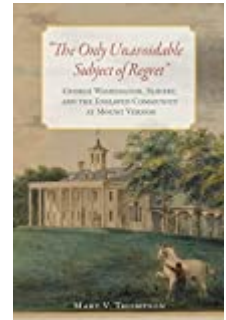


Mary V. Thompson. *"The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret": George Washington, Slavery, and the Enslaved Community at Mount Vernon.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019. Illustrations. 502 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-4184-4.



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George Washington's Slavery and the Enslaved Community of Mount Vernon

Ona (Oney) Judge was a so-called dower slave on George Washington's plantations. Dower slaves were a group of people and their descendants whom Martha Washington's first husband, Daniel Custis, enslaved and whose ownership passed to Martha on his death. The young woman was held in bondage first at Mount Vernon and later, during Washington's presidency, at the president's house in Philadelphia, then the nation's capital. After learning that Martha wanted to transfer Judge to a notoriously cruel niece, Judge escaped at the age of twenty-three. She ultimately fled to New Hampshire, where she married and had children. Although the Washingtons did not wish to risk the negative public reaction associated with forcing Judge to return, they spent many years trying to locate her and return her to Virginia.

Judge's story, once overlooked, is now well known. This is due in large part to Erica Armstrong Dunbar's highly regarded biography, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of*

Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge (2017), which won the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Frederick Douglass Prize. Similarly, Mary V. Thompson's *"The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret": George Washington, Slavery, and the Enslaved Community at Mount Vernon* grapples with Judge's story. Like Dunbar, Thompson gives a sense of the intimacy between Judge and the Washingtons. Judge, for example, daily assisted Martha with her appearance, brushing her hair, concocting compounds to help smooth her skin, and removing stains from her clothes.

What is remarkable about Thompson's extraordinary book, though, is that Judge is only one of the many people enslaved by the Washingtons whose stories are brought to vibrant life. We meet Billy Lee, who long served as George Washington's valet, accompanying him throughout the Revolutionary War, and who later was freed when Washington died "as a testimony of my sense of his attachment to me" (p. 54). However, Lee suffered

from alcohol-induced delirium tremens, and the author speculates whether he drank to dull the pain of a broken kneecap sustained while on a surveying trip with Washington in 1785. There is also the figure of Sambo Anderson who was born in Africa, with his face still bearing distinct “tattooing and tribal scars” (p. 16). Anderson learned carpentry from an English-born craftsman who had originally arrived in Virginia as an indentured convict and later served the Washingtons in that same capacity.

The lives of men and women employed in the Washington household, such as Judge and Lee, or those with a valuable skill, such as Anderson, receive more frequent mention in the records than their counterparts who worked in the fields. But Thompson rectifies this disparity through detailed appendices. There she lays out complete lists of dates when George Washington acquired the men and women whom he enslaved; their births, marriages, and deaths; and the origin of their names—African, biblical, classical, English, occupation-based, names based on place, and so on. What is more, no other author has constructed as full a survey of the farm managers and overseers employed throughout Washington’s life to monitor the people he owned.

This work is best understood, then, not as a monograph but as an encyclopedic study of slavery at Mount Vernon. Every facet of bondpeople’s life on the plantation in the mid to late eighteenth century is detailed. There are scintillating specifics about enslaved people’s families, their meager housing, their pastimes, and their efforts to make a little money by selling produce at markets in nearby Alexandria. There is also gruesome detail on the punishment meted out by overseers, drivers, and owners whose cruelty was designed to keep the bondpeople in check.

One concern with such an expansive volume might be that the analysis gets buried in the mountain of details. Rest assured, though: Thompson offers lengthy descriptions of George Washington’s

struggles with the trauma of slavery, with the tension between his desire to emancipate his own slaves and recognition that the future of the United States was being built on enslaved labor. While the author has worked as an archivist in Mount Vernon for many years—and admits to admiring Washington—she is not reticent in describing the lengths that the Washingtons employed to extract labor from the enslaved and to prevent them from running away. Interestingly, Thompson determines that between 1760 and 1799 about 7 percent of the enslaved men and women fled from Mount Vernon, compared to 2-4 percent across most Virginian plantations (p. 275). This obviously represented a significant threat to the Washingtons’ profit margins: as the author puts it, their “interests and those of the enslaved community were often incompatible” (p. 291).

Admittedly, the sheer amount of detail in Thompson’s work can make for a dense read; this is not a book to approach lightly. And at certain points, the author occludes historiographical controversies that cast Washington in a bad light. For instance, on Washington’s defense of slavery as a younger man, Thompson suggests that for modern readers to judge “a person from another time and culture” is “quite naïve” (p. 26). Yet such an approach ignores the voices that were raised against slavery throughout Washington’s life, of which Washington would have been aware. After all, as the author herself acknowledges, Washington’s own position changed post-Revolution to deploring the practice, and in developing his new stance he drew on anti-slavery ideology. Readers would be better off consulting Dunbar’s work for a treatment of the development of Washington’s ideas on slavery in all their complexity.

However, there is no more comprehensive summary of the daily work and life, the hopes and fears, religion and funerary practices, and the relationships among the enslaved at Mount Vernon. Few works come close to exposing the vicious irony that a man who led a revolution on behalf of

freedom stole the liberty of so many people. This book will appeal to undergraduates, postgraduates, and academics working on the history of slavery and eighteenth-century North America.

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