

FAIRFAX COUNTY

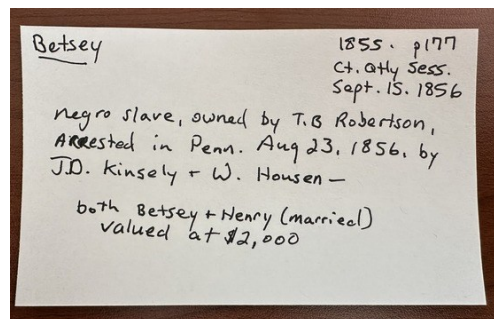
VIRGINIA

Found in the Archives no. 108

Circuit Court Historic Records Center

Slavery Index Now Accessible Digitally!

The Circuit Court Historic Record Center's Fairfax Slavery Index project, started in 2015, now indexes over 40,000 references to individuals involved in slavery recorded in court documents and is accessible digitally on HRC's website. Prior to 2025, researchers wanting to access this project would have had to do so in person at Historic Records Center. This index documents the court related experiences of those enslaved, enslavers, freed individuals, hirers, patrollers, and other individuals involved with slavery in Fairfax County. The digitization of these records makes them more accessible as they can be viewed at HRC's website anytime and anywhere.



Digitization is not at an end. Court records yet to be explored for the slavery index project include chancery cases, term papers and Sheriff's executions. The index will be updated as HRC reviews more records and uploads other indexes to the internal searchable database created by Circuit Court IT called Itrackfiles. Physical index cards and records can and should be consulted if there are questions or to view any additional information.

Since the Slavery Index Project's beginning it has been used to conduct genealogical and historical research and can be used at any point during the research process. It can provide that last piece of information or a starting point for a new project. While it is focused on Fairfax County, sometimes events from nearby counties show up in the Court Minute Books. Such was the case with Henry and Betsey, an enslaved married couple that ran away from a farm near Dumfries in Prince William County. They slipped away from their overseer one night during the first week of July 1856.

Descriptions of the couple were provided by their owner, T. B. Robertson, in a reward advertisement in the Alexandria Gazette regarding Betsey and Henry. At the time of their escape, Betsey was about 24 years old. She was described by Roberston as a humble, petite woman who usually wore something covering her hair. Henry was about 27 years old, medium height, muscular, and usually had a 5 o'clock shadow style beard. Despite his enslaved status, Henry was viewed as keeping a good disposition.^[1] It is important to keep in mind that these descriptions are how they were perceived by white individuals. It is likely they would have described themselves differently.

\$200 REWARD.—Left the overseer on my farm, a week or two ago, *HENRY and BETSY*. Henry is of medium size, black, muscular, and very likely, about 27 years of age, well dressed; had new white summer and black winter pantaloons; commonly wears whiskers not very long though thick and uniform. His expression is generally good, inclined to smile, prompt of speech, and civil. Betsy, his wife, is exceedingly short, and not very stout; manner rather humble. She is quite dark, though less so than Henry, is about 24 years of age; usually wears something about her head.— They are doubtless striving to escape. \$200 will be paid for both if taken out of Virginia, or \$100 for each; \$100 will be paid for both if taken in Virginia, or \$50 for each or either, and \$500 will be paid by me for the conviction of any person who shall have been engaged in harbouring or otherwise assisting said negroes. The State gives \$100, making \$1000.

je 18—eotf T. B. ROBERTSON.

\$200 Reward.," *Alexandria Gazette*, July 14, 1856, 3, *Virginia Chronicle*; "*\$1000 Reward.*," *Alexandria Gazette*, August 6, 1856, 1, *Virginia Chronicle*.

A month later, five other enslaved people from the same farm escaped in the first week of August 1856. The reward advertisement purports that the seven "are most probably all now together."^[2]

\$1000 REWARD.—Ranaway from the farm of the subscriber, near Dumfries, Prince William County, Va., the following Negroes: **MOSES, ABRAM, LITTLETON, ARMSTEAD, TOM, HENRY, and BETSEY.** The first named on Monday night, the next four on Tuesday night, and the last two some three or four weeks ago. They are most probably all now together. Moses was raised in Prince William, is some six feet high, very intelligent, and well acquainted in said county, and has labored in Loudoun and Fauquier—dresses well.

All are comfortably clad; some having black frock coats, new cotton shirts, and white drilled cotton pantaloons. Moses is perhaps the oldest, and does not exceed 30 or 32 years of age. Abram is black and thin, 28 years of age, about 5 feet 7 or 8 inches high. Littleton is likely, very straight, and walks short and quickly, has lost a front tooth. I think, Armstead is 5 feet 7 inches, stoutly made, stoops in the neck, very down-cast look, and seems uneasy when spoken to, and is the lightest of the party. Tom is about 5 feet 6 inches, large eyes, and modest expression. Henry is very likely and muscular; his wife very low. The last two have been previously described in the Baltimore Sun and the Alexandria Gazette. All are different shades of black.

The above reward will be paid if taken and secured out of the State, or rateably for such as may be secured, or \$700 or rateably if taken and secured in Virginia.

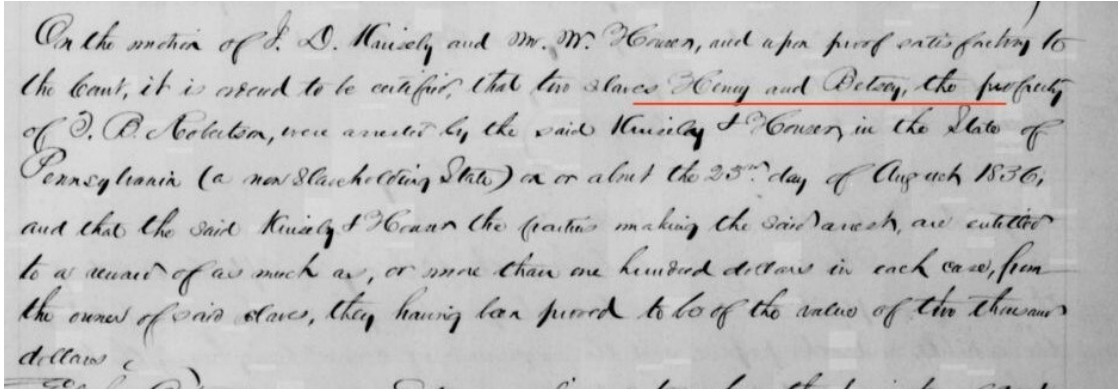
T. B. ROBERTSON,
Alexandria, Va.

aug 6—eotf

“\$1000 Reward.,” *Alexandria Gazette*, August 6, 1856, 1, *Virginia Chronicle*.

After almost two months on the run, and almost making it to freedom, Henry and Betsey show up in Fairfax’s Court of Quarterly Sessions book after being arrested in Pennsylvania on August 23rd, 1856.^[3] It is not clear when Henry and Betsey made it to Pennsylvania, if they ever met up with the others that escaped, or why this was brought to court here in Fairfax because their owner appears to reside in Alexandria. With the nature of this event being out of the jurisdiction of Fairfax County, it is unknown what happened to Moses, Abram, Littleton, Armstead, and Tom. It goes without saying that seven runaways from the same farm during a one-month period would have been cause for alarm by the slaveholder. Robertson

paid two hundred dollars for the return of the married couple who had together been valued at two thousand dollars.

A snippet of a handwritten court document in cursive script. The text is written on aged, slightly yellowed paper. The words "Henry and Betsey" are underlined in red ink. The document appears to be a court order or a record of a legal proceeding, mentioning a reward for the return of slaves.

On the motion of J. D. Kinzey and Mr. W. H. Green, and upon proof satisfactory to the Court, it is ordered to be certified, that the slaves Henry and Betsey, the property of D. B. Robertson, were arrested by the said Kinzey & Green in the State of Pennsylvania (a non-slaveholding State) on or about the 25th day of August 1856, and that the said Kinzey & Green the parties making the said arrests, are entitled to a reward of as much as, or more than one hundred dollars in each case, from the owners of said slaves, they having been proved to be of the value of two thousand dollars.

September Court 1856, September 15, 1865, Court Minute Book of Quarterly Sessions 1855-1858, Fairfax County Court Historic Records Center, 177.

By identifying individuals such as Betsey and Henry in the slavery index researchers can then conduct further research using primary sources from the Fairfax Circuit Court and other repositories to learn more about the lives of these individuals. Betsey and Henry resisted slavery and perhaps inspired other enslaved individuals to pursue freedom as well. Despite being “humble” and of “good disposition” they defied their owners. Is this all we can learn about Betsey and Henry? Perhaps. Or maybe further research will reveal more about their lives. This example shows how just a few references in court documents can be utilized to learn about individuals like Betsey and Henry. We encourage you to visit to see what you can learn about individuals of Fairfax’s past like Betsey and Henry.

[1] “\$200 Reward.” *Alexandria Gazette*, July 14, 1856, 3, *Virginia Chronicle*; “\$1000 Reward.” *Alexandria Gazette*, August 6, 1856, 1, *Virginia Chronicle*.

[2] “\$1000 Reward.” *Alexandria Gazette*, August 6, 1856, 1, *Virginia Chronicle*.

[3] September Court 1856, September 15, 1865, Court Minute Book of Quarterly Sessions 1855-1858, Fairfax County Court Historic Records Center, 177.

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About *Found in the Archives*

Found in the Archives is a monthly publication of the Clerk of the Fairfax Circuit Court, 19th Judicial Circuit, who proudly serves The City of Fairfax and Fairfax County. The Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center (HRC) holds the early county and court records including deeds, wills, court minutes, chancery and law papers, marriage licenses, birth, death, and tax records dating from 1742 through the early 1900s housed in approximately 2300 books and roughly 750 boxes of loose paper files. HRC is open Monday – Friday 8 am to 4 pm. and offers tours at 3pm on Friday. Click below to plan your next visit. *What will you find?*

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