

## UNpacking Slavery Romanticism in Richmond, Virginia

*By Jasmine Taylor, Jasmine The Invincible blog, 2020*

I'm proud to introduce my UNpacked series! In UNpacked, I will tackle issues concerning race, gender, or class that I uncover during my travels. I hope it sparks a dialogue for you to have with your loved ones or even encourages you to do research and further educate yourself about the topic.

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Nestled in Richmond, Virginia, lies Jackson Ward, a historic neighborhood that was once known as the "Harlem of the South." Serving as a hub for Black enterprise and culture from the 1920s to the 1940s, the area's vibrant legacy still radiates through the residents and business owners dedicated to preserving it to the present day.

At the center of this cultural revitalization stands the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia (BHMVA). The museum is housed in the Leigh Street Armory, a striking 19th-century building with castle-like turrets that open into beautifully modern, expansive exhibit spaces. Originally constructed in 1895, the two-story brick structure is thought to be the oldest United States armory for a Black militia. Before the museum moved in, the Armory served as a segregated school for Black children and a military reception center for Black soldiers during World War II. It makes perfect sense that the BHMVA would breathe new life into this pillar of the community once again.

Inside, the traveling exhibition *Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello: Paradox of Liberty* gives voice to over 600 enslaved men, women, and children. But for me, the visit was about more than just viewing artifacts; it was about confronting a narrative I had seen peddled elsewhere.

While planning this trip, I was struck by tourism materials that described Sally Hemings merely as Jefferson's "concubine"—a term that felt like a romanticization of a relationship defined by ownership rather than agency. It raised a difficult question: when we use terms like "mistress" for an enslaved woman, are we accurately preserving history, or are we softening the reality of survival?

Standing in the BHMVA, I found the space to finally unpack the "forbidden love" myth often attached to Hemings and Jefferson.

### **The Facts**

Sally Hemings was born into slavery to her mother, Elizabeth Hemings. Her father was the owner of the plantation, John Wayles.

Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson, was Sally Hemings' half-sister. Martha "inherited" the Hemings family following the death of John Wayles and brought them to Monticello in 1774. Hemings was likely only a year old.

Martha died in 1782, four months after the birth of her last child.

At the age of 14, Hemings went to France to serve as a handmaid to Jefferson's daughter Maria. She lived her life "freely" while overseas, learning French and attending parties with Jefferson's daughters. It was at this time that Hemings and Jefferson became "sexually involved."

After negotiating privileges for herself and freedom for her future children, she agreed to revisit her life as a slave in America. By 1789, Hemings returned to Virginia—pregnant with Jefferson's child. She would go on to bear six children by Jefferson. Four lived into adulthood. Some of her children chose to "pass" as white and blend into the white community.

While it's hard for me to accept the often "romantic" presentation of this story, it was a profound experience to witness *The Paradox of Liberty* while standing in the heart of Jackson Ward. There is a poetic justice in unpacking the realities of Sally Hemings's enslavement within a space dedicated to celebrating Black heritage. It undoubtedly feels like a necessary reclamation of the narrative.