

Hercules: Master of cuisine, slave of Washington

By Craig LaBan

INQUIRER RESTAURANT CRITIC

He was one of the first great chefs of Philadelphia - in fact, of the young nation. The chief cook in President George Washington's home here in 1790 had only one name: Hercules.

In the mansion's open-hearth kitchen, where elaborate banquets were prepared, where spitted meats sizzled and "fricaseys" simmered in cast-iron pans over hickory fires, underlings scurried to execute the orders of Hercules, "the great master-spirit," according to one account, who seemed to be everywhere at once.

To Washington, however, Hercules was what he called that "species of property" - a slave. And though his talents would earn Hercules extraordinary privileges, including an income, fine clothes, and freedom to roam the city, Washington also went to great lengths to maintain the bondage of his prized cook - with deception, slave catchers, and, eventually, an attempt to stash him at Mount Vernon.

Recent controversy over the President's House, at Sixth and Market Streets, has renewed interest in Hercules and the lives of the other eight slaves who worked for Washington during his presidency in Philadelphia from 1790 to 1797. Their story surged into the international spotlight with the 2007 dig that unearthed the kitchen foundation and an underground passageway leading to it, obviously used by servants. Ironically, the kitchen where Hercules toiled was just in front of the new Liberty Bell Center.

The attention, along with queries from The Inquirer, led to a reexamination of historical documents regarding Hercules' life and especially his escape in 1797, when he disappeared, never to be captured again.

One document, a Mount Vernon farm report, has established new facts: Hercules did not escape from his privileged post in Philadelphia in early March, as had been widely believed. He fled

Washington's Virginia plantation, where he had been transferred and put on hard labor - and his disappearance was discovered on his master's 65th birthday.

Thus, the saga of Hercules has emerged as compelling historical drama - his rise from plantation slave to respected chef in the president's kitchen, his appearance as a loyal servant trusted to stroll the city's boulevards in fine clothes, and his clever escape.

Indeed, a supposed portrait of Hercules in full cook's regalia believed to have been painted by Gilbert Stuart has become one of the iconic images of the slave memorial being built at the President's House and now scheduled to open this year.

Through the eyes of George Washington Parke Custis, the president's stepgrandson, who grew up in his Philadelphia home, Hercules was a "celebrated *artiste*" in the kitchen, "as highly accomplished a proficient in the culinary art as could be found in the United States." He also was the family's beloved "Uncle Harkless" and a gilded boulevardier, the "veriest dandy" of his age, Custis wrote in his 1860 memoir.

But contemporary historians such as Mary V. Thompson of Mount Vernon, Anna Coxe Toogood of Independence National Historical Park, David R. Hoth of the Washington Papers at the University of Virginia, and Edward Lawler Jr. of the Independence Hall Association have gone beyond Custis' memories to tease the outlines of Hercules' narrative from household account books, correspondences, and Mount Vernon farm reports.

His story has become the inspiration for preachers' sermons, a televised chef segment on PBS, and activists and historians who want to bring sharper focus to the Founding Fathers' dark entanglement with slavery.

"It helps people understand . . . freedom for whites was often built on the backs of enslaved people," says Gary B. Nash, a professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Los Angeles. "Slavery is liberty's evil twin brother. We think of them as polar opposites, and yet they're joined at the hip."

But who, in fact, was Hercules, and what is his legacy? Chef-patriot? Early African American hero? Or was he simply a man bent on finding his freedom despite being a favored servant of the nation's great hero? And what was it like for a Virginia slave to land in the cosmopolitan Philadelphia of the 1790s? It was not only the new nation's political center, but also the nexus of its abolitionist movement, not to mention the gastronomic capital of colonial America.

The Custis reminiscences provide ample color to stoke the quaint legend of the dandy chef, who, once those "savory viands" were served to the "masters of the republic," would shed his white apron for the black silks and polished shoe buckles of his evening promenade. The porter would bow low, Custis said, as Hercules passed through the mansion's front door with his hat cocked and a gold-headed cane in hand, then headed down High Street to join "his brother-loungers of the pave."

But on these strolls about town, Hercules was most likely exposed to possibilities of life beyond slavery in Philadelphia, the "North Star" of American abolitionism, according to Nash's 1988 book, *Forging Freedom*.

"When Hercules went to market to buy fish or meat, he'd find himself amidst hundreds of free black Philadelphians," Nash says. "It must have been wonderful."

It must have also been confounding for a man of such great status who remained a slave.

A look through the kitchen window of the President's House, however, provides a picture of Hercules' life beside the blazing hearth that is far from a leisurely stroll.

Simple tastes

George Washington was no gourmet. Unlike his political rival Thomas Jefferson, forever a foodie after his diplomatic years in France, Washington was steeped in the ritual of simple tastes. He ate hoecakes for breakfast at 7, the white corn-mush patties swimming in butter and honey (to soften them for his famously sore teeth), with three cups of black tea. For his informal Saturday evenings, the fish-loving Washington regularly ate a humble hash of boiled beets, potatoes, onions, and salt fish (conveniently supplied by New England's congressional delegation) covered with fried pork scraps and buttery egg sauce.

But the president could also host in capital style, with regular feasts for 30 or more guests: senators, foreign dignitaries, Indian chiefs. And he needed a kitchen that could carry it off.

Hercules, the brawny and charming father of four, was Washington's choice. Little is known about his early life; Washington is believed to have purchased him in 1767, when Hercules was a 13-year-old ferryman. But Hercules clearly learned his kitchen craft well at Mount Vernon from Martha Washington's longtime slave cook, Old Doll. By the time Hercules was about 36, the president tapped him to come north to Philadelphia. The white cooks who worked at the previous presidential residence in New York were "dirty figures," Washington wrote to his private secretary, Tobias Lear. They would "not be a pleasant sight in view (as the kitchen always will be)."

Washington was keenly aware of the political importance of dining room ceremony, and his regular Thursday dinners with members of Congress would set an impressive standard for the nation's first power meals.

These were the nights, Custis wrote, "when Uncle Harkless shone in all his splendor."

The kitchen staff, having toiled from the fire-stoking before dawn until the 4 p.m. service, would typically produce more than two dozen dishes laid out over two courses, plus a finale of fruits, walnuts, and sweet wines. The elegantly mirrored pedestal adorned with spun-sugar figurines was surrounded with puddings, soups, boiled meats, smoked gammon ham, game birds, fish, seasonal vegetables, jellies, and cakes.

With the president scooping pudding for guests and leading the meal in toasts, his wife the consummate hostess, and servants in the family's red-and-white livery, these were dignified affairs awash in Madeira, porter, cider, and French claret, but deliberately shy of aristocratic Euro pomp.

Addressing an incoming steward, Washington directed "that my table be handsomely, but not extravagantly, furnished." He had carefully logged each purchase coming into the house for seven

weeks, in part because of overspending by the previous steward.

Gush of banquets

These detailed colonial logs, recently made available by Mount Vernon and never before published, provide a rare seven-week view into the president's larder and the sheer magnitude of this kitchen's task. With Congress drawing to a close and talk of avoiding another war with Britain likely swirling around the table, May brought forth a presidential gush of banquets.

During the week of May 19, 1794, for instance, the kitchen prepared 293 pounds of beef, 111 pounds of veal, 54 pounds of mutton, 129 pounds of lamb, 16 pounds of pork, calves' feet (for sweet colonial Jell-O), 44 chickens, 22 pigeons, 4 ducks, 10 lobsters, 98 pounds of butter, 32 dozen eggs, myriad fruits and vegetables, 3 half-barrels of beer, 20 bottles of porter, 9 bottles of cider, 2 bottles of sauternes, 22 bottles of Madeira, 4 bottles of claret, 10 bottles of Champagne, and 1 twenty-eight-pound cheese.

Working in an 18th-century kitchen was backbreaking, with heavy iron pots swinging on cranes, whole animals turning on spit jacks, and tin reflector ovens beside the roasting-hot fires. Even the basic tasks, such as purifying sugar from large loaves, were a lengthy chore.

But the meat - regularly more than a quarter-ton each week, give or take a pig - was an astounding amount for a staff of roughly seven to butcher, boil, roast, or fry into "fricaseys," "ragoos," pastry-wrapped "coffin crust" pies, and scallopini-like "collops" rolled "olive-style" around forcemeat.

At least Hercules did not bake desserts. And contrary to Custis' image of him, he may not have always been in charge, either. The steward oversaw all the marketing, inspected each morning by Martha Washington after breakfast. The account books also contain numerous records of professional white cooks who worked for the household for various durations.

But while the hired cooks and stewards came and went, Hercules was the mainstay in the kitchen. And the Washingtons rewarded him with tokens of their approval. There were tickets to see a play at the Southwark Theater (*The Beaux' Stratagem*) and the spectacular riding acrobatics at Ricketts' Circus (America's first), according to account books. There were bottles of rum to mourn the death of his wife, Lane Alice, an enslaved Mount Vernon seamstress. A reluctant Washington also granted Hercules the favor of bringing his 13-year-old son, Richmond, to Philadelphia as a kitchen scullion and chimney sweep.

Most telling, though, was allowing Hercules the right to sell the kitchen "slops" - the remaining animal skins, used tea leaves, and rendered tallow that would have been compost on the plantation. In the city, these were lucrative leftovers, an income-producing perk traditionally bestowed on top chefs, including James Hemings, Jefferson's Paris-trained slave chef, who was paid a salary and soon to be freed.

For Hercules, that meant annual earnings of up to \$200, if Custis is accurate, as much as the Washingtons paid hired chefs. That income was no doubt what allowed Hercules to buy his dapper wardrobe, his velvet-collared blue cloth coat with bright metal buttons, and a golden pocket watch dangling from a long fob.

Culinary capital

He was dressed for adventure in a city that, for a country kitchen slave, must have been astounding on many levels.

As a food artisan, he found himself walking in what was the culinary capital of the United States, bursting with politicians and international diplomats, and a vibrant port that welcomed boats weekly from Europe, New England, and the Caribbean. That same week of May 19, 1794, according to the Philadelphia Gazette, there were casks of raisins and hogsheads of Tenerife wines from the Canary Islands waiting at the Walnut Street wharf, Grenadan rum just landed at Dock Street, Boston mackerel and "country gin" at Front and Spruce Streets, and, at 117 S. Front St., French hams, olives, brandied fruit, baskets of anisette, and Gruyère cheese.

According to local food historian William Woys Weaver, the bustling High Street market with arcaded stalls was teeming from the river to Fourth Street with local bounty: river shad, passenger pigeons, famously delicate salt-marsh mutton, Chester County cream cheese, and the yellow dessert apples Washington was known to covet. Ladies sold hot buckwheat cakes for breakfast, and black street vendors like Flora Calvil made spicy West Indies pepper pot stew.

The Caribbean and French influence grew exponentially during Hercules' stay in Philadelphia, as the Haitian slave rebellion and the French Revolution flooded the city by 1793 with well-trained European cooks. It's hard to imagine these exotic new flavors didn't have some influence on Hercules and the fashion-conscious Washingtons. Their cuisine was largely rooted, with plenty of Virginian embellishments, in English influences such as their well-thumbed edition of *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, by Hannah Glasse.

Use of the tomato, Weaver says, was becoming widespread in Philadelphia. And the ornately fluted ice creams known as "fromage glaces," made by Victor Collet at 127 N. Front St. in 1795, would become nationally renowned. The Washington account book for June 25 that year shows an ice cream mold purchased for \$7.

Talking shop

Undoubtedly, Hercules also had ample opportunity to talk kitchen shop with Hemings, a fellow Virginia slave whose training in France under the chef of Prince Louis-Joseph de Bourbon gave then-Secretary of State Jefferson's table, just blocks away, a special sophistication.

But there was likely another topic simmering in the air between them, too: freedom.

Hemings could have claimed his liberty in France, where slavery was outlawed. But he returned with Jefferson on the promise that he would be freed if he passed his knowledge of French cookery onto Monticello's kitchen staff. Jefferson made good on that promise, freeing Hemings in 1796.

Pennsylvania had already become the first government in the New World to begin the abolition of

slavery with its Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. And with the Quaker-backed Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery and Free African Society working on their behalf, there were 1,805 free blacks in the city in 1790, while only 273 remained enslaved, according to the federal census as noted in Nash's book. By 1800, the slave number had dropped to 55 among a black population of 6,436, about 10 percent of the city's population.

The Washingtons were deeply concerned.

To circumvent the Gradual Abolition Act, which allowed citizens of other states to hold slaves only six months before the slaves could claim their freedom, the Washingtons regularly and illegally shuttled their slaves across state lines before the deadline expired, thus resetting their residency at zero. And Washington wanted to keep it secret at all costs - even if it meant a lie.

"I wish to have it accomplished under the pretext that may deceive both them and the public," he wrote to Lear. " . . . This advise may be known to none but yourself and Mrs. Washington."

It wasn't long before the slaves figured out why they were being shuffled back and forth between Philadelphia and Virginia by stagecoach and boat, but Hercules, Lear wrote Washington in 1791, was "mortified to the last degree to think that a suspicion could be entertained of his fidelity or attachment to you."

"So much did the poor fellow's feelings appear to be touched that it left no doubt of his sincerity."

But was he? Or was Hercules, in fact, setting the Washingtons up for his own flight?

Martha Washington showed her trust by allowing Hercules to stay, at least once, beyond the six months. But the president clearly never relaxed.

He signed the Fugitive Slave Act that Congress had overwhelmingly approved in 1793, which allowed slave owners to retrieve their runaways anywhere, even if captured in non-slavery states. Then, after Martha Washington's maid, Oney Judge, escaped while the family was eating dinner in Philadelphia on May 21, 1796, Washington went on high alert.

© Copyright | Philly Online, LLC. All Rights Reserved. Any copying, redistribution or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the express written consent of Philly Online, LLC is expressly prohibited.