

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

the first woman executed by the state of Florida, was born a slave in Georgia, the eldest of six children of Jacob Bryan, a white planter, and Susan (maiden name unknown), who was Bryan's slave and also his common-law wife. Legal documents indicate that in January 1830 Bryan brought Susan and his children to a plantation in Duval County, Florida.

In November 1842 Jacob Bryan executed a legal deed of manumission to emancipate Susan and several of his children, though the historical record is unclear as to whether Celia was one of those freed. Manumission of slaves had been possible in Florida under Spanish law, though usually for male slaves who had fought for the Spanish Empire, and for the common-law slave wives and slave children of white planters. As a result a sizeable free black population developed in eastern Florida, making it possible for interracial couples like Sarah and Jacob Bryan to live together openly. Spanish law had also allowed some slaves to own property, and even to file lawsuits against their owners. But after Florida became a U.S. territory in 1821 this relatively flexible system of race relations gave way to the more stringent legal code familiar to the other Southern slave states. By the time Jacob Bryan manumitted his slaves in 1842 Florida had enacted laws that severely restricted the rights of free blacks. These included a highly discriminatory poll tax, which required free blacks to pay an annual sum of eight dollars once they reached the age of fifteen, even though whites, beginning at the age of twenty-one, paid only one dollar each year. Free blacks could no longer vote, serve on juries, or testify against whites in court. They could not carry firearms, assemble in large groups, or sell liquor. The children of interracial couples could not inherit their parents' property. An 1829 law also placed severe restrictions on the laws of manumission, requiring a fee of two hundred dollars per slave. Bryan, it appears, did not pay this fee when he freed his slave wife and children in 1842, perhaps because he could not afford it. Sarah and Bryan's children also did not conform to the law's requirement that freed slaves emigrate permanently from the state of Florida within thirty days of their manumission. Instead, they continued to live and work in Duval County, believing that they were free.

There is little in the historical record about Celia or her family until December 1847, at which time Celia was arrested on suspicion of having killed Jacob Bryan. At Celia's trial the following June, it emerged that she had been working in a field when Bryan approached her, perhaps to chastise or discipline her. Celia then attacked Bryan with her hoe, which had a knife attached to the handle. The blow "cut open his skull so as to produce instant death" (Schafer, 598). Some sources indicate that Celia had been aided in her attack by two male slaves, but it seems most likely that she acted alone. The six-man, all-white jury found Celia guilty only of manslaughter, probably in recognition that she had acted in self-defense and not with malice aforethought. That the jury also recommended clemency or mercy for Celia further suggests that they believed her actions were in some sense justified. It

emerged during the trial that Bryan was not only Celia's father but may have also been the father of Celia's four children, which may have earned her the sympathy of the jurors. Judge Thomas Douglas nevertheless sentenced her to death.

Doubts about the severity of the sentence and the impropriety of executing a woman prompted Governor William D. Mosely to commute Celia's sentence for three months to review what was called her "great hardship" (Schafer, 606). Some prominent white landowners also petitioned for clemency for Celia, but on 22 September 1848 she became the first woman executed by the state of Florida. The newspapers declared that Celia was "without the least remorse for the crime that she had committed" and "up to the last moment blamed her mother as the cause of her death" (Schafer, 598). Her body hung on the gallows for one hour before it was taken down and buried.

Celia's trial and execution for killing Jacob Bryan also had severe repercussions for her mother and siblings. Susan Bryan and her children, including Dennis, Mary, and Sarah, were arrested and jailed as slaves; an inventory of Jacob Bryan's estate had classified them all as slaves with a combined value of \$3800. A seventeen-month investigation by a Florida judge found that Bryan had not fully complied with the state's manumission laws, but also recognized that it had been Bryan's intention to free his wife and children. Susan Bryan and her children were granted their freedom in March 1849, but the ruling was appealed by Jacob Bryan's brother, John, and his sister, Amaziah Archer, who claimed to be the rightful heirs to his property, including his slaves. In November 1851 Judge Thomas Douglas of Florida's Eastern Circuit Court ruled that Dennis, Mary, and their mother should be freed, but that Sarah, who had not been born in Florida, should be sold back into slavery. Three months later she was put up at a public auction in Jacksonville. In 1853 the Florida Supreme Court ruled that Dennis, Mary, and Jacob Bryan's other children, including Celia, had never been emancipated. Mary was probably returned to slavery; Dennis, who had been released from jail after wealthy whites guaranteed a \$4000 bond, escaped. The court later awarded Amaziah Archer \$900 to reimburse her for the loss of Dennis.

The case of the Florida slave Celia is in some respects similar to that of another slave named **Celia**, who was executed in Missouri in 1855 for killing her master who had repeatedly raped her from the moment he had purchased her as a fourteen year old in 1850. In both cases there appears to have been some sympathy for the accused, probably because both women had killed men who had abused them. In earlier times both women might have received clemency, but the growing sectional divisions over slavery probably sealed their fates. States like Missouri and Florida had become increasingly intolerant of any challenge to those who owned slaves, and so slaves who killed their masters could expect no mercy. The Florida Supreme Court's 1853 ruling returning the children of Jacob Bryan to slavery also reveals the dramatic erosion of the rights that free blacks had once enjoyed.

Celia was the first woman executed by the state of Florida, and she was also the last woman executed in that state until 1998, when Judy Buenoano, a white woman who had poisoned her husband, died in the electric chair.

Further Reading

Rozsa, Lori. "Woman on Death Row: Echoes of a Slave's Hanging in 1848," *Miami Herald*, 29 Mar. 1998.

Schafer, Daniel L. "A Class of People neither Freemen nor Slaves: From Spanish to American Race Relations in Florida, 1821-1861," *Journal of Social History* 26.3 (1993).

See also

Celia <[https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/
acref-9780195301731-e-35515](https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-35515)>