

James Hemings, an enslaved cook

Reading Level: Middle School

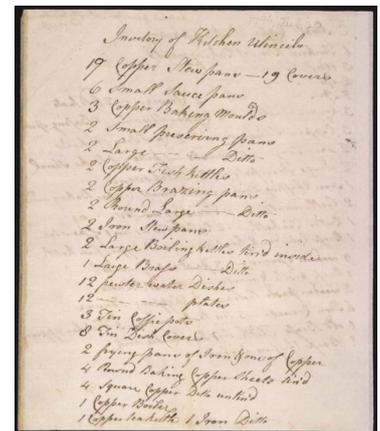
In 1784, James Hemings, Betty Hemings's enslaved nineteen-year-old son, crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the *Ceres* with Thomas Jefferson and his daughter Martha. He was traveling to Paris to be trained as a chef.

Hemings apprenticed with several French caterers and cooks. He studied with the chef of the Prince de Condé. After training for several years, James became the *chef de cuisine* for Jefferson's household in Paris. He was paid four dollars a month.

In France, James could have claimed his freedom, but in 1789 he chose to return to Virginia a slave. He traveled with Thomas Jefferson in New York and Pennsylvania where slavery was illegal. Jefferson paid him wages as if James was a free servant. Finally, Jefferson drew up a contract that stated James would return to Monticello to train another chef and then he would receive his freedom.

In 1796, James Hemings left Monticello with thirty dollars and his free papers. He continued to travel. In a letter to his daughter, Jefferson wrote that James, "tells me his next trip will be to Spain. I am afraid his journeys will end in the moon."

James Hemings was thirty-six when Thomas Jefferson heard that his former chef had "committed an act of suicide." Jefferson wrote to Monticello to inform the Hemings family of James's "tragical end."



Page one of a list of kitchen equipment written out by James Hemings before his departure from Monticello.