

**First, First Ladies:** Martha Washington was born Martha Dandridge on June 2, 1731 on her father's Virginia plantation near Williamsburg. At 18, she married the wealthy Daniel Parke Custis, two decades her senior. Eight years later, she was a young, wealthy widow with two children and independent control over her and her children's inheritance. Two years later, at her estate on the Pamunkey River northwest of Williamsburg known as the White House, George (one year her junior) married Martha, the richest widow in Virginia. George won the presidency of the United States of America on April 14, 1789. Martha was to become the first, First Lady of the United States of America.

Raised in an era when chattel slavery was legal in the American colonies (written in the U.S. Constitution-Article I: Sections 2 & 9, Article IV: Section 2), there is no record of Martha's questioning the peculiar institution of slavery. As part of her widow's "dower," Martha received at least 85 slaves. The full Custis Estate totaled about 27 square miles of farm plantations with 285 enslaved men, women, and children attached to those lands. Upon their marriage, George became the legal manager of the Custis Estate but Martha continued to make many estate decisions. Using Martha's great wealth, George tripled the size of Mount Vernon.

George could not sell or own Martha's "dower" slaves, nor the land which they farmed for more than forty years, because they and the land were held in trust for Martha's son. Of the nine slaves George transported from his home in Virginia to work on the executive mansion in the Philadelphia capital, seven were Martha's "dower" slaves.

Abolition had begun in Pennsylvania, but nonresidents legally were allowed to hold slaves for up to six months. To prevent establishing residency for their enslaved workers, George and Martha rotated their President House slaves in and out of Pennsylvania within the six-month legal guidelines. George reasoned that residency would have qualified them for manumission which could have left him liable to the Custis Estate for the monetary value of any enslaved people gone free.

First Lady Martha had promised a young female slave of hers, Ona Judge, as a gift to her granddaughter Eliza Custis. It is written that Martha was personally distraught upon learning Ona had escaped, hid with free-black friends, and successfully traveled north. According to biographer Patricia Brady, Ona Judge professed a great regard for Martha and the way she had been treated, but she couldn't face a future as a slave for herself and her children. Another house slave, their chief cook Hercules, also escaped. By 1797, the number of Martha's "dower" slaves had grown to 153 and Washington's slaves numbered 124.

George willed that his slaves be freed upon his death. However, because he was unable to own Martha's "dowers," he was not able to will them to be freed or rented to others, where they might have worked themselves free. Thus, to spare Martha from seeing their slave families torn apart, were any of her "dowers" to be sold individually by the estate, Washington's will also stated that his slaves not be sold until after Martha's death. George died suddenly in 1797. Four years later, alive and well, Martha freed his slaves.

Abigail Adams had visited Martha and noted a sinister motive for Martha freeing George's slaves while she was still alive. In a letter Adams wrote, "With their freedom suspended until her death, she [Martha] did not feel as though her life was safe in their hands...[for] it was in their interest to get rid of her." Martha died in 1801, willed her "dower" slaves to her four grandchildren with Elisha, the one slave Martha owned outright, specifically to her grandson.

Michelle Obama was born Michelle LaVaughn Robinson, on January 17, 1964 on the south side of Chicago where her father was an employee of the city's water plant. In 1992, Barack (three years her senior) married Michelle at a church on Chicago's south side when both were young lawyers with student loans from Harvard. Barack won the presidency of the United States of America on November 4, 2008. Michelle is to become the first First Lady of the United States of America who is a descendent of American plantation slavery.

Sources: U.S. Constitution; *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*, Henry Wiencek; [http://genealogy.wikia.com/wiki/Michelle\\_Robinson\\_\(1964\)](http://genealogy.wikia.com/wiki/Michelle_Robinson_(1964)) ; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies/>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha\\_Washington](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha_Washington).