
Skelton, Elizabeth Frazer

(1800–after 1855),

Bruce L. Mouser

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trader and matriarch active in Guinea/Conakry, was born to John Frazer at Bangalan Town on the Rio Pongo in Guinea/Conakry. Her father, from Scotland, was associated with Glasgow and Liverpool trading firms along the Windward Coast. He married Phenda, African widow of another trader, at the Isle de Los in 1799. Elizabeth was one of six children (James, Margaret, Elizabeth, Mary Ann, Nancy, and Eleanor). John Frazer maintained residences in both the Pongo and South Carolina, but moved his major center to Charleston in 1807 and then to Florida in 1811 where he died in 1813. Phenda remained behind in the Pongo to manage the Pongo property. James and Margaret were sent to England for studies. Elizabeth boarded with the Church Missionary Society's mission (1808–1817) in the Pongo and then traveled to Liverpool, where she lived for four years in the household of Thomas Powell, who had been John Frazer's agent in England. She also studied in France. Elizabeth was well schooled for the time and spoke both English and French fluently, in addition to African languages used on the coast. Upon her return to Africa, she married William Skelton Jr. (b. 1794), the Eurafrican son of William Skelton Sr., who was a trading associate of Benjamin and Thomas Curtis at Kissing near Thia on the lower Pongo River, on 24 July 1826. At least two children (Mary Anne and Emma) were born to this marriage. Both daughters married well and spoke French fluently.

From 1826 to 1846, Elizabeth (aka. "Mammy" Skelton) and her husband maintained a successful trading factory at Victoria near the mouth of the Nunez River. Victoria was the first port for oceangoing vessels entering this river, and from that point, Elizabeth used her knowledge of languages, manners, and European business practice to make it necessary for all Europeans entering the river for trade or diplomacy to accept her hospitality. She engaged mainly in legitimate commerce, but she was reported to have traded in slaves, especially via canoe commerce into Guinea/Bissao. She established powerful alliances with major Eurafrican families in the Rio Pongo through her daughters' marriages to leaders within the Curtis, Lightbourn, and Faber families. After the death of William Skelton Jr., in 1843, Elizabeth married John Bicaise. This alliance was even more profitable and advantageous than the former one.

Elizabeth's life spanned several important stages in Guinea's coastal history. She was born a product of the slave trade era (to c. 1830), was fundamental to the British phase (1815–1855), and was an important player in the French phase (beginning c. 1850). She inherited a significant estate from John Frazer in South Carolina and Florida, which, even after lawyers' fees, made her one of the wealthiest women on the Guinea coast.

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