

# John Gadsby beyond Alexandria

## Baltimore: Indian Queen Hotel (1808-1819)

John Gadsby left Alexandria in the summer of 1808, moving to Baltimore with his second wife Margaret and children. Gadsby took over the management of the Indian Queen Hotel, located at the corner of Hanover and W. Baltimore Streets. The *Baltimore Gazette* in 1827 praised Gadsby: “It is well known that he is the first man who introduced the proper style and taste for public entertainments in this city.”

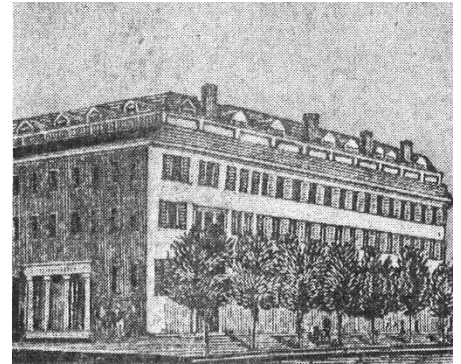
This hotel was known for its size. At its peak, it could sleep 150 people. Gadsby introduced new mechanical innovations—meat roasted by mechanically turned spits and a mechanically-powered coffee roaster that could roast 20 to 30 pounds of coffee at a time. He also opened hot and cold public baths and a reading room. According to Baltimore’s *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, the reading room would be “furnished with all the most desirable newspapers of the union—and may be visited by the guests of the house, and a few select subscribers only” (May 2, 1814).

The hotel was busy, with multiple stage coach lines starting and ending at the doorstep. Gadsby also hosted a variety of groups, from faculty at nearby University of Maryland School of Medicine to a delegation of Odawa (“Ottaway”) Indians from what is now Michigan.

Gadsby used enslaved workers to run this busy hotel. The 1810 census shows Gadsby owned 45 enslaved people, a high number compared to other local slave owners. Gadsby’s success, like the success of many other tavernkeepers, was based on an enslaved labor force.

In February 1812, his wife Margaret died “after a painful and affecting illness which she bore with exemplary and christian fortitude. Leaving an affectionate husband and six children to lament their irreparable loss” (*Federal Gazette*, Baltimore, February 10, 1812). Just under a year later, Gadsby married Providence (Provey) Norris in January 1813.

He was still operating his hotel when the War of 1812 broke out. As the war came closer to the city in late August 1814, Gadsby was named a ward leader for Baltimore’s Committee of Vigilance & Safety and gave \$50 to defend the city from the British. Gadsby also hosted Francis Scott Key after he witnessed the Battle of Fort McHenry, mid-September of 1814, from a British warship. During his stay at the Indian Queen, he made the final edits to his song that soon became the National Anthem.



*Indian Queen Hotel. It was torn down in the 1830s.*



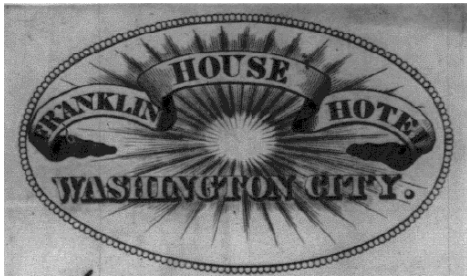
*Indian Queen Bill Head*

Business started going downhill for Gadsby as early as 1817. For two years, he advertised his lease for sale. Clearly, he was not doing well financially. Based on newspaper account from 1824, he had invested over \$30,000 in the hotel, and he was trying to liquidate assets. By late fall of 1819, David Barnum had taken over the Indian Queen.

Questions remain about Gadsby's life immediately after the Indian Queen. The 1820 census shows him in District 1, right outside the Baltimore city limits, with 15 people "engaged in agriculture," probably the 15 enslaved people listed. Newspapers indicate Gadsby was trying to sell farm land in the area as well. Perhaps this was where the Gadsby family was living?

By 1823, however, he was ready to get back in the hotel game. He was in negotiation to manage the Washington Hall & Hotel in Philadelphia before it burned in March 1823.

## Washington, D.C.: Franklin House Hotel (1823-1826)



*Franklin House Hotel Bill Head. The Franklin was demolished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Instead of Philadelphia, John Gadsby appears in Washington, D.C. in late 1823. The *Baltimore Patriot* in December announced, "we observe by the Washington papers that Mr. John Gadsby, recently of Baltimore, has taken the Franklin House, Washington City, and has just opened it in very superior style for the accommodation of the public."

The Franklin House Hotel, located at the corner of I & 21<sup>st</sup> Streets (near George Washington University today), was only about a 40-minute ride to the Capitol. It already had a reputation for hosting the most distinguished men in the city, thanks to its former tavern keeper, William O'Neale.

From newspaper accounts and other primary documents, it seems John Gadsby was bringing his family into the business. His son John, Jr. was advertising for staff.

One of Gadsby's special guests at the Franklin was the Marquette de Lafayette during his Goodwill Tour in October and December of 1824. Lafayette stayed at the Franklin while in town both times and Gadsby hosted a large public dinner in Lafayette's honor in October.

Senator Andrew Jackson and family lodged at the Franklin in December 1824 - January 1825 during the presidential election crisis. The House of Representatives decided the outcome of the 1824 election because neither candidate John Quincy Adams nor Andrew Jackson received a majority Electoral College vote. Once the House chose Adams, Jackson paid his \$86.25 bill and left town.

By summer of 1826, when Gadsby announced the hotel was for rent, the Franklin boasted a billiard room, extensive coach house for 30 horses, 6 parlors, private suites, and rooms for 60 to 70 people. In his *National Intelligencer* ad, Gadsby called the hotel "elegant and spacious....Neither pains nor expense have been spared in fitting it up in a style of elegance and convenience, suited for a first rate Establishment."

## Washington, D.C.: National Hotel (1826-1836)

In 1826, Gadsby bought a series of row houses located on the block of Pennsylvania Avenue & Sixth Streets and converted the buildings into a lodging enterprise – suites, entertainment spaces, rooms, and private apartments for families. It opened to the public late 1826.

The hotel was 4 stories, with entrances on 2 facades. From accounts, we can gather that the hotel served 300 to 400 people. The *Providence Patriot* in Rhode Island wrote in 1829, “*The public hotel of Mr. Gadsby, at Washington, may be regarded as one of the wonders of that capital. It exceeds any establishment of the kind which we have seen in America, if not in dimensions, at least in convenience and airiness....under the same roof are a bank, stage office, a hat store, and a merchant tailor’s store; in the parallelogram is comprised an open area of 140 feet by 80, with a perennial fountain of spring water and grass plots; and wide piazzas are attached, inside, to the several stories, which afford room for exercise and protect the chambers at all seasons....Mr. Gadsby, who superintends it indefatigably and courteously, possesses ample experience and peculiar skill in his profession.*”



*The National Hotel. It was demolished in 1942 and is now the site of the Newseum.*

Gadsby decorated the rooms in the most fashionable style of the period. Senator Levi Woodbury in 1828 praised the “*superb bed and fine hangings, the good carpet, and curtains rivaling the snow in hue.*”

Gadsby also made a point in his advertisements to talk about his bar: “*a great variety of choice and well selected wines, of various kinds, from the oldest established wine merchants in the United States.*”

On February 22, 1827, National Hotel hosted a gala celebration: a Birthnight Ball honoring the late President George Washington. Gala guests included President John Quincy Adams, Vice President John Calhoun, and most of the Cabinet.

Thanks to newspapers of the time, we know that a long list of congressmen and diplomats resided at the National during the legislative session, including Henry Clay; Stephen F. Austin, representing the Republic of Texas; and William Henry Harrison during his 1836 presidential campaign.

The National was the temporary home to Andrew Jackson when he arrived in Washington on February 12, 1829 for the presidential transition and inauguration. He stayed in a suite of rooms, where Cabinet considerations were a major topic of conversation. Newspapers began to refer to Jackson’s suite as “the wigwam.” On March 4 after his inauguration at the Capitol, he hosted the people’s party at the White House. It got out of hand quickly, thanks to some alcoholic punch, and Jackson escaped out a window (or possibly a side entrance) and returned to his room at the National.

This hotel required a large number of staff, most of whom were enslaved. According to the 1830 census, Gadsby owned 39 enslaved people and employed 4 free black women.

Nathan Sargent, a writer who visited the National, described his experience:

*“This he conducted in a sort of military style, and especially was this observed at his long dinner-table. The guests being all seated, and an army of colored servants standing behind the chairs, Mr. Gadsby, a short, stout gentleman, standing at the head of the table, the guests silent with expectation, the word was given, “Remove covers!” when all the servants moved like automata, each at the same moment placing his hand upon the handle of a cover, each at the same instant lifting it, stepping back in line and facing to the head of the table, and, at a sign from Mr. Gadsby, all marching and keeping regular step to the place of depositing the covers, and then back to commence waiting on the guests.*

*Who, of the hundreds of thousands who in these good old cheap times – only 1.25 a day – enjoyed the hospitalities of this gentlemanly and most liberal Boniface, can forget his urbane manner, his careful attention to his guests, his well-ordered house, his fine old wines, and the princely manner in which he would send his bottle of choice Madeira to some old friend or favored guest at the table?”*

The National Hotel is infamous for many events that occurred after John Gadsby retired. While William, John’s son, ran the hotel, Solomon Northrup was kidnapped in 1841. Northrup later wrote *Twelve Years a Slave* about his experience as a slave before being rescued. Later, Henry Clay died in his room at the National in 1852. In March 1857, a mysterious disease, known in the papers as the National Hotel disease, struck almost 400 people, killing 36 of them, including 3 members of Congress. Finally, John Wilkes Booth stayed at the National the night before he assassinated Abraham Lincoln.

## Washington, D.C.: Retirement Years (1836-1844)

In the fall of 1836, the *National Intelligencer* announced John Gadsby’s retirement - *“This gentleman so well known throughout the country as proprietor of the hotel which bears his name, having acquired a handsome independence by his exertions, has retired from the business.”* He tasked son William with the day-to-day operation of the National.

On October 24, 1836, Gadsby purchased his retirement home, formerly owned by naval hero Stephen Decatur on Lafayette Square, at public auction for \$12,000. Immediately, the Gadsbys were befriended





*Formerly Decatur House,  
now managed by the White  
House Historical Society.*

by their socially prominent neighbors, including Dolley Madison. They led an active social life, joining in afternoon promenades, taking carriage rides down Pennsylvania Avenue, and throwing major parties.

Ten enslaved people moved with the Gadsbys from the National Hotel. Two enslaved families - the Kings and the Williamses - lived with them there. In addition, Rosa Marks lived and worked at their home, even after emancipation. We know more about this group of African Americans because of the Emancipation Petitions of 1862. In 1862, the United States Congress freed enslaved people in Washington with the District of Columbia Emancipation Act. The government, however, deemed it appropriate to reimburse slave owners in Washington for their financial losses. Family members Augusta and Mary Bruff filed the necessary paperwork.

Even in retirement, Gadsby was not far from the headlines remained active. We believe he was in real estate, transforming the old Franklin into row houses and renting them. In 1839, he decided to sell at auction some stock of “well selected wine,” about 10,000 bottles in total specially selected by Gadsby. This included Madeira imported in 1807 for Thomas Jefferson. Gadsby stated in his *National Intelligencer* ad “*Their character is too well known to require further particulars.*” Either this sale was unsuccessful, or he had even more wine than listed because a similar auction occurred after his death just 5 years later.

As a member of the community, in 1840, he put a notice in the newspaper that his house was robbed as and warned others: “*My family were all alarmed last night by a man inside of my house trying the locks of the chamber doors....He began to make the circle of the rooms, when the screams of the ladies of the family, by whom he was discovered, alarmed him so as to deter him from prosecuting his intentions, and he made his escape before he had plundered the house of anything.*” In 1841, he was a manager of the People’s Tippecanoe Inauguration Ball during the inauguration festivities of William Henry Harrison.

At the age of 78, John Gadsby passed away on May 15, 1844. According to his obituary in the *National Intelligencer*, he was a “*well-respected and useful citizen.*” He is buried at Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C. in a large family vault with 22 members of his family and Rosa Marks.

In May 1837, a writer noted, “*Saw Mr. Gadsby's vault, just finished. It is a very beautiful specimen of architecture, and differs from the common mode – being covered with granite.*” Even in death, he was making a statement on his rise to the top of Washington society.



*The Gadsby Vault at  
Congressional Cemetery.*