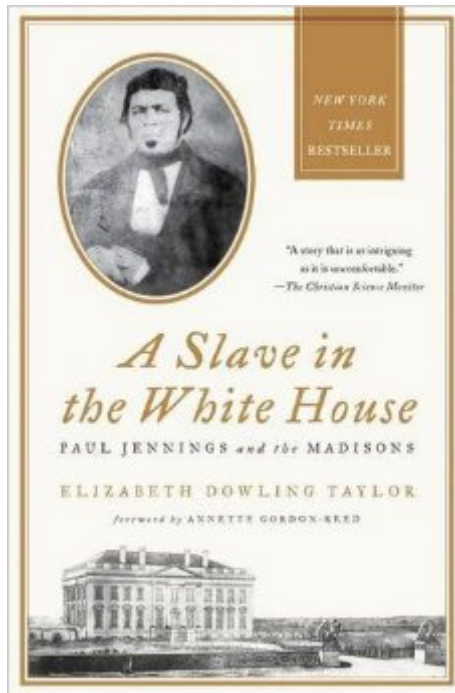


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A Slave In The White House: Paul Jennings And The Madisons



Synopsis

Paul Jennings was born into slavery on the plantation of James and Dolley Madison in Virginia, later becoming part of the Madison household staff at the White House. Once finally emancipated by Senator Daniel Webster later in life, he would give an aged and impoverished Dolley Madison, his former owner, money from his own pocket, write the first White House memoir, and see his sons fight with the Union Army in the Civil War. He died a free man in northwest Washington at 75. Based on correspondence, legal documents, and journal entries rarely seen before, this amazing portrait of the times reveals the mores and attitudes toward slavery of the nineteenth century, and sheds new light on famous characters such as James Madison, who believed the white and black populations could not coexist as equals; French General Lafayette who was appalled by this idea; Dolley Madison, who ruthlessly sold Paul after her husband's death; and many other since forgotten slaves, abolitionists, and civil right activists.

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Customer Reviews

This book will unfortunately have limited appeal because of its scholarly approach and necessary supposition of much of Paul Jennings' life. He was born at Montpelier, James and Dolley Madison's home in Virginia. His mother was Dolley's maid and Paul was mulatto so he was raised in the house as Dolley's son's "boy." As Payne Todd's constant companion, Paul was present during his sessions with his tutor. Later, as Madison's valet and doorman, he was present during political discussions and long talks about running the agricultural affairs of Montpelier. No surprise, then that

he learned to read and write, and that he was more sophisticated and gentlemanly than many slaves. During the War of 1812, Paul was instrumental in saving the large portrait of George Washington as the British approached, intent on burning the White House. Master and Mistress both trusted Paul implicitly. However, he remained a slave until Dolley Madison was in deep financial trouble living as a widow in Washington. He had met Daniel Webster, who was known to purchase the freedom of slaves and let them work off the purchase price in his household, perhaps one of the reasons Webster was always broke. By the time Webster bought his freedom, Paul was a middle-aged married man with children. Because of Paul's position in life, author Elizabeth Dowling Taylor was forced to make too many assumptions about who he met, where he was at any specific time, what he may have overheard, and who his slave associates were. She does use any documentation she has found in her career as a curator and researcher, and there is more than usual for a slave, but still one tires of "he might have" and "probably."

A Slave in the White House: Paul Jennings and the Madisons by Elizabeth Dowling Taylor is a fascinating account of a man who served the Madison family as a slave for over 48 years. However, I think the title is a misnomer in that Jennings only served in the White House for eight years, and this book covers his entire 74-75 year life. *A Slave in the White House* has a forward by Annette Gordon-Reed, the author known for her work on the Hemings family of Monticello. Paul Jennings was born a slave in 1799 on James Madison's plantation, Montpelier. The son of a house slave, Jennings learned to read and write from observing lessons given to the white children living at Montpelier. He was ten when James Madison became president, and Madison took Jennings with him to the White House as a footman. Perhaps the most dramatic episode for Jennings was when British Troops invaded Washington, and Jennings was one of several individuals who helped Dolley Madison escape the White House and save George Washington's famous portrait during the War of 1812. After two terms, Madison returned to Montpelier where Jennings served as Madison's personal valet for the last 16 years of Madison's life. He probably spent more time with the former president, except perhaps Madison's wife, Dolley. Daniel Webster bought Jennings' freedom in 1847 from Dolley Madison, and Jennings worked for Webster for two years to pay off the debt. I think that Paul Jennings is an important man in the history of our Nation for many reasons. Jennings was an eyewitness to history for the 47 years that he was a slave. He was the first White House employee (slave or free) to publish his reminiscences about working in the president's house.

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