

AMHERST - Community and students came together for thought provoking and inspirational talk and book signing at the Commonwealth Honors College's "Running from the Washingtons: Ona Judge and the Quest for Freedom" on February 12th.

The event - which took place from 5-6 p.m. in the CHC Events Hall - featured Erica Armstrong Dunbar; a writer, historian, and professor at Rutgers University. The evening's topic was Ona Judge, a young enslaved woman who escaped from George and Martha Washington to find freedom.

In welcoming guests to the event, Dean Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina describes the significance of the upcoming talk; "There was no way to really know the Washingtons without knowing this story."

As Dunbar took the stage she prefaced her lecture; "I'll ask you all to spend a little time with me this evening thinking about our nation's history and about this incredible woman...."

"I was angry because I felt like, okay, here I am supposed to be an expert in early African American history, and I don't know this story." Dunbar adds about the nine year journey she went on to fully understand Ona and her life with the Washingtons.

Dunbar went on to discuss the way that the first President of the United States managed to cheat the system and keep his slaves, despite Pennsylvania laws. The law at the time stated that any out of towners' slaves who have been in Pennsylvania for six months or more are free.

Ona Judge eventually became Martha Washington's favorite slave, which ultimately is what led her to running away. Dunbar explains that Ona was set to be given away to Martha's niece, a woman who was known to be rude and unpleasant, as a wedding gift.

After hearing this news she flees to Portsmouth, New Hampshire and is pursued by the Washingtons for the rest of her life.

As the event concludes, Dunbar describes her experience of writing Ona's story and sharing it with the world as, "One of the most important moments of her professional career."

This event was held as part of the Commonwealth Honors College's events celebrating Black Heritage Month.