
Conceição, Albina Maria da

(c. 1846-?),

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an emancipated African who challenged her illegal re-enslavement in nineteenth-century Brazil, was born in Luanda, the capital of the Portuguese colony of Angola, probably in 1846. As proof of origin or place of birth, Albina's right chest carried a hot-iron brand characteristic of the African coast in the form of an "I," acquired when still young. As a young child, she was abducted by a slave merchant and transported to the Americas. The slave ship that carried her across the Atlantic was captured at sea under antislavery measures intended to suppress the slave trade from Africa to Brazil. Formally, the trade had been banned since November 1831, yet it continued to exist in the form of contraband trade until finally extinguished by the Brazilian parliamentary act of 4 September 1850, known as the Eusébio de Queiróz Law.

Sent on to Rio de Janeiro, capital of the Brazilian empire, the legally free African Albina was delivered by Brazilian authorities to the lieutenant and engineer Pedro Bandeira de Gouveia, who was expected to educate her to become a domestic servant. At that time, liberated Africans like Albina, both adults and children, were compelled to remain in Brazil to learn Portuguese and the Christian religion. They were to work under the protection or custody of the state or free persons, under the promise that in the future they could live as free people. Like the promise of being returned to Africa, full emancipation almost never happened.

Albina traveled with Gouveia's family to Belém, the capital of the northern province of Pará. En route, Albina, who at the time was starting to lose her baby teeth (thus, her age can be estimated at 5 or 6 years old), remained in the custody of Dr. Fausto Augusto de Aguiar, president of Pará Province between 1850 and 1852. Later, when Fausto Aguiar was elected to Parliament and journeyed to the city of Rio de Janeiro, custody of Albina was ceded to the family of the physician and politician Joaquim Frutuoso Pereira Guimarães. Mariana Pimenta Cabedo, Guimarães's widow, treated Albina as a slave and sold her to Ignácia Bucheira, who later sold her to Anna Fillipa, who in turn sold her to one Tiburcio. Albina eventually came to be owned by Antonio Joaquim Nogueira. Nogueira then returned to Lisbon, where he was born, and left Albina with his attorney in Belém, who sold her again to José dos Santos. Finally, Santos resold Albina to José Soares da Silva Pimentel, owner of a soap factory in Belém. Through a succession of acts of buying and selling, Albina knew slavery under the rule of various masters.

In 1876, at age 30, Albina, with the help of several free persons, went before the judicial system to demand her freedom. Among her aides was Jose Maria de Sá Lamego, who used the periodical press of Belém to report the story of Albina and her illegal bondage, but, not satisfied, took the case to the provincial president and police authorities. He did not meet much success. However, the Portuguese

consul offered help. After all, Albina, although African, had been born in Angola, a colony of Portugal. She was therefore of Portuguese nationality. Once the legal process to achieve freedom had started, her last owner, José Soares da Silva Pimentel, agreed to establish a price for manumission. In December 1877 he requested the value of 392,000 réis, a little over 40 pounds sterling by the exchange rate of the time.

Although her bondage was illegal, paying the price for freedom avoided a protracted freedom suit that carried with it no guarantees for success. It is not known whether Albina acquired freedom without paying her owner, or manumission came after an exchange of money. The judicial suit does not speak to this key issue of her life. The final chapter of Albina's story and her struggle for freedom, when she died and whether free or slave, or even if she died after the end of slavery in Brazil, abolished 13 May 1888, is not registered in the surviving records. Nonetheless, her life and the lives of other unnamed persons are important, as Albina's case—though surreal—was far from unique. Other Africans knew slavery and lived through similar situations, despite their legal status as free people. Like Albina Maria da Conceição, some of them tried to use the legal system to recover their freedom.

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