

Published February 6, 2024. Editor's Headline: "Slaves of the Founders"

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Recently I advised a German student with an English-language project. The young woman is 22, works full-time, and studies in night school to attain her Abitur, a series of exams that'll gain her a certificate equivalent to an AA degree.

She wanted to address racial and gender discrimination from the U.S. formative years onward.

Our discussions went to the nation's first autonomous government. Native American displacement and murder were common, as was slavery in the South. Indeed, the first and third Presidents owned plantations that employed hundreds of slaves: At their respective deaths, George Washington held 317 enslaved people, Thomas Jefferson six hundred.

Washington remained undistinguished as he climbed the military ladder. From his father the surveyor he'd learned how land is measured; the next step for the son was appropriating some of that land for himself or his government. He claimed desirable stretches of territory as his own even while receiving delegations of Native Americans with whom he ate, drank, smoked the peace pipe, and debated solutions to the problem of "their" existence.

As part of the landed gentry, Washington needed indentured laborers to work the land. What better way to acquire them than to marry a widow who owned hundreds of slaves, thanks to her deceased husband? Enter Martha Washington.

In 1793, while the nation's capital remained Philadelphia, President Washington signed into law the Fugitive Slave Act, which punished with federal persecution any resident who helped runaway slaves to freedom—this, at a time when northern states, and even some southern ones, turned against chattel slavery. Northern states enacted laws against it, arguing that the Fugitive Slave Law was unconstitutional. The country was as divided as it is today.

Slave revolts became more frequent after Haitian slaves started a series of revolts that threw off their bonds. These Blacks forged their own government. Southern states responded with more repressive laws and more brutal whippings, which happened on Washington's Mount Vernon as well as on Jefferson's Monticello.

When one of the Washingtons' house slaves absconded during their Philadelphia residence, the Washingtons placed newspaper ads promising big money for her capture. Ona Judge was a seamstress whose services Martha Washington was determined to recoup; she planned to give the slave as a wedding gift. "Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge," is a 240-page treatise penned by Erica Armstrong Dunbar, a professor and scholar with a distinguished career.

The book examines the trajectory of a young woman's search for freedom and refuge. Ona Judge relocated to the town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where anti-slavery sentiment was high and a sizeable community existed of free Black men and women. Some of them helped Ona settle, find jobs, and go into hiding when needed (no Underground Railroad yet existed). Ona married a free Black man and bore three children, but her husband, a maritime ship hand, died after six years of marriage. After that, the young woman's life grew more precarious although still preferable to the bondage of slavery, where she was subject to beatings, rape, and sale.

"Never Caught" is a must-read for anyone who realizes that author James W. Loewen is spot-on with his "Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbooks Got Wrong."

Today Thomas Jefferson's paternity of the Sally Hemings offspring is well known although, in his day, Jefferson kept the affair under the radar. The liaison began when he took the young slave, who was said to be exceptionally good-looking, with him to France sometime after his wife's death. He also took her older brother James with him to act as his butler. Sally turned up pregnant while in France and, as Jefferson got ready to return home, wished to stay, having learned French and knowing she would be free in France. Wanting to keep her by his side, Jefferson promised freedom to her and her children. She was thirty years younger than he and a half-sister to his deceased wife. The last of their children was born when Jefferson was sixty-five; he lived to be eighty-three. All Hemings children attained freedom on turning 21 but, since Jefferson's plantation was deeply indebted, other slaves were sold along with the furniture and furnishings of the great house.

It should be noted that the first Africans who arrived in Virginia were not considered slaves for life. However horrible their Middle Passage, they were indentured servants, free to go after seven years like their European counterparts.

Sally Hemings' mother, Betty, was the offspring of an African woman owned by John Wayles who was raped by the ship's captain, John Hemings. Captain Hemings tried to purchase his child from Wayles but the owner kept the baby; Betty grew up on his plantation. She bore six children by a Black man before bearing Wayles six mulatto children after his three white wives died consecutively. Betty cared for Wayles' daughter Martha, whose mother died when the baby was three weeks old; hence, the sibling relationship of which Martha was fully aware. Martha Jefferson saw to it that the Hemings women she brought with her were afforded more humane treatment than other Jefferson slaves.

Sally was one of the children of Betty and Wayles; so was her older brother, James, who became Jefferson's personal servant. When Jefferson accorded manumission to James, the young man went out into the world but killed himself a few months later. Freedom did not mean the good life for young Blacks.

Despite anti-slavery views in the North, people regarded Blacks as "the lower orders," incapable of work beyond janitorial service. In *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857), the Supreme Court ruled that African Americans could not attain citizenship even though Scott resided in a free state and

territory where slavery was prohibited. The justices continued to deny Blacks any standing in court; they could not bring suit against whites who stole their wages or raped their wives and daughters.

Miscegenation laws were enacted early on, apparently to guard the virtue of white women, while males regularly indulged their sexual proclivities with slaves, who had no choice in the matter. Most Southerners pretended the practice did not exist even as they fathered untold mulatto and maroon children.

When I related the above, my German student was dismayed. So was I.