



It Happened Near Me: The Letters of Harriett Newby

County: Fauquier/Prince William

Date: 1859

Background: Harriett Newby was an African-American woman enslaved by a local doctor who owned a house in Warrenton (Fauquier County) and a farm in Prince William County near Brentsville. She spent time at both properties. Her husband Dangerfield was freed when his owner moved from Fauquier to the free state of Ohio in 1858. Dangerfield moved to Ohio to make money with which to purchase the freedom of his wife and children so she could join him. Harriett wrote to him regularly. Here are two of her letters.

Brent[s]ville, April 11, 1859

Dear Husband:

I received your letter today, and it gives me much pleasure to here from you, but was sorry to [hear] of your sikeness; hope you may be well when you receive this. . . I wrote in my last letter that Miss Virginia had a baby—a little girl. I had to nurse her day and night. Dear Dangerfield, you cannot imagine how much I want to see you. Com[e] as soon as you can for nothing would give me more pleasure than to see you. It is the greatest Comfort that I have ... thinking of the promist [sic] time when you will be here. The baby commenced to crall [sic] to-day it is very delicate. Nothing more at present, but remain

Your affectionate wife
Harriet Newby

Brent[s]ville August 16, 1859

Dear Husband:

Your letter came duly to hand and it gave me much pleasure to here from you, and especely to here you are better of your rhumatism. I want you to buy me as soon as possible, for if you do not get me some body else will. Dear Husband, you [know] not the trouble I see; the last two years has been like a trouble[d] dream. It is said that Master is in want of money. If so, I know not what time he may sell me, and then all my bright hopes of the future[e] are blasted, for their [sic] has been one bright hope to cheer me in all of my troubles, that is to be with you. If I thought I shoul[d] never see you this earth would have no charms for me. Do all you can for me, witch I have no doubt you will. The children are all well. The baby cannot walk yet. It can step around everything by holding on. I must bring my letter to a Close as I have no newes to write. You mus[t] write soon and say when you think you can come.

Your affectionate wife,
Harriet Newby

What Happened Next?

Dangerfield worked hard to earn the money to buy his family's freedom. However, Harriett Newby's enslaver refused to sell her and her children to Dangerfield. Seeing no other option, Dangerfield joined John Brown for his Harpers Ferry raid in 1859. Dangerfield was shot and killed during the Raid. His body was left in the street, where someone found Harriett's letters in his pocket. After John Brown's Raid, Harriett and her children were sold into the Deep South.



Top left: A photograph of Dangerfield Newby. No known photos of Harriett have been found.

Top Right: Brentsville Courthouse, near where Harriett wrote some of her letters to Dangerfield.

Left: Warrenton in 1862. Harriett traveled between Brentsville and Warrenton whenever her owner told her to.

Making Sense of Evidence from the Past.

1. Why can Harriett, a slave woman, write? Was it legal to teach a slave to write?
2. Were slave marriages legal, or just unofficial? Why would/wouldn't they be allowed in a major slave exporting state like Virginia, the largest slave state?
3. In the first letter, Harriett says that Miss Virginia, Harriett's mistress, had a baby. Why does Harriett nurse her mistress' child, and her own child?
4. Harriett writes, "I know not what time he [Master] may sell me . . . If I thought I should never see you, this earth would have no charms for me . . ." What is Harriett afraid will happen?
5. Historians aren't sure what happened to Harriett Newby or her children. If you were going to try and find out, where would you start looking? List two examples.