

Chapter 1

The Squire and the Slave

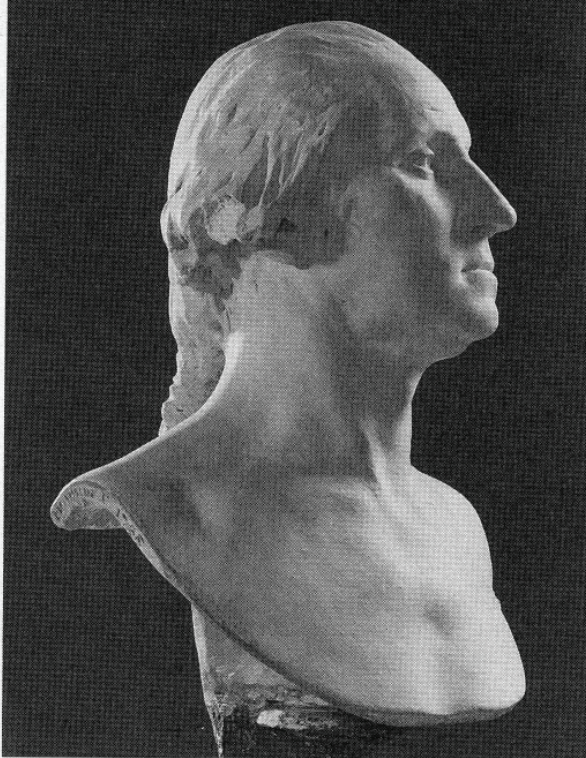


Figure 1 George Washington bust by Jean-Antoine Houdon.

The first time I seen the General was at a foxhunt. I was surprised how big he was. I was pretty tall mesself, but he was inches taller than me, big head, big butt, big, strong hands. I was smilin' to mesself when he swung aboard his horse—I was feelin' sorry for the horse. Then we started ridin.' He fooled me again. Whether he rode at a canter or a gallop, he rode like he was glued to the saddle. Din't

bounce at all, din't stand in his stirrup, jes glided easy like. Damn, I thought, I got to show him what I can do.

It was the Fall of 1768. Red, yellow and brown autumn leaves were swirling and spinning in the air and the cerulean blue Virginia sky was clear and bright, when a young mulatto man, Billy Lee, galloped his well-lathered sorrel up to George Washington. Although Washington didn't stand in his stirrups while riding, he was standing in them now, surveying the terrain while a pack of seven specially bred foxhounds bayed away, frantically searching to recover the scent of a very fast and very frightened red fox.

"Where are the other riders? Washington asked, "and who the hell are you?"

"Somewhere back over that hill, General. They cain't keep up with you, so I come mesself. My given name is William Lee, but folks call me Billy."

Billy was again struck by the size of the man and the chiseled shape of his huge head with its profusion of reddish-brown hair, pulled back and tied. His eyes were deep-set—a grayish blue, and at first look rather chilling. He was the biggest and most impressive white man Billy had ever seen. And when he stood in the stirrups, his head silhouetted against the brilliant sky, Billy thought if you powdered his hair white this man looked like the picture of God in Mama's bible.

Washington was also the best-dressed fox-hunter that Billy had ever seen. Billy's master, John Lee, usually dressed in every-day clothes when on the hunt, but Washington wore a vivid scarlet coat with brass buttons, black breeches and stockings and a fine pair of long, polished leather boots. He wasn't wearing his black hunting cap, which hung instead on his saddle. The other hunters were a motley crew, wearing all manner and color of clothing, but they wore their black caps held by a cord below their chins. Billy wore an ordinary brown shirt, breeches and shoes, but he also wore a little red cap on his head—designating him as the huntsman.

As Washington eased himself back into the saddle, the hounds flushed the fox out of a thicket and resumed the chase. Billy bolted after them, leaving Washington to utter some inaudible profanity as this presumptuous black boy surged ahead, soared over a high white wooden fence and through apparently impenetrable brush and trees,

then landed gracefully and galloped after the hounds. Washington caught up with Billy at the foxhole, where the hounds were digging away in a frenzy of sweat and saliva.

Washington, visibly impressed, had to catch his breath as he spoke, “Where did you learn to ride like that?”

“Colonel Lee taught me the simple stuff. After that I got bettuh and fastuh on my own. I guess it jes comes natural to me, General.”

“Don’t call me ‘General,’” Washington said with some impatience. “My rank in the militia was Colonel.”

Billy just smiled back, unfazed. “Well,” he said, you jes look like a General to me, sir.” Billy thought that, no matter what Washington said, he liked being called “General.”

By then the other riders had at last caught up, and the leader, Colonel John Lee, a stout, rosy-faced and cheerful man, released a lean, fierce-looking English terrier he was carrying across the horn of his saddle to dig out the poor, trapped fox.

“I see, Colonel Washington, that you’ve met my boy, Billy,” Lee announced in a triumphant tone, “I do believe he can give you a run for your money on horseback.”

“He already has, Colonel Lee,” Washington acknowledged, “quite a run indeed. Do you mean to tell me this young man is a slave? He doesn’t carry himself like a slave.”

Billy shifted in the saddle, then blew a loud note on the small brass hunting horn he carried around his neck, declaring the demise of the poor fox.

“I know what you mean,” Colonel Lee retorted. “Not only that, he can also read and write. Billy copies all my correspondence for the Burgesses.”

Washington looked at Billy skeptically. The other hunters—slave owners all—evidently didn’t like the idea of literate slaves, and they looked askance at John Lee.

Lee, oblivious of his neighbors, warmed to the subject. “Billy is quite a talker, too. Probably because he has spent so much time inside our home. His mother is our cook, and Billy always helps her out. When he was seven or eight years old, I asked him if he wanted to grow up to be a cook like his mother. No, he said, he wanted to be a master like me, because the food’s better and you get to tell people what to do.” Lee laughed out loud, and Washington smiled. He was

not particularly interested in the youthful history of a slave, even a clever one—who seemed not to know his place.

Billy didn't believe this discussion was doing him any good. He sensed that Washington regarded him as a questionable curiosity, so he busied himself polishing his horn and smiled away.

What was going on in Washington's mind was not clear until later. He was not the kind of man to speak his mind when it was only half made-up. Indeed, he was not the kind of man to speak his mind at all unless absolutely necessary, regarding casual conversation as an unnatural and unnecessary act.

Washington cantered over to Colonel Lee in nonchalant fashion, and the two men exchanged words. Billy had a hunch the General was offering to buy him. He didn't know whether he liked the idea or not. In fact, he had lived his whole life on the John Lee plantation, and although he was aware of his status as a slave, he was comfortable where he was. Billy and the other slaves sometimes talked about freedom, but it was an idea that, until now, had never held any reality for him, personally. The possibility of being sold had never seriously occurred to him before, and he realized that there was no way to know how this monument of a man would turn out as a master. Billy briefly lost his almost perpetual smile; it didn't please him that a couple of white men might be casually talking about buying and selling him. His life might be about to change radically—without any decision from him. When Lee shook his head and Washington shrugged, Billy didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed.

But soon afterward, Colonel Lee died suddenly. The slaves on his plantation were badly frightened. Their expectations ran all the way from being sold to the West Indies—a real hellhole for slaves—to being set free. Billy's Mama was a short, squat, dark-skinned woman, with surprisingly broad shoulders and large hands, yet her touch with food was light and inventive. Mrs. Lee was very proud of her cuisine and had no intention of setting any of her slaves free—least of all, Billy's Mama. Mama hadn't any thought of freedom. She was worried about the struggle of having to live and work on her own in the white world. But Billy's ideas had changed dramatically after the encounter with Washington had taught him how vulnerable he was. Now, the very idea of freedom excited him.

Washington went to see the widow Lee to offer his condolences, and to learn if he could buy Billy. Mrs. Lee brought Washington to her kitchen where Billy and his brother Frank—a somewhat younger, darker-skinned lad—were standing together, looking scared. Mama was working, but wearing a sullen expression, giving sharp looks around from time to time.

Washington offered a price for Billy that he knew was low. The widow, disappointed shook her head, and suggested a higher price. They dickered for a while and finally agreed on a price. It was excruciating for Billy to stand there and learn how much money these white people thought he was worth.

Suddenly, Washington turned to Billy and asked him if he wanted to be purchased and brought to Mount Vernon.

Billy thought it was nice to be asked, but what he said was, “I don’ wanna be separated from Mama an’ my brothuh.”

Washington was not deterred. “Mrs. Lee,” he said, “I’d be happy to buy Billy’s mother and brother, too, if you’ll quote me a fair price.”

Billy smiled, but the widow said, “I’m not selling the mother.” Billy’s smile evaporated.

“Then perhaps I shouldn’t buy Billy,” Washington said.

Feeling helpless, Billy’s attention skittered between Washington and the widow.

Mrs. Lee said, “That’s up to you, Colonel Washington, but I’m going to sell Billy to someone, one way or another.”

That immediately clarified what had become a confused negotiation. Billy and Washington glanced at each other and both knew instinctively that this deal was going to happen. Frank vaguely understood, too, and he leaned against Billy, who put an arm around him.

“I’ll buy Billy’s brother to keep him company,” Washington said.

The widow agreed, and the haggling on a final price went quickly. Washington and the widow scribbled a note confirming the sale. Billy and Frank picked up their clothes, while the widow embraced their Mama, both women quietly shedding tears. Washington stood silently as the boys hugged Mama. The widow, accepting the currency from Washington, was unable to say anything more. Mama forced a smile and murmured to her sons, “Do what Colonel

Washington tells you,” in a shaky voice. “Yes, Mama,” Billy said, hugging his mother for the last time. Frank just nodded, unable to speak.

Washington walked on ahead, apparently oblivious to the emotion of the moment, looking for all the world like a man who had made a good bargain for a pair of fine horses.

Billy didn’t look back; he didn’t want to start crying again.