

John Hemmings, an enslaved craftsman

Reading Level: Elementary School



John Hemmings was Betty Hemings's youngest son. He was Thomas Jefferson's slave and a talented woodworker. At fourteen he worked as an "out-carpenter". He chopped down trees for firewood. He cut logs for building materials. He helped build fences, barns, and the slave cabins on Mulberry Row.

Only the hearth and chimney remain of the Joinery, which was a carpenter's shop where John Hemmings worked, first as an apprentice and later as the head joiner.

When he was seventeen, John Hemmings worked with woodworkers at Monticello and became a joiner. He was skillful in making "anything that was wanted in woodwork." He crafted wheels, bookshelves and plow frames. In letters he was described as "a first-rate workman."

John Hemmings was close to Thomas Jefferson. He wrote letters to Jefferson about his work at Poplar Forest, one of Jefferson's plantations. Unlike most enslaved workers, John received twenty dollars a year. He could even choose his own clothes from a store!

In 1827, John Hemmings was freed by Jefferson's will. He was given his woodworking tools, a log house and an acre of land. John's wife Priscilla died in 1830. John mourned the loss of his wife and his master. He lived at Monticello until he died.