



**Seeking the Absent  
Potential:  
When Food and  
Intersectionality  
Meet Up in the  
Museum**

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#### ABSTRACT

“Seeking the Absent Potential: When Food and Intersectionality Meetup in the Museum,” discusses the author’s role in the creation and development of an exhibition for the National Library of Medicine at the National Institute of Health (USA) exploring food and foodways in the early American Chesapeake Region. Rejecting traditional museum practices and approaches to this topic, this essay details the evolution of the exhibition using material culture, intersectionality, and the “radical political potential” of queer theory to reveal how we can find the “absent potential” in the wake of meager resources that center Black voices and lives.

#### CV

Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson is professor and chair of the Department of American Studies at the University of Maryland College Park. She is the author of *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* (winner of the James Beard Media Award for Food Issues and Advocacy, 2023); co-editor of *Taking Food Public: Redefining Food in a Changing World* (2013); and, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (winner of the Elli Kōngäs-Maranda Prize, American Folklore Society). She is known nationally and internationally for her work in building the scholarly subfield of Black food studies, and she publishes and speaks extensively on topics such as Black women, food, and power; food and literature; food and sustainability; race, food, and design thinking; eating and workplace cultures; as well as the historical legacies of race and gender (mis)representation, with (and without) food.

#### Keywords

Black Culture, Exhibition, Intersectionality, Material Culture, Museum

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# Reading the objects for their uses—intended and unintended—from an intersectional point of view should be undertaken as a central feature of queering the museum.

In the fall of 2014, I was invited by the Exhibition Program at the National Library of Medicine (NLM) at the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland (USA), to be the lead curator of an exhibition that explored the early North American nation's first First Lady, Martha Washington, and food. I was told that the project could consider “cultural influences on food and diets during the Colonial era, and the role of women and enslaved peoples in preparing food for the family and/or plantations, among other themes”. For reference, I was pointed to our colleagues at the library at Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, the nation's first president, and a slaveholder, because they “have done good research on the topic and will be collaborating with us” (NLM email).

The Exhibition Program at NLM produces special displays, traveling and online banner exhibitions that “explore the social and cultural history of science and medicine” (NLM website). The travelling banner

exhibitions are seen in public libraries, medical and academic libraries, and cultural centres nationwide and worldwide. This point was especially interesting to me because it suggested that this exhibition could have a far-reaching impact on informing the world about the roles of enslaved Black women and men and their contributions to the evolution of American cuisine—a departure from the narratives and stories that are usually told about African Americans in the United States.

In their edited collection, *Queering the Museum*, Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton maintain

that “museums are both shaped by and shape the social-political landscapes in which they operate and are thus implicated in systems of power and privilege”.<sup>1</sup> Given this, the power to convey a message of African American creativity, survival, and resilience was critically important to me as the visiting curator. More importantly, there was an opportunity here not to centre on slaveholders but, instead, on those who endured and resisted the horrors of chattel slavery using their talents with food and in other areas of domesticity. I refused to be a party to reinforcing traditional narratives of white power and Black subservience, despite Black enslavement.

For over twenty years, I have been studying the material lives of African Americans, particularly their relationships to food and food cultures—acquisition, preparation, and consumption, among other aspects. I am not a full-time museum professional but an academic trained in museum practices who believes that

<sup>1</sup> Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton, *Queering the Museum* (Abingdon, 2020), 107.

exhibitions need to involve theory, practice, and reflection. Or, in short, praxis. Working from this point of view, I sought to “queer” the exhibition, which according to Sullivan and Middleton basically means to deviate from whatever is perceived to be the norm or the traditional, the dominant way of seeing things, specifically to push back on homophobia and transphobia. At the same time, there was an investment in shifting the narrative to challenge traditional power systems that viewed enslaved women, men, and children—of all ages, abilities, and sexualities who worked in either (or both) the plantation household or the fields—as mere powerless servants. Consequently, I embraced the position suggested by theorist Cathy Cohen, who rejects the label “queer” because it is “fraught with unspoken assumptions which inhibit the radical political potential of this category”<sup>2</sup>.

Building on Cohen’s notion of freeing the radical political potential of queer, I noted, too, what performance theorist Sandra Richards refers to as the “absent potential” that was embedded in the description of the library’s goals for the exhibition: “to explore the nation’s first First Lady, Martha Washington, and food” and “to consider [...] the role of women and enslaved peoples in preparing food for the family and/or plantations, among other themes”. I wanted to do more than consider this possibility, I wanted to make it a central focus of the exhibition.

Further thoughts about this interpretive project mirrored one of the central claims found in *Queering the Museum*. That is, “museums can, and should be active participants in the articulation of critically engaged and socially transformative ways of knowing, being, [and] doing”.<sup>3</sup> And, this must be a goal because

**From collection practices to interpretations, object placement, cataloguing and**

**labelling resources, and more, almost all museums have been, and continue to be, complicit in replicating and reproducing inequitable power relations.**

Sullivan and Middleton include curatorial practices that can and should be queered to include “juxtaposing disparate objects; tracing object biographies; cataloguing diverse interpretations and multiple ontologies facilitating the emergence of previously marginalised voices, knowledges, and forms of engagement; and acknowledging [...] structural violence”<sup>4</sup>. As the curator, I did not want to see inequitable power relations perpetuated, and arguably, neither did the NLM, which is probably why they invited me to lead why they invited me to lead the project.

### ***Meals Tell Stories/ Martha Washington + Food - The Planning Meeting***

The exhibition design team and curators held their initial creative kick-off meeting in December of 2016 to explore potential narrative approaches for the project. During the first half of the meeting, I sat silent, listening to all of the perspectives and ideas. We walked into the meeting with the tentative title of the project being *Martha Washington + Food*, and the goal of leaving the meeting with an agreed-upon storyline that would inform and focus the research and development of the content and project schedule.

As I sat there silent, taking notes, I thought about how intersectionality would inform this project but also about what was happening in Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia during that time. The more I thought about these things, the more I saw the potential to do more. Our exhibit’s completion would coincide with the opening of the Smithsonian Institution’s

<sup>2</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”, *GLQ*, 3/4 (1997), 437–465, at 451.

<sup>3</sup> Sullivan and Middleton, (see n. 1), 109.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

National Museum of African American History and Culture, so there would be much attention on African American life in the United States. Additionally, in 2016, George Washington's historic site, Mount Vernon, would be unveiling its own exhibition about the lives of the enslaved who lived there and how their lives were inextricably bound to the Washington family. *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon*, explored "the personal stories of the people enslaved at Mount Vernon while providing insight into George Washington's evolving opposition to slavery". This is significant not only because of its timing in terms of the opening of the "Blackseum" but also because the timing of Mount Vernon's exhibition would limit our access to certain assets for our installation.

And here is why the "absent potential" is important.

**We need to look and think beyond the norm—those ideas, sources, terrains, identities—taken as an ideal.**

Sandra Richards makes this argument when she writes how scholars (and practitioners) largely ignore the African-American contribution to theatre and performance as if it is a disreputable second cousin to literature. She says, "Literature locates 'authentic' cultural expression on the terrain of the folk, but the folk have articulated their presence most brilliantly in those realms with which literature is uncomfortable, namely in areas centered in performance."<sup>5</sup> When the folk insists upon performance being upheld as a form of criticism then they are seeing the absent potential. Richards maintains that we have to be willing to analyse "the latent intertexts likely to be produced in performance, increasing and complicating meaning"<sup>6</sup> and to also see the various possible opportunities for interpretation. In drama, people embody a

character through performance. In real life, however, these embodied performances are called living, and we can analyse the voices and experiences of those less often heard to spotlight and bear witness to the complexities of their lives.

Because my material culture practices and thinking are often from an intersectional point of view, I revel in reading the latent intertexts of performance where varied and complicated meanings reside but are overlooked. An intersectional point of view enables thinking beyond levels of oppression when it comes to Black people's work with food. Intersectionality is both a conceptual tool and a theory created by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. She argues for seeing subjectivity/identity as dynamic, messy, and intertwined, but never singular. More specifically, intersectionality examines the context-driven ways in which axes of power intersect and cohere. Additive models of identity (female, or Black, or middle-class, or coloured, or disabled, or ...) are limiting and tend to categorise people in terms of varying degrees, or levels, of oppression. For example, a friend told her daughter, "If you are going to be Black and a lesbian with a disability, please do not also be poor because that makes you way too oppressed." It is because identities are complex, shifting, and oftentimes contradictory with interdependent components that are lived and experienced, that intersectionality is a useful model for ferreting out a whole bunch of interpretations about food and people of the African Diaspora.

I was thinking these thoughts as I looked through the packet of select readings that we had assembled. While thumbing through the cookbook *Dining with the Washingtons: Historic Recipes, Entertaining, and Hospitality from Mount Vernon*, I came upon a page titled, "A Cooks Day" [sic]. This day in the life of the

<sup>5</sup> Sandra L. Richards, "Writing the Absent Potential. Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African American Literature", in Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (eds.), *Performance and Performativity* (London and New York, 1996), 64-88, at 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

cooks—one male and one female cook and her husband—can be found within the first fifty pages of the book, highlighting its importance in the overall story of the household cookery. It was a perfect scenario around which to tell a set of stories and to queer the archive and the museum exhibition. We left that meeting with the idea that “meals tell stories”, and that we would tell these stories through the lens of “A Cooks Day, 1790s” [sic].

## Meals Tell Stories/ A Cooks Day

The cook’s diary page begins with the enslaved waking long before daybreak to begin preparing the day’s meals. At 4:00 a.m., Nathan, one of Washington’s two enslaved cooks, wakes up in his bunk in the male quarters. He washes, shaves, and dresses for the day. And, in a nearby cabin, the other cook, Lucy, and her husband Frank Lee, the butler, also wake up and prepare for work. By 4:30 a.m., the day is well underway, wood is gathered, and buckets of water are filled. Milk is obtained from the cows, eggs from the hens, flour, salt, lard, or butter is readied for biscuits. Even though I only had this one page from which to tell this particular story, aspects of this narrative occurred at several other plantations and farms, large and small, northern and southern, throughout the nation. Aside from this one page from the diary, the remaining sources reflected white experiences (the Washingtons and their guests), including documents (probate records, diaries, and other papers), and artifacts. Most of these sources came from the collections of the History of Medicine Division at the NLM, extant reference books and articles, and material artifacts housed at the historic Mount Vernon plantation. So, how would I tell the story of the changing technologies that affected the everyday lives of Black people in bondage in the new nation using

such scant resources? Where would I get the rest of my sources from? What artifacts would be best for telling these stories?

One approach is to read the gaps that are left by the archives. That is, the documents that are not there and the information that is not in the written record. Artifacts also reveal gaps. Because an object, though created for one purpose, can have a number of other uses and meanings. Reading these materials from the perspective of African American lived experiences would lay bare even more of what is not there but can be interpreted, challenged, and revealed. In her article, “The History of Technology, the Resistance of Archives, and the Whiteness of Race”, Carolyn de la Pena writes: “Much scholarship [tends] to focus on big questions concerning the relationship between technology and cultural values or social change, rather than examining cultures and social relations embedded in the technologies themselves. Within this landscape, there are few built-in mechanisms for producing scholarship that prioritizes race”.<sup>7</sup> De la Pena also suggests that the real difficulty “occurs in tandem: difficult-to-locate sources combine with our own tendencies to fail to see all that can be found in what is available, and to creatively *engage* and *interpret* it in order to draw race out of the archive”<sup>8</sup>.

De la Pena challenges us to dig deeper and read more carefully—work that involves risks. She says, “In order to write the histories on race and technology that are missing, we must, again, become the historians who ask about what is missing from the record and the archives. We have to be willing to talk about race, even when our subjects did not”, and to contextualise race and other variables as intertwined even in history. Yes, as she goes on to say, “it is a risk, and it can lead to overreaching in one’s

<sup>7</sup> Carolyn de la Pena, “The History of Technology, the Resistance of Archives, and the Whiteness of Race”, in *Technology and Culture*, 51/ 4 (2010), 919-937, at 921.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 923, original emphasis.

analysis, misreading the data, and simply getting things wrong. [But] it can also open up essential new terrain in the study of how racialized thinking has shaped technological innovation and influenced our engagement with its objects in the United States”.<sup>9</sup>

**It is a risk that we must take because exhibitions should engage and use a plethora of voices, including those whose lives are interlocked by gender, race, class, sexuality, and even age but are also routed in oppression and systemic degradation.**

Consequently, by using that one diary page, I wanted us to view the historical record through the lens of Black people, not to fill in what is missing but to push the evidence to move beyond the absences that were created to hear what is being said when we read the sources for Black lives, cultures, and histories. Only then, I knew, would we be engaging the absent potential.

## Creating the Exhibition Script and Choosing the Objects: The Water

Over the next several weeks, the title of the project changed from *Meals Tell Stories/Martha Washington + Food to Meals Tell Stories + A Cook's Day*. Arrangements were made with Mount Vernon's Loan Collection Program to view assets that would be available to us for use in our exhibition, and a visit to the historic site was set up to survey these objects. We were told in advance that out of concern for safety and preservation, we would be given “no more than eight Washington original objects” but that an additional fifteen or so representational objects would be available to us (email correspondence 2015).

On a hot, muggy day during the first week of June, the project manager, exhibition registrar, and I visi-

ted the historic Mount Vernon. As we waited to go to the storage facility, I walked around the home that sat overlooking Virginia's Potomac River. Though I had been to the site many times before, this time, I was struck by an overwhelming sadness because as I looked at the river, I realised that my early ancestors were surrounded by bodies of water that ushered in both the horrors of bondage and the possibilities of freedom. The water made it possible for early Africans to be driven into the brutal mouth of enslavement, and for some, it was a way of escaping those same atrocities either because they jumped overboard during the Middle Passage, died during the journey, or escaped once they reached new shores and realised their fate. It was also a barrier to those who wanted to escape Mount Vernon but could not because they were surrounded by water and had no means of leaving. Still, for others, it was a means of escape. At that moment, I knew that I had to talk about freedom as central to this narrative because of the multiple meanings that the water represented.

The river was a source of food that provisioned the household—fish and other water edibles as well as coffee beans. African foods and livestock made their way to the Americas during the Middle Passage when Europeans stocked and restocked slave ships. Africans came to the Americas not only with intimate memories of traditional culinary practices and cuisines but also with particular regionally based agricultural knowledge. These, and other, skills were called upon to benefit New World markets, especially the tending of new kinds of crops. African women, in particular, prepared foods both during transport and once they arrived using their customary methods and borrowing from Native Americans and Europeans. They introduced plants and herbs such as tamarind, hibiscus flowers, and the kola nut to improve tastes and fight diseases resulting from vitamin deficiency.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 926.



**Fig. 1: Faux fish. Photo taken by the author, 2016.**

So, the exhibition begins with an illustration of how slave labour was operationalised in the eighteenth century along the seacoast. Mount Vernon's location on the river not only influenced what foods the Washington family were able to enjoy but also would have had an impact on the busyness of the servants and staff as they prepared for any guests who might visit. In the inchoate society of the 1700s, those enslaved were expected to perform a wide range of jobs that were hard, laborious, and unrelieved by time of day. These were the stories that had to go into the interpretation, and I had to rely upon historical documents, paintings, and other art owned by the Washington estate, documentaries, Washington's planter diaries, and my own research on Black women and food to tell an intricate, yet complex and powerful story.

## Exhibition Design— Banners and Display Cases

It is difficult to tell a messy story in a linear way. However, exhibitions are by nature hierarchical in how the information is presented, so as to enable audiences to digest the content. And though we were not presenting this interpretation chronologically, we did want it to flow smoothly and to tell several overlapping stories. So, we began designing the banners, banner texts, call-out sentences, captions, and caption titles with Mount Vernon as the anchor primarily

because of the research and interpretive work conducted there. But, we also gathered data from other plantations in the Chesapeake region, given that recent historical and archeological approaches had brought to light scholarly evidence on the daily lives of the enslaved and those landowners who benefited from the institution of slavery.

By January 2016, we had settled on the penultimate title, *Fire & Freedom: Food & Enslavement in Early America*, because enslavement was hellacious, and the word “fire” reflected the contradictions embedded in the hearth as a place for cooking and also for administering terror. Having settled on this, we began pulling out the elements we needed to look at them together as classes of information and for consistency, length, and messaging. There were six banners in all, and each had a title, text, and a focus statement to capture the viewer's attention. These were pulled from the banner text I had written. Lastly, they contained an image and caption titles. The exhibition contained three products—a cluster of travelling banners that were initially set up in the main hall of the NLM at the National Institute of Health; a larger set of the same banners that were installed immediately outside the library entrance as well as inside; and, display cases.



**Fig. 2: *Fire & Freedom* traveling banner display in the main hall of the NLM. Photo taken by the author, 2016.**

## Banner 1 – Introduction to the Exhibition

The flow of the exhibition follows the logic posited by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie, whose TED talk highlights “the danger of the single story”. That is the story that tells only one narrative of a person or group of people, thereby becoming the defining truth, no matter how false it may be. Part of an intersectional framework requires that this approach be debunked and that the myriad stories of Black lives come to the fore. This was the aim and intention of the exhibition. As the story unfolds, the viewer is made aware of the various enslaved persons who help to ensure that the meals are complete—the butler, Frank Lee, the teenage waiter, Marcus, and the cooks, Lucy and Nathan. By contextualising the cook’s day within a larger discussion of the labour and technology of enslaved peoples, we can convey the various ways in which power informs meals, from food acquisition to preparation, presentation, consumption, to disposal. We can also highlight the “fires” of enslavement, especially in the kitchen, to reveal how brutal it was and how the work was often forced with threats of humiliation, separation from family and community, even rape or death.

The introductory banner and texts set the stage by communicating how meals can tell us how power is exchanged between and among different peoples, races, genders, and classes. It also highlighted the Chesapeake region of the United States and the ways in which early Europeans relied upon the labour of Native Americans on whose land they had settled, of enslaved Africans who had been forcefully brought to this new world, and of indentured servants for life-saving knowledge of farming and food acquisition. This banner explained how settler colonialists used these human resources, the natural environment, and maritime trade to gain economic prosperity. Finally, the first banner indicated that Mount Vernon was simply being used as an example for exploring how labour was extracted and the ways that foods tell stories that are beyond taste and sustenance.

To convey this story, the banner included the frontal image of the plantation site, a maritime compass, a body of water, and the visage of an enslaved woman that mirrored the image on the diary page of the “Cooks Day” schedule. The banner colour was a warm brown to imply the relatively somber tone of the narrative but also to prove to be inviting to viewers.

## Banners 2 and 3 – Producing Food / Negotiating Power

The focal point for banners 2 and 3 were the waterways. Consequently, over half the banner is a dark blue representing the power of the Potomac River and maritime trade and activity. Banner 2 highlights how power was negotiated between George Washington and the enslaved. Though Washington used the Potomac River for an extensive fishing enterprise and grew food for sustenance and commerce, he relied upon the skill, labour, and knowledge of the enslaved at Mount Vernon for much of his wealth. Slaves used this position as a negotiating tool to bargain for labour arrangements that provided some degree of autonomy. To emphasise the possibility of this type of negotiation taking place, we used a portion of the painting *Washington at Mount Vernon, 1797*, by Nathaniel Currier (1852), which depicted an enslaved man talking to a white man on horseback as if explaining a situation. We extracted this image to illustrate the possibility of negotiating.

Rivers and waterways were important transportation routes and commerce centres. Markets would feature food and luxury goods like imported coffees, but they also contained human chattel, in the form of a seemingly inexhaustible source of slave labour—men, women, and children. The waterways were also a means by which some enslaved people sought to escape by secreting themselves aboard boats and steamships. To emphasise all of this, the banner contains images of slave ships as well as some of the goods that could be found in the market. The display

case that sat below the larger banner contained an advertisement for a 1769 slave auction that took place in Charleston, South Carolina, as well as faux fish and coffee beans that were created to illustrate some of the foods that were bought and traded (Fig. 3 and 4 Banners 2 and 3 “Producing Food/Negotiating Power”)



**Fig. 3:** Large display banner representing power negotiations by an enslaved man and other representations of maritime commerce. Photo taken by the author, 2016.



**Fig. 4:** The display case flanking banner 2 held a book with an article on the “Natural History of Coffee”, a glass plate on cocoa beans, and faux coffee beans to complement the discussion of maritime trade. Photo taken by the author, 2016.

The layout of these first three banners echoed the content focusing on enslaved Africans whose culinary labour included work both inside and outside of the slaveowner’s home and the plantation at large. These installations were outside of the actual exhibition space to reflect the public sphere. Once visitors entered the library, they came into contact with the remaining three banners, all of which presented information about what took place within the domestic realm.

## Banners 4, 5, and 6 - The Kitchen and the “Big House”

Banners 4, 5, and 6 moved the visitor into the library installation space, and they emphasised activities that took place inside the home. Banner 5, “Kitchen Contradictions”, illustrated the chaotic, noisy, smoky, smelly, sweltering, and dangerous nature of an early American kitchen, particularly hearth cooking. Using the “Cooks Day” entry, we stated, “Enslaved cooks, such as Lucy and Nathan at George Washington’s Mount Vernon, started work at 4:00 A.M.” The work of preparing tasty meals over an open fire required hard and precise work. This latter point was necessary to state because it is and was often believed that Black cooks lacked culinary skills and simply intuitively knew how to cook. Research indicates the fallacies of this thinking, with records showing that several of the most esteemed early African cooks—especially those who cooked for presidents and the wealthy—were trained in and throughout Europe. Skill and precision were also necessary because if not, cooks and scullions, even children who were being watched, could get burned. If cooks unintentionally misgauged fire temperatures, they might destroy food. The changing seasons could spoil meats and turn vegetables to mush.

The “Kitchen Contradictions” banner held an image taken from the painting *Washington’s Kitchen, Mount Vernon* by Eastman Johnson (1864). The central image is taken from a painting that shows an enslaved



**Fig. 5: Banner and display case inside the library. Photo taken by the author, 2016.**

woman cooking while hunched over a hearth, while a child sits on her lap. The banner colour is in hues of red to highlight the heat and fire of the hearth and the situation. The display case for this banner contained three assets from the eighteenth century Washington collection—a mixing bowl, rolling pin, and knitting needle. This juxtaposition of objects was to emphasise that the work of the enslaved was never done. Plantation cooks like Lucy used the large bowl to make biscuits or bread. They would leave the dough to rise for hours, and then thump it, sometimes using the side of a rolling pin, for another hour until it was smooth and elastic. While she waited for the dough to rise, she was expected to knit stockings and tend to the other food that was simmering over the hearth. And she might do these tasks while watching small children and/or supervising other kitchen workers.

Other assets in the display case included a recipe book from the NLM collection—*An Enumeration of the Principal Vegetables, and Vegetable Productions*, “by the Author of *Some Information on the Use*

of Indian Corn”. We turned the book to the page holding a recipe on buckwheat, one of the many crops grown by George Washington. Buckwheat was a seed favoured for its nutritional value, and its dried leaves were used for tea. Buckwheat was also ground into flour to make griddles and pancakes using a large bowl like the one Lucy worked with.



**Fig. 6: Installing the large mixing bowl. The display case would also include the knitting needle and the rolling pin. Photo taken by the author, 2016.**

An adjacent display case held a similar, smaller bowl included from the Mount Vernon collection. This bowl was suggestive of the kind used by “Old Doll”, an aged slave who was sometimes still summoned to the kitchen to make mint water and any other food. George or Martha Washington would often summon their enslaved, regardless of the hour, to create a menthol drink to help relieve a sore throat, upset stomach, or indigestion. A recipe book entitled, *The Compleat City and Country Cook: or, Accomplish'd Housewife.*, by Charles Carter (1732), with an entry for “A cordial mint water”, was used as well as faux springs of mint and an imaging plate depicting the mint herb from the NLM.

The fifth banner, titled “Labored Meals”, highlighted ways in which slavery put in place social and culina-



**Fig. 7: The adjacent display case held a smaller serving bowl used for mint water and other foods, along with faux springs of mint and an imaging plate depicting the mint herb.**

**Photo taken by the author, 2016.**

ry boundaries that separated those who ate from those who worked. Though food preparation is often described as a labour of love, capable of strengthening family ties, this was less so for those enslaved—regardless of gender, age, or health—who prepared food. Regardless of the kind of plantation or farm on which one found themselves, the work day might never end because they were always at the beck and call of the landowner, as mentioned above in relation to Old Doll.

In the fields, for example, women and men may have killed hogs, shelled corn, planted and gathered crops, dug holes for fence poles, and other seasonal agrarian duties. But, they were usually also cooking and/or possibly tending to smaller children and doing other tasks. Seasons primarily mattered inside the house because they determined the kinds of work needed to be done—from decorating interiors to preparing meals for birthdays, holidays, and even everyday activities. And similar to the work in the fields, there were always multiple tasks to be completed.

In the kitchen, scullions handled the menial tasks. Maids and houseboys assisted the head cook, who was often male, as was the butler who made sure that

meal times were coordinated. But how do you convey all of this, and especially the demarcation and meal-taking boundaries, in an exhibition with banners and display cases? On the banner, we used a painting courtesy of Mount Vernon Ladies' Associates titled, *The Washington Family/La Famille de Washington*, by Edward Savage and David Elkin (1798). The painting illustrated the Washington family taking a meal while an enslaved person stood just off to the right in the shadows. The banner caption reads: "Servants' skills were invaluable, as they worked as the conduits between dining rooms and kitchens in wealthy homes. At Mount Vernon, under the watchful eyes of Martha Washington, Frank Lee, the enslaved butler, supervised the maids and the waiters to ensure the table was properly set, and the house meticulously cleaned."



**Fig. 8: The display case contained a faux chicken prop with feathers to illustrate how a cook or scullion would chase, catch, and chop off the head of a chicken. It was accompanied by cookbooks with recipes for fried and fricasseed chicken dishes. Photo taken by the author, 2016.**

The display case beneath this banner contained a faux chicken prop with feathers to illustrate how a cook or scullion would chase, catch, and chop off the head of a chicken. Sometimes, the animal would jump around without a head, spurting blood everywhere. After pulling pin feathers, the remaining hair would be singed, and the chicken would be dressed—gizzards and liver removed—and either trussed (tied) so it cooked evenly on a spit, or the carcass cut into pieces for frying. One of Martha Washington's reci-

pes required a pound of butter to be used for chicken that is fried or fricasseed (a process of stewing pieces of meat in butter). In contrast to a single cooking method, Lucy Lee, one of several enslaved cooks at Mount Vernon, most likely blended African, Native American, and European styles of preparation and cooking, thereby leaving her imprint on Washington family meals. This discussion is illustrated by recipe books found in the NLM collection.

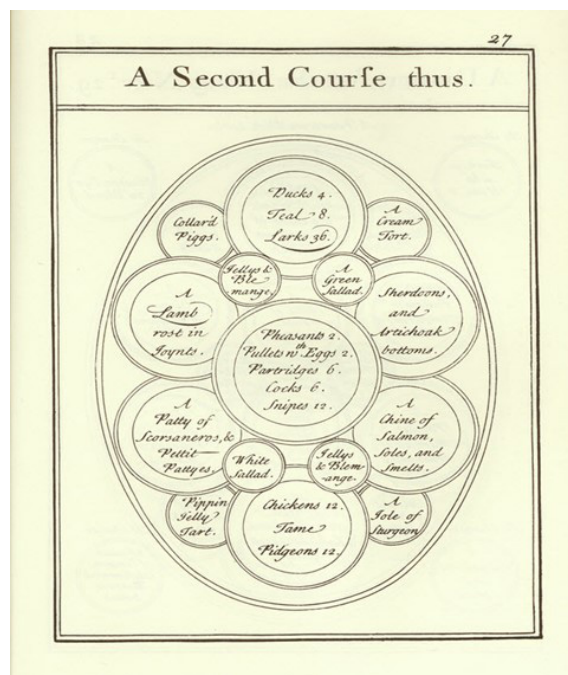
Another object in the neighbouring display case was a dinner plate from the Mount Vernon collection, which we used to represent how enslaved butlers like Frank Lee, of the Washington estate, mastered invaluable management skills. More than ensuring the costly porcelain was simply well maintained, butlers like Frank helped safeguard the Washingtons' ability to entertain in genteel society. This included orchestrating meals with symmetry and exactitude. For example, at the conclusion of each course, he removed soiled napery to reveal a new tablecloth. To illustrate the complexity of the tasks, we included

a page from *The Complete Practical Cook: or, new System of the Whole Art and Mystery of Cookery* by Charles Carter (1730), showing what a table filled with only the second course would look like.

The final banner was simply titled "Freedom", emphasising the truism that slavery was never benevolent or kind regardless of an enslaved person's status on the plantation or farm. Though some were afforded extra privileges, including the opportunity to travel outside the plantation to earn income from selling leftover foodstuffs or their own crops in the marketplace, the opportunity to wear fine clothes; or to have various tools (hammer, nails, fishing rod, and even a shaving razor), they knew they were not free. Despite these minor advantages, and no matter how appreciated or "well-treated" they were, enslaved people still longed for freedom.

And slaveowners did everything they could to remind enslaved people of their status as property. For example, during his presidency, George Washington repeatedly rotated, albeit illegally, enslaved Africans between their official household in Philadelphia and the Mount Vernon plantation. This circumvented the Gradual Abolition Act, which allowed those slaves who remained in Pennsylvania for more than six months to gain their freedom. Rotating them consistently reset the point when the clock on their residency began.

Despite these shenanigans, enslaved men and some women and children found ways to escape, often using the distractions provided by holidays and celebrations. For example, it is said that noted chef Hercules, considered George Washington's favourite "capital cook", used the occasion of 22 February, 1797, Washington's sixty-fifth birthday, to escape and was never heard of again. Similarly, in her book *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar tells the story of how Judge,



**Fig. 9: "A Second Course thus", taken from *The Complete Practical Cook: or, new System of the Whole Art and Mystery of Cookery*, by Charles Carter (1730)). The rendering shows what a table filled with the second course of a genteel meal would look like. Courtesy National Library of Medicine, 2016.**

having lived in New York and Pennsylvania and thus being familiar with the Gradual Abolition Act, ran away rather than be sent back to Virginia. In May of 1796, during the day's festivities, the 22-year-old Judge walked out of Washington's mansion in Philadelphia and onto a ship that would take her to New Hampshire. She lived in New England, albeit often uncomfortably, rather than allow the Washingtons to re-enslave her.

Several assets were used to tell this story, most of them not directly centred upon escape, though the historical record is replete with runaway ads. On the banner, for example, we placed a copy of the runaway advertisement for Marcus, a young house servant who served breakfast at Mount Vernon. This illustration provides some tension for the discussion of foodways in the Washington household because, despite constant references to the slaveholders' supposed benevolence, the advertisement serves as a reminder that no enslaved person wanted to be in servitude. Consequently, the aim of these assets was to illustrate and highlight the tensions between Black realities about freedom and slaveholders' propagandistic

narratives of enslavement as beneficial and kind. Also on the banner are a picture of famed chef, Hercules, images of genteel serving dishes, random calendar date entries, and finally, the image of the enslaved woman servant to mirror and bookend the opening banner.

The display case accompanying banner 6 also contained several assets from the Mount Vernon collection, including a shaving razor, a grease skillet, a metal canister, a sugar bowl with lid, and other genteel dining ware, as well as two books from the NLM—Washington's *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation* by J. M. Toner (1888) and *A Treatise on Tobacco, Tea, Coffee, and Chocolate* by Simon Pauli (1746). I will briefly explain the

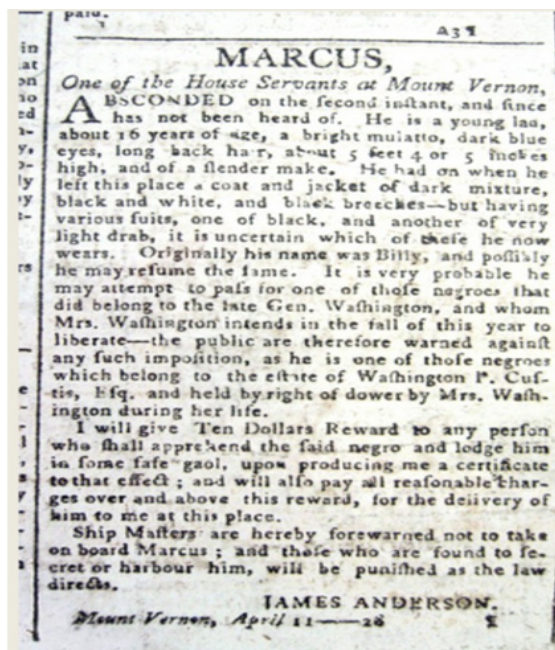


Fig. 10: Runaway advertisement for Marcus, a young house servant who served breakfast at Mount Vernon. "Marcus", *Philadelphia Gazette*, 16 May, 1800.



Fig. 11.1, 11.2: A shaving razor, grease skillet, and metal canister were among the assets used to create an ironic point of view about slavery and freedom.

rationale for their inclusion and, by extension, how they serve to offer juxtaposing meanings and interpretations.

Under this banner of “Freedom”, I have already discussed the runaway ad for Marcus and explained that some enslaved chose escape over extra privileges like making money, regulated movement off the plantation or farm, and even a small convenience like razor shaving, an extra privilege afforded someone with Hercules’ stature among the other enslaved men. We included this tool along with the grease skillet and a canister because Hercules was “as highly accomplished a proficient in the culinary art as could be found in the United States”. As a result, he had the role of overseeing Washington’s kitchens. He would have mastered hearth cooking, knowing the proper amount of oil and lard to fry foods, and how to wield long-handled skillets to deftly maneuver hot pans while roasting meats. The grease skillet is a utensil placed below the spit to catch drippings from pieces of meat roasting on the hearth, including a turkey, and the canisters were used to contain flour, rice, corn meal, and other dry goods to keep out insects and vermin. They had a tight-fitting lid, making them difficult to access, and were closely guarded and carefully rationed by Martha Washington or another person in charge of the house servants, quite possibly Hercules.

A fine china sugar bowl and saucer were included because, for one, they were among the assets available to us. As a result, I had to conceive of a story and tie them to the theme of the exhibition and, more importantly, to the notion of Black freedom. Given that George Washington followed rules of polite society and behaviour at his dinner table, large meals would feature desserts of fruits, nuts, and sweet wines. Later, the Washingtons would enjoy a light repast of bread and leftover meat known as “tea”, which was viewed as a necessary social performance among the social elite and often included actual tea drink-

ing, complete with a sugar drop, an expensive commodity. Some of the enslaved even knew of the value of this performance and would earn enough money to purchase teacups and a teapot or kettle for themselves. Though their tea was taken without sugar, the performance and the implements alone would have elevated their status among those in the enslaved community.

The evidence of such sweetness, however, often belied the actual tensions that existed in the dining room. Amidst the finery of the china and other tea-taking trappings was the dire reality that the enslaved had no such time for extended leisure. While the Washingtons relaxed, the slaves’ day continued. They could not eat until the dining room table had been cleared and cleaned, the teatime meal prepared and the tea brewed, the wood chopped for the next day, the dough kneaded, and the hoecake batter ready for breakfast the next morning. Thus, even amidst the beauty of the table setting lay a stark reality for those who served and were rendered invisible by their race and social status. Nonetheless, many enslaved people used their perceived indistinctness to their own advantage. While tending to the comforts of the plantation family, enslaved women, men, and children simultaneously studied these habits of dining and leisure both to avoid punishment and to be aware of opportunities for them to escape.

## Oh Freedom!

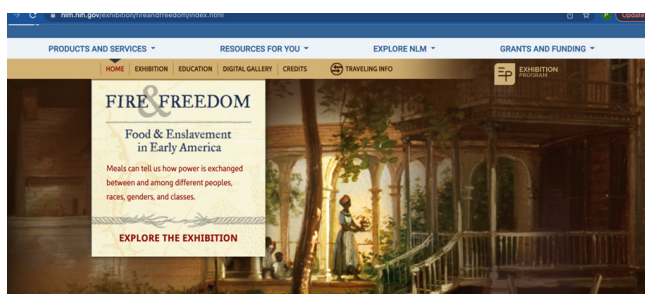
During enslavement, food and freedom were often intertwined. Not only did some slaves use moments of distraction during celebrations to escape, but many more actually used food as a means of resistance. The forced labour of slavery affected everything from work routines to food distribution, preparation, and consumption. The enslaved often registered rebellion by feigning illness, breaking tools, or finding other ways of sabotaging production. In the kitchen, food could be slowly cooked, burned, and even filled with poison. This kind of culinary maneuvering is a

central aspect of our African American culinary heritage. From the African imprint left on the foodways of the New World to the creative means of acquiring, producing, and distributing foods, African American foodways have never been simple or as one-dimensional as the single story implies.

Ultimately, this exhibition highlighted some of these dimensions and dynamics, and as the lead curator, I was intent on not telling a singular narrative and on introducing visitors to new ways of reading material objects that are often only interpreted from the standpoint of the moneyed and the wealthy.

**Reading the objects for their uses—intended and unintended—from an intersectional point of view should be a central undertaking in queering the museum.**

Pushing past the unbalanced power relations that often exist in interpretations should be another goal. Lastly, seeking to read the gaps and being purposeful and radical in doing so by allowing oneself to dive deep into the research to ensure accuracy and balance will go a long way toward finding the absent potential in most museum exhibitions we might curate.



**Fig. 12: The landing page for the online exhibition *Fire & Freedom: Food & Enslavement in Early America*, URL: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/fireandfreedom/index.html> (2016)**

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