

North Wind Picture Archive



ONEY JUDGE

Washington's Runaway Slave

She was born in 1773, an enslaved person in one of the most famous households of her time: Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington and his wife, Martha. By the time she died in New Hampshire 75 years later, she had become one of the best-known of Washington's slaves, because Oney Judge told her story to an abolitionist newspaper, the story of someone who actually escaped from the household of the United States' first president.

Oney's mother was an enslaved person named Betty, who worked as a seamstress at Mount Vernon. Oney's father, Andrew Judge, was an indentured servant who came from England. In exchange for his passage to America and his room and board, he agreed to work as a tailor for the Washingtons for four years. When Andrew Judge gained his freedom, however, Oney and her mother stayed behind, still slaves belonging to Washington's wife, Martha Custis. Oney grew up in the Washington manor house, a playmate and servant to Martha Washington's granddaughter, Nelly Custis. She also became an expert at sewing.

When the Washington household moved first to New York City in 1789, and then to Philadelphia in 1790, Oney was one of the seven slaves they brought with them. Soon Oney had become Mrs. Washington's personal attendant, helping her dress and powder her hair for official receptions, going with her to social events and visits, and running errands in the city. Oney also made friends with

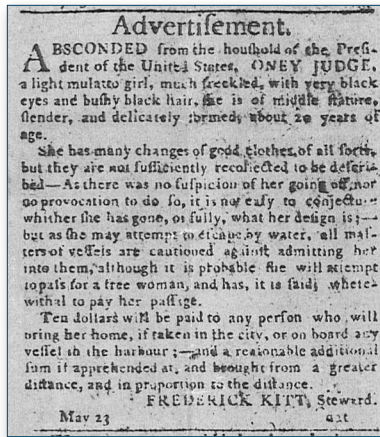
many of the free blacks living in Philadelphia at the time. They told her about liberty and freedom, ideas that Oney found appealing.

In 1796, Washington decided to spend his summer back at Mount Vernon. Oney knew that if she returned with the family to Virginia, her chance of seeking the freedom she had heard so much about would be very slim. Mrs. Washington had also told Oney that she intended to give her as a gift to her oldest granddaughter, Elizabeth Custis, who was going to be married. Oney refused to accept the idea that she would be given like a possession, no different from a piece of furniture. She decided to escape.

"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 before hand, and left while the Washingtons were eating dinner," Oney told a newspaper years

later. Her friends hid her until they could find a passage on a ship that was heading north. Soon Oney found herself in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Washington was quite upset at the idea that her property was gone. She even suspected that someone had stolen Oney away, since she felt that Oney had been given a good life with the Washingtons and couldn't possibly have wanted to leave. She persuaded the president's steward to place an advertisement offering a reward for Oney's return:



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 black 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: 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, 1796

Oney might have lived peacefully in Portsmouth if it hadn't been for a moment of very bad luck. As she was walking through the streets of the town one day, she passed Elizabeth Langdon, who was a friend of Martha Washington's granddaughter and had visited the Washington home in Philadelphia many times. Elizabeth recognized Oney and tried to talk to her, but Oney scurried away. But the damage was done. Elizabeth passed the word back to George Washington that she knew where his wife's escaped slave was. Washington himself had signed a Fugitive Slave Act in 1793 (probably putting his signature on it just a few feet from where Oney was working), which guaranteed the rights of slaveholders to regain their property when their slaves escaped. Washington knew that slavery was no longer a popular institution in the North, and he had even replaced many of his slaves with

indentured servants. But that did not stop him from immediately writing to the customs officer in Portsmouth, Joseph Whipple. He asked Whipple for help in getting Oney back.

Whipple found Oney and talked with her. He did not want to force her to return to Virginia, because he was afraid it would cause a riot among the anti-slavery people in Portsmouth. Instead, he offered her a deal: he

would persuade the Washingtons to promise to free her after their deaths, if she returned to them now on her own. Oney refused. Washington himself was not happy when he heard about the deal, and Oney's response:

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 with her is totally inadmissible, for . . . it would neither be politic or just to reward unfaithfulness . . . and thereby discontent the minds of all her fellow-servants who by their steady attachments are far more deserving than herself of favor.

In 1797 Washington retired from the presidency. Oney was still living in Portsmouth, now married to a sailor named Jack Staines and the mother of a baby. Washington sent his nephew, Burnwell Bassett, to Portsmouth, to again try to bring Oney back to Virginia. This time the Langdon family helped Oney. When Bassett had dinner with them and told them of his mission, they sent word to Oney and she went into hiding with her family. After Washington died three months later, Oney recalled that ". . . they never troubled me any more after he was gone."

Oney lived the rest of her life as a free woman, although she was still technically a fugitive slave. She learned to read, and told her story to the antislavery newspaper *The Granite Freeman* in 1845. She died in Greenland, New Hampshire in 1848, remembered by the title of the article about her: "Washington's runaway slave."