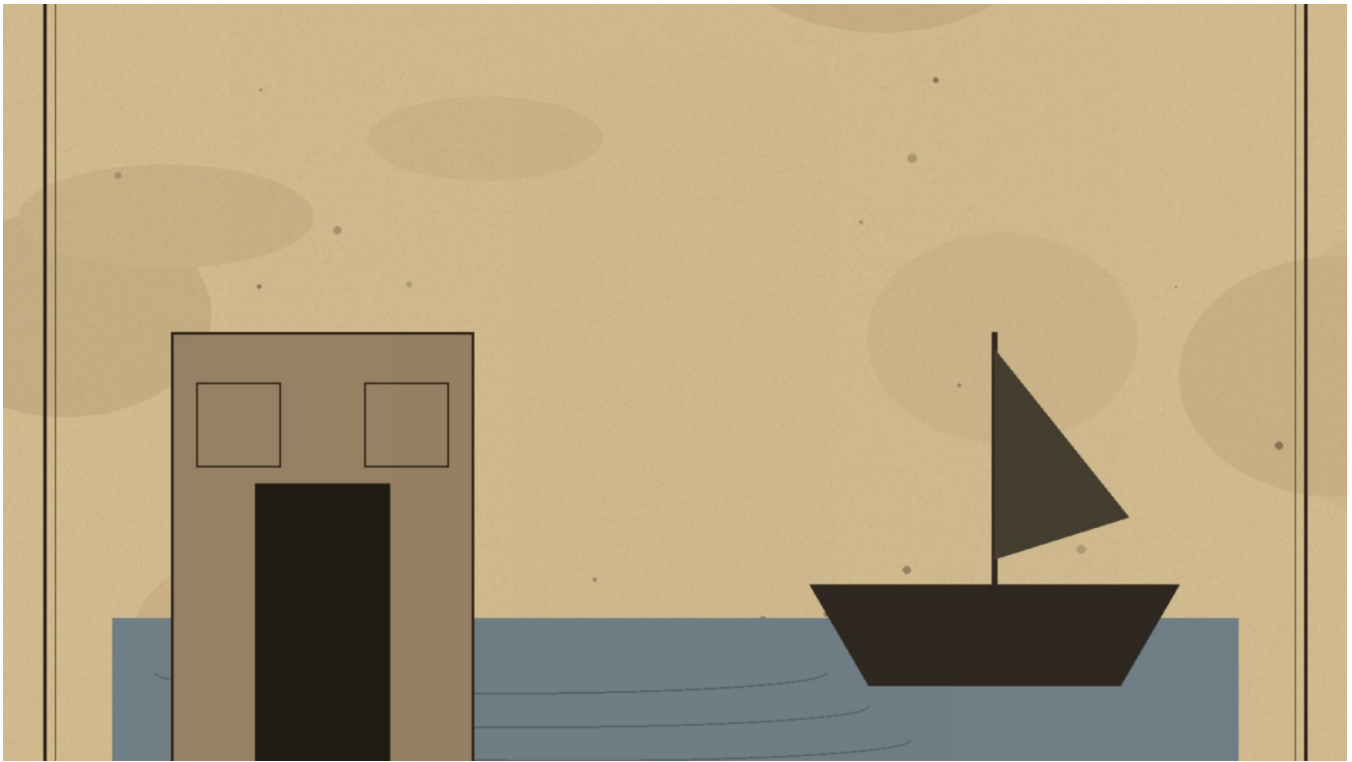




What a 1796 Gazette Ad for Ona Judge Reveals About Power and the Press

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A Philadelphia Gazette ad offered money for the return of Ona Judge, who sought freedom from the President's household — a hard lesson in how print notice once served slavery.

Some public notices protect people. Some public notices hunt them.

On May 24, 1796, the **Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser** carried an advertisement stating that Oney Judge had “absconded from the household of the President of the United States.” The ad described her in general terms, warned vessel masters against taking her aboard, and offered ten dollars if she were brought home from the city or harbor — more if from a greater distance. The steward Frederick Kitt was named as the subscriber of the ad. The National Park Service identifies this as the only published advertisement the Washington household placed seeking her return.

This paper is not a celebration of that advertisement. It is a careful look at what the form of public notice reveals: early American newspapers carried legal-style ads that treated freedom seekers as property to be recovered. Reading the notice today — respectfully, without invented dialogue — shows how print could serve the slavery system, and why later generations fought for legal freedom and equal protection.

Discussed on X by @NoticeNearYou: <https://x.com/NoticeNearYou/status/2105697431472206302>

Who Ona Maria Judge was — and was not — in this document

Ona Maria Judge, often called Oney Judge, was a freedom seeker. In the ad's framing she appears as missing property from a famous household. In a human framing she is a person who risked everything to claim her own life.

The enslavers connected to the household were George Washington, then President of the United States, and Martha Washington. Naming the presidency here is institutional and historical, not decorative. The highest executive office in the new republic sat on top of a household that included enslaved people — and that household used the newspaper when Judge left.

Frederick Kitt, the steward, is the name on the advertisement as published. Printer A. Brown and the *Philadelphia Gazette* supplied the press machinery that turned a private recovery effort into a public page.

Primary presentations of the ad are available through the National Park Service and Encyclopedia Virginia. Those are the right places to read the wording. This paper paraphrases for clarity and refuses invented quotes beyond what those records support.

What the notice said, stripped of romance

In plain terms the advertisement did four jobs:

1. Announced that Judge had left the President's household.
2. Gave readers marks to identify her — appearance and clothing described in general terms.
3. Warned ship captains and others against helping her travel by water.
4. Offered money for her return, with a higher amount for longer distance.

That is the anatomy of a recovery ad. It is also the anatomy of a public-notice form: publication, description, warning to third parties, and a bounty. The legal and social system behind it treated a human being as reclaimable property.

If you only remember one structural lesson, remember this: the newspaper page was not neutral weather. It was a tool. Tools inherit the morality of the law and custom that swing them.

Why this belongs in a public-notice curriculum

Notice Nearby usually writes about hearings, budgets, bonds, and modern legal ads. Why pause on 1796?

Because public notice is easy to praise in the abstract. "Sunshine is good." "People should be told." Those sentences are incomplete. People should ask: told what, by whom, under what law, aiming at what result?

The Judge advertisement shows notice serving capture. Later emancipation-era proclamations show notice serving freedom in a wartime legal frame. Both used publication. The difference was the law and the purpose behind the ink.

Students of democracy need both examples. Otherwise "public notice" becomes a brand name instead of a civic technology that can heal or harm.

Philadelphia, vessels, and the geography of escape

The ad's warning to vessel masters is not a random flourish. Philadelphia was a port. Water routes were real paths out. An enslaving household that feared maritime escape used the paper to deputize the harbor's commercial eyes.

Distance pricing — more money if she were found farther away — turns geography into a bounty schedule. It also reveals how publication radiates: the Gazette page could travel farther than a single messenger.

Modern readers should resist turning that into adventure fiction. For Judge, distance was survival. For the subscriber of the ad, distance was a recovery cost.

How to read hard historical ads without doing fresh harm

A few guardrails keep this kind of history usable in a commercial public-interest paper:

- Do not invent Judge's inner monologue or fake dialogue.
- Do not reproduce racist caricature in art or captions.
- Do not treat the ad as a cute “found newspaper” novelty.
- Do name the power imbalance: presidential household versus enslaved woman seeking freedom.
- Do point readers to NPS and Encyclopedia Virginia primary presentations.
- Do connect the form to later notice law without claiming the 1796 ad “caused” a modern statute.

Dignity is not the same as softness. You can say plainly that the ad hunted a person. You can also refuse to turn her into a content prop.

Press, power, and “only published advertisement”

The National Park Service note that this was the only published advertisement the Washington household placed for her return is historically important. It tells you the household chose the newspaper tool at least once in her case, and that historians have tracked that choice.

It does not mean newspapers were the only pressure applied in freedom-seeker cases generally. Private messages, legal process, and informal networks also existed in the period. The point for our beat is narrower: when recovery sought a public multiplier, the Gazette ad was the multiplier.

Printers made money from ads. Readers scanned ads for commerce, auctions, runaway notices, and shipping news. The business model of the early press mixed those categories on shared pages. That mix is part of why legal-style notices felt ordinary to contemporary readers and feel shocking when isolated today.

From 1796 recovery ads to later freedom notices

History did not jump in one step from Gazette recovery ads to perfect justice. It moved through war, amendment, statute, and struggle. The Emancipation Proclamation — another item in this historic-notice set — put freedom into wartime public text for designated rebellious areas. Constitutional amendments and civil-rights law later rebuilt the formal baseline.

Holding the Judge ad beside later freedom proclamations is not a neat before-and-after poster. It is a reminder that publication follows power. When power upholds slavery, notices can hunt. When power proclaims freedom — even partially, even as a war measure — notices can announce a different legal world.

Readers should leave with humility: ink is strong, but ink is not virtue by itself.

What a modern notice reader can take to the courthouse

You will not find a 1796-style recovery ad in a legitimate U.S. newspaper today as lawful slavery practice. You will find other notices that still reward careful reading:

- Who is speaking — a court, a county clerk, a private party, an agency?

- Who is the notice aimed at — creditors, heirs, tenants, the general public?
- What happens if someone ignores it — default judgment, lost claim, missed hearing?
- Is the notice protecting a process or merely accelerating a taking?

The Judge ad trains the muscle that asks those questions without assuming the printed page is automatically on the side of the vulnerable.

The difference between explaining an ad and endorsing it

Commercial publishers sometimes fear that describing an ugly document will look like praise. The opposite mistake is worse: hiding the document so the public never learns how ordinary the injustice looked on a busy page.

Explanation means: here is what was printed, who paid for it, what form it used, and what system made that form normal. Endorsement would mean: this was right. This paper refuses endorsement. It insists on explanation.

That stance matches how responsible museums and parks services present runaway ads — as evidence, not as entertainment.

Household labor, invisibility, and sudden visibility

Enslaved workers in elite households were often simultaneously omnipresent in daily life and invisible in civic honor. A recovery ad flips that invisibility in the cruelest way. The person becomes highly visible as a target: height, clothing, manner, routes of escape.

For readers of public notice, that flip is a warning about descriptive power. Description can identify a missing child for rescue. Description can also paint a target for capture. The ethics live in the purpose and the law, not in the adjective count.

Why vessel warnings still matter to notice literacy

Third-party warnings are a classic notice device. Modern construction notices tell drivers lanes will close. Modern lien notices warn creditors. The 1796 ad warned captains not to carry Judge.

When you see a notice aimed at strangers — “all persons are warned...” — ask what duty it tries to create for bystanders. Sometimes it is safety. Sometimes it is complicity. The grammar can look similar while the moral cargo differs.

Connecting this paper to the rest of the historic set

Read this ad beside the Emancipation Proclamation paper in this series. One document uses publication to recover a freedom seeker for an enslaving household. Another uses publication to declare freedom in rebellion areas as a war measure. The shared medium is public text. The purposes collide.

Also read it beside the Federal Register origin paper. Institutional mailboxes can carry better or worse freight. Building a mailbox is not the end of civic work. Filling it justly is the ongoing work.

Timeline of the public moment

Judge's departure and the May 24, 1796, advertisement sit in a short, sharp public window. The household discovers absence. The steward places an ad. The Gazette prints it. Harbor readers and city readers see a

bounty description. Whatever private searches happened around that window, the newspaper page is the part that entered the shared civic record.

That timeline teaches a notice habit: isolate the public act from the private scramble. Historians can debate motives and subsequent attempts to recover Judge — using sources beyond this brief. Our beat stays with the printed instrument because that is the notice artifact.

Money on the page — what ten dollars signaled

Ten dollars in 1796 was not a symbolic penny. It was a real offer meant to motivate strangers. The higher amount for greater distance turned pursuit into a priced errand. Bounty structure is itself a kind of notice design: it tells the public what behavior the subscriber wants to buy.

Modern lost-pet posters and modern skip-trace incentives still use priced attention. The moral chasm is the legal status of the person described. In 1796, slavery law made a human being the object of a recovery market. Naming that fact is not anachronistic scolding; it is reading the ad's legal world accurately.

Why “President’s household” language matters in a notice

The advertisement's reference to the President's household did more than identify an employer. It wrapped the recovery claim in the prestige of the office. Readers were asked to help return someone to the nation's most famous home.

Institutional prestige can grease the social enforcement of a notice. That is true for good notices (a court order) and bad ones (a recovery ad under slavery). Literacy means noticing when official aura is being borrowed to move private force.

Closing: notice reveals who the law once served

The May 24, 1796, Gazette advertisement offered money for the return of Ona Judge after she sought freedom from the President's household. Frederick Kitt's name stood on the ad. The press made the hunt public.

Old newspaper notices reveal who the law once served — and who it failed. Studying them carefully is part of taking public notice seriously, not part of polishing a founding myth.

Discussed on @NoticeNearYou: <https://x.com/NoticeNearYou/status/2105697431472206302>

Notes

- Sources: U.S. National Park Service transcript/context; Encyclopedia Virginia primary-document presentation of the May 24, 1796 Philadelphia Gazette advertisement.

- Author: Ryan Standley / Record of Sale, LLC / Notice Nearby.

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Historic public-notice series: [Federal Register Vol. 1]([papers/federal-register-volume-one-1936]) · [Homestead Act]([papers/homestead-act-public-notice-1862]) · [Emancipation Proclamation]([papers/emancipation-proclamation-public-notice-1863]) · [Selective Service 1917]([papers/selective-service-proclamation-1917]) · [Bainbridge Exclusion Order]([papers/civilian-exclusion-order-bainbridge-1942]).

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