

Slaves and Slavery in George Washington's World



An interview with Henry Wiencek

Common-place: One of the striking revelations in Imperfect God is just how intertwined Washington's life was with the institution of slavery. Everyone knows he owned slaves, but few recognize just how pervasive a part of his day-to-day existence slaves and slavery were. Was this a revelation to you as well? If so, how did it come about?

Henry Wiencek: Because Washington is chiefly known and studied as a political figure, historians have looked at Washington's encounter with slavery through a political lens. Finding that Washington made no official statements about slavery during his presidency and that the issue did not arise in any dramatically significant way during his term, the political historians have relegated slavery to a footnote in studies of Washington. The story is almost the same for Washington as a military leader. General biographers of Washington have by and large been uninterested in slavery (Flexner is somewhat of an exception), except as a narrative device for making Washington look good; so they have tended to cherry pick anecdotes and statements that put Washington in a positive light, and they have tended to compartmentalize the discussion in a single, brief section or chapter. Reading these books would make one think that slavery was present in Washington's life only as a kind of social/environmental wallpaper—African American figures hovering silently in the background in

dining rooms and in fields—and that slavery never ruffled his Olympian conscience at all.

Because I came at Washington from the perspective of someone who studies plantation families, I knew before I had even begun that I would find slavery a pervasive presence in Washington's life. How could it be otherwise? Before he was anything else he was a planter/farmer (two different things), and if you asked him while he was in office what his occupation was, he would have said "farmer." He inherited slaves when he was still a child; he bought, sold, and rented slaves; he personally managed slaves, depended on slaves for his income for his entire life, negotiated with individual slaves, personally chose certain slaves for his household and for public appearances, and entered contracts regarding slaves; he married a woman whose wealth consisted very largely of slaves and who controlled more slaves than he did; he directly felt the effects of local and federal laws regarding slaves, etc., etc. Having slaves around all the time was part of his psychology—it was comforting; it validated his status as a person of substance and authority. There was no doubt at all that slavery pervaded his life, but the question was: ubiquitous or not, did slaves and slavery stand far in the background of his consciousness (as wallpaper), or did he have some direct, pressing awareness of moral and ethical issues regarding slavery? We look back and say slavery was evil by our standards; maybe he didn't feel that way at all. I was acutely aware of the problem of "presentism"—judging a figure of the distant past by our standards. I wanted to discover what Washington's own standards were, and my starting point was his last will and testament, in which he freed his slaves. In parsing the language of his will I found that, by the last year of his life, slavery had become a huge moral issue for him. Did this represent a change in his thinking? If so, what brought about that change? When? The will also suggested that Washington sharply disagreed with his wife and the rest of his extended family on the slavery issue.

CP: It seems clear from Imperfect God that you learned a great deal from genealogists. For historians working inside the academy, this might seem striking. How was it that you came to be interested in genealogy as a way of addressing larger historical questions about race and slavery?



William Costin (c. 1780-1842), the Washingtons' mixed-race grandson/nephew. He was the son of Ann Dandridge, enslaved half sister of Martha Washington, and Jacky Custis, Martha's son. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

HW: When I researched my previous book, *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White*, I could not avoid genealogy and genealogists. That book focused on one extended family with a black side, a white side, and family genealogists on every side trying to reconstruct a lost/hidden past. In several instances I came across documents indicating hidden or forgotten blood ties between the whites and blacks. You can't avoid finding that kind of information if you're studying plantation families. It happened everywhere and the evidence is thick on the ground—wills, gifts of land, odd emancipations, payments for education, favored treatment for particular people. I had so many of these stories from Hairston documents and oral history that I couldn't put them all into the book. And after the book came out more people called or wrote to me about other instances. The other part of this is you have to be careful in evaluating this information—not everything is at it seems.

When you encounter evidence of kinship between owners and slaves you have, first of all, learned something new about the complexity of their world, and next you are confronted with the question: did knowledge of his or her kinship to slaves influence the actions of an owner? Martha Washington's first father-in-law, John Custis, all but acknowledged his mixed-race son, freed him, and gave him a very generous bequest. In contrast, Martha held her own half sister in slavery. The existence of this half sister, Ann Dandridge, was one of the great shocks of my research, and I discovered her only because genealogists had written to Mount Vernon about Dandridge and their letters were in the files. I

pursued the leads in that correspondence and came up with additional evidence. So through the work of genealogists I came up with information that completely changed our view of what slavery was like at Mount Vernon.

Another case: The genealogist Anita Wills, who grew up in California, was told by her mother that the family originated in Virginia, and when Wills researched her past she found she was a descendant of mixed-race indentured servants held by Washington's family. Her genealogical research opened a window on a facet of servitude I knew nothing about—the forced indenture of mixed-race children, a quasi-slavery fastened on people who fell afoul of the racial purity laws, which one might more accurately call the “how-to-get-free-servants-for-thirty-years statutes.” All of this told me a lot about the fabric of Washington's world, and all of this came to light because a genealogist in California began tugging at a thread that led her all the way back to Westmoreland County, Virginia, and to George Washington.

Genealogy is much more than just birth certificates and gravestones. You are compelled to get deeply into wills, all manner of legal documents, county and state records, family letters and diaries. By chasing down every stray reference to a particular person, you find supremely important documents by accident, documents you certainly would not have found otherwise. By pursuing documents about one of Washington's slaves you can encounter documents about Washington himself you might never have discovered through a strictly defined “George Washington” search.

Genealogy has special importance to the study of slavery because by studying the wills and inheritance practices of slave-owning families you begin to see that slave owning was often a collective enterprise. The simple declarative statement “George Washington owned slaves” is actually a vast oversimplification. Yes, he owned slaves, but some of his slaves intermarried with “Martha's” slaves. I have to put *Martha's* in quotation marks because she didn't actually own them; they were owned by a legal entity—the estate of her deceased first husband—and they were earmarked for her son, Jacky, and after his death, for his heirs. You see how complicated it gets. The slaves were at Mount Vernon, under Washington's control, but his ownership of his own slaves and his control of “Martha's” were complicated by intermarriages among the slaves. Some of the offspring belonged to George; some, to the Custis heirs.

This phenomenon of collective family ownership of slaves turns out to be very important for understanding Washington. I was curious to find out if there was any direct connection between Washington's private slaveholding and his public policy on slavery, and I found that there was such a connection. While he was in office, the revolting slave-trading practices of an in-law drove Washington to plan the emancipation of all the slaves at Mount Vernon—his own and “Martha's”—an emancipation that Washington knew would have a strong political impact. I found unpublished letters from Washington's negotiations with a Custis heir, in which a very detailed manumission plan is outlined. The Custis heir resisted Washington's plan, thus preventing the president from taking a

forceful stand on emancipation.

As to “genealogy as a way of addressing larger historical questions about race and slavery”—genealogy teaches us that many white colonial families had mixed-race kin. It would be fascinating to consult Virginia’s African American genealogists and see how many of them can trace their families back to leading white families such as the Carters, Lees, Byrds, Randolphs, et al. (Right now I can say “yes” to three of those names—I don’t know about the Byrds, but they’re related to the Custises, so I guess they’d be a “yes” too.) That would give us a sense of how closely entwined these leading families were with slaves. Reading the accounts of the very peculiar, very intense relationship between Landon Carter and his slave Nassau, I have wondered if they were half brothers. My point is that, in public statements, the white male leadership of colonial Virginia reviled miscegenation, and we have come to believe that they were genuinely revolted by race mixing. Then how could these same men so avidly practice it? If they were disgusted by mixed-race people, how could the masters and mistresses of the era staff their houses with mulattoes? Wouldn’t you expect mulattoes to be shunned, exiled? Jefferson is a prime example. He spoke forcefully against racial mixing, but his entire household staff consisted of mulatto and all-but-white slaves, many of whom were his relatives. My thinking is that, to some degree, this eighteenth-century racial-purity talk was smokescreen and rationalization for outsiders. It’s an extremely complex issue.

CP: *To follow up, how do you think attention to genealogy might’ve altered the arguments of other books on similar topics? Ed Morgan’s classic American Slavery, American Freedom comes to mind here.*

HW: Broad-scope books such as those of Edmund Morgan, Philip Morgan, David Davis, and the Genoveses really have little opportunity to take up genealogical issues, except in an anecdotal way. But if your anecdote is about Jefferson it packs a lot of wallop. Philip Morgan wrote a terrific article about shadow families, “Interracial Sex in the Chesapeake and the British Atlantic World, c. 1700-1820” (in Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, eds, *Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* [Charlottesville, 1999]), which delves into some specific genealogies. But I think you might be defining *genealogy* too narrowly—it can also mean the study of family histories, which is particularly revealing in looking at the South. To pick one example, the settlement of Mississippi was, to a great extent, a family enterprise—nuclear and extended families from Virginia and the Carolinas migrated as units to the new land, bringing with them enslaved African American families (sometimes intact, sometimes not). By studying the wills and other financial records of slave-owning families we see that the natural increase in a family’s slaves often provided the capital and the labor for the rising white generation to expand operations into new lands. At age eleven, Washington inherited 10 slaves; he died owning 123, an enormous “dividend” in humans that his heirs could have converted to cash—but Washington freed his people. When you look into the histories of other planter families you see parents doling out the African American “increase” to their children to finance the creation

of new plantations. When you read the wills you find that dowries for the daughters often consisted of slaves or of cash raised from the sale of slaves. So studying genealogy reveals how deeply slavery was woven into the lives of families, one generation after another, and you see how unusual it was for George Washington to deny this bonanza to his heirs.

CP: *As we conduct this interview, African American genealogy is in the national spotlight as it has never been, thanks to Henry Louis Gates's PBS series, [African American Lives](#). The series explores the family histories of a group of famous African Americans, and for most of them, that history was hitherto unknown. Much like your work, the program raises profound questions about exactly who Americans are. Can you say something about the importance of those questions? How, for example, might they reshape America's sense of itself?*

HW: First off, presentations such as Gates's PBS series explode the idea of racial purity. Genealogy shows that there has been a tremendous amount of racial mixing in our past. A great many white people have mixed blood, and a great many more white people have African American blood relatives. What does this do to our definition of *family*? If you have black kin, doesn't that mean you belong to a black family? Our definition of family has tended to be legalistic, document based, and oriented toward property rights—it's the courtroom approach. Don't forget that one prime purpose of genealogy has been to establish the legal inheritance of property. Some genealogists are quite rigid on this point and insist that a family consists only of a string of legally documented legal heirs. It's very interesting that many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wills specified that property could be passed only to so-and-so and his or her "lawful issue." They knew that there were many extra-legal children and grandchildren, and they wanted to exclude them from inheriting, but that didn't make such "side families" less real. Many southern families, white and black, are going back into the records to find their blood kin because they want a truer picture of their families than the law has recognized. Jefferson descendants are wrestling with this right now. The Hemings descendants may not be legal heirs of any Jeffersons, but does that exclude them from the Jefferson family?

Another fascinating aspect of African American family history is that you encounter the tremendous achievements of the African American community under slavery and segregation—schools and churches built, businesses started, land bought and farmed, campaigns for civil rights waged. You see a whole hidden history emerge on a family, community, and regional scale. When I go to African American family reunions the people remember very well where they came from, and it serves as their bedrock today.

CP: *Can you tell us about your current work? What will follow Imperfect God?*

HW: I'm writing a book about Jefferson and his slaves. Hard going! I don't have a title yet. When I was writing about Washington I wished I were writing about

Jefferson because there's so much more information about TJ and his slaves; now that I got my wish, I yearn for the old days working on GW. Watch what you wish for.

This article originally appeared in issue 6.4 (July, 2006).

Henry Wiencek is the author of the acclaimed *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (2003), winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in history and the Best Book of 2003 award from the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. He has also written *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White* (1999), which received the 1999 National Book Critics Circle Award. In the spirit of rereading, this issue's Common Reading asks Wiencek to talk about his work on Washington and slavery and to reflect on some of the ways it revises received wisdom about the American past.