

ENSLAVED AFRICANS IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF GEORGE AND MARTHA WASHINGTON

At various times during Washington's stay in Philadelphia, nine enslaved Africans are known to have lived and worked here at the President's House. They were dynamic participants in the daily life of the presidential household and the surrounding city. Painstaking research by modern scholars provides us with a glimpse into the lives of these people. The brief biographies that follow help us better understand their lives. They also serve to represent the thousands of free and enslaved people of African descent who lived and toiled here in Philadelphia and who helped build a new nation.



Presumed portrait of Washington's cook [Hercules], attributed to Gilbert Stuart. Collections of Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

Austin, half brother of Ona Judge. He died on December 20, 1794, after a fall from a horse while returning to Mt. Vernon, leaving a wife and five children.

Christopher Sheels attempted to escape from Mt. Vernon in 1799, but was unsuccessful. His fate after Martha Washington's death in 1802 is unknown.

Giles was a driver, postillion, and stable hand. He returned to Mt. Vernon in 1791, after being injured in an accident during Washington's tour of the southern states. He died before 1799.

Hercules served for many years as cook both at Mount Vernon and in Philadelphia. He seized his freedom just before the family retired to Mt. Vernon. He was celebrated for his mastery of his craft and for setting exacting standards for kitchen workers. Even though Hercules fled from bondage in 1797, he was legally freed in Washington's will.

Joe (Richardson) is mentioned in 1795 records as "Postillion Joe," although his time in Philadelphia is uncertain. He was married to a woman freed (along with their children) after Washington's 1799 death, whereupon the family took the name Richardson.

Moll was nursemaid to Martha Washington's two grandchildren. She also served as nursemaid to Martha's children both before Martha's marriage and at Mt. Vernon.

Ona/Oney Judge was, like her mother, a talented seamstress. She became Martha Washington's personal maid as a teenager. In 1796, Ona seized her freedom and escaped to New Hampshire, where she lived until her death in 1848. In New Hampshire, she married a free black sailor named Jack Staines and had three children, who all died before her.

Paris was a young stable hand. He was returned to Mt. Vernon in 1791 for "unsatisfactory behavior" and died in 1794.

Richmond came to Philadelphia at the age of 11 with his father, Hercules. He worked in the kitchen briefly, but returned to Mt. Vernon in 1791. His later fate is unknown.



Washington and family at Mount Vernon. Collections of New York Public Library.

ONA'S ESCAPE

After Ona escaped from Philadelphia, Washington tried relentlessly to recapture her. He discovered where she had gone when a friend of Martha Washington's granddaughter happened to encounter Ona in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Washington wrote to the Collector of Customs in Portsmouth and requested that he apprehend Ona and send her back. After speaking with Ona, the New Hampshire official declined to do so. Two years later, Washington asked his secretary and nephew, Burwell Bassett, Jr., to seize Ona and her child, born since her escape. Bassett confided his intentions to John Langdon, the Governor of New Hampshire, and Langdon sent a warning to Ona. She escaped, yet again, and fled with her child. Near the end of her life, when Ona was old and had outlived all of her family, people who spoke with her were impressed by her dignity, her faith in God, and her abiding love of freedom.