

## CASSY'S KENTUCKY

Judith Shearer

Cassy was a woman who was a slave in Kentucky in the 1800s. She would have known that cast iron stoves were invented in the 1830s. She would have known that before that time, women cooked with heavy skillets and pots placed directly on open fires. She would have known that people washed by sprinkling water on their faces and hands and that soap was seldom used.

She may not have known that between 1830 and 1860 ploughed acreage doubled in the United States. Cotton was a huge industry and with the development of the gin and Britain's demand for more cotton, the industry grew even more. A national highway was even completed as far as mid-Ohio by 1833, the year Cassy was tried for murder.

Fincastle County, Kentucky's first name, was officially formed in 1776 as a western frontier of Virginia. Kentucky entered the Union in 1792 as a pro-slavery state, allowing free blacks to vote. In 1799, free blacks lost their right to vote when the second Kentucky Constitution was adopted. Life was complicated for her.

The Kentucky Abolition Society formed in 1808 and published its anti-slavery paper, *The Abolition Intelligencer and Missionary Magazine*. Cassy couldn't read but she may have known very well that Kentucky was a major exporter of slaves to the South. By 1820 slaves were 40% of the state's population. By 1825 free blacks were allowed to

legally marry each other but were not allowed to marry slaves. By 1833 in Kentucky, the average price for a healthy 18-25 year old African American male was \$400. Within five years the price rose to \$1,300.

That same year, 1833, England's countrymen discussed abolishing slavery and encouraged the United States to do the same. Britain seized control of the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic and in the following year they abolished slavery and freed 700,000 slaves. Thereafter they sometimes confiscated the slave ships headed for the United States.

Cassy may have seen James Audubon drawing birds in Kentucky. Audubon's drawings were a huge success in England and in France, as was his book, Ornithological Biography.

In Kentucky, a white man named James Birney, a former slave owner, organized "The Kentucky Society for the Gradual Relief of the State from Slavery." He published an antislavery newspaper in Danville until threats to him became so numerous, he moved to Cincinnati. He wanted slaves to be educated, including having apprenticeships in skills. He also wanted freed black men to move to Africa. James Birney was the first presidential candidate for the Liberty Party, a party of moderate abolitionists. They were considered responsible for the defeat of Kentuckian Henry Clay when he ran for president. Clay, a hero to future president Abraham Lincoln, was a U. S. Senator in 1833. Clay was a friend of Cassy's lawyer's father.

Richard Bibb, a white Methodist minister and rich slaveholder in Kentucky, believed slavery was wrong; however, he also believed he was taking

care of people who were not quite human. When he heard about Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia, he freed 51 of his 150 slaves and offered them tickets to Liberia. Most of them went but died of cholera before they reached Africa. When Bibb died, all his slaves were freed. They turned down offers for tickets to Liberia and lived in their homes in an all Black community he gave them near Russellville.

By 1833 the Kentucky Colonization Society had been operating for four years with many members, including Henry Clay. Robert Russell Wickliffe also belonged to the organization; however, he believed free blacks would corrupt American society with immorality and their inability to cope with freedom. His second wife, one of the wealthiest people in Kentucky, transported her light skinned slave, Milly, along with Milly's light-skinned child, Alfred, to Liberia. Alfred was Wickliffe's grandson. In 1833 the Kentucky Colonization Society sent, from Louisville to Liberia, 102 manumitted slaves.

The second steam locomotive was built in Kentucky and in 1831 Kentucky began its first railroad, the Lexington and Ohio, using slave labor. In 1831 a Kentucky slave, Tice Davids, successfully escaped to Ripley, Ohio and it was said that based on his escape and disappearance that he must have traveled on an underground railroad.

A freed slave named Charlotte lived on Vine Street in Lexington and in 1833 she was selling pies and gingerbread to make a living for herself. She purchased a white man at the slave auction at the courthouse, William Solomon. The man was an alcoholic and Charlotte said she bought him because a white man would have worked him to

death. When the cholera epidemic broke out that year, many people fled Lexington. Charlotte told Solomon he could leave and she offered him a ride on her cart. He declined and stayed to dig graves for the plague victims. He became a town hero and was honored at his death with a large gravestone at his burial site in the Lexington Cemetery which is still there today.

The Missouri Compromise, sponsored by Henry Clay, had been in effect for ten years by 1833. The agreement banned slavery in states north of 30' N, 30" N latitude and allowed Missouri to enter the United States as a slave state. To balance slave and free states, a free state was allowed in the Union for each slave state. The compromise didn't last.

Kentucky was indeed a vibrant and complicated place before the Civil War and it was during this time that a slave named Cassy lived and died in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. She was owned by one of the town's Revolutionary War heroes, William Gray, a man who fought on King's Mountain. It was in 1833 that Cassy was tried for murdering her owner's youngest daughter, Phenaty.

As Americans, and Kentuckians, begin to talk about remembrance of the Civil War and, for some, celebration of the Civil War and secession, perhaps Americans should pause a moment. Much like today, America, and in particular Kentucky, was and is filled with contradictory ideals, much like today, filled with rhetoric and misunderstanding.

Two things are for certain: Cassy's son and his children, Cassy's grandchildren, were a part of the over four million people enslaved in America before the War Between the States. And, before that war

would end, Americans fought Americans to death, with over 600,000 dead. There was no, and is, no celebration in those numbers.

At her trial in 1833, Cassy was defended by Gustavus A. Henry, a young white lawyer distantly related to American patriot Patrick Henry. Like William Gray, Cassy's owner, Henry's grandfather fought in the American Revolution. Twenty-two years later Gustavus Henry, a man who defended a slave in court in 1833, would hold office in the Confederate Congress of the United States under President Jefferson Davis.

But his side lost the war. And, by 1870 there were no African American slaves in Kentucky or in America. Cassy's descendants were free, something she could never have imagined for herself. Iron collars and chains were packed up in attics or stored in barns to gather dust and dirt. Human rights had trumped states' rights.

Perhaps America should pause to celebrate its cast iron stoves, its ploughed fields and wise leaders, its Audubon-drawn birds, and strive to gain a greater understanding of its contradictions, its compromises, its Constitution and its sacrifices. Cassy's Kentucky held an important place in history as did the Kentucky her lawyer knew.

Note: All Bones Be White, published by Roman and Littlefield, University Press of America, Hamilton Books, 2011, is Cassy's story.

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