

Ona Judge: Freedom Regained

Ona Judge was owned by the family of George Washington and in 1789 was one of nine enslaved people the president brought with him to the presidential residence at the corner of 6th and Market Sts. in Philadelphia. Ona Judge was commanded to serve Martha.

In 1796, as the Washingtons prepared to return to Virginia, Ona learned that she was to be given as a wedding gift to Martha Washington's granddaughter Eliza. Her fiancé was Thomas Law, a real estate speculator with a reputation for sexual assault. So, fearing for her safety and a life of perpetual enslavement, Ona made the courageous decision to escape on May 21, 1796. She fled the President's House in Philadelphia thanks to help from Rev. Richard Allen and the capital's abolitionist community.

Judge made it to New Hampshire, married, and had three children. She lived the remainder of her life in relative obscurity, but her story, thanks to interviews she gave in 1845 have become a testament to the harsh realities of enslavement and the resilience of those who wanted freedom.

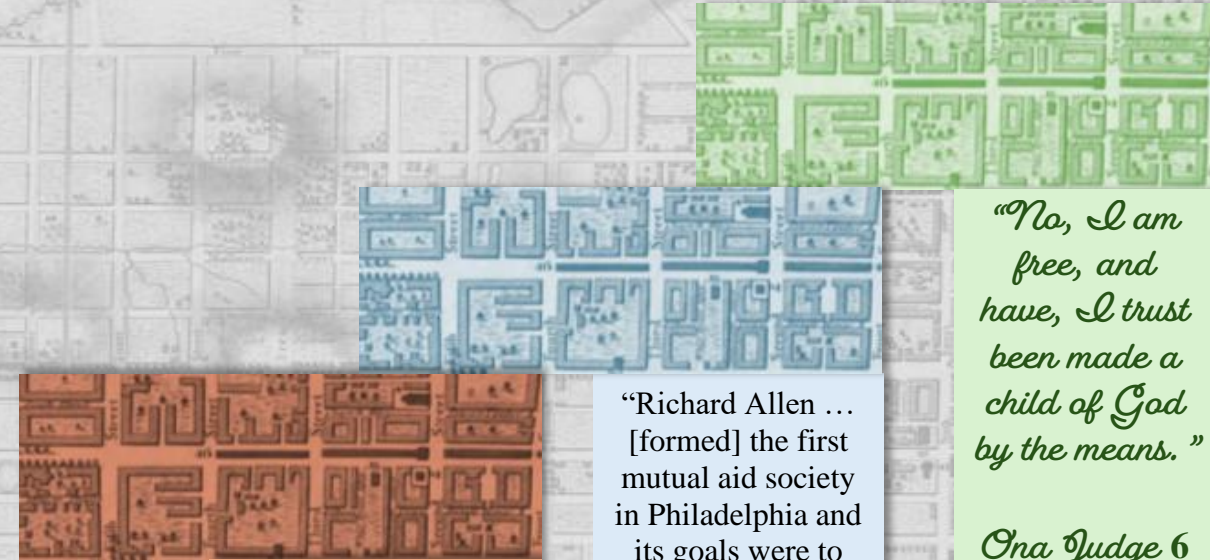


"I knew that if I went back to Virginia, I should never get my liberty. I had friends among the colored people of Philadelphia, had my things carried there before and, and left Washington's house while they were eating dinner."

Ona Judge 1



Mother Bethel A. M. E. Church, the first Colored Methodist Church in Philadelphia, established in 1787



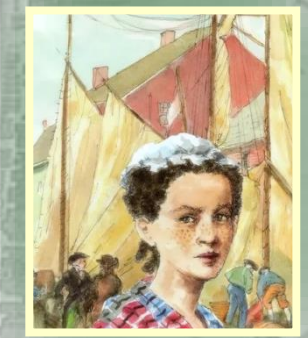
"[T]he ingratitude of the girl, who was brought up & treated more like a child than a Servant (& Mrs Washington's desire to recover her) ought not to escape with impunity if it can be avoided."

George Washington 4

"Richard Allen ... [formed] the first mutual aid society in Philadelphia and its goals were to help widows, the poor, and fugitive slaves..." 3

"No, I am free, and have, I trust been made a child of God by the means."

Ona Judge 6



This map of 1796 Philadelphia begins with Ona's fear about remaining in the President's House, Allen's supportive Mother Bethel AME Church, Ona's journey from the president's house, undocumented time in hiding, Washington's attempt to recapture her, and her journey aboard the *Nancy*, a ship commanded by Captain John Bolles, to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. 2 Many of the dates associated with Ona's quest for freedom are not known especially, secrecy was paramount and she left no written record, her time hiding for a short period of time before she sailed to New Hampshire.

References

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4. “From George Washington to Oliver Wolcott, Jr., 1 September 1796,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-20-02-0397>.
5. Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave Ona Judge*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017.
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