

Betsey Baptiste

By

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ABSTRACT

Betsey Baptiste came to Georgia in 1795 as an African slave and received her freedom in 1813. She worked as a “vendor of small wares” and was able to support herself, buy a house, and add to her property holdings over the years. Betsey was forced to live under the authority of nineteenth century whites, who were uncomfortable with this odd class of free blacks in a slave-holding society. These whites created laws to control and hinder virtually every action of the blacks. Despite the constant hardships she faced, Betsey lived fifty-one years in Savannah as a free black. She never married or had children, and she died in 1857 of old age.

MISSING PIECES: An Introduction to Betsey Baptiste

In January of 1795, a young woman arrived in Georgia from her native home of Africa aboard a slave ship.¹ All traces of friends and family and a lifetime of memories remained behind her. In Savannah, this young woman would face a new life in a strange and hostile place among people whose words and actions she could not understand. Her old life would be gone, cast away as insignificant by the people who brought her to this place. Sources indicate that this woman was a young adult in 1795, probably around twenty-five years old,² but we can never know her true age, birthplace, language or birth name. We do know, however, that as a slave she would become Betsey Baptiste.

It may seem odd to begin a biography by revealing the missing pieces, but the story of Betsey Baptiste must include her life before she arrived on a slave ship. To her, those early years in Africa may have been the most important. But the only surviving evidence of Betsey's existence concerns her life in Savannah, after she gained her freedom. This evidence depicts a determined, hardworking

¹ Each year, Betsey was required to register and report her name, address, occupation, place of nativity, and arrival date in the *Register of Free Persons of Color* according to a City Council ordinance in 1817 and a state law in 1818. In each entry, Betsey's place of birth is listed as Africa and her arrival in Georgia is listed as January, 1795. See *Register of Free Persons of Color*, vols. 1-5, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA. Names are grouped into alphabetical categories by surname. Also see Prince, *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia*, Athens (1837), 796 and *Records of Savannah Georgia*, Minutes of the Council, October, 1817, 429.

² Determining Betsey's approximate age upon arrival involved more math than any student of History should attempt. An average was determined from conflicting sources which include *Register of Free Persons of Color*, vols. 1-5, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA. *Georgia Census of 1820, Chatham County*, Chatham County Superior Court (Savannah, Georgia) Deed Book 2E, Folio 346.

Woman who prospered despite the hardships society placed upon her as a free black woman in ante-bellum Georgia.

Not surprisingly, freedom in early nineteenth century Savannahian did not mean equality for it was freedom on the terms of the whites in control. Betsey was forced to abide by rules that restricted and limited her every movement. Her achievements are remarkable considering the difficulties she must have encountered.

While it is certain that Betsey Baptiste's life was marked by struggle, she may have found a gratifying measure in her new American name. In January of 1795, Betsey's known date of arrival, the Sloop *Betsy* entered the port of Savannah.³ While the content of this ship is not documented, an advertisement placed in a Savannah newspaper in 1796 proves that this ship brought African slaves to Savannah. It's quite possible that the young African woman who arrived as a slave and managed to build a new life, own property and support herself, was named after the ship that brought her to Savannah.

³ *Georgia Gazette* January 1, 1795, p. 3

Savannah, 1795

Betsey's arrival in 1795 occurred at a time of extreme anxiety among the white population in Georgia. As members of a slave-holding society, eighteenth century Georgians saw blacks as a constant threat. The fear of rebellion and the dread of disease became evident in the many state laws and city ordinances created to control the black population.

As early as 1765, slave patrols were established "for preventing the many dangers and inconveniences that may arise from the disorderly and unlawful meetings of negroes and other slaves."⁴ Slaves were not permitted to carry fire arms or to travel to or from the cities without a pass, nor were slaves allowed to own "drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and intentions."⁵

In Savannah the minutes of the city council reveal the anxiety caused by blacks in relation to the constant fear of epidemics. In addition to the threat of "wicked designs," blacks posed a threat as carriers of disease from the West Indies. In October of 1792, Samuel Coulter informed the City Council that one of his recently imported slaves was infected with small pox. He was instructed to remove all of his slaves and inoculate them in "some place in the vicinity of this city where all communication with the inhabitants may be prevented."⁶ In 1795 the City Council ordered a ship from Jamaica carrying black and white passengers to

⁴ Prince, *Digest* (1837), 772

⁵ *Ibid.*, 785

⁶ *Records of Savannah, Georgia*, Minutes of the Council, Oct. 1792, 131

Land at “the Island of Cockspur [and] perform Quarantine for twenty days.”⁷ The Council then established a quarantine of forty days from time of departure for any ship arriving from the West Indies.

The slave insurrections in the West Indies also became cause for concern in Savannah in 1795, just six months after Betsey’s arrival. At a town meeting citizens met to discuss a ship from Kingston “laying at Cockspur” which held “near one hundred Negroes...whose landing may be dangerous to the inhabitants of [the] state.”⁸ Citizens agreed to support the City Council in any actions they might take to protect the city. As a result, the City Council resolved that any vessel arriving with “seasoned Negroes, or People of Colour from any of the West Indies” could be refused permission to land in Savannah.⁹

The dangers associated with blacks would continue to affect the decisions of white lawmakers and the attitudes of Savannah citizens. Throughout her life in Savannah, Betsey would live within boundaries set by a society determined to control every action of slaves and free blacks.

⁷ Ibid., March 1795, 282

⁸ Ibid., July 1795, 219

⁹ Ibid., July 1795, 211

“Free Woman of Color”

Betsey’s first known owner was a free mulatto woman named Amaritta Baptiste.¹⁰ In 1790, Amaritta received her own freedom from Alexander Watt of Savannah.¹¹ Perhaps it was Amaritta’s experience as a slave that convinced her to pursue the eventual freedom of Betsey and another slave woman named Amelia. In 1813, in an unusual document, Amaritta tried to guarantee the freedom of the two women when she sold them to Levi D’Lyon, a prominent Savannah Attorney.¹² The deed for this transaction (Appendix I) calls into question the true status of Betsey, Amelia, and many other “free” blacks in early nineteenth century Georgia.

The document that describes the transaction between Amaritta and D’Lyon is considered a “manumission” deed, although D’Lyon clearly purchases Betsey for three hundred dollars (Amelia has a similar but separate deed). The unusual transaction is indexed as freedom arrangement between Betsey and Amaritta, but several conditions appear within the document to ensure Betsey’s eventual freedom from D’Lyon upon Amaritta’s death. Four years after the transaction, Betsey registers as a free woman¹³ yet there is no evidence that Amaritta died.

¹⁰ *Chatham County Superior Court (Savannah, Georgia) Deed Book 2E, Folio 346*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Deed Book 1H, Folio 238

¹² *Ibid.*, Deed Book 2E, Folio 346. For additional information on Levi D’Lyon, see Lorraine Abraham, “Levi Sheftall D’Lyon, A Preliminary Biography,” *Savannah Biographies*, Vol. 21, Minis Room, Armstrong State College Collection.

¹³ *Register of Free Persons of Color*, V. 1, 1817-1829, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA, s.v. “Baptiste, Betsey”

This transaction becomes more intriguing when one considers that manumission deeds had been illegal since 1801,¹⁴ and Levi D'Lyon would have known this.

The Act of 1801 making manumission deeds illegal stated that slaves could only be freed through an act of legislation. Betsey was never legally freed, though she was among the blacks in Savannah who owned property and registered as free persons each year.¹⁵ Any explanation for the strange conditions surrounding Betsey's freedom would involve speculation, but exploitation is certainly a possibility. D'Lyon would become Betsey's guardian,¹⁶ and he may have required payment from her in exchange for her continued freedom. After all, the manumission deed was merely a bill of sale according to the law,¹⁷ which implies that D'Lyon could have sold Betsey at any time. Perhaps the free status of Betsey and many free blacks in Savannah was more tentative than appearances might suggest.

Regardless of the conditions of her freedom, Betsey was no longer a slave after 1813. She supported herself as a "huckster," vending fruit and small wares,¹⁸ and leased a house at 5 Bay Lane, 7 Washington Ward in 1817.¹⁹ She must have made a significant income since she was able to purchase the house and add to her property within ten years. By 1857, she had doubled the size of her property and increased its value from one hundred and fifty dollars to eight

¹⁴ Prince, *Digest* (1837), 787

¹⁵ *Register of Free Persons of Color*, vols. 1-5, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA

¹⁶ In 1810, an Act of Legislation required free people of color to conduct all legal affairs through a white guardian. Prince, *Digest* (1837), 789

¹⁷ I would like to thank Gordon Smith Attorney at Law for his time and his help interpreting Betsey's deeds into a more recognizable language. Without his help, I would not have found many of the legal references I found so useful.

¹⁸ Betsey's occupation is listed annually in the *Register of Free Persons of Color* and it does not change.

¹⁹ *Chatham County Superior Court (Savannah, Georgia) Deed Book 2H, Folio 388*

Hundred dollars.²⁰ In 1858 her estate sold at a public auction for twelve hundred dollars.²¹ The bill of sale offers the following description of the property:

All that eastern half of lot number seven Washington Ward Situate [sic] lying and being in the City of Savannah...extending Thirty feet more or less on Bay Street and running back to Bay Lane ninety feet more or less agreeable [sic] to plan of City Of Savannah, bounded west by western half of said lot, east by lot number eight, north by Bay Street and south by Bay Lane, together with all and singular the houses, buildings, [and] improvements.²²

A town map of 1853 (Appendix 2) shows lot 7 with several buildings,²³ and the deed to the estate indicates that Betsey's portion of the lot contained more than one structure.

Close examination of this map also reveals the original Second African Baptist Church in Greene Square, just a few blocks from Betsey's home. While no membership records remain from this church, it is very likely that Betsey worshipped and found fellowship as a member of this congregation.²⁴

Unfortunately, this aspect of her life did not escape the constant restraints and restrictions of the white controlling class.

For many blacks in the ante-bellum South, church was the only form of social interaction available. Often slaves as well as free blacks could choose their places of worship. Apparently, however, the city kept close watch on these black

²⁰ City of Savannah Tax Digest, 1854, 141 and 1857, 187

²¹ Chatham County Superior Court (Savannah, Georgia) Deed Book 3R, Folio 153

²² Ibid.

²³ Vincent Map, (1853), Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA

²⁴ I must thank Mr. Harry James, Deacon and Church Historian at the First African Baptist Church, Franklin Square, Savannah, GA for his help in searching for Betsey among church records. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful. I did however, enjoy the fascinating tour of his historic church.

Congregations. In April, 1810, City Councilmen found that “the night meetings and associations of negroes and people of color have been found to be productive of no good purpose.”²⁵ The Council ordered that “Black preachers be informed that the City Council prohibits such things and persons violating this resolution [are] to be committed to Gaol.”²⁶

Some whites felt the effects of restrictions governing black worship. In 1826, Mary Garnett was fined ten dollars for “Entertaining negroes on Sunday.”²⁷ It is not known whether she was conducting a worship service or merely welcoming blacks into her home, but council minutes show that other whites were fined for the same offense from time to time.

Betsy and other free blacks did enjoy some entertainment, despite the watchful eye of the white society. One cause for concern in City Council was the practice of “dancing and making merry” among blacks. Nighttime parties or “dances” were tolerated for some time, although blacks had to hold written tickets permitting them to attend such events. In 1824 the City Council established a curfew of ten o’clock for blacks.²⁸

Most of Betsey’s daily activity was probably spent supporting herself, although she and other free black women were required to spend at least twenty days a year working for the city in the hospital.²⁹ As a “vendor of small wares,” Betsey collected or bought wild fruit, vegetables, eggs, poultry, grass (for

²⁵ *Records of Savannah, Georgia*, Minutes of the Council, April 1810, 253

²⁶ *Ibid.* Gaol is a British form of “jail” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition (1989), s.v. “Gaol”

²⁷ *Records of Savannah, Georgia*, Minutes of the Council, June 1826, 116

²⁸ *Ibid.*, April, 1824, 221

²⁹ *Records of Savannah, Georgia*, Minutes of the Council, September, 1819, 429

baskets), bread and small cakes³⁰ and sold them in a stall in the “Markethouse or [at] the Courthouse in Wright’s Square.”³¹ This occupation appears to have created a dilemma among Savannahians, who depended on black women to provide these goods. In 1812, the City Council resolved that no further badges would be issued for vendors and that “all negroe wenches without badges found selling cakes, apples etc.” would be put in jail.³² Several debates took place among Councilmen who feared that blacks who rented stalls for vending foods enjoyed a monopoly “contrary to that policy that ought to make them dependent on white persons and not independent of them.”³³ Apparently, Betsey’s occupation allowed her the independence to acquire property and support herself.

Betsey lived alone in her home for most of her free years, and evidence indicates that she never married or had children. Her name does not change throughout her free life, and no children ever appear with her in the tax digest or in the Register of Free Persons. This was not unusual for women in her position. As property owners, free black women could not afford the risk of losing property rights to a man upon marriage. One source states that “Those who had saved money, acquired real estate, or operated a business could not lose everything by the wrong choice of a mate.”³⁴ The added financial burden of raising a family would also discourage many free women from marrying.

³⁰ In the *Georgia Gazette*, February 5, 1795, p. 2. C 3, an ordinance regulating the behavior of vendors was published.

³¹ *Records of Savannah, Georgia Minutes of the Council*, September, 1812, 10

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, July 1822, 41

³⁴ Loren Schweningen, “Property Owning Free African-American Women in the South, 1800-1870,” *The Journal of Women’s History* vol. 1 (Winter 1990) p. 13

It appears that Betsey did offer some assistance to other women by allowing them to move into her home. On two separate occasions, a woman and child moved in with Betsey, stayed a few years and moved out. In 1820, Amelia Baptiste and a child lived with her, although Amelia, who had been freed with Betsey in 1813, had lived at another address until then.³⁵ It appears that the two women were simply sharing expenses until Amelia and the child moved on.

It should be pointed out that Amelia and Betsey could not have been related. According to their manumission deeds, the two women were approximately the same age, and Amelia was born in Georgia.³⁶ Betsey is one of very few native Africans who registered as a free black – most were born in Georgia. At no time does Betsey's life seem to touch the life of another native African. This seems to support the opinion that she had no family in Georgia.

In 1850, for a second time, a woman and child appear as members of Betsey's household.³⁷ Jane and Sally Wilson, aged eighteen and seven, live with Betsey until her death in 1857. This arrangement was probably helpful for both women, since Betsey must have needed assistance in her later years. For the last three years of her life, Betsey's taxes were paid by Jane Wilson.³⁸

³⁵ *U.S. Federal Census of Georgia, 1820 (Chatham County)*, entry 079 and *Register of Free Persons of Color*, vol. 1, 1817-1829. S.v. "Baptiste, Amelia"

³⁶ *Register of Free Persons of Color*, vols. 1-5, s.v. "Baptiste, Amelia"

³⁷ *U.S. Federal Census of Georgia, 1850 (Chatham County)*, page 267

³⁸ *City of Savannah Tax Digest*, 1855, p. 146; 1856, p. 152; 1857, p. 187

Epilogue

Betsey Baptiste lived for sixty-two years after she arrived in America aboard a slave ship. She died “of old age” in 1857, a free woman.³⁹ It would be easy to assume that life for Betsey was harsh, considering the time and place of her existence, but she must have lived a full, active life. She worked, she was self sufficient, and she lived in a neighborhood with other people who were just like her. These people enjoyed social events – even if they did need permission to attend them. They did humanitarian work, even if they were required to do so by law, and they had friends that they could count on in a time of need.

Betsey Baptiste left no will when she died,⁴⁰ and no gravestone marks her place of burial.⁴¹ It’s likely she would be perplexed to find herself the subject of a historical study. To Betsey, her life must have seemed difficult and tragic at times but simple and unmagnificent for the most part – to those in power in antebellum Savannah her life was undoubtedly insignificant and bothersome. But to many whom look back at the unjust and peculiar era when some people were considered less than human according to the color of their skin, Betsey stands out as a strong woman and a powerful historical figure.

³⁹ *Laurel Grove Cemetery, Savannah, GA 1852-1861*, vol. 1. (Savannah; Genealogical Committee of Georgia Historical Society, 1993), p. 343. Information from this book is from *Index to Laurel Grove*, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA.

⁴⁰ After Betsey’s death, Michael Finney, administration of her estate, applied to sell her property in a public auction. He was able to do so after placing a notice in a local paper. Chatham County Superior Court (Savannah, GA), Deed Book 3R p 153

⁴¹ *Laurel Grove Cemetery Savannah, GA 1852 1861*, vole 1 p 343. This register gives no lot number. A search through Laurel Grove Cemetery proven torture despite the help of Mr. Robinson, caretaker of Laurel Grove.

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