

A life hidden in shadows of slavery, revealed

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Abby led a life relegated to the shadows, as was typical for enslaved women at the time of the American Revolution. While great events went on around her, Abby attended to her mistress' chores. If not for a single momentous event, everything about Abby's life would most certainly be lost to history. But even what is known about that event tells us little about her.

Researcher Amanda Kemp knows this much: Abby served Sarah Jay, wife of John Jay, a founding father who in 1789 became the Supreme Court's first chief justice. Kemp knows that in 1783 Abby accompanied the Jays to Paris, where John assisted Benjamin Franklin in negotiating the treaty that ended the Revolutionary War.

But there's much Kemp does not know. She doesn't how old Abby lived to be or whether she had family. Kemp doesn't know if Abby was a big woman or small. She doesn't know where she was laid to rest.

Freedom interrupted

Abby was property. That's the long and short of Abby's life, except for a momentous event: in Paris, she ran away. Her defiant act was noted in correspondence. And because historic figures penned those letters, they have been in safekeeping for 224 years.

Today, the six letters reside in university archives, where they caught the eye of Kemp, 41, a historian, playwright and research associate at Franklin & Marshall College.

What Kemp read got under her skin. The letters tell how Abby was caught and thrown into prison. Given the choice of staying in jail or returning to her mistress, Abby chose prison, where she fell ill and died.

What particularly stood out to Kemp about Abby's tragic story was the connection to Franklin. The letters suggest that after Abby ran away, Sarah Jay may have turned to Franklin for help. The situation for Sarah was delicate, because France did not recognize slavery, Kemp said. French authorities had no reason to arrest and imprison a runaway slave. Yet that's what happened. Letters show that Franklin's 23-year-old grandson, Temple Franklin, employed as Franklin's secretary, asked a French police lieutenant to intervene.

Did Franklin instruct his grandson to have the runaway arrested?"

I don't have a paper trail to tell me that," Kemp said. But Kemp thinks it's likely Franklin, held with high regard in French society, handed the matter over to his grandson so that his own name would not be tied to the recapture of a slave.

The full picture

For the past four months, a museum in Paris has featured an impressive exhibit telling the story of Franklin's remarkable life. A publisher, inventor, philanthropist and statesman, Franklin was one of the most accomplished men of his time, perhaps of all time.

But the exhibit fails to mention that Franklin owned slaves for 30 years before taking up the abolitionist cause late in life. The exhibit certainly makes no mention of Abby. So that's why Kemp asked the museum to allow her to perform a monologue about the woman. The museum balked.

Last month, Kemp flew to Paris anyway, and with a French documentary maker recording her conversations with museum goers and her recitations on the sidewalk, in a gallery and at a soiree, Kemp paid homage to Abby's ill-fated bid for freedom. People finally heard about Abby.

Kemp said she's not out to tear Franklin down, but to have his story told fully.

"What keeps me wanting to do that isn't an interest in scholarly honesty," Kemp said, "but a driving desire to heal. The wound of slavery has an ongoing legacy, but we're stuck because we haven't fully known our past."

In Paris now a few people know about Abby. Kemp drew her from the shadows and gave her voice. Let's listen.