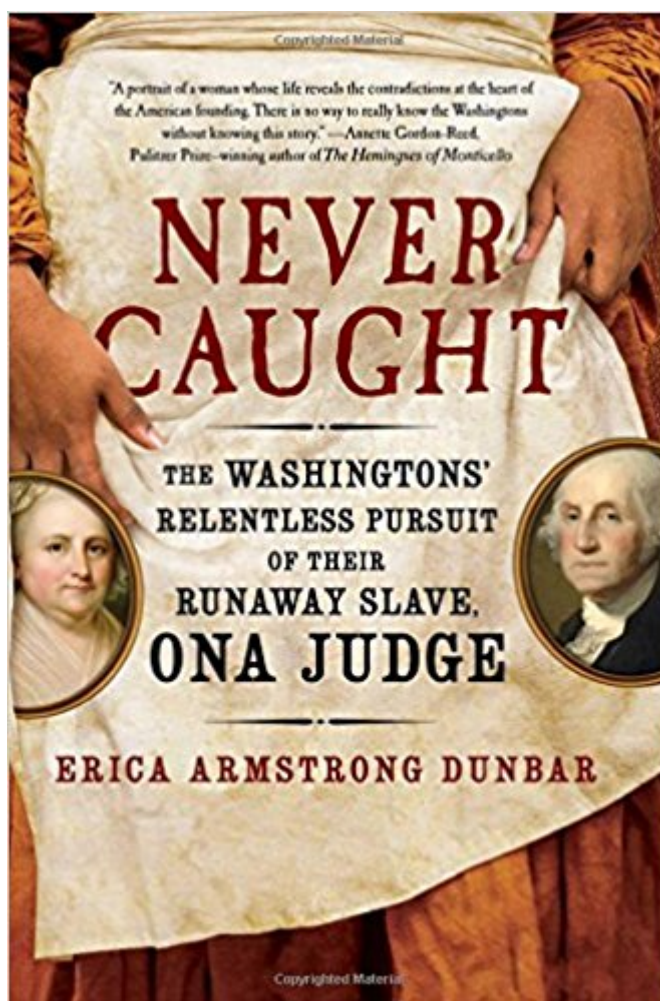


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# Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit Of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge



## Synopsis

“A fascinating and moving account of a courageous and resourceful woman. Beautifully written and utilizing previously untapped sources it sheds new light both on the father of our country and on the intersections of slavery and freedom.” —Eric Foner, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Fiery Trial* and *Gateway to Freedom* A startling and eye-opening look into America’s First Family, *Never Caught* is the powerful narrative of Ona Judge, George and Martha Washington’s runaway slave who risked everything to escape the nation’s capital and reach freedom. When George Washington was elected president, he reluctantly left his beloved Mount Vernon to serve in Philadelphia, the temporary seat of the nation’s capital. In setting up his household he took Tobias Lear, his celebrated secretary and eight slaves, including Ona Judge, about whom little has been written. As he grew accustomed to Northern ways, there was one change he couldn’t get his arms around: Pennsylvania law required enslaved people be set free after six months of residency in the state. Rather than comply, Washington decided to circumvent the law. Every six months he sent the slaves back down south just as the clock was about to expire. Though Ona Judge lived a life of relative comfort, the few pleasantries she was afforded were nothing compared to freedom, a glimpse of which she encountered first-hand in Philadelphia. So, when the opportunity presented itself, Judge left everything she knew to escape to New England. Yet freedom would not come without its costs. At just twenty-two-years-old, Ona became the subject of an intense manhunt led by George Washington, who used his political and personal contacts to recapture his property. With impeccable research, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar weaves a powerful tale and offers fascinating new scholarship on how one young woman risked it all to gain freedom from the famous founding father.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A fascinating and moving account of a courageous and resourceful woman. Beautifully written and utilizing previously untapped sources it sheds new light both on the father of our country and on the intersections of slavery and freedom in the flawed republic he helped to found.” (Eric Foner, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Fiery Trial* and *Gateway to Freedom*) “Never Caught is the compelling story of Ona Judge Staines, the woman who successfully defied George and Martha Washington in order to live as free woman. With vivid prose and deep sympathy, Dunbar paints a portrait of woman whose life reveals the contradictions at the heart of the American founding: men like Washington fought for liberty for themselves even as they kept people like Ona Staines in bondage. There is no way to really know the Washingtons without knowing this story.” (Annette Gordon Reed, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Hemings of Monticello*) “A crisp and compulsively readable feat of research and storytelling.” (USA Today) “Totally engrossing and absolutely necessary for understanding the birth of the American Republic, *Never Caught* is richly human history from the vantage point of the enslaved fifth of the early American population. Here is Ona Judge’s (successful) quest for freedom, on one side, and, on the other, George and Martha Washington’s (vain) use of federal power to try to keep her enslaved.” (Nell Irvin Painter, author of *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol*) “Dunbar has teased out Ona Judge from the shadows of history and given us a determined woman who rejected life as a slave in the comfortable household of George Washington for the risks of freedom. We see Washington -- a man torn by conflicting sentiments about slavery -- in a new and ambiguous light, and plunge with Judge into the teeming cities of the young republic, where for the first time Americans are beginning to grapple with the contradiction between the Founders’ ideals and the unyielding fact of slavery. No one who reads this book will think quite the same way about George and Martha Washington again.” (Fergus M. Bordewich, author of *The First Congress*) “Dunbar brings to life the forgotten story of a woman who fled enslavement from America’s First Family. Her mostly Northern story is a powerful reminder that the tentacles of slavery could reach from the South, all the way to the state of New Hampshire. The surprising part of this true history is not that she achieved her freedom, but the lengths to which George and Martha Washington would go to try to recapture a young woman who insulted them by rejecting

bondage." (Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, Dean of Commonwealth Honors College and author of *Mr & Ms. Prince*)

“In this riveting and thoroughly researched account of the life of Ona Judge Staines, historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar carefully and compellingly constructs enslaved life inside The President’s House and in the larger urban and rural communities of the time. A true page-turner, readers will come away with a deeper appreciation of enslaved people’s lives and a disturbing portrait of George and Martha Washington as slave owners. This book will change the way we study the history of slavery in the U.S, the history of American Presidents, and especially the burgeoning field of black women’s history.” (Daina Ramey Berry, Historian at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*)

“With the production of the Tony-award winning play, *Hamilton*, many Americans have been reminded of the noble actions of the nation’s fathers and mothers in birthing a new country founded on democracy, liberty, and freedom. In *Never Caught* historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar pulls back the curtain on their individual actions by focusing on Ona Judge, an enslaved woman owned by Martha and George Washington, who stole herself to freedom and refused to be reenslaved. Piecing together the fragments of a life, in vivid prose, Dunbar reminds us of the tremendous toll slavery visited on men and women of conscience and conviction, both black and white. This is a must read for anyone interested in this nation’s long pursuit of perfecting freedom.” (Earl Lewis, President of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation)

“A startling, well-researched narrative that seriously questions the intentions of our first president.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“There are books that can take over your life: Try as you might, you can’t seem to escape their mysterious power. That’s the feeling I had when reading the tour de force, *Never Caught*.” (Essence Magazine)

[Dunbar] sketches an evocative portrait of [Ona’s] daily life, both before and after her risky escape. For the reader, as for Judge, George Washington the Founding Father takes a back seat to George Washington the slave master. (Pacific Standard Magazine)

“Dunbar weaves an unforgettable story about a courageous woman willing to risk everything for freedom.” (Real Simple)

“Erica Armstrong Dunbar combines the known facts of Ona’s life in service to the Washingtons with vivid descriptions of the physical and emotional conditions early American slaves faced.” (New York Post)

“Compulsively readable” (USA Today)

“A valuable addition to African-American history, *Never Caught* pays a triple dividend.” (Richmond-Times Dispatch)

“A story of extraordinary grit.” (The Philadelphia Inquirer)

*Never Caught* is a gripping story of courage of a black slave woman who sacrificed many things including her family to gain freedom. *Never Caught* shows freedom is more important than anything else. What makes *Never Caught*

uniquely interesting and important is that this is one of the rare narratives from a black woman slave. It also shines light on the dark corners of American history and the first Family, the Washingtons. (Washington Book Review)

Erica Armstrong Dunbar is the Charles and Mary Beard Professor of History at Rutgers University. She also serves as Director of the Program in African American History at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Her first book, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* was published by Yale University Press in 2008. She is also the author of *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave Ona Judge*.

What an incredible piece of history. Startling and inspiring at once. In *Ona Judge* Staines, I'd say we have a new American hero. A 22-year old enslaved girl who chose a dirt poor fugitive's life in New Hampshire over a "privileged" life of slavery, a girl who ran away from no less than the beloved first president of the USA! Her courage is hard to fathom. And the Washingtons -- wow -- how slyly and relentlessly they chased her down. Amazing story. Must read!

I picked this book up after reading a small portion of it that had been featured on Longreads, and I was immediately struck by how powerful and compelling Dunbar's writing is. This book is wonderfully researched and informative and provides an unflinching look at what life was like not just for Ona and her family but for others who had been enslaved. Reading material like this is absolutely vital for those who want a complete picture of what American history was like, and I appreciate the effort and research that Dunbar put into crafting this. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

A good read about a piece of history I never knew. Really thoroughly researched and footnoted. (Notes at the end so reading is not interrupted.) One more piece of the true heritage we all share but mostly weren't ever taught -- Just one of Washington's slaves.

Ona Judge shows courage and tenacity. These qualities sustain her struggle and enable her survival. I found it interesting that while the first leader of our country, President George Washington, was fighting for our individual freedom he himself was enslaving so many people of color. Both he and his wife, Martha, owned family slaves and had for many generations. When Ona Judge decides to make her daring escape it set off a half-century of cat-and-mouse game that ends

in an unbelievable tale.

Fascinating story. I never knew anything about slavery in colonial days, and this book is so informative about the conditions that the slaves were forced to live and work in. It's a heartbreaking story. We've always been taught that George Washington was a heroic, saintly man, but the people he enslaved and "owned" definitely knew otherwise. Read this book!

Author Erica Armstrong Dunbar's fast-moving, well-researched book, "Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge," tells the little-known story of Ona Judge, Martha Washington's personal slave. Judge accompanied the First Family to New York and Philadelphia during George Washington's presidency, making a daring (and successful) escape just months before the president's second term, setting him on a vengeful mission to recapture her. Dunbar's meticulous research helps paint a detailed picture of what life was like for slaves in the Washington household and for those who escaped to freedom in New England. Where she was unable to provide documentation for specific events in Judge's life, she describes the kinds of things that other slaves experienced. It's a good approach that avoids projecting about things that can't be documented. With George Washington's voluminous public and private correspondence, his actions and comments are far easier to report. While Dunbar notes that he wasn't as cruel as many slave-owners of his time were, Washington's response to Judge's escape shows him to be a meaner, more spiteful person than the usual image of the first president. Furious at the 19-year-old's escape, Washington dispatched slave-hunters and leaned on federal officials up and down the East Coast to find the girl and return her to Alexandria. But, with abolitionist sentiment growing in New England, Washington's political allies in New Hampshire, who knew where Judge was living, were reluctant to assist the president. She would remain free and outlive the Washingtons by several decades but always labor under the fear that their descendants could force her (and her New England-born children) into slavery. "Never Caught" is a page-turner that those interested in learning about another side of George Washington and a daring young woman who risked it all for freedom will enjoy.

What a great book and a great important part of history. I thank the author for her well done, in

depth hard work!! I am passing this to my daughters because though we think we know & care about the injustices of slavery, there is always so much more to the story!!

This is a quick read that gives us insight into an important slice of history and increases our puzzlement over the conundrum we face when trying to reconcile our views of our founding fathers who were also slaveholders. Well worth the few hours it takes to make your way through this story.

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