



CREATED BY

LUCY

YOUSAF B

Historical Character File: A Slave's Freedom

Dear audience member,

This learning product was created by a PIONEER School for Expeditionary Learning 8th grade student in the spring of 2004. And while I have been trying for several years to intertwine historical inquiry, literacy, and craftsmanship in the curriculum I develop, this is my first attempt at facilitating the development of a product of this complexity. I am truly honored by the academic and creative risks these students were willing to take as we learned from this process together. Please take a moment to read their introductory advice below, as it will help you understand the context of our endeavors. And thank you for sharing in our learning!

-Matt Strand, PIONEER 8th Grade Humanities

PIONEER 8th Graders' Introduction

What is a historical character file?

- A historically/geographically accurate, fictional story about a character we created; it includes a portrait of the character, a narrative/biography, a character map, a bibliography, and the option of including artifacts from the character's life
- Our way of showing what we are learning
- An experiment in learning based on educator Ron Berger's character file project
- A project about slaves in United States history

What were we trying to accomplish?

- To build our schema (background knowledge) about slavery
- To educate others/ourselves about the slavery era
- To bring back the history through every detail instead of bits and pieces
- To challenge the notion that slaves were merely stereotypical "victims"; they were human beings with complex emotions that often used various "forms of freedom" as a way to experience power and dignity
- To feel the personal, human level of history rather than simply memorizing dates and facts in order to gain a different perspective of and respect for the real people that endured this system

What else should the audience know?

- Our intent is not to be racist or offensive; some of us have chosen to portray the physical and verbal abuse slaves experienced; sometimes this involves violence and racial slurs that, according to the primary, secondary, and expert resources we used in our research, were commonplace; these elements were included to convey historical realities
- We worked for 2 months on this project: asking questions, researching, discussing, drafting, drawing, critiquing, revising, and creating artifacts
- We went deep. And we'll remember it because we spent so much time on it. And we actually enjoyed the process; almost all of us would be willing to do a project like this again in the future.

Lucy

April 14, 2004

To Fly Away on the Wings of a Bird

A slave narrative for Bessy Foss

(Introduction and conclusion by Ginny Foss, a girl of 16 who is the nanny for the Foss children on the plantation.

She was never able to meet Bessy because she came to the plantation just after she died. Ginny is becoming close to Toby and loves to hear his story about Bessy.)

Toby Foss is a wonderful man. He is so caring and would never hurt even the smallest fly. Toby was the slave who was the closest to Bessy before she died of an awful sickness... the doctor wasn't even sure what it was. He said it might have been some kind of fever.

Two years ago Bessy passed away. She was just 18. Toby nursed her through it all; he stayed by her bed every moment that he was not working. This of course was when the master and the overseer finally realized she was sick after she fainted out of weakness. She was out cold for two days. Toby hated them for it; he got many beatings trying to tell the master that she was deathly ill. He was right too, she was deathly ill. It would make anyone shudder to see Bessy being beaten so harshly when she was slow doing her work because of how weak she was. The overseer called her a 'lazy nigger' and would whip her 10 times every 5 hours with the cat o' nine tails. Then, one day Bessy's small body just crumpled.

Toby was an old man, 50 at least. He was becoming wrinkled now, although one could see when he was younger how handsome he was, with rich dark skin and a large smile. You could often see him from miles off because he was so tall and proud. His strength was also amazing. Some said he was the strongest man around.

“Toby and Bessy’s relationship ran very deep: he was like a father to her and his care for her was genuine. It was extremely rough for him when Bessy died

Now that she is gone, Toby can only talk about Bessy. When I asked him to tell me about her, his soft wrinkled face broke into a small grin and he sat in the broken down rocking chair that stood on the dusty, rotting floor boards of his porch. He motioned for me to sit next to him and I did. He was looking towards the sagging roof over the porch as if trying not to cry. With a long sigh he began...

“That Bessy was a special girl. So sweet. She was a troubled child, but she worked real hard to get everything better. I didn’t have the heart to tell her it wouldn’t be better. We were slaves. That’s just how it was for us. She was real strong, Bessy was stronger than many of the other slave women. Yet with all this strength she was still somehow very soft looking, motherly, and kind. Maybe this was why she always had a flock of the young ones around her, not only slave children, but also the master’s.

“Bessy’s smile was so darn pretty too, made you feel all warm and good inside. I loved looking into her eyes--dark, deep and sparkling. They always had fun dancing around in them like impish fairies. But if you looked hard enough, you could also see a dark secret of sadness buried deep within her. Bessy’s hands would have been beautiful,

ladylike and dainty, with a soft peachy color on her palms and a creamy dark on the tops of her hands. With all her work though they were calloused and rough.

“Bessy was a big dreamer. One of the dreams that she longed for the most was to become an author, she would write on anything thing that she could get a hold of. I read some of her work once and I was amazed, it was so darn good! Bessy said that when all the slaves were free she would become an author and be an inspiration to all the other black women. She once told me how writing made her feel so free. I remember looking at her face then, all glowing and warm it was, with a far away look and a faint smile on it. I’ll never forget how she looked, her beautiful troubled face, so at peace. She had looked so free.

“Bessy was a very smart and quick-minded young lady. As soon as she moved away from the fields to nanny the master’s children, the ones that were going to school were teaching her their lessons in no time. Luckily she moved too, cause those damned white men were raping her. Poor girl probably would have committed suicide if she hadn’t moved, damaged her pride and will it did. Bessy picked up on the children’s lessons pretty darn quick and was soon teaching it loyally to us other slaves. Sometimes she would falter though. She was afraid that we would get caught and sold away or whipped, but we knew how to keep our mouths shut. The slaves that had been at the plantation for a while were all almost completely literate, Bessy taught us a lot! She sometimes would get maps for us so we knew how to read road signs, and most of us could write pretty well too. Many of the slaves she taught ran away. They followed that Drinking Gourd in the sky - the Big Dipper. They also followed the Underground Railroad. Bessy always dreamt of following the Underground Railroad. So she was

inspired to make up a story. She shared it with me and then later on wrote it down. I still have it here with me.”

“The creaking of the rocking chair stopped and Toby went into the tiny room of a house in which he lived. He returned with a few wrinkled papers, he caressed them gently and then sat down in his rocking chair again. “I’ve read this story so many times that I think I can tell it to you” He winked at me and began....

‘A young girl of fifteen dashed out into the dark night, her sleeping baby in bundles of linen in her arms. Her eyes, wide and fearful, darted about as she swiftly escaped, the corn stalks in the field that stretched for miles were waving slightly as she ran. The moon hid behind a cloud, putting an eerie glow on the endless cornfield. The moon seemed to be hiding too, waiting with anticipation, holding its breath for the girl. She was tense as she ran, feet pattering on the soft Earth, breath coming in rapid gasps. Over the fence and into the deep dark woods beyond she ran. When she stopped for a breath after running for what felt like an eternity, she looked down through the bundles of cloth at her beloved one. He seemed to sense her gaze and fluttered his eyelids open, revealing his dark, peaceful eyes. They seemed to have a glint in them as if smiling, congratulating her. She was filled with hope and inspiration again and began to run. Miles later she stopped, smelling the fresh night air. She could smell the river, she sensed it and there was that star winking at her, pointing the way. When she reached it she felt a calmness come over her,

just looking at its dark coolness, ever flowing in such a calm way made her feel at peace. This was it. This was her river; once she crossed it, she would be nearly free. She waded in deeper and deeper, balancing her baby on her head with one hand as she paddled as hard as she could with the other, the bottom of the river was far below her now...'

"Then, I remember, Bessy had stopped to explain to me that there was a small lake on the girl's plantation and she had learned to be a very strong swimmer from sneaking out at night to practice. After that, Bessy had continued again.

'At last her bare, dainty brown feet touched the soft cold mud of the opposite shore. She let out a gasp, realizing how tense and fearful her body had been. She took a deep breath and tried to relax her aching muscles.

Five nights later, the young girl was starving and weak. She had only had a few roots, leaves and a berry here and there to eat, and very little water. Her muscles ached in agony, her hair was ragged, and her clothes torn. Her dear son looked bony and hollow. Tears streamed down her dirty face as she stumbled on, searching, reaching out for a hand. But nothing was there, no one was there for her. These words kept on running though her head over and over again: No one... no one. It might have been minutes. It might have been hours, she could not tell. But she stumbled upon a small white house next to a trampled dirt road. On the house's clothes line there was a single quilt. Even in her terrible state, the girl

knew that this was a house on the Underground Railroad. She searched for the patch. There it was the single yellow star! She searched for other patches, ones that might warn her away from the house. The small red patch that meant slaves had been found at this house before, was not there. Her heart filled with hope as she stumbled up the front steps and weakly knocked on the door. After a minute the knob turned and the girl looked in to a kind, pale white wrinkled face of an old woman. She was in a nightgown and carrying a candle. Help me, the girl rasped. The old woman stretched out a bony hand. She knew that she would be safe now. She had entered the Underground Railroad, and somebody was there for her. Hand in hand the old white woman and the young black girl walked into the house.

“I gave a low whistle after Bessy finished that story. I was in shock. That story amazed me. It showed parts of Bessy, her loneliness, and her determination. Right then and there I thought, my Bessy *is* gonna be an author and I’m gonna help her make that dream come true. I told her that too, I remember she looked at me and smiled, it was a smile that reached deep into her soul, then, she had leaned forward and gave me a tight hug. A feeling of joy and closeness filled us both. If only dear Bessy were still alive.”

“I don’t know what happened to the slaves that ran away, but they haven’t been found. We just had to hope for the best. All I know is that if it wasn’t for Bessy teaching them, they would be nowhere right now, and with many extra deep wounds on their backs. If I hadn’t been so old I would have been long gone. Besides, Bessy needed me real bad too. I was like a father to her and she was like a daughter to me. We took a big

risk being literate. If the master or the overseer ever found out we would all be sold away or maybe even killed. That would cause such pain and grief. We had known each other for so long... but we were taking the risk cause it might have set us free. Gave Bessy a sense of freedom teaching us too, and that mattered a lot to her.

“Bessy’s always dreamt of falling in love, marrying and then having a large happy family. Bessy would picture it with her eyes closed, a sweet half smile on her face and then would whisper.

“We will all sit around a large wooden table at meal times and laugh, talk, and eat to our heart’s content. The children will go to school every day, and on winter nights they will all sit around the fire while their father and I will read aloud. I can just see their shining faces looking up at me, wide-eyed and full of wonder. Oh how I’d love them!

“Bessy would have loved the husband she pictured too. She imagined him tall with thick curly hair and rich dark skin. He would have peaceful eyes and a beautiful smile. He would be a truly kind man. She told me this whole story one night in my little shed right next to the gardens. I ‘spose she had imagined it that day during her endless work. That’s how Bessy could sometimes escape. She would try to fog out the world that she was living in and just imagine her own world.

“Bessy had had a very rough childhood. When she was 6 or 7 years old, she and her mother first came to the plantation. Her mother tried to run away, saying that she would come back for Bessy. But her mother was caught, and because she was so sick from not getting enough food, when the master’s overseer, John, beat her harshly she

died very soon after. This was devastating for Bessy because at that time in her life she felt like she needed a mother most. When Bessy was older, about 13 or 14, the white men on the plantation started making fun of her body and soon after that began, she was raped. Bessy had felt so confused and hurt. 'What have I done to deserve this awful treatment?' she once asked me. The raping continued and although she was beaten very harshly when she resisted it, she still tried. If the raping hadn't stopped when it did, Bessy would have been totally ruined forever. But the master moved her to the house to be a nanny and maid slave. I never really understood why the master moved her. Maybe he knew about the raping and cared enough about Bessy to move her so that the men would not do it anymore. With so much time between those awful events, Bessy was finally learning to get over it by trying to forget about it. Whenever a scene from those dreadful days would come into her head, she tried to picture something happy instead. Time, however, could not make things better or go away. It could only make the memories less clear. Luckily, Bessy never got pregnant.

"One of Bessy's biggest fears was that she might be raped again. But she had many other fears too. She feared that her secret of being able to read and write would get her sent away from the plantation or that something would happen to the other slaves she'd taught. They were like her family now. Although she had many fears, she tried not to let them get in her way. Nevertheless, I could see in her eyes that they still did.

"Bessy and I always loved the location of the plantation. It was on the out-skirts of a small town in South Carolina. The land seemed to be an endless green mass of fields, gardens, and trees. Bessy especially loved it in the spring when all the pretty blue birds

were chirping, the little green sprouts were just peeking out of the rich, dark earth of the garden, and the large oak trees were sprouting their first little buds of leaves.

“When Bessy was not working or watching the children, she loved to dig in the garden with me and take in all the beauty of the world. She would notice how appealing everything could be if we just looked hard enough. She would point the little things out to me. ‘Toby, look how that bird cocks its head as if tryin’ to find out the world’s secrets.’ She sighed at how lovingly the barn cats cleaned their kittens and laughed at how the watchdogs would wrestle and chase each other around playfully. Bessy longed to be able to play like these animals. When we slaves weren’t being beaten, the plantation could be a real pretty place. With its rows of rich green fields and the many grand old trees that seemed to be everywhere, yes I could be beautiful

“Bessy never knew anyone in her family except her mother. Her mother always told her wonderful stories about her heroic grandmother who had helped some slaves from her plantation escape to the North. Her grandmother was able to do this because she worked in the big house and knew the schedules and plans of the master. She was not afraid to defy the rules in order to save her friends. Her grandmother would plan for carts to come and pick up the slaves; stealing maps, she would teach the illiterate ways to read them. Even though her grandmother could not read fully, she knew how to follow some maps and make out road signs. Bessy’s Grandmother was a kind woman. She never ran away herself because she knew she was needed to help take care of the children and the other slaves. I remember Bessy coming to me one night, eyes a-shining. ‘Toby... I wanna be just like my grandmother!’ she had said to me, and then she sat down and told me how she imagined her looking. ‘She would have soft dark skin with wrinkles in just the right

places -not too many- just enough so that she would look elderly and kind. Her hair would be fluffy and short and her smile would be beautiful, kind and thoughtful,' she explained to me, eyes glowing.

"Bessy and her mother always valued each other because they were the only family that they had, but they did not get along very well before she died because Bessy's mother could be quite demanding and always took her anger out on Bessy, telling her that she was too bossy. Her mother didn't like anyone else to be in control. Bessy knew that she could be bossy at times, but she also knew that this was true for her mother as well. Maybe that is why they didn't get along very well. But with all this arguing Bessy valued and loved her mother very much. Bessy always loathed fighting with her mother. I noticed how far away, and distraught she always looked after a fight.

"A tradition that we all had in our little slave family that was one of Bessy's favorites was that each year during the months between July and September all the slaves would start collecting food from wherever they worked and build up a stash very slowly. Then after we had each gathered a reasonable amount we would all have a midnight feast. For Bessy this meant taking small amounts of food from around the house. She loved doing this; it gave her a thrill to be so sneaky. Of course there was always the fear of being caught, which only added to the excitement of it.

"As well as being a slave nanny for the children, Bessy also worked around the house and in the garden. Bessy worked day in and day out and it always seemed like she never got a break. When she did, she treasured it very much, even though it was often very short. Bessy was one of the master's favorites. Most of us would take this as a compliment and Bessy tried to, but she just got so tired of saying 'Yes massa?' and 'I will

do that massa' and then 'Yes massa?' again. The whole thing would repeat itself too many times to count. Just because Bessy was one of the master's favorites didn't mean that she was let off easily. No, in fact, she got beaten even more harshly when she did something wrong because the master would be so disappointed in her. If you lifted up the back of Bessy's shirt you would find scars and cuts that would make you shudder. No, Bessy was not let off easy, but she figured if she could just forgive and forget life would be easier. Well, as easy as it *got* being a slave. Life had its ups and downs for Bessy, but she usually managed to stay or act pretty happy. As long as she managed to keep the horrible memories away."

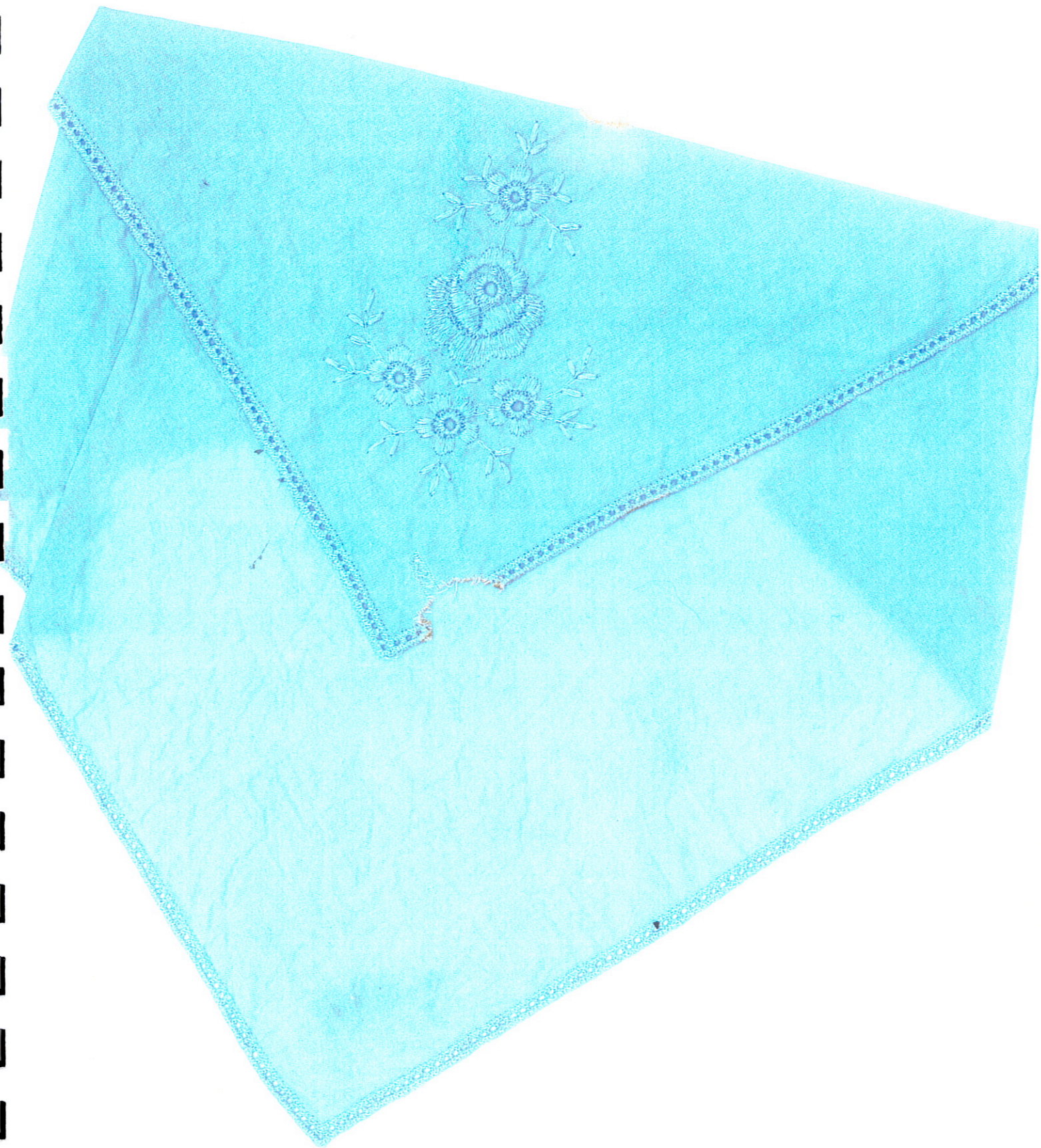
Toby and I both grinned at each other when he finished the story, although his grin was full of sadness. I knew that Toby was feeling bad about Bessy's life, and I noticed how he tried to make it seem more pleasant than it had been, that was just his way.

"Well, we better be goin' to bed, Ginny," Toby said as he slowly got up from his chair "Thank you for the story. Good night" I replied and gave him a kiss on the cheek. On my way back to the big house, I thought about how special Bessy was to each and every person on this plantation -perhaps excluding the overseer. She even has a place in my heart, though I never knew her. Bessy Foss will never be forgotten.

Monday, February 12, 1824

Maybe it is the gray of February, but it feels like a shadow has fallen over the plantation; everyone seems to be trudging through a thick blanket of fog, trying to find their way. I shall not talk about that now though because something very exciting has happened. Yesterday Mistress was up all night hollering in pain. Finally, at a very early hour of the morning Martha and I delivered little Mary. Martha is so good with births and babies, I hope when I am as old as she is I too will have the knowledge and experience that Martha has. Mary is 'Mistress' first girl after four boys; so I hoped she would have a girl. Mistress, however, is very ashamed. She wanted another boy because that is what Master wanted; she won't even so much as look at little Mary since the birth, except of course when she is feeding her. I have double the workload now and I hardly get any sleep and I have been whipped so often that I cannot bend over because of the pain. I don't mind so much though, because now I have Mary to look after. She is so sweet; her eyes are bright blue and she already has a lot of dark brown hair. Mary amazes me. Already I love her as if she were my own, I wish that I could be like her, so innocent of all the horrible things in this harsh world. I saw Mary's little ink footprints that the doctor had left for Mistress on the nursery room table, they looked so sweet lying there on their own like that that I just had to take them. Mistress won't miss them I am sure of it! My little Mary brings so much joy to my heart that I can feel the fog that is within me gently lifting!

~Bessy



“This was Bessy’s only handkerchief and she treasured it dearly. It was her grandmother’s and Bessy’s mother had given it to her before she ran away. Bessy would always tell me stories about this handkerchief, what had happened to it, and where it had been. She kept it with her all the time. I spose’ that was her most treasured belonging”

Mary Louise Foss born to Mr. and
Mrs. Jonathan Foss on February 11
1824.

Weight: Six pounds seven ounces.

Length: Nineteen inches

Hair Color: Dark Brown

Eye Color: Blue



Lucy

April 24, 2004

Sushi

A Character Map for Bessy Foss

* Family History

- ① Ancestry: Bessy only knew of one Grandmother.
- ② Current Family: None
- ③ Family Heirlooms: A handkerchief that was passed down the line of women, starting with Bessy's Grandmother.

* Historical/Geographical frame:

- ① Type of Work Environment: Bessy worked in her master's house taking care of his children, cleaning and cooking.
- ② State Weather: It is sunny and humid during the summer. During the winter, it is cold with lots of rain and no snow. Spring and fall are in between the two.

* Personal Description

- ① Physical Description: Bessy is about 5'5" with creamy dark skin and has neat cornrows running across her head. She has straight white teeth and a big shining smile that lit up her face. Bessy also had beautiful eyes full of truth.
- ② Dreams and Hopes: Becoming an author and helping the other slaves become free by teaching them how to read and write. Bessy knew how to teach them because the master's children had taught her.
- ③ Fears: Being raped by the master's friends again. Bessy also feared that and the other slaves' reading and writing abilities would be discovered.

④ Important Event From Childhood: Her mother ran away and then was caught. She was very sick when the master found her; he did not see this and had her continue with her work,† soon after she died. This happened when Bessy was about six or seven.

⑤ Things That Other's Would Say About Her: Bessy was loved dearly on the plantation. She was a kind hearted and loving person who was very accepting and patient. She always looked on the positive side of things. Sometimes the other slaves would become frustrated with her because she hardly thought of herself at all, she was always paying attention to others and she didn't really accept that she had problems.

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