Slaves at the President's House

FROM *ANNALS OF PHILADELPHIA AND PENNSYLVANIA IN THE OLDEN TIME* (1881)

by William C. Kashatus

President George Washington arrived in Philadelphia on the morning of Sunday, November 21, 1790, exhausted and depressed. The journey north from Mount Vernon, his beloved Virginia plantation, had not been pleasant. Heavy rain made the roads impassable at various points along the route, extending the journey from two to three days. A drunken coachman overturned the president's baggage wagon not once, but twice, adding to his already considerable misery. To make matters worse, Washington discovered that the house he was to occupy was unfinished.

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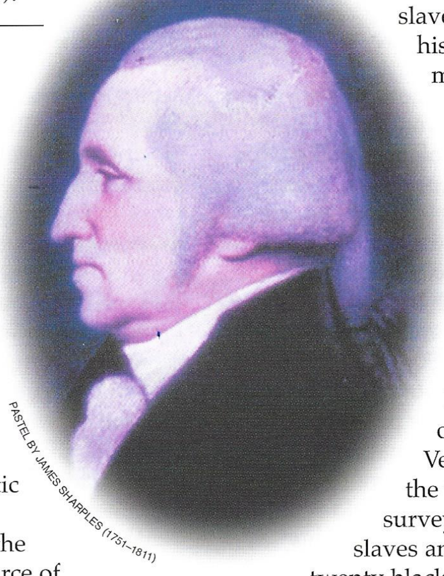
The President's House at 190 High (now Market) Street, between Fifth and Sixth Streets, was located less than six hundred feet from Pennsylvania's State House (popularly known since the mid-nineteenth century as Independence Hall) where, fourteen years earlier, Congress had declared independence from Great Britain. Owned by Robert Morris (1734–1806) a United States senator from Pennsylvania, the mansion was one of the largest houses in the city. Morris offered his residence as an inducement for Congress to relocate the federal capitol from New York City to Philadelphia for a period of ten years while the new Federal City was being built on the banks of the Potomac River.

Although Washington considered the residence "the best single house in the city," he also realized that it was not large enough to meet the many demands of his personal and public lives. Accordingly, he directed his personal secretary, Tobias Lear, to enlarge the house. The second floor was to be renovated to include living quarters for Washington, his wife Martha, and stepchildren, as well as a "private study and dressing room." A public office would be added to the third floor where the president could transact the business of government with his cabinet. An addition to "lodge servants" would also be made to a "Back building" located behind the house. Washington believed that these renovations were necessary for "the commodious accommodation" of his family and domestic servants, which included eight of the more than three hundred slaves from Mount Vernon.

George Washington was well aware of the moral contradiction between his

President's House, Philadelphia, 1790 (facing page). Independence Hall (top, left) once had a wall surrounding the State House garden (above). Profile of George Washington (below).



PASTEL BY JAMES SHARPLES (1751–1811)

slaveholding and the responsibility he held as the president of a new nation forged on the principles of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The American Revolution had not only created a new, more democratic understanding of government, but also codified those democratic principles in a federal constitution that made the common people the source of political authority in the fledgling nation. African Americans had helped to secure those principles by joining the Continental Army and fighting for American independence.

Quietly, Washington began to rethink the issue of slavery and the fundamental paradox of the new nation he had helped to create—how the freedom of some was forged upon the slavery of others. He would struggle with this dilemma throughout his presidency. The location of the nation's capitol at Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights (1791) were drafted, constantly served to remind him of the moral repugnance and political contradiction of slavery in a free nation. His experience at Philadelphia ultimately convinced him to do what no other Southern slave-holding founding father was able to do: provide for the freedom of all the slaves under his control in his last will and testament.

George Washington was a product of eighteenth-century Virginia's planter class. He became a slaveholder at the age of eleven when his father Augustine died, leaving him ten slaves and five hundred acres of land on the family's Mount Vernon estate. By 1754, the twenty-two-year-old surveyor owned thirty-six slaves and added another twenty black servants to his household five years later when he married Martha Dandridge Custis (1731–1802), a wealthy widow. The twenty servants were "dower slaves" who legally belonged to the estate of her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis, and were held in trust for their children and, later, grandchildren.

Keenly aware that his personal prosperity was inextricably tied to the South's "peculiar institution" of slavery, Washing-

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In 1853, Junius B. Stearns depicted Washington among African American fieldworkers at his sprawling Virginia plantation, Mount Vernon (above). Washington at West Point *(facing page) by artist Augustus Koellner (1813–1848).*

ton steadily acquired more slaves during the decade that followed. Although he had extensive land holdings in the Ohio Valley, they yielded little profit since many were occupied by squatters or farmers who refused to recognize his title. The source of his wealth was Mount Vernon, which he had transformed from the sizeable tobacco farm he inherited in the 1750s into a great manor house and plantation by the time of his ascendancy to the presidency in April 1789. The transformation was due largely to slave labor. The more slaves he owned, the more land he could settle and cultivate. Three-quarters of his slaves provided the manual and skilled labor necessary to run Mount Vernon. In addition to the field hands who planted and harvested cash crops, chiefly tobacco and wheat, Mount Vernon's workforce included millers, blacksmiths, breeders of livestock, and carpenters. Others served as house servants, boatmen, coachmen, and cooks.

To ensure labor efficiency, Washington divided Mount Vernon into five separate farms, each with its own slave community. In this way, he avoided "losing much valuable time" his slaves would otherwise spend "commuting" to work in the outlying fields. He made sure to separate husbands from wives and parents from children, an arrangement that severely weakened the slave families. Labor efficiency was also achieved through other, more severe methods, including a work schedule that ran from dawn to dusk, six days a week; clothing and housing slaves as meagerly as possible; and strict, sometimes inhumane discipline.

Washington expected "a certain income" from his plantation and realized that it would not be possible without a measure of "tranquility" among the slaves. But the tranquility he desired was based on the constant threat of physical brutality. Punishment took the form of public whippings, shackling those who attempted to run away and, in the most severe cases, making an example of disobedient slaves by selling them. Occasionally, sale to the West Indies was used as a means of frightening his slaves into submission. In 1766, for example, the thirty-five-year-old planter shipped off an incorrigible fieldhand named Tom to the islands in return for "whatever he will fetch." Despite the fact that Tom was "exceedingly healthy, strong and good at the hoe," Washington considered him to be "both a rogue and a runaway." The act of exiling him to the disease-ridden West Indies plantations was nothing less than a death sentence. More important, it served as a chilling reminder to Mount Vernon's slaves that their master would not tolerate disobedience.

By nature, George Washington was not a cruel individual; other large planters of northern Virginia considered him to be benevolent. Like fellow

Southern planters, he regarded the ownership of slaves as both the foundation of his wealth and as a status symbol. Predictably, the kind of control he wielded was, at times, so intoxicating that he failed to realize the impact of his actions on the lives of those he owned. Considering these circumstances, Washington's ability to reconsider the moral implications of slavery in later years was exceptional. His attitude toward slavery began to change during the American Revolution when he saw blacks, for the first time, as human beings rather than as slaves.

The American Revolution not only transformed Washington into a national hero, but also forced him to become more progressive in his attitude towards African Americans. He initially refused to allow blacks to serve in the Continental Army, but when Lord Dunmore (John Murray), the royal governor of Virginia, offered slaves their freedom in exchange for fighting in the British Army, he quickly rescinded his objection and allowed "free Negroes" to enlist in the patriot army. Soon measures were taken to permit enslaved blacks to join the army and reward them with their freedom. Many historians accept the estimate of five thousand as the number of African Americans who served in the Continental Army or state militias during the Revolutionary War. Just as important was the personal impact his black soldiers had on him. Washington's respect for their courage made him increasingly troubled by the degrading effects of slavery on his own character. By 1778, he began to express his earnest desire to "get clear" of those he held in bondage and decided to discontinue selling them. "The advantages resulting from the sale of my Negroes, I have very little doubt of," he admitted. "But my scruples arise from a reluctance in offering these people at public vendue."

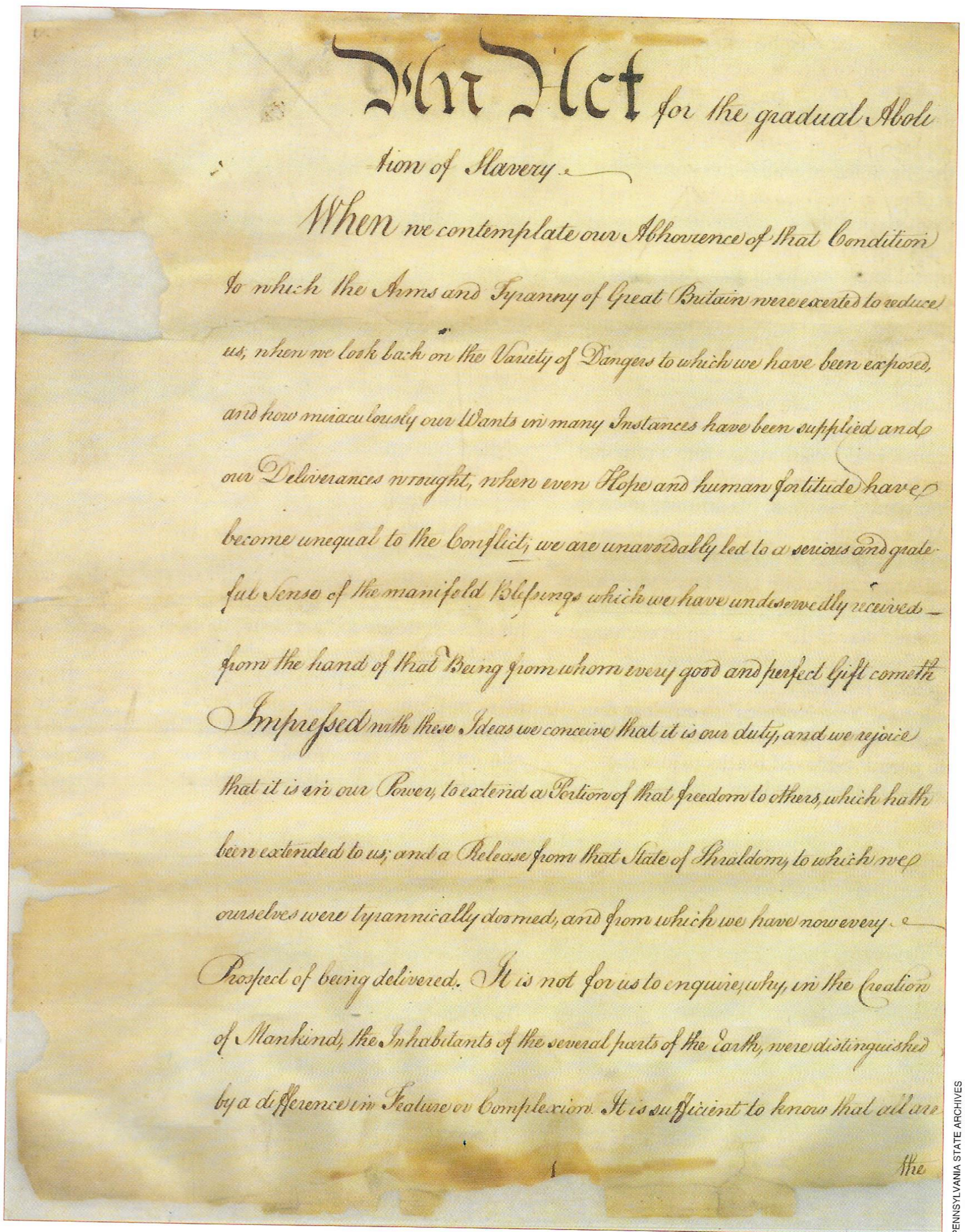
First Lady Martha Dandridge Custis Washington (1731–1802).

Over the next decade Washington continued to wrestle with this moral dilemma. Shortly before assuming the presidency, in 1789, he vowed never to purchase another slave and expressed his desire to "see some plan adopted by the legislature by which slavery in this country may be abolished by slow, sure, and imperceptible degrees." His experience in Philadelphia would serve as the catalyst to free his own slaves.

The relocation of the capitol from New York City to Philadelphia in 1790 was the result of a Congressional compromise. Southern congressmen agreed to support Secretary of the

Treasury Alexander Hamilton's financial proposals in return for building a permanent capitol along the banks of the Potomac River, closer to the South. It was also agreed that Philadelphia—located midway between the geographical boundaries of the new nation with New Hampshire being the northernmost state and Georgia being the southernmost—would be a convenient meeting place for Congress during the ten-year period required to build the new Federal City.

With a population of forty-four thousand citizens, Philadelphia was the largest city in the United States by 1790. It was also home to more than eighteen hundred free blacks, one of the largest communities of its kind on the eastern seaboard. The existence of a sizeable free black community was largely due to the Religious Society of Friends; Philadelphia's Quakers were among the first groups to commit themselves to abolitionism, viewing slavery as a fundamental contradiction to their belief in the spiritual equality of all human beings. After making slaveholding a cause for disownment from their religious body in 1776, many of the city's Quakers took their anti-slavery crusade into the larger society. They formed anti-slavery organizations and lobbied the state legislature to make the peculiar institution illegal. Their efforts resulted in the passage of An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery by the General Assembly of Pennsylvania on March 1, 1780, making the state the first to initiate emancipation. The legislation mandated that children born to enslaved parents in Pennsylvania after March 1, 1780, would be bound in indentured servant status to their parents' slave owners until they reached the age of twenty-eight. After that they were free for the rest of their lives.



An Act for the gradual Aboli-
tion of Slavery.

When we contemplate our Abhorrence of that Condition
to which the Arms and Tyranny of Great Britain were exerted to reduce
us, when we look back on the Variety of Dangers to which we have been exposed,
and how miraculously our Wants in many Instances have been supplied and
our Deliverances wrought, when even Hope and human fortitude have
become unequal to the Conflict; we are unavoidably led to a serious and grate-
ful Sense of the manifold Blessings which we have undeservedly received —
from the hand of that Being from whom every good and perfect Gift cometh.
Impressed with these Ideas we conceive that it is our duty, and we rejoice
that it is in our Power, to extend a Portion of that freedom to others, which hath
been extended to us; and a Release from that State of Thraldom, to which we
ourselves were tyrannically doomed, and from which we have now every
Prospect of being delivered. It is not for us to enquire, why, in the Creation
of Mankind, the Inhabitants of the several parts of the Earth, were distinguished
by a difference in Feature or Complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are
the

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Those in slavery prior to March 1 had to be registered as such at county and Philadelphia courts by November 1, 1780; slave owners who neglected to register their slaves saw them liberated. The earliest the child of a slave would be free was March 1808, although by 1790, all but 273 of Philadelphia's blacks had been freed. Owners bringing slaves into Pennsylvania after February 1780 could retain them for six months, a provision aimed towards transients who had no intention of becoming Pennsylvania residents. However, the act exempted congressmen and foreign officials from the six-month provision. Evasion of the law by taking slaves out of Pennsylvania for brief periods every six months led to an amendment, passed March 29, 1788, which required the children born after February 1780 to be registered. The amendment also stopped Pennsylvania's slaveholders from selling their slaves out of state or taking pregnant female slaves

Pennsylvania's 1780 Gradual Abolition Act (facing page), the country's first emancipation law. Hercules (right), Washington's cook, escaped to freedom near the end of his presidency. Richard Allen (below), former slave and bishop of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded the Free African Society.

out of state so that their children would be born into slavery. In addition, slaves of owners coming into Pennsylvania with the intent to become residents had their slaves freed upon arrival.

But freedom did not come without significant burdens for Philadelphia's African Americans.

Caught in a precarious position between slavery and freedom, Philadelphia's free black residents shared some of the rights and privileges of free society, but the legal principle that color was sufficient grounds for presuming slave status made them vulnerable to being kidnapped and sold back into bondage. Even if they managed to escape the slave catcher, free blacks still faced discrimination, as well as competition from white indentured and free labor. Eventually, they began to organize themselves into an influential middle-class community.

Led by the Reverend Richard Allen (1760–1831), a black Methodist minister who had been born into slavery, Philadelphia's free black community founded, in 1787, the Free African Society, dedicated to the mutual aid, support, and development of leaders within the city's growing black community. The Free African Society raised funds to establish black churches and schools, and provided relief for "the free Africans and their descendants of the City of Philadelphia." It also made crucial connections in the white abolitionist community and gathered new recruits, including many former slaves, to operate organizations of their own making that would assume a guardianship role over the conduct of the city's blacks. The very existence of such a thriving black community into which runaways could literally disappear created anxiety for Washington, who expected to use several household slaves at the presidential mansion just as he had at Mount Vernon.

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Between 1790 and 1797, eight of Washington's most highly favored slaves came to Philadelphia. Six of them were "dower" slaves, which meant that they belonged to the Custis estate, but Washington, as guardian for Martha's grandchildren, was responsible for them. The eldest was Moll, a single, fifty-one-year-old woman who had once served as nanny for Martha Custis's four children by her first marriage. In Philadelphia, she became nanny to the First Lady's two youngest grandchildren, eleven-year-old Nelly and nine-year-old George Washington Parke Custis.

Hercules was the Washingtons' cook. Owned by the president, he was in his late thirties when he arrived in Philadelphia, a widower with three children. His two daughters—eight-year-old Evey and five-year-old Delia—remained at Mount Vernon, while his son, thirteen-year-old Richmond, was allowed to relocate to Philadelphia to assist his father in the kitchen. Considered one of the finest chefs in the country, Hercules was favored by Washington and granted special privileges. Permitted to sell leftovers from the kitchen, Hercules earned "one to two hundred dollars a year" from this lucrative business. Most of the money was spent on expensive clothing and accessories, giving him the appearance of a "celebrated dandy."

In Philadelphia there were three stable hands: Austin, a mulatto in his early thirties; Giles, also in his early thirties; and Paris, an eighteen-year-old. Except for the fact that Paris was owned by Washington, little is known about him. Austin and Giles had similar backgrounds; both were dower slaves and experienced coachmen sufficiently trusted by the president to accompany the First Lady on long trips. Austin had been Washington's carriage footman at Mount Vernon. During the Revolutionary War, he accompanied Martha Washington on her visits to the battlefield. The president was comfortable allowing Austin to travel unaccompanied between Philadelphia and Mount Vernon, where his wife and five young children continued to live. Giles, who was single, drove the baggage wagon for Washington and had accompanied the general's wife on her visit to the Valley Forge encampment during the winter of 1777–1778.

The Washingtons also enjoyed their own personal attendants, both of whom were dower slaves. Ona Judge, a sixteen-year-old dower slave and half-sister to Austin, was maid and body servant to the First Lady, and Christopher Sheels, a fifteen-year-old dower slave, was the president's body servant. Sheels was the nephew of Billy Lee, Washington's personal attendant throughout the Revolutionary War and during his first year as president in New York City.

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Injured in a fall, Lee became incapacitated and was retired to Mount Vernon when the capitol moved to Philadelphia.

The first family treated their slaves with benevolence at the executive mansion. There is no record, for example, of any whippings or harsh physical punishment during their years in Philadelphia. Instead, they were well fed, well clothed, and provided with comfortable living quarters. Washington's instructions were straightforward: Hercules, Richmond, and Christopher Sheels were to sleep in a room in the attic of the main house; Moll and Ona Judge with the First Lady's grandchildren in two rooms over the kitchen; and Giles, Paris, and Austin in the servants quarters between the smokehouse and stable. Ona, Austin, and Hercules were permitted to attend the theater.

Washington's benevolence was due, in part, to his desire to create an atmosphere of formality and civility while consciously avoiding royal ostentation. He was sensitive to the fact that his example as the first president of the United States would shape the nature of the executive office for many years to follow. He carefully avoided the appearance of monarchy and the tyranny many Americans associated with it. Washington was careful not to exceed the yearly salary of twenty-five thousand dollars fixed by Congress. He was, by nature, a reserved individual who insisted on being addressed simply as "Mr. President." He could be powerful and commanding, occasionally barking at the more than seventy servants he employed at the executive mansion during the Philadelphia years.

Despite his demeanor, Washington was not a recluse. He enjoyed the city, or at least the company of its wealthy citizens. Thousands of people attended his open houses, public levees, and fashionable state dinners prepared by Hercules. These ceremonies, along with the two cream-colored horses and elegant carriage driven by Austin and Giles, were often criticized as "monarchical displays." Nor did the fact that this "comfortable lifestyle," procured at the expense of slave labor, escape public notice as Washington, the "great champion of American Freedom," was occasionally chastised for holding "the human species in slavery." While Washington was concerned about appearances, he was not yet ready or willing to surrender his slaves, even to Pennsylvania law, which provided for emancipation.

Despite his position, Washington feared that he might witness his own slaves and the dower slaves freed by the Gradual Abolition Act and he quietly planned to take advantage of the six-month provision by sending slaves on brief trips to Mount Vernon. The president shrewdly argued that he remained a citizen of Virginia and was subject to its laws, rather than those of the Keystone State. Since slavery was legal in his native state, the Constitution protected his right to own slaves and that he could not be deprived of his human property. Because the city was the seat of the federal government, he was obliged to live in Philadelphia. He was careful that neither he nor his slaves ever spent the six continuous months necessary to establish legal residency in Pennsylvania, thereby making them immune to the Commonwealth's laws. "In case it shall be found that any of my slaves may attempt their freedom at the extirpation of six months, it is my wish that you send them home to Virginia," the president instructed Tobias Lear. To accomplish this, Washington had the slaves accompany his wife to Mount

Anticipating the arrival of George Washington in 1789, on his way from Mount Vernon (below) to New York for his inauguration, celebrants erected triumphal arches (facing page) at Gray's Ferry near Philadelphia.

Vernon for periodic visits, creating a "pretext" which he believed "deceived both [the slaves] and the public." Not everyone was fooled.

Of the slaves, Hercules was wise to Washington's scheme. The cook was in daily contact with Philadelphia's free black and Quaker abolitionist communities and quickly learned the details of Pennsylvania's statutes on emancipation. When Lear informed Hercules that he was to return to Mount Vernon for a brief visit, he replied that he fully was aware of the "true motive." Hercules assured Lear that while he did not "make the least objection to going," he was "mortified" that his "fidelity" to Washington was being questioned. Although the conversation convinced Lear of his loyalty, Hercules was planning his escape, crafting his own deception by swearing allegiance to his master.

Washington sent three of the eight slaves back to Mount Vernon within the first year of his arrival at Philadelphia: the teen-aged Paris and Richmond, for their constant disobedience; and Giles, who was seriously injured and could no longer ride a horse. Three years later, while returning to Mount Vernon, Austin fell from a horse and died. White indentured servants took their places.

As his first term in office unfolded, Washington found himself in a political conundrum over slavery. While his personal sentiments were increasingly shifting toward abolitionism, he understood his presidential responsibility to uphold the Constitution, which recognized the legal existence of the peculiar institution. At the same time, Section 2, Article IV, which addressed the return of escaped slaves, was so vague that northern abolitionists were able to circumvent the law and secure freedom for fugitives. Washington had long suspected that Philadelphia's Quakers had established a clandestine network to "liberate the slave" and denounced their actions as "repugnant to justice." In February 1793, he signed the Fugitive Slave Act, enabling a slave owner or his agent to capture a runaway, bring him before a federal, state, or local judge and, upon proof of ownership, reclaim him. According to the law, anyone interfering with this process would be fined five hundred dollars and could be sued by the slaveholder. The Fugitive Slave Act forced Pennsylvania to defer to the federal government in matters regarding the property laws of slave states and as such was a serious violation of the states rights doctrine. Despite his personal misgivings about slavery, the president had used his constitutional authority to protect his property interests as a slaveholder. Later that year, he was forced, once again, to see African Americans as human beings rather than chattel.

In a selfless act that would eventually lead to its dissolution, the Free African Society demonstrated the humanitarian commitment of Philadelphia's black citizens by volunteering their services to Mayor Matthew Clarkson during the deadly yellow fever epidemic that plagued the city during the late summer and autumn of 1793 (see "Plagued! Philadelphia's Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793" by William C. Kashatus III, Spring 1993). By the time the plague ended in late October, it had claimed the lives of more than four thousand urban dwellers, nearly 10 percent of the population. Despite the disease's virulence, free blacks valiantly nursed the sick in the city's devasted neighborhoods. Others worked as carters to transport victims to cemeteries. Still others toiled late into the night to bury the dead. Some white residents appreciated their efforts. "Indeed I don't know what the people would do if it was not for the Negroes, as they are the principle nurses," wrote Isaac Heston, a twenty-three-year-old law clerk, on September 19. Other whites discounted the courage of the black volunteers, contending their race made them immune to the disease, and accused them of stealing the possessions of the victims. Ultimately, the heroic efforts of the Free African Society resulted in its financial ruin. Having accumulated a debt of 177 pounds due to the expenses of bedding and moving victims of the plague, the society was forced to dissolve at the end of the year.

The society's courageous efforts were not lost on Washington, who had retreated to the countryside in nearby Germantown during the epidemic. He was able once again to distance himself from the political and personal economic interests that connected him to slavery long enough to acknowledge the respect he felt toward the African American race as a whole. Shortly after he returned to the city, the president resolved to divest himself of thousands of acres of his western lands and selling or renting the four outlying farms at Mount Vernon. By doing so, he would no longer need to rely on slave labor to support himself and could use the profit from the land

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sales to purchase the dower slaves from the Custis estate in order to set them free at his death. Washington admitted that his "motive to liberate a certain species of property which I possess" was "compelled by an imperious necessity."

Four slaves—Ona Judge, Hercules, Moll, and Christopher Sheels—remained in Philadelphia. It is doubtful that they had any clue of the president's intentions to free them. Apparently, neither did Martha Washington. When she confided to Ona that she would be bequeathed to one of her granddaughters as a wedding gift, the maid realized that her fate had been sealed. Told that she was to accompany the Washingtons to Mount Vernon in May 1796, Ona began plotting her escape. On her errands in Philadelphia, she secured the assistance of the free black community, which had grown to more than five thousand residents. She planned to take refuge among them until she could make arrangements to relocate further north. On the day of the Washingtons' departure for Virginia, Ona was careful to avoid any suspicion. She dutifully packed her things, had another servant carry her baggage outside of the president's house, and waited until the First Family sat down to dinner. Then she vanished into the Philadelphia underground.

In June, Ona, with the help of the city's free blacks, secretly boarded the sloop *Nancy*. She had found a friend in John Bowles, the vessel's captain, who was sympathetic to the plight of runaway slaves and had been carrying fugitives on his monthly voyages from Philadelphia to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Five days later, Ona arrived in Portsmouth, believing she had liberated herself from slavery. However, slavery remained legal in New Hampshire and the president, at the insistence of the First Lady, attempted to recover her. When she was found, Ona agreed to return to Mount Vernon in exchange for her eventual freedom. Angered by her brash proposal, Washington refused to negotiate with her on the grounds that it would "neither be politic or just to reward unfaithfulness with a premature preference," especially considering the "steady attachments of other servants who are far more deserving of favor."

Upon learning of the president's reply, Ona—preferring death over slavery—refused to return and married John Staines, a free black sailor, in 1797. Washington most likely would have let the matter rest, not wanting to risk the publicity of using the machinery of the federal government to recover his wife's property. The First Lady, infuriated by what she perceived to be a breach of personal trust, pressed him into making another attempt. Ona had complicated that possibility by marrying a free man and the president died before he could pursue the claim any further.

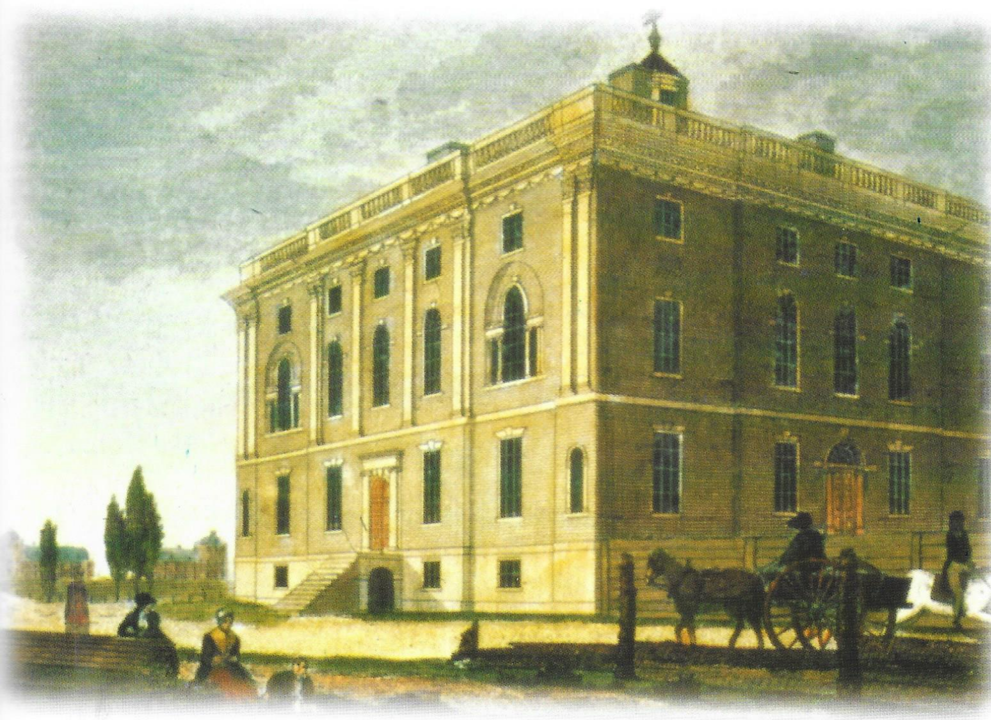
Washington, like his wife, had also mistaken obedience for loyalty in the case of Hercules. Shortly before he left Philadelphia to return to private life in March 1797, the cook escaped. The former president, offended by the deception, tried to hide his disappointment by dismissing the incident as "a most inconvenient thing." He also predicted that there would be many more "elopements" as long as "Negroes were held in bondage against their own wishes" and expressed his hope that Virginia's legislature would adopt a "policy of gradual abolition."

Moll and Christopher Sheels returned to Mount Vernon with the First Family in 1797. Sheels, who was literate, later attempted an escape but Washington found a note outlining his plot and foiled it. Moll, on the other hand, remained a faithful servant for the rest of her life.

On July 9, 1799, Washington completed his last will and testament. Just five months before his death, the sixty-seven-year-old chief executive set in motion his plan to free the 123 slaves he owned. Having no issue of his own, his estate was to pass to the children of his siblings, a select few friends, and his wife and her family. Although Washington stipulated that his slaves would not be manumitted until the death of his wife, Martha, realizing the discomfort her husband felt with the knowledge that their freedom depended on her death, authorized their manumissions within a year of his passing, on December 14, 1799. He was, however, unable to extend such courtesy to the dower slaves of the Custis estate. His inability to sell off his western lands and rent the outlying farms at Mount Vernon kept him from raising the money necessary to purchase the dower slaves and they were divided among Martha Washington's grandchildren upon her death in 1802.

Several historians believe that the manumission of the former president's slaves was a far more complicated issue. Washington might have made the manumissions conditional on his wife's death in order to spare her the spectacle of watching slave families being torn apart, since

Pennsylvania built an executive mansion on Ninth Street in Philadelphia in 1797, but President John Adams chose the smaller High Street residence where Washington and his family had resided.



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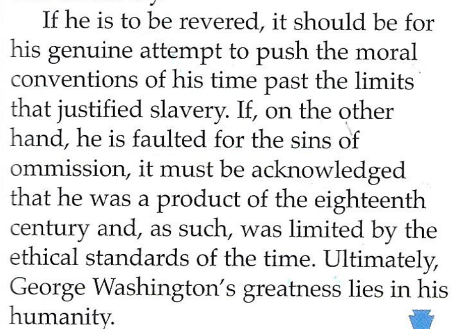
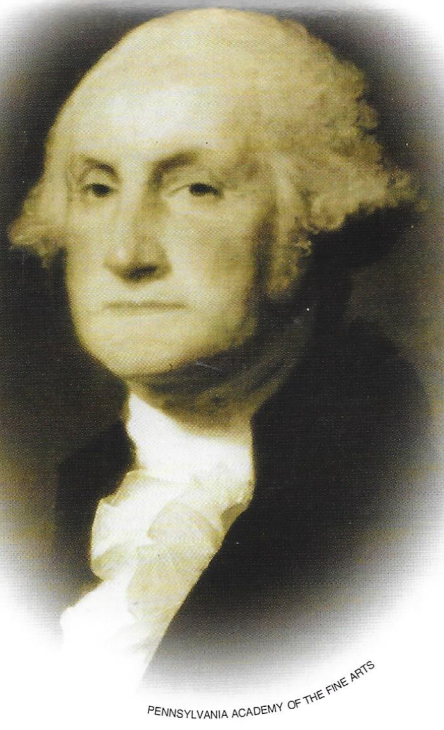
his slaves had extensively intermarried with the dowers. Washington's inability to provide for the manumission of the dower slaves might have had less to do with the sale of his western lands and the sub-division of Mount Vernon than with his granddaughters' husbands, who may have preferred owning slaves rather than inheriting money generated by the sale of those lands.

The eight slaves Washington took to Philadelphia sparked great public interest—and debate—when the media reported, in 2002, that the new Liberty Bell Center at Independence National Historical Park was being constructed near the site of the presidential mansion. While the house was demolished in the 1830s, the site still offers an important opportunity to interpret the issue of slavery at what was once the nation's capitol. Together with a coalition of local historians and scholars, the National Park Service collaborated on an exhibit in and around the Liberty Bell Center that addresses the nation's complex and contradictory roots in freedom and slavery. Although Washington's presidency is not the focus of the exhibit, his legacy and the age-old conflict between equality and slavery are addressed in it.

How historians interpret that legacy at any given time is at least as much a reflection of how the nation feels about itself as it is of a president many have deified as the greatest American leader who ever lived and whom others have criticized as a founding father with feet of clay. Regardless of the perspective, George Washington, it should be remembered, relied on the tacitly understood moral conventions of his time in deciding what he could and could not do about the peculiar institution of slavery.



If he is to be revered, it should be for his genuine attempt to push the moral conventions of his time past the limits that justified slavery. If, on the other hand, he is faulted for the sins of ommission, it must be acknowledged that he was a product of the eighteenth century and, as such, was limited by the ethical standards of the time. Ultimately, George Washington's greatness lies in his humanity.



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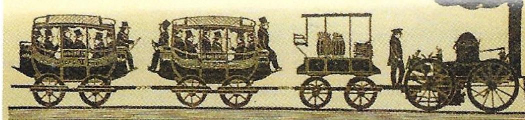

While investigating the site of the Robert Morris Mansion, used by Presidents George Washington and John Adams as their official residence when Philadelphia served as the nation's capitol from 1790 to 1800, archaeologists recently uncovered the remains of an icehouse. Independence National Historical Park (INHP), administered by the National Park Service will interpret the mansion, demolished in 1832, and its famous first families, as well as the slaves owned by George and Martha Washington.

INHP, which has long recognized both the existence of the Morris Mansion and the slaves in President Washington's household, relates the history of slavery in the nation throughout the park. The story is told at the Liberty Bell, named by abolitionists, and at Independence Hall, the site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the 3/5ths Compromise. During walking tours, park rangers speak of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and slave owner, and of Benjamin Franklin, a former slave owner turned ardent abolitionist. INHP buildings and sites where slavery is noted include Congress Hall, Franklin Court, and the Second Bank of the United States.

Measuring forty-five acres, Independence National Historical Park contains twenty buildings open to the public. Commonly called "the birthplace of the nation," the park interprets events and the lives of the diverse population during the decade when the city hosted the federal government.

For information about visiting Independence National Historical Park, including the recently introduced security screening and timed ticketing for tours, write: Independence National Historical Park, National Park Service, 143 South Third St., Philadelphia, PA 19106; telephone (215) 965-2305; or visit www.nps.gov/inde/ on the Web.