The “Black” Eye on George Washington’s “White’ House”

America the Beautiful, upon close historical inspection, is not really that beautiful after all. It has fundamental flaws, and one of those flaws is the “black” eye on George Washington’s “White’ House.” That “black” eye is slavery.

From age eleven, in 1743, until his death at sixty-seven in 1799, Washington (and his wife, Martha Washington) owned Africans and their descendants as slaves. Although he cannot be held personally responsible for the institution of slavery in America, he can be held responsible—as president of the Constitutional Convention and president of the United States—for condoning, hence encouraging, slavery. Because he enslaved black human beings and because he refused to use his considerable political power to condemn slavery during his presidencies, he can be held so responsible.¹

He enslaved black people in the South and also in the North. Though many Americans surely will find such statements inflammatory and provocative, the historical record is clear: the “father of our country,” while selflessly supporting the liberty of white people, selfishly opposed the liberty of black people. And he did so in Philadelphia, at the President’s

This article, just like the successful battle to persuade INHP to agree to commemorate the Philadelphia “Noosed Nine,” could not have happened without the spiritually motivated, thoughtfully planned, effectively executed, and relentlessly pursued constructive activism of the hundreds of ATAC members, the scholarly insight of ATAC’s official and learned historian Dr. Shirley Turpin-Parham, the meticulous probing of erudite and catalytic historian Edward Lawler Jr. of the Independence Hall Association, the Afrocentric guidance of ATAC founding member Dr. Edward Robinson, the cultural illumination of preeminent African-based artifacts collector and author Charles Blockson, and the black-conscious agitation of Generations Unlimited. But most important, this article could not have been written, researched, or even thought about without the existence, the energy, the courage, the resiliency, the foresight, and the aspirations of the “Noosed Nine,” not to mention the tens of millions of other enslaved Africans and enslaved African descendants. This article is for all of them.


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House, which is America's "first real 'White House'."  

The President's House in Philadelphia was a majestic domicile owned by Robert Morris, who leased it to Washington. And the story of slavery at the President's House begins with Robert Morris, who, as a wealthy Philadelphia financier, provided substantial financial assistance to Washington's Revolutionary War efforts. As a result, his money helped to make America free. Morris earned much of his money, however, from investment in the slave economy, including the slave trade. His wealth, to a significant extent, was blood money earned literally from the blood, sweat, and tears of enslaved Africans and their enslaved descendants. Were it not for the considerable profits accrued from slavery by Morris (and other slave investors and traders), America could have remained a colony of the British Empire. In this way, therefore, black enslavement did give rise to white freedom.

During Washington's years in Philadelphia, some of the enslaved African descendants he owned lived inside the President's House. But others were lodged outside in slave quarters, which, in the worst sort of irony and hypocrisy, were located a mere five feet from the entrance to what is now the Liberty Bell Center, near the southeast corner of Sixth and Market streets. Originally called the State House Bell, this symbol of liberty was adopted by abolitionists in the 1830s.³

Evidence of the existence and location of slave quarters is found in a 1785 map of the President's House grounds that indicates the presence of a smokehouse and an attached covered shed that was later likely converted into slave quarters. In 1790, Washington's chief secretary, Tobias Lear, wrote to Washington telling him that "The Smoke-House will be extended

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² Michael Kilian, "Plans Made to Mark the First 'White House,'" Chicago Tribune, Nov. 8, 2003, p. 12; Edward Lawler Jr., "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 126 (2002): 5–95. The contention that the Philadelphia house was the first real "White House" is based on three facts. First, although George Washington was sworn in as president in New York City in 1789, he lived there in one house for only ten months and later in a second house for only six months. But he lived in Philadelphia for more than six years and did so in one house. Second, the federal Residence Act of 1790, which designated the District of Columbia as the permanent national capital, designated Philadelphia as the temporary national capital where the president officially would reside, as Washington did from November 1790 until March 1797. Third, Philadelphia was the first city to house more than one president.

³ The New York Anti-Slavery Society used the bell as the frontispiece to an 1837 edition of Liberty. The name, the "Liberty Bell," is first documented in a poem about the Bell printed in an abolitionist pamphlet and reprinted in William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery paper, the Liberator. For a history of the Bell, see http://www.ushistory.org/libertybell/index.html.
to the end of the Stable, and two good rooms made in it for the accommodation of the Stable people." The so-called "Stable people" included three enslaved black stable workers, in particular enslaved African descendants Giles, Paris, and probably Austin.\(^4\)

The President's House is great, just as America today is great; but the greatness of each came at a cost—a very expensive cost paid by enslaved Africans, enslaved African descendants, and the offspring of those descendants. That cost was a direct and immediate result of the transatlantic slave trade. Because of enslavement, African men, women, and children, from 1619 through 1865 (and beyond), lost more than just their freedom. They also lost their culture, their family, their language, their land, their religion, their name, their human status, and often their sanity, their limbs, and even their lives.

Before making this country great, Africans and their descendants—not just those who were enslaved but also those who were relatively "free"—actually made this country possible. They made it possible by volunteering five thousand of their bodies as armed soldiers and another ten thousand in noncombat roles to help Washington secure what was a nearly inconceivable victory in the Revolutionary War, despite his initial refusal to accept their assistance as battlefield troops.\(^5\) And they made it possible by continuing to labor relentlessly without compensation, without appreciation, and without respect from slave owners, including those like Washington who served as delegates to the convention that produced the 1787 Constitution.

That Constitution—created with Washington presiding—not only endorsed slavery but promoted it in at least five specific clauses.

The first was Article I, Section 2, Clause 3, which defined enslaved black people as subhuman, counting them as "three-fifths" of a total human being for the purpose of representation in Congress. (Apologists for this clause argue that it was a necessary compromise designed to dilute the political power of strong slaveholding southern states. The three-fifths clause was not a true compromise, however, in that it was not consistently applied since it did not give enslaved Africans or their enslaved descendants three-fifths of any wages, three-fifths of any land, three-


fifths of any votes, three-fifths of any rights, three-fifths of any freedom, etc.)

The second, similar in purpose to the first, was Article II, Section 1, Clause 2, which established the Electoral College. In combination with the three-fifths clause, this clause gave white southerners more influence than white northerners in presidential elections.

The third clause was Article I, Section 8, Clause 15, which guaranteed federal military aid in case of insurrection and thus comforted and protected the South in case of slave rebellion.

The fourth clause was Article I, Section 9, Clause 1, which continued the importation of Africans as slaves for at least two more decades. Despite the fact that in 1808 Congress could act to prohibit the importation of slaves, United States slave traders and slave masters were not very concerned because by that time the enslaved black population would be “domestically grown” or bred rather than shipped. Washington was among those slave owners who began working to increase his slave population by breeding. As biographer Henry Wiencek argues in his revealing book on Washington and his enslaved black workers, Washington “wanted teenaged slaves, including girls with a long period of childbearing ahead of them. Washington was growing laborers as if they were a crop, to make himself self-sufficient as a slave owner.”6

The fifth clause was Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3, which tightened the grip of slavery by requiring free states to return escapees to slave states. To enforce this provision, Washington (presumably within the Philadelphia President’s House) signed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which created an explicit legal procedure for capturing escapees and for financially punishing black and white persons who assisted them. This new law forced free states to be complicit with slave states by actively assisting in the re-enslavement of escapees.7

It truthfully can be said that Washington was great. But his greatness was as a patriot, a general, and a president. His greatness was not as a man—that is, if greatness is measured by how a man treats his fellow man or woman, even if he or she happens to be black and enslaved. American


schoolchildren often have been taught the myths of the great Washington who “could not tell a lie” and who threw a coin across the Potomac. But they rarely, if ever, have been taught the truth about the real Washington and about what he did to his enslaved black laborers—to his fellow men and women. For example, very few students, and very few other Americans for that matter, know that Washington had a habit of being an unsanitary miser who, at his Mount Vernon, Virginia, plantation, issued “dirty,” “fouled,” and “manure”-soaked wool from the stomachs of sheep to his enslaved black workers for their garments because it was the least expensive. 8 Similarly, many of those black laborers had to resort to rummaging for coarse burlap bags to use as clothing because Washington refused to adequately clothe them. As stated by Wiencek during a 2003 radio interview in Philadelphia, Washington’s “slaves were miserably clothed. . . . (In fact, they) were so badly clothed that they were stealing the wheat sacks made of the cheapest, roughest burlap to repair their own clothes. . . . Otherwise, (they) would go around in rags.” 9

Although Washington considered his enslaved black workers unworthy of proper clothing (among other items), he certainly found their teeth quite worthy—so much so that he replaced a number of his unhealthy teeth with their healthy teeth. While schoolchildren often are taught about his wooden teeth, a story based on myth, they are never taught about his “slave” teeth, a story based on truth. Notwithstanding that it was quite likely that a dentist from Philadelphia made Washington’s first total set of normal dentures in 1789, the complete story is much more interesting or, better stated, much more disturbing. Instead of wooden teeth or standard dentures, Washington had teeth that actually were “yanked from the heads of his slaves and fitted into his dentures. Moreover, Washington apparently had slaves’ teeth transplanted into his own jaw in 1784.” 10

In providing shelter, Washington’s treatment of his fellow men and women was just as bad. Consistent with Wiencek’s statement that Washington’s enslaved black workforce was “miserably housed . . . (in) a very harsh place” 11 is the observation of Julian Niemcewicz, a Polish poet.

11 Henry Wiencek, interview by Barbara Bogaev.
who resided at Mount Vernon for two weeks in 1798 and who described
the living conditions of many of the enslaved population:

We entered some negroes' huts, for their habitations cannot be called
houses. They are far more miserable than the poorest of the cottages of our
peasants. The husband and his wife sleep on a miserable bed, the children
on the floor. A very poor chimney, a little kitchen furniture amid this mis-
ery—a teakettle and cups. A boy about fifteen was lying on the floor with
an attack of dreadful convulsions. . . . They receive a cotton jacket and a
pair of breeches yearly.12

Washington's treatment, or more precisely his mistreatment, of his fellow
men and women went beyond stinginess in providing clothing and shelter.
Washington disparaged the human worth of his enslaved black laborers
and expressed his disdain by referring to them as "a Species of Property,"
very much as he described animals like his dogs and horses.13 As
Washington scholar Joseph Ellis noted, "Most of the slaves who worked
his [Washington's] farms he treated as cattle and referred to only by their
first names."14

Many historians and others contend that Washington was simply a
man of his times and that he therefore could not and did not truly ap-
preciate the error of his ways. But he could and he did. Ellis notes, slavery
"was an inescapable presence that enveloped . . . [Washington's] day-by-
day experience from the moment he walked out the front door of his
mansion until he returned from his midday ride around the farms."15 He
could not escape slavery. Yet, because he knew it was wrong, he preferred
to turn a blind eye. As he wrote in a November 23, 1794, letter in refer-
ence to slavery, "I do not like to think, much less talk about it."16

Not only did Washington obviously and constantly understand the
error of his ways, at times he also lied about his actions. Notwithstanding
clergyman Mason Locke Weems's 1809 "Washington cannot tell a lie"

12 Works Progress Administration in the State of Virginia, The Negro in Virginia (New York,
14 Ellis, His Excellency, 46.
15 Ellis, His Excellency, 256.
16 George Washington to Alexander Spotwood, Nov. 23, 1794, in The Writings of George
(Washington, DC, 1931–44), 34:47–48, cited by Ellis, His Excellency, 256.
story, Washington was not truthful when it came to his continued enslavement of black human beings. Consider, for example, his December 19, 1786, vow to never again purchase another slave. Despite that vow, he later, at least once, accepted enslaved black people as partial payment on a debt and again purchased them to get enslaved skilled craftsmen to labor on renovations at Mount Vernon. Even if he had kept his promise to never again purchase slaves, it would have been “a somewhat hollow promise since, as . . . [Washington] himself acknowledged, he was already overstocked with ‘this species of property’.”

As “species of property,” all of Washington’s enslaved Africans and African descendants, including those brought to Philadelphia, were treated by him in a degrading, demeaning, debasing, and dehumanizing manner. Many Americans believe that Washington’s enslaved black laborers at the Philadelphia President’s House did not suffer too much. To that contention there is both a general and a specific response. The general response is that slavery always causes dreadful suffering because it is an inherent evil designed to break the spirit, confound the mind, flail the flesh, imprison the body, and ultimately kill the person. The specific response is that those nine brought to Philadelphia suffered to such an extent that two of Washington’s ostensible favorites—Hercules and Oney Judge—felt compelled to escape while in Philadelphia and at least two others—Richmond and Christopher Sheels—evidently planned their escape not long after returning from Philadelphia. Similarly, at Mount Vernon, seven others—Peros, Jack, Neptune, Cupid, Sam, Bett, and Tom—felt forced to escape, although their freedom was short-lived.

When considering the issue of slavery, whether in connection with Washington in Philadelphia or other slave owners throughout America, it is essential to recognize that the so-called “slaves” were sentient human beings, not inanimate things. They were flesh and blood. They had personalities. They had aspirations. They had names and backgrounds. And those names and backgrounds must be made known so that they, as real human beings, are both humanized and individualized. A few historians,

such as Shirley Parham, Charles Blockson, and Edward Lawler Jr., have begun the process of humanizing and individualizing the nine real human beings, whom this writer emphatically refers to as the “Noosed Nine,” enslaved at Philadelphia’s President’s House. In fact, Lawler, in his article in this issue, has written a detailed biography of each of those nine, namely Austin, Christopher Sheels, Giles, Hercules, Joe (Richardson), Moll, Oney Judge, Paris, and Richmond.

Washington worked hard to make sure that his enslaved black laborers would not escape, either by stealth or by law. According to the provisions of the Gradual Abolition Act passed by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1780, enslaved Africans and enslaved African descendants brought into the commonwealth by slaveholders from other states could gain their freedom if they remained in Pennsylvania for a period of six consecutive months. But ten years later, with the advice of his attorney general, Edmund Randolph, Washington found a way to undermine the spirit of that law by taking advantage of a technical loophole that permitted out-of-state slave owners in Pennsylvania to rotate their human property outside Pennsylvania in order to avoid the six-month freedom requirement. That loophole indicated that just one full day outside the state would nullify the six-month period. In other words, if an enslaved person on even the last day of a six-month period of residency were taken a mere one inch over the Pennsylvania state line for just one full day, the six-month period would have to be started anew, over and over again each time that person was taken to any other state for any distance for at least one full day. Washington exploited this loophole and did so deceitfully, writing to his chief secretary on April 12, 1791, “I wish to have it accomplished under pretext that may deceive both them [the slaves] and the Public.”

Unfortunately, Washington’s chicanery in Pennsylvania paled in comparison to his ultimate mistreatment of enslaved black human beings throughout America. In addition to the misery he inflicted upon the nine in Philadelphia, Washington caused grief for many other enslaved black people. It was in Philadelphia that he aggressively and successfully sought the return of several black people who had fled to the British in response to Lord Dunmore’s 1775 freedom proclamation. Most heinously, on

22 Wiencek, Imperfect God, 251, 254–58.
February 12, 1793, Washington signed into law the heart-wrenching Fugitive Slave Act. Imagine, for a moment, that you are an enslaved black man, black woman, or black child. As such you suffer the unimaginable horrors of captivity. Those horrors include forced labor, flesh-gouging whippings, arbitrary auctions, tortuous rapes or grisly castrations, lynching nightmares, and rampant dehumanization. But then, one day, you escape to freedom, to the “Promised Land.” You plan to work to buy the freedom of family and friends. You find a job. You get an education. However, if you are anywhere in the United States or its territories from 1793 through 1847, your freedom may well be short-lived because Washington signed into law a document that can return you to slavery. Specifically, section 3 of that act states:

That when a person held to labor in any of the United States, or in either of the Territories on the Northwest or South of the river Ohio, . . . shall escape into any other part of the said States or Territory, the person to whom such labor or service may be due, his agent or attorney, is hereby empowered to seize or arrest such fugitive from labor, . . . and upon proof to the satisfaction of such Judge or magistrate, either by oral testimony or affidavit . . . that the person so seized or arrested doth, under the laws of the State or Territory from which he or she fled, owe service or labor to the person claiming him or her, it shall be the duty of such Judge or magistrate to give a certificate thereof to such claimant, . . . which shall be sufficient warrant for removing the said fugitive from labor to the State or Territory from which he or she fled.23

Washington’s historically documented wrongs, many of which were perpetrated in Philadelphia, must be righted—to the extent that such horrific wrongs ever can be righted. Avenging The Ancestors Coalition (ATAC), a broad-based coalition of African American historians, academics, civic organizations, community activists, elected officials, religious leaders, media personalities, lawyers, businessmen, businesswomen, and other descendants of the victims of the Euro-American slave trade, is demanding that we now right those wrongs. ATAC has spearheaded a voluminous letter-writing campaign and a petition drive, which has gathered more than fifteen thousand signatures to date (and increasing daily). Moreover, ATAC held major demonstrations on July 3, 2002, July 3, 2003, July 3, 2004, and July 1, 2005, and has provided substantial docu-

mentation to U.S. House Appropriations Committee member Congressman Chaka Fattah of Pennsylvania, who was instrumental in securing an amendment to the Interior Department's 2003 budget requiring the National Park Service to develop plans for the President's House site, including an "appropriate commemoration" of the nine enslaved African descendants there. And, in September 2005, primarily through the efforts of Congressman Fattah, $3.6 million in federal funding was provided for the site and the commemoration. In addition, ATAC has also secured $1.5 million from Mayor John Street of Philadelphia toward the funding for the commemorative project, which will be part of the overall $4.5 million President's House plan.

For the better part of thirty years, Independence National Historical Park (INHP) suppressed, hid, and denied the complete truth about slavery at the Philadelphia President's House. It is high time, after three decades, that INHP finally commemorate at least those nine forced to labor in American slavery. Although it is indisputably true that white indentured servants also "labored" at this President's House, their situation cannot be compared to the plight of the enslaved black workers there. To make such a comparison is worse than historically erroneous; it is an insult. While indentured servants had mere contractual limitations on their freedom, enslaved black workers had no freedom whatsoever. While indentured servants were (figuratively) locked into a contract for a temporary period of work, enslaved black workers were (literally) shackled into a lifetime (even multigenerational lifetime) sentence of nonstop work. The difference between white indentured servants and black enslaved persons is obvious. And it is also obvious that the genuine contributions of those nine enslaved black laborers must be commemorated at the President's House.

With the prodding of ATAC and others, INHP has agreed to a historic commemoration. ATAC has been watching (keeping a "black" eye on) and working on this Philadelphia slavery issue for nearly four years. It is because of ATAC’s watching and especially working that ATAC was able to help persuade INHP to go from "denying to designing." For a very long time, INHP effectively denied the complete truth about the presence of Washington's enslaved black laborers in Philadelphia and his slave quarters at the President's House. Within the past few years, however, under the

good-faith leadership and honest pragmatism of Mary Bomar, the former INHP superintendent, INHP began seeking design plans to commemorate those enslaved persons. But it was not altruism that led INHP to do the right thing. Rather, it was ATAC and others that persuaded INHP to go from “denying to designing.”

For the design, ATAC seeks a culturally dignified, historically complete, prominently conspicuous, physically dramatic, formally official, and timely installed commemoration on the grounds of the President’s House to honor, primarily, the nine enslaved African descendants. ATAC seeks that commemoration because justice demands it. As forced laborers, ATAC’s ancestors had their culture, family, language, land, religion, name, human status, and often their sanity, limbs, and even lives stripped from them for three centuries by America (and other European slave-trading countries); died for America in all of its wars; and transformed America into the economic world power that it remains today. In other words, they made American liberty possible. Therefore, they deserve an appropriate commemoration.

That, and only that, will begin to move us toward healing the catastrophic injury that was slavery. And, in particular, it will begin to move us toward healing the “black” eye on George Washington’s “White’ House.”

Avenging The Ancestors Coalition

Michael Coard