as an African American. She thought it to her interest. He seems never to have forgiven her. “And by her dress and conduct as such I am not aware that her identity as Harriet Hemings of Monticello has ever been discovered.” Finding her now would be difficult. “Harriet married a white man in good standing in Washington City, whose name I could give,” Madison said, “but will not, for prudential reasons.”

Truth isn’t always stranger than nineteenth-century fiction but, usually, it’s less melodramatic. Thomas Jefferson’s daughter didn’t leap to a watery grave. As late as the 1860s, years after Clotel was published, she was still alive—within plain sight of the White House after all—pursuing whatever liberty, and happiness, she could find.