

"I am determined to lower her Spirit
or Skin her Back"
Kathryn Gehred

I have been working on a project that seeks to publish Martha Washington's papers and correspondence. The work has been described as a new lens through which to examine George Washington – a man who has been endlessly studied and mythologised by the American public. To study Washington through his wife's eyes "humanises" the president, or so I have been told.

I have found that America's fascination with George Washington has served as a way to humanise people who were peripheral to the historic record. As every document connected to Washington is considered precious and worthy of study, some documentary evidence of people who may otherwise have fallen into obscurity has been preserved. The study of these figures on the edges of history, in the shadow of a symbol of US national identity, can inform the present in valuable ways.

In a letter Martha Washington wrote to her niece regarding household management (a letter which would be considered peripheral to most histories of George Washington), I found an interesting description of an enslaved woman named Charlotte:

she is so indolent that she will do nothing but what she is told [...] if you suffer them to goe on so idel they will in a little time do nothing but work for them selves.¹

Those familiar with the history of slavery will probably know that not working, or working slowly, was a way for enslaved people to resist their master's control. Slaveholders tended to describe that behaviour as laziness – a description that has left a stubborn, racist legacy. Martha Washington, very much a traditional plantation mistress, felt that supervision

was required in any large staff, "but more so among blacks – many of whom will impose when they can do it".²

I suspect Charlotte's "indolence" might in fact have been rebelliousness. Some digging in the Washington Papers turned up documents that backed up this suspicion. Four years before Martha's letter, Charlotte had an ugly altercation with a white woman in the streets of Alexandria, Virginia. The woman thought that Charlotte's gown was one that had been stolen from her two years earlier.

My Wife wanted to take a nearer View of the Gown; but Mrs Charlotte, countenanced by another black Woman, to whom she appealed as a Lady of Character & Distinction, abused my Wife very grossly and threatened to beat her; nor would she demean herself so much as to be seen walking with such a Creature as my Wife.³

Charlotte's behaviour was profoundly dangerous for an enslaved person. The following account, written by Washington's farm manager Anthony Whitting, shows some of the consequences of being an "impudent" slave:

Charlotte I Guess will be reported Sick this week I Gave her a Whiping on Saturday & I find She dont intend to work in order I suppose to be even with Me When I was Culling out the River hogs she sent by Muddy hole David requesting I would Give her a Spear rib as She Long'd for it this I knew to be false and thought it to be a piece of impudence in her which She has a Great Share of I did not send it but on Saturday I sent one to each of the Women at the Qu[arte]r

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of Course She had one with the rest but She I fancy watch'd me home & as soon as I got in the house brings the Spear rib & thro's down at the Door (affronted I suppose at my not sending it on Thursday) told me indeed She wanted none of my Meat & was in Short very impudent I took a hickory Switch which I rode with & Gave her a very Good Whiping She certainly could come for nothing else, On Monday Morning Mrs Ehlers informed me She had sent her work but Charlotte had sent it back I went to the Qur & Gave a little more but I believe She has not done any thing yet under a pretence of her finger receiving a blow & was Swelld She threatens me very much with informing Lady Washington when She comes home & says She has not been whipd for 14 Years past, but I fully expect I shall have to Give her some More of it before She will behave herself for I am determined to lower her Spirit or Skin her Back.⁴

¹ Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett, August 1790.

² Martha Washington to Elizabeth Willing Powel, May 1797.

³ Charles MacIver to George Washington, June 1786.

⁴ Anthony Whitting to George Washington, January 1793.

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George Washington responded, writing: "Your treatment of Charlotte was very proper – and if she, or any other – of the Servants will not do their duty by fair means – or are impertinent, correction (as the only alternative) must be administered".⁵ For George Washington, keeping enslaved people in line by punishing those who behaved in an "impertinent" way was in his interest. He was the master, they were the slaves. If he couldn't control them, there was a chance they could revolt and escape.

From the slaves' perspective, however, this brutality was dehumanising. Charlotte left no documents so her perspective must be deduced. However, it is clear from her actions that she understood her position as a slave and chose to behave outside those limitations. She worked at her own pace, wore a nice dress in public and demanded meat from the farm manager. None of this behaviour would be considered radical outside the context of slavery but from Charlotte it was both threatening and punishable.

For many slaves, being quiet and submissive was the wisest choice to navigate their environment. Charlotte (like the revolutionaries who fought against British tyranny) was clearly incapable of quiet submission to injustice. No matter how many times she was denied it, she continued to demand respect. But Charlotte's story is not immediately apparent from the study of George Washington. If one focused solely on his political accomplishments or military career, Charlotte's life would not come into historical view. It is by looking at the figures on the periphery of history that stories like Charlotte's come to light.

⁵ George Washington to Anthony Whitting, January 1793.