

The Story of Betty and Hercules: An Enslaved Ossabaw Family's Yearnings for Freedom

By Paul M. Pressly.

The American Revolution threw slavery into question in Georgia and precipitated a massive movement of enslaved Black people around the new state. Many escaped from their plantations; others were moved by owners to distant locations; some were used by patriot and British forces for heavy labor. The logic behind the revolt against the British Crown created a powerful ripple effect among the thousands of enslaved Black Georgians who embarked on their own quest for liberty. Life on the island was not immune to the turmoil.

On October 11, 1781 a fugitive-slave ad in the *Royal Georgia Gazette* announced that nine enslaved people had fled Ossabaw Island in a new yawl, a "ship's boat" meant to be rowed by four to eight people and with a small mast and sail. They were thought to be headed to Kilkenny on Ogeechee Neck (on the mainland, near present day Richmond Hill.) The owners, the Morel Family, offered one guinea reward for each adult and two dollars for each child. Given that most fugitive enslaved during the colonial period were young men, the fact that this group included women and children underscores how the Revolution created a new dynamic. The escapees—Hercules, Betty, and their compatriots—were demonstrating a grim determination to realize their deepest aspirations.

Runaway family members included Hercules from Angola; his wife Betty, who was "country born", and their children, Peter, 13, and Winter, 5. According to the ad, Hercules was "a short, thick fellow" of the Angola country. The other escaped family consisted of Jupiter, black complexion, who spoke good English; Auba his wife; her son, Sancho, 9, and a "sucking child." Finally there was Jack, 45 years old, of the Angola country, who spoke bad English.

Two of the three men were from Angola and, whether or not they spoke the same language, shared the same broad cultural background. It is not inconceivable they were "shipmates" on the vessel that made the Middle Passage bringing them to North America, and shared a tight bond based on that experience. Betty was "country-born", and so presumably was Jupiter, who spoke "good English." His wife Auba bears an African name, and her son, a Spanish name, raising the possibility that Auba was bought by the Spanish or Portuguese in West Central Africa and was brought to Georgia indirectly through a secondary market that crossed imperial boundaries.

Betty, Hercules, and Winter had already attempted to escape from the Morels at Kilkenny Plantation on the mainland at the end of 1780. Once they were recaptured, they were sent to Ossabaw, where escape was more difficult.

In a fugitive slave ad on October 20, 1785 (Gazette of the State of Georgia), Peter Henry Morel noted that none of the escaped had been returned to Ossabaw three years after the end of the war. The ad noted that the family of Hercules was still together and in the possession of Col. Thomas Brown, formerly of the King's Rangers, in East Florida. Col. Brown was the most effective and most notorious of the British guerilla fighters in Georgia during the Revolution. He led several hundred men in devastating cavalry raids into the Georgia backcountry, especially around the Augusta area. The fact that Hercules and Betty attached themselves to him showed their ability to identify powerful figures capable of helping in their quest for freedom. The ad noted, "Peter is now in the sugar house in Charleston," a comment that suggests that reclaiming lost "property" several years after the Revolution within the boundaries of the new United States was no easy matter.

The ad concluded that Jupiter, Auba, Sancho, Auba's infant child, and Jack "were sent up among the Indians from St. Augustine, and have not been heard of since." The British and Creeks had long enjoyed close ties based on the exchange of deerskins for merchandise. African Americans played integral roles in the trade as packhorsemen or laborers at the stores maintained by traders in native towns. Creeks had a mixed view of Africans but, over time, many blacks became fully accepted into native society. Black Creeks were a notable feature of that world after the Revolution. During the war, the Creeks sided with the British, so it was only natural for Jupiter and his family to make their way into native territory.

Thomas Brown was a not untypical Englishman who had his eye on the mainline in terms of plantations. He migrated shortly afterwards to the Bahamas and established a major holding with a considerable number enslaved. Did Betty and Hercules end up on his estate or did they manage to find freedom in Nova Scotia or elsewhere? We do not know. Whatever the case, we know the odds were heavily against them.

The Revolution disrupted the institution of slavery in Georgia, caused a massive outflow of people, and gave Blacks an opportunity to assert greater independence and negotiated new terms for labor. As late as the mid-1780s, planters (enslavers) were complaining about their "saucy" attitudes and tendency to disappear. By the end of the decade, the planters (enslavers) had had their revenge by tightening the legal foundation of slavery in ways that made it more severe and coercive than before the Revolution.

Dr. Paul M. Pressly is Director Emeritus of the Ossabaw Island Education Alliance. He is the author of several historical articles and editor or author of four books, including an upcoming book on colonial Georgia, Spanish Florida, and the yearning for freedom by enslaved Blacks in colonial Georgia.

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Images from the Ossabaw Collection housed at the Georgia Historical Society.

The following is a transcription of an advertisement in the Royal Georgia Gazette, 1781. Transcribed by Daniel T. Elliott in Archaeological Investigations

Institute Publication Series, Report Number 108 page 32.

at The Tabbies 1 and 2, North End Plantation, Ossabaw Island, Georgia LAMAR

"Ran away from the subscriber on the island

To be fold at the Printing Office, for Cafe, The South Carolina and Georgia ALMANACK For the Year of our Lord 1781.

AN AWAY from the subscriber on Sunday the 3d inflant, from Kilkenny on Ogechee Neck, the following NEGROES, viz. Hercules, a fhort flout fellow, of the Argola Country, of a black complexion, and speaks good English. Betty, his wife, a country born wench, of a yellow complexion, has a fear over her left eye, fpeaks good English. Winter, her child, about five years old.—Whoever delivers the above Negroes to the fubscriber at Bewlie, or to Peter Henry Morel in Savannah, shall receive three guineas reward, or a guinea for any one of them; and upon conviction. of a white person harbouring or enticing them away ten guineas will be given; or a Negro five guineas.
Dec. 7, 1780. JOHN MOREL.

from the fubfcriber on Monday

thick fellow, of the August wife, of a vellowith comcar over one of hereyes, (peaks r, about 1; years old, and children: Japiter, of a black good English; Auba, his wife, o, about 9 years old, and a lack, about 15 years old, of feedes tod English. They

had only her icams paid over with patch, and it is supposed are gone cowind. Kilkerny on Ogethee Neck. Ore gone towards Kingerny on Ogenee Neck. Ore gone i reward will be paid on the de-livery of each grown tagen to Peter Henry Morel in Savannah, or to the tableriber at Bewle, two dollars for each of the children, and one gainea for the host; and upon information of their being harboared by a waite perion a reased of ten guineas wall be given, and if by a regro five gainese, to be paid on conviction of the efferder.

JOHN MOREL. The state of the s

of Ossabaw on the 8th instant, the following negroes: Hercules, a short, thick fellow, of the Angola country; Betty, his wife, of a yellowish complexion, has a large scar over one of her eyes, speaks good English, Peter, 13 years old and Winter, 5, her children; Jupiter, black complexion, speaks good English; Auba, his wife, with her son, Sancho, 9 years old and a sucking child; Jack, 45 years old, of the Angola country, speaks bad English; they went off in a new yawl, 20 feet long, which had only her seams paid over with pitch, and it is supposed are gone toward Kilkenny on Ogechee Neck. One guinea reward will be paid on the delivery of each grown negro to Peter Henry Morel in Savannah, or to the subscriber at Bewlie, 2 dollars for each of the children, 1 guinea for the boat. John Morel, Bewlie" (Royal Georgia Gazette 1781: Kilbourne 1999b:249; Windley 1983:195).

