

No Author

The Life of Joice Heth, the Nurse of Gen. George Washington, (the Father of Our Country,) Now Living at the Astonishing Age of 161 Years, and Weighs Only 46 Pounds

New York: The Author, 1835.

Summary

The Life of Joice Heth is a twelve-page pamphlet published in 1835 that purports to tell the story of Joice Heth, an enslaved African American woman whom famed showman P.T. Barnum exhibited as the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington. Barnum's assistant, Levi Lyman, is believed to have written and distributed the pamphlet as a means of increasing attendance at Heth's exhibitions. Scholar Benjamin Reiss, who has studied Heth's real life extensively, calls the story told in *The Life* "manifestly bogus" (p. 212).

Many of the details of Heth's actual life—including the year of her birth—are unknown. By 1835 she was the legal property of John S. Bowling of Paris, Kentucky, and was exhibiting as the childhood nurse of George Washington in Louisville, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio. Heth would tell stories about the young Washington, sing hymns that she claimed to have taught him, entertain questions from the audience, and allow onlookers to inspect her body, which appeared tremendously aged. In June 1835, Bowling sold his interest in Heth's exhibitions to a pair of itinerant showmen who, in turn, sold the rights to Barnum for one thousand dollars. Barnum was fascinated by both Heth's act and her physical appearance—she was blind, toothless, paralyzed in both legs and one arm, and had long, curling fingernails—and he proceeded to exhibit her in a variety of settings across the American Northeast. Fueled by a variety of public relations stunts engineered by Barnum and Lyman, Heth became an extremely popular attraction. Newspapers covered her exhibitions, and there was widespread speculation about the authenticity of her story. From August 1835 to January 1836, Barnum put Heth on display six days a week, sometimes for as long as 12 hours a day. When Heth died on February 19, 1836, Barnum capitalized on her death by charging admission to a public autopsy of her body. According to Barnum's own account, over 1,000 people attended the autopsy, where a physician concluded that Heth could not have been more than 80 years old and that therefore every aspect of her supposed life story was fabricated.

It is impossible to know how much agency Heth, who remained enslaved during her entire association with Barnum, had over her exhibitions and the role she performed in them. In later writings of his own, Barnum presented differing accounts of exactly how much of Heth's stage persona he had invented. In an 1841 series of newspaper sketches, Barnum presented Heth as an almost mindless puppet and claimed to have invented virtually her entire act. But in his 1869 *Struggles and Triumphs* he portrayed himself as an innocent victim who had believed Heth's story and been fooled by her. Regardless of Barnum's changing accounts, the historical record seems clear that while Heth was undoubtedly exploited by Barnum, she herself was a remarkable performer who had developed her nurse-of-Washington gimmick before meeting him.

According to the "manifestly bogus" account contained in *The Life of Joice Heth*, Heth is born in Madagascar and sold into slavery at the age of fifteen. And while the text condemns the slave-trader who captured Heth as "one of those inhuman beings, who . . . to enrich themselves, made merchandize of human flesh," it also states that her later owners, the Washington family, were very kind to her and treated her "more as an hired servant than a slave" (p. 3, p. 4). The Washingtons assign "the whole care and management of both the nursery and kitchen" to Heth, and she allegedly converts to Christianity and is baptized in the Potomac River in 1720. She is described as "the first person to put clothes on the unconscious infant" George Washington, and is later sold to another owner so that she can live with her husband, "a slave named Peter" with whom Heth has fifteen children (p. 4).

After mentioning Peter's death and Heth's sale to a series of different owners, the text goes on to describe Heth's physical condition. In what is likely an attempt to lend a sense of scientific accuracy to the text's claims about Heth's age and history, precise details about Heth's general health, pulse, hearing and conversational skills are included. Her diet is also discussed at length: "She seems extremely fond of animal food, frequently asking for it; and when denied it, telling her the doctors say it is not good for her, she will make as a quick and spirited reply; 'I guess I have lived long enough to know what is good for me, as well as the doctors; if I had minded them I should have been dead long ago'" (p. 6). The text also claims that Heth exhibits herself in order to earn enough to free her five great-grandchildren "who are now held in bondage by a respectable gentleman of Kentucky, who has generously offered to set them free" for two-thirds of what they cost him (p. 9). The pamphlet concludes by reprinting excerpts from various newspaper articles about Heth.

Works Consulted: Reiss, Benjamin, "Heth, Joice," *American National Biography Online*, 10 June 2008, <http://www.anb.org/articles/20/20-01885.html>; ---, *The Showman and The Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

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