

Who was Ona Judge?

The Black Young Woman who Frustrated George Washington!

Many people may not know the story of how in 1796, exactly twenty years after George Washington, along with more than fifty of his compatriots put his signature on the Declaration of Independence, stating: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--”, and sixteen years after The Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 was passed by the Pennsylvania legislature, and by a judicial decision Massachusetts ended slavery in 1783, George Washington still had a 23 year old Black young woman enslaved in his house. This is the story of that Black young woman, named Ona Judge.

Ona was born in 1773 and by 1796, had worked for about seven years as a personal slave to the President’s wife, Martha Washington. Ona was the daughter of Betty, a slave seamstress, and Andrew Judge, an English indentured servant at Mount Vernon, the Washington plantation. These slaves were among 85 that Martha Washington inherited on the death of her first husband, Daniel Custis, and brought with her to Mount Vernon when she married George Washington.

Ona had accompanied the Washington family to Philadelphia, where the city had become a temporary seat of the Federal Government. After The Gradual Abolition Act of 1780, the law in Pennsylvania was that slaves, who stayed in the State for more than six months without any interruption, could declare themselves free. To prevent this from happening and to interrupt their residency in Pennsylvania, the Washington family always made sure to take their slaves out of State for a couple of days or so, and bring them back to Philadelphia.

Ona Judge met and befriended some of the freed slaves in Philadelphia and the idea and desire for freedom was planted in her mind. But, if she escapes, where could she go? How can she hide away from the clutches of the most powerful man in USA, George Washington? What made her escape imminent, however, was overhearing her mistress, Mrs. Washington, confiding to a friend that she was going to give Ona away as a wedding present to her granddaughter. That did it!

The Washington family was getting ready to return to Virginia. Ona realized if she went back to Virginia with them, where the law was not as in Pennsylvania, she would never see freedom. In preparation for her escape she started to hide and carry a few of her belongings at a time, and leave them with her friends in Philadelphia. Little by little, within a week or so, she managed to transfer most of her personal items.

One evening as the family was eating dinner, Ona slipped out the back door and escaped. The advertisement in the papers read: “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... 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 harbor; ...a reasonable additional sum if apprehended at, and brought from a greater distance, and in proportion to the distance.” Ten dollars must have been a lot of money in those days.

Once the news spread about Ona’s escape and people started looking for her, her Philadelphia friends decided it was not safe for her to remain there. They boarded her on a ship to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Ona pretended to be one of the freed slaves and was going about her business

in Portsmouth when within a few months, a friend of the Washington family saw her in the streets, recognized, and reported her as the absconded slave of President George Washington.

The escaped slave was discovered. George Washington used his power and his influential friends in high places, to have Ona captured and returned. She was treated like smuggled goods, since slaves were “property”, and interviewed by the Portsmouth Customs Official, Mr. Joseph Whipple, who reported to his boss, The Secretary of the Treasury, Mr. Oliver Walcott. They planned to capture and ship her back to her master, President George Washington. The plan, however, was abandoned for fear of a riot at the docks by supporters of abolition. To his credit, Mr. Whipple refused to capture Ona and board her on a ship against her will.

George Washington was furious because he could not have his way, but there was not much he could do. Exactly a year after Ona’s escape, his presidency ended in 1797. Even though Ona had married by then and was the mother of an infant, the attempt to kidnap and return her back to her master continued for another year, where George Washington sent his nephew, Burnwell Bassett Jr., to Portsmouth with that mission. But the kidnapping plan was foiled and abandoned. Ona Judge remained a free woman until her death in 1848, at the ripe age of seventy five. The man who was able to defeat the British forces and declare the Independence of the Nation was defeated by the indomitable human spirit and the desire for freedom embodied in the image of a young Black woman – Ona Judge.

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