

## Paul Jennings's Account of the British Attack



E. C. Perry Photograph Co., *Paul Jennings*, undated. Photograph. Estate of Sylvia Jennings Alexander.

In 1799, Paul Jennings was born to slavery on the Madison plantation, Montpelier. He moved into the White House when James Madison became president in 1809. After James's second term, the household returned to Montpelier, and Paul became the former president's personal servant.

James Madison promised to free his slaves when he died, and made this promise to Paul Jennings specifically. But instead, he willed them all to Dolley, fearing she would be destitute otherwise. In 1847, Dolley sold Jennings to Pollard Webb, an insurance agent. Senator Daniel Webster then purchased him and allowed him to buy his freedom by working at the rate of \$8 per month. The complex arrangement may have been designed to free Jennings without costing Dolley, whose finances were dire. Jennings always said he had bought his freedom from Dolley Madison, and he stayed in touch with her later.

He even gave her small amounts of money when he could, and spoke highly of her. She evidently did not know that he helped plan the failed 1848 slave escape aboard the *Pearl*. (See the life stories of **Sukey** and **The Edmonson Sisters**.)

Paul Jennings had learned to read and write. In 1865, he published the first White House memoir, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*. These passages deal with the alarming hours just before the British attacked Washington in August 1814, when he was 15. (See the life story of **Dolley Madison**, **Resource 6**, and **Resource 8**.)

### Discussion Questions

- ★ What makes this account of life in the White House both unique and historically significant?
- ★ According to Paul Jennings, who saved the portrait of George Washington during the evacuation of the White House?
- ★ Why are there conflicting accounts of this event?

**Sources:** Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Paul Jennings, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*, Annotations, <http://context.montpelier.org/document/448> (accessed by M. Waters, 10-18-2016); Elizabeth Dowling Taylor, *A Slave in the White House: Paul Jennings and the Madisons* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012).

## Paul Jennings's Reminiscence

Mrs. Madison ordered dinner to be ready at 3, as usual; I set the table myself, and brought up the ale, cider, and wine, and placed them in the coolers, as all the Cabinet and several military gentlemen and strangers were expected. While waiting, at just about 3, as Sukey, the house-servant, was lolling out of a chamber window, James Smith, a free colored man who had accompanied Mr. Madison to Bladensburg, galloped up to the house, waving his hat, and cried out, 'Clear out, clear out! General Armstrong has ordered a retreat!' All then was confusion. Mrs. Madison ordered her carriage, and passing through the dining-room, caught up what silver she could crowd into her old-fashioned reticule, and then jumped into the chariot with her servant girl Sukey, and Daniel Carroll, who took charge of them; Jo. Bolin drove them over to Georgetown Heights; the British were expected in a few minutes . . . [but] they did not arrive for some hours. . . .

It has often been stated in print, that when Mrs. Madison escaped from the White House, she cut out from the frame the large portrait of Washington (now in one of the parlors there), and carried it off. This is totally false. She had no time for doing it. It would have required a ladder to get it down. All she carried off was the silver in her reticule, as the British were thought to be but a few squares off, and were expected every moment. John Susé (a Frenchman, then door-keeper, and still living) and Magraw, the President's gardener, took it down and sent it off on a wagon, with some large silver urns and such other valuables as could be hastily got hold of. When the British did arrive, they ate up the very dinner, and drank the wines, &c., that I had prepared for the President's party.

Paul Jennings, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*. Brooklyn: George C. Beadle, 1865. Electronic Edition, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jennings/jennings.html> (accessed by M. Waters, 12-6-2016).

### Notes

*reticule* = a small handbag

*John Susé* = Jean-Pierre Sioussat, the chief steward (doorkeeper) and chef in the Madison White House.