



SPOTLIGHT
on History



**Hercules Posey:
The Presidential Top Chef**

Who Was Hercules Posey?

Hercules Posey was an African-American born into slavery around 1747.

He was under the ownership of John Posey, who was George Washington's neighbor while at Mount Vernon.

Posey operated a ferry across the Potomac River, and so Hercules's role was a ferryman for boat transportation.

In 1769, Posey gave Hercules along with another 25 enslaved individuals to George Washington as payment for the debt he owed to Washington.



Hercules's Wife and Family

Under the ownership of Washington, Hercules settled into the estate at Mount Vernon and began a family.

Martha Washington owned her own enslaved individuals, one of whom was a seamstress named Alice.

These individuals under Martha were called “dower slaves” - meaning these individuals were brought as property as a dowry when a woman married into her husband's family.

Alice originally belonged to Daniel Parke Custis, Martha's deceased husband.

When Martha married George, Alice came to the estate as a dowry.

While under the Washington household, Hercules married Alice and had three children - Richmond, Evey, and Delia.





Image:

Mount Vernon Today

Courtesy of George Washington's Mount Vernon



Hercules the Chief Chef

Hercules began his time at Mount Vernon in the kitchen.

Hercules would have been taught how to cook by older enslaved individuals who already had been working in the kitchen.

As an apprentice, he most likely started his work in the scullery - which means he cleaned and prepared the food before cooking.

He soon worked his way up to become the chief chef in the kitchen by 1786.

Hercules became well known for being a skilled chef, and under his care, the kitchen was expected to be exceptionally cleaned and cared for.



Moving to the Capitol

Early in Washington's first presidential term, he took several enslaved individuals with him to Philadelphia - the new nation's capitol.

Hercules came to Philadelphia with Washington in order to continue his role as chief chef.



Primary Source

Image:

President's House in
Philadelphia

Courtesy of George Washington's
Mount Vernon



Hercules in Philadelphia

While in Philadelphia, Hercules was allowed to do things most other enslaved individuals were not allowed to do.

He was allowed to bring his son, Richmond, to join him while at the presidential residence.

He was allowed to sell leftovers, or “slops” as they were called, from the presidential kitchen.

He was allowed to keep the profits for himself, and earned about \$200 per year salary for his sales!

He was also allowed to leave the house to explore Philadelphia, even using some of his own money to pay for nice clothes.





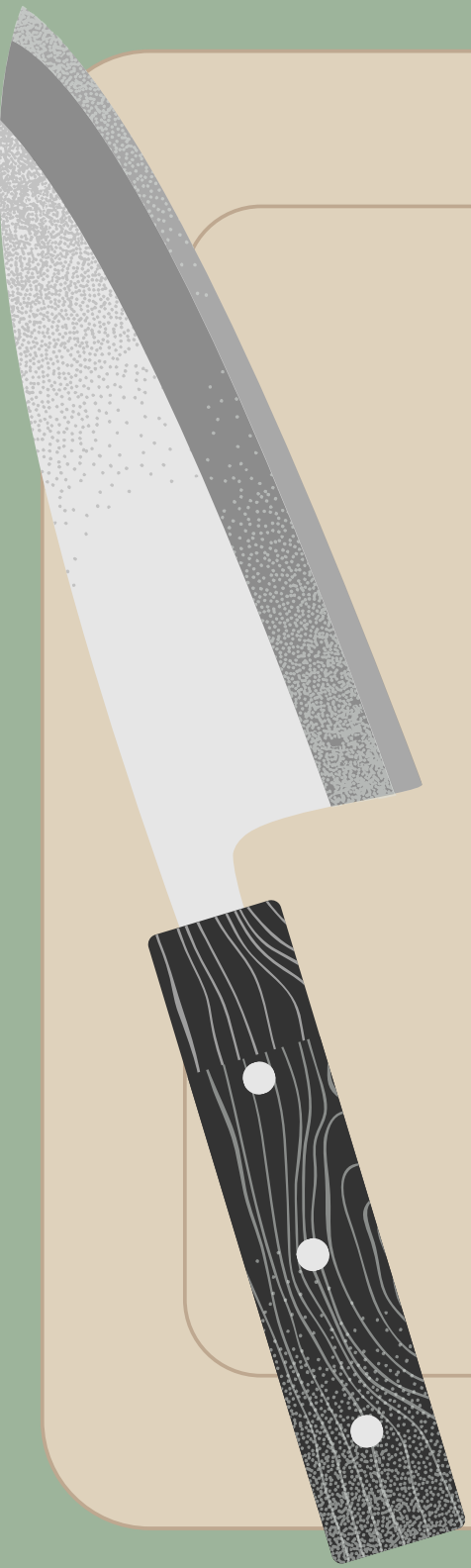
Hercules Back at Mount Vernon

In Pennsylvania at the time, the 1780 Gradual Abolition Law stated that enslaved individuals could receive their freedom after 6 months of living in the area.

Because he did not want to lose any of his enslaved property due to the law, Washington rotated between 8 enslaved individuals, including Hercules, every 6 months to keep his staff under his ownership.

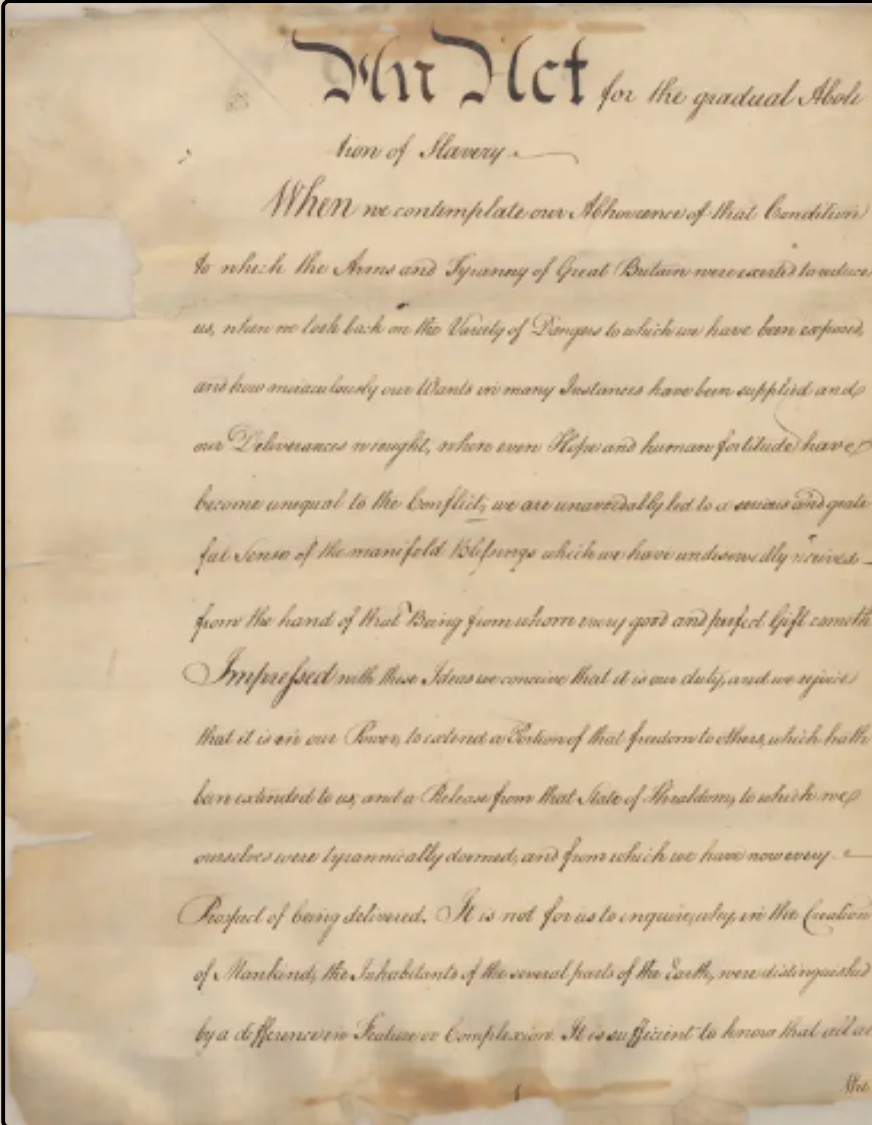
With the plan to rotate through each individual, Hercules was very dismayed that he could not be trusted to stay in Philadelphia longer than 6 months.

Though Hercules vowed to remain loyal to Washington, Washington sent Hercules back to Mount Vernon.



Primary Source
Document:
Gradual Abolition Act
of 1780

Courtesy of George Washington's
Mount Vernon



The Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery

When we contemplate our Abhorrence of that Condition to which the Arms and Tyranny of Great Britain necessarily reduced us, when we look back on the Variety of Dangers to which we have been exposed, and how miraculously our Wants in many Instances have been supplied, and our Deliverances wrought, when even Hope and human Fortitude have become unequal to the Conflict, we are unavoidably led to a serious and grateful Sense of the manifold Blessings which we have undescribably received from the hand of that Being from whom every good and perfect Gift cometh. Impressed with these Ideas we conceive that it is our duty, and we rejoice that it is our Power, to extend a Portion of that Freedom to others, which hath been extended to us, and a Release from that State of Abolition, to which we consider we were tyrannically doomed, and from which we have now every Prospect of being delivered. It is not for us to enquire, why in the Creation of Mankind, the Inhabitants of the several parts of the Earth, were distinguished by a difference in Feature or Complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are

180

Hercules's Escape

With George and Martha both in Philadelphia, there was little need for kitchen staff at Mount Vernon.

Male enslaved individuals, including Hercules, worked in the gardens or as bricklayers.

On February 22nd, 1797 (Washington's birthday), Hercules escaped from Mount Vernon.

He did not return, and was never found at that time.

Washington wrote that he was hurt and confused by the loss of his chief chef.



Image:

Mount Vernon Lower Garden

Courtesy of George Washington's Mount Vernon



Hercules's Legacy

Alice passed away years earlier in 1787, and so only Hercules's children remained at Mount Vernon.

Washington was unable to emancipate Hercules's children because of the laws regarding dower slaves at the time.

However, Washington successfully emancipated Hercules and 122 other individuals in his Will after his death.

Today, historical research and primary source documents show what eventually happened to Hercules after he left Mount Vernon:

- **Hercules moved to William Street and Orange Street (now Baxter Street) in NYC.**
- **He worked as a laborer and as a cook, before passing away in 1812 at the age of 65.**
- **He was buried in the Second African Burying Ground on Chrystie Street.**



Check Out These Additional Resources

- **Hercules**
George Washington's Mount Vernon
[Link here](#)
- **African American Registry (AAREG)**
Hercules Posey, Slave and Chef born
[Link here](#)
- **A Case of Mistaken Identity**
George Washington's Mount Vernon
[Link here](#)
- **New York City Cemetery Project**
African Burial Ground, Chrystie Street (St. Philip's Cemetery)
[Link here](#)