

1950

## A Free Negro Purchases his Daughter

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### Recommended Citation

Doherty, Herbert J. Jr. (1950) "A Free Negro Purchases his Daughter," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 29 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol29/iss1/6>

A FREE NEGRO PURCHASES HIS DAUGHTER

TWO LETTERS FROM THE RICHARD KEITH CALL COLLECTION

*Edited by* HERBERT J. DOHERTY JR.

Many interesting sidelights to Southern history are to be found in the documents comprising the Richard Keith Call collection in the Florida Historical Society Library. Certain letters addressed to Call give us new and intriguing views of life in the old South. Here are two letters addressed to Call from Canada by a free Negro. We know very little about these letters or the circumstances surrounding them; as Call's side of the correspondence is not preserved in the collection, nor is there any reference to the matter nor the persons in any other documents of the collection which this writer has examined. Consequently, we can only speculate, in the light of the usual practices of that day, upon what actually took place.

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Original letters in the Richard Keith. Call collection,  
Florida Historical Society Library, St. Augustine :  
(Addressed to Call)

Hamilton [Ontario?] Sept. 2, 1858.

Respected Sir—

With pleasure I received your letter Aug. 20th the 28th—from it I gather some information. It is not my wish, Sir that you should run any risk for my Daughter after I purchase her, & it was for that reason which made me make an agreement with the Express Co. to fetch her to Hamilton, so that she should be protected from all harm or trouble. I have advanced the money by the Express Co. to the said firm & have now in my possession a copy of the receipt. Signed by Smallwood Earle & Co. which I will give to you in full word for word

*Copy*

\$400.—

New York Aug 12th 1858

The American Express Co. has deposited with us the sum of Four Hundred Dollars, to be held by us until

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Gov. R. K. Call, 'of Florida, shall deliver to us a servant girl named Mary, at New York; when we are to deliver said girl over to said Express Co., and they are to return us this certificate and the four hundred dollars then to be placed to the credit of said Call.

(Signed)

Smallwood, Earle & Co.

I feel perfectly willing the money should be in your hands whenever you think proper, for I am entirely independent of the Abolitionists, and have no connection with them in paying my Debts. I expect this time of year produces dangerous storms, therefore you will please use your own best judgment in selecting the time for her to sail. I feel every confidence in your word, & taking into consideration the risk of her voyage. I hope that you will be kind enough to see that she is rightly directed to the care of the Express Co. for Hamilton, as they will see her safe thro' (if God permit)

I shall expect to hear from you when you decide on the time for her starting to the North. Martha desires Love to Mary & her husband.

Your most  
Obedient Servant  
John Jenkins

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June 7th 1859

Gov. Call—

Sir

Please pardon my seemingly neglect for not writing to you sooner than this. The joy I felt at my Daughter's arrival was such that I have hardly been able to express my mind, to think of the promise the Lord made me many years ago, how that I should have them together again, & now when I behold the fulfillment of that promise, I am filled with astonishment. Sir, I feel great gratitude to you, for your kind and Fatherly treatment to her while she was with you, & now that you have been the Gentleman to bestow so much comfort upon me in my old days. May God bless you according to the measure you mete

out. There is not a time I bow in prayer but I supplicate the throne of grace in your behalf. I am rejoiced to hear that your daughter is to be married so well to please you, hoping the evening of your days will be spent comfortably and happy, for I feel that you are worthy of the blessing. We all join in love to yourself, your two Daughters, & their families, & to Perry, wishing you all prosperity here and peace hereafter.

P.S. My respects to all your Servants. If you or your Daughter should come, North this summer,. I hope you will extend your journey to Canada. We should be glad to see you if any way convenient. As the season for seeding returned I have given my son in law Jefferson' the charge of my farms. I keep seven or eight men for his help. They have sowed twenty Bushels of Spring Wheat, also Oats, Peas, & planted Potatoes, Beans and expect to sow a large field of Turnips. Grass & Wheat and all other crops have looked remarkably promising, almost too much so-the 4th it turned cool and the morning of the 5th we had a severe frost-It cut down the potatoes, Corn, Beans, and mostly the gardens. There has not been an instance of the kind for more than twenty years, that, we have had a frost so late. I think many things can be replanted & come to maturity. I feel to trust in the Lord, believing His day & power sufficient for all who look to him.

I am  
 Dear Sir  
 Your much  
 Obliged &  
 Humble  
*Servant*  
 John Jenkins

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Kind Master

As father has left a space for me, I improve it to return you thanks for your past kindness & acknowledge the receipt of your letter in April.

As father said he wished to write I delayed—

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I would inform you my health is good, I am going to school, & have great enjoyment with my Father & Sister & also my Black *Brother in Law*. As you have a desire to know, I tell you he is as Dark as myself, therefore we cannot *twit* one another only upon facts. Sister is not so Dark. I must tell you I like Canada very well. Altho' we have not the Sugar Cane here we have the Sugar Tree. We made some this Spring, it tastes very nice.

I am very well pleased to think Miss Mary has done so well for herself and for you. I trust you will all enjoy great comfort. Kiss Dear little Nona and Richard for me. I send much love to Mrs. -Ellen, Mr. Long & Mrs. Mary and her gentleman, hoping the Lord may bless you *all*, here and hereafter. Please *give my Love* to Manda, Melvina & Sister Judah also to Mr. & Mrs. Joiner hoping they are well-Also to all my Friends

Master I hope if you and your Daughter's come North Make it convenient to come & see us & the Country. Altho I am here I still remember you *all* with Love. I hope you please write soon as you can

Affectionately Yours  
Mary Jane Higgins

The writer of the two letters is obviously a free Negro then residing in Canada. Judging from the return address on the first letter, his farm is located near Hamilton. This is probably Hamilton, Ontario Province, which is on the western end of Lake Ontario approximately forty miles northwest of Niagara Falls, N. Y. Why he lived in Canada and how he achieved his freedom in the first place are questions of considerable interest. There are several distinct possibilities as to how he may have achieved his freedom, He may have been a runaway slave ; he may have purchased his freedom ; he may have been freed for performing some service; or he may have been the son of free Negroes.

Dr. Dorothy Dodd expresses the opinion that he was not a runaway slave because Call would not have dealt with him if that had been the ease. She thinks that

he may have been a free Negro, who married one of Call's slaves. This would explain his daughter's status, because the children of such a union would have been the property of Call. This explanation seems to be the most reasonable. As to how Jenkins became a free Negro, we can only say that circumstances seem to preclude the possibility that he secured that status by running away.

Free Negroes in the old South received that status in several ways. Some were freed for meritorious services, and some were freed at the death of their master by the terms of his will. More often the free population was increased by the fact that a slave might buy his freedom. This was done by working overtime, or by "hiring out" on holidays or after work hours.<sup>1</sup> A Negro as industrious as these letters indicate Jenkins to be might well have purchased his freedom, and then secured enough capital to buy his family. The records are full of instances in which a father would purchase a wife, son, or daughter, and eventually free his whole family.'

Jenkins and his daughter both seem to be of a responsible type. They apparently have received more education than masters usually gave to slaves in the fifteen years before the Civil War. Allan Nevins points out that for various reasons free Negroes were likely to be of a superior type. Some had been house servants; most of them had enough initiative to work out of slavery. A high percentage had white blood.<sup>3</sup>

Despite his industry and education, however, the free Negro led a hard life. In the North he was assumed to be an inferior creature and was subjected to many discriminating restrictions. He was kept in menial positions, debarred from intellectual professions, denied educational opportunities in some areas, and subjected to legal discrimination. In New York, free Negroes were allowed to ride only in conveyances marked "Colored." Nevins says that they were in fact "little better than

1. Weatherford, W. D., *The Negro from Africa to America*, (New York, 1924) pp. 173-174.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

3. Nevins, Allan, *Ordeal of the Union, I*, (New York, 1947) p. 524.

outcasts." De Tocqueville observed that prejudice was stronger against free Negroes in non-slave states than in the slave states.\*

In the South the greatest objection to free Negroes came from the fear that they would stir up servile insurrection. The free Negro in the South was neither completely free nor a slave. He was of a class designated as "free persons of color." He had no political rights and few civil rights. In Florida he could own property, sue and be sued in the state courts; and enjoy the rights to the privilege of habeas corpus. Yet he could not own firearms, liquor, or poisonous drugs. He must have a white "guardian". If he could not pay his debts, or was arrested for vagrancy, he could be sold into slavery for a limited time. By 1860, there were only 932 free Negroes in Florida, and all immigration of free Negroes was prohibited by law.<sup>5</sup>

In view of the harsh treatment accorded to free persons of color, both in the North and the South, it hardly seems unusual that Jenkins would seek a haven in Canada and would work towards the day when he could bring his family to join him.

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 519.

5. Davis, William Watson, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), pp. 413-415.