EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 04-26

ONA JUDGE DAY

WHEREAS, Ona Maria Judge, commonly known as Ona Judge, was born into enslavement at Mount Vernon, Virginia, in or around 1773, the daughter of Betty Davis, an enslaved woman of African descent, and Andrew Judge, a white English tailor indentured to the family of George Washington and his spouse Martha; and

WHEREAS, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 established one of the nation's earliest legal pathways toward ending slavery and helped shape Philadelphia's role as a center of evolving conversations around freedom, liberty, and human dignity; and

WHEREAS, on April 30, 1789, George Washington was sworn in as the first President of the United States, and in 1790, the federal government relocated to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, then serving as the temporary capital of the nation under the Residence Act; and

WHEREAS, in November 1790, Ona Judge arrived in Philadelphia with the Washington household and lived in the city during a formative period in Philadelphia's history, as the city stood at the center of the nation's early political, economic, and democratic development; and

WHEREAS, while residing in Philadelphia, Ona Judge experienced firsthand the contrast between the emerging ideals of liberty publicly celebrated throughout the city and the continued existence of slavery within prominent households, including the presidential household itself; and

WHEREAS, under Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act, enslaved persons could become eligible for freedom after six months of residency in the Commonwealth, but to avoid complying with Pennsylvania law, members of the Washington household rotated the nine enslaved Africans, including Ona Judge, in and out of Pennsylvania, disrupting the residency period and preventing eligibility for emancipation; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia in the 1790s was home to a growing community of free Black residents, abolitionists, faith leaders, and advocates for freedom, whose presence and example contributed to an environment in which Ona Judge could envision the possibility of a life beyond enslavement; and

WHEREAS, on May 21, 1796, Ona Judge escaped the Washingtons' Philadelphia home, fleeing by ship to Portsmouth, New Hampshire; and

WHEREAS, The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, federal legislation signed into law by President Washington, authorized the seizure and return of individuals who had escaped enslavement, placing Ona Judge at continued risk even after her escape; and

WHEREAS, despite repeated attempts to secure her return, Ona Judge remained free for the rest of her life, later marrying Jack Staines, raising a family, and living independently in New Hampshire until her death on February 25, 1848, in Greenland, New Hampshire; and

WHEREAS, Ona Judge's story remains an important part of Philadelphia's historical narrative and contributes to broader public understanding of the individuals and experiences that shaped the nation's early history; and

WHEREAS, as Philadelphia prepares to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States of America, the City of Philadelphia recognizes the importance of reflecting upon the many individuals whose experiences broaden public understanding of freedom, democracy, and self-determination in the nation's birthplace; and

WHEREAS, the observance of Ona Judge Day also complements the City's ongoing educational and historical programming connected to Juneteenth and other commemorations recognizing the continuing pursuit of freedom, dignity, and equal justice throughout American history — and her courageous escape stands as a powerful reflection of the contradictions present at our nation's founding — illuminating the tension between the ideals of liberty and the reality of enslavement that existed side by side; and

WHEREAS, Ona Judge's courage, determination, and pursuit of freedom remain an enduring part of Philadelphia's story, reminding us that the history of Philadelphia was shaped not only by founding documents and institutions, but also by the lives and actions of individuals who sought opportunity, dignity, and self-determination, and whose legacy — 230 years after her first steps toward freedom — continues to resonate today and for generations to come.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, CHERELLE L. PARKER, Mayor of the City of Philadelphia, by the powers vested in me, do hereby ORDER as follows:

SECTION 1. <u>Designation of Ona Judge Day on May 21.</u>

May 21 of every year is designated a day to commemorate Ona Judge's legacy and vitality to the history of Philadelphia and our nation.



Cherelle L. Parker, Mayor

Date: May 21, 2026