
Belinda

(c. 1713—c.1790),

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author of the first known slave narrative by an African woman in the United States, and successful petitioner for reparations for her enslavement, was born around 1713. Some historians have argued that she was brought to the US from Ghana, because her petition noted that she had lived on the “Ria da Valta River,” which they viewed as a reference to the Volta River. However, she recalled praying in a sacred grove “to the great Orisa who made all things” as a child. Orisa deities are associated with spiritual traditions among Yoruba-speaking communities in southwestern Nigeria and parts of Benin.

Regardless of the exact location of her original home, in her narrative she recalled her childhood as a happy one. This peaceful world of groves gave way to the hardships of the Middle Passage. European raiders came into her village when she was about twelve years of age, “whose faces were like the moon, and whose bows and arrows were like the thunder and lightning of the clouds” (cited in Finkenbine, 97). Perhaps Belinda misremembered her capture, but no other historical accounts mention European slave raiders in West Africa using such weapons. It is possible that, as some historians have suggested about the slave narrative author Olaudah Equiano, Belinda was not born in Africa at all. Yet it is significant that Belinda was referred to in her petition to the Massachusetts legislature as “African,” and not, as was more common at the time, as a “Negro.”

At any rate, Belinda’s account suggests that the slave raiders decided to leave her parents behind as too old, and took the child to the coast of Guinea. The girl was terrified to see three hundred or so Africans chained up. After she crossed the Atlantic, she was purchased by a wealthy resident of the North American British colony of Massachusetts, Isaac Royall. He was a successful professor at Harvard College whose family owned a sugar plantation on the Caribbean island of Antigua. In contrast, by the standards of colonial Massachusetts law, Belinda could not even own property, as she was a mere slave. She toiled for Royall for decades until the coming of the American Revolution. Royall, a loyalist, fled to England rather than accept the rebel regime. Belinda made her way to Boston, where many slaves, free African Americans, and sympathetic whites were drawing together petitions to abolish slavery and to provide a means for slaves to purchase their freedom. Anthony Vassall, a former slave who had been owned by Isaac Royall’s sister Penelope, petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for ownership of some of the land that his old loyalist master had abandoned. It is likely Belinda knew of this case.

In 1783, Belinda submitted a petition to the Massachusetts state legislature demanding to be paid reparations from Royall’s estate for unpaid labor. There is little doubt that Belinda was illiterate, as she signed this document with an X. The letter itself is written in a very dramatic way, by someone who clearly was familiar with drafting similar petitions. Historian Roy Finkenbine contends that a likely candidate for the real identity of the author was the famous Boston-based, African American activist

Prince Hall. He was a former slave who had become a leading figure in the Boston African American community, and had much experience with this kind of legal proceedings. The Massachusetts legislature granted Belinda's request for an annual pension of fifteen pounds and twelve shillings from Royall's estate for one year. She successfully applied again in 1787 for a three-year extension of the same pension, and did so again in 1790. Then she vanished from the historical record.

Meanwhile, a greatly altered version of her petition, which included a reference to rape, circulated among English abolitionists. While Belinda had no connection to the men who altered her story to bolster support for the fight against slavery, the transatlantic movement of her petition demonstrates the international character of the antislavery movement. Her case also set a precedent for the demand for reparations for the victims of the African slave trade that have appeared periodically in the three centuries since Belinda's successful appeal.

[See also Smith, Venture.]

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See also

Smith, Venture <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-49995>>