

Burwell Colbert, an enslaved butler

Reading Level: Middle School

Burwell Colbert was born in 1783 at Monticello. At ten years old, he began working in the nailery on Mulberry Row. He was trained as painter and a glazier, a person who sets glass in window panes, and also served as the butler at Monticello. In 1805, Jefferson wrote that Burwell “paints and takes care of the house.”

Burwell Colbert married his first cousin Critta, a nursemaid for Jefferson’s granddaughters; they had eight children. In 1819, Critta died. She was only thirty-six. Burwell was “overwhelmed with grief.”

In later years, Colbert was described as “the main, principal servant” at Monticello. His duties ranged from supervising the house maids to chief waiter. He was also Thomas Jefferson’s personal servant, laying out his clothes and accompanying Jefferson on trips.

Letters and records show that Thomas Jefferson “had the most perfect confidence” in Colbert. He was the one nailer to be “absolutely excepted from the whip.” When Colbert was sick, Jefferson’s granddaughter wrote that her Grandpapa’s “constant anxiety [convinced] me still more of his extraordinary value for Burwell.”

In 1826, Thomas Jefferson gave Burwell his freedom, writing, “I give to my good, affectionate, and faithful servant Burwell his freedom, and the sum of three hundred Dollars . . .” The faithful servant was by the bedside of Thomas Jefferson the night Jefferson died.

In 1834, Burwell married Elizabeth Battles, a free woman of color; they had three daughters. He spent the remainder of his life a free man. He worked as a painter and a glazier at the University of Virginia and at the homes of Jefferson’s friends and family. Records are not clear on the year of his death.



Burwell Colbert was known to have been at Jefferson’s side when his master died in this bed on July 4, 1826.