

Eliza Barnes & Elizabeth Sewell

This may not be the only case of this type fought out in the courts of Prince William County; however, it is the only one this author has seen. The case is listed in the records with the unassuming title of “Barnes & Sewell vs Champe Terry.” Most of the documentation is missing, including the outcome. The records for this case were perhaps destroyed during the Civil War, as were many of the “loose papers” in the clerk’s office at Brentsville. The few pages remaining, however, will substantiate this story.

Eliza Ann Barnes & Elizabeth Sewell were born Free Persons of Color to mothers who were also free; all had lived their entire lives in Maryland. As unlikely as either of the young women could have imagined, both found themselves incarcerated in the small town of Brentsville, Virginia.

Eliza, upon giving a deposition, stated she was born in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, the daughter of Mary Barnes and granddaughter of Patience Barnes. Patience, although born into slavery, was given her freedom around the year 1805 by Colonel Barnes of St. Mary’s County. According to Eliza, a Mrs. Polly Dorsey also of St. Mary’s raised her until the year 1832. At that time she was left in Baltimore to live with her aunt Susan Hundy. She was employed as a domestic before a shopkeeper, near the bridge on Pratt Street, gave her a job as a cook on a fishing boat.

This was considered a very good job as she was assigned to an old established fisherman by the name of Squire Norris. Squire was much respected for his skills on the Potomac. At the end of the fishing season, Eliza was traveling through Washington City on her way back to Baltimore when Thomas Barnett or Barry, a constable, arrested her. A justice committed her to jail, where she remained until the morning she and Elizabeth were taken out in chains.

Elizabeth Sewell, the other Negro girl arrested, states that she was born free in the city of Baltimore and raised on Federal Hill. Nathaniel Chew of West River, Maryland, set her mother free. She was hired as a cook for Mr. Norris, who owned a fishing company on the Potomac River. She was arrested by the same constable as Eliza and close to the same time while traveling through Washington City. Elizabeth added that a third Free Negro by the name of Nancy Jones occupied a cell with them and was expected to be sold within a few days.

There appears to have been some collusion between the constable, jailor, and the jailor’s brother because the sale of the women took place inside the jail at the break of daylight with only a few people present, including the jailor William Ball, his brother James Ball of Prince William County, Enoch Smallwood, and Evan G. Jeffries.

Although the chain of ownership or the sequence of transactions is not clear there is no doubt that Enoch Smallwood, Evan Jeffries, Champe Terry, and the two Ball brothers were all involved in this scam.

Also in the testimony we find that at some point William Cockrell came upon James Ball with the two women chained together at their feet. Cockrell began to question Ball about the women and without receiving a satisfactory answer, asked the women who they were and where were

they going. They told Cockrell that they were Free Women that had been sold as Slaves for only jail fees and that they were being taken to Georgia. Cockrell then enlisted the help of Mr. Farrow who obtained a warrant and took possession of the women over the strong objections of James Ball. They were first taken to Dumfries then on to Brentsville.

As stated before, the outcome is not known; but on August 3, 1835 Barnes and Sewell were granted "leave to file a petition to sue Champe Terry in forma pauperis." And the next day a motion was made in court by Champe Terry to have Negroes delivered to him upon the payment of all costs. Outcome unknown.

Ron Turner