



Patty Allen (1770-after 1831)

Patty Allen was born in 1770, likely in New Kent County, Virginia. As a child born enslaved to John Parke Custis, Patty knew the inhumanity of the institution of slavery; in particular, that enslaved people were considered personal property and could be sold or moved at the will of their enslaver. The first known record of Patty comes from a December 1771 list of enslaved people, compiled by George Washington, describing his and his stepson, John Parke Custis, enslaved holdings in York, New Kent and King William Counties, Virginia. Under John Parke Custis's New Kent County "Old Quarter," Patty is named, aged one year; due to the nature of the list, Patty's mother remains unknown.¹

Patty's enslaver, John Parke Custis, died in November 1781. Custis died intestate which exposed his estate to a long process of liquidation, part of which involved inventorying each house and farm held by Custis, in order to make equal division of his land and personal property among his widow and four young children. In the New Kent County inventory taken in April 1782, it is likely that references to "Patt" and "Little Patt," is in fact Patty Allen, who are both named under the "girls" heading. Patty was 11 years old.²

While Custis's estate was being resolved, Patty likely continued living and working in New Kent County. The Custis children, ages 2-5 and George just born, could not legally claim their inheritance and the enslaved people they inherited could not be moved or sold until his daughters married and his son reached the age of majority. It is important to acknowledge the fear and anxiety that Patty and her family, as well as the others enslaved by the Custis family, certainly felt during this period.³ Patty would have had no control over where she would be sent to live and work, or to whom of the Custis children she would be enslaved.

¹ "List of Slaves Belonging to George Washington and John Parke Custis, December 1771," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/02-08-02-0382>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, vol. 8, 24 June 1767–25 December 1771, ed. W. W. Abbott and Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993, pp. 587–592.]. If she survived childbirth, Patty's mother is likely also named in the New Kent County Old Quarter section of the 1771 list. Unfortunately, the overseer at the New Kent County Old Quarter, Richard Street, did not provide ages for the adults on the list forwarded to George Washington, nor was Patty's mother explicitly identified.

² "Inventory and Appraisalment of the Estate of John Park Custis Esquire in New Kent County, April 12th, 1782," Fairfax County Will Book E-1 page 14, 25 June 1784, Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, Fairfax, VA.

³ Some of John Parke Custis's enslaved waited 20 years to learn to whom of his children they would be enslaved. Custis's daughters, Elizabeth "Betsy" Parke Custis, Martha "Patty" Parke Custis, and Eleanor "Nelly" Parke Custis, married in 1796, 1795, and 1799, respectively. Custis's son, George Washington "Wash" Parke Custis, reached the age of majority in 1802. It was only upon each daughters' marriages, and George Washington Parke Custis reaching age 21, that the enslaved were divided among the Custis heirs. The enslaved who were moved to Georgetown with Martha "Patty" Parke Custis Peter waited, at minimum, 13 years to learn their fate; and those moved to George Washington Parke Custis in Arlington in 1802 waited for two decades after John Parke Custis's death.



In 1795, Patty was moved to the newly-formed District of Columbia, as part of Martha Parke Custis's patrimony upon her marriage to Thomas Peter. Patty was 25 years old.⁴ The structure of Martha Peter's 1795 patrimony list indicates that the enslaved were listed in families, grouped together as husband, wife and children; or mothers and children. Following this track, Patty (age 25) was listed with her husband, Joe (age 27), and their sons, Tom (age 10) and Harry (age 7). Few records have been found regarding Joe, Tom and Harry's fates after the Peter marriage. Sources indicate that Patty was then separated from her first husband, Joe, and sons, forever.⁵

While enslaved by the Peters at Tudor Place, Patty lived with her free husband off the property.⁶ Forced apart from her first husband and sons, Patty would not have known whether she would ever see them again. Britannia Peter Kennon's reminiscences, from which Patty's living arrangement is recalled, offer little context to place Patty's free husband in time and space. Moreover, unfortunately, his name and when they married is unknown. Separated from her family, and living in an unfamiliar place, Patty likely sought new relationships, such as her second marriage, to feel a sense of comfort and kinship ties in a new community.⁷

Every day, Patty labored as the cook for the Peter family. A cook's role required skill and experience, so it is likely that Patty learned these skills from her mother or another family member while in New Kent County, and as such, was prepared to take on the role of cook when moved to Tudor Place. Patty's days began very early, as Britannia Peter Kennon recalled, before the "crack of day," as she would not only have had to build the cooking fires, but also walk from her home in Georgetown to Tudor Place. During Patty's enslavement, the kitchen was separate from the main

⁴ "Thomas Peter Account Book, 1796-1799," in Thomas and Martha (Custis) Peter Papers, MS-2, Box 1, Folder 19, Tudor Place Manuscript Collection, Tudor Place Historic House & Garden, Georgetown, Washington, D. C.

⁵ Ibid. In 1796, Thomas Peter sold about half of the enslaved inherited by his wife, Martha upon their marriage, most likely in New Kent County, Virginia, where the enslaved had originally lived. Joe, Tom and Harry do not appear in Thomas Peter's account book as sold in 1796, but it is possible they were sold later, or, alternatively, sent to one of the Peter family farms in Montgomery County, Maryland. Thomas Peter imported Joe into Montgomery County on May 26, 1796 (see Montgomery County Land Records Liber G, page 216, 2 June 1796). New Kent County, Virginia has suffered from significant court records losses which complicates research that could link families, genealogical histories and stories about these individuals.

⁶ "Britannia's Reminiscences, 1895-1900," in Armistead Peter, Jr. Papers, MS-14, Box 69, Folder 24, and Box 70, Folder 1-3, Tudor Place Manuscript Collection, Tudor Place Historic House & Garden, Georgetown, Washington, D. C. In her reminiscences, Britannia Peter Kennon recalled that "every night, she [Patty] went home to her husband, who was free, and every morning—be the weather good or bad—she was in the kitchen at the crack of day." For Patty to be permitted to live off Tudor Place property was an extraordinary arrangement. While free African American men could receive permission from their wives' enslavers to visit periodically, enslaved women were typically not afforded the same courtesy. Documentation and information detailing this arrangement between Patty and her enslavers, Thomas and Martha Peter is yet to be discovered; but would be integral to understanding Britannia's grasp and approach to the dynamics of slavery as an enslaver. Britannia, daughter of Thomas and Martha Peter, was born in 1815, and as such, would have likely only known Patty as a young girl or teenager.

⁷ Ibid. Patty's free husband is unlikely to be Joe, her husband in the 1795 patrimony list, as there is currently no evidence to suggest that Joe was emancipated by Thomas or Martha Peter. Britannia recalled an enslaved man named Jo who helped extinguish a tree fire started by a lightning strike at Tudor Place, but no date and little context is given for this event. See Grant S. Quertermous, *A Georgetown Life: The Reminiscences of Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon of Tudor Place* (Georgetown University Press, 2020): 172.



house, so in some ways, it became her domain. She kept logs on the “great open fireplace” which required a constant eye on the state of their burn. Patty used an “old Dutch oven, a crane and innumerable pots and kettles” to prepare meals at Tudor Place. With this cookware, Patty likely prepared meals such as bread puddings, soups and stews and roasted meats for the Peters and their guests.⁸

Though Patty was forced to live as property of the Peters, she was part of a larger community of free and enslaved African Americans in Georgetown. Before 1831, “Patty Allen” appears on a list titled “Communicants of the Coloured People” at Christ Church Georgetown, along with another enslaved woman to the Peters, Eliza Gray. Patty was about 60 years old, and this record serves as the only source for her surname. It is also the last known record for Patty, whose death date is unknown. Patty’s attendance at Christ Church Georgetown, late in her life, revealed her own part of the unique and resilient culture of the enslaved and emancipated people living in Georgetown.⁹ In some ways, Patty existed in both worlds of the enslaved and the free, straddling them as necessitated by her legal status as an enslaved woman, yet somewhat independent of the severe restrictions placed on her contemporaries.

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⁸ Ibid. See also Leana Schafer, “South Yard Dwellings: Food & Cooking,” Montpelier’s Digital Doorway, <https://digitaldoorway.montpelier.org/2021/02/04/south-yard-dwellings-food-cooking/>, accessed 22 Dec 2023.

⁹ “Communicants among the Coloured People,” Christ Church Georgetown Registers, Vol. I, 1820-1865, ca. 1831, p. 69, from typewritten notes held in Tudor Place’s vertical files. “Patty Allen – Mrs. Thos Peter’s” is listed under this heading. This is the only known record which gives Patty’s surname. Britannia referred to her as “Old Patty.” As of November 2023, according to Archivist Glenn Metzdorf, the original registers for Christ Church Georgetown are missing.

¹⁰ The author acknowledges the research assistance of the following individuals: Haley Wilkinson (formerly with Tudor Place); Rob DeHart, Curator (Tudor Place); Glenn Metzdorf, Archivist (Christ Church Georgetown, District of Columbia); and Molly Kerr, Founding Director (History Revealed, Inc., Alexandria, VA).