



The Secret Lives of the Nine Negro Teeth of George Washington

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“By Cash pd Negroes for 9 Teeth on Acct of Dr. Lemoire” –Lund Washington, Mount Vernon plantation, Account Book dated 1784.

The first Negro tooth purchased for George Washington came from a blacksmith, who died that very year at Mount Vernon of the flux. The art of the blacksmith had been in his blood—passed down from ancestral spirits who had come seeking their descendants across the sea. Back in what the elder slaves called Africy, he had heard, blacksmiths were revered men who drew iron from the earth and worked it with fire and magic: crafting spears so wondrous they could pierce the sky and swords with beauty enough to rend mountains. Here, in this Colony of Virginia, he had been set to shape crueller things: collars to fasten about bowed necks, shackles to ensnare tired limbs, and muzzles to silence men like beasts. But blacksmiths know the secret language of iron, and he beseeched his creations to bind the spirits of their wielders—as surely as they bound flesh. For the blacksmith understood what masters had chosen to forget: when you make a man or woman a slave you enslave yourself in turn. And the souls of those who made thralls of others would never know rest—in this life, or the next.

When he wore that tooth, George Washington complained of hearing the heavy fall of a hammer on an anvil day and night. He ordered all iron making stopped at Mount Vernon. But the sound of the blacksmith’s hammer rang out in his head all the same.

The second Negro tooth belonging to George Washington came from a slave from the Kingdom of Ibani, what the English with their inarticulate tongues call Bonny Land, and (much to his annoyance) hence him, a Bonny man. The Bonny man journeyed from Africa on a ship called the *Jesus*, which, as he understood, was named for an ancient sorcerer who defied death. Unlike the other slaves bound on that ship who came from the hinterlands beyond his kingdom, he knew the fate that awaited him—though he would never know what law or sacred edict he had broken that sent him to this fate. He found himself in that fetid hull chained beside a merman, with scales that sparkled like green jewels and eyes as round as black coins. The Bonny man had seen mermen before out among the waves, and stories said some of them swam into rivers to find wives among local fisher women. But he hadn’t known the whites made slaves of them too. As he would later learn, mermen were prized by thaumturgical inclined aristocrats who dressed them in fine livery to display to guests; most, however, were destined for Spanish holdings, where they were forced to dive for giant pearls off the shores of New Granada. The two survived the horrors of the passage by relying on each other. The Bonny man shared tales of his kingdom, of his wife and children and family, forever lost. The merman in turn told of his underwater

home, of its queen and many curiosities. He also taught the Bonny man a song: a plea to old and terrible things that dwelled in the deep, dark, hidden parts of the sea—great beings with gaping mouths that opened up whirlpools or tentacles that could drag ships beneath the depths. They would one day rise to wreak vengeance, he promised, for all those who had been chained to suffer in these floating coffins. The Bonny man never saw the merman after they made land on the English isle of Barbados. But he carried the song with him, as far as the Colony of Virginia, and on the Mount Vernon plantation, he sang it as he looked across fields of wheat to an ocean he couldn't see—and waited.

When George Washington wore the Bonny man's tooth, he found himself humming an unknown song, that sounded (strange to his thinking) like the tongue of the savage mermen. And in the dark hidden parts of the sea, old and terrible things, stirred.

The third Negro tooth of George Washington was bought from a slave who later ran from Mount Vernon, of which an account was posted in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1785:

Advertisment: Runaway from the plantation of the Subscriber, in Fairfax County, some Time in October laft, on All-Hallows Eve, a Mulatto Fellow, 5 Feet 8 Inches high of Tawney Complexion named Tom, about 25 Years of Age, missing a front tooth. He is sensible for a Slave and self-taught in foul necromancy. He lived for some Years previous as a servant at a school of learned forcery near Williamsburg, and was removed on Account of inciting the dead slaves there to rife up in infurrection. It is supposed he returned to the school to raise up a young Negro Wench, named Anne, a former servant who died of the pox and was buried on the campus grounds, his Sister. He sold away a tooth and with that small money was able to purchase a spell used to call upon powers potent on All-Hallows Eve to spirit themselves away to parts now unknown. Whoever will secure the said Tom, living, and Anne, dead, so that they be delivered to the plantation of the Subscriber in Fairfax County aforefaid, shall have Twenty Shillings Reward, besides what the Law allows.

To George Washington's frustration, Tom's tooth frequently fell out of his dentures, no matter how he tried to secure it. Most bizarre of all, he would find it often in the unlikeliest of places—as if the vexsome thing was deliberately concealing itself. Then one day the tooth was gone altogether, never to be seen again.

George Washington's fourth Negro tooth was from a woman named Henrietta. (Contrary to widespread belief, there is no difference of significance between the dentition of men and women—as any trained dentist, odontomancer, or the Fay folk, who require human teeth as currency, will well attest.) Henrietta's father had been John Indian, whose father had been a Yamasee warrior captured and sold into bondage in Virginia. Her mother's mother had come to the mainland from Jamaica, sold away for taking part in Queen Nanny's War. As slaves, both were reputed to be unruly and impossible to control. Henrietta inherited that defiant blood, and more than one owner learned the hard way she wasn't to be trifled with. After holding down and

whipping her last mistress soundly, she was sold to work fields at Mount Vernon—because, as her former master advertised, strong legs and a broad back weren't to be wasted. Henrietta often dreamed of her grandparents. She often dreamed she was her grandparents. Sometimes she was a Yamasee warrior, charging a fort with flintlock musket drawn, eyes fixed on the soldier she intended to kill—as from the ramparts English mages hurled volleys of emerald fireballs that could melt through iron. Other times she was a young woman, barely fifteen, who chanted Asante war songs as she drove a long sabre, the blade blazing bright with obeah, into the belly of a slave master (this one had been a pallid blood drinker) and watched as he blackened and crumbled away to ash.

When George Washington wore Henrietta's tooth he sometimes woke screaming from night terrors. He told Martha they were memories from the war, and would never speak of the faces he saw coming for him in those dreams: a fierce Indian man with long black hair and death in his eyes, and a laughing slave girl with a curiously innocent face, who plunged scorching steel into his belly.

The fifth Negro tooth belonging to George Washington came by unexplained means from a conjure man who was not listed among Mount Vernon's slaves. He had been born before independence, in what was then the Province of New Jersey, and learned his trade from his mother—a root woman of some renown (among local slaves at any rate), having been brought to the region from the southern territories of New France. The conjure man used his magics mostly in the treatment of maladies affecting his fellow bondsmen, of the mundane or paranormal varieties. He had been one of the tens of thousands of slaves during the war who answered the call put out by the Earl of Dunmore, Royal Governor of Virginia in November 1775:

And I hereby declare all indentured servants, Negroes, hedge witches and wizards, occultists, lycanthropes, giants, non-cannibal ogres and any sentient magical creatures or others (appertaining to Rebels) free and relieved of supernatural function that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His MAJESTY'S Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, to His MAJESTY'S Crown and Dignity. This edict excludes Daemonic beasts who should not take said proclamation as a summons who, in doing so, will be exorcized from His MAJESTY'S realm with all deliberate speed.

The conjure man was first put in the service of Hessian mercenaries, to care for their frightening midnight black steeds that breathed flames and with hooves of fire. Following, he'd been set to performing menial domestic spells for Scottish warlocks, treated no better there than a servant. It was fortune (aided by some skillful stone casting) that placed him in Colonel Tye's regiment. Like the conjure man, Tye had been a slave in New Jersey who fled to the British, working his way to becoming a respected guerilla commander. Tye led the infamous Black Brigade—a motley crew of fugitive slaves, outlaw juju men, and even a Spanish mulata werewolf—who worked alongside the elite Queen's Rangers. Aided by the conjure man's gris-gris, the Black Brigade carried out raids on militiamen: launching attacks on their homes, destroying their weapons, stealing supplies, burning spells and striking fear into the hearts of patriots. The

conjure man's brightest moment had come the day he captured his own master and bound him in the same shackles he'd once been forced to wear. The Brigade stirred such hysteria that the patriot governor of New Jersey declared martial law, putting up protective wards around the province—and General George Washington himself was forced to send his best mage hunters against them. In a running skirmish with those patriot huntsmen, Tye was fatally struck by a cursed ball from a long rifle—cutting through his gris-gris. The conjure man stood guard over his fallen commander, performing a final rite that would disallow their enemies from reanimating the man or binding his soul. Of the five mage hunters he killed three, but was felled in the attempt. With his final breath, he whispered his own curse on any that would desecrate his corpse.

One of the surviving mage hunters pulled the conjure man's teeth as a souvenir of the battle, and a few days hence tumbled to land awkwardly from his horse and broke his neck. The tooth passed to a second man, who choked to death on an improbably lodged bit of turtle soup in his windpipe. And, so it went, bringing dire misfortune to each of its owners. The conjure man's tooth has now, by some twist of fate, made its way to Mount Vernon and into George Washington's collection. He has not worn it, yet.

The sixth Negro tooth of George Washington belonged to a slave who had tumbled here from another world. The startled English sorcerer who witnessed this remarkable event had been set to deliver a speech on conjurations at the Royal Society of London for Improving Supernatural Knowledge. Alas, before the sorcerer could tell the world of his discovery, he was quietly killed by agents of the Second Royal African Company, working in a rare alliance with their Dutch rivals. As they saw it, if Negroes could simply be pulled out of thin air the lucrative trade in human cargo that made such mercantilists wealthy could be irrevocably harmed. The conjured Negro, however, was allowed to live—bundled up and shipped from London to a Virginia slave market. Good property, after all, was not to be wasted. She ended up at Mount Vernon, and was given the name Esther. The other slaves, however, called her Solomon—on account of her wisdom.

Solomon claimed not to know anything about magic, which didn't exist in her native home. But how could that be, the other slaves wondered, when she could mix together powders to cure their sicknesses better than any physician; when she could make predictions of the weather that always came true; when she could construct all manner of wondrous contraptions from the simplest of objects? Even the plantation manager claimed she was “a Negro of curious intellect,” and listened to her suggestions on crop rotations and field systems. The slaves well knew the many agricultural reforms at Mount Vernon, for which their master took credit, was actually Solomon's genius. They often asked why she didn't use her remarkable wit to get hired out and make money? Certainly, that'd be enough to buy her freedom.

Solomon always shook her head, saying that though she was from another land, she felt tied to them by “the consanguinity of bondage.” She would work to free them all, or, falling short of that, at the least bring some measure of ease to their lives. But at night, after she'd finished her

mysterious “experiments” (which she kept secret from all) she could be found gazing up at the stars, and it was hard not to see the longing held deep in her eyes. When George Washington wore Solomon’s tooth, he dreamed of a place of golden spires and colorful glass domes, where Negroes flew through the sky on metal wings like birds and sprawling cities that glowed bright at night were run by machines who thought faster than men. It both awed and frightened him at once.

The seventh Negro tooth purchased for George Washington had come from a Negro from Africa who himself had once been a trader in slaves. He had not gone out with the raids or the wars between kingdoms to procure them, but had been an instrumental middleman—a translator who spoke the languages of both the coastal slavers and their European buyers. He was instrumental in keeping the enchanted rifles and rum jugs flowing and assuring his benefactors a good value for the human merchandise. It was thus ironic that his downfall came from making a bad deal. The local ruler, a distant relative to a king, felt cheated and (much to the trader’s shock) announced his translator put up for sale. The English merchant gladly accepted the offer. And just like that, the trader went from a man of position to a commodity.

He went half mad of despair when they’d chained him in the hold of the slave ship. Twice he tried to rip out his throat with his fingernails, preferring death to captivity. But each time he died, he returned to life—without sign of injury. He’d jumped into the sea to drown, only to be hauled back in without a drop of water in his lungs. He’d managed to get hold a sailor’s knife, driven it into his chest, and watched in shock as his body pushed the blade out and healed the wound. It was then he understood the extent of his downfall: he had been cursed. Perhaps by the gods. Perhaps by spirits of the vengeful dead. Or by some witch or conjurer for whom he’d haggled out a good price. He would never know. But they had cursed him to suffer this turn of fate, to become what he’d made of others. And there would be no escape.

The Negro slave trader’s tooth was George Washington’s favorite. No matter how much he used it, the tooth showed no signs of wear. Sometimes he could have sworn he’d broken it. But when inspected, it didn’t show as much as a fracture—as if it mended itself. He put that tooth to work hardest of all, and gave it not a bit of rest.

The eighth Negro tooth belonging to George Washington came from his cook, who was called Ulysses. He had become a favorite in the Mount Vernon household, known for his culinary arts and the meticulous care he gave to his kitchen. The dinners and parties held at the mansion were always catered by Ulysses, and visitors praised his skill at devising new dishes to tingle the tongue and salivate the senses. Those within the higher social circles frequented by the Washingtons familiarly called him “Uncle Lysses” and showered him with such gifts that local papers remarked: “the Negro cook had become something of a celebrated puffed-up dandy.”

Ulysses took his work seriously, as much as he took his name. He used the monies gained from those gifts, as well as his habit of selling leftovers (people paid good money to sup on the

Washingtons' fare) to purchase translated works by Homer. In those pages, he learned about the fascinating travels of his namesake, and was particularly taken by the figure Circe—an enchantress famed for her vast knowledge of potions and herbs, who through a fine feast laced with a potent elixir had turned men into swine. Ulysses amassed other books as well: eastern texts on Chinese herbology, banned manuscripts of Mussulman alchemy, even rare ancient Egyptian papyri on shape-shifting.

His first tests at transmogrification had merely increased the appetite of Washington's guests, who turned so ravenous they relieved themselves of knife or spoon and shoveled fistfuls of food into their mouths like beasts. A second test had set them all to loud high-pitched squealing—which was blamed on an over-imbibing of cherubimical spirits. Success came, at last, when he heard some days after a summer dining party that a Virginia plantation owner and close friend of the Washingtons had gone missing—the very same day his wife had found a great fat spotted hog rummaging noisily through their parlor. She had her slaves round up the horrid beast, which was summarily butchered and served for dinner.

Over the years, Ulysses was judicious in his selections for the transfiguring brew: several slave owners or overseers known to be particularly cruel; a shipping merchant from Rhode Island whose substantial wealth came from the slave trade; a visiting French physiognomist and naturalist who prattled on about the inherent “lower mental capabilities” to be found among Negroes, whose skulls he compared to “near-human creatures” such as the apes of inner Africa and the fierce woodland goblins of Bavaria. Then, one day in early 1797, Ulysses disappeared.

The Washingtons were upset and hunted everywhere for their absconded cook, putting out to all who would listen the kindness they'd shown to the ungrateful servant. He was never found, but the Mount Vernon slaves whispered that on the day Ulysses vanished a black crow with a mischievous glint in its eye was found standing in a pile of the man's abandoned clothes. It cawed once, and then flapped away.

When George Washington wore the tooth of his runaway cook, it was strangely at dinner parties. Slaves would watch as he wandered into the kitchen, eyes glazed over in a seeming trance, and placed drops of some strange liquid into the food and drink of his guests. His servants never touched those leftovers. But that summer many Virginians took note of a bizarre rash of wild pigs infesting the streets and countryside of Fairfax County.

The ninth, and final, Negro tooth purchased for George Washington came from a slave woman named Emma. She had been among Mount Vernon's earliest slaves, born there just a decade after Augustine Washington had moved in with his family. Had anyone recorded Emma's life for posterity, they would have learned of a girl who came of age in the shadows of one of Virginia's most powerful families. A girl who had fast learned that she was included among the Washington's possessions—treasured like a chair cut from exotic Jamaican mahogany or a bit of fine Canton porcelain. A young woman who had watched the Washington children go on to attend school and learn the ways of the gentry, while she was trained to wait on their whims.

They had the entire world to explore and discover. Her world was Mount Vernon, and her aspirations could grow no further than the wants and needs of her owners.

That was not to say Emma did not have her own life, for slaves learned early how to carve out spaces separate from their masters. She had befriended, loved, married, cried, fought, and found succor in a community as vibrant as the Washingtons'—perhaps even more so, if only because they understood how precious it was to live. Yet she still dreamed for more. To be unbound from this place. To live a life where she had not seen friends and family put under the lash; a life where the children she bore were not the property of others; a place where she might draw a free breath and taste its sweetness. Emma didn't know any particular sorcery. She was no root woman or conjurer, nor had she been trained like the Washington women in simple domestic enchantments. But her dreams worked their own magic. A strong and potent magic that she clung to, that grew up and blossomed inside her—where not even her owners could touch, or take it away.

When George Washington wore Emma's tooth, some of that magic worked its way into him and perhaps troubled some small bit of his soul. In July 1799, six months before he died, Washington stipulated in his will that the 123 slaves belonging to himself, among them Emma, be freed upon his wife's death. No such stipulations were made for the Negro teeth still in his possession.

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