
Williams, Jenny (Cumfry)

(fl. early 1800s), often referred to as “Jenny” with no surname, was a self-liberated slave
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for whom the residents of Springfield, Massachusetts rallied to purchase her freedom in 1808. Her origins are unknown, but it is presumed she was born into bondage in the vicinity of Schenectady, New York.

In the early 1800s Jenny escaped from the state of New York, where slavery was still legal, to Massachusetts, where it had been abolished for more than a decade. The earliest known evidence of her life was recorded in the Springfield vital records: “Jack Williams a negro Man and Jenny Cumfry a mulatto woman both of this town enter their Intention of Marriage this second day of Sept. Anno Dom 1802. Notification posted 4th inst” (Springfield Vital Records, 1802, p. 266). The event of their marriage was also recorded in the records of the First Church (Congregational) of Springfield where they were simply listed as “Jack and Jenny.” At that time the First Church was the main church in Springfield and its membership included most of the prominent residents; therefore it can be assumed that Jack and Jenny were well known to the community.

In 1808 Peter Van Geyseling (or “Van Gyseling”), a man of Dutch descent whose family owned land in and around Schenectady, New York, appeared in Springfield seeking to seize Jenny, whom he claimed was his property. He brandished the proper legal authority and paperwork. Led by Rev. Bezaleel Howard of the First Church, the citizens of Springfield rallied to Jenny’s aid and negotiated a sale price with Mr. Van Geysling of \$100. Then they “easily raised” this amount by subscription, nineteen people signing their names and offering a contribution. The amounts pledged ranged from the \$10 of Rev. Howard to the \$2 offered by “Simon negro.” Rev. Howard could have sought one or two wealthy donors to supply the purchase price, but instead the larger number of people each giving a small amount demonstrated the sympathetic sentiment of a wider community. The bill of sale, dated 16 February 1808, transfers ownership of “a Negro woman named Jenny, alias Dinah, about thirty years of age” to the Selectmen of Springfield.

The earliest known sources indicate that Jenny and Jack lived out their lives in a small cottage on Goose Pond, near what is now Mason Square in Springfield, where Jenny was known locally for dispensing “a fine quality of spruce beer.” The 1810 U.S. Census shows “Jack Williams” as head of a household in Springfield with two “other free persons.” It is unknown how or when they died; their deaths apparently went unrecorded.

The significance of Jenny’s story lies in its early date. It shows the existence of an anti-slavery sentiment in western Massachusetts decades before abolitionist organizations like the Hampden County Colonization Society (1825) and the Hampden County Anti-Slavery Society (1833) were formed. In fact, it may be the earliest example of a community of people purchasing the freedom of an enslaved person in the United States.

Further Reading

The actual Bill of Sale document is located at the Lyman & Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History in Springfield, Massachusetts, as are the records of the First Church of Springfield which note Jenny's marriage in 1802. The marriage was also recorded in the Springfield vital records.

Morris, Henry. "Slavery in the Connecticut River Valley." In *Papers and Proceedings of the Connecticut Valley Historical Society, 1876-1881*, as presented at the meeting of 2 June 1879.

Johnson, Clifton. *Hampden County, 1636-1936*. vol. 1 (The American Historical Society, Inc., New York, 1936), p. 277.