

Israel Gillette, an enslaved house servant

Reading Level: Middle School

Israel Gillette was born in 1800, the son of Edward (Ned) and Jane Gillette, enslaved farm laborers. He had twelve brothers and sisters. In 1873, when Israel was seventy-three years old, a reporter recorded memories of his life. His recollections provide valuable information about Thomas Jefferson, and life at Monticello for both free whites and slaves.

Israel's childhood was spent working at Monticello, first in the textile shop and then in the main house. He made fires, dusted and polished, and ran errands. Later he took on the duties of chief waiter and butler. He often traveled with Jefferson in the new carriage, which was pulled by a team of four horses. Israel rode one of the horses and helped guide the team.

When Thomas Jefferson died, his will freed only seven slaves. Israel recalled that Jefferson's death created great "uncertainty to us slaves." His own family was sold "in at least ten different directions." Israel was bought by Thomas Walker Gilmer. In 1838, Israel married Elizabeth Randolph, a seamstress and "free woman of color." In 1841, when Gilmer became a congressman, Israel did not want to accompany his master to Washington. In 1841, Gilmer agreed to sell Israel his freedom for \$500.

In 1844, Israel Gillette arrived in a Virginia court to obtain his free papers. He adopted the last name of Jefferson. Israel and Elizabeth left for Ohio, a free state where Israel finally "considered myself wholly free and not till then." In Ohio, he struggled to learn to read and write. He worked as a waiter in a private home and on a steamboat. He died sometime after 1873.