

In July 1790, Congress established Philadelphia as the temporary capital of the United States while the planned Federal City (Washington D.C.) was being constructed. Over the following ten years, the area around this first block of Independence Mall housed the seats of federal power for the entire country. While the Supreme Court and Congress conducted business in the buildings standing to the east and west sides of Independence Hall, respectively, the office of the president was then located on this exact spot, and its remains now lie directly beneath your feet. In this house, the nation's first executive mansion, Presidents George Washington and John Adams lived and carried out the important affairs of state. During this time, the house itself served as a mirror of the young republic, reflecting both the lofty principles and painful contradictions of the new nation. Although the office of the president was lauded as embodying the fundamental ideals invoked by the phrases "*We the People*" and "*All men are created equal*," the meaning behind those words did not apply to everyone in the new United States, or to the nine enslaved men and women held in bondage in this house.

Over the past 240 years, the President's House Site has experienced a rich and complex history. During its first thirty or so years, the house was associated with a host of important events and people. However, this site's historical significance eventually faded in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The house was ultimately demolished and its vital story very nearly erased from public memory. Below is a brief timeline of the President's House Site.



Image to Right: The President's House by William L. Breton Torn down in 1832

## HISTORY OF THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE SITE

### 1767–1772: Mary Lawrence Masters Residence

In 1767, Mary Lawrence Masters initiates construction on the property that would come to be known as the President's House. In 1772, Mrs. Master's eldest daughter Polly marries Richard Penn, grandson of William Penn and lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania. The house is given to the young couple as a wedding present.

### 1772–1775: Richard and Polly Penn Residence

The Penns live in the house for only about three years. In 1775, shortly before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Richard Penn is asked to present the First Continental Congress's grievances to King George III personally in the form of the "Olive Branch Petition." The Penns spend the duration of the war in England.

### 1777–1778: General Sir William Howe Headquarters

In September 1777, British forces under General Sir William Howe occupy Philadelphia after the Battles of Brandywine and Germantown. General Howe makes the Masters-Penn house his winter residence and headquarters while Washington and his troops retreat to Valley Forge. In June 1778, the British evacuate Philadelphia and consolidate their forces in New York.

### 1778–1779: Benedict Arnold Residence

Colonial forces enter Philadelphia under the command of Major-General Benedict Arnold, who promptly makes the Masters-Penn House his residence and headquarters. In March 1779, Arnold resigns his post and two months later, while still living in the house, he begins his treasonous correspondence with the British.

### 1779–1790: Robert Morris Residence

In January 1780, the house is severely damaged by fire, and is subsequently purchased and rebuilt by Robert Morris, the famed "Financier of the Revolution." Morris rebuilds the house to its original plan, enlarges the property, and adds an icehouse and several back buildings.

### 1790–1800: Washington and Adams Executive Mansion

In 1790, Robert Morris volunteers his house to serve as President Washington's residence while Philadelphia temporarily serves as the nation's capital. Washington occupies the property from November 1790 to March 1797, during which time his household includes nine enslaved Africans brought up from Mount Vernon. He also makes several enlargements and modifications to the house and back buildings, including the addition of a slave quarters between the kitchen and stables.

John Adams succeeds Washington as President and moves into the President's House in March 1797. Adams leaves Philadelphia in 1800 and moves into the newly completed White House in Washington D.C. on November 1.

### 1800–1832: Francis's Union Hotel

After Adam's departure, the President's House is converted into the Francis's Union Hotel, and subsequently into a boardinghouse and a series of commercial storefronts.

### 1832–1935: Commercial Transformation

In 1832, the building is demolished and rebuilt as a series of three narrow stores. Only the east and west walls of the original house are left standing, and are incorporated into the later commercial buildings.

### 1935–1951: Demolition

In 1935, the later commercial properties are themselves demolished, although remnants of the original east and west walls of the President's House survive until the early 1950s. In 1951, the entire block is razed for the construction of Independence Mall, and the last surviving aboveground components of the house are finally destroyed. In 1954, as part of the Mall plan, a public toilet is built within the footprint of the house—likely damaging any subsurface remnants of the foundations—and remains in place until 2003.

## THE PRESIDENTS HOUSE - WASHINGTON AND ADAMS

The house that once stood here became the nation's first "White House" from 1790 to 1800. In the process, both men literally invented the Office of the President, and established many of the traditions and protocols that our commanders-in-chief follow to this day.

### The Washington Years

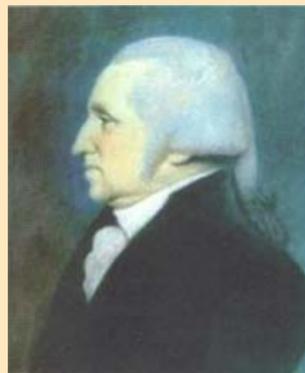


Image Above: George Washington by Ellen Sharples

Washington moved into the President's House in November 1790, calling the elegant, three-story brick mansion the "best single house in the city," and remained in residence until March 1797. Washington brought with him a household that consisted of about thirty people, including members of his own family, his personal staff and their families, some fifteen white servants, and a total of nine enslaved Africans. Washington conducted the business of the Executive Branch from a small, second-floor office. While president in Philadelphia, he signed into law the ten amendments to the Constitution that made up the Bill of Rights, approved a national banking system to keep the country financially stable, and proclaimed a policy of neutrality regarding American involvement in European affairs.

The issue of slavery plagued Washington throughout his time in Philadelphia. Washington eventually decided to free his slaves in his will, undertook measures to free wife Martha's dower slaves, and donated money toward the creation of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas.

Washington also conspired to prevent those enslaved individuals he held in the President's House from achieving their freedom by knowingly violating Pennsylvania law. Under the Gradual Abolition Law of 1780, citizens from other states were permitted to live in Pennsylvania with their slaves for a period of up to six months. The law also provided that any enslaved people residing here continuously for that length of time could take steps to obtain their own freedom. In order to keep this from happening to the slaves brought from Mt. Vernon, Washington regularly rotated them out of Pennsylvania before the six-month deadline. Amendments to the Gradual Abolition Law passed in 1788, however, and made such actions illegal. He made life much more perilous for African Americans throughout the country (making up 1/5 of the total population) by signing into law the notorious Fugitive Slave Law of 1793.

#### Executives and family members who lived at the President's House from 1790 to 1797

Custis, George Washington Parke "Wash"	Grandson of Martha Washington
Custis, Eleanor "Nelly"	Granddaughter of Martha Washington
Dandridge, Bartholomew Jr.	Secretary to George Washington and Nephew of Martha Washington
Humphreys, David	Secretary to George Washington
Jackson, William, Maj.	Aide-de-Camp to George Washington
Lear, Benjamin	Son of Tobias, born 1791; Left the Household after the death of his Mother
Lear, Polly	Wife of Tobias, died 1793, Possibly of Yellow Fever
Lear, Tobias	Senior Secretary to George Washington
Lewis, Robert	Nephew to George Washington, Secretary
Lewis, Howell	Nephew to George Washington, Secretary after 1792
Washington, George	President
Washington, L.A.	President's Nephew
Washington, Martha Custis	President's Wife

#### Executives and family members who lived at the President's House from 1797 to 1800

Adams, Abigail	President's Wife
Adams, John	President
Adams, Thomas	President's Son, lived here during their last winter in the house
Smith, Abigail Adams (Nabby)	President's Daughter, lived here during their last winter in the house
Smith, Caroline	President's Granddaughter, lived here during their last winter in the house
Smith, Louisa	Abigail Adams's Niece and Ward

### The Adams Years

John Adams and his wife Abigail moved into the President's House in March 1797 upon his election to the presidency. Adams, a man of frugal habits, simple tastes, and a lifelong aversion to slavery, likely ran a much different household than his predecessor. Though Adams left no explicit records of how he functionally utilized the President's House, we do know that during his time there, no slaves were ever in residence. In contrast to the relative pomp of the Washington administration, the President's House under Adams appears to have exuded a much more sedate, aloof atmosphere (he regularly underspent his allotment for state functions and related entertaining). The largest function at the house during his residence occurred after Washington died in December 1799, when more than a hundred people attended Mrs. Adams' mourning "drawing room" in his honor.

During his presidency, Adams headed up a deeply divided and increasingly partisan government, as the nation became more and more entrenched along emergent Republican and Federalist Party lines. In foreign affairs, he wrestled with the "XYZ" diplomatic snub by the French, which very nearly plunged the new nation into war. Domestically, Adams' administration saw the ratification of the 11<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, the creation of a national Navy, and the establishment of the Mississippi Territory, but was roundly criticized for signing into law the controversial Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Adams left the President's House in May 1800, moving into the recently finished White House by November of the same year.

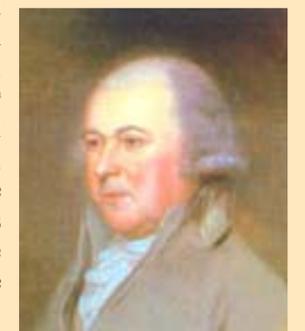


Image Above: John Adams by Charles W. Peale

## ENSLAVED PEOPLE IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF GEORGE AND MARTHA WASHINGTON

The enslaved people who lived and worked here at the President's House were integral parts of the complex life in the household. They did not simply react to events; they were dynamic participants in the daily life of the family and the city. Too often people who are little known as individuals in historical documents are neglected when interpreting the past for modern audiences.

Interpretation of life in the President's House gives us an opportunity to give names and faces to a few of the thousands of free and enslaved people of African descent who were part of Philadelphia society.



Image Above: Presumed portrait of Washington's cook [Hercules].  
Image to Right in Background: Image of chained slaves in front of the Capital Building after the fire of 1814.

**Austin**, the half brother of Ona Judge, worked as a postillion and stable hand. He died on December 20, 1794, after a fall from a horse, leaving a wife and five children.

**Christopher Sheels** became Washington's personal attendant as a teenager after his uncle, who was with the general throughout the Revolution, became incapacitated. A literate man, Christopher attempted to escape in 1799, but was unsuccessful. His fate after Martha Washington's 1802 death 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** was the chief Cook during Washington's entire stay in Philadelphia, but escaped just before the family retired to Mt. Vernon. He was celebrated for his mastery of his craft and exacting standards for kitchen workers. Even though Hercules had fled from bondage in 1797, he was legally freed by the terms of 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. Before Martha's marriage and at Mt. Vernon, she had served as nursemaid to Martha's children.

**Ona/Oney Judge** was, like her mother, a talented seamstress. She became Martha Washington's personal maid as a teenager. In 1796, Ona escaped to New Hampshire, where she lived until her 1848 death. 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. Although his father was not a dower slave, his mother was, making Richmond and his sisters dower slaves by association. He worked as a scullion in the kitchen for a year, but returned to Mt. Vernon in 1791. His later fate is unknown.



Washington and family at Mount Vernon

### ONA'S ESCAPE

After Ona escaped from Philadelphia, Washington attempted to recapture her. He found out where she was 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, requesting that he apprehend Ona and send her back. The New Hampshire official, after speaking with Ona, 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 Landon, the governor of New Hampshire, while dining with him, but Landon sent a warning to Ona. She escaped yet again and fled the town 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.

## ARCHEOLOGY METHODS AND INTERPRETATION

### Recovering the Past

The historical past exists independently of our knowledge or our perceptions—in fact, the past has sometimes been described as “a foreign country.” How then, do we recreate a past that is distant from us and in many ways unknowable? The simple answer is: through the collection and analysis of as much information (data) as we can possibly find pertaining to the past. Historians, for example, search out old documents—letters, diaries, deeds, and census information, to name a few such sources—relating to specific people and times. Yet written sources, most of those that have survived at least, were produced by or for society’s elite. The poor and the enslaved rarely left a written record and such individuals go unmentioned in documents produced by their social “betters,” other than as figures in a ledger or numbers in tax and census records. We are fortunate, then, that surviving historic



Image Above: Privy Fill, Dexter House, NCC

records associated with the President’s House identify the enslaved African-American residents and provide some biographical information on these individuals. On the other hand, we know little about their daily lives, and it is in this respect that archeology becomes critical in recreating a more complete, and inclusive, history of the people that lived and labored here.

### Archeology of the President’s House Site

Archeology is the study of the past through material remains, the everyday objects that people lost or discarded, as well as the places they inhabited and the spaces through which they moved. Wherever people live or work or play, they leave some physical trace of themselves—a sewing needle that falls through a gap in the floorboards, a child’s toy lost and forgotten in the yard, a broken dish tossed down an abandoned well. Through excavation and the analysis of recovered artifacts, we can often learn about the kinds of food people ate, the clothes they wore, some of the ways in which they entertained themselves, and even the diseases they suffered from.

What can we expect to find here at the President’s House Site? Research has indicated that nineteenth- and twentieth-century development of the property has probably destroyed much of the physical evidence. The construction of deep basements, for instance, has in all likelihood eradicated all or nearly all of the late-eighteenth-century ground surfaces, as well as most of the building foundations and footings. What may have survived later development are the lower portions of shaft features, historic pits generally lined with brick or stone. These pits were used for a variety of purposes, but the most commonly encountered shaft features are privies (outhouses) and wells. Other less commonly found shaft features include ice pits, cisterns, dry wells, and other



Image Above: Ice house, President’s House

specialized structures. Shaft features often served a secondary function as receptacles for disposal of trash from adjacent homes and businesses. They sometimes contain household items that were deposited while the feature was in use or after it was abandoned.

When deposits of household trash are found within these deep features, the study of this material can reveal in great detail aspects of daily life that are otherwise absent in historical documents. Such deposits can illuminate the lives of all strata of society.

A partial listing of the artifacts we might expect to find here would include objects such as broken ceramic dishes, bottles, pins, needles, animal bone, jewelry, and clothing items like buttons and buckles. Sometimes, if the conditions of preservation permit, we can recover pieces of cloth, seeds from the fruits or vegetables consumed, and even the remains of parasites that plagued their human hosts.

### Putting It All Together

The recovery of archeological remains from the site can then help us to address some questions about the people who lived here:

Can we identify artifacts associated with enslaved people who lived and worked at the President’s House, and if so, how do these material goods compare to those used by free persons occupying the site?

What might these objects have meant to the people (enslaved and free) who owned and used them?

Did the objects possessed by enslaved people, and the spaces in which they were used, help them to maintain an identity separate and distinct from the Free occupants of the President’s House?

Through the analysis of the site’s material remains—coupled with information from historic research and input from scholars, students, and the local community—we can begin to answer some of these questions, formulate others, and ultimately draw inferences about the everyday life of the enslaved community that lived and worked at the President’s House Site.

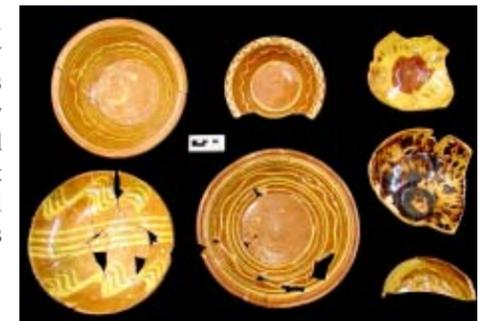


Image Above: Redware Ceramic Vessels, Dexter House, NCC