Transcript:

We the people of the United States. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Jason Raia:

Hello, and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, the civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, where we explore American history, civics, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Rea, chief operating officer at Freedoms Foundation and host of *George Washington Slept Here*. The format is simple. A long form conversation with a friend of Freedoms Foundation where everyone can learn something new. Before we begin, we encourage everyone to subscribe to *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to your podcasts, and make sure you get every new episode as soon as it's out. We love hearing from our listeners, so please email us gwshpodcast@gmail.com with your comments, questions, or suggestions. Today's interview is with George Boudreau, public historian and editor of *Women in George Washington's World*, which just came out last year. Hello, George.

George Boudreau:

Hello.

Jason Raia:

Our conversation today is going to be structured in a way to keep us on track. We wanna explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting here before us? And your current work as a teacher and writer of early American history. And then I wanna talk about the state of America today. Finally, we will end with a quiz, which hopefully will allow listeners to learn a little something extra about you. So, George, tell us, where were you born and raised?

George Boudreau:

I am from Michigan City, Indiana, which is in the northwestern corner of the state, overlooking Lake Michigan and Chicago on the other side of the water.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Excellent. And who were your early influences? Who were the people who sort of pushed you to become Dr. George Boudreau.

George Boudreau:

I suppose my family, my grandmother was a 2nd grade teacher, and my grandfather was a Virginian and quite a storyteller and both push that. Dad was a very patriotic World War II veteran, and so we always had history as a part of that, loading the kids into the green Chevy station wagon and driving to historic sites around the country, and I was fascinated by that. And very early, I got interested in the history of the White House and the presidency, and they were very indulgent in that. So a lot of trips to president sites and, and and getting to do that.

Jason Raia:

Great. So things are starting to make sense. I'm understanding where your writing and your research, how that connects. You went to Manchester College and Indiana University. So early on, you're really, you know, the Midwest through and through. So I'm curious, how did you wind up in Philadelphia, which has become really part and parcel with your career now?

George Boudreau:

I was fascinated by Philadelphia history. I studied under a great fellow named Paul Lucas at Indiana, who was a colonial historian, but very into New England and the Connecticut River Valley. And I wanted to do something else. I grew very tired of talking about Puritan theology, that a little goes a long way. And I became fascinated with Quaker Pennsylvania and the work done there. Two historians really drew me to do that. A woman named Mary Maples Dunn, who went on to be a Dean at Bryn Mawr and then the President of Smith College and who edited the Papers of William Penn with her husband, Richard S. Dunn. And Gary Nash, who was a early pioneering leader of social history and how do we look at the roles of the poor and working people in, the life of the colony.

And it was vastly different. The story of early Pennsylvania and early Massachusetts are vastly different. So it was something new and different and a little bit radical, I think. I think my graduate committee all thought I was a little bit mad, and I was a very poor grad student, but, but came here, you know, saved my pennies and came out, starting in the early nineties. I guess in ‘91, I did my first research trip to Philadelphia, and did them again, you know, sort of for 3 to 4 weeks at a time working in the different archives. And, in ‘94, I was well into starting my dissertation and applied for a series of grants. There were several organizations that funded you for a month or in one case for 10 months to write and do research. And I remember my adviser who was a good friend, but maybe a bit more cynical than I was saying, oh, you're never gonna win these. You're there's no way you're gonna ever win one of these prizes. It's a waste of time, and I won all four.

Jason Raia:

Oh, wow.

George Boudreau:

Which I think I've been told I broke the system because after that, they changed the rules that you weren't allowed to. But got funding from the David Library, the American Revolution -

Jason Raia:

Sure. Which is now part of APS which we're gonna talk about it later.

George Boudreau:

The American Philosophical Society now and, the Library Company of Philadelphia founded by Franklin in 1731, the Historical Society, the American Philosophical Society, founded by Franklin in 1743, and then what is now the McNeil Center For Early American Studies at Penn where they gave me 10 months. So I said I've always said I moved to Philadelphia to stay for 10 months, and it's now been almost 30 years.

Jason Raia:

Wow.

George Boudreau:

And as soon as I get everything done, I'm gonna go –

Jason Raia:

Back to Indiana?

George Boudreau:

No. There's a lot of songs about going back to Indiana. Nobody ever actually moves back there Except for Dan Quayle.

Jason Raia:

I think that's true of New Jersey as well. Anyway, so okay. So you wind up here, in this sort of twin because you're doing your dissertation work and graduate study, but also, there is, and they're certainly interrelated, but there is this deep abiding connection to the history of the era and what's happening in Philadelphia, what had happened in Philadelphia. So I wanna start with this, this question of public history. On your website, when you introduce yourself to people, you talk about yourself as a public historian. And and, to my recollection, that's only something I started hearing, more widely used in in maybe the last five years or so.

George Boudreau:

Oh, wow.

Jason Raia:

And so but I think there's a great distinction between those who are in a university doing research, you know, writing, and not to say it that but it's a different role than teaching, and though you do both. But tell us the difference. Tell us what a public historian is versus what we think of as just a regular old historian.

George Boudreau:

The term goes back a lot later than five years. It's the first time I have to look that up or go to the website of the National Council For Public History. I know the MCPH has a definition there. It was sometimes at first called applied history. There were folks who were going to, you know, be in a traditional college classroom and teach and maybe publish and grade papers. And applied history or public history was more geared towards reaching an audience in other venues. Historic house museums, national parks, battlefields, and a variety of other things, publishing, working with different organizations, broadcasting now, documentary editing, documents publishing.

So all this public history can take all kinds of avenues. I was very lucky when I moved here. I guess, sometime in ‘94, I very quickly learned that my research on Franklin in early Philadelphia was very relevant to historic sites near where I was. And I soon began our, or volunteering with the National Park Service at Independence National Park downtown in Philadelphia and other sites in the area that who needed, you know, historical work done. What do you know, how do we figure this out, or what are we doing with this? I think within my first year, I was teaching sections for their summer teachers workshop and worked with them and then got involved in other ways pretty quickly. After my McNeil Center fellowship ran out, I won another prize from what's called the Spencer Foundation, which awards money for the history and study of education. I was pondering what to do, and a friend who was with the National Park Service recommended that I apply to run and live in the Powell House, a mansion in Society Hill, Philadelphia, which was great. It was a wonderful building and had an amazing story about the man and particularly the woman who had lived there, but it also had a lot of needs. They've had some fundraising problems, and they've been closed for a while. And I learned a lot about historic site management sort of on the ground running. And the excitement for me was I was always fascinated in how surviving stuff, materials, paintings, furniture can tell us about the past. They had done a microscopic analysis of the original painted surfaces in the house done by a scientist named Matthew Mosca, who had just finished doing George Washington's Mount Vernon before he studied the surfaces in the Powell Home. And when I got there, these were in these three ring binders, massive amounts of data, but, you know, of no relevance. No one was ever gonna see them. And I reorganized the guides group and worked with fundraising, and we restored all the painted surfaces of the Powell house. So I as I've joked many times in the past, I learned more about the history of the painted venetian blind than any human being could want to know, but I could pick out exactly the color, of green paint that was on Samuel Powell's

venetian Blinds and and others, it turned out and it was exciting, and I loved working with the public. So —

Jason Raia:

That's really the connection. It's that public piece of it, you're not just sitting in a research library, though that might be part of what you're doing, but it is very much the intersection with the public, and, certainly, history has become ever more popular. There were some real popularizers, the turnouts, and the, you know, those other biographies that came out around early 2000. But it's now there's this real hunger on behalf of the public to better understand history.

George Boudreau:

One of my fun days at work was, an organizer of another organization called me one day and said, a man named David McCullough wants to see the Powell House. And I said, you're kidding. And she said, do you know him? And I said, well, you know, I'm a historian. Of course, I know who David McCullough is, but I had lunch for them in the Powell House garden and then took them on a walk. And, I don't know if you ever got to talk to David McCullough, but I joked with him at lunch that day that I would let I would listen to him read the phone book. I–

Jason Raia:

Absolutely.

George Boudreau:

Come to him or come to know him from the Ken Burns Civil War series. And David had the most beautiful, speaking voice and lovely in conversation. One of the great things about getting to sit down in my garden. I lived at the Powell House at the time too, and we sat down with them. He was as inquisitive as a smart child. His eyes were bright. He was fascinated. You know, he said to me I remember he was he he was debating what the next topic of his book was going to be. And at that point, it was still a dual biography of Jefferson and Adams. And he said at that lunch, I'm really thinking I'm gonna write a book on John Adams. And I said, we really need a great new book on John Adams too.

Jason Raia:

Amen to that.

George Boudreau:

John Adams famously dined with Samuel and Elizabeth Powell in September of 1774, and John Adams liked food. I know that's hard to believe when you look at his portraits, but he wrote

about every dish, every type of cheese, and all four kinds of alcohol that he had that day. And David said to me, what kind of wine did Adams drink? And I said, well, he drank Madeira. And he said, have you ever had it? Do you know what it tastes like? And I'm like, well, would you like some? So I went and got these Powell House commemorative stemware, and we sat in the garden sipping Madeira, which was quite–

Jason Raia:

Oh, what fun.

George Boudreau:

Yeah. They were they, you know, I was honored to get to meet him a few times.

Jason Raia:

So, you really led us to, where I wanna turn next, which is, the connection between place and, in history, and why place is important and why being there, standing where something happened 200, 250 years before is somehow more real. What what is and and and so much of what you have done, and we're gonna get to your book, *Independence*, which is all about place. But why is place so important to better understanding history?

George Boudreau:

I may be maybe because I'm not very bright, but, I've always said I can't write about something I can't walk through. I think place is incredibly important. I, you know, no matter what I'm writing about, I tend to try to go there. My, you know, my work with *Independence* grew out of a controversial period in the history of the historic district there and fights over what would happen with the site of George and George and Martha Washington's Philadelphia home and the enslaved people who they kept there. They kept in bondage there. And I said my argument was just tell the story, but, you know, you just don't you know, as I said to the Freedoms Foundation's teacher's workshop, show me anywhere in history that George Washington said, please don't mention that I enslave people. You know, it just doesn't happen. He wasn't hiding and if you look at any picture of early Mount Vernon, there are enslaved workers on the lawn. It is the re it is reality. No one's asking us to cover this up. So I I get very deeply into this, and that's one of the reasons I write about Philadelphia as I do and a few other places. And my next project is all about places. And, both here and in London, I've spent a lot of time just walking. You know, I've I have walked up and down the streets trying to figure out where young Benjamin Franklin was and, and also his home at Craven Street. Only surviving Benjamin Franklin house in the world is in London. So I think it's it's vastly important to know that you're treading on the stairs, touching the same railing. Maybe if you know, I'd try not to sit in colonial chairs, but, you know, I think it's incredibly evocative, and it connects us into a bigger picture.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Absolutely. I think there is, there's that physical connection when they're when you're in a physical space. But there's even an emotional connection that might be even more important when you imagine. And I think that's an important element of it is the role of imagination that is triggered when you are in a place where you know something historical happened even if it's minor. You talk about being in Europe, and the first time I was in Europe and going these backstairs up to a restaurant. And the marble stairs had been worn away from literally hundreds of years of people going up and down those stairs. And it wasn't that Napoleon went up those stairs. It's that for hundreds of years, people have been going up and down, up and down, up and down, and you could just feel it. There was this almost physical connection to this emotional, like, people have been here this long. This building has been here this long, and there's something special about that.

George Boudreau:

My favorite of those is a place very near Liverpool Street Station. If you know Eastern London, there is, you know, down the street in hang a right is a place called the Jamaica Wine Bar, which was the Jamaica coffee house in the 18th Century, And it has its front stoop exactly that. It's a piece of stone, I think it's granite, that has been worn down maybe 5, 6 inches with, you know, people going in to get, you know, their beverage. And it is, among other things, a part of the world history of slavery because the ship's captains going in to get employed by a merchant to go to Jamaica to to move enslaved Africans from from the from West Africa, across the the Atlantic, you know, but it's this incredibly powerful space. You know, it's the fascination of these places, you know, that and to tell the complex story. It's a very, very, very complex story.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. and that the complexity of that story, I was downstairs when you were when you were speaking earlier about just tell the story, and in all its complexity, and and, and it does not require judgment. It doesn't mean that and and we, of course, wanna be particularly, careful of that in applying our values backwards to something that happened in the 18th Century. But we still need to understand it. We still need to look at it squarely and say this is the reality of what happened. Let's talk about Ben Franklin because Ben –

You do, And Ben Franklin is so incredibly important to Philadelphia, even though he's a Bostonian, which very few people seem to know. And I spent almost 20 years of my life living in Boston. I haven't gone to school there, but he does. He abandons it as quickly as he can. He comes down to Philadelphia, and he makes his way in the world. And so much of particularly historic Philadelphia. It has this connection to Franklin. So we've already mentioned a couple of the places. But tell us very quickly why Franklin's so important to Philadelphia.

George Boudreau:

Well he, you could almost argue that if he didn't found Philadelphia but he certainly made it. He made it what it became and continued to impact it for centuries to follow. You know, he found Philadelphia, a rather quiet little riverside village, a a a shipping port certainly, sending grains into the Atlantic world where they could be, you know, turned into bread that was would be eaten in London, or, you know, cornmeal that would be served to enslaved workers in Caribbean. But he looked at it and this sort of, you can almost say it's a, something of a raw clay. It is very diverse. Almost if you could walk around 1720's Philadelphia, you'd be sort of freaked out because there were as Stephanie Grauman Wolf wrote a great story about daily life in early America, a great book about daily life said, there would have been a cacophony of languages. It would've you know, it might must have almost sounded like the parrot house at the zoo of people screaming in German dialects and various parts of the British Isles and, you know, Irish brogues and, of course, we don't know, but I surmise that African languages there were accents being spoken of various you know, of course, Africa's incredibly linguistically diverse.

But all this going on, if you could walk through the market house that ran from Second Street West in Philadelphia, you know, and you would hear all this.You know, he, of course, arrived on a quiet day. He arrived on a Sunday morning on October 6, 1723. But still, he found something that he wasn't expecting. He, first of all, found out that economically, Philadelphia was a good place to be a poor guy because bread was really cheap. You know? 50 years later, he tells the story that he could buy good, fluffy white bread, you know, the higher you know, the upper crust meal for next to nothing in Philadelphia. And second of all, it was religiously diverse. And I would imagine that his Franklin that Franklin's rather strict Puritan father and mother who, you know, raised their children reading the bible around the fire on Milk Street in Boston with Old South Meeting House across the street, found their teenage son and his dissenting beliefs somewhat disturbing and I you know, he has no record of his being beaten for his religious beliefs, but the Puritans, you know, Calvinists can be rather sticklers. And he comes to Philadelphia, and, you know, he's a writer and a printer, and he follows the crowd into what clearly is a religious structure at the corner of Second and Market. There's a bar there now. And he sits down and he waits for the sermon to begin because, As of course, as a good boy from Puritan, Boston, he knows he learned about the town by listening to the preacher's sermon. And he went in and sat down, belly full of warm bread, and he'd had a bunch of river water to drink and fell sound asleep, which as I am a notorious napper, I'm with him. You know?

And the Quakers being a gentle people let him sleep until the service was over. So the first place he ever slept was a Quaker Meeting House. Fruitful ground for him and his ideas and his thoughts about intellectual diversity and, you know, he must have been a pleasant guy. One of the great writers of the 18th century English speaking world is doctor Samuel Johnson. Johnson talked about it being an era of clubbable men, of folks who would go and sit down and have a pint and chat about ideas and the latest book and the latest magazine. Magazines are kind of a new invention. And maybe they're talking about the paintings that hang in lord so and so's parlor that everybody's allowed to pay 3 pence and go and see on Saturdays or whatever. All these ideas are spreading and growing, and Franklin loved this.

He travels to England very early on in his Philadelphia time, and he's enamored of this. And he comes back and just finds, everybody else is willing to join. He quickly found his club called the Junto. It meets every Friday in a room adjacent to a tavern, and they come up with rules that everybody has to follow and questions they have to answer, and they and they are required to pause after each one and take a sip of wine and and think. And I have gotta tell you, I've not read every document Franklin wrote, but I can tell you I very carefully attempted to follow the Junto questions and take a sip of wine afterwards. And that's a lot of wine. You're getting into 20, 30 sips of wine, and, you know, I don't know, if you know, how they got home safely. They did. But he was a person on the rise, and he was doing very well. And the city was growing with him.

Jason Raia:

And it's all built around this, these enlightenment ideals.

George Boudreau:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

It is the new intellect. It is what they call natural philosophy, but we what we would call science, and they are curious. There is this intellectual curiosity, not only with Franklin, but with this group, these groups of people that he surrounds himself with. And so books become very important for this, and they import them from London. And he founded the Library Company. Right?

George Boudreau:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

And then after that, you have the American Philosophical Society that he is critical of. And, the first time I visited there, with the librarian. They were very kind to bring out some of the treasures, and one of them was this diary of Franklin's where in on the back page, he is testing inks as a printer and and looking at how they dry and and trying to decide which one. And you could see where some were gray and and some were more black and and some absorbed into the paper, and some sat more on top of the paper. And so here is this mini experiment. You know?

George Boudreau:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

It wasn't just, oh, There's black ink. I'll take it. We'll look at what we'll use on our printer.

George Boudreau:

Well, if you think about it, in the 18th Century, if you wanted something somewhat out of the ordinary. Then it might take 6 months to get it. And today, we live in the era of Amazon Prime. I probably shouldn't say that on a podcast because it's not there.

Jason Raia:

They do not sponsor us.

George Boudreau:

If they wanna send me a check for that, I'll be glad to take it. But you know, we live in an era where there's never really any moment that you can't have exactly what you want. And if you think about what it must have been like to shop in the 18th Century. One of the great studies of this is George and Martha George and Martha Washington, where I love that as, you know, he woos the widow, Custis. And he has made his move, and they are getting ready. And he's, you know, ordering nightgowns for her and, you know, debating the color of a lady's nightgown with the supplier in London, and I'm like, wow. Here's a bachelor who's trying to buy I don't know. I imagine her nightgowns were not terribly risque, but, you know, this is constant discussion going on. So to live in this transatlantic world of purchases was phenomenal and Franklin makes among his closest friends on people who were essentially doing his shopping in England. They all do. Some of this stuff is hilarious where, you know, the Chief Justice of Pennsylvania is writing to a supplier in England and Describing parmesan cheese and that he wants and he wants this quality, and it should taste it's and it should crumble this way. And, you know, he's had parmesan cheese before when he was a student at Cambridge, and he wants that kind of cheese now. And you're like, good lord. There are cows all over America. Can't you make your own cheese? But they weren't making it.

Jason Raia:

Nope. So Franklin becomes this instrumental figure. The enlightenment is driving him and others like him. So sort of walk us through, how that sort of becomes this incredible moment that becomes 1776 and what is happening.

George Boudreau:

Well, that would take about 20 years or so to really go through with it. But Philadelphia becomes the largest city in British North America and certainly, in a lot of ways, the most complex. It's

interesting to read as I did when I was writing *Independence*, the letters and diaries of congressmen from other colonies who are coming here, And some are amazed. They are absolutely gobsmacked by what they discover. And some are like, oh, god. Really? This is your state house? It's kinda boring, and the paddling is pretty plain. And what do you mean, you know, you can't see Independence Hall on a tall hill overlooking the city. It's very plainly placed, you know, on a city lot and so some of them are not terribly impressed with that.

You know, but the city does quickly get a reputation as being sophisticated and intellectual. The Library Company, the Philosophical Society, in 1749, Franklin called for the creation of a nondenominational college that became what we now call the University of Pennsylvania. It is a school that allows poor kids to come and study. If you really wanted to get into the educated, enlightened of the town, Quaker leaders like Anthony Benezet create schools where they're teaching young black children and young female children more than just, you know, how to plant a rose garden or, you know, how to, you know, how to serve tea. And so a lot of this plays into it that, you know, it is a place where there are things to study, things to do, things to discuss. And so all that's going to play very much, you know, in the end, Philadelphia being called the Athens of America. It's it's something very different than you're going to see and the other thing, frankly, is Philadelphia came through the era of almost nonstop warfare from that stretched from the 1680’s to 1760’s where communities New England communities are being devastated by, you know, one generation after another of men getting killed in battle.

And because of Philadelphia's connection to Quakerism, we never got as into it, there was upheaval here. And there was, eventually, Franklin helped found a militia to protect the city. But we never lost the numbers that other colonies did. And so our economy didn't struggle as much. So when do you know? Again, one of my favorites is John Adams getting here and just saying he writes home to Abigail. Oh my god. They're gonna kill us with kindness. You go to a home, and they serve turkey and roast beef and chicken and all these different types of wines and all these desserts, and you're like, oh, John, you're gonna end up with gout. You know? You gotta pull back and have a glass of water.

Jason Raia:

Which, of course, Franklin does get. By the end of his life, he's that who got famous sedan chair.

George Boudreau:

Yeah. You know, he does walk, but his gout is miserable, and he actually writes some dialogues between himself and the dreaded gout. And now it feels like somebody's biting down on his toe, which must be a miserable, miserable thing to go through.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. So in Athens of America, there are architectural movements. There are artistic movements. Charles Willson Peale, you write about in *Independence*, you know, becomes even though he's from, from Baltimore and then Annapolis, but, it is Philadelphia where he becomes one of the great American artists who records the earliest American history and those players, both major and minor. Tell us a little bit about Charles Willson Peale.

George Boudreau:

He's fascinating because he is essentially a self-trained artist. He does finally spent some time in London, working in proximity to Benjamin West, who was a great self-taught artist, and then eventually he went on to Europe and studied European art and became a very important painter in Georgian London. But Peale is fascinating because he's almost like, you know, Franklin's nonbiological son, he has this expansive view of learning and thinks he can capture it all, that the world is surmountable, and we can understand it. And Peale, you know, his mind was always expansive. He believed very strongly in portraiture, but he began collecting natural science artifacts at points in a is this house with all of his bizarrely named children. He named all of his kids after either founding fathers or famous artists. So little Titian and little Rembrandt running around the house, you know, playing with little Benjamin Franklin Peale. And, you know, at one point, he kept a bald eagle in the residence with them. He helped observe the excavation of a mastodon and, you know, the mastodon was, and this is not my first research. This is I'm copying off others, but mastodon is something that doesn't make sense because of what happened to these things? Why aren't they wandering the streets of Pennsylvania anymore? And, of course, they didn't comprehend they didn't know the dinosaurs had existed yet.

Jason Raia:

Right.

George Boudreau:

So they're doing this. And at one point, Peale gets a mastodon skeleton and puts it together. And it's quite hilarious because he thought the tusks were giant teeth and that they were carnivores, so the early pictures he printed of them. But, someone, some museum in Europe, actually owns his mastodon skeleton. I'm trying to remember where it is. You'll have to look that up and tag this into your broadcast. But, you know, they have this idea that all knowledge is collectible.

Jason Raia:

Right. And that's and we still see that to this stay with the American Philosophical Society where it's so interesting because, their members who are very limited, there's, just under a 1000, I think, at the moment. And they are from history and political science. I I was lucky enough to be invited, by a friend and, actually former guest of, of this podcast, who was inducted as a political

scientist, on the same day that Elena Kagan, the Supreme Court Justice, was inducted. But then they're all but then so many of their members are these hardcore scientists.

George Boudreau:

Mhmm.

Jason Raia:

Who are doing real hard science, but in this one organization founded by Franklin, you still have this enlightenment idea of natural philosophy where history, politics, science, you know, chemistry, and all of it is all under the same roof.

George Boudreau:

Yep. And they still do phenomenal work.

Jason Raia:

Yes.

George Boudreau:

I don't know. I read recently the number of scholarly grants they give. So they make it possible for kids like me to, you know, to come, to do a month's research. And I will always think, the former librarian, a man named Mar Marty Levitt, was giving us the vault tour when we first arrived and handed me a framed piece of paper. And said, do you know what this is? And I said, it's a framed piece of paper, and it's a piece of paper under glass and he said, can you tell me anything about it? And I started to read it, and it began with when in the course of human events, it becomes necessary and -

Jason Raia:

And were there notes in the margin?

George Boudreau:

There are. There are notes in the margin and -

Jason Raia:

Tell us who they're written by.

George Boudreau:

They're written well, he said, well, do you recognize anybody? I said, well, it's the Declaration of Independence. He said can you tell me? I said, it's Thomas Jefferson's handwriting. And he said, very good. And like I said, most people don't get that. And I said, well, I've seen Thomas Jefferson’s handwriting before, but it is this you know, it is I think it's very emblematic of the APS that no one, with the possible exception of their brilliant library staff, has any real grasp of what's in those buildings.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely.

George Boudreau:

Just so much. And they're still finding it. You know, one of the things they've been working on is digitizing Deborah Read Franklin's, shop account books because Mrs. Franklin ran the business while he was running the printing press. And, Franklin, you know, very quickly, even though he is not a person by any means of the elite, he begins to see himself as a public facing person. And, part of that is when he creates The Library Company of Philadelphia, one of the first things he does is he donates his printer services. So he's now a philanthropist. He's a businessman giving very publicly to charity. So they have all the printed forms they need and such, and it's kind of a big deal.

Jason Raia:

And it's his wife who in some ways makes that possible because she continues to run the business. And the reason I find that so fascinating is that the other part of your work, of your scholarship, in addition to talking about historical places, has been about giving voice to those in American history who have not always had a voice. And so, looking at women, looking at, enslaved people, looking at lower classes, and making sure we understand and hear their stories in addition to and that's, to me, one of the more important things is you're not saying we don't need to hear those other stories anymore. We need to hear all these new stories you're saying that there's always room for more stories and that we need to hear all of the stories that we can hear.

George Boudreau:

So, as you've heard may have heard me say to the group of teachers, I don't really look at history as like dessert. You know? If you get a bigger piece of history of your history, that means I get less of my for mine. We all have our histories. And I think ignoring any of them is perilous, and I'll go so far as to say un-American. We've been a complex people since the day we started crawling off the boats, probably seasick as hell. And, I certainly, I, I've dabbled in DNA and some research, and you I found some ancestors I was quite shocked to find, but, you know, there they are. And I think that we are complex people. If you look at the current Congress, I

hope, or, you know, the diversity of the Supreme Court now that we've never had, won this divorce, that's with that's a complex story right there.Or if you look at where a successful campaign goes on, politically, I think that's vastly important.

Jason Raia:

So Phyllis Wheatley and, Ona Judge, were two of the names that immediately jumped out at me. Phillis Wheatley, again, because I'm, having, you know, spent so much time in Boston. And in the Museum of the American Revolution here in Philadelphia, they have a first edition of that volume of poetry that she wrote, in honor of George Washington. So that was really interesting. But I want you to tell us about your essay and about Ona Judge because she is a fascinating story, that is this direct connection, because she was in George Washington's household.

George Boudreau:

She was. Yeah. I mean, I wanted very much to get someone to write an essay on the enslaved women of the presidential household in Philadelphia. And one of the people who was one of the natural choices to do that was Erica Dunbar, who wrote the phenomenal book *Never Caught*, and there's now a young person's edtion to that too. But Professor Dunbar was busy with other things, including she's now a producer of the TV show, *The Gilded Age*. So, Erica was busy. and I asked around several people and, of course, you know, as you do in academia. Does anybody know anybody working on this topic? And the answer I kept getting was, why don't you do it? You covered some of this in your book, *Independence*, and I'm like, well, I guess I could. I was incredibly fortunate. I'm a longtime volunteer with the National Park Service, and I was permitted to use park archives, provided I sat alone in a room by myself, not breathing on an NPS employee in the height of the COVID, and was able to go through papers. The Parks' now retired historian, Anna Cox Toogood, a woman that we call Coxley, had created a great archive of documents related to the enslaved community and this house. And as I looked at this, I was trying to find an angle. You know? Erica Dunbar has already published a great book as a biography. I was in the process of nominating my own judge for a state historical marker, which will be going up in the next year sometime. And trying to think of, you know, how to do this.

And I went back to, you know, teachers used to tell us to go back to the primary source and look for Ona's voice and Ona said to me in print, you know, when they explain, how'd you get away? How'd you, how did you escape from the home of the President of the United States of America? This guy who's the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, and she explains that she, quote, “I had friends among the colored people of the town.” And she you know, if you think about that experience, if you know Mount Vernon now, you know, it's still very rural. You know? If you wanna go to get a sandwich or, you know, to go to fill up your car with gas or, you know, it's a slap. It's a walk. Town is a heck of a drive. So Ona is taken from this world that she is born into at Mount Vernon and transplanted into two Northeastern urban cities. And in the second of those, where the Washington household moves in 1790, suddenly, she is surrounded by an African American community that isn't in the process of gaining freedom. The story of abolition in Philadelphia would take more time than we have today. But, this community is rising, is

coming about, and she becomes friendly with some of these folks. And some I mean, we don't know for certain, but we can surmise either helped her out the back door of the President's house or hid her in basements or in attics or in, you know, coach houses and got her on a ship and got her out of Pennsylvania. And she remained, as she said, forever free.

You know, the number of documents we have of African American women are so few. But the fact that she leaves us two autobiographical interviews is amazing. And I'll tell you that I think the success of that was, in part, building on what I did with *Independence* and having access to the park service's archive of primary sources, I could walk the streets of Philadelphia and tell you where other people who own a might or likely knew lived and their story of couples who had gained freedom, of couples who had bought a house, you know, and doing this you know, one of the challenges that that I the essay fails on. I really wanted to juxtapose Ona's later life in freedom with a woman who we only know by the name Moll. The Custis children, Martha's grandchildren, called her mammy, but mammy is an incredibly loaded term in modern America. But she was this beloved, almost stereotypical caregiver who, you know, the children talk about. You know, she cuddled us and dried our tears, and she was you know, she raised Martha Washington's children for her and Moll vanishes.

We just I, you know, I hope someone listening to this will be the one to call me and say, oh, we found her. One hypothesis is that after Martha died in 182, Moll was inherited by one of the grandsons-in-law and went to be with him, but, you know, it's this astounding thing when you realize these people who you know, this this woman was in the presidential household for its first 8 years, and then she vanishes. We don't know what happened to her. And so often, especially As I've gotten to know more and more about the Washington family and their enslaved workers, the idea that people just can vanish from the historical record seems almost nonsensical.

So there's a lot of history out there to do. There's no point I've I can reason yet on why we ever stopped looking, you know, I am so proud of my friends and colleagues at Mount Vernon and at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and at James and Dolly Madison's, Montpelier and others who have broken through the stone walls and start telling these stories. And one of the things that I, you know, I have spent a lot of time studying is what folks used to inherit because I'm trying to figure out how this painting got from point A to point Z, or why is this chest of drawers where it ends up. But it's really mind boggling when you start to see people being inherited in the same way.

Martha intended to give Ona Judge to a granddaughter as a wedding present. And everybody, including this granddaughter's eventual husband, thought she was just a nasty piece of work. And Ona didn't wanna go. You know? She had seen freedom. She'd been given that taste, and she declared independence. I think I wrote this in women's washing *Women in Washington's World*. She declared her own independence a block from where the Declaration had been proclaimed. She and I think about her little, young, defenseless. But stepping into a community, the reality was Ona could walk out of the front door of 190 High Street. I don't know if she used the front door or not. I like to think she did. And encounter African American women who had

gone from slavery to freedom and now we're making the things of freedom, families, financial success, homes, and I think that's vastly important. You know, it's not something when I was a third grader, they taught me.

Jason Raia:

Right.

George Boudreau:

But we got a lot of work to do, and I'd like to think, you know, since you know, our internet connection when I was in third grade was really bad. But that's gotten better. If we can change in that way, we can change history too.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. So I want to have at least a brief discussion about what we call America today. So as someone who studied that era, I'm curious what lessons you think early America holds for us today in a world where Americans are having a harder and harder time talking to one another because they don't agree about stuff or because their own experience is just so vastly different. They don't see anything in common with other people.

George Boudreau:

I think we have to learn from the past. You know, I think about the number of times I've watched people get emotional over the history that I write. I've seen that so often. I will always remember taking my NEH teacher's workshop to The Library Company of Philadelphia, and their wonderful, unemotional librarian James Green, who is now retired but is a brilliant historian of Franklin's era and his printed works. Jim was, and Jim is a very quiet, very mild mannered fellow, and he was describing things. And one of the teachers was standing facing a brick wall weeping. And I went up to this lady and said, if you need something, please let me know, but I'm a little rattled. So can you tell me what's going on? And she turned to me and was just in tears, and she said, George, I've taught AP government in Ohio for my entire career and you just let me see a rough printed draft of the Constitution with James Wilson's margin notes on it. Do you know what this means to me? And I said, you know, you don't normally get to get a librarian emotional, but I said, I think we need to tell Mr. Green how you're feeling. And she did that. He teared up too, and we're all you know, it's like a Walton family Christmas special. We're all in tears. But it does mean something. What scares me, there's this idea of late that in order for you to have, I can't. If you have a history you know, if somehow you have that, then somehow I won't. And that's kind of nuts.

Jason Raia:

That's the zero sum game.

George Boudreau:

Yeah.

Jason Raia:

That if you win, I have to lose. And if I win, you have to lose as opposed to one, just allowing history to be history. What happened? I think as a teacher, it's always what I used to say, when I was a dean of students, to young teachers, and teaching high school. I'm like, they're adolescents, their job is to make mistakes, to screw up. Our job is to help them understand it. And I think teaching history is the same way. It's the facts are the facts. What happened, happened. What we need to do is figure out what do we learn from it? How do we understand it? How do we make meaning from it? And it doesn't have to be, I think you make a really important point, it doesn't have to be, oh, you are a terrible person because you're related to this person who we, today, a judge did something terrible.

Okay. We like to close with a quiz because this has been deep, and there have been tears. And, We wanna we wanna make sure that-

George Boudreau:

There's gonna be somebody's gonna be crying over something. Okay. Just bear in mind, folks, I'm old. I haven't taken a quiz since the eighties?

Jason Raia:

So, question number one, excluding Washington and Lincoln, who is your favorite president?

George Boudreau:

Franklin Roosevelt.

Jason Raia:

Okay. What's one book you would recommend for listeners to pick up and read?

George Boudreau:

Oh, wow. I could give you piles of them.

Jason Raia:

Pick your favorite.

George Boudreau:

Wow. Rhys Isaac's *Transformation of Virginia*. We talked about that earlier. Or my dear friend, Judy Van Buskirk's brilliant book, *Generous Enemies*, about the revolution in New York City. That's another phenomenal book.

Jason Raia:

Excellent.

George Boudreau:

I have a lot of friends who publish, so I may have just gotten myself in disagreement.

Jason Raia:

We'll pass on all the emails. If you had not chosen a career as a historian, what might you have become?

George Boudreau:

Oh, golly. I don't know. Maybe I would have gone into cooking. I like to cook.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

George Boudreau:

Or gardening. Although I don't get to do this as much as I'd like to.

Jason Raia:

Excellent. What pet peeve annoys you the most?

George Boudreau:

Oh, people who lie about history and somehow consider that patriotic.

Jason Raia:

Oh That was deep.

George Boudreau:

Sorry.

Jason Raia:

What's your favorite movie?

George Boudreau:

Honestly? Oh my. Gut reaction, *It's A Wonderful Life*.

Jason Raia:

Okay. Fair enough.

George Boudreau:

High up there would also be my father's favorite movie, called *The Best Years of our Lives*, which is a covers which everyone who had a dad who fought in World War II should see annually.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

George Boudreau:

But I always said it's the story of my father who came back and became a builder after-

Jason Raia:

Yep.

George Boudreau:

-after defeating Hitler.

Jason Raia:

Yep. That's, yeah, that's the story of that movie. And, yeah, it's that greatest generation story. They did what they needed to do, and then they came home and went back to a normal life. If you can meet just one historical person, who would it be?

George Boudreau:

Oh, boy. There's lots of them. Just for the pleasantry of the company, I'd love to have met Eleanor Roosevelt. I admired her greatly as a child and still do. I've wept at her grave. If I could have an hour with Benjamin Franklin, it would answer a lot of research questions. It would really I you know, I have a lot of stuff I need to know, and that would you know? Who was William's mother? You know? So can I use those two?

Jason Raia:

Sure. Absolutely. We'll let you do two. And final question, and we ask the same question of everybody, bourbon or scotch?

George Boudreau:

Bourbon.

Jason Raia:

Excellent. Bourbon's winning.

George Boudreau:

Yep. Yeah. My grandmother was a scotch drinker. I always thought it tasted like peat. Like peat you would put around a plant.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

George Boudreau:

And I have been well blessed to do several, historic research trips to Charleston, and I strongly recommend they're not paying me to say this, but go to Husk, drink bourbon at the bar. The food at their bar is unbelievably good. And Charleston, you just everybody should go there and eat and then see the new museum.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. Yes. Husk is amazing, and there's now one in Nashville and, yeah. They do amazing stuff. I enjoyed it very much there. And this concludes this episode of *George Washington Slept Here*. George Boudreau, Thank you for a wonderful conversation. I also wanna thank our producers, Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen, a special shout out to, friend of the pod, Bill

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Thanks, and talk to you next time.