

Witness TO REVOLUTION | The Unlikely Travels of Washington's Tent

AUDIO TOUR »

Object Highlight: Selina Gray Letter 216

Selina Norris Gray, shown in a photograph here accompanied by two younger women, was born enslaved at Arlington House in 1823. She served as a housekeeper in the Custis-Lee family home. In about 1847, she married an enslaved man named Thornton Gray, who cared for the family's horses and drove carriages. George Washington Parke Custis's will stipulated that the enslaved people of Arlington would be freed no later than 1862, so Gray was still enslaved to the Custis-Lee family when they fled the home at the outbreak of the Civil War. When United States soldiers began looting the house, Gray helped ensure the survival of the tents by advocating for them as private property worth saving from destruction.

Selina Gray maintained a correspondence with Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee after the war. Here is Cecelia Torres, Selina Gray's great-great-granddaughter, reading from an 1872 letter:

"Your things at the time of the war was taken away by everybody... The bookcase you speak of I cannot tell you anything of it. I don't remember of seeing it since you left. I suppose it was carried off like everything else... I underwent a great deal to stay at Arlington as long as I did."

As the U.S. government confiscated the Lee family's property at Arlington to become Arlington National Cemetery, Selina Gray became a free woman and a property owner herself. She and Thornton Gray purchased ten acres near Arlington, became involved in the local communities including Freedman's Village, and established their own home while advocating for their own children's education. Generations of the Norris and Gray families are still involved in preservation and education at Arlington today.