

History or Hoax?

George Washington's 161-Year-Old Nurse

The year is 1835. The place is Niblo's Garden in New York City where the strange and exotic exhibits of P.T. Barnum, the world's greatest showman, are visited and viewed. People by the hundreds are flocking to see Joice Heth. Joice claims to be 161 years old and the former nurse of George Washington. She entertains audiences with tales about young Georgie as she calls him.

Barnum assures the crowd that Joice has legal documents to prove her amazing age. She tells her visitors that at the age of 15 she was brought to America on a slave ship and sold to Thomas Buckner, a Virginia planter. Several years later he sold her to the Washington family. When "Little Georgie" was born she became his nurse.

In 1694, at the age of 20, she married a slave named Peter who belonged to a neighbor of the Washington family. They had 15 children. Now she was working for Mr. Barnum to earn money to free some of her great grandchildren who were slaves.

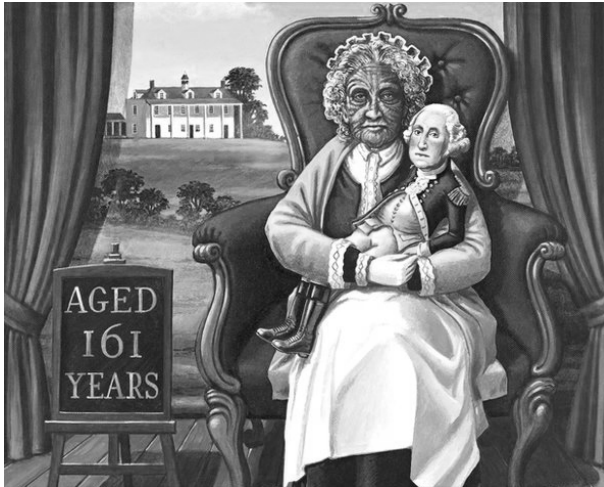
As Joice told stories about Little Georgie to the crowd, Barnum displayed the documents to prove her age.

HISTORY OR HOAX?
You Decide!

George Washington's 161-Year-Old Nurse

☑ Hoax

Those who came to see Joice Heth found a tiny lady who weighed only 46 pounds. She smiled and spoke clearly, sang hymns, and told stories about “Little Georgie” who, she says, was a handful. She said her needs were few: tea, cornbread, her pipe, a little tobacco, and dog food which she munched on now and then.



Joice Heth died on February 19, 1836. The doctor who performed the autopsy (at Barnum’s request) certified that Joice Heth could not have been more than 80 years old at the time of her death. The old lady had found an interesting way to support herself in her last years.

Obviously Barnum was sorry he had requested the autopsy and to cover his embarrassment, planted a story in the *New York Herald* (February 27, 1836) that said the body that was autopsied was not that of Joice Heth.