

Sukey ca. 1795–after 1848

Household Slave

Sukey was born into slavery on Montpelier, the Madison family's Virginia plantation. As children, she and Paul Jennings, also enslaved at Montpelier, became part of James and Dolley Madison's household staff in Washington.



Baroness Anne-Marguerite-Henriette Hyde de Neuville, *Martha Church, Cook in "Ordinary Costume,"* ca. 1807–1814. Watercolor, graphite, and brown ink on paper. New-York Historical Society, 1953.276.

The enslaved handled cooking, cleaning, laundry, and other chores, just as George Washington's and Thomas Jefferson's slaves had done in their administrations. But Sukey does not appear in Dolley's letters until James was no longer president and they were all back at Montpelier. Mentioning her for the first time in a letter in 1818, Dolley wrote that Sukey had been stealing from every room in the house, and that Dolley had sent her away to one of the other Madison farms: "[I] find it terribly inconvenient to do without her, & suppose I shall take her again. . . . I must even let her steal from me, to keep from labor myself—more than my strength will permit."

Personal Maid

Mrs. Madison did take Sukey back, and later called her "my most efficient House servant." Every person the Madisons enslaved in the mansion was a "house servant," but Sukey had a special role: she was Dolley's personal maid. Her precise tasks are not known, but she probably took care of Mrs. Mad-

ison's wardrobe, helped her dress and change several times a day, fixed her hair, inspected and repaired her clothes after each wearing, carefully washed the most delicate items, and put everything away for the next use. To Dolley Madison, her clothes meant fashion and power. To Sukey, they meant work. Theirs was an intimate relationship between two women whose condition and status could not have been more different. Sukey would have known details that few others did: that Mrs. Madison had painful rheumatism and trouble with her eyes, that she was sometimes lonely and depressed.

Dolley Madison's Silk Satin Open Robe. The National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.



Mother

There is no record of what Sukey thought or felt. Unlike Paul Jennings, she did not learn to read and write. There are no images of her either. The watercolor painting included here portrays a different Black woman from the same period, a cook about Sukey's age. Most of what is known about Sukey comes from the letters of her owner, Dolley Madison, and from Paul Jennings, who once called her "sister Sukey." Historians now believe Sukey had at least five children: Rebecca in 1824, followed quickly by Ben, George, and William. The youngest, Ellen, was born in 1833. They used the surname Stewart, and when they were old enough, they became house servants to the Madisons.

Sukey continued to serve Mrs. Madison for many years, and she attended Mr. Madison in his final illness. After James died, when the widowed Dolley began to spend more time in Washington, Sukey went with her. She was there in 1844, when news arrived that her son William was dying. Her daughter Rebecca was sold that year. Ben, and possibly George, had been sold the year before.

And then, in late 1847, Mrs. Madison tried to sell Sukey's last child, 15-year-old Ellen, for \$400. She made arrangements with slave traders to send Ellen to the public well, where they could seize her. The traders bungled the operation, however, and Ellen ran away, hiding in a safe house

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for the next six months. She may well have had help from Paul Jennings, who was then free. On April 15, 1848, Ellen was one of seventy runaways who boarded the schooner *Pearl* under cover of darkness and set sail down the Potomac River toward Philadelphia in a massive slave escape that Jennings helped plan. When Mrs. Madison heard the news the following morning, she flew into a rage and sold Sukey on the spot to a local Washington family. With this, Sukey vanished from the public record.

The *Pearl* was captured before it escaped Southern waters. Ellen Stewart was imprisoned with other runaways, and soon sold by Mrs. Madison for \$400. Dolley promised to send her son Payne some of the proceeds “to put his clothes in order.”

Abolitionists had long been critical of the Madisons, and Dolley especially, for continuing to own slaves. Two weeks before the attempted *Pearl* escape, the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* scoffed at news that Dolley was broke: “What may be thought of the idea that old Mrs. Madison is [so] reduced and destitute, that she must exchange the members of her family for potatoes, beans and pork, to keep life a-going, we do not know. It certainly sounds queer in our ears. It has been a very general impression that Mr. Madison left a fair, if not large property. . . .”

Following the story of the *Pearl’s* recaptured slaves closely, abolitionists

began a massive fund-raising effort on Ellen’s behalf. One newspaper wrote: “Let me ask the good women, mothers and sisters, to pity the poor child. . . . Her mother is overwhelmed with grief.” By July 1848, enough money had been raised to buy Ellen Stewart from a Baltimore slave pen for \$475. This figure included the original price paid to Mrs. Madison, and \$75 for the expenses incurred by the pen’s owners. Soon after, Sukey’s daughter was reported to be in Boston, living free.

For the story of two other teenage girls aboard the *Pearl*, see the life story of the **Edmonson Sisters**.

Sources: Significant details in this life story are based on Elizabeth Dowling Taylor’s *A Slave in the White House: Paul Jennings and the Madisons* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012), and on research by historians at The Dolley Madison Digital Edition, Holly C. Shulman, ed., University of Virginia. Additional sources: Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and company, 2006); Mary Kay Ricks, *Escape on the Pearl: The Heroic Bid for Freedom on the Underground Railroad* (New York: William Morrow, 2007).

Discussion Questions

- ★ As an enslaved female domestic, what were Sukey’s responsibilities in the Madison household?
- ★ What punishments did Sukey endure for displeasing Dolley Madison? What do these episodes reveal about the lives of enslaved women?
- ★ Why do historians have to rely on third-person accounts to learn about Sukey’s life?
- ★ Why is it important to do the work necessary to uncover the lives and experiences of women like Sukey?