

ARLONZIA PETTWAY'S FAMILY HISTORY: DINAH THE SLAVE AND HER DESCENDANTS

Arlonzia Pettway, born in 1923, grew up learning family histories from her great-grandmother Dinah Miller. Dinah told Arlonzia about her youth in Africa, her capture and passage to America, and the circumstances that brought her to Gee's Bend. Dinah's two children became prominent in the community. Her daughter, Sally (Arlonzia's grandmother), was the Bend's midwife and nurse; her son, John Henry Miller, was the foreman for the absentee landlords, the Van de Graaffs, and lived at Sandy Hill, the old Pettway plantation house, when photographer Arthur Rothstein traveled through the area in 1937.

Arlonzia's narrative of Dinah's entry into Mobile, Alabama, strikingly resembles the murky events surrounding the slave schooner *Clotilde* (sometimes spelled *Clotilda*). In 1859, amid talk of secession and the restoration of the slave trade with Africa, a group of Alabamians led by Timothy Meaher attempted to smuggle 116 West African slaves into Mobile Bay. Tipped off to the plan, federal agents waited to intercept the ship, but the captain scuttled his craft and removed the captives to the canebrake. Eighty or so slaves may have been distributed north to Selma and Wilcox County. Thirty-two of the Africans settled on the bay at Magazine Point, a few miles north of Mobile. After the Civil War, this group stayed there and founded a community known as Africatown, which thrived well into the twentieth century. Dinah Miller's surname may be a corruption of "Meaher."

Arlonzia was not aware of the *Clotilde* affair when her reminiscence was recorded. The life dates for Dinah's children, Sally and John Henry, align well with an 1859 arrival for their mother, although Arlonzia's recollected chronology perhaps puts Dinah on Alabama shores ahead of the caper. Links between Dinah and the last documented slave ship remain plausible but unproven. However her earliest years unfolded, Dinah—and others born in antebellum times—helped raise and mold the twentieth-century quiltmakers of Gee's Bend.

My great-grandmother came from Africa. She came with her mother and father and brother when she was just thirteen, and she died here at an old age. We used to sit and listen to her telling us about it. She told of back in Africa, how they couldn't get the Africans on the ship. For two weeks she said they kept them

penned up, and they wouldn't go near the ship. Then they decked the ship up with red lights and red bow ribbons 'cause they understood that the Africans loved the color red so much, and then the Africans got on there.

This white man bought her, and she said she cost a dime. He paid a dime for her, and he carried her a different direction from her mama and her brothers. She don't know which way they went. She followed this man what bought her with ten cents. I was real small when she told me the story, but it startled me so I kept it. She say the first field she worked in was a place down there they called Mobile Bay. Every day at dinner she would make us bow around her knees so she could tell us her stories.

When they landed on this side, there was seven white men waiting. One white man bought twenty-five of them, including her, but not none of the rest of her family. She was separated from all of them right there and never seen them again. The man that bought her and those other ones took them down to Mobile Bay

to farm the land by the bay. They gave her the name Dinah. There weren't no Millers up around here; she say she come from Africa with that name.

At that time there wasn't nobody else farming that land but the Cherokee Indians. She worked down there, and another man bought them and took them to Snow Hill. Four big healthy mens, two Indians and two whites, was sent to Snow Hill to work with the slaves and get the womens pregnant. So that's when she got pregnant with Sally, my grandmama. She had to live with those four mens, and once the woman got pregnant, they moved them out and brought more womens in. They wanted big strong babies.

Dinah still worked the fields after Sally was born. They get somebody to nurse the babies so the field slaves could still work. Mama Sally—that's what I called my grandmama—she got to be a big-enough girl and she started working in the fields with her mama. Boiled peas in a fifty-gallon pot. Those was not good times. They'd ring the bell and the slaves would come for peas and bread. They give them about ten to twelve



ONE OF THE NEGROES LIVING ON THE OLD PETTWAY PLANTATION. GEE'S BEND, ALABAMA. JOHN HENRY MILLER, FOREMAN OF THE PLANTATION Arthur Rothstein photograph and title, 1937. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. John Henry Miller was Dinah Miller's son and Sally Miller's brother.

minutes to get to the food and to eat and get back to work. If they didn't eat it in that time, they didn't get no more food for the day. The boss man would ride a horse through the field three or four times a day overseeing the workers. One man couldn't work fast, always couldn't keep up, and Dinah told that every day he got licked with the rawhide whip, blood would be just running down off him.

She also told me this: The mens had to take this kind of a training program to see how fast they could run. They put this dog in the pen with a man, and the man had to run fast enough to jump the fence and get out before the dog gets him. Dog bite him bad if he didn't get out—tear him up.

After Dinah had Sally, they took her out of the field and she became a cook and housecleaner for the boss man's wife in a place called Vredenburgh, over near Camden. After that, she went back out in the fields and worked until Grandmama Sally got about seventeen years old. Grandmama Sally got pregnant for a white man, and they named the son Tank. Sally loved the baby, but a white lady, mother of the white boy, took the baby and kept the baby. Sally told me she cried for six months over her baby. Sally came into Camden, and that's where she met Esau and married him. Later on, they came across the river to Gee's Bend and worked on the Pettway plantation. Dinah had another baby, a son, John Henry. He was Sally's half brother. They didn't have the same daddy. But I believe John Henry also had a Indian daddy. He was red skinned and had that pretty hair. He become the foreman on the old Pettway plantation. And at the end, the government let John Henry live in the plantation house till they tore it down. Then they gave him a new house.

Sally became a midwife when she was thirty-six years old, that's what she said. She was the main person people would call here when they get in labor. They get a wagon pulled by two mules and get Sally, take her back to their house to deliver the baby. Esau and Sally had twelve head of children. The fourth child was Missouri [1902-1981], my mama. The first son they had, Grandmama Sally named him Tank. She had told her friends if she ever got another son, she was going to name him Tank, after the one got taken away from her by the white lady.

She told me a lot of things. She told me the first church they had was made out of brush. They hewed out logs to have anything to sit on. And they had services like that. And they had services there under the brush for about a year, and the boss man found out that they was having services out there under the brush arbor, and he burned it up. They had named that church Pleasant Hill, and that's where the name Pleasant Grove came from, 'cause they had gave the first one the name Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, not too far from the church sitting there now. So when they burnt that one down Dinah say they built another one, and they built another one, and they built another one. They build many brush arbor, and every time they burn that one up they build another one somewhere else. She told me that they build these brush arbor and have service under it, and they would sing and they would pray, and they would gain souls out there under those brushes, too. There had never been a church in this area before that. They had never seen a church.

They had done built three log-cabin churches before the big one got built. Slave masters burnt up all of them. Didn't want them to serve God, 'cause they 'fraid they'd come free—and that's what they did. The first church was down in a ditch. She say they would pray so hard for it not to rain, 'cause the ditch would get so full of water they couldn't have service on Sunday. One time it started raining on Friday, all Friday night, and they were so worried; it rained all day Saturday and Saturday night, and when they got there Sunday morning the water was just rushing. It had come up to the log they sit on and was rushing through there, and they just stood around there and they still had service. Dinah said all the people there, they were just like she was, all of them was slaves came from Africa. They wasn't Christians when they came here, but they had such a hard time they became Christians. They got punished, so she told me. She said they wasn't allowed to write; they catch you writing, they'll cut your fingers off. And they didn't learn them how to speak the language like they should. The boss man teach them to talk a bad way, then when the slavery was over with, they talked about how the black peoples didn't know how to talk. But they talked what they was taught. What the black people talked was just what they learned, and it wasn't right. They just had their African language when they got here. But the white people still say, "But the black people don't know how to speak this language."



AUNT SALLY, OLD MIDWIFE, THE ONLY DOCTOR OR NURSE EVER HEARD OF IN GEE'S BEND BEFORE PROJECT WAS STARTED. GEE'S BEND, ALABAMA
Marion Post Wolcott photograph and title, 1939. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Sally Miller, mother of Missouri Pettway and grandmother of Arlonzia Pettway.