McNeill Center Seminar

April 17, 2020

“Liberty. . . or the Genius of America”:

Revisiting the Library Company’s Iconic Painting

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

In 1792, Philadelphia was the capital of the newly established United States. Congress met in Independence Square. George Washington’s mansion with its small slave quarter stood nearby. Just a few steps away was a new building constructed by the Library Company of Philadelphia, an institution founded by Benjamin Franklin and his asociates in 1731 as a private subscription library.. Hanging above the mantel in the Library Company’s new building was a large painting sent from London by Samuel Jennings, a Philadelphian living abroad. Fixed to the frame was its provative title: “Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, or the Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks.” [[1]](#footnote-1) [Figure 1]

Jennings 1792 painting now hangs in the main reading room of the current Library Company building. Although some scholars work diligently in its shadow without ever taking a look, other visitors are troubled by the image of a cluster of African-Americans bowing before an immense white woman. To some it evokes critiques of white benevolence contained in classic works like novelist Alice Walker’s 1974 *Ms.* essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Garden.” In a memorable passage, she described the enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley, “a sickly little black girl” who had been snatched from her home and country, struggling to write an ode to George Washington about the blessing of Liberty. “The Goddess comes, she moves divinely fair; /Olive and laurel binds her golden hair.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In that reading the conditions for “emancipation” are another form of oppression. Feminist activists from the nineteenth-century to the present have been equally hostile to a form of representation that uses idealized images of white women to dignify a history focused on white men. The title of Aileen Kraditor’s 1968 survey *Up From the Pedestal* captures that complaint. It is difficult for an icon to become a person.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the 1970s, feminists like Walker and Kraditor had something to fight against. Today’s activists may find antiquarian objects like Jenning’s painting simply irrelevent. Yet in a nation still struggling to work within an eighteenth-century political framework, the contradictions and obfuscations in our nation’s eighteenth-century icons may be more enduring and therefore more relevant to our own situation than they seem. We, like them, profess a belief in human equality yet find it difficult to confront structural racism or surmount cultural patterns that undermine full civil and political equality for women. We too struggle with dissonance between our professed beliefs and our actions in a world we did not make.

This essay builds on a brief analysis in my 2007 book *Well-behaved Women Seldom Make History* that compares Jennings’ painting with a 1792 Philadelphia engraving celebrating the rights of women.[[4]](#footnote-4) In a more fundamental way, it draws upon a landmark essay by Kirsten Sword that reconceptualizes the nature of the antislavery movement in the revolutionary era and that ends with a comparison between Jennings’ painting and a contemporary painting by Jeremiah Paul now called “The Emancipation of Dinah Nevil.”[[5]](#footnote-5) My essay begins with a close look at the Library Company painting, then after an exploration of work on the transatlantic antislavery movement, compares it with the 1792 engraving and the painting by Jeremiah Paul.

I: Liberty

The goddess of Liberty was not a person. Although Jennings dressed her in the style of the 1790s, she was not intended to represent an actual woman. She was one of a chorus of iconographic representations that animated contemporary political discourse, poetry, and visual art. Some represented abstract concepts like Justice, Charity, Wisdom, or Peace. In the eighteenth century, artists on both sides of the Atlantic associated *Libertas,* or Liberty, with a purportedly ancient Roman ceremony in which a slave about to be freed was touched with a rod (the *vindicata*) and given a soft hat (the *pileus*).[[6]](#footnote-6) Jennings’s white goddess holds a liberty pole surmounted by a liberty cap. Beneath her feet are broken chains.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In their earliest use, these emblems alluded, not to chattel slavery as practiced in the Americas, but to a particular kind of political slavery. In revolutionary America, so-called sons of liberty claimed that Parliament had enslaved them by levying taxes without their consent. As the radical pamphleteer Thomas Paine, expressed it, “if being bound in that manner, is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The idea was not as far-fetched as it seems. The English common law defined liberty as a right to the undisturbed possession of property. The ability to claim other human beings as property didn’t undercut the argument. Perhaps it enchanced it. In a letter written in 1774, George Washington explained, “The crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights, or submit to every imposition that can be heap’d upon us; till custom and use will make us as tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway.” [[9]](#footnote-9)

The earliest known use of the icon of liberty was in Paul Revere’s design for an obelisk erected on Boston Common after the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1765. The successive panels show evil ministers assaulting America by passing taxes without their consent. In the last panel, Liberty celebrates the repeal of the Stamp Act with Britannia, pictured as a white woman, and America, portrayed as an Indian maiden, standing beside her.[[10]](#footnote-10) [Figure 2]. In a cartoon published in 1774, evil British ministers assault America while Britannia looks on in distress. [Figure 3]. Over the course of the Revolution the two figures appeared alone or together on maps, political cartoons, engravings, and on handmade paraphernalia. [Figure 4] In a flag created for a Connecticut company that eventually became a unit in the Continental Army, the two icons merged. Liberty became an Indian damsel who carried both a sword and a liberty pole and used a solder’s broad-brimmed hat as a cap.[[11]](#footnote-11) [Figure 5]

The Library company painting is the first known American image to link the icon of Liberty with the emancipation of slaves. The artist had proposed using the figure of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom. The gentlemen of the Library Company wanted nothing less than “the figure of Liberty (with her Cap and proper Insignia).” They asked that she be surrounded with “Groups of Negroes sitting on the Earth, or in some attitude expressive of Ease & Joy.” Some of the figures do sit on the earth. Those in the foreground appear to be in distress; those in the distance are celebrating. One man holds a banjo. A child sits with a basket of food. Others dance around a liberty pole surmounted with a wreath of laurel. [[12]](#footnote-12) Liberty, the painting suggests, is a kind and gentle goddess who will listen to the appeals of worthy supplicants.

In its portrayal of African Americans, Jennngs’ painting contrasts with the 1787 medallion produced by the manufacturer Josiah Wedgewood for the British Abolition Society. [Figure 6] Benjamin Franklin had given several of these medallions to friends in Philadelphia. It shows a kneeling African bound in chains and dressed in a breech cloth imploring the viewer, “Am I not a man and a brother?”[[13]](#footnote-13) In contrast, the figures in Jennings painting are all fully clothed. It is the small child, not the grown man, who lifts his clasped hands. Perhaps this is an allusion to Pennsylvania’s emancipation statute, passed in its first form in 1780. It didn’t really free anyone but ruled that children born to enslaved mothers after that date would be emancipated at age 28 after serving an indentureship with their mother’s master.[[14]](#footnote-14) Intentionally or not, the image of the petitioning child in this painting pushes ever so gently toward wider emancipation.

But what sort of emancipation did it imagine? Here it is important to remember that *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* did not belong to an abolition society. It belonged to a circulating library. Presumably, then, its purpose was to celebrate the emancipatory power of learning. Each item in the foreground represents an aspect of enlightenment arts and science, with books taking a place of honor. Volumes of Homer and Virgil lean against the base of the pedestal. Books on Philosophy and Agriculture sit atop the pedsta surmounted by the current catalogue of the library. The Library Company painting celebrates a particular form of emancipation, one achieved through the cultivation of reason. Liberty’s hands embrace the catalogue, as though she is about to open it. Intentionally or not, the sight-line of the painting leads straight from Liberty to the book and then to the African-Americans before her, shifting attention from the white rescuer to the enslaved persons and perhaps in particular to the African-American whose gaze seems to have caught Liberty.

II: Emancipation

Sword and other scholars have written about, women and men who in the years leading up to American revolution built a trans-Atlantic and multi-racial community that linked religion, race, and revolution in a quest for liberty.[[15]](#footnote-15) That network included white evangelical women like Rhode Island’s Sarah Osborn and Boston’s Susannah Wheatley but it was animated by the aspirations and the purposeful actions of enslaved pesons within their circle.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Even children’s books today explain how Susannah’s Wheatley’s children taught an enslaved child named Phillis to read and how she soon outpaced them with her literary gifts. Few explain how the gift of writing not only changed her life but American politics. Phillis Wheatly published her first poem in the *Newport Mercury* in 1767 and in 1770 an ode on the death of the British evangelist George Whitefield that appeared in Boston as well as Newport papers. That poem brought her to the attention of Whitefield’s patron, Selena Hastings, the Countess of Huntington, to whom she dedicated *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,* published in London in 1773.[[17]](#footnote-17)

David Waldstreicher has argued that Wheatley’s visit to England and the subsequent publication of her poems “made her the most famous individual of African descent in England and America for the remaining dozen years of her short life. In the process, she became a one-woman antislavery argument whose fate, and words, had real implications at a moment in history when the future of the colonies, and slavery, had yet to be determined.” He also argues that she was a political actor who fully understand that her fame rested on her contradictory identity as a slave poet.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In earlier accounts of her life, Wheatley appears as a solitary figure, like the mariner Gustava Vassa (Olaudah Equiano) whose autobiography became a publishing sensation a decade later. Kirsten Sword’s work connects both of them to a network of self-effacing Quaker activists, evangelical Protestants, and persons of color, like James Somerset, who was in 1770 freed in a ruling by Lord Mansfield that, though limited legally, inspired scores of enslaved persons to claim their freedom.[[19]](#footnote-19) Strange as it seems, Wheatley may have known Somerset, who spent some time in Boston with his master before winning his freedom.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Wheatley without question knew Samson Occum, a Mohegan pastor trained in an “Indian School” [later Dartmouth College], supported in part by the Countess of Huntington. In 1774, a Connecticut newspaper published a powerful letter Wheatley wrote Occum that evoked “a glorious dispensation of civil and religious Liberty.” These two liberties, she argued, “ are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one Without the other.”

Otherwise the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us.

Less anyone doubt the identity of those “modern Egyptians,” she drove the point home. “How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, --I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Wheatley was quite capable of applying revolutionary principles to her own situation. For her, slavery was not a metaphor.

Wheatley’s story invites us to consider the dual titles attached to the Library Company painting. Together they suggest that “*displaying* the arts and sciences” can *encourage* “the Emancipation of the Blacks.” We might ask then, in what manner the Library Company attempted to bring those two goals together. We do know that by 1774, the Library had purchased a first edition of Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. By 1785 it had acquired from a Philadelphia collector a copy of the eulogy that catapaulted Wheatley to international fame in the decade before. The 1793 supplement to its catalog also lists the 1789 edition of Equiano’s *Narrative* and a variety of works by British and American abolitionists. All these works were readily available not only to private patrons but to members of Congress. There is no way of knowing how they may have related to the instructions they sent to Jennings regarding his painting.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The painting does, however, exmplify the underlying arguments of such works—that enslaved persons have the same yearning for liberty and capacity for improvement as others. The African-Americans in Jennings’s painting are neither undressed as in classic representations of slavery nor stuffed into livery as in high-style portraits of loyal servants portrayed alongside their masters. They are dressed in the manner of ordinary working people. There is a hint of Quaker egalitarianism and “plainness” in their attire. It is intersting to look at image of Phillis Wheatley that appeared in her book of poetry in relation to Jennings’ African-American woman and alongside a portrait of the Countess of Huntington. {Figure 6b, Figure7a and b]

Note that the neat linen kerchief that covers Wheatley’s shoulders is virutally identical to that on the shoulders of the woman in Jennings’ painting, but that Wheatley’s lace-trimmed cap is of the same style as that worn by the Countess. In a period when clothing was a marker of civility as well as class, the significant point is not that Wheatley had acquired some of the attributes of a lady, but that the anonymous woman in Jenning’s portrait also had material markings of respectability.

III. The Rights of Women

In the same city in the same year, the newly established *Lady’s Magazine* was making another argument for education.. [Figure 8] As in the Jenning’s painting, the Goddess of Liberty sits in her Temple surrounded by artifacts alluding to enlightenment arts and sciences. The woman kneeling before her offers a sheet of paper labeled, “The Rights of Women,” an obvious allusion to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* If anyone doubted that, a ten-page review inside the magazine summarized the book’s major arguments and embellished with direct quotations. Since William Gibbons, the publisher of the *Lady’s Magazine* was about to publish a pirated edition of the book, the engraving and review were no doubt intended as an advertisement.

Not surprisingly, the excerpts chosen by the anonymous reviewer highlighted arguments that would have been familiar to Philadelphians. Wollstonecraft, like Wheatley, knew how to reconfigure the rhetoric of revolution. She argued that “ tyrants of every denomination, from the weak king to the weak father of a family. . .are all eager to crush reason,” a general charge that she then turned on male leaders: “Do you not act a similar part, when you force all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain immured in their families groping in the dark. . . . They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependant. “ Like Wheatley, she also knew how to weave Biblical allusions into her argument. Men who denied women the “rights of reason,” she exclaimed, were “worse than Egyptian taskmasters.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

In March 1793, Annis Boudinot Stockton, a locally renowned poet, friend of Washington, and widow of a New Jersey signer of the Declaration of Independence, wrote to her daughter in Philadelphia, “I have been engaged these two days with reading the rights of woman which I never could procure before, tho it has been much longer in the neighborhod. . .” She assumed that her daughter would know what book she was reading. That Stockton had had difficulty getting her hands on it suggests that copies were quickly snatched up.[[24]](#footnote-24) She took the book seriously and read it with care. She was sorry that a woman capable of writing so well should have spent so much space countering the “nonsense” of Rousseau, whom she considered a “refined idiot.” In America, she argued, “the Empire of reason is not monopolized by men.” Nor from her own observations of American women could she discern “any of that Slavish obedience. . . that she talks so much of.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Still she admired the author’s “charming remarks on education and her “admirable” chapter on modesty which she thought had “some marks of originality.” She neverless thought Wolstonecraft mistook gracious and civility for slavish obedience. She thought “an accomodating manner” added dignity to human character not only in a relationship with a husband but “with every other person, that we are obliged to be in the habits of strict intimacy.” Stockton was responding from her experience of family life and from her own elevated position among the Federalist elite. Like Abigail Adams, she wanted to balance independent thought with marital interdependence.

[Y]ou know that it is a favourite tenet with me, that there is no sex in Soul—I believe it as firmly as I do my existance—but at the same time I do not think that the sexes were made to be independent of each other—I believe that our creator intended us for different walks in life.

Although she admired Wollstonecraft’s “wonderful book,” she found some of her “expressions. . . by far too strong.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Stockton’s reaction is particularly interesting because in 1793 she lived in New Jersey, where, as Rosemary Zagarri has noted, the state’s legislators in 1776 “followed their revolutionary beliefs to their logical, if unexpected and untraditional, conclusion” by refusing to limit the franchise to white males. They concluded that if “those who paid taxes should be allowed to vote, there was on the face of it no logical reason why taxpaying women should be excluded.” [[27]](#footnote-27) Although by definition a right to vote based on independent status was limited to single women or widows, it nevertheless offered a genuine opportunity for widows like Annis Stockton to participate in government. There is so far no documentation that she ever cast a ballot, but dozens of other New Jersey women did so. A study of poll lists from nine New Jersey towns, shows that between 1797 and 1807, 7.7 percent of voters were female. Partisan politics is more visibile in period sources than feminist activism, but both may have played a part. A 1797 article reported, “In Elizabethtown, the *federal ladies,* maids as well as matrons, believeers in the democfratic Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman,* turned out in support of their favourite candidates.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

In an oration given before the Society of Cincinnati on July 4, 1793, Annis Stockton’s brother Elias Boudinot seems to have prophesied an expansion of female voting. Although his speech focused primarily on the participation of military leaders and common soldiers, he paused to acknowledge the contributions of women. “The Rights of Women are no longer strange sounds to an American ear: they are now heard as familiar terms in every part of the United States; and I devoutly hope that the day is not far distant when we shall find them dignifying, in a distinguishing code, the jurisprudence of the several States in the Union.” Like his sister, he affirmed women’s “domestic character,” but he reminded his listeners that the American continent might have remained in oblivion had Queen Isabella not come to the aid of Columbus. Then turning from history to scripture, he closed with a familiar allusion to the exodus from Egypt.

To your Sex, then, Ladies, are we obliged to raise the Palm—had this great Event depended altogether on our Sex, it is not easy to guess what our United Fate had been at this moment. Instead of our present agreeable employment, we might have been Hewers of Wood, and drawers of Water to some mighty PHAROAH, whose tender mercies would have been cruelty.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Boudinot did not mention those inhabitants of New Jersey who still suffered as hewers of wood and drawers of water.

In this era, the rights of white women and the rights of African Americans only rarely came together, which is one reason why Wollstonecraft was able to evoke the metaphor of slavery in much the same way as her revolutionary predecessors. But in the same year her book was published, British abolitionists launched a massive boycott of sugar grown on slave plantations in the West Indies. Although the boycotts were organized by men, they appealed to women, not only as consumers but as compassionate persons. William Cowper’s “The Negro’s Complaint’ imagined slaves fanning West Indian soil with tears. Other writers claimed that in sweetening their tea with sugar, ladies were actually consuming the flesh of slaves.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft both evoked and rearranged that image by attacking thecomplaisance that Stockton praised. In her view an insistence on maintaining domestic harmony could too easily be used against women. “Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subjected to prejudice which brutalizes them. . . only to sweeten the cup of man?” she asked. “Is this not indirectly to deny woman reason?” She surely would have agreed that women blessed with a secure income or an agreeable marriage might act independently. Her concern was not with individual cases but with the broader distribution of power in a world where men had ultimate authority in both domestic and public affairs. Certainly women had the power to influence men, but when women were kept in ignorance that influence might not conduce to public good. “When I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense,” she said, “for indirectly, they obtain too much power.” [[31]](#footnote-31)

On August 7, 1800, a Republican orator in Morristown, New Jersey made his own argument in behalf of female education. Arguing that because “daughters are the same relations to us as our sons” men owed them the same opportunity for learning. “The contrary idea originated in the same abuse of power, as monarchy and slavery, and owes its little remaining support to stale sophistry.“ Yes, some men continued to deny that women had reason, but history had destroyed such “cobweb theories” by providing evidence of female achievement, not only in antiquity but in the present. His long list of accomplished women included “the untaught towerings of . . . Wheatly” as well as “the invulnerable reason of Mary Wollstonecraft!”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Thus, for a few brief years in New Jersey, both parties came together in behalf of women’s rights as they understood them, rights that as in the Library Company painting rested on access to refinement and learning.

IV. Dinah Nevil

The Library Company painting and the *Lady’s Magazine* engraving take on more complex meanings when compared with a third work of art produced in Philadelphia in roughly the same period.[[33]](#footnote-33) [Figure 6] This curious painting combines portrait-like images of a crowd of white citizens with a group of persons of color on their left and before them three a kneeling female figure. Although portrayed in the posture of the enslaved figure in the Weddgewood medallion, she is strikingly white even thouigh the feathers in her hair and on her skirt suggest the painter intended to identify her as an Indian. Could he have intended her as an icon of America? Building on such a notion, a 1928 art dealer who who was one of the first to comment on the painting suggested that it protrayed “Asia, Africa, Europe, and America paying homage to George Washington.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Unfortunately the other figures in the painting don’t line up very well with that anlysis.

Thanks to the work of early American historians, the painting is now associated with the story of Dinah Nevil, an enslaved woman rescued by Quaker activists in 1775. Since to some of her contemporaries she appeared to be white and since she herself claimed descent from Indians native to New Jersey, the painter may have been alluding to her uncertain status. In his 2006 book, *The Forgotten Fifth,* Gary Nash labeled the painting *Kneeling Dinah,* c. 1787 with this caption: “On bended kneed, Dinah Nevil, a mixed-race woman who had been sold by her New Jersey master to a Virginia planter, watches imploringly as the Quaker with broad-brimmed hat pays the Virginian to free her and her two children. This was the first release from slavery obtained by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, formed in 1775.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Kirsten Sword agrees that the painting commemorates the 1775 founding, but she believes it represents a contested understanding of the work of the little-known men and women, mostly Quakers, who with little public notice and great personal sacrifice sustained the work of the Society through the war and helped to re-establish it in 1784. She argues that the 1784 letter in which the Society’s newly appointed secretary Tench Coxe described the institution’s founding, “acknowledged the generative role of Nevil’s case, even as it obscured most of what she represented.” Sword’s essay challenges the long-standing image of early Quaker activists as “ideologically pure but culturally insular and politically naïve.” She sees them as crucial participants in the multi-racial, transatlantic network of slave resistance discussed above, a resistance in which Nevil and her rescuers played a part.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In 1773, Nevil and her four children were bound in some fashion to a white family in Flemington, New Jersey when her master sold them to a Virginia slave trader who was “collecting a cargo of slaves and servants in Philadelphia.” With the help of supportive whites in Philadelphia, Nevil made a claim to freedom based on a loophole in 1727 Pennsylvania Law against “making slaves of the Indian Natives.” When elilte efforts to rescue her failed, a group of less prosperous men formed the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes. As Nevil’s case dragged on, she and her children were consigned to the workhouse, where two of the children died. In 1775, Thomas Harrison and his wife Sarah assumed responsibility for their care. “Dinah and her children lived in their home and became ‘attached to his family,’ while Thomas Harrison made repeated financial and legal gambles to secure their freedom.” Finally, he “purchased the family’s freedom at a price he could ill afford.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Much of this story is found in later Abolition Society minutes. The triggering moment for the creation of the painting was not the long-circulated story about Dinah’s rescue but the day in 1795 when Thomas Harrison asked recompense for his services from the newly reconfigured, more prosperous, and now well-connected society. After debating his request, his fellow members concluded

that althou’ the society does not conceive itself legally bound to reimburse Thomas Harrison the money expended by him in 1784 to obtain the freedom of Dinah Nevill and her children, yet in consideration of the peculiar hardship of his situation at the time, being left alone without other members of the society to cooperate with him, and that the money was advanced by him solely with the motive of procuring their freedom, therefore- Resolved That the Society will reimburse him & the president is hereby directed to draw an Order in his favor for £133.9.7 on the Treasurer, for the purpose.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Sword sees the painting as an effort by the painter, a son of one of Harrison’s closest associates, to honor the contributions of unseen actors in the antislavery movement on the eve of revolution when those of them who were pacifists and Quakers were in disrepute.

In this reading, the Society did not emerge from the glorious principles of the Revolution but from the actions of ordinary people who took responsibility for the welfare of others. By 1780, Sword writes, “Harrison had become the white person to whom Philadelphia’s people of color took their grievances.” His wife Sarah, no less committed to ending slavery, took a different path. Between 1786 and 1800, she traveled 20,000 miles as an itinerant Quaker witness, preaching to slaveholders from North Carolina to Georgia and then embarking for the British Isles and eventually for the continent of Europe. One of her companions was Lydia Hoskins a member of the Burlington, New Jersey Friend’s Meeting, a society that between 1788 and 1802 produced five women and only two men who felt the call to become “Public Friends.” These New Jersey women surely would not have approved of Mary Wollstonecraft’s contentious manner even though their religious commitments led them to behave in remarkable independent, and some of their neighbors would say scandalous ways.[[39]](#footnote-39) Perhaps Sarah’s extended journeys propelled Thomas to ask for financial help. She seems to have returned home in 1797, living out the rest of her life in Philadelphia.

It is highly unlikely that the painting ever hung in the Harrison house. But its creator certainly knew Thomas and Sarah Harrison. Although early twentieth-century dealers attributed the painting to James Peale, x-ray examination of its altered signature linked it to Jeremiah Paul, the son of one of Harrison’s closest Quaker associates, an artist who first came to public notice in Philadelphia in the 1790s.[[40]](#footnote-40) He is remembered in history primarily for having participated in 1795 in an exhibition mounted by the Columbianum, Charles Willson Peale’s short-lived attempt to establish an art academy in the United States.[[41]](#footnote-41) The catalog for the exhibition, lists him as a “Portrait and Landscape Painter” living at No. 35 S. Fourth Street. By coincidence, the same catalog lists “A Portrait of Phillis Wheatley (Poetress of Boston) by the late Mr. Dusemitere.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

Although Paul has a couple of other paintings in Philadelphia collections, he is not well-known. [[43]](#footnote-43) No one seems to know how his painting of Dinah Nevil was commissioned or whether it was ever exhibited in Philadelphia. Rembrandt Peale who studied alongside Paul as a young man claimed that “frequent intoxication soon destroyed his talent and his life.” If so, he somehow found the will to leave Philadelphia for the west, where he is thought to have painted "phantasmagorias" and theatrical scenery.[[44]](#footnote-44) There is one intriguing detail, however, in the scattering of references to his work. In 17 his sometime business partner, William Clark, included nude and semi-nude figures in an allegorical wall painting in the drawing room of a Maryland grandee, a potentially scandalous act for the time.[[45]](#footnote-45) Although Peale and others believed serious painters needed to paint “from life,” the only models available were plaster casts sent from Europe. The early Philadelphia art chronicler William Dunlap described Paul as a sign painter who dared to exhibit in an engraver’s window in 1811 “Venus and Cupid, nine feet by seven, taken from living models."[[46]](#footnote-46)

Of course, none of the rules against nude paintings applied to persons of color or to the iconic image of America. Paul’s decision to paint Nevil as near-white is therefore intriguing, given his careful attention to color in the other figures on the same canvas. Even more interesting is the resemblance between her and the woman kneeling before Liberty in the *Ladys’ Magazine* engraving. (Figures 10a, 10b) Intentionally or not, the painting goes far beyond its allusion to the story of Dinah Nevil, using the familiar image of America to evoke deep sympathy not only for the enslaved but for an enslaved person who was also a proto-white woman. Whatever his motivation, he evoked the ever changing metaphor of enslavement used in this period by white feminists as well as male revolutionaries.

No one has yet been able to identify any of the white rexuers in the painting. Some have guessed that Paul himself and pershaps his father stand behind the man in the Quaker hat, who could be Thomas Harrison. Perhaps the woman in the green hat is Sarah. If the hat doesn’t seem like appropriate clothing for a female preacher that may be because she was not yet a preacher. Print sources, as well as a similar hat in the collections of Colonial Willliamsburg, make clear that puffy-crowned, stiff-brimmed hats like this one were worn by respectable shop-keepers and lady’s maids in the 1770s, so it is quite possible this reflects a detaill that persons familiar with her appearance in that period may have known.

In any case, Quakers tended to dress in more or less current fashions but with more restraint than their neighbors. For both sexes, “plainness” was associated with hats, so much so that when distinguishing herself from non-Friends one Quaker diarist referred to them as the “hatless ones.” Broadbrimmed hats like the one in painting appear in silhouettes taken of Philadelphia Quakers in the early republic. Silhouettes of women in this period also include caps of various styles, often tied under the chin, some with puffy crowns. At least one from 1803 has a brim.[[47]](#footnote-47) (Figures 11a, 11b)

The three figures directly behind Nevil, each a different shade of brown, are somewhat unusual for American painters in this period. They certainly contrast with the even skin tones of the African Americans in the Library Company picture. Paul’s delineation of color seem closer to so-called *casta* paintings from the Carribean or Spanish America, raising the question of possible influence from such paintings on Paul’s perceptions of race.[[48]](#footnote-48) As several scholars have observed, the categories in *casta* paintings not only represent interracial mixing in slave societies, they hint at the “transformative impact of culture.” Although eighteenth-century scientists argued that human beings, like plants, degenerated when removed from their native environment, others insisted that certain environments produced physical improvement.[[49]](#footnote-49) Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush pushed that idea even further, postulaing that the appropriate mix of liberty and restraint might turn Black bodies white. Princeton scholar Samuiel Stanhope Smith tinkered with related ideas as he struggled with the presence of Delaware Indians on Princeton’s campus.[[50]](#footnote-50) That Jeremiah Paul ended up going west is intriguing, Perhaps he was inspired by the artifacts returning to Philadelphia from the Lewis and Clark expedition, perhaps by exotic images arriving from beyond the Atlantic. The strangest and still unexplained image in his painting is the young girl pictured in profile. She is non-white, but unlike the two men beside her fully clothed, and her hair is neatly arranged. She looks a lot like images from India appearing in marine collections from the early republic.Which is say that even a chaotic and decidedly awkward painting like this one can still yield intriguing questions.

The history of the American revolution, the antislavery movement, and of women’s rights movement can all be adequately discussed without the assistance of the painting now hanging in the Library Company reading room. But serious attention to the details in that painting and to related visual sources does invite us to bring those three themes together showing how a single metaphor unfolded in different ways in the years following the American revolution. Samuel Jennings transformed an image used to validate the American revolution into an argument for the emancipation of slaves. Mary Wollstonecraft’s publisher returned that image to its metaphorical use by arguing for the Rights of Women. Jeremiah Paul reposition American herself as a slave. Perhaps that act has something to say after all. A society that denies full rights to its citizens is itself in some sense enslaved. Although the first two representations of Liberty offer a focus on the arts and sciences as a solution, Paul’s frenetic painting suggests that human beings must go further, dropping whatever coin they have into the fight.

1. Robert C. Smith, “Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences: A Philadelphia Allegory by Samuel Jennings,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, 2 (1965): 84-89, 94, and “A Philadelphia Allegory,” *The Art Bulletin* 31 (1949): 323-326. Also see the Library Company’s website at: <http://www.librarycompany.org/instance.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983), 236. Walker’s originally essay appeared in *Ms.* May 1974*.* Wheatley’s lines come from “To His Excellency General Washington,” in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley,* ed. John Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 145. Wheatley enclosed the poem in a letter to George Washington, 26 October 1775. See *Founders Online,*National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0222-0002>, accessed April 3, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Aileen S. Kraditor, *Up From the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of Amreican Feminism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Well-behaved Women Seldom Make History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kirsten Sword, **“**Dinah Nevil: Strategic Deceptions in Eighteenth-Century Antislavery,” *The Journal of American History*, 97. 2 (September 2010): 315-343. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Yvonne Korshak, “The Liberty Cap as a Revolutionary Symbol in America and France,” Smithsonian Studies in American Art, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 52-69; J. David Harden, “Liberty Caps and Liberty Trees,” *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 66-102. There are no female icons in the street actions and popular protects described in Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), although she was certainly present in print culture, cartoons, public ceremonies, and kinds of artifacts. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Smith, Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences,” 96-97, also find echoes of “Britannia,” the icon from Great Britain in Jennings’ Liberty, but her accessories clearly identify her with the classical *Libertas*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis,* No. 1, Dec. 23, 1776, in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine,* ed Philip Foner (New York, 1945), 1:50. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Washington to Fairfax, August 24, 1774 in Papers of George Washington: Colonial Series. Vol.10:155, quoted in Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. E. McClung Fleming “The American Image as Indian Princess, 1765-1783,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 2 (1965): 65, 70-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I thank Philip Mead for sharing this image and its history. The flag is at the Smithsonian. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Smith “Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences,” 88-89, 102-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Phillip Lapsansky, “Graphic Discord: Abolitionist and Antiabolitionist Images,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America,* ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horen (Ithaca and London: Cornell Universty Press, 1994), 201-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. # *An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,* March 1, 1780, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, *Our Documentary Heritage,* [*http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/documents/1776-1865/abolition-slavery.html*](http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/documents/1776-1865/abolition-slavery.html)*,* accessed April 4, 2020.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kirsten Sword, **“**Dinah Nevil: Strategic Deceptions in Eighteenth-Century Antislavery,” *The Journal of American History*, 97. 2 (September 2010): 315-343. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For the complexity of Sarah Osborn’s reaction to slavery, see Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013)265-275 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. John C. Shields, “Foreword: In Her Own Write,” in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley,* vii-xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. David Waldstreicher, “T[he Wheatleyan Moment](https://www-jstor-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/23546668?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=%22Dinah+Nevil%22&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicResults%3Frefreqid%3Dsearch%253Abae4e4751dd2b2a310479c60b3b74162%26amp%3Bacc%3Don%26amp%3Bsi%3D1%26amp%3Bfc%3Doff%26amp%3Bso%3Dnew%26amp%3Bwc%3Don%26amp%3Bgroup%3Dnone%26amp%3BQuery%3D%2522Dinah%2BNevil%2522&ab_segments=0%2Fdefault-1%2Frelevance_config_with_defaults_duplicate). Early American Studies, 9. 3 (Fall 2011):, 527, 540. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sword, **“**Dinah Nevil,” 321-324. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Sword, “Dinah Nevil,” 323; Waldstreicher, “The Wheatleyan Moment, 536-537. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *The Connecticut Gazette*, March 11, 1774 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Richard Newman “Phillis Wheatley and the Information Revolution,” OUPblog, February 21, 2014 <https://blog.oup.com/2014/02/phillis-wheatley-african-american-writing-information-revolution/>; *Supplement to the Catalogue of Books, Belonging to the Library Company of Philadelphia*, 1793, pp. 10, 21, 22, 24, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “New Publications: A Vindication of the Rights of Women,” *The Lady's Magazine, and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge, (*Philadelphia: 1792) 189 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Caroline Wigginton, “A Late Night Vindication: Annis Boudinot Stockton’s Reading of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” Legacy* 25.2 (2008): 225-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Anne Boudinot Stockton to Julia Stockton Rush, March 22, 1793, in *Transatlantic Feminism in the Age of Revolution,* ed. Lisa L. Moore Joanna Brooks, and Caroline Wigginton, Oxford Scholarship Online, March 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Stockton to Rush, March 22, 1793; Wigginton, 226-227. The problem of balancing female independence and deference to male governance appears most famously in the 1776 exchange between Abigail and John Adams. For the transatlantic implications of that exchange, see Elaine Forman Crane, “Abigail Adams, Gender Politics, and *The History of Emily Montague:* A Postscript,” *William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Oct., 2007), pp. 839- 844; and Sarah M.S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); 4-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Marcela Micucci, “The First Generation: America’s Women Voters, 1776-1807,” *History Now*, Spring 2020, Gilder Lehrman Institute, gilderlehrman.org. Accessed April 5, 2020. News stories on the museum’s research include Jennifer Schuessler, “The Jersey Exception,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2020; Stephen Salisbury, “Women and the Right to Vote,” Philadelphia Inquirer, February 25, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Elias Boudinot, *An Oration Delivered at Elizabeth Town, New-Jersey, agreeable to a resolution of the State Society of Cincinnati* (Society of the Cincinnati in the State of New Jersey: 1793): 24-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713-1833* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 110-129; Charlotte Sussman, “Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792,” *Representations*, 48. (Autumn, 1994), 48-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Quoted in Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties*, 117, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Genius of Liberty,* August 7, 1800, quoted in “Petticoat Electors.” This story was reprinted in *Republican Watchtower,* New York: NY, July 19, 1800 36.4 and in *Constitutional Telegraph, Boston, Mass.,* August 20, 1800. 1.93 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Jeremiah Paul, *Manumission of Dinah Nevill*, Philadelphia, ca. 1795.

    https://mam.org/milwaukee-collects/image-gallery [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Fred J. Peters, *Monthly Report of Rarities*, 1928. I thank Luke Beckerdite for this information. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution,* (Harvard University Press, 2006). In *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsulvania and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 80, Nash and Jean Soderlund had already identified Nevill as the woman identified only as “an Indian woman” in Edward R. Turner, “The First Abolition Society in the United States,” PMHB 3 (1912) 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Sword, “Remembering Dinah Nevill,” 336, 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Sword, “Remembering Dinah Nevil,” 318, 319, 330-334. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Minutes of the Society for the Relief of Negroes, General Minutes, Reel 1, pp. 231-232. 1 Mo 19 1795. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Kirsten Sword kindly shared these notes which she transcribed in 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Sword, “Remembering Dinah Nevil,”331;“Memoirs of Life and Travels of Sarah Harrison,” *Friends’ Miscellany* (1838) 100-120; Liam Riordan, *Many Identities, One Nation: The Revolution and Its Legacy in the Mid-Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 147-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Edward R. Turner, “The First Abolition Society in the United States,” PMHB 36 (1912) [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Sonia K. Johnston, “Jeremiah Paul,” *The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art,* ed. Joan Marter. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Carol Eaton Soltis, *The Art of the Peales: Adaptations and Innovations, (*Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2017): 288n353. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *The Exhibition of the Columbianum or American Academy of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, & Established at Philadelphia, 1795* (Philadelphia, 1795). The pages are not numbered. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ellwood C. Parry, III, “Distant Relatives and American Cousins of Thomas Eakins's Children at Play,” The American Art Journal, 18. 1 (Winter, 1986): 21-41; Jeremiah Paul, “A View Near the upper Ferry on Schuylkill,” Sketchbook, 1794 Historical Society of Pennsylvania, in Jane Mork Gibson and Robert Wolterstorff, “The Fairmount Waterworks,”*Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 84 (Summer, 1988), 1+4-46  [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Rembrandt Peale, “Reminiscences,” *The Crayon,* 1.2 (January 10, 1855) 23. James Thomas Flexner, “The Scope of Painting in the 1790’s,” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 74. 1 (Jan., 1950), 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. F. McSherry Fowble, “Rinaldo and Armida: An Example of Classical Nudity in Eighteenth-century American Painting,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 5 (1969): 53. For context see David Sellin, “The First Pose: Howard Roberts, Thomas Eakins, and a Century of Philadelphia Nudes,” Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin, 70 (Spring, 1975): 9, [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Flexner, 79l. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Anne Verplanck, ‘The Silhouette and Quaker Identity in Early National Philadelphia,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 43.1 (Spring 2009): 45-49, 51, 59, 62, 65, 68, 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. For recent literature on visual representations of race in Atlantic societies, see Rebecca P. Brienen, “Joanna and her Sisters: Mulatto Women in Print and Image, 1602-1796. *Early Modern Women*, 10. 2 (Spring 2016): 65-94; Rebecca Earle, “’Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes’: Race, Clothing and Identity in the Americas (17th-19th Centuries) *History Workshop Journal* 52 (Autumn, 2001): 175-195 and “[The Pleasures of Taxonomy: Casta Paintings, Classification, and Colonialism](https://www-jstor-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.73.3.0427?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=%28casta&searchText=paintings&searchText=and&searchText=London%29&searchText=AND&searchText=%28&searchText=%22West+Indies%22&searchText=%29&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FsearchType%3DfacetSearch%26amp%3Bsd%3D%26amp%3Bed%3D%26amp%3BQuery%3D%2522West%2BIndies%2522%26amp%3Bprq%3Dcasta%2Bpaintings%2Band%2BLondon%26amp%3Bswp%3Don%26amp%3Bhp%3D25%26amp%3Bacc%3Don%26amp%3Bso%3Drel%26amp%3Bpagemark%3DcGFnZU1hcms9MQ%253D%253D&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_SYC-4946%2Fcontrol),”The William and Mary Quarterly, 73. 3 (July 2016): 427-466; Christa Olson, “Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body,”*Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 39. 4 (Fall 2009): 307-330; James Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra , “Mapping Ethnogenesis in the Early Modern Atlantic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 68. 2 (April 2011): 181-208 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Earle, “Taxonomy,” p. 455, 460-464, 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Eric Herschthal, "Antislavery Science in the Early Republic: The Case of Dr. Benjamin Rush," *Early American Studies,* 15.2 (Spring 2017): 274-307; Nicholas Guyatt, “Samuel Stanhope Smith,” in *The Princeton and Slavery Project*, https.//slavery.princeton.edu, accessed February 29, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)