

A petition to free a white slave

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Petition of Gurdon Deming to the North Carolina General Assembly, December 1800. Records of the General Assembly, Session Records, North Carolina Division of Archives and History.

As you read...

This is a petition to the North Carolina General Assembly to manumit (free) an enslaved woman named Lucy. The petitioner, Gurdon Deming, argued that Lucy was too “perfectly White” to be kept in slavery. No law was passed, which means that Lucy was not granted her freedom as a result of the petition. (See the previous page for more information about manumission.)

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What evidence did Deming present in his petition to show that Lucy should not have been enslaved?
2. According to Deming, how did Lucy become a slave?
3. If Lucy was the daughter of a white woman and was so white in her appearance, why do you think her mother thought to hide her among slaves on a plantation?
4. What does this story tell us about the way white southerners connected slavery and race?
5. Do you believe Deming’s story? Can you think of other possible explanations for why Lucy, who appeared to be white, could have been a slave?

To the Honorable the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina.

The Petition of Gurdon Deming a citizen of the county of Cumberland Humbly sheweth, that he is the owner of a Certain woman named Lucy and her child Laura Who were represented to be slaves and as such purchased by your petitioner –

That he has reason to believe and doth believe from diligent inquires made, that the Said Lucy ought not to be held in bondage. Your petitioner is aware that legal proof cannot be made of the fact, yet your petitioner is fully satisfied, that the Said Lucy is the daughter of a free white Woman – that to conceal this circumstance, so as to protect the reputation of the real mother, Lucy at her birth was placed in charge of a woman slave of one John Selph – Your petitioner learns from a number of the most respectable citizens of Fayetteville, that it was always the intention of Mr. Selph to manumit the Said Lucy at his death – but the

death of Mr. Selph being sudden and his estate providing insolvent, his intentions were frustrated – Lucy was sold by his administrator and she was purchased at a mere nominal Sum by Several Gentlemen with the View to Carry out the wishes of Mr. Selph; Owing however to the insolvency of the person delegated to bid her off, occurring soon after, She was again Sold and has subsequently fallen with into the hands of your petitioner –

The History of Lucy is a romantic one, and if your petitioner could detail it without giving offense and bringing to light, what has long been forgotten and thereby do injury perhaps to persons now residents of a distant state, he is certain your honorable body would not hesitate a moment in assisting him in doing simple justice to this injured Girl, by authorizing her immediate Emancipation –

Lucy in colour is perfectly White, and cannot be distinguished from the purest of the race, her associations have been distinct from the coloured population, and her whole demeanor that of the whites to which class she evidently belongs.

In consideration of these things your petitioner humbly prays your honorable body to pass a law authorizing the Emancipation of the Said Lucy, and her child Laura, And as in duty bound, your petitioner will ever pray.

Gurdon Deming

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