

THE GILDER LEHRMAN INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY

Inside the Vault : Highlights from the Gilder Lehrman Collection

August 7, 2020

The session will start shortly. Please note:

- Your video and audio will automatically turn off.
- You can participate through the Q&A function.
- If you have technical difficulties, please email firstfriday@gilderlehrman.org so we can assist you.

Gilder Lehrman Staff

Panelists

- Sandy Trenholm – Collection Director
- Nancy Hayward – Former Director of Educational Outreach at George Washington's Mount Vernon
- Jeanette Providence – Educator at Grant Union High School in Sacramento, California
- Darnell Abraham – George Washington in HAMILTON

Support

- Allison Kraft – Assistant Curator

During the Session

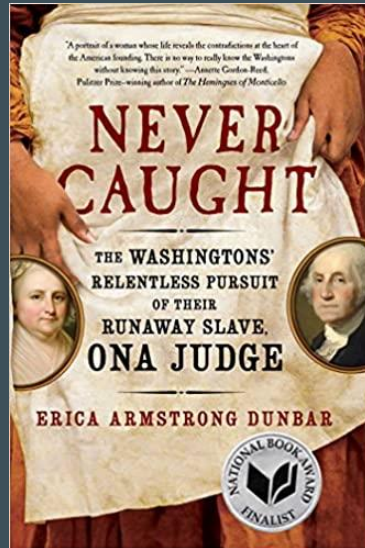
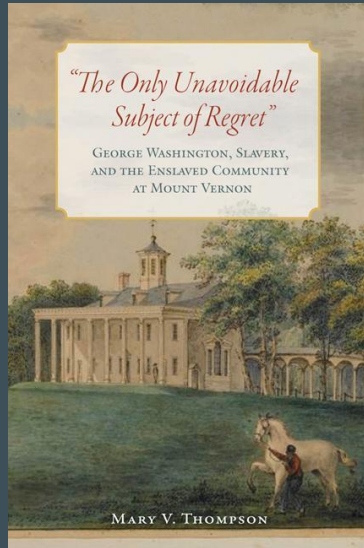


- If you would like to ask a question, you can **use the Q&A feature**, which is at the bottom of your screen.
- **Viewing in full screen** is recommended to see the presenters and the presentation at the same time.

For Security

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.

Recommended Reading

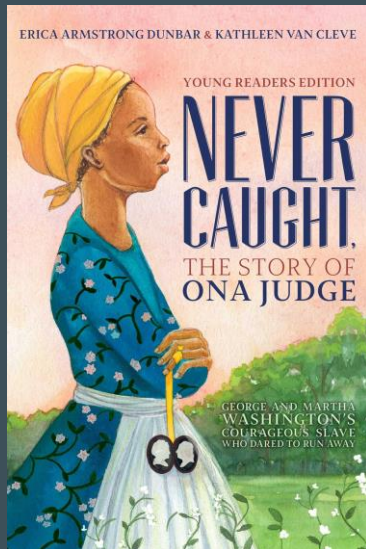


The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret: George Washington, Slavery, and the Enslaved Community at Mount Vernon.

By Mary V. Thompson

Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge

By Erica Armstrong Dunbar



Never Caught, The Story of Ona Judge
Young Readers Edition

By Erica Armstrong Dunbar

Slavery in the Founding Era

- After the Revolutionary War, 500,000 people (one-fifth of the US population) lived in bondage.
- Some people began to realize that the ideals of freedom were in conflict with the institution of slavery.
- Our featured letter shows George Washington struggling with this conflict.

What Words do We Associate with George Washington?



Founding Father

Intelligent

President

Leadership

Tall

General

Farmer

Brave

Slave Owner

Depiction of Life at Mount Vernon



Junius Brutus Stearns, *Life of George Washington – The Farmer*, 1853. Library of Congress.

George Washington Becomes a Slave Owner

- Became a slaveholder at age 11
 - Inherited 10 enslaved people from his father's estate
- 317 enslaved people lived at Mount Vernon when Washington died.
 - 124 people belonged to George Washington.
 - 153 people were “dower slaves” that belonged to the estate of Martha Washington's first husband, Daniel Custis.
 - 40 people were leased from Penelope French.



Junius Brutus Stearns, *Life of George Washington*
– *The Farmer*, 1853. Library of Congress. (Detail)

Slavery at Mount Vernon



- He was a businessman.
 - Economics drove his decisions.
- He relentlessly searched for people who escaped bondage.
- He was strict and had a temper.
- He authorized the use of physical punishment.
- While president, he sent enslaved people back to Virginia every six months to prevent them from earning their freedom under Pennsylvania law.

Slavery at Mount Vernon



John Trumbull, *George Washington and William Lee*, 1780. Metropolitan Museum.
(Detail)

- Many enslaved people at Mount Vernon could
 - Read and write
 - Run errands in town
 - Earn their own money
- Enslaved people were paid to work on “holydays.”
- Washington lent guns to enslaved people so they could hunt.
- Billy Lee was sent to Philadelphia to see a doctor.

Washington's Changing Beliefs

- Washington came to believe that slavery was wrong and should be abolished.

Economics:

- Exposure to the successful use of wage labor
- Saw slavery as a drain on his finances

Morality:

- Conflicted with the ideals of the Revolution
- Friendships with abolitionists

Land is worth more in Pennsylvania and Maryland than Virginia because of immigration and because “there are Laws here for the gradual abolition of Slavery, which neither of the two states above mentioned have, at present, but which nothing is more certain than that they must have, & at a period not remote.” George Washington, 1796

- Mercer owes Washington money.
- Washington owes two debts that he is anxious to pay off.
- Mercer wants to repay Washington in either “military certificates” or enslaved people.

18th-Century Language

“Your favor of the 20th. ulto. did not reach me till about the first inst. – It found me in a fever, from which I am now but sufficiently recovered to attend to business. – I mention this to shew that I had it not in my power to give an answer to your propositions sooner.”

Uto = last month

Inst (Instant) = this month

Translation: Sorry I didn't write back sooner. Been sick.

The Debt

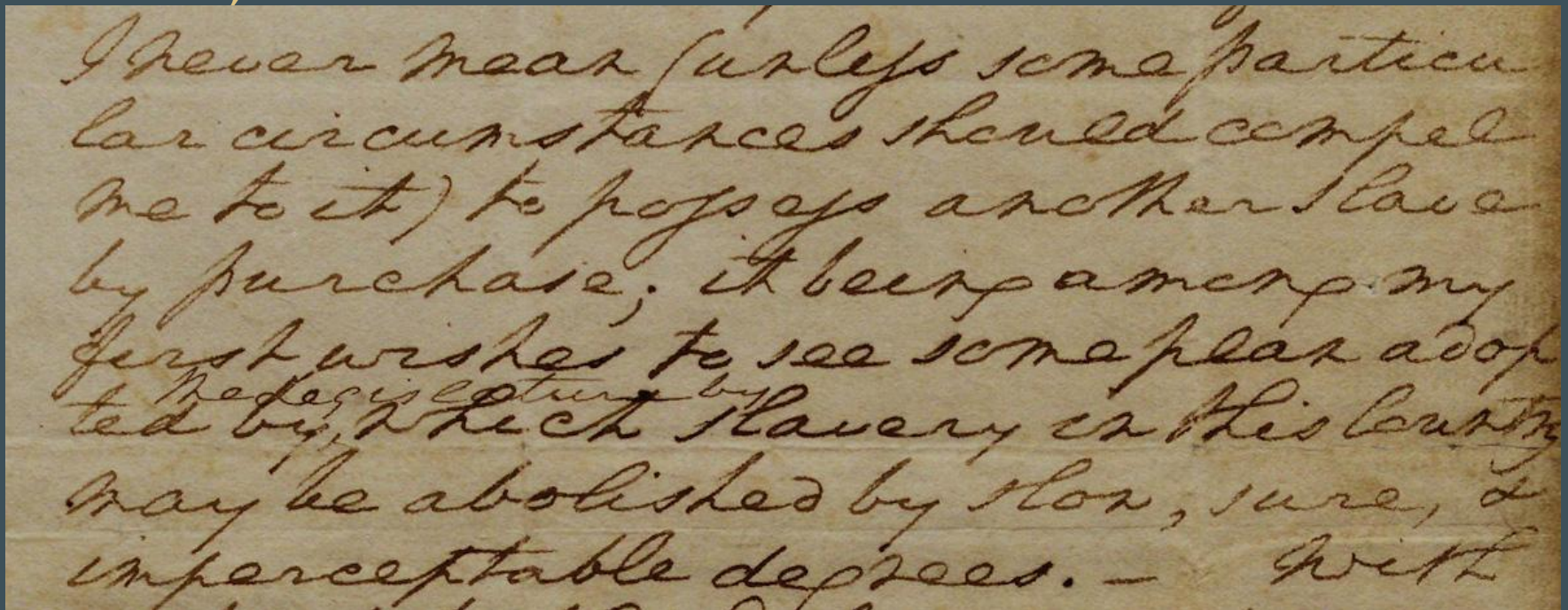
“It is owing to Govr. Clinton of New York, who was so obliging as to borrow, & become my security for £2500 to answer some calls of mine. This sum was to be returned in twelve months from the conclusion of the Peace. For the remains of it, about Eight hundred pounds york Cy. I am now paying an interest of Seven pr Ct.”

- Borrowed £2500 pounds from George Clinton
- Money was due back within 12 months after the “conclusion of Peace.”
- The loan has 7% interest.
- Three years later, Washington still owes Clinton £800.

£2,500 in 1786 = £ 325,800 today (\$425,000)

Abolishing Slavery

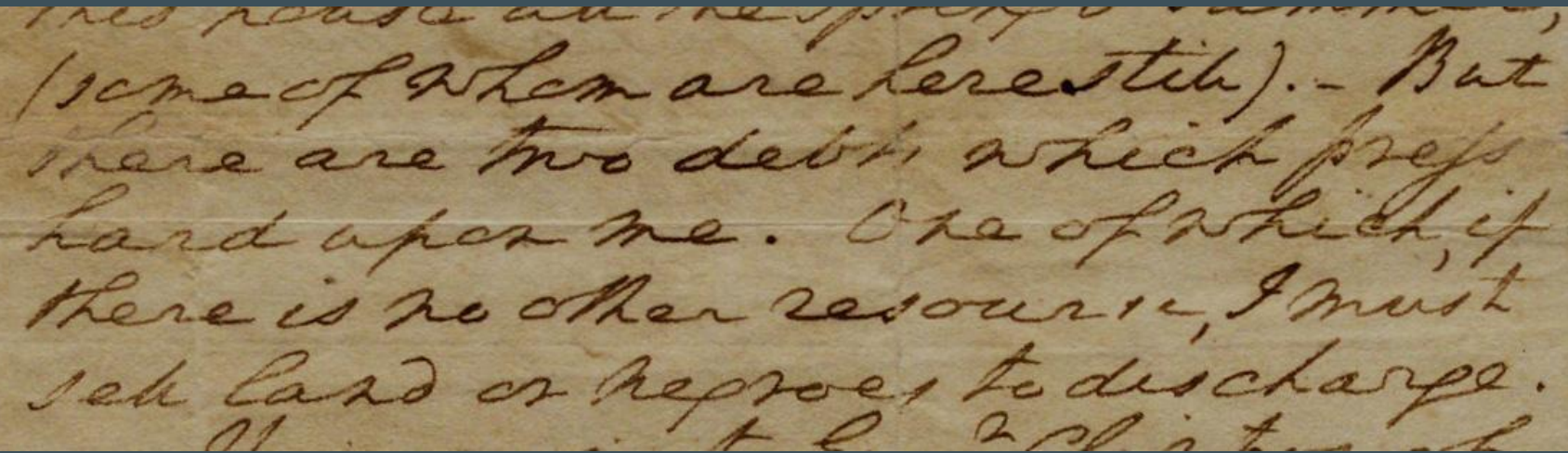
THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

A photograph of a handwritten manuscript on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in a cursive script, likely from the 18th or 19th century. The ink is dark brown. The text is a quote about abolishing slavery, with some words crossed out and replaced by handwritten insertions. The paper shows signs of wear and discoloration.

I never mean (unless some particular
circumstances should compel
me to it) to possess another Slave
by purchase; it being among my
first wishes to see some plan adop-
ted by ^{the Legislature by} which Slavery in this Country
may be abolished by slow, sure, &
imperceptable degrees. — With

“I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by *[inserted: The Legislature by]* which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptable degrees.”

Selling people to pay debts

A snippet of a handwritten manuscript on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in a cursive script. The visible portion of the text reads: "(some of whom are heretish). - But there are two debts which press hard upon me. One of which, if there is no other resource, I must sell land or negroes to discharge." The text is slightly faded and the paper shows signs of age and wear.

(some of whom are heretish). - But there are two debts which press hard upon me. One of which, if there is no other resource, I must sell land or negroes to discharge.

“But there are two debts which press hard upon me. One of which, if there is no other resource, I must sell land or negroes to discharge.”

What Happened Next

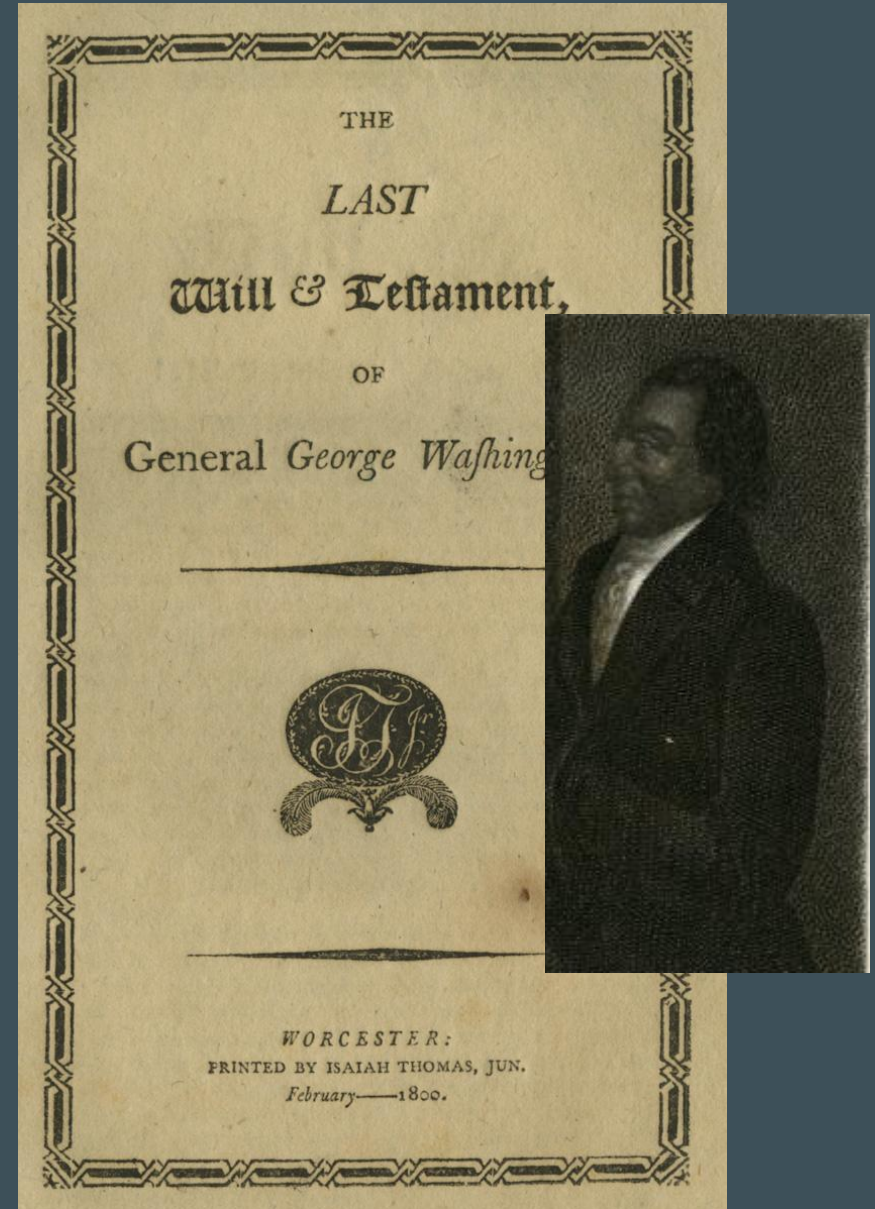
- Washington accepted 200 pounds and military certificates to repay the debt.
- Did he purchase more people?
- Did he free his enslaved people?

Emancipation vs Manumission

- In 1782, the Virginia General Assembly passed “An Act to Authorize the Manumission of Slaves.” This allowed slaveholders to free people.
- Manumission - a slaveholder voluntarily frees his enslaved people
- Emancipation - the government frees the enslaved people

Washington's Will

- Washington freed the people *he owned* upon the death of his wife, Martha.
- William Lee was freed immediately upon Washington's death and given a thirty dollar annuity.
- Enslaved people didn't have to leave the estate.
- The estate provided support for people who were too old, ill, or too young to support themselves.



How?

Why?

Q&A

**Did you
know?**

Who?

Study the Founding Era with EduHam Online

★ HAMILTON EDUCATION PROGRAM ONLINE

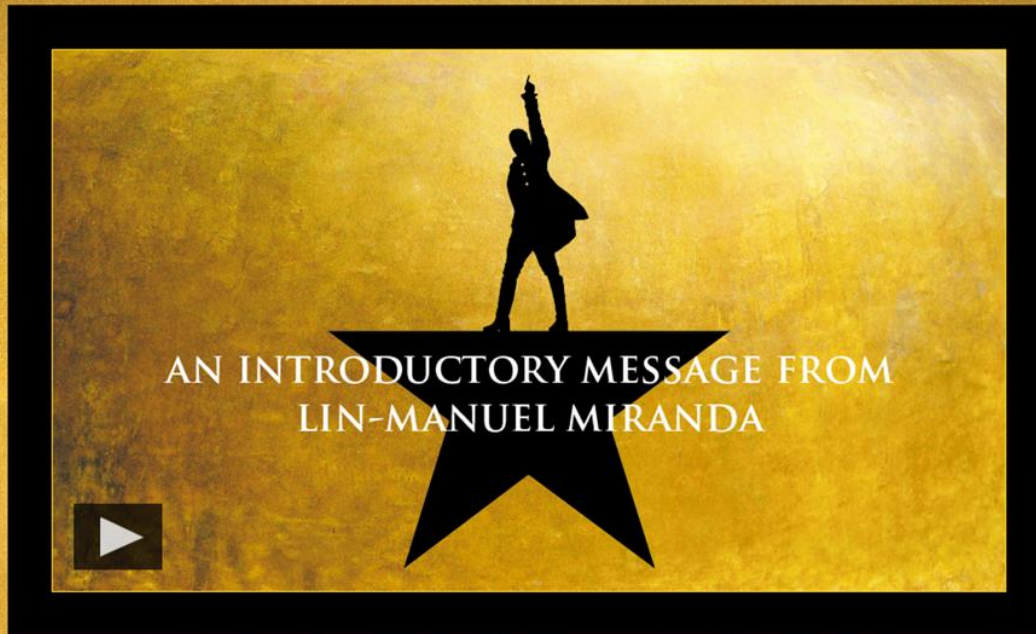
DASHBOARD

RESEARCH

VIDEOS

LOG OUT

Powered By Google
Select Language ▼



Upcoming Programs

- *Inside the Vault*, Friday, August 21 at 2 pm ET (11 am PT)
 - Featuring an Eleanor Roosevelt letter about the four basic rights of all Americans.
- *History Camp: History's Treasures*
 - Students in grades 3-8 can discover the hidden secrets in primary sources.
- *Book Breaks*, August 9 at 2 pm ET (11 am PT)
 - Kellie Carter Jackson discusses her book *Force and Freedom*.
- Visit gilderlehrman.org for free resources for students, teachers, families, and history enthusiasts of all ages.