

Hercules

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Hercules, a member of the Mount Vernon enslaved community, became widely admired for his culinary skills displayed after George Washington's first retirement following the American Revolution. Washington appreciated Hercules' skills in the kitchen so much that he brought him from Mount Vernon to Philadelphia to live and work in the presidential household. Hercules, however, later ran away, one of the few instances of a member of Mount Vernon's enslaved community successfully escaping during Washington's lifetime.

Hercules first appears in the historic record for the Mount Vernon Estate in George Washington's list of tithables (persons for whom taxes had to be paid) in 1770. Previous to his arrival at Mount Vernon, Hercules worked as a ferryman for Washington's neighbor John Posey. In 1767, Hercules was mortgaged to Washington and became the ferryman at the Mansion House Farm for the Washingtons. Since slaves were first listed in tithable lists at age sixteen, Hercules was likely born sometime in or around 1754.¹ Hercules was married to Alice, a Custis family dower slave owned by Martha Washington. The couple had three children during their marriage: Richmond (1777), Evey (1782), and Delia (1785).² Although it is not known exactly when Hercules started working as a cook at Mount Vernon, the 1786 Mount Vernon slave census lists him as the chief cook at the Mansion House.³

Hercules was one of nine slaves brought by George Washington to Philadelphia in 1790 to work in the President's House. Hercules' cooking was very much loved in the Washington household, and was "familarly termed Uncle Harkless," according to Washington's step-grandson George Washington Parke Custis.⁴ Custis described Hercules as "a celebrated artiste . . . as highly accomplished a proficient in the culinary art as could be found in the United States."⁵

Due to his culinary prowess, Hercules was able to bring his son Richmond, to Philadelphia. He was also given other special privileges not entitled to most of Washington's slaves. According to Custis, Hercules accrued a salary of "one to two hundred dollars a year," by selling leftovers, known as slops, from the presidential kitchen. Hercules was a "celebrated dandy," in the words of Custis, and the chef kept an equally meticulous kitchen: "Under his iron discipline, wo[e] to his underlings if speck or spot could be discovered on the tables or dressers, or if the utensils did not shine like polished silver."⁶

Different accounts provide varying reasons for Hercules' decision to escape to freedom. In *The Private Affairs of George Washington*, Stephen Decatur Jr., the American naval hero and a descendent of Washington's secretary Tobias Lear, described Hercules as being so enamored by Philadelphia that when Washington left to return to Mount Vernon in 1797, Hercules chose to run away. Decatur notes that "although diligent inquiries were made for him, he was never apprehended."⁷

However, other records indicate that Hercules escaped in early 1797, soon after being made a regular laborer at Mount Vernon instead of his usual chef duties. The Washingtons often returned their slaves to Mount Vernon from Philadelphia to circumvent a Pennsylvania law that allowed slaves to claim freedom after residing in the state for a minimum of six months. Weekly reports from Mount Vernon indicated that Hercules and other male house servants were put to work with the bricklayers and gardeners in early 1797.⁸ Hercules was most likely not needed in the kitchen at the time, due to a lack of visitors to Mount Vernon while George and Martha Washington lived in Philadelphia.⁹

Washington was angered and confused by the decision to run away, believing that Hercules lived a privileged life, having even received three bottles of rum from Martha to "bury his wife" in September of

1787.¹⁰ On March 10, 1797, Washington expressed to Tobias Lear that he wanted Hercules to be found and returned to Mount Vernon, as soon as possible.¹¹ Washington was so distressed by the absence of the family chef that he even wrote to Major George Lewis on November 13, 1797, about buying a slave in Fredericksburg who was reputed to be an excellent chef. Washington stated that while he "had resolved never to become the master of another slave by purchase," because of Hercules' absence, "this resolution I fear I must break."¹²

Washington's last will and testament, written in July 1799 before his death that December, provided for the eventual emancipation, care, and education of his slaves, following the death of Martha Washington. However, he had no legal control over whether the Custis family dower slaves would gain their freedom. As a result, Hercules' wife and children remained enslaved, even after Martha Washington's death in May 1802.

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Notes:

1. "Memorandum List of Tithables, 14 June 1771," Founders Online, National Archives. Source: The Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series, vol. 8, 24 June 1767–?25 December 1771, ed. W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993, pp. 479–480.
2. Louis-Philippe, *Diary of My Travels in America*, translation by Stephen Becker (New York: Delacorte Press, 1977), p. 32; "1786 Mount Vernon Slave Census," *Diaries of George Washington*, vol. 4, Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press), pp. 277–83.
3. "1786 Mount Vernon Slave Census," *Diaries of George Washington*, vol. 4, Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press), pp. 277–83.
4. George Washington Parke Custis, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of the Life and Character of Washington*, ed. Benson J. Lossing (New York, 1860), 422.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Stephen Decatur, Jr., *Private Affairs of George Washington* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1933), p. 296.
8. See Weekly Reports for "January 7, 14, 20, and 28, 1797, and February 11 and 25, 1797," in *Mount Vernon Farm Accounts, January 7–September 10, 1797* (bound Photostat, Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington at Mount Vernon); and "Weekly Report for February 18, 1797," in *Mount Vernon Weekly Reports, January 10, 1795– March 18, 1797* (bound photostat, Fred W. Smith National Library).
9. *Dining with the Washingtons: Historic Recipes, Entertaining, and Hospitality from Mount Vernon*, McLeod, Stephen, ed. (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2011), 25.
10. Ibid.
11. "From George Washington to Tobias Lear, 10 March 1797," Founders Online, National Archives. Source: The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series, vol. 1, 4 March 1797–?30 December 1797, ed. W. W. Abbot (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 27–8.
12. Decatur, Jr., 297.

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Decatur, Jr., Stephen. *Private Affairs of George Washington*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933.

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