

Escaping Washington for Freedom

Let's not Celebrate George Washington, but the Slaves Who Escaped Him

CrimethInc.

February 19, 2018

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President's Day, a federal holiday, observes George Washington's birthday on February 22. Yet as a slave owner and profiteer on others' servitude, George Washington is a poor exemplar of the struggle for freedom. Rather than looking to him for a model representing resistance to tyranny, let's remember the slaves and indentured servants who sought to escape from him and the Native Americans who defended themselves against his attacks.

Washington is celebrated as the father of the American Revolution, itself the blueprint for countless subsequent struggles for independence and democracy. We can't grasp the meaning of the American Revolution without recalling that George Washington was one of the wealthiest people in North America. Even now, he remains among the wealthiest presidents in US history, with holdings that would be worth about half a billion dollars today. Of all subsequent presidents, only Donald Trump is wealthier.¹

As Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh describe in *The Many-Headed Hydra*, the American Revolution began in the 1760s with a series of protests and riots involving sailors, slaves, stevedores, working women, and other marginalized people. Networked in a global ferment involving mutinies, slave revolts, and strikes, these disturbances threatened to undermine the entire imperial order. Sensing that the empire was overextended and upheaval was inevitable, the colonial elite set themselves at the head of the rebellion, using it to free themselves of the financial burden of supporting the Crown. George Washington and his colleagues were not the initiators of the revolt, but the ones who coopted and contained it—a lesson about what happens when revolutionaries seek to gain legitimacy and resources through alliances with the upper class. Thus the Revolutionary War of the 1770s gave way to the American Counterrevolution of the 1780s and 1790s, climaxing with the establishment of the Federal Government, the Constitution, the Fugitive Slave Act, the Northwest Territory, and the Riot Act.² Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

From this vantage point, the apparently "individual" rebellions of slaves who set out to secure their own liberty compare favorably with a formal political revolution that did little to substantively alter the circumstances of the most oppressed while defusing social tensions for several generations. From their acts of defiance, whole Maroon and Quilombo communities arose in permanent resistance to white supremacy in both its monarchist and democratic variants. Just as the Russian Revolution might have turned out better if the working class had not permitted the Bolsheviks to seize the reins, the American Revolution could eventually have established a Quilombo the size of a continent had the revolutionaries deposed white supremacists like George Washington as ruling class interlopers.

¹ John F. Kennedy would have inherited a legacy worth a billion dollars, but was killed before he could come into his inheritance.

² "The motley crew had helped to make the revolution, but the vanguard struck back in the 1770s and 1780s, against mobs, slaves, and sailors, in what must be considered an American Thermidor. The effort to reform the mob by removing its more militant elements began in 1766 and continued, not always successfully, through the revolution and beyond. Patriot landowners, merchants, and artisans increasingly condemned revolutionary crowds, seeking to move politics from 'out of doors' into legislative chambers, in which the propertyless would have no vote and no voice. Paine, for his part, would turn against the crowd after Philadelphia's Fort Wilson Riot of 1779. When Samuel Adams helped to draw up Massachusetts's Riot Act of 1786, designed to be used to disperse and control the insurgents of Shays' Rebellion, he ceased to believe that the mob 'embodied the fundamental rights of man against which government itself could be judged,' and detached himself from the creative democratic force that years before had given him the best idea of his life."

— *The Many-Headed Hydra*, Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh

It's much easier to study the Great Men of History than to learn about those who set out to get free of their authority. Here, we present some context from Washington's life and the little we know about the slaves and indentured servants who sought to escape him. Much of this is drawn from the materials in the Founding Fathers database and the Geography of Slavery in Virginia archive. We hope this text will encourage others to uncover all the buried histories of the underclass—those who have been not only forgotten but also erased.

“It was the sense of all his neighbors that he treated them with more severity than any other man... The first time I walked with General Washington among his [sic] negroes, when he spoke to them, he amazed me by the utterance of his words. He spoke as differently as if he had been quite another man, or had been in anger.”

-Richard Parkinson, *A Tour in America, in 1798, 1799, and 1800*

Some Background

In 1646, at the end of the Third Powhatan War, all the Powhatan males in their capital village over the age of eleven were deported to Tangier Island as slaves. The Rappahannock River became the dividing line between white settlers and Native Americans. Native Americans were not to go south of it on pain of death; European colonists were not to cross north of it except to avoid bad weather or gather wood.

Two years later, the restriction on colonial expansion was lifted, and George Washington's great-great-grandfather, Nathaniel Pope, asserted ownership of more than a thousand acres near the land that was to become known as Pope's Creek, Washington's childhood home.

This anecdote illustrates the deep roots of the class and race privileges that formed the foundation of George Washington's life. Washington was descended from a long line of colonial authorities: planters, lawyers, politicians, sheriffs—and slave owners. All of these professions were interchangeable and interdependent, forming the constellation from which the North American ruling class arose.

In 1738, when George Washington was six years old, his father, Augustine Washington, placed an advertisement seeking the capture of a servant of his who had run away in company with other servants:

“RAN away from Capt. McCarty's Plantation, on Pope's Creek, in Westmoreland County, a Servant Man belonging to me the Subscriber, in Prince William County; his Christian Name is John, but Sirname forgot, is pretty tall, a Bricklayer by Trade, and is a Kentishman; he came into Patowmack, in the Forward, Capt. Major, last Year; is suppos'd to have the Figure of our Saviour mark'd with Gunpowder on one of his Arms. He went away about the 20th of April last, in Company with three other Servants, viz. Richard Martin, is a middle siz'd Man, fresh colour'd about 22 Years of Age, and is a Sailor; had on a blew Jacket. Richard Kibble, is a middle siz'd young Fellow, has several Marks made with Gunpowder on his Arms, but particularly one on his Breast, being the Figures of a Woman and a Cherry-Tree, and is a Carpenter by Trade; he wore a blew grey Coat with a large Cape, a Snuff-colour'd Wastecoat, and Buckskin Breeches. Edward Ormsby, is a small thin Fellow, of a swarthy Complexion,

and is a Taylor by Trade; has a Hesitation or Stammering in his Speech, and being an Irishman, has a good deal of the Brogue. They went away from Capt. Aylett's Landing, on Patowmack, in a small Boat, and are suppos'd to be gone towards the Eastern-shore, or North-Carolina. Whoever will secure the said Bricklayer, so that he may be had again, shall have Five Pounds Reward, besides what the Law allows, paid by Augustine Washington."

-*The Virginia Gazette*, June 9, 1738

The masters of these runaways, the McCarthys, Balls, and Washingtons, were all cousins. According to an advertisement placed the previous year, the Irishman, Edward Ormsby, had already attempted to escape "in Company with a Mulatto Woman, known by the Name of Anne Relee, alias Bush; who being whipt last Court held for the County of King George, may possibly have the Marks on her Back."

On one side, we see the Washington family, already the representatives of economic power, political legitimacy, and white supremacy; on the other side, a multi-ethnic network of rebels and criminals, the class of people who sparked the revolution.

Though these interracial alliances had been forming since the imposition of racial hierarchy in the 1600s, friendships like that of Edward Ormsby, the Irishman, Anne "Bush" Relee, the "Mulatto Woman," and John, the Kentishman, were reaching a boiling point by the end of the 1730s.³ To quote *The Many-Headed Hydra* again:

"During these years a furious barrage of plots, revolts, and war ripped through colonial Atlantic societies like a hurricane. No respecter of national or imperial bound-

³ We can cite a few examples here to evoke the spirit of the era.

On a cold night in April 1734, Marie Joseph Angélique, a 34-year old Madeira woman enslaved in Montréal, and Claude Thibault, her white lover indentured to the same household, lit their master's home ablaze as cover for their escape. The fire consumed 46 buildings, a considerable part of Montréal, and led to looting by the underclass. While Thibault was never seen again, Angélique was captured, viciously tortured, and executed across from the church her flames had gutted. Her ashes were thrown to the winds.

In 1739, twenty miles southwest of Charleston, South Carolina, twenty slaves unfurled a banner proclaiming "LIBERTY!" and chanted the word as they stormed a local warehouse, killing two guards and seizing weapons. The armed rebels proceeded south along the Stono River towards Spanish Florida, only fifty miles away. In hopes of destabilizing the British, the Spanish had promised freedom and land near St. Augustine to any slaves who escaped the British colonies. Since 1732, at least 250 runaways had seized this opportunity.

On their way to Florida, sixty slaves joined the insurrection—burning seven plantations and killing two dozen members of slave-owning families along the way. Unfortunately, the next day, a better-armed militia intercepted the Stono rebels, killing 44 and scattering the remainder. Rounded up in the following days, the insurgents were exported to the Caribbean or executed. Their decapitated heads dotted the local highways of colonial South Carolina. To counter this rebellion and two others in Georgia and South Carolina around the same time, the South Carolina legislature passed the Negro Act of 1740, restricting slave assembly, movement, and independence. Slaves were prohibited from growing their own food, earning money, or learning to write. The Assembly also enacted a 10-year moratorium against importing African slaves on the premise that a homegrown slave population would be less prone to uprisings.

Just two years later, African and Irish conspirators in New York City managed to burn thirteen buildings over the course of March and April 1841, including Fort George, the chief military installation of the colony and one of the greatest fortifications in all British America. Retaliation was quick and severe: over thirty conspirators were hanged, burned at the stake, gibbeted, or banished to places as far away as Newfoundland, Madeira, St. Domingue, and Curaçao.

Though New York was over two hundred miles away from Pope's Creek, Charleston over four hundred miles away, and Montréal nearly a thousand, the specter of slave revolts and interracial alliances ceaselessly haunted the ruling class.

aries, this cycle of rebellion slashed through British, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish territories, which stretched from the northern reaches of South America through the West Indies to the southern colonies and then the port cities of North America. Most of these events took place in plantation regions and were led by African Americans, but other areas (such as New York) and other actors (such as the Irish) were also involved. The magnitude of the upheaval was, in comparative terms, extraordinary, encompassing more than eighty separate cases of conspiracy, revolt, mutiny, and arson—a figure probably six or seven times greater than the number of similar events that occurred in either the dozen years before 1730 or the dozen after 1742.”

This was the context in which George Washington grew up. Roles based in race, gender, and nationality were being imposed from the top down by means of laws, religion, and brute force while the rabble were pushing back from below by working slow, running away, malingering, plotting, hiding out, stealing, sharing, and carrying out frontal attacks on the owning class. Over time, through the medium of storytelling, the tactics and strategies of individual rebels became working class traditions and customs. Sailors like Richard Martin, the aforementioned John’s fellow runaway, played an important role as propagandists, as their profession took them all over the colonies and beyond.

As a young boy, George Washington was indoctrinated to take for granted the distinctions between classes and the suffering inflicted on those beneath his station. He would have heard about servants escaping from his father. He also lived in proximity to indentured servants like Mary Monroe “Mol” Bowden.

Born in 1730, at age seven Mary Bowden was indentured for thirty years to George Washington’s father. Her only crime was being the daughter of a mixed-race indentured servant, Mary Hilliard, and William Monroe Jr., an ancestor of President James Monroe. At the age of two, Mary Hilliard had been awarded as an indentured servant to William Monroe senior and subsequently bore his son’s child. She mothered several more children, all of whom were indentured at birth to men of George Washington’s social class.⁴

George Washington was five years old when Mary “Mol” Bowden entered the Washington household. With the servant’s quarter immediately adjacent to the main house, Mol and George must have known each other and may have played together. When Washington’s father died in 1743, Washington’s half-brother Augustine Jr. inherited the right to control Mary “Mol” Bowden’s life. She did not passively accept this state of affairs, as we shall see below.

George Washington’s Youth

In 1749, at the age of seventeen, Washington began a career as a land surveyor. His family connections immediately secured him high-paying work as the official surveyor for the newly established Culpeper County. One of his chief employers was the Ohio Company, the leading Anglo-American entity pushing for the colonization and exploitation of the Ohio River Valley. His half-brothers Lawrence and Augustine Jr. were founding members.

⁴ *Notes And Documents of Free Persons of Color: Four Hundred Years of An American Family’s History*, by Anita Willis.

Etymologically, “survey” derives from Latin roots meaning “to look over,” just as “surveillance” derives from Latin meaning “to watch over.” The role of surveyors like Washington was to divide the land of so-called North America into privatized properties within a matrix of control—an essential step in the genocide inflicted on Native Americans and the enclosure of the commons in North America.

In winter 1751, Mary Monroe “Mol” Bowden escaped from Augustine Washington Jr. While Washington was mapping the region, she joined countless others in taking advantage of the friction between map and territory to make a break for freedom. She remained at liberty for five months, but was eventually caught and returned to Washington’s brother for a reward of 180 pounds of tobacco. In punishment, an additional year was added to Mary’s 30-year indenture.

In the winter of 1753–1754, Washington went from surveying lands for the Ohio Company to leading a military expedition for them to secure the Ohio River Valley from the French and their Native allies. In the course of this mission, the Seneca leader Tanacharison dubbed Washington “Town Destroyer.” The title itself had originally been given to Washington’s great-grandfather, John Washington, who had killed six Native American leaders gathered for peace talks in the 1670s. Living up to his lineage, George Washington and his colleagues ambushed and killed a group of French soldiers. The French subsequently claimed the officers had been operating in a diplomatic capacity. In response, the French captured Washington and sent him home in defeat, where he was stripped of his rank and resigned. Washington’s rash behavior helped to trigger the French-Indian War, which produced the global Seven Years War.

In the subsequent hostilities, Washington complained about the insubordination of the militiamen under his command:

“In all things I meet with the greatest opposition no orders are obey’d but what a Party of Soldier’s or my own drawn Sword Enforces; without this a single horse for the most urgent occasion cannot be had, to such a pitch has the insolence of these People arrivd by having every point hitherto submitted to them; however, I have given up none where his Majestys Service requires the Contrary, and where my proceedings are justified by my Instruction’s, nor will I, unless they execute what they threaten, i.e., ‘to blow out my brains.’”

Even in the midst of war, ordinary British colonists did not welcome the leadership of representatives of the ruling class like George Washington. The threat they faced from conflict with Native Americans was not mitigated by the governance of such colonial authorities, but exacerbated by it.

Washington Becomes a Planter and Politician

In January 1756, Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow from the ruling class. Martha’s father, John Dandridge, was a British immigrant who owned Virginia land and about twenty slaves. During Martha’s youth, her father had apparently fathered a child, Ann, with one of his slaves, a woman of African and Ani-Yun-Wiya/Cherokee descent. Ann was forced to follow Martha from the Dandridges’ home to Custis’s home and then to Washington’s.

Martha joined George Washington at Mt. Vernon, a few dozen miles from Pope’s Creek. Washington became a planter and politician. Thanks to Martha’s wealth, he added tens of thousands

of acres to his land holdings and expanded the number of slaves in his captivity from 50 to over 300. Without this boost in property—both land and human—Washington never would have been able to achieve the financial, social, and political status he did. He probably never would have been president.

Around the same time, Mary “Mol” Bowden attempted to flee once again. This time, she succeeded in getting away from Popes’ Creek for two years before being recaptured. When she was taken to court in August 1758, six years and six months were added to her indenture in punishment. She was 45 when her indenture expired, having spent her entire life up to that point in servitude—the only exception being the years of freedom she won by taking flight.

On July 10, 1759, John Winter, an indentured convict hired out to paint Washington’s house in Mt. Vernon, ran off after getting £5 but only doing part of the work. Washington recorded that “before he had near finishd Painting my House [Winter] Stole a good deal of my Paint & Oyl and apprehensive of Justice ran off.” John Winter’s master, John Fendell, ran the following advertisement in the Maryland Gazette:

“Ran away from the Subscriber, a Convict Servant Man named John Winter, a very compleat House Painter; he can imitate Marble or mahogany very exactly, and can paint Floor Cloths as neat as any imported from Britain, The Time of his going off is uncertain, as he was hired to a Gentleman in Virginia who can give no Account of the Time. The last Work he did was a House for Col. Washington near Alexandria.”

As a convict servant, John was punished, like Mol, simply for being born into the wrong class. When the commons of Ireland and Britain were enclosed in the 1600s, vast numbers of peasants were forced off of the land they had shared for generations. Centuries-long traditions of subsistence farming, wood gathering, medicine growing, animal herding, and kinship were destroyed as Britain’s poor were driven into Britain’s nascent cities—which became open-air prisons. Life before the enclosures was hardly perfect, but afterwards it became impossible. Those who refused to leave their land were charged with trespassing and loitering, punishable by servitude or death. Those who refused to work in the cities’ sweatshops, foundries, or mines were charged with vagrancy—punishable by servitude or death. And those who continued to gather food or firewood like their ancestors or who stole out of desperation were charged with theft—all punishable by servitude and death.

The first generations of servants to be spared the gallows in London found a slower death in Virginia, where mortality rates were astronomic.⁵ By the 1750s, the conditions were not as catastrophic, but they remained miserable. We can see why people like John Winter chose the dignity of the fugitive over the life of the servant.

On April 14, 1760, a slave Washington described in his journal as “Boson” ran away from Washington’s home at Mt. Vernon. He was caught and returned on April 18. Boson was likely whipped, deprived rations, or “smoked” in retaliation. “Smoking” involved suspending a slave in an active smokehouse or forcing him to dig a shallow hole big enough for himself to fit. Dried grass, leaves, and stalks were placed over the slave and lit on fire. As the plant matter burned, the slave was deprived of oxygen and showered with tiny embers. This practice was so well established by the

⁵ Of the first 600 or more colonists sent to Jamestown between 1607–1611, all but 60 died of starvation, disease, exposure, Native attacks, or being worked to death. By 1624, only 1200 of the 6000 colonists sent to Jamestown had survived.

1820s, that Missouri overseers called it “Virginia play.” Knowing the punishments he risked and the separation from his loved ones should he succeed, it speaks to the severity of Mt. Vernon slave life and the courage of Boson that he chose to make another run for it that summer. Sadly, Boson was captured and returned again on August 24, 1760.

In August 1761, four slaves whose names are recorded as Peros, Jack, Neptune, and Cupid fled one of Washington’s plantations together. Washington bought an advertisement offering a ransom for their return, describing the fugitives and asserting that

“The two last of these Negroes were bought from an African Ship in August 1759, and talk very broken and unintelligible English; the second one, Jack, is Countryman to those, and speaks pretty good English, having been several Years in the Country. The other, Peros, speaks much better than either, indeed has little of his Country Dialect left, and is esteemed a sensible judicious Negro. As they went off without the least Suspicion, Provocation, or Difference with any Body, or the least angry Word or Abuse from their Overseers, tis supposed they will hardly lurk about in the Neighbourhood, but steer some direct Course (which cannot even be guessed at) in Hopes of an Escape.”

A record of Washington’s personal servants and slaves published in 1762 lists 71 people in thrall to the man we celebrate today as a hero of liberty. These were some of the people whose labor built Washington’s fortune:

“A List of Tythables in Fairfax County—given into Captn Daniel McCarty—June 9th 1762—viz. 1 George Washington Ho. Servants: Thomas Bishop, Breechy, Schomberg, Jack, Doll, Jenny, Betty, Phillis, Moll, Sall, Kate. Carpenters: Turnr Crump, Anthony, Will, Morris, George, Michael, Tom, Sam, Ned. Smiths: Peter, London. Miller: George. Ditcher: Robt Haims. Ho. House: Burgs Mitchell, Jack, Jack, Jack, Ned, James, Charles, Davy. Dogue Run: John Alton, Peros, Will, Cæsar, Troy, Stafford, Betty, Sarah, Sue, Lucy. Creek Plann: Josias Cook, Matt, Cupid, Will, Jenny, Kitty. Muddy hole: Edwd Violette, Grig, Will, Jupiter, Essex, Sam, Betty, Ruth, Hannah, Kate, Phœbe. River Plann: Saml Johnson [Jr.], Tom, Ben, George, Robin, Nat, Peg, Murria, Clœ, Flora, Doll—GW. In all—71”

Meanwhile, following France’s loss of lands between the Appalachian Mountains and Mississippi River, Anglo-American settlers begin to stream into the Ohio River Valley. An inter-tribal Native alliance arose involving members of the Odawas, Anishinaabeg (Ojibwas), Neshnabé (Potawatomis), Wendat (Hurons), Myaamiaki (Miamis), Waayaahatanwa (Weas), Kiiikaapoa (Kickapoos), Mascoutens, Peeyankihšiaki (Piankashaws), Lenni Lenape (Delawares) Shawnees, Wyandots, Mingos, and Onöndowá’ga (Seneca). Hostilities broke out in 1763 with an uprising known as Pontiac’s Rebellion, named for Pontiac, an Odawa leader. This stalled colonial expansion and forced the British to modify their policies, albeit at a high cost of lives.

Shortly after the uprising began, King George III issued his Royal Proclamation of 1763, forbidding British subjects from settling the newly-acquired lands. Though the proclamation was not related to the uprising, American colonists imagined it to be a result of it—adding to tensions between colonists, Native Americans, and the British Crown.

At that time, Washington was serving as a representative in the House of Burgesses for Frederick County. As the British imposed taxes on the American colonies to pay the costs of the military operations that expanded the territory that Washington and others were colonizing, Washington became increasingly upset with British rule. In 1764, the House sent the British Parliament a letter written by Thomas Jefferson complaining that “the inhabitants of the colonies are the slaves of the *Britons* from whom they are descended.”

Jefferson made no mention of the irony that he himself had fathered slaves whom he kept in bondage. This contradiction emerged again and again throughout the American Revolution. When the ruling class thought themselves to be treated unfairly, they complained that they were being treated like slaves; yet those who owned slaves always insisted that they treated their slaves so well that the latter had no objection to slavery. During the war of 1812, newspapers once again complained that American POWs were being treated worse than slaves.

In fact, many of the costs of establishing the empire were not imposed on those who benefitted from it, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, but on ordinary people. Sailors, who were forced to perform manual labor similar to that imposed on chattel slaves, subjected to harsh punishments, and received little pay, were strongly affected by the new Stamp Act. The few goods they were permitted to take from port to port to sell on their own time were subject to new taxes. Consequently, they led some of the fiercest resistance to these taxes.

At the same time, Washington was gathering slaves from the estates of the investors in the Dismal Swamp Company for the purpose of draining the Great Dismal Swamp. This was another stage in the surveying and pacification of the unruly terrain of North America.

Starting in the 1600s, Native Americans, black people, and unruly whites used the murky swamp as a refuge from British settlements. By the 1800s, thousands of mostly African-American maroons inhabited the high and dry parts of the swamp, known as mesic islands. Self-sufficiency, barter with the outside world, and raids on nearby plantations kept the maroons housed, fed, and moderately comfortable. Numerous attacks against the planter class were conceived in the swamp and carried out from it. Here, the collective acts of individual runaways became a communal force.

Today, Donald Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp” continues George Washington’s legacy. Masking his actions as a rebellion against the powerful, he aims to carry out ecological devastation and crack down on targeted communities in pursuit of his own financial gain.

Knowing that the work would be grueling, possibly fatal, and the conditions horrible, investors contributed the slaves they considered “least valuable”—54 slaves all together. For his part, Washington selected two people from Mt. Vernon, Jack and Caesar, then bought four more from an estate sale: Harry, Topsom, Nan, and a child named Toney.

Harry was likely born around 1740 near the Gambia River in West Africa. Kidnapped and forced across the Atlantic, Harry survived the grueling conditions of the Middle Passage that took the lives of millions, arriving in Virginia around 1761. Thompson, Nan, and Toney may also have been African-born.

Despite the investors’ low opinion of the people they forced to dig and ditch the swamp, these slaves not only survived but repeatedly escaped over the following years. The other acts of rebellion they committed are lost to history. Those must have been considerable, however, in view of the courage it took to risk their lives to escape.

In September 1764, a slave whose name is recorded as Breechy fled from Mt. Vernon. Born around 1740, Breechy had experienced excruciating chest pains and fever during February 1760,

requiring bed rest and doctor's visits. He was given a leather knee brace too during the summer of 1764, presumably from the grueling farm labor. Breechy was captured and returned December 19 by "Christmas (Criemus) Meekins (Meakens) of New Kent County." Breechy was listed in one of Washington's last lists of slaves in 1799.

On April 10, 1766, Washington paid a bill to a Maryland prison where one of his slaves was housed, a person whose name is recorded as Cloe. At this time, jails often served as an extension of household authority: if a wife, minor, slave, servant, or apprentice was misbehaving and the head of the household could afford to pay his or her keep, the offender could be confined in the jail or physically punished by the jailor. Likewise, women, people of color, or apprentices traveling without their master or his written approval could be locked up until their master located them and paid for their keep. Given how far away from Mt. Vernon she was, Cloe was likely on the lam when she was confined.

Later in 1766, two slaves whose names are recorded as Tom and Bett ran away from Mt. Vernon. Tom, the slave foreman at River Farm, was sold the following year in the West Indies as a punishment for being "both a Rogue & Runaway." Washington wrote to the ship's captain to "keep him handcuffed till you get to Sea." Bett, too, was eventually caught.

In late 1767, several slaves in Fairfax area conspired to kill their masters. Slaves belonging to Washington's business partner, friend, and fellow founding father George Mason were involved in the plot. Feeling he was not properly reimbursed for the Crown executing his slaves, Mason had Washington collect money from Mason's debtors to help his business stay afloat. This incident was reported in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of December 31, 1767:

"From Alexandria, in Virginia, we learn, that a Number of Negroes there had lately conspired to poison their Overseers, and that several Persons have lost their Lives in Consequence thereof; that some of the Negroes have been taken up, four of whom were executed about three Weeks ago, after which their Heads were cut off, and fixed on the Chimnies of the Court-House; and it was expected that four more would soon meet with the same Fate."

George Mason later voiced opposition to slavery. Yet he never gave full credit to the courage of those who rebelled against him, convincing him that enslaving people was more trouble than it was worth. Historians have repeated the omission, describing Mason as a humanitarian, not as a man educated by others' courageous defiance to him.

In April 1767, an African slave whose name is recorded as Tom escaped from forced labor at the Dismal Swamp. He seems to have remained at liberty for quite some time. An advertisement for his capture that Washington's brother placed in the *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg on June 23, 1768 reads:

"Nansemond, June 20, 1768. RUN away from the subscriber some time in April 1767, a new Negro man named TOM, belonging to the proprietors of the Dismal Swamp. He is about 5 feet 6 inches high, has his country marks (that is, four on each of his cheeks.) Any person that apprehends the said fellow, so that I may get him, shall have three pounds reward."

On July 21, 1770, Michael Tracey, an indentured servant owned by Washington, ran away. Tracey was born in Ireland and indentured in Virginia. A bricklayer by trade, he was bought by Washington on July 25, 1768, when, according to Washington's diary, he

“Went to Alexandria & bought a Bricklayer from Mr. Piper & returnd to Dinner.”

Michael was at Mt. Vernon til at least 1770 when he was sold to an Alexandria brewer named Andrew Wales, who later reported him missing.

In June 1771, Will Shag escaped from the Great House Plantation where he was enslaved. The estate belonged to Martha Washington’s son, John Parke Custis, but it was under Washington’s care, as John had not yet fully reached adulthood. Will’s absence was immediately reported to Washington.

Will had repeatedly escaped before. His captors had moved him to the Great Plantation in the hopes it would settle him. Following his escape, he lived for a few months along the York River and passed as a free man by the name of Will Jones. An overseer from Great House went to capture him and bring him back, but on the way, Will beat him and escaped again.

Joseph Valentine, manager of Great House, ran this advertisement in the July 18, 1771 edition of the *Virginia Gazette*:

“Ran away, about the middle of June last, from Mr. John Parke Custis’s plantation, near the Capitol landing, a likely young Virginia born Negro fellow named Will, about 6 feet high, very full faced, and full eyed. The said Negro broke York gaol some time ago, and was taken again, but in bringing him home to the said plantation he made his escape from the overseer. As he passed at York some time for a free man, I have reason to believe that he will try to get on board some vessel. Whoever will bring the said Negro to me, near Williamsburg, shall receive Twenty shillings reward, besides what the law allows. He is out-lawed... All masters of vessels are cautioned against taking him on board at their peril.”

The process of “outlawing” a slave was set forth in “An Act directing the trial of Slaves committing capital crimes... and for the better government of negroes, mulattoes, and Indians, bond or free.” This act stipulated that in the case of “outlawed” fugitive slaves,

“it shall be lawful for any person, or persons whatsoever, to kill and destroy such slaves, by any ways or means, without accusation, or impeachment of any crime for the same.”

After several weeks of freedom, Will Shag was arrested. In August, Valentine wrote to Washington informing him of the situation, saying of Will “he will not worke and a greater Roge is not to be foun.” A month later, the overseers at Bakers Quarter are reported to have captured Will sleeping in the woods. Valentine insisted that Washington should sell him, as they would never be able to keep him in captivity.

On July 29, 1771, a valuable ostler named Harry made his first escape from Mount Vernon. Harry had spent years enslaved in the mosquito-invested Dismal Swamp digging ditches and cutting wood, then slowly worked his way up to become a house servant caring for Washington’s horses. In June, Harry had been demoted to building a mill at Mt. Vernon’s furthest property, Ferry Plantation. This shift may have been too reminiscent of the swamp; it was almost certainly the catalyst for his July cavale.

Washington paid one pound and sixteen shillings to advertise for the recovery of his property, as Cassandra Pybus relates in *The Human Tradition in the Black Atlantic, 1500–2000*. Washington

noted in his diary on August 2, 1771, “At home all day a writing Letters & Advertisements of Harry who run away the 29th.” Harry was captured and returned a few weeks later, but remained determined to escape.

On December 5, 1771, the *Virginia Gazette*, Williamsburg, ran the following advertisement:

“RUN away from the Subscriber, in Isle of Wight, a Negro named JACK, about five and thirty Years of Age, five Feet ten Inches high, a slim, clean made, talkative, artful, and very saucy Fellow. Also a Negro Woman named VENUS, thirty two Years old, five Feet four Inches high, stout made, very smooth tongued, and has been five Years accustomed to the House. They worked in the Dismal Swamp about two Years, under Mr. John Washington, and carried with them several different Kinds of Apparel. Whoever delivers the said Negroes to me, or secures them so that I may get them, shall have a Reward of FORTY SHILLINGS for each.”

Venus and Jack, formerly owned by the Washingtons and the Dismal Swamp Company, escaped repeatedly over an eight-year period.

A list of slaves held captive under Washington’s authority in December 1771 includes over 200 people.

In spring of 1772, Will Shag succeeded in escaping again. He was captured once more and returned in July. The following winter, Washington had him sold in the Caribbean. Uncompromising rebels like Will spread revolt wherever they were sent.

In 1773, a slave in his early fifties whose name is recorded as Coachman Jemmy, escaped from Washington’s Great House plantation after being put to work making ditches. James Hill, the manager of the plantation, called Jemmy “one of the Greatest Raschals I ever lookd after in all my life” and advised Washington to get rid of him as soon as possible:

“there is no getg. of him to do any thing more then he Pleases & he only corrupts the Rest & if you dont conclude to Sell him am determined to send him to the Easten Shore that he never Shall Strike a Stroke this side while I stay in the Estate.”

If Jemmy was caught, Hill advised Washington to sell him to the Caribbean like Will Shag, and in no case keep him on the estate—because even if he were kept in shackles, “the negro Blacksmiths in town will soon file them off.” This comment hints at the clandestine networks of solidarity that rendered all these escapes possible.

The same year, the slave who had escaped with “Venus” in 1771, whose name is recorded as “Jack Dismal” on account of the years of hard labor he had performed in the course of Washington’s attempt to “drain the swamp,” escaped again from the man who had bought him from the Washingtons. The February 18, 1773 issue of the *Virginia Gazette* reads:

“RUN away from Mr. James Hunter’s, opposite Fredericksburg, on his way to Frederick, a Negro man named JACK DISMAL, a black slim made fellow, about 5 feet 10 inches high, has thick lips, and is a cunning, artful fellow. It is supposed he went down Rappahannock in some vessel, in order to get to James river. Whoever secures the said Negro, so that I get him again, shall have FORTY SHILLINGS, or FIVE POUNDS if delivered to William Herndon, my overseer in Frederick county.”

Reading such ads, one is struck by the central role that newspapers played in maintaining white supremacy, and by the fact that would-be slave owners were constantly forced to shell out reward money to maintain their position. Before the American Revolution, as today, wealthy property owners, corporate media outlets, and armed enforcers of order formed a three-way alliance.

The Tide of Revolution

All the tensions in the colonies were coming to a head at once. William Webster, an indentured servant at Mt. Vernon purchased in March 1774, ran away immediately. He was captured and returned on April 26, 1774, but he escaped again a year later.

Meanwhile, Washington was railing against the “Intolerable Acts” passed by the British Parliament to punish colonists in Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party. He wrote to Bryan Fairfax that

“The crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights or submit to every imposition till custom and use shall make us as tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway.”

When colonial Governor Lord Dunmore disbanded the House of Burgesses, Washington chaired a meeting in Fairfax County condemning the taxes imposed by the Crown and calling for the first inter-colonial convention of the colonies. The meeting and ensuing proclamation are known as the Fairfax Resolves: “We will use every means which Heaven hath given us to prevent our becoming its [Britain’s] slaves.”

In April 1775, William Webster escaped again, this time in the company of another indentured servant, Thomas Spears. While preparing to rise in rebellion against the Crown, Washington offered a reward of forty dollars for the return of these two men he sought to keep in subjugation.

On June 14, 1775, Congress created the Continental Army and appointed Washington Commander-in-Chief. His refusal to accept a salary won him acclaim; the truth is that the unpaid labor of his many slaves rendered any salary the rebel colonies could raise for him superfluous.

Ten days later, a slave whose name is recorded as Charles escaped from Washington’s brother. Charles had sustained a serious knee injury, likely while laboring to enrich the Washington family.

On August 7, 1775, Joseph Smith, an indentured painter from Scotland, escaped from Washington’s brother-in-law while on loan from Washington. He went to fight for the British forces under Lord Dunmore, preferring the tyranny of the Crown to the tyranny of his master. As a cousin of Washington’s wrote to Washington, upon Smith’s wounding and capture,

“The Paint(er) was one among the Prisoners taken at Hampton, after recieveg a wound in the thigh—& is now in jail at Wmsburg the wound almost well—I have wrote to Colo. Lewis desireg he woud order him up to Fredrixburg, if he cannot sell him in Wmsburg, & sell him to some of the back people, after Whipg him at a Publick whipping Post—my information is from Thos Davis by last Post—he calls himself Joseph Wilson but acknowledges himse[l]f to be your Servt, & that he Run away from Colo. Lewis, but is unwilling to be sent back.

Our Dunmore has at length Publishd his much dreaded proclamation—declareg Freedom to All Indented Servts & Slaves (the Property of Rebels) that will repair to his majestys Standard—being able to bear Arms—What effect it will have upon those sort of people I cannot tell—I think if there was no white Servts in this family I shoud be under no apprehension about the Slaves, however I am determined, that if any of them Create any confusition to make & [an] example of him, Sears who is at worck here says there is not a man of them, but woud leave us, if they believe’d they coud make there Escape—Tom Spears Excepted—& yet they have no fault to find[.] Liberty is sweet.”

This letter reveals a great deal about the loyalties of indentured servants. The conditions of unrest that had arisen in the colonies had forced the British to offer them the possibility of freedom—and this was more attractive to them than the mere *national liberation* that George Washington sought while aiming to keep slaves and indentured servants in chains.

Already, by November 1775, hundreds of runaways had made their way to Dunmore’s camp. By the end of the war, between 80,000 and 100,000 slaves had escaped—roughly 1 in 4⁶—making the American Revolution the first mass slave exodus in American history. However, only 20,000–30,000 made it across British lines. (By contrast, a mere 5000 slaves fought alongside their masters for American Independence.) Where did the rest of the escapees go? Some were captured and returned; others succumbed to disease; but the rest must have melted away into maroon communities or set out for the frontier.

Washington privately feared the defection of servants and slaves to British lines, admitting to Richard Henry Lee, “If that man [Dunmore] is not crushed before spring he will become the most formidable enemy of America... His strength will increase as a snowball by rolling, and faster, if some expedient cannot be hit upon to convince the slaves and servants of the impotency of his designs.”

On July 19, 1776, fifteen days after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Harry, the slave who had made an escape in 1771, sought again to escape along with a couple of white servants. The group made their way down the Potomac until they reached Lord Dunmore’s overcrowded, disease-ridden fleet. An outbreak of smallpox followed by typhoid fever forced Dunmore to later admit, “There was not a ship in the fleet that did not throw one, two, three or more dead overboard every night.”

Despite the miserable conditions, Harry enlisted in Dunmore’s “Black Pioneers” and rose to the rank of Corporal. During the invasion of Charleston in 1781, Harry commanded a company of black troops. It would seem that the black soldiers saw little to no combat, serving a support role of establishing infrastructure, building earthworks, and assembling grapeshot. People of color played similar roles in the US military during World War II and other campaigns.

In 1778, Washington ordered that a slave named Priscilla be separated from her husband and sent from Mt. Vernon to serve his mother Mary Ball Washington in Fredericksburg. Priscilla and her husband protested the move vigorously until Washington was forced to reunite them a year later. Incidents like this one show that in these unpredictable conditions of social ferment, even enslaved people who did not choose to escape could bring leverage to bear on their captors, forcing them to make concessions.

⁶ There were approximately 450,000 black slaves in the colonies at this time. Twice that many black people are in prison in the United States today, still performing slave labor.

The same year, Jack Dismal and Venus escaped again with another slave named Zeny and her daughter Nelly. Meanwhile, a slave belonging to George Washington whose name is recorded as Ben, died while being forced to work in the rice field of the Great Dismal Swamp. This tragic episode illustrates the fortitude that Jack, Venus, Harry, and others displayed in surviving their ordeal in the swamp and repeatedly setting out for freedom.

In 1779, Washington earned his title, “Town Destroyer,” by ordering the Sullivan Expedition, which demolished at least 40 Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) villages in New York. Though relatively few of the Haudenosaunee were killed outright, the destruction of their homes, crops, cattle, and winter stores created a situation in which one in five of the 5000 Haudenosaunee refugees died of hunger or exposure that winter. The area we now think of as rural New York was cleared for white settlement by this act of mass killing.

In 1781, at the high point of the Revolutionary War, Washington’s cousin, Lund Washington, recorded that 17 slaves had escaped from Mt. Vernon. The fourteen men and three women took refuge on the HMS Savage docked in the nearby Potomac. According to Lund Washington, these included⁷

“Peter. an old man. Lewis. an old man. Frank. an old man. Frederick. a man about 45 years old; an overseer and valuable. Gunner. a man about 45 years old; valuable, a Brick maker. Harry. a man about 40 years old, valuable, a Horseler. Tom, a man about 20 years old, stout and Healthy. Sambo. a man about 20 years old, stout and Healthy. Thomas. a lad about 17 years old, House servant. Peter. a lad about 15 years old, very likely. Stephen. a man about 20 years old, a cooper by trade. James. a man about 25 years old, stout and Healthy. Watty. a man about 20 years old, by trade a weaver. Daniel. a man about 19 years old, very likely. Lucy. a woman about 20 years old. Esther. a woman about 18 years old. Deborah. a woman about 16 years old.”

Washington wrote back, furious with the British for *stealing his property*.

The War of Independence Concludes, The War on Slaves Continues

When the war ended in 1782, it took the British forces and their allies by surprise. Boston King, a slave who had liberated himself, recalled that in New York City, the peace

“issued universal joy among all parties, except us, who had escaped from slavery, and taken refuge in the English army; for a report prevailed at New York, that all slaves, in number 2000, were to be delivered up to their masters, although some of them had been three or four years among the English. This dreadful rumor filled us all with inexpressible anguish and terror, especially when we saw our masters coming from Virginia, North Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon their slaves in the streets of New York, or even dragging them out of their beds. Many of the slaves had very cruel masters, so that the thoughts of returning home with them embittered life to us. For some days, we lost our appetite for food, and sleep departed from our eyes.”

⁷ Note that the aforementioned Harry is listed here, though he had escaped years earlier.

Rather than going to New York themselves, masters often hired slave catchers or complained to officials. Virginia Governor Benjamin Harrison was so swamped by complaints that he wrote Washington for help, who answered,

“I have but little expectation that many will be recovered; several of my own are with the Enemy but I scarce ever bestowed a thought on them; they have so many doors through which they can escape from New York, that scarce any thing but an inclination to return, or voluntarily surrender for themselves will restore many to their former Masters.”

Washington still hoped to recover his “property,” however. As the Americans began to take control of New York City, he asked local merchant Daniel Parker to look for his runaways: “If by chance you should come at the knowledge of any of them, I will be much obliged by your securing them so I may obtain them again.” Appointed as a commissioner to ensure no American property was taken away by the British, Daniel Parker succeeded in capturing seven of the over twenty escapees from Mt. Vernon. One of the 1781 runaways, the 18-year-old Deborah, managed to leave New York aboard the Polly on April 27, 1783. Harry, his future wife, Jenny, and over 400 self-liberated former slaves followed in July 1783 on L’Abondance. Finally, on the very last ship to leave New York City with refugee runaways on board, Daniel, the 21-year-old who escaped with Deborah in 1781, left the country for good. All told, thousands of runaways were successfully evacuated to Nova Scotia, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and England.

Yet Jenny and Harry soon found themselves in a freezing, unfarmable section of Nova Scotia, suffering a fate only slightly better than that of Virginia slaves. Here, too, they were considered inferior, prohibited from voting or serving on juries. After eight years of toil, the community sent a delegate to Britain to protest their condition. Hoping to draw new settlers to their colony on the west coast of Africa, the Sierra Leone Company offered free grants of land “subject to certain charges and obligations” to new settlers: twenty acres for every man, ten for every woman, five for every child.

And so in 1791, Jenny, Harry, and over 1100 other refugees who had stayed in Nova Scotia found themselves on their way to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

After the Revolution: The Reaction

After the war, the collective ferment of the mid-1700s gave way to the re-entrenchment of bureaucracy.

With the Treaty of Paris in 1783, hostilities between the British and Americans officially ended, and the British turned over lands from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. Over 45,000 Native Americans still lived in the region west of the Appalachian Mountains. Before the Americans took control of the land, Native representatives began meeting together to coordinate defense—in some cases setting aside generations of inter-tribal conflict. Many still remembered the burning of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) villages in rural New York, the massacre at Gnadenhutzen of pacifist Lenni Lenape (Delaware People), and other war crimes committed by the Americans during the Revolutionary War. Native Americans had won most of their engagements during the war, yet had not been consulted during the peace process. They did not wish to cede their homes northwest of the Ohio River.

On one side, in 1785, Congress began selling land in the Ohio River Valley to help pay the costs of the Revolutionary War. On the other side, by 1786, a formal self-defense coalition was established involving members of the Wendat (Hurons), Shawnee, Odawas, Anishinaabeg (Ojibwas), Neshnabé (Potawatomis), Lenni Lenape (Delaware), Myaamiaki (Miami), Waayaahatanwa (Wea), Kiikaapoa (Kickapoo), Peeyankihšiaki (Piankashaw), Kaahkaahkiaki (Kaskaskia), and Chickamauga Cherokee. Raids and ambushes against settlers encroaching on Native land soon followed. Mihšihkinaahkwa (Little Turtle) of the Atchatchakangouen (Crane Band of the Myaamiaki), Weyapiersenwah (Blue Jacket) of the Shawnee, Buckongahelas of the Lenni Lenape, and Egushawa (The Gatherer) of the Odawa were among the leaders during the ensuing conflict; the Northwest Indian War is sometimes called Little Turtle's War or Blue Jacket's War in their honor.

In 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance. Not only did this act bullheadedly assert US ownership of the Ohio River Valley, it also proclaimed:

“There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted: Provided, always, That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.”

Slave owners found a way around this easily enough: family members in a slave state would seasonally send slaves to family members in Ohio, Indiana, or Illinois. Before the slaves could establish residency, they were sent back to slave states, only to be rotated back to “free” territory again a few months later. George and Martha Washington utilized this tactic themselves, bringing eight slaves—Giles, Paris, Moll, Hercules, Richmond, Christopher Sheels, Oney Judge, and her half-brother Austin—to the President's House in Philadelphia, then rotating them back to Mt. Vernon or taking them on short trips to New Jersey. When Austin died in 1794, he was replaced in the rotation by Postilion Joe Richardson.

In 1789, the Federal government further solidified its power in the Constitution, protecting the rights of slave owners in the process. The Constitution infamously declared each slave to count as three fifths of a human being. George Washington became the first president of the United States.

In 1790, Washington ordered that an army be raised for Secretary of War Henry Knox to launch a campaign against the tribes to the northwest. The first engagement proved a decisive loss for the Americans, who lost over a hundred soldiers. Washington ordered another campaign the following year, but Mihšihkinaahkwa, Weyapiersenwah, and hundreds of Native warriors ambushed the American troops, killing the majority of them. Over the following two years, Native warriors won several more engagements, but the cost of war ultimately took its toll. After the Native coalition surrendered, forts and other European infrastructure began to appear in the Ohio River Valley. So did slave owners.

In 1793, Washington signed the Fugitive Slave Act, giving power to slave owners or their representatives to enter states that had outlawed slavery to regain their slaves. As a Federal law, the Act trumped local or state laws forbidding the kidnapping of self-liberated slaves. The Act also forbid anyone from harboring or aiding a fugitive slave. Those who continued to aid runaways risked corporal punishment, fines, jail time, and, in extreme cases, banishment.

Writing to his manager William Pearce that same year, Washington emphasized the importance of maintaining class society, counseling against managers and overseers fraternizing with slaves and servants:

“To treat them civilly is no more than what all men are entitled to, but my advice to you is, to keep them at a proper distance; for they will grow upon familiarity, in proportion as you will sink in authority, if you do not.”

When a slave whose name is recorded as Abram escaped, Washington counseled William Pearce in a letter written March 1794 that when Abram was captured he should make sure he was punished in front of other slaves, and punished by the crueler of the two overseers at Union Farm.

The following May, towards the start of her second trimester of pregnancy, Priscilla ran away for a week. She may have been away visiting friends, or seeking a respite from working while pregnant—or perhaps she didn’t want another child born into the hell of Mt. Vernon.

In 1796, 21-year-old Oney Judge, a dower slave belonging to Martha Washington, walked out the back door of the President’s House and escaped. Martha had been planning to give Oney to her granddaughter as a wedding gift. With over 2000 free people of color in Philadelphia, it was a far more promising place to escape than Mt. Vernon. As Oney later recalled,

“Whilst they were packing up to go to Virginia, I was packing to go, I didn’t know where; for I knew that if I went back to Virginia, I should never get my liberty. I had friends among the colored people of Philadelphia, had my things carried there beforehand, and left Washington’s house while they were eating dinner.”

An ad appeared in *The Philadelphia Gazette* of May 24, 1796 on behalf of the First Lady:

“Absconded from the household of the President of the United States, ONEY JUDGE, a light mulatto girl, much freckled, with very black eyes and bushy hair. She is of middle stature, slender, and delicately formed, about 20 years of age. She has many changes of good clothes, of all sorts, but they are not sufficiently recollected to be described—As there was no suspicion of her going off, nor no provocation to do so, it is not easy to conjecture whither she has gone, or fully, what her design is; but as she may attempt to escape by water, all masters of vessels are cautioned against admitting her into them, although it is probable she will attempt to pass for a free woman, and has, it is said, wherewithal to pay her passage. Ten dollars will be paid to any person who will bring her home, if taken in the city, or on board any vessel in the harbour;—and a reasonable additional sum if apprehended at, and brought from a greater distance, and in proportion to the distance. FREDERICK KITT, Steward. May 23”

Reclaiming Oney became an obsession for Washington, but she always managed to stay a step ahead of him. First, she went to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. But after Senator John Langdon spotted her and snitched on her to the Washingtons, Oney panicked and offered to return to Mt. Vernon if her freedom could be guaranteed at the time of Washington’s death. The President responded furiously to Langdon:

“I regret that the attempt you made to restore the girl (Oney Judge as she called herself while with us, and who, without the least provocation absconded from her Mistress) should have been attended with so little success. To enter into such a compromise, as she has suggested to you, is totally inadmissible, for reasons that must strike at first view: for however well disposed I might be to a gradual abolition, or even to an entire emancipation of that description of People (if the latter was in itself practicable at this Moment) it would neither be politic or just, to reward unfaithfulness with a premature preference; and thereby discontent, beforehand, the minds of all her fellow Servants; who by their steady adherence, are far more deserving than herself, of favor...

Put her on board a Vessel bound either to Alexandria or the Federal City... I do not mean however, by this request, that such violent measures should be used as would excite a mob or riot, which might be the case if she has adherents, or even uneasy sensations in the minds of well disposed Citizens. rather than either of these shd happen, I would forego her services altogether; and the example also, which is of infinite more importance.”

Langdon mostly attempted verbal persuasion after this, agreeing that physical force would likely draw an abolitionist mob to Oney’s defense. He added “It has been remarked that there are many Servants who have escaped from the Southern States into Massachusetts and some to New Hampshire,” forcing Langdon to conclude to Washington that the practice of slavery was more trouble than it was worth.

Oney fell in love with a free sailor named Jack Staines. Despite Langdon’s attempts to block their marriage license, the two wedded, moved to Greenland, New Hampshire, and had a daughter, whom they namd Eliza. In 1798, Washington renewed his efforts to capture Oney, going so far as threatening to take Eliza, whom the law deemed his legal property, but to no avail.

Back at Mt. Vernon, Priscilla also fled again in 1796, after giving birth in January. This time, she was captured and returned by a William Minter Green around October 24. Over the next couple years, Priscilla was frequently ill, being forced to live in unhealthy conditions while raising children without her husband, who was owned by Washington but kept on a different farm in the Mt. Vernon complex.

The following three years saw a series of further escapes. On February 22, 1797, Hercules, who had served as the Presidential chef, escaped. Another slave named Caesar was repeatedly absent from work. In April 1798, slaves named Lucy and Dundee disappeared for several days, as did Joe, a gardener, and another slave named Sophia later that year.

Hercules had always appeared to be loyal to the Washingtons. Bought by the Washingtons in 1767 as a ferryman, he worked his way up to serve as head cook at Mt. Vernon. As cook, Hercules followed Washington to the President’s House in New York and Philadelphia. Known for ruling the kitchen with an iron fist, Hercules served the food eaten by the first First Family and all the dignitaries they hosted. One guest later recalled, a feast of “roast beef, veal, turkey, ducks, fowls, hams, &c.; puddings, jellies, oranges, apples, nuts, almonds, figs, raisins, and a variety of wines and punches.”

Due to his worth, Hercules was given considerable freedom: he walked to the local markets each morning, perusing the latest arrivals in the cosmopolitan Philadelphia, and was even al-

lowed to sell scraps from the kitchen, earning him an income similar to top-paid chiefs—\$200 a year.

Living in Philadelphia gave Hercules the chance to showcase his latest wears. After serving dinner at the stroke of 4, Hercules would dress and stroll the streets of the city. His dandyism was widely known.

Yet as a slave, Hercules was rotated between Philadelphia and Mt. Vernon, and on one visit south he was demoted to the humiliating task of digging ditches. Hercules had served fine meats and wines to foreign dignitaries! He could not abide this change in status.

February 22, 1797 was George Washington's 65th birthday. He celebrated the day in Philadelphia, where sixteen rounds of cannon fire announced the general's birthday. February 22 was also a holiday for the slaves and servants of Mt. Vernon, and Hercules intended to make good use of it. Perhaps using the river-faring knowledge of his youth, and counting on the free people of color in Philadelphia, Hercules made his way north. The last the Washingtons ever heard of Hercules, he was living well in New York City in 1801.

During the summer of 1799, 25-year-old Christopher Sheels plotted to escape with his fiancée, a woman enslaved to Washington's neighbor, Roger West. The plan was discovered in September when written correspondence including a map of their route was found in the yard of Mt. Vernon.

Born around 1774 to Alyce, an enslaved spinner, and Christopher Sheels, a white wagon driver, Christopher spent his first fourteen years at Mt. Vernon. His grandmother, whose name is recorded as Old Doll, was one of the original dower slaves brought to Mt. Vernon by Martha in the 1750s. As an adolescent, Christopher had accompanied Washington to New York City and then Philadelphia, acting as the President's loyal body servant the whole time. Even the winter after his attempt was foiled, as Washington lay dying, Christopher Sheel stayed by his bed—witnessing the inflammation and bloodletting that ended the first president's life.

After Washington

“Shame! Shame! That man should be deemed the property of man or that the name of Washington should be found among the list of such proprietors.” –Edward Rushton, letter to Washington, February 20, 1797

America began the 19th century in mourning. Congress wore black and set aside \$200,000 to build a pyramid mausoleum for Washington beneath the Capitol's rotunda, a proposal Martha vetoed. America's major cities held funeral processions attended by the thousands. In France, Napoleon ordered ten days of mourning; the ships of the British Navy lowered their flags to half mast. When February 22 arrived, patriotic Americans were as determined as ever to celebrate the first president's birthday.

But the slaves of Mt. Vernon must have received the news of Washington's death with mixed emotions. Washington owned well over 100 of them; they'd long been told that they would be set free when he passed away. Yet many had befriended, intermarried with, and parented children with Martha's dower slaves and those of the neighbors. What would emancipation mean for those whose loved ones were still in chains?

The problem was soon rendered moot, as it was revealed that Washington's will did not free his slaves at the time of his death, but rather at the time of Martha's. George had lied through his teeth.⁸

On August 2, a 16-year-old slave whose name is recorded as Marcus ran off. Though Washington's slaves hadn't been freed yet, newspapers around the country were carrying news that they had been. Perhaps Marcus hoped to take advantage of this.

"MARCUS, One of the House Servants at Mount Vernon, Absconded on the second instant, and since has not been heard of. He is a young lad, about 16 years of age, a bright mulatto, dark blue eyes, long black hair, about 5 feet 4 or 5 inches high, and of a slender make. He had on when he left this place a coat and jacket of dark mixture, black and white, and black breeches – but having various suits, one of black, and another of very light drab, it is uncertain which of these he now wears. Originally, his name was Billy and possibly he may resume the same. It is very probable he may attempt to pass for one of those negroes that did belong to the late Gen. Washington, and whom Mrs. Washington intends in the fall of this year to liberate – the public are therefore warned against any such imposition, as he is one of those negroes which belongs to the estate of Washington P. Custis Esq. and held by right of dower by Mrs. Washington during her life. I will give Ten Dollars Reward to any person who shall apprehend the said negro and lodge him in some safe gaol, upon producing me a certificate to that effect; and will also pay all reasonable charges over and above this reward, for the delivery of him to me at this place. Ship Masters are hereby forewarned not to take on board Marcus; and those who are found to secret or harbor him, will be punished as the law directs. JAMES ANDERSON, Mount Vernon, August 28."

-*The Philadelphia Gazette & Daily Advertiser*, September 22, 1800

Around this time, Martha began fearing for her life. There were rumors at Mt. Vernon to the effect that Washington's slaves intended to kill her in order to hasten their freedom. Martha started to suspect that her food would be poisoned. A series of suspicious fires that year pushed Martha to her breaking point: all of Washington's 123 slaves were to be freed the first of the year.

To put this in context, the Creole Slave Mutiny is considered the largest US slave revolt in terms of the number of people freed: 128. Here at Mt. Vernon, we see a similar number freed as the consequence of at least a handful of people conducting a campaign of harassment and intimidation against Martha Washington. When First Lady Abigail Adams visited Mt. Vernon in mid-December 1800, she noted that Martha "did not feel as tho her Life was safe in their Hands, many of whom would be told that it was there interest to get rid of her."

Though life outside Mt. Vernon would be hard—some of the liberated slaves had never left the property or learned trades—most thought the risk was better than life there.

When Jack Staines died in 1803, Oney Judge Staines was left destitute, her children suffering a fate similar to other free poor people, both black and white: Eliza and Nancy became indentured

⁸ Washington suffered from tooth pain for much of his life; in later years, he wore dentures. His teeth were not made of wood; they may have been made from the extracted teeth of his slaves. In May 1784, Lund Washington noted in Mt. Vernon's ledger books, "By Cash pd Negroes for 9 Teeth on Acct of Dr. Lemoire." Dr. Lemoire was George Washington's dentist, Dr. Jean Le Mayeur, who corresponded with George Washington about his visit to Mount Vernon that summer.

servants, while her son Will was apprenticed as a sailor. Yet despite the hardships, Oney maintained until her death in 1848 that she had no regrets about leaving the Washingtons. “No, I am free, and have, I trust been made a child of God by the means.”

After leaving Nova Scotia in 1791, Harry and his wife Jenny found themselves mistreated yet again in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Though Jenny and Harry were able to start their own farm, sustaining it proved impossible under the tax system imposed by the Sierra Leone Company. This diabolical form of debt-slavery later became the sharecropping industry that dominated the lives of former slaves in the American South after the Civil War.

But Harry did not quit. He and hundreds of other self-freed former American slaves refused to pay the tax and eventually, to the horror of the Sierra Leone Company, formed their own government. If not for the arrival of 500 Jamaican maroons from Nova Scotia in the summer of 1800, Harry and the rest might have succeeded in push for self-determination.

Instead, the British were able to use the tried-and-true method of offering privileges to one section of the underclass in return for their assistance suppressing another part of the underclass. The Company promised better land to the maroons on the condition that they pacify the rebels. Rounded up and charged with “open and unprovoked rebellion,” Harry, Jenny, and other insurgents were eventually exiled across the Sierra Leone River to the Bullom Shore.

From the Gambia River in West Africa to the Dismal Swamp of America to South Carolina, New York, and Nova Scotia and then Sierra Leone, Harry never stopped seeking freedom. He passed the last years of his life as an influential member of the new settlement in the Bullom Shore. Freedom is not comprised of guarantees, but of the willingness to continue setting out for the horizon.

In the 1800s, slaves no longer ran away from George Washington, but for the next sixty years they fled from cities and counties that bore his name. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and into the 21st, people of color have been confined to schools, workplaces, and prisons named after the first president, in which they are afforded no more respect than he accorded them while he was alive. The fact that people celebrate his name, his birthday, and his legacy while forgetting or erasing those of Harry and Oney Judge is an insult to those who suffered at his hands; that he is remembered as a revolutionary hero shows that *the American Revolution has yet to take place*.

The Dismal Swamp Company that Washington helped found was a colossal failure. Only after decades of little success were the investors able to recoup any money by logging a small portion of the swamp. By the end of his life, Washington dreaded the occasional company updates; he sold his shares in the 1790s. Perhaps this is an indication of how successful Trump’s efforts to “drain the swamp” will ultimately be.

“George Washington was a slave owner... are we going to take down statues to George Washington? How about Thomas Jefferson? What do you think of Thomas Jefferson? You like him? Good. Are we going to take down the statue? ‘Cause he was a major slave owner. Are we going to take down his statue? So you know what? It’s fine. You are changing history; you’re changing culture.”

-Donald Trump, responding to fascist violence and murder in Charlottesville. Virginia

Here’s to changing history and changing culture.
Faster comrade, the New World is behind you.

The Dollar Bill: A Postscript

One of the authors of this cursory summary, a Leopold Trebitch,⁹ toyed with the idea of telling readers to burn a portrait of George Washington—the one-dollar bill. How ubiquitous its presence! How invented its worth—yet how real its power! Burning a dollar bill is an act of freedom, mixed with discomfort: “*What am I doing! I’m going to regret this!*” Yet, what do we consume that costs less than a dollar? It’s hardly an expensive lesson.

In the end, we concluded that in order to honor those who escaped George Washington, it is more sensible to give that dollar to one of the following causes. Burn a dollar if you like, but then give a hundred more to...

The Kris Thompson Legal Fund

On August 22, 2017, Kiwi Herring, a trans woman, was killed by the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department while defending herself against a homophobic neighbor. As the only witness to the murder, Kiwi Herring’s widow, Kris Thompson, has been punitively charged with Assault in the First Degree and Armed Criminal Action in order to silence Kris from speaking out against the police. If convicted, Kris faces a minimum of three years in prison with no probation or parole, and up to the maximum of *two consecutive life sentences*. Please give generously.

Ferguson Prisoners

The revolt in Ferguson breathed new life into many of the current struggles against police and white supremacy for a truly egalitarian world. Yet when the tear gas clears, we often forget those who remain locked up—who risked their freedom in order to put a limit on the abuse of the police, celebrate the life of Mike Brown, or send a heartfelt fuck you to those in power.

Further Reading

- *The London Hanged: Crime And Civil Society In The Eighteenth Century*, Peter Linebaugh
- *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh
- *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, Marcus Rediker
- *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Sylvia Federici
- *The Human Tradition in the Black Atlantic, 1500–2000*, edited by Karen Racine & Beatriz Gallotti Mamigonian

⁹ Leopold Trebitch is a rogue and rabble-rouser, living in the caves of St. Louis. Rants, musings, and diggings of his can be found at The Trebitch Times.

- Waging Life
- *Dixie Be Damned: 300 Years of Insurrection in the American South*, Neal Shirley & Saralee Stafford

Marie Joseph Angélique

- *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal*](aboulder.com), Afua Cooper

Oney Judge

- *The Escape of Oney Judge: Martha Washington's Slave Finds Freedom*, Emily Arnold McCully

Mary Monroe “Mol” Bowden

- *Notes And Documents of Free Persons of Color: Four Hundred Years of An American Family's History*, Anita Wills

Harry

- *Washington's Revolution (Harry that is, not George)*
- *George Washington's Runaway Slave, Harry*

Hercules

- *Hercules: Master of cuisine, slave of Washington*
- *A Birthday Shock From Washington's Chef*

Databases

- *Founding Fathers*
- *Geography of Slavery in Virginia*

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CrimethInc.
Escaping Washington for Freedom
Let's not Celebrate George Washington, but the Slaves Who Escaped Him
February 19, 2018

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