

PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: “JAMES HEMINGS: GHOST IN AMERICA’S KITCHEN”

October 20, 2026

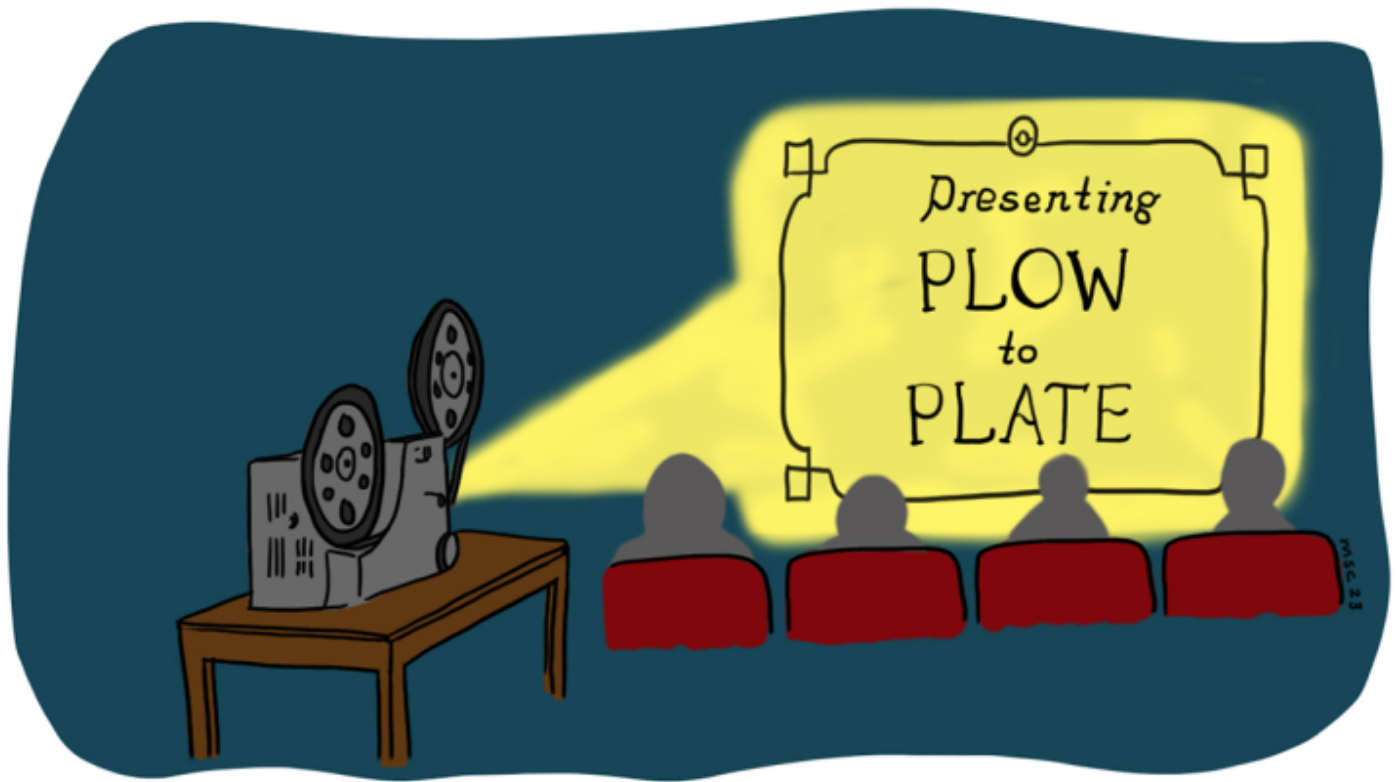


Illustration by Maggie Carson

By Adam Rabiner

DNA evidence has all but confirmed that Thomas Jefferson fathered children by Sally Hemings, the woman he enslaved—old news by now, and the reason her name is familiar to most Americans. Less known is that Sally had an exceptionally accomplished older brother, James Hemings (1765–1801). *James Hemings: Ghost in America’s Kitchen* opens with words flashing on the screen that sum up the breadth of James Hemings’s life: master chef, valet, maître d’hôtel, teacher, slave, patriot. The lack of recognition for his contributions to the American culinary story is why he is the “ghost

in America's kitchen," and the filmmakers aim to shed light on that hidden history.

His story slipped into obscurity for many reasons. He died young, possibly having "drunk himself to death" after failing to become Jefferson's first White House chef. As a free man, Hemings insisted that Jefferson formally request his service in a letter; Jefferson demurred and offered the position to a white man instead. Chef Ashbell McElveen, the film's main narrator, thinks murder is the likelier explanation.

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Hemings feels ghostly because he left so few physical artifacts behind. He spoke both English and French. At 19, he accompanied Jefferson to Paris, where he was professionally trained as a chef and served as Jefferson's personal cook. Yet the only handwritten documents currently attributable to him are a 1796 kitchen inventory and a handful of recipes later transcribed by members of his family. No portrait of him exists. Yet the American food landscape we know today would not be possible without him. He is credited with inventing—or at least popularizing—ice cream, macaroni and cheese, whipped cream, crème brûlée and even French fries, and is often called one of America's culinary founding fathers and the granddaddy of all Southern chefs. The film reveals little about his day-to-day life, but his impact on Southern cooking (including barbecue) and American gastronomy runs deep.

The documentary also argues that Hemings's choices extend beyond foodways. In Paris, Jefferson never declared James enslaved, as French law required. As such, had Hemings petitioned the French government for his freedom, he would have jeopardized French funding of the Revolutionary War. And when Jefferson returned to the new United States three years later, Hemings chose to go with him as a slave rather than remain a free man in France—hence his standing, in the film's telling, as an

American patriot.

Jefferson pledged to free Hemings on the condition that he keep cooking for him and teach Hemings's brother Peter—another enslaved household member—everything he knew. Peter, gifted in other ways, never became the brilliant, innovative chef James was. James was a teacher, as the film notes, but perhaps not the most successful one.

If culinary racism erased James Hemings from history, this film works to restore him to his rightful place. Too little of his daily life survives for the filmmakers to truly flesh him out—the man on screen is no longer a ghost, but he is lightly sketched. He's a shadow beside the larger-than-life white contemporaries whose lives were better documented and whose reputations were better preserved. Still, James Hemings is finally getting his due. The Hemings descendants in the film are proud of their line to the third president, but they take special pride in descending from the man who set the template for fine dining in America.

James Hemings: Ghost in America's Kitchen: Tuesday, Nov. 10, 2026

After signing up for the Plow to Plate mailing list, you'll receive the screening link. You can view the film upon link receipt—or any time, on demand

ABOUT US

Plow to Plate, presented by the Safe Food Committee of the Park Slope Food Coop, is a film series focused on food. Its goal is to educate the community about food-related topics and issues, such as how food is sustainably cultivated, harvested, distributed, prepared and served. All screenings are FREE and open to the public.