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Women Make History: Stories We Should Have Learned in School

"I am free, and I have, I
trust, been made a child
of God by the means."

Ona Judge [Interview](#)



Ona Judge mural by Manuel Ramirez

Note: A reader sent me a news clipping about the Ona Judge mural above. When I was in New Hampshire in August, I visited the site and bought a copy of Erica Armstrong Dunbar's biography, [Never Caught](#). Unless otherwise noted, this brilliant biography was my source for this story.

Ona Judge: The Woman Who Defeated George Washington

In 1796, a young enslaved woman named Ona Judge did the unimaginable: she risked her life to [escape](#) her enslavers, President George Washington and his wife, Martha. Judge's courageous break for freedom pitted her against the most powerful and revered man in the newly formed nation. It also likely contributed to his later decision to emancipate the 123 men, women, and children enslaved at his Mount Vernon plantation.

[Born](#) into slavery around 1774 at Mount Vernon, her mother worked in the main house as a seamstress and housemaid, and Judge's father was a white indentured servant employed by Washington as a tailor. From an early age, Judge joined her mother at their master's home, learning to sew and attend to Mrs. Washington's personal needs. By about age 12, she became Martha Washington's maid. She was described as "a light mulatto girl, much freckled."

George Washington was Martha's second husband. When her first husband, Daniel Custis, died, he left his property to her, including Judge's mother and her descendants. Upon Martha's death, her first husband's estate would pass to his heirs, not Washington's. Martha Washington outlived her four children, but they left her two grandchildren whom the Washingtons raised. From a young age, Judge knew the grandchildren and their friends, as she would have tended to many of their needs. This would later betray her identity after her escape from slavery.

In 1787, George Washington was elected President. The first family took seven enslaved women and men with them to the Executive Mansion in New York and then to Philadelphia, where the new government was located. Judge was 16. She served Martha Washington, helping her bathe, dress, do her hair, and attend to other personal needs. She also accompanied Mrs. Washington on social outings and was often on hand when she entertained.

When Judge arrived in Philadelphia, strong anti-slavery sentiment was on the rise in Northern states, led by Pennsylvania. Many, including Benjamin Franklin, had emancipated their slaves, and Franklin led the state's abolition society. The city's population of some 44,000 included 1,800 free Blacks and 300 enslaved people. Legal paths to emancipation were being established. According to Judge's biographer Erica Armstrong Dunbar, "Pennsylvania required the emancipation of all adult slaves who were brought into the Commonwealth for a period of more than six months."

According to Presidential archives, when the Washingtons became aware of this law, he and his wife began to rotate their enslaved people between Virginia and Philadelphia. Each time they left and returned to the city, the time clock restarted. Washington was sensitive to the fragile alliances among the states and the anti-slavery movement in the North. Letters reveal that he feared the publicity of his own slaves seeking their freedom, and he made it clear to his white colleagues that he wanted those he enslaved to remain ignorant of the law.

For Judge, life as the First Lady's maid had its benefits. She received fine garments, including expensive gowns, bonnets, and shoes. She also received small stipends to attend plays, the circus, and other forms of entertainment. Although it would have been difficult for Judge to fraternize with free blacks in Philadelphia, she would have been aware of her vastly different situation and that she would never have the one thing most important to her: freedom.

A Break For Freedom: Towards the end of Washington's second term, Judge learned that Mrs. Washington's granddaughter was engaged to be married and that Martha Washington intended to gift Judge as a wedding present. In May 1796, while the Washingtons were eating dinner, twenty-two-year-old Judge slipped away and boarded a ship for Portsmouth, New Hampshire, under the protection of the ship's captain. Judge



Ona Judge at Mt. Vernon

kept the captain's name a secret until after his death, and she never revealed the names of anyone who helped her escape.

In 1845, nearly 50 years later, the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* published an [interview](#) with Judge that answered many of the mysteries surrounding her escape. She recounted that: "Whilst they were packing up to go to Virginia, I was packing to go; I didn't know where, for I knew that if I went back to Virginia, I should never get my liberty. I had friends among the colored people of Philadelphia, had my things carried there beforehand, and left Washington's house while they were eating dinner."

A Fugitive's Life: Arriving in Portsmouth, Judge found her surroundings quite different from Pennsylvania. According to Dunbar, fewer than 800 Blacks lived in the entire state, and less than 200 were enslaved. The city was home to fewer Blacks than the number of enslaved people at Mount Vernon. Once again, a network of free Blacks and early abolitionists came to her side, helping Judge find lodging, clothing, and work.

Judge's escape infuriated the Washingtons. Within two days, ads appeared in the *Philadelphia Gazette* and the *Daily Advertiser* offering a \$10 reward for her return. They described her as having "very black eyes and bushy black hair...of middle stature, slender, and delicately formed." Three years earlier, Washington had signed the [Fugitive Slave Act](#) into law, authorizing local governments to seize and return runaway slaves. The law also imposed fines on those who helped them escape.

Trying to keep a low profile, Judge kept her fine dresses packed away and applied only for jobs below her skill level as a seamstress or housemaid. Not long after her arrival in New Hampshire, Judge had the misfortune of being spotted by a friend of the Washingtons' granddaughter who recognized Judge from days spent at Mount Vernon. The President was informed, and he immediately asked a local authority to take her into custody and return her. Sensitive to Portsmouth's abolitionist culture, Washington didn't want the authorities to take Judge by force or create a scene. When confronted, Judge proclaimed that she would "rather suffer death than return to slavery."

Advertisement.

ABSCONDED from the household of the President of the United States, ONEY JUDGE, a light mulatto girl, much freckled, with very black eyes and bushy black hair, she is of middle stature, slender, and delicately formed, about 20 years of age.

She has many changes of good clothes, of all sorts, but they are not sufficiently recollected to be described—As there was no suspicion of her going off, nor no provocation to do so, it is not easy to conjecture whether she has gone, or fully, what her design is;—but as she may attempt to escape by water, all masters of vessels are cautioned against admitting her into them, although it is probable she will attempt to pass for a free woman, and has, it is said, whetted withal to pay her passage.

Ten dollars will be paid to any person who will bring her home, if taken in the city, or on board any vessel in the harbour;—and a reasonable additional sum if apprehended at, and brought from a greater distance, and in proportion to the distance.

Philadelphia Gazette, May 1796

A year later, Judge married and had children. Two years passed without incident, but in August 1799, just months before Washington's death, she opened her front door. There stood Washington's [nephew](#), ready to return her to Mount Vernon. Judge stood firm: she would rather die than return to a life of slavery. The nephew was under orders not to create a scandal, so he left. But a few days later, Judge was tipped off by New Hampshire Senator John Langdon that the nephew planned to return in the middle of the night to take her by force. Judge fled with her children to a neighboring town and hid among friends.

George Washington died in December 1799, leaving [instructions](#) to emancipate the enslaved people at Mount Vernon after the death of his wife. Because Judge belonged to

the Custis family, his will didn't apply to her, and she remained a fugitive. In 1802, Martha Washington passed away, but unlike her husband, she left her property, including the Custis slaves, to her grandchildren. However, they never attempted to recapture Judge.

Judge continued to live with friends, taking whatever work she could find. She learned to read and write, and she became a devout Christian. Her husband died in 1803, and Judge also outlived her three children. Although she lived in extreme poverty, she never regretted her decision to flee. "I am free, and have, I trust, been made a child of God by the means." Ona Judge Staines died in 1848.

Judge's story was lost until the 1990s, when Erica Armstrong Dunbar was researching 19th-century African American women in Philadelphia. She happened upon one of the newspaper ads for Judge's capture. Intrigued, Dunbar later focused on Judge's story. Her biography, *Never Caught*, was published in 2017. Nine years later, on the 230th anniversary of Judge's escape in May 2026, the [Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire](#) unveiled an interpretive mural of Judge by [Manuel Ramirez](#).

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask yourself: Would I have been willing to die, leaving my children orphaned, rather than be enslaved?

Ask a friend: What was the greatest sacrifice you've been willing to make, and under what circumstances?

Let's Meet Up in Utah and California or via Zoom!

September:

- *Thursday, Sep. 17, Sausalito Books by the Bay, 6 p.m., Sausalito, CA*
- *Sunday, Sep. 20, Book Passage, 1 p.m., Corte Madera, CA*

October:

- *Sunday, Oct. 4, Wasatch Back Book Festival, 1 - 5 p.m., Park City Library, Park City, Utah*
- *Wednesday, Oct. 7, The Battle of the Book Bans with the ACLU, 5 p.m., Park City Library, Park City, Utah*
- *Friday, Oct. 9, Women of Visionary Influence (WOVI), 5:30 p.m., MST, Virtual Event*
- *Saturday, Oct. 10, Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), 1 p.m., Salt Lake City*
- *Wednesday, Oct. 21, The Other Book Club!, 7 p.m., Sandy, Utah*
- *Wednesday, Oct. 28, University of Utah, Osher Lunch & Learn, 12 noon, MST, Virtual Event*

Check the [Events Page](#) of my website for details and additional gatherings. I look forward to connecting!

Other Exciting News!

AWP Conference, March 2027, Chicago: I'll be moderating a panel, "Now You See Her, Now You Don't: The Need to Amplify Women's Voices" at the largest literary conference in North America. Stay tuned for details!

[Booklovers Winter Festival](#) - February 6, 2027, 9 a.m. - 8 p.m., Tickets On Sale! Bringing together book lovers, authors, and publishers for readings, trivia, and lots of literary fun. I'll be speaking (time TBD) at This Is the Place Heritage Park in Salt Lake City.

I love hearing from you! Let me know what you're up to. And thank you for sharing the newsletter and the book, [Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience](#). Available at Indie Bookstores, [Barnes & Noble](#), [Amazon](#), [Kindle](#), [BookShop](#), and on my website.



I'm passionate about all things Mary Ware Dennett, a pivotal leader of the women's suffrage and reproductive rights movements. A grant from the Schlesinger Library forwarded my research on Dennett. My articles about her have been published in [Ms.](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and more. My new book, [Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience](#), highlights the stories of remarkable women who, like Dennett, achieved great things only to be swept aside by history or have their achievements wrongly attributed to men.

If you'd like a speaker, [reach out!](#) I'd love to speak to your business, school, women's group, book club, or civic organization in person or via Zoom.

Join the Women Make History Community!

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