"A fascinating root-seeking odyssey...[Kearse] illuminates the work of racial repair confronting us all."
—Alondra Nelson, author of The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome

"Inheriting the role of griotte—family storyteller—from her mother, Bettye Kearse set out to preserve and deepen the knowledge about her family that oral tradition traces back to President Madison and an African slave named Mandy...Her quest, at once personal and historical, is both engrossing and very moving."
—Gail Pool, author of Lost Among the Baining: Adventure, Marriage, and Other Fieldwork

For thousands of years, West African griots and griottes have recited the stories of their people. Without this tradition Bettye Kearse would not have known that she is a descendant of President James Madison and his slave: his half-sister, Coreen. In 1990, Bettye became the eighth-generation griotte for her family. Their credo—“Always remember—you’re a Madison. You come from African slaves and a president”—was intended to be a source of pride, but for her, it echoed with abuses of slavery, including rape and incest.

Bettye embarked on a journey of discovery—of her ancestors, the nation, and herself. She learned that wherever African slaves walked, recorded history silenced their voices and buried their footsteps: beside a slave-holding fortress in Ghana; below a federal building in New York City; and under a brick walkway at James Madison’s Virginia plantation. And when Bettye tried to confirm the information her ancestors had passed down, she encountered obstacles at every turn.

Part personal quest, part testimony, part historical correction, The Other Madisons is the saga of an extraordinary American family told by a griotte determined to tell the whole story.

BETTYE KEARSE is a retired pediatric physician and geneticist. Her writing has appeared in TIME, Mental Floss, the Boston Herald, River Teeth, and Black Lives Have Always Mattered, and was listed as notable in The Best American Essays. She lives in New Mexico.
BETTYE KEARSE ON WRITING THE OTHER MADISONS

Why is oral history important?
Many cultures have age-old traditions of oral history. The stories of the ancestors and the history of a people link past and present, preserving not just a family or a community, but entire cultures and their values. The stories also influence how each person views himself in the present and within the continuum of past and future. American slave owners successfully abolished many African customs, but the tradition of oral history held strong. For many African-American families, like mine, this tradition is all that preserves the legacies our ancestors left for us.

Why was it important to you to visit the places where your ancestors lived?
Mandy was my family’s first African ancestor in America, and being her descendant shaped who I am. So I thought that if I walked where Mandy had walked and saw what she had seen, I could better understand this vital part of myself. But I learned that I can never know what it is like to be stolen, to lose everything I know and everyone I love, to stand on an auction block, to be vulnerable to someone else’s power, and, finally to be a slave for the rest of my life. I can only hope that in my own life I will do justice to Mandy’s life and keep memory of her alive.
What was the most surprising discovery you made in your research?
By excluding the words “slave” and “slavery,” choosing instead the term “other persons,” the framers of the Constitution made concrete the perception that African slaves were lesser. But, I was surprised to discover, the Founding Fathers had inadvertently, and counter to their intent, admitted that the nation’s enslaved were human, though, perhaps, only three-fifths so.

Who is your audience?
Though African-American women seeking a deeper historical and personal understanding of the sexual abuse of enslaved women and their descendants are my primary audience, my hope is that any reader—the general public, as well as high school and college teachers and students of American History, African-American History, Southern History, Women’s Studies, Psychology, and Sociology—will come to The Other Madisons.

What do you hope readers take away from your story?
Racism tries to convince African Americans that we are lesser, that we have nothing to be proud of and little to contribute. These myths are far from the truth. America’s enslaved people possessed remarkable inner strength and talents. These qualities did not die with the slaves but were passed down to their descendants, enabling us to make remarkable and important contributions to America and the world.
SELECTED PRAISE FOR THE OTHER MADISONS

One of Parade's "24 Best Memoirs to Read this Year"

"A Roots for a new generation, rich in storytelling and steeped in history."
—Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

"Astonishing... In extraordinary times, as statues fall, Bettye Kearse has written an extraordinary book. It contains lessons for all Americans... Powerful...Seeking to validate and enlarge the black Madisons’ saga, to tell a nuanced story until now completely unknown, [Kearse] succeeds richly...Leaving her much-celebrated white ancestors in the background, she restores the black Madisons to history. They are resilient Americans, second to none."
—Michael Henry Adams, The Guardian

"[An] evocative and probing debut...[Kearse] succeeds in portraying her family’s tenacious rise in social standing across eight generations. This moving account asks essential questions about how American history gets told."
—Publishers Weekly

"A compelling saga that gives a voice to those that history tried to erase...Poignant and eye-opening, this is a must-read."
—Booklist

"A richly detailed, nuanced, and poignant story—part memoir and part social history—that places the dual legacy of slavery and sexual violence at the center of America's founding."
—The Progressive

"The Other Madisons marks the culmination of Kearse’s 30-year investigation into not only her own family history, but that of other enslaved and free African Americans whose voices have been silenced over the centuries."
—Smithsonian Magazine,"Five New Nonfiction Books to Read While You’re Stuck at Home"

"A beautiful, sometimes wrenching, meditation on the brutality at the center of American history and the gnarled, complex power dynamics it has spawned in every facet of American life, from the halls of power to individual households."
—Nina Renata Aron, California Magazine

"Kearse's enlightening book, The Other Madisons, has not only been a labor of love for the author for 30 years but, more deeply, her life's purpose...Kearse's experiences with racism and those of her ancestors are deftly and sympathetically braided throughout the pages. Most notable is Mandy, who eloquently speaks to the reader through the author's imagination. Kearse came to understand that her ancestors must have possessed incredible inner strength and hope."
—Albuquerque Journal

"The Other Madisons, as a thorough history of one family, may offer answers for other descendants of enslaved people as well. It is part personal quest, as Kearse works to understand and reconcile her own origins, and a carefully researched and documented correction to the American historical record."
—Shelf Awareness
If you wish to purchase the book from Amazon, you can scan this QR code