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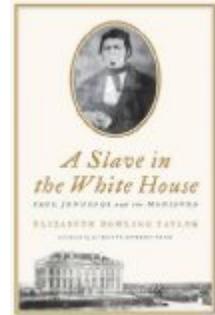
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Dowling Taylor. *A Slave in the White House: Paul Jennings and the Madisons*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xxiii + 304 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-10893-6.

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James Madison may have been “an exceptional statesman, a political philosopher without peer,” but when it came to the management of Montpelier, his plantation in Orange County, Virginia, he was “but a garden-variety slaveholder,” writes Elizabeth Dowling Taylor, independent scholar and one-time director of education at Madison’s historic home (p. 21). Paul Jennings grew up there in a manner typical for a slave, but when Madison became president in 1809, Jennings’s life took an extraordinary turn. The ten-year-old accompanied the Madisons to Washington, DC, where he served as footman in the president’s house. Pleasing both Mr. and Mrs. Madison, Jennings began a long career (albeit as a bondman) that led to his appointment as the president’s personal valet.

As Madison’s constant attendant, Jennings observed firsthand events that shaped the early republic and life among the powerful. He witnessed the sacking of Washington by the British in the War of 1812 and later the celebration of victory over the British in the same war, for example. When Madison retired from office, Jennings returned with him to Virginia where he established a family despite having little time of his own. After James Madison died in 1836, his widow moved back to Washington and hired Jennings out to the Polks, who now occupied the White House. Once again, Jennings served a U.S. president.

Eventually, Dolley Madison sold Paul Jennings to Daniel Webster with the understanding that he would earn his freedom by repaying Webster for the cost of his purchase. Jennings paid off the debt at age 46. Afterward he worked to free his wife and children who were still in Virginia. His wife died, but the former slave continued his quest to free the rest of his family. As

a newly emancipated Washingtonian, he found employment in the United States Pension Office, became a property owner, and worked with Northern abolitionists to organize the largest-scale slave escape ever attempted. One of the runaways aboard the schooner *Pearl*, which in 1848 unsuccessfully attempted to ship slaves to freedom from a dock south of Pennsylvania Avenue, was Ellen Stewart, the daughter of Sukey, lady’s maid to Dolley Madison. Jennings’s willingness to put himself at great risk by becoming involved in the event—particularly in Stewart’s escape—shows loyalty to the idea of freedom and not to his former mistress.

Jennings wrote about his life in the White House in a memoir first published by a friend in 1865. Historians have consulted his account to learn about the Madisons and the elite men (and some women) who surrounded them. Taylor turns the tables in *A Slave in the White House*; she mines accounts by the Madisons and their visitors to learn about Jennings and other slaves. She also painstakingly pieces together snippets of information about Jennings and other enslaved people from plantation records, government records (census and court), and newspaper accounts. Reading these sources together with Jennings’s memoir allows her to recreate not only the world of a White House slave in the early nineteenth century but also the place of enslaved people in the new nation, especially in the newly constructed nation’s capital and in nearby Virginia.

In telling Jennings’s story, Taylor joins a growing body of scholars who are examining the relationships that developed between the nation’s founders and slavery. Scholars such as Henry Wiencek, Annette Gordon-Reed, and Clarence Walker argue that leaving enslaved

people out of the nation's early history distorts that history by rendering it incomplete. As Taylor observes, "The elite and the enslaved together created a unique society, the two interdependent elements evolving in response to one another" (p. 13). To understand the world of the early presidents, historians must also understand the world of the people they held in captivity. Because most of this scholarship to date has centered on Washington or Jefferson and their slaves, Taylor's focus on Jennings and the Madisons is especially welcome.

A Slave in the White House documents the life and times of Jennings but also of the Madisons. Dolley comes off less as the adept hostess depicted by other historians and more as an inept mistress incapable of comprehending her servants as more than the help. James comes off as deluded about slavery, unable to understand that the man who was his constant companion embraced a political philosophy of freedom for himself and his loved ones. For Jennings, liberty was the inherent right of all men and a cause worthy of action. Throughout his adult life, Jennings took risks to aid other people in escaping bondage: he forged passes and free papers, and he later helped raise funds on behalf of people less fortunate than himself.

Despite the intimacy of their relationship, Madison, the great philosopher of liberty, did not understand Jennings's (or any other slave's) desire for freedom, even the freedom to visit family members. The man whose views on liberty did so much to shape the U.S. Constitution was "never able to close the deep divide" that separated master and slave, Taylor observes (p. 92). For those who would excuse his "failure" to act by citing the controversial nature of slavery, Taylor points out that the issue of religious liberty was "just as contentious in its day," and here Madison excelled (p. 222).

Although Taylor has proven remarkably adept at locating a wide variety of sources written by people who knew Jennings and who commented in writing about his life, the brevity of the accounts results in a narrative that is highly speculative in places. The author posits that Jennings read David Walker's pamphlet calling for slaves

and free blacks to unite against oppression (*Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*) on the basis that Jennings was in Richmond in 1829, when the pamphlet was said to be circulating there. Jennings most certainly met Edward Coles, Dolley's cousin and James's secretary, who freed his slaves and moved to Illinois, where slavery was banned, and he probably overheard conversations about Coles's plans as he discussed them with the Madisons. It is far less likely that Jennings conversed privately with Coles about anything to do with slavery, as Taylor suggests. To be fair, Taylor distinguishes clearly between conclusions drawn from documentary evidence and conjecture. "It is possible" such a conversation with Coles occurred, she writes (p. 106).

Jennings comes off a more shadowy figure in freedom than in slavery. While he was a slave, the Madisons kept careful records of his whereabouts. As a freedman, his story is documented less thoroughly. Yet, Taylor manages to tell us quite a lot. Jennings and his descendants are carefully traced through census records, city directories, and wills, and asides acquaint readers with the places Jennings lived and the cast of characters he encountered. The reader learns about people like Henry Pleasants, another slave whom Webster purchased so that he could earn funds for purchasing his freedom, and John Brent, who inhabited a house in Jennings's Washington neighborhood.

One thing is certain: Jennings achieved a lot in his lifetime, despite the constraints of slavery and a freedom restricted by racism. "He knew how to succeed within the system in which he was trapped," Taylor writes. He did as he was told, but he "was also good at gaming the system," that is, figuring out how to use his circumstances to his advantage (p. 78). While it is important to acknowledge this, Taylor also wants us ponder how much more Jennings might have done if he had been born into a society that believed in equal opportunity for all.

The book's photographs include pictures of Jennings and of his descendants. Appendices consist of Jennings's memoir and a family genealogy.

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