

Abram

A Court of Oyer and Terminer commenced at Brentsville December 22, 1836. Abram, a slave, was charged with attempting to ravish a white female.

Six days previous to the trial, Mary Jane Hurdle had been in Brentsville to visit the wife of Capt. B. Norvill and later had stopped to see Mrs. Clifford. She had only been in town about an hour, and at around 2 p.m. she decided to walk home. She started down Main Street, walked past Waggener's Tavern, and then out of town. When she crossed the bridge over Cedar Run and reached the top of the hill, she saw the accused Abram following her. According to Mary Jane, Abram began to say things improperly to her and to put his hands on her shoulders. She said to him that she was going to report him to a Magistrate in Brentsville and he would be lashed. He is reported to have said go ahead that he did not live in Brentsville. As she turned around and started back towards Brentsville, she was within sight of John Williams' house, the first dwelling coming into town from that direction. It was at this point that he confronted her again and started an attack that ripped her clothes; he stated that he would have her even at the risk of his life. Her screams and two men coming down the road towards them frightened him off.

One of the men was a slave named Van and belonged to Captain Norville. The other man William Alexander, also a slave, belonged to Porittsoun Robinson who was visiting from Richmond. Upon hearing the cries for help, both ran over to her. Van later stated in court that when he came on the scene she was in great distress with her hair messed and clothes torn. He said he also saw a man fleeing up Cedar Run but could not catch him. It was at this point that William went back to town and Van escorted Mary to her home.

Divided into two groups, the men of the town took up the search for the attacker. He was found by the group of men that included William Dickinson and William Fewell. Abram was found hiding in one of the back rooms of Robert Williams' house that was being rented by James Driscoll.

The evidence against him was the identification by the victim Mary Jane Hurdle. Also, when he was found, his shoes and pantaloons were wet. Abram originally said he was innocent but later confessed, as most slaves seem to have done in that time period.

His defense was that he was coerced into making a confession by William Fewell and others. The only witness for the defense was Dr. Richard Marsteller who testified that he thought the prisoner was induced into a confession by James Reid & William Fewell. This was accomplished by telling the prisoner "that it would not injure his situation or make the worse for him" if he would confess.

Abram was found guilty and condemned to be hanged on the second Friday of February 1837.

Ron Turner

