Independence

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Independence National Historical Park
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

William L. Breton, private collection

The President's House stood near the corner of 6th and Market Streets. It was torn down in 1832.

The President's House 1790-1800

George Washington called it "*the best single house in the city*…" The city rented this elegant three-story brick house from financier Robert Morris as a presidential residence.

After ten years in Philadelphia, the nation's capital relocated to Washington D.C. in 1800. The executive branch of the Federal government moved to the White House.

Building a Republic

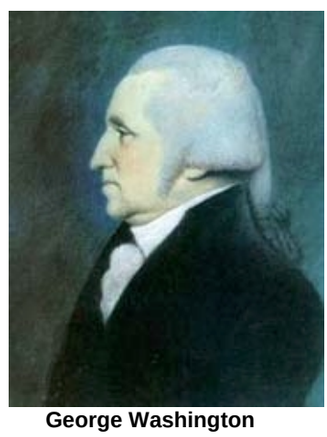
Both Presidents George Washington (1790-97) and John Adams (1797-1800) lived and worked in this house.

These were turbulent times for the young nation. International political crises, such as the French Revolution, tested the strength and resolve of the new President.

The President negotiated treaties with the various Indian nations to help protect the expanding western frontier. In 1793, Congress passed and Washington signed the Fugitive Slave Act which extended the reach of slave catchers into the northern states.

Washington had a large staff of more than 20 servants, including as many as nine enslaved African descendants who came up from Mount Vernon. Before moving in, the President ordered additions to the house, including sleeping quarters for the enslaved stable hands – today near the entrance to the Liberty Bell Center.

During Adams' term, there were stormy cabinet meetings over establishing a navy to deal with the threat of war with France.



George Washington
Ellen Sharples

John Adams
Charles W. Peale

Collections of Independence National Historical Park [INHP]

Joseph Bunel, an envoy from the Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture met with Adams to re-open trade. Meanwhile, on an almost daily basis, a spirited free press attacked Adams' administration.

The President's beloved wife, Abigail, was his closest ally at this chaotic time. They had a small staff of six or seven people: *"I have always employed freemen, both as domestics and laborers, and never in my life did I own a slave."* John Adams wrote.

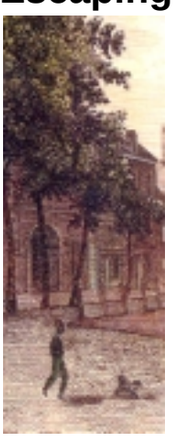
First Lady Martha Washington managed a large household when she lived here. Revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture sent envoys from Haiti to forge economic ties with America; Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea) negotiated a treaty with President Washington; l. to r. C.W. Peale, INHP collections; Courtesy of the Trinity University Haiti Program, Washington, DC; C.W. Peale, INHP collections.

Philadelphia: The Nation's Capital

(cw -l to r) Moving a blacksmith shop for Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church (*Goal [Jail] in Walnut St*); Visiting Indian Chiefs (*New Lutheran Church*); Dock workers (*Arch St. Ferry*); Philadelphia (*Plan of the City*) William Birch, 1800, INHP.

Philadelphia was the U.S. capital from 1790 to 1800. The crowded, bustling city drew people from all over: wealthy refugees escaping the French and Haitian Revolutions, German immigrants, and sailors who traveled the world. Philadelphia's large free black population, which grew after Pennsylvania adopted the nation's first Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, created benevolent organizations like the Free African Society. Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Absalom Jones, founder of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, played key roles as leaders in the black community. During the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic, members of their group courageously stayed in the city to nurse the sick and bury the dead.

Escaping Slavery



New Market, detail, Wm. Birch, INHP

Oney Judge, 22 years old, an expert seamstress and Martha Washington's personal servant, chose freedom upon learning she was to go to the First Lady's granddaughter as a wedding gift. In 1796, aided by the free black community, she escaped and sailed to New Hampshire. She married and had three children. George Washington tried relentlessly for her return, viewing her escape as an act of "*disloyalty*" and "*unfaithfulness,*" but she remained free.

Hercules was one of the finest chefs in the United States. Although allowed to attend the theater and circus, and sell surplus food, he was still enslaved. With the family's return to Mt. Vernon in 1797, Hercules seized his freedom. Washington wrote to George Lewis: *"The running off of my cook has been a most inconvenient thing…."* Hercules was never recaptured.

Washington's efforts to recover his escaped slaves contrasted with his growing personal opposition to slavery. In most states slavery was legal and many people viewed the unpaid labor of enslaved workers as essential to the economy and their way of life. During his presidency in Philadelphia, Washington devised ways to evade Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act to ensure his enslaved Africans remained in bondage.

The President's House Commemoration

The President's House in the 1790s was a mirror of the young republic, reflecting both the ideals and contradictions of the United States. The house stood in the shadow of Independence Hall, where the words "All men are created equal" and "We the People" were adopted. The people living here, like the nation itself, struggled with these ideas and what they meant to freemen and enslaved Africans alike.

Independence National Historical Park is working with the City of Philadelphia, our partners and interested citizens to commemorate the President's House and the enslaved Africans who lived and worked there.
A permanent commemoration will be created on the open site next to the entrance to the Liberty Bell Center.

Back of State House, Wm. Birch, 1800, INHP

To learn more

- *Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).
- Edward Lawler, Jr., "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History & Biography* (January, 2002).
- *David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- *Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1988).
- Richard Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic (*UNC Press, 2002).
- *Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves and the Creation of America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003).

Websites: http://www.nps.gov/adam/ http://www.nps.gov/inde http://www.mountvernon.org http://www.ushistory.org (* these books are for sale in the Independence Visitor Center Bookstore)

3-30-05