

Legislation Text

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Honoring the life, courage, and resilience of Ona “Oney” Judge, whose story of escape to freedom has become a pillar in Black American history for its themes of autonomy, self-actualization, pride, and its particular significance in Philadelphia’s abolitionist history.

WHEREAS, Ona Judge was born in Mount Vernon, Virginia in 1773. She was the daughter of an enslaved woman of African ancestry named Betty and an indentured servant of English descent named Andrew Judge. Both Ona’s parents were among the 150 people who were forced to work on the Mount Vernon estate for the first President of the United States, George Washington, and his wife, Martha Washington. Ona would serve Martha Washington continuously through her teenage years, combing Martha’s hair daily, picking her outfits, traveling frequently with Martha, and even being forced to sleep in the room next to Martha’s; and

WHEREAS, In 1789, when Ona was just fifteen years old, George Washington was elected first President of the United States. He moved the family to the nation’s capital in Philadelphia. At the time, Pennsylvania’s Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 granted freedom from enslavement to any person that could establish residency in the state for more than six months. Because of this law, Philadelphia at the time had the largest Black free population in the North, with thousands of Black people living freely in the City; and

WHEREAS, Pennsylvania’s abolition law threatened George Washington’s use of slave labor, but he was adamant on continuing his way of life. George Washington created a system to evade the requirements of the law by rotating his enslaved staff across state lines to New Jersey or back to Mount Vernon after five months of work in Philadelphia. These workers were only brought back when their six month residency requirement restarted; and

WHEREAS, These acts did not break the Pennsylvania law, but instead created a loophole to evade the spirit of the abolitionist policy. George Washington went on to sign the first Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which allowed slaveowners to hire bounty hunters to seize and arrest fugitives seeking freedom; and

WHEREAS, Ona would escape the Washingtons’ house in Philadelphia in 1796, when she boarded the *Nancy* on the Delaware River and made her way to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Ona was able to secure lodging with a free African American family upon her arrival. In January of 1797, Ona met a free Black sailor by the name of John “Jack” Staines, and they would marry. Ona moved into her own home with her husband, and together they had three children: Eliza, William, and Nancy; and

WHEREAS, The Washingtons became aware of Ona’s new home in New Hampshire and hired bounty hunters to reclaim her many times. The first attempt occurred while George Washington was serving as President, where he elicited the advice of the U.S. Secretary of Treasury Oliver Wolcott to help catch Ona. Secretary Wolcott recommended collector of customs for Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Joseph Whipple; and

WHEREAS, Whipple was able to trick Ona into speaking with him by putting out an ad for domestic work. The Washingtons had believed that Ona was seduced away from their home, so Whipple used this opportunity to try to negotiate her return. Ona asserted that she had not run away to Portsmouth because she was coerced, but to

seek freedom. Ona was able to continue evasion from both Whipple and President Washington until the end of his second term in 1797; and

WHEREAS, George Washington was still determined to recapture Ona Judge, so he turned to Martha Washington's nephew, Burwell Bassett, Jr. Bassett sought out Ona's Portsmouth residence, knocked on her front door, and insisted that Ona return to Mount Vernon. Ona refused and is noted to have responded that she was "free now, and choose[s] to remain so"; and

WHEREAS, In August 1799, frustrated with Ona's lack of cooperation, Bassett solicited the help of Senator John Langdon to capture her. Bassett shared President Washington's instructions with the Senator, to "take her by force, and carry her back," if necessary. Because the Langdons were former slave owners, Bassett believed the Senator would be sympathetic to his cause; and

WHEREAS, For the second time, Ona Judge evaded her capture by the Washingtons. Ona fled on the night Bassett set up a plan for her recapture. The Langdons decided to send word to Ona of Bassett's impending action, and Ona immediately hired a horse that took her to a woodsy town just eight miles from Portsmouth, called Greenland, New Hampshire. This second attempt was the last time that anyone came looking for Ona, as President Washington passed away shortly thereafter, in December 1799, when Ona was in her late twenties; and

WHEREAS, In George Washington's will, it stated that all enslaved people of his estate would be emancipated upon the death of his wife, Martha. Martha would later amend her husband's will to emancipate many enslaved people from Mount Vernon after suspicious fires led her to realize that her life was the last barrier to freedom for many. Unfortunately, Ona was not included in the group of those emancipated. The grandchildren of the Washingtons inherited claims to Ona's bondage due to laws that President Washington helped put in place; and

WHEREAS, Ona remained on the run her whole life. On February 25, 1848, Ona Judge died in Greenland, New Hampshire. Her story persisted through her family and her interviews with two abolitionist newspapers in 1845 and early 1846, near the end of her life. In those interviews, Ona expressed that she never regretted her escape to freedom, saying that she was made a child of God from her hardships; and

WHEREAS, Ona's life story was documented by historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar in her 2019 book *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave Ona Judge*. An outdoor memorial exhibit was installed at the President's House Site at 6th and Market in 2010 to examine the paradox between slavery and freedom in the founding of our nation. A path of bronze footsteps embedded in the stone floor of the President's House memorial symbolizes her brave escape. The nine people known to have been enslaved in Washington's Philadelphia home are engraved on a marble slab at this site: Molly, Christopher Sheels, Richmond, Giles, Austin, Paris, Joe, Hercules, and Ona Judge; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That we hereby honor the life, courage, and resilience of Ona "Oney" Judge, whose story of escape to freedom has become a pillar in Black American history for its themes of autonomy, self-actualization, pride, and its particular significance in Philadelphia's abolitionist history.