

Nanny was Enslaved in Old Ogdensburgh

By Bryan Thompson

Nanny, the property of Louis and Catherine Hasbrouck, arrived in the frontier village of Ogdensburgh when Louis, the new county clerk, moved his family here from Ulster County in 1804.

The trip was a long and arduous one on primitive roads dodging stumps and wallowing through mud holes. Travelers were often reduced to walking through the most difficult sections. The route was cold in winter and bug-infested in summer.

As a house slave, Nanny's responsibilities included tending the eternal household fires, cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, gardening and tending to her mistress in childbirth.

Nanny was born into the household of Catherine Banks Hasbrouck's parents. Nanny's father was Jerry, a slave owned by Catherine's parents. As she was raised in the Banks household, Nanny may have felt like a member of the family, but her masters considered her and all slaves "stock". This was made abundantly clear in a letter from Joseph Hasbrouck to his brother Louis in January 1812 regarding the division of their father's estate:

"Phillip (their brother) took Dick, Har and Tobi along with him. I kept none of the old stock except Janet ... When I got rid of the old stock I immediately went and purchased a black man, a woman and two children."

Letters between Catherine Hasbrouck and her two sisters often contain little tidbits of news from Nanny's old friends and family. Eliza (Banks)Graham noted in August 1805: "Diana and Phillis says I must let Nanny know they have handsome new calico frocks." Sarah (Banks) Lasher wrote in July 1809: "The kitchen folk are all well, Frances and York have made a visit lately of a fortnight and all send their love to Nanny."

The Hasbrouck household was in an ill state when a Mr. Graham visited Ogdensburgh in 1808. When Louis's brother, David, a pharmacist, heard of their condition he wrote (October 1808)," I beg that you will write me as soon as you conveniently can and inform me how you all are. Should Nanny still continue in the situation in which she was when Mr. Graham left you. I should judge if your physician approves it would be proper to bleed freely, blister and salivate her." Nanny was an important enough member of the household to warrant medical attention from a doctor. Thankfully, Nanny and the family recovered from their illness.

An additional note in Eliza Graham's letter of August 1805 reveals a much darker side to enslavement in New York State. "Pompey has had a mind to come in the chamber to see Miss Diana, but was found out and (he) looked like a squirrel that is treed running over the roof. (We went) After him in our chemise." (Pompey and Diana were both slaves in the Graham household.)

All black social organizations including churches were banned in the state after an early 18th-century slave uprising. No slave (such as Pompey) could marry without his master's consent. Most households had only one or two slaves and it was considered a moral failing if one of the master's servants became pregnant. This led to a constantly decreasing black population.

Lonely and upended

Nanny could not marry without the explicit permission of her masters. It must have been a lonely life for Nanny in the frontier village of Ogdensburgh — far from her Ulster County family and friends. However, this situation would change in early 1812 and would totally upend Nanny's life.

About this time Nanny secretly found herself a paramour among the young men of Ogdensburgh. As the year progressed, it became obvious that Nanny was pregnant, much to Catherine Hasbrouck's chagrin. The Hasbrouck family stayed in the village through the military build-up in the summer and early fall of 1812 despite the pleas of their extended family in Ulster County that they come back to Ulster.

Finally, after the failed attack of the British in October 1812, the family decided to evacuate, leaving Louis Hasbrouck behind to tend to his law practice. Catherine's sister, Sarah Lasher, expressed concern for Nanny in her advanced pregnancy being at a battlefield.

A few weeks after the family arrived in Hurley, on Nov. 13, 1812, Nanny delivered a baby boy. Catherine wrote: "(Nanny) Nurses as boldly as you please. I cannot think of taking her back with her white brat and no doubt another as soon as possible. I have not mentioned it yet for I have hardly seen her. I cannot stomach it."

Although Nanny had been raised with her, Catherine was determined to get rid of her. On Nov. 29th, she wrote to her husband, "The child is very troublesome. Nany [sic] is lovely. I have not seen her child but twice. I feel determined not to have her if you agree." Although Nanny had come with Catherine into the marriage, all her property had become that of her husband, Louis, to do with as he pleased. It was Louis's ultimate decision whether Nanny stayed.

When Nanny became aware of Catherine's plans to get rid of her, she openly argued with Catherine and begged to go back to Ogdensburgh to be with the father of her child. Considering that Nanny had cared for Catherine through the births and laying in of three of Catherine's daughters, she may have felt entitled to some sympathy from her mistress. Unfortunately, Catherine wrote, she was outraged that a slave would talk to her so and doubly, when Nanny refused to reveal the name of the father of the baby.

In January 1813 Catherine wrote to Louis, "She (Nanny) said (she) supposed I wanted to know whose child it was, that she said I should never know. Her talk plainly bespeaks it to be some of our young men and if she don't tell to the contrary I shall pawn it on them. Otherwise why not tell? A grown tart and she seems very proud. The dirty rascal if I knew I would publish it in the papers. I believe she has had many meetings with him whoever it is. She always had too much to

say without more freedom than she might. I feel affronted that I have no patience when I speak it.”

Controversial issue

New York was in the midst of a gradual abolition process, but the idea of rights for black people was still extremely controversial. In April 1813, Catherine wrote about a visit her Aunt Graham had with two young men with modern ideas from New York City. The topic of reform of race laws came up.

“Aunt gave him a good lecture about (the evils of) the negroes having more privileges. She was very severe. But he only laughed at it” — April 13, 1813. Even after New York State voted in 1799 to gradually abolish slavery by July 4, 1827, the idea of giving rights to black people was still very controversial.

Catherine seems to have gone so far as to impugn the fidelity of Louis himself in her quest to be rid of Nanny. Louis protested, “Do justice to a husband who never sullied the purity of conjugal love.” — Dec. 18, 1812.

After months of wrangling, Catherine succeeded in having Nanny removed from the household. Louis Hasbrouck sold Nanny and her male child (still unnamed) to Thomas Jansen of Shawangunk in September 1813. Nanny’s service was to be for 10 years, but her child by law was indentured for 21 years to his new master. What became of them after this point remains a mystery. It is unlikely they ever returned to Ogdensburgh.

Louis Hasbrouck soon after purchased a young man named Sharp who would remain in Ogdensburgh after emancipation. Sharp married and raised three children in the village as a free man under the name of Joseph Sharp.

Sources :

Hasbrouck Family Papers University of Michigan Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Hasbrouck Family Papers Ogdensburg Public Library Ogdensburg, NY.