

George Washington, Slave Catcher

By ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR FEB. 16, 2015

AMID the car and mattress sales that serve as markers for Presidents' Day, Black History Month reminds Americans to focus on our common history. In 1926, the African-American historian Carter G. Woodson introduced Negro History Week as a commemoration built around the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Now February serves as a point of collision between presidential celebration and marginalized black history.

While Lincoln's role in ending slavery is understood to have been more nuanced than his reputation as the great emancipator would suggest, it has taken longer for us to replace stories about cherry trees and false teeth with narratives about George Washington's slaveholding.

When he was 11 years old, Washington inherited 10 slaves from his father's estate. He continued to acquire slaves — some through the death of family members and others through direct purchase. Washington's cache of enslaved people peaked in 1759 when he married the wealthy widow Martha Dandridge Custis. His new wife brought more than 80 slaves to the estate at Mount Vernon. On the eve of the American Revolution, nearly 150 souls were counted as part of the property there.

In 1789, Washington became the first president of the United States, a planter president who used and sanctioned black slavery. Washington needed slave labor to maintain his wealth, his lifestyle and his reputation. As he aged, Washington flirted with attempts to extricate himself from the murderous institution — “to get quit of Negroes,” as he famously wrote in 1778. But he never did.

During the president's two terms in office, the Washingtons relocated first to New York and then to Philadelphia. Although slavery had steadily declined in the North, the Washingtons decided that they could not live without it. Once settled in Philadelphia, Washington encountered his first roadblock to slave ownership in the region — Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act of 1780.

The act began dismantling slavery, eventually releasing people from bondage after their 28th birthdays. Under the law, any slave who entered Pennsylvania with an owner and lived in the state for longer than six months would be set free automatically. This presented a problem for the new president.

Washington developed a canny strategy that would protect his property and allow him to avoid public scrutiny. Every six months, the president's slaves would travel back to Mount Vernon or would journey with Mrs. Washington outside the boundaries of the state. In essence, the Washingtons reset the clock. The president was secretive when writing to his personal secretary Tobias Lear in 1791: "I request that these Sentiments and this advise may be known to none but yourself & Mrs. Washington."

The president went on to support policies that would protect slave owners who had invested money in black lives. In 1793, Washington signed the first fugitive slave law, which allowed fugitives to be seized in any state, tried and returned to their owners. Anyone who harbored or assisted a fugitive faced a \$500 penalty and possible imprisonment.

Washington almost made it through his two terms in office without a major incident involving his slave ownership. On a spring evening in May of 1796, though, Ona Judge, the Washingtons' 22-year-old slave woman, slipped away from the president's house in Philadelphia. At 15, she had joined the Washingtons on their tour of Northern living. She was among a small cohort of nine slaves who lived with the president and his family in Philadelphia. Judge was Martha Washington's first attendant; she took care of Mrs. Washington's personal needs.

What prompted Judge's decision to bolt was Martha Washington's plan to give Judge away as a wedding gift to her granddaughter. Judge fled Philadelphia for Portsmouth, N.H., a city with 360 free black people, and virtually no slaves. Within a

few months of her arrival, Judge married Jack Staines, a free black sailor, with whom she had three children. Judge and her offspring were vulnerable to slave catchers. They lived as free people, but legally belonged to Martha Washington.

Washington and his agents pursued Judge for three years, dispatching friends, officials and relatives to find and recapture her. Twelve weeks before his death, Washington was still actively pursuing her, but with the help of close allies, Judge managed to elude his slave-catching grasp.

George Washington died on Dec. 14, 1799. At the time of his death, 318 enslaved people lived at Mount Vernon and fewer than half of them belonged to the former president. Washington's will called for the emancipation of his slaves following the death of his wife. He completed in death what he had been unwilling to do while living, an act made easier because he had no biological children expecting an inheritance. Martha Washington lived until 1802 and upon her death all of her human property went to her inheritors. She emancipated none of her slaves.

When asked by a reporter if she had regrets about leaving the Washingtons, Judge responded, "No, I am free, and have, I trust, been made a child of God by the means." Ona Judge died on Feb. 25, 1848. She has earned a salute during the month of February.

Correction: February 20, 2015

An Op-Ed article on Monday referred imprecisely to Martha Washington's handling of George Washington's slaves after his death in 1799. While she did not emancipate her own slaves, as the essay noted, in 1801 she freed all of his slaves, as he had requested.

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