

Masters and Slaves: A Tale of Two Families

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Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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*In 2003 I was asked by Kentucky State **Senator Georgia Davis Powers** to help research and write a book about her great aunt **Celia Mudd**, who was born into slavery but ultimately inherited the Lancaster property in Bardstown and became a prominent local philanthropist. Here is more of what I learned, chapter two of a new work in progress called **Inheritance**.*

As Celia Mudd grew up on the Lancaster farm in rural Kentucky, Grandma Patty and her mother Emily shared most of the strange and terrible story — how her ancestors and whole family became and remained property of a white clan. It had begun almost two hundred years before she was born with an English woman named Elizabeth Shorter, herself born somewhere in Europe. She came to the New World as an indentured servant in the household of William Boswell, harboring the hope of earning her freedom.

Twenty years later, while living on Boswell's land in Maryland, Elizabeth married a Negro slave named Little Robin. And together they had a daughter named Patty. So began the family line that eventually led to Celia.

The Lancasters emigrated from England around the same time. Descended from landed gentry, they counted among their ancestors the young son of King Henry III. But when John Lancaster married Fanny Jearnaghem, an Irish lass with no title or property, the family was, as one uncle put it, "considerably vexed."

That's one telling of the story. In another version the reason was the escalating attacks on Catholics. But maybe John really came for adventure, determined to be among the first to stake a claim in the new world. Whatever the true motives, Lancaster and his bride, along with several brothers and sisters, sailed in 1664 and landed at Cobs Island, just off shore from southern Charles County in Maryland. They had joined a great wave that made that region an early center of Catholicism in North America.

With more than enough funds to settle and succeed, the couple prospered and raised eight children. One of them, John Junior, inherited his father's taste for travel and became a sea captain. Until around 1730 he transported tobacco and such to England. He always came home, however, and at an advanced age, after marrying a daughter of the wealthy Raphael Neale, ended his days comfortably at Neale's Gift, the family's vast plantation on the Potomac River.

As a wedding gift Neale gave his son-in-law an elderly Negro slave they called Martha. Purchased years earlier from William Bosworth, she was also known as Patty. This was Elizabeth Shorter's daughter. She had gone from white to black, from indentured servant to

inherited property, in a single generation.

Among the six children born to John Junior and his wife at Neale's Gift was one more in the long line of Lancaster men named John. Like most of his kin, this John was content to remain in Maryland. But another son, another Raphael, couldn't resist the urge to strike out on his own. At 32 he married Elinor Bradford. Their first boy, John Lancaster IV, was born in 1766, followed quickly by a brother and four sisters.

These were tumultuous times. The American colonies strained under the yoke of English masters. The Revolutionary War was barely over in 1783 when Raphael decided to set out for the next frontier, bringing the whole family along with a group of Catholics. The pioneers made their way overland to the Ohio River and built a long raft to float downstream to Limestone. Along the way they barely avoided hostile Indians.

Making it through Lexington to Marion County a cave became their first Kentucky home. The buffalo were gone but otherwise the land was plentiful. Deer and bear and fowl of every kind, berries in springtime, wild nuts and grapes in the fall, creeks and river to transport anything else they needed. And a virtually endless forest of huge trees to build a permanent home.

The Lancasters took full advantage of this bounty. Once a sturdy cabin was up, however, John was off on another adventure. A seasoned hunter and Indian fighter before reaching 21, he returned to Maryland several times over the next three years, guiding more settlers to the new land and bringing back seeds, tools, and essentials for his family.

Until the legendary spring of 1788. As the story was told in later years, John was on the Ohio aboard a flatboat bound for Louisville when the boatman saw a large party of Indians lying in wait. The current took them closer and escape became hopeless. Although showing a white flag the natives leveled their muskets at the travelers.

Then a skiff came directly at their boat and struck so violently that its passengers were dumped in the drink. Thinking quickly, John dove in after them, apparently hoping that a rescue might demonstrate his friendly intent. He only succeeded in making himself a more valuable prize. Once back on land the braves he had saved came to blows over which would get to keep the crazy white warrior.

Rain poured down in torrents that night. Bound to stakes on the soaking ground, the four prisoners could only watch and contemplate their fates as their captors got drunk and dangerous on the whiskey they had stolen. The next day, they were marched to a Shawnee village. But once there, the swaggering brave who won the fight over John's ownership embraced him tearfully and called him brother.

Having lost a real brother only a year before the brave had decided to make the white pioneer a symbolic replacement. An "adoption" ceremony commenced immediately. Relieved of his clothing John's naked body was painted and greased with bear oil while his captors hastily taught him a few scraps of song, just enough to play his part.

Over the next week he learned much about Shawnee manners and customs. For his energy and fleetness of foot he was given a new name - Kioba, or Running Buck. For a while he almost felt like he was on a more or less equal footing with the rest of the tribe. But once his new "brother" was sent out on a hunt things rapidly deteriorated. Now he was under the

rough control of a sullen Shawnee known as Captain Jim.

John had also attracted the attention of Captain Jim's daughter, who knew her father's mood and propensity for violence. When Jim returned to camp alone one day, after chasing his wife angrily into the woods, the young girl suspected the worst. Her mother could be wounded or dead, and Kioba might be next. "Bucketete, run," she said.

Shocked out of his passivity John made an impetuous dash for freedom. Only later did he learn that one of the remaining captives was burned at the stake for his success. Over the next six days Lancaster criss-crossed Indian trails and lived on turkey eggs while finding his way back to the river. There he tied himself with bark to the trunk of a box elder and crossed to the Kentucky side, constructed a raft, and floated toward Beargrass Creek.

At nightfall he was caught in a dreadful storm. Numb with cold and exhausted, he clung to the makeshift craft, fully expecting to be tossed overboard or killed in a plunge over the falls. But to his utter amazement, he was still alive at daybreak and drifting toward a white settlement.

After this adventure John Lancaster declared his wandering days over and married within a year, settling down with the well-dowried Catherine Miles in a four-room log cabin just north of Lebanon. By the time their majestic 24-room home, Viney Level, was completed the couple had welcomed the first six of a dozen children. The famous guide also soon distinguished himself as a popular, if aggressive businessman with land in four counties. After Kentucky was admitted to the United States he served in both the state House and Senate.

He also continued to own slaves, however, 40 of them in all eventually, including several inherited from his father. His brush with brutal captivity had apparently failed to change his views on treating other human beings as property.

Celia's mother Emily was born at Viney Level in 1839, less than a year after John Lancaster's death. She barely remembered it except, bitterly, as the place where her mother once begged to keep from losing her. After long service as one of the family's house slaves in Maryland, Patty had been sold from her kinfolk and sent on her own to Kentucky.

By this time the Lancasters had owned Celia's people for almost a century. Mixing blood along the way with captive Indians and a white slaver or two, some were sold, others given away as wedding gifts. Only one had obtained her freedom, by proving in a Maryland court that she was the descendant of a free white woman.

John Lancaster's demise made a deep impact on his fifth son, Benjamin. He sensed that life at Viney Level would never be the same. In Ben's youth the sprawling plantation was for him a magical place filled with love, romance and religion. But the mood changed. Most of his siblings established their own homesteads or joined the church. Now that their father was gone, two of his brothers were considering whether to dispose of the place.

The executor of the huge estate was one of Ben's older siblings, a local doctor. The two never got along well. Although most of the heirs received equal shares Viney Level itself was left to William, a 26-year-old who would live there with his wife and one sister. They would care for their ailing mother until she passed away. Unhappy with the arrangement Ben

decided to resettle with his own family in Kentucky's rural Nelson County.

Ben Lancaster had been married more than ten years to Ann Pottinger, a strong-willed woman with practical instincts and a gentle soul. They had met in Bardstown, fallen in love, and taken their vows in the grand St. Joseph's Cathedral. Although raised as a protestant, Ann was so eager to please her husband that she volunteered to convert. In the Lancaster tradition, their first child was named John. The baby survived less than a month, just long enough to be baptized. They immediately tried again and Mary Jane was born on December 13, 1828. Samuel, Matt and Robert arrived at product two-year intervals. The path ahead looked bright and unobstructed.

Instead the horizon darkened. The first sign was the death of baby Catherine after only three weeks. The next year, joy was accompanied by tragedy; Ann Elizabeth was born in August but Ben's father passed away three months before. Along with this shock came the disturbing news that Ben would have no voice in the future of Viney Level.

Returning home, he struggled to put anger and grief aside and concentrate on business. The perfect opportunity to expand his holdings soon appeared to present itself. Henry Nicholls had gone broke and his farm was up for auction. According to town gossip, Nicholls had gone south to purchase mules, but by the time he returned his 40 slaves were gone. They'd somehow seized the chance to free themselves. Nicholls was so strapped for funds he didn't have enough money to offer a reward for their capture.

Nicholls' loss could be Ben Lancaster's gain. The spread included a fine two-story home with 11 rooms, plus outbuildings and a slave cabin. More than enough room for his growing family and the slaves his damned brother had reluctantly agreed to surrender.

Overcoming his wife's fears about the move took some convincing. After baby Catherine's death she had begun to experience terrifyingly lucid dreams that the family would face another, greater tragedy. Only after a visit to their prospective new home did the visions fade sufficiently for Ben to make a bid. They took occupancy in September, full of optimistic plans. All that remained was to drive some stock over from the old homestead.

Two weeks later, at 41-years-old, Ben Lancaster was dead. Thrown from his horse just three miles from his destination he sustained severe injuries that led to fatal blood poisoning. Anne would never again doubt her premonitions.

For Patty the tragedy meant little at first. Upon the death of Ben's father she had been passed on initially to Mary Jane Lancaster, the younger sister still living at the main plantation. For Viney Level's many slaves Ben was just another master, spoiled and capricious, even cruel at times. They didn't mourn his departure from the world. But when Patty saw his widow's grief she found it hard not to feel some pity.

Ann had come over for a frank talk with Ben's younger brother, the new owner, in hopes of getting the slaves that were promised. She looked uncomfortable asking, Patty thought, almost as if disapproving of her own proposal.

Normally, such a request would have been immediately granted. But the animosity between Lancaster siblings ran deep, and Ann returned to Bardstown with nothing but a wagonload of food and a vague promise to think it over. It was not until eight years later, after Ben's mother finally died, that a small group of slaves were sent to live with the determined

widow. Among them were Patty and Clay Hopkins, plus five of their children.

There was 15-year-old Nicholas, a delicate boy well suited for indoor chores who dreaded the occasional work that everyone, even masters, had to do in the fields. And the beautiful Isabella. Just a year younger than Ann's son Robert, she drove the boys wild but somehow knew how to keep them at bay. The youngest children, five and six-year old Jane and Thomas, also came. But despite Patty's desperate pleading and Ann's attempts to intervene little Emily was sold at public auction to E.C. Johnson. They rarely saw her for the next ten years.

By the time Emily was reunited with her family the Lancaster spread was one of the most prosperous in the region. Ann had defied predictions and built an impressive enterprise that went well beyond subsistence. Starting out with corn and a modest vegetable garden, she quickly added hemp, hogs, sheep, and chicken. Then came horses, bred for local racing and sale in nearby states. The secret of her success, Emily saw, was a combination of shrewd calculation and Christian kindness.

Unlike many masters Ann treated her slaves with some care, like a practical yet somewhat compassionate queen mother. They lived in cramped, dingy quarters behind the big house but were well fed and clothed, and rarely beaten. One some farms the whip, and worse, was the solution to almost any problem. At the Lancaster spread punishment was normally a strong slap and a reading from the bible. In one area, however, Missus Ann was like any other master despite her religious principles. To keep her small empire growing she considered it sound business to breed future workers.

Barely a few months after Emily arrived Boss Sam made the arrangements, paying a local slave collector for the use of the perfect stud farmhand, a handsome lad her age. On the surface the reason was to add another set of hands at a busy time of the year. But as Patty later explained to her daughter, the Lancasters expected something more from young Allen Mudd.

He may not have been aware of the matchmaking plan. But Allen was ready to play his part.

As Emily looked at her stomach eight months later, she refused to accept that pregnancy and childbirth weren't her own idea. She preferred to believe that Allen Mudd and she had fallen in love. More to the point, that she was irresistible.

"You said the Boss done made all the plans. We just breeders, you said, and since you too old now it's my turn. Nothin' special 'bout that." Her mood changed every few minutes these days, from moonstruck lover to inconsolable child. It wasn't just realizing that she was very close to giving birth, but an uncontrollable desire to be the center of attention.

Grandma Patty sighed. Her daughter had so much to learn. "Maybe you not special to them," she said, sucking on her corn cob pipe. "For the massas we no different than a good cow. They want the milk and they'll do what's needed to get it. But it's still jest a cow. But now then, that don't mean you got to be no cow in your mind and heart. That child of yours be as special as you make it."

The words calmed her. Emily enjoyed the idea that somehow, despite everything, she could control her fate. "Mammy," she asked, "you think my baby's gonna be free someday?"

"That's up to God. And nobody knows what he got in mind for us." Patty shoved a stick into the crackling fireplace and looked around their cramped quarters. Yes, it's surely a mystery, she thought. But it's hard to believe that a righteous Lord wants any of his creations to be treated this way.

"Old Tom used to say, He forgot all about us."

"Well, he don't feel that way now."

Emily's mouth dropped open. "What he say?" she demanded, tickled by the prospect of hearing one of Patty's famous tales about communing with the dead. Tom had been discovered in the barn only a week ago, hung from the loft by his own hand. They'd kept the youngsters out but everyone was gossiping.

"That he sorry for what he done," replied Patty. She closed her eyes and searched for the right words. "He a good man, but he lost faith and decided it was better to die than trust in God's mercy."

"You seen him?"

"Plain as day. I was in the barn, you know, and it was pitch dark night. Then a light come up from nowhere and there he was. And he tol' me how it happened. He say, 'I just couldn't clear my mind bout my family.'" He remembered them back home, in Africa, and how he been snatched by slavers and brung here from his village. Not like our people what's been here so long. Old Tom, he couldn't forget what it was like before, to be free. Pained him terrible, knowing he'd never see his wife again, never see his children.

"I couldn't wait no longer, he said. A man can take just so much misery. So he made his plan. Even then he couldn't do it right away. For days, he would just pass by and look at that big beam and think, 'Maybe today.' But he knew he couldn't, so then he figured another way."

By this time Patty's other children had joined them. They huddled close on the rough wood floor. She paused to inhale the harsh tobacco glowing in her pipe and leaned forward to make the most of the moment. The story was grim, but the mood was charged with gleeful anticipation. She loved these moments, surrounded by family, the day's chores done and no masters in sight.

"He'd seed Massa Matt hide some whiskey in the barn. When Missus Ann wasn't lookin' he'd go in there and take his swigs. That boy sure do go at it and Missus Ann don't like it one bit. So, Tom thinks, Least this way I gets to take back something from them crackers. Maybe give me some nerve to do what's to be done.

Now he knows that it wasn't nerve he got. It was just a little invitation from the devil. He told me that! But anyways that night he waits til we all sleeping and finds that jug and empties it. I mean, that man was crazy with drink. And then he takes some hemp, ties it round his neck, and..."

The kids froze, eyes glowing in the dark like birthday candles. Patty leaned back and flashed a contented grin. "And now he knows God is watching and cares about our people. He also

knows that he made a mistake. "Cause he misses you all, and he can't be here when this baby comes. And he says, "It's okay here on the other side - but don't you be in no hurry. Better days are coming. They can't keep us down forever. We can have freedom, we can fight for it. We are deserving in the eyes of the Lord and we will be released.' That's what he said."

Emily was in tears, caught up in her mother's story. She wanted that for her baby, release from bondage, for all her people. She would marry Allen Mudd and they would win their freedom and buy a small farm and raise a family. No one would ever separate them, she imagined, or make them work from sunrise to nightfall, or feed them the crumbs while living like royalty. No more masters too lazy to swat their own flies.

To Be Continued...

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