

A birthday shock from Washington's chef

Researchers recently found proof that Hercules fled Mt. Vernon on Feb. 22, 1797.

By Craig LaBan

Inquirer Restaurant Critic

Second of two parts.

There was cannon fire in Philadelphia on the morning of Feb. 22, 1797, as 16 rounds of salute - one for each state - rang out in celebration of the nation's greatest hero.

It was the 65th birthday of George Washington, the "man who united all hearts," as John Quincy Adams called him. And with Washington's final weeks as president ahead, the event was celebrated with "more sincere joy" than ever, according to the Philadelphia Gazette. People of all classes paraded to the President's House at Sixth and Market. At the ball that night, there were so many splendid dancing ladies and gentlemen "the room appeared like a grove of moving plumes," the paper wrote.

At Mount Vernon, however, Washington's birthday began with a sobering discovery: Hercules was gone.

Hercules had been the president's prized cook, a charismatic slave whom Washington had handpicked to come north to Philadelphia, where he prepared celebrated feasts for the Washingtons and their stream of high-profile guests.

But recent revelations in historic farm reports from Mount Vernon have turned up a new twist to the 213-year-old story of Hercules and his escape.

Contradictory to long-held beliefs, the chef did not flee from his vaunted position in Philadelphia at the end of Washington's second term. He had landed in distinctly **less comfortable circumstances** that miserable winter.

Washington was on guard to prevent another escape during his final months in Philadelphia, where in the spring of 1796 Martha's maid, Oney Judge, had run away. So when he returned to the capitol that fall, Washington left Hercules in Virginia.

Runaways from Washington's estate weren't uncommon, and though some managed to flee to the British during the Revolution, most failed, writes Wiencek. Four men escaped in 1761, only to be recaptured. A slave named Sam was caught several times trying to run away. One named Tom was caught and sent away in handcuffs to be sold in the West Indies. Hercules' literate contemporary Christopher was caught when a note to his wife detailing his escape plans was discovered.

Oney Judge proved Philadelphia was a risk. But back at Mount Vernon, surely, Hercules would be secure.

The once-trusted chef, also noted for the fine silk clothes of his evening promenades in Philadelphia, suddenly found himself that November in the coarse linens and woolens of a field slave. Hercules was relegated to hard labor alongside others, digging clay for 100,000 bricks, spreading dung, grubbing bushes, and smashing stones into sand to coat the houses on the property, according to farm reports and a November memo from Washington to his farm manager. "That will Keep them," he wrote, "out of idleness and mischief."

When Hercules' son Richmond was then caught stealing money from an employee's saddlebags, Washington made his suspicions of a planned father-son escape clear in a letter: "This will make a watch, without its being suspected by, or intimated to them . . ."

By February, after several days of working in the damp chill, Hercules had had enough. Before dawn on Feb. 22, 1797, he launched his quest for freedom.

The recent discovery by Mount Vernon historian Mary V. Thompson of this key detail in the weekly farm report from Feb. 25, 1797 - "*Herculus absconded 4 [days ago]*" - has finally solved two long-held mysteries: the place and timing of Hercules' flight.

Hercules' rough confinement at Mount Vernon reinforces the complexity of Washington's struggle with slavery. Ultimately, he would be the only Founding Father to free his slaves, an act he added to his will in the last year of his life, historian Henry Wiencek wrote in *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*.

It was a decision born both of Washington's evolving moral battle with the paradox of human bondage after the War for Independence and of the increasing failure of his plantation as a viable slave business. His slaves, however, were not to be free until the president and his wife were dead.

That Hercules chose his master's big day, Feb. 22, as the moment to escape has been greeted with cheers of poetic justice.

"Happy birthday, George!" Wiencek said of the news. "Hercules is a lot gutsier than we even thought. It was a lot harder to get out of Virginia than Philadelphia."

"The irony is absolutely perfect," said lawyer Michael Coard, a founder of the *Avenging the Ancestors Coalition*, an activist group dedicated to bringing attention to Washington's nine slaves at the President's House. It plans to hold a Hercules Freedom Day there today at noon. "It couldn't

have been scripted better," he said.

An arduous trek

Escaping Mount Vernon was no small feat. The estate where Washington's mansion overlooks the Potomac was an 8,000-acre plantation encompassing five farms with at least 316 slaves. And the dreary weather that February was bone-chillingly damp, according to farm reports, alternating between rainy 40-degree days and snow at night.

Historians such as David R. Hoth, associate editor at the Papers of George Washington, believe Hercules "almost for certain" would have first headed to Alexandria. The port city would have provided ships out of Virginia and the temporary safety of a community of free blacks.

But getting there would not have been easy. What today is a simple 15-minute drive north was in 1797 an arduous and winding route. To flee the hump of land that was Mount Vernon, surrounded by river, creek, and marsh, Hercules likely would have had to start veering northwest before connecting to River Road at Little Hunting Creek, says Pamela Cressey, Alexandria city archaeologist. He could have passed through woods, small paths, and fields on his way north. But there was likely only one ford across the Great Hunting Creek. Heading east then, he would have passed the high bluffs of Hoof's Run Creek into Alexandria, where there was an enclave of free blacks known as the Bottoms.

With the stormy weather and treacherous night travel, the journey would likely have taken at least two days, Cressey said. And for Hercules, the clock was ticking.

The Mount Vernon overseer would have noticed his absence at dawn, when slaves reported to work, says Thompson. "He only had a 12-hour head start, if that."

Reconstructing the escape

For more than two centuries, the supposed script of Hercules' escape has been different. Most historians believed he slipped away in Philadelphia, disappearing from the President's House on the morning in March 1797 when Washington left the presidency and headed home for Mount Vernon.

In a letter from March 10, 1797, the traveling Washington writes from Head of Elk, Md., to his secretary in Philadelphia, Tobias Lear: "I pray you to desire [steward Frederick Kitt] to make all the enquiry he can after Hercules, and send him round in the Vessel if he can be discovered and apprehended . . ."

But historians such as Thompson, Hoth, Ed Lawler, and Anna Coxe Toogood of Independence National Historical Park continued to tug at loose threads in the letters that didn't quite jibe.

Why would Washington, in a letter to dispatch his men to maintain the hunt for Hercules "at any expense," declare his certainty that the slave had "gone to Philadelphia" if it was *from* there he had

escaped?

"The phraseology bothers me, too," Lawler wrote.

The mystery began to unravel when Toogood discovered in the farm reports references to Hercules digging clay at the time the president was hosting his farewell feasts in Philadelphia. Then Thompson, having learned of Toogood's finds from *The Inquirer*, turned to the farm reports again. She found what she was looking for in the 1797 report from Feb. 25: "Eureka!" she wrote in an e-mail.

The discovery changes much about the perception of Hercules' motivations. After years of being portrayed as a favored servant simply walking off into a Philadelphia famous for its abolitionist options, the revelation of his labors on the plantation lends a new poignancy to his escape.

"Hercules had occupied such a high position, this [hard labor] strikes me as a pretty severe punishment," Wiencek said. "It's certainly a humiliation. The community of slaves would all have looked up to him as tight with the boss, with the ability to earn his own money and live in the mansion with autonomy. And then he's just tossed down from the mountain, and he's one of the grunts."

Wiencek is one of several historians who has interpreted Hercules as a master manipulator, one of the few slaves who managed to negotiate privileges from Washington, including the perk to earn an income by selling kitchen "slops," and freedom to wander the city: "His competence gave him great value to the Washingtons."

Hercules may have also been "setting his masters up" with protestations of loyalty, Wiencek wrote in his book, noting a 1791 exchange when Hercules realized the Washingtons were concerned he would escape. Tobias Lear wrote the president that "he was mortified to the last degree to think that a suspicion could be entertained of his fidelity or attachment to you."

But the new information that Hercules did not escape from Philadelphia despite six years of opportunities may prove that he was more faithful than previously believed. Until, of course, he was put on clay-digging duty at Mount Vernon.

"That would have been a horrible, horrible circumstance," said historian Annette Gordon-Reed, author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning tome on Thomas Jefferson's slaves, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. "Knowing he had a shot back in Philadelphia to become a free person, it had to have been a horrible feeling."

Family may have long been a factor delaying Hercules from leaving. He had at least four children at Mount Vernon who might have been punished. In a letter to his farm manager after Richmond's theft in 1796, Washington wanted Hercules' son to be "made an example of."

By the time Hercules fled in 1797, the three children he'd raised since his wife died 10 years earlier ranged from in age from 11 to 20. A fourth child, a daughter of 6, seemed to have understood her father's need to leave. A Mount Vernon visitor asked whether she was "deeply upset that she would never see her father again."

She replied, according to the future French king Louis-Philippe, in his *Diary of My Travels in America*: "Oh! sir, I am very glad, because he is free now."

The lure of Philadelphia

There were northbound boats leaving Alexandria in early March 1797, according to Hoth, who cites the *Columbia Mirror* and *Alexandria Gazette*: The schooners *Jerusha* and *Trial* headed to Philadelphia, as did the sloops *Dianna* and *Peggy*. The sloop *Polly* left for Baltimore on March 2.

Either way, *Hercules* would have had to stow away, historians say, a difficult but not impossible task. Later in her life, Washington's runaway maid, Oney Judge, told a newspaper in New Hampshire that she had escaped from the President's House just eight months before *Hercules*, thanks to the abolition-minded sea captain John Bowles and her "friends among the colored people of Philadelphia."

If *Hercules* managed to reach Philadelphia, he could have accessed that network.

According to historian Gary Nash's book *Forging Freedom*, Philadelphia at the time had the largest free black population in the United States, with major clusters near Northern Liberties and Cedar Ward, near Fourth Street and modern-day South Street. Richard Allen, the pioneering abolitionist who founded the historic Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church at Sixth and Lombard Streets, also had a chimney-sweep business that did work at the President's House, according to account books.

It is also a good possibility, Wiencek says, that *Hercules* had set aside a stash of money and clothing.

"*Hercules* was much better prepared than most to not only escape but to stay escaped," Hoth agreed.

Washington, in his ever-evolving conflict over slavery, lamented to his nephew George Lewis in November 1797, that the "inconvenient" fleeing of his cook had him reconsidering his vow never to buy another slave.

But he was convinced of Philadelphia's hold on his former chef. He sent two notes to former steward Kitt the following January, nearly a year after the escape, urging him to hire men to keep up the hunt: "If proper measures were employed to discover (unsuspectedly, so as not to alarm him) where his haunts are . . . it would render me an acceptable service as I neither have, nor can get a good Cook to hire."

There was one hearsay sighting later that month, Kitt replied. But then, for the nearly two remaining years of Washington's life, *Hercules* was gone.

A new life in Europe?

Where *Hercules* ultimately landed we may never know.

"Doubtless, he finished his days working for someone very rich because he could handle the demands of that scene very well," Weaver said.

But in the small world of colonial America, where Washington could track down Oney Judge in Portsmouth, N.H., it's possible, historians say, that Hercules believed the United States was no longer safe.

"Canada's a possibility," Nash said. "That's where [several] Mount Vernon slaves who fled to the British ended up, in Nova Scotia."

Along those lines, some, like Thompson, believe that a painting supposedly of Hercules purportedly by Washington's portraitist, Gilbert Stuart, might hold a clue, beginning with the aristocratic residences in Europe where it has hung, including the dining room of a famed socialite's Parisian mansion, a baron's manse in Gloucestershire, England, and its current home at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Spain.

Legend has it that Stuart was so impressed by Hercules' talents in Philadelphia that he painted a portrait of the president's cook, too, said Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, an associate professor of art history at the University of Pennsylvania who curated an exhibit with the painting *Presumed Portrait of George Washington's Cook*.

But questions regarding its provenance and age raise tantalizing possibilities of a later sitting and European journey for Hercules.

To begin with, Stuart experts do not acknowledge it as part of the artist's work.

"I'm familiar with it," said Ellen Miles, curator of painting and sculpture at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. "But it's never made it into the basic Stuart books."

The cut and fashion of the subject's white coat says late 18th century, Miles said. But his chef's hat is a tall toque that didn't become popular until the early 19th century, said Christine Crawford-Oppenheimer, a librarian at the Culinary Institute of America.

Could it have been painted after the cook settled in Europe, perhaps after joining the household of a British diplomat?

"It's possible," Nash said, citing a Russian portrait of Jean LaPierre, who he believes is the former slave "Negro John" who returned to Europe with Tadeusz Kosciuszko, the Polish military leader who fought as a colonel in Washington's Continental Army.

Either way, Hercules resurfaced at least once more in the United States. He was spotted in late 1801 by Col. Richard Varick, Washington's former recording secretary, who was then mayor of New York. In responding to his alert, Martha Washington wrote "to decline taking Hercules back again."

But the date is key. On Jan. 1, 1801, according to biographer Patricia Brady, Martha Washington decided to free all 123 of her late husband's slaves, despite his wish that they would not be freed until both he and his wife were dead.

Did the former slave know he'd been freed?

"Hercules," Nash chuckled, "was a clever, clever guy."

Contact restaurant critic Craig LaBan

at 215-854-2682 or claban@phillynews.com.