

THE BALLAD OF BILLY LEE
THE STORY OF GEORGE WASHINGTON'S FAVORITE SLAVE

A NOVEL

BY LEN LAMENSDORF

ADAPTED FROM THE PLAY
THE BALLAD OF BILLY LEE

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Prologue

To: Editor, *The National Intelligencer*

From: Marcus Ames, Reporter

Date: July 4, 1825

The interviews lasted many hours across several days. He was not what I expected. An elderly, but still muscular mulatto man with two bad knees, hobbling about from chair to chair in his white-washed cottage at Mount Vernon, talking non-stop about his days with the General, as he called him.

I took extensive notes, and a much longer story will follow, but for now you need to know that this Billy Lee claims intimate knowledge of General Washington over a thirty-year span. It's all oral testimony, few documents to back it up, but his command of detail is extremely impressive.

Little things, like what Washington talked about in the boat crossing the Delaware, what he had for breakfast most mornings, how he liked his hair tied, his favorite horses, favorite dogs, favorite cuss words.

Big things too, like his reasons for insisting that Martha burn all their correspondence, what he thought of Hamilton, Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson. (Wait 'till you hear his thoughts on Jefferson.) How he managed the excruciating pain he suffered from his terrible teeth virtually his whole life. And – you won't believe this – how beautiful women threw themselves at him throughout his life. How Washington dealt with them—sometimes with Billy's help.

I realize this report arrives far too late to make the Annual Independence special issue and a bit early for the Jubilee issue in 1826. But it does seem to me that we're onto something bigger here. If he's telling the truth, this Billy Lee is God's witness. This strikes me as a big story. I presume your permission to pursue it.

Know that Mount Vernon has the look and feel of a rotting ruin. The mansion is going to seed, the slave population has been depleted by sales of whole families to plantations further south, all of which Billy says the General would consider a betrayal. He's been at Mount Vernon for a long time, but claims all his friends are either dead or gone. He is, I would guess, about seventy-five, and obviously headed for the hereafter, where he says he will ride again with the General. My intention is to get his story before he goes.

For our illustrator, if you decide to go all the way with this, Billy Lee is a light-skinned negro just short of six feet, with deep creases in his face that all flow upward, like a permanent smile. He conveys the impression of someone present at the creation. I do believe he is the genuine article.