



Text Version of Audio Story: Hercules

In the late 1700s, he had an income that, considering the times, was astounding. He — Hercules, as he was known — was a private chef in one of the finest homes in Philadelphia.

The good money he was making came from selling the leftovers from the kitchen of the mansion ... the leftovers the family couldn't eat and, without refrigeration, there was no good way of keeping the food to enjoy for a midnight snack. Allowing him to sell his culinary creations was a perk, if you will, afforded him in return for his incredible skills as a chef. Hercules was considered the finest chef in the New World. His name was known to dignitaries and royalties of Europe.

To feast upon his imaginative, culinary creations was a delight people would brag to their friends about, an experience one could tell their grandchildren of. Folks of the day salivated at the mere mention of his name. He attempted to spoil himself, his wife and his children with the money he made selling the leftovers. He adorned himself in the finest of tailor-made clothing of the period. His, by many accounts, was a life far, far better than that of the average American in the late 1700s. Indeed, Hercules was the most renowned chef of the time, in the service of the most famous American of the time. His boss was the President of the United States, George Washington.

For all Hercules had — the money, the fine clothing, the comfortable life, the renown, the admiration — there was one thing he didn't have: His freedom. Hercules was a slave. The irony is difficult to wrap our modern-day brains around. The founding fathers, the framers of the Constitution, the don't-tread-on-me guys — these guys who risked everything including death, these guys who so passionately pursued liberty for themselves and their posterity — were engaged in the evils of human bondage.

Washington — himself, of course, a slave owner — encouraged his fellow statesmen to abolish slavery ... this at a time when he was the owner of 300 slaves. The argument has been made by many historians that if you were going to be a slave in those days, your life would have been far better if you were a slave belonging to Washington than perhaps another plantation owner. I guess that argument is to say being a slave owned by George Washington was the lesser of two evils.

General Washington made it a policy not to purchase or sell slaves. He encouraged slaves to marry and have families and promised never to break them up by selling family

members off. Slaves were cared for, even when they could no longer work or were sick. Washington's slaves were well-fed and well-dressed. It was noted by a visitor to the Mt. Vernon estate that Washington's slaves were better provided for than most working whites of the time. With all that said, they were still slaves. People denied of the very things people want most in life — the ability to make choices, the ability to do as one pleases, the ability to pursue the passion of one's life. In the land of liberty, they were denied liberty — no matter how one attempts to justify it.

In the dark of the night, in 1797, Hercules the chef slipped the bonds of slavery and escaped to freedom.

From somewhere behind the radio, I'm the American Storyteller.