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**ISSN 2278-9529**  
**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Manumitted from Slavery before the American Civil War: Bethany Veney**

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**Article History:** Submitted-08/01/2020, Revised-26/02/2020, Accepted-28/02/2020, Published-29/02/2020.

### **Abstract:**

Bethany Veney is manumitted from slavery even before American Civil War. Even though her narrative is published in 1889, it can be studied under the Antebellum Slave Narratives because she suffering and liberation is before the Civil War. Bethany veney is born as property to James Fletcher. She grows up with good principles and gets married to a slave by name Jerry. Her husband is sold even before the birth of their first child. She is taken to New Orleans slave market but gets back to Luray. Bethany Veney in her second marriage with Frank Veney is blessed with a baby boy. She is very religious and gets baptized. Maybe it was the hand of the providence that she and her son are manumitted by G.J. Adams. Bethany veney finds freedom unlike many slaves and fugitives of Antebellum Era.

**Keywords: Antebellum Era Slavery; Slave Trade; Sexual Abuse; Manumission; Hiring Slaves' Time.**

Bethany Veney is well known as 'Aunt Betty' while she is in slavery. Bethany Veney is very much influenced by her mother and religion. Her mother is blessed with five children and James Fletcher is their master. Bethany Veney along with other slave children is plucking apples. Miss Nasenath Fletcher orders them to blackberry pasture. Wilma King observes that children of

slaves do not enjoy their childhood. In fact childhood and its tender joys are absent in the life of slave children:

Enslaved children had virtually no childhood because they entered the workplace early and were subjected to arbitrary authority, punishment, and separation, just as enslaved. (King xxi)

Miss Nasenath Fletcher takes the opportunity to teach morals and religion to the slave children. Slaveholders always use religion to teach the slaves to be submissive and be true to their earthly masters. Miss Nasenath Fletcher tells the slave children that if anyone lies they will be punished by God. Bethany Veney asks her mother about what Miss Nasenath Fletcher told them. To that, her poor mother explains, what Miss Nasenath Fletcher fails to convey. She tells Bethany Veney that God will protect those who never lie. The little girl believes it even up to the day when she is writing this narrative. Bethany Veney confesses that:

Though my conception of what constituted the truth was very dim, my fear of what should befall me, if I were to tell a lie, was very great. (Veney 2)

At the age of nine, Bethany Veney loses her mother and is followed by the death of Master Fletcher. An inventory is prepared and the slaves of Master Fletcher are divided among his children. Lots are drawn to divide the property. Master Fletcher's eldest daughter Miss Lucy gets Bethany Veney and her sister Matilda. Bethany Veney's uncle Peter and her grandmother goes to Miss Nasenath. Later Miss Nasenath marries David Kibbler. Miss Lucy decides to live with her sister Nasenath and David Kibbler.

Bethany Veney is happy as Miss Lucy feeds her slaves well and never whips them. But the shift to David Kibbler's place, he starts to control Bethany Veney and Matilda as if they are his slaves. David Kibbler's temper is such that he once struck her with a nail rod. On seeing the plight of Bethany Veney, Miss Lucy tries to manumit Bethany Veney and requests a gentleman from Ohio to take Bethany Veney to the Free States. On hearing this David Kibbler and other people warns Miss Lucy that these gentlemen from the North never keep their promises. Bethany Veney at times imagines how her life will have been if she is set free at that age. Even Miss Lucy

does not keep up her promise. Miss Lucy bequeaths Bethany Veney to her nephew through a will.

David Kibbler's brother and sister, Jerry Kibbler and Sally get religion. They set up a schoolhouse to teach religion to others. Bethany Veney on few occasions accompanies Miss Lucy to such meetings. Bethany Veney is affected by the tender voice and solemnity in which the minister sang the hymn. Master Jerry and Miss Sally are happy to see Bethany Veney everyday night for prayer. David Kibbler is not happy and so he sends Bethany Veney to old Mr. Levers a few miles away with an intention to prevent her from religious meetings.

One day Bethany Veney decides to walk on her knees to the church till she comes before Master David Kibbler. After seeing the position in which she is, David Kibbler says nothing and allows her to the religious meetings. She decides to join the church and asks her master's permission, to which David Kibbler just comments that, "I don't care. If that's your way of getting to heaven, I don't care. I only wish you are all there." (Veney 9)

Years roll on to Bethany Veney in slavery. A slave by name Jerry property of Master Jonas Mansfield proposes to Bethany Veney. She is baptized and wants her marriage to be performed by a minister. But it is strange for the slave masters to see slaves' marriage done by a minister. So slaves are asked to marry just like that, without any formality what so ever. David Kibbler mocks at this, "No matter for that, if you want Bett, and she wants you, that's the whole of it". (Veney 10)

Bethany Veney's marriage takes place on one fine day when Jerry brings a peddler who is willing to perform their marriage. She requests the minister not to make them promise that they will be together all their life, because slaves cannot keep up their promises as their life does not belong to them.

A slave trader by name Frank White purchases Jerry and sells him in the slaves market. Little later Bethany Veney becomes mother to a girl child. She wishes death to herself and her child than to live. She knows that no mother possess the power to protect her child. She feels that the unbridled acts of the slaveholders are cruel and their lust is uncontrollable as the laws are in favour of white people:

Feels that the law holds over her no protecting arm, it is not strange that, rude and uncultured as I was, I felt all this, and would have been glad if we could have died together there and then. (Veney 17)

Miss Lucy advises Bethany Veney to find someone who can purchase her. On her advice Bethany Veney works for John Prince for a couple of weeks. At the end of her stay, Bethany Veney asks John Prince that if he is planning to buy her and her child he shall feed them well.

Bethany Veney and her child Charlotte have a great time with a kind Master John Prince and his wife. One day after several years she is surprised with the news that she is sold to David McCoy who once separated her from her husband Jerry. Damian Pargas mentions that forced separation of slaves from family members have shattering effect on slaves and that slaveholders knows it:

Whatever their desperately confused and contradictory reasoning, Slaveholders knew that slaves usually viewed the prospect of forced removal as catastrophic. (Pargas 59)

David McCoy makes the purchase to make a lot of money by selling Bethany Veney at Richmond because she is known to many as a faithful servant. Bethany Veney describes the efforts of slave holders at the auction:

It was to array such poor creatures as we in the gaudiest and most striking attire conceivable, that, when placed upon the auction stand, we should attract the attention of all the present, if not in one way, why, in another. (Veney 20)

Veney, when put upon the stage for sale, shocks the Doctor by showing him her coated tongue. When potential buyers ask her questions she answers impolitely. She does it intentionally to escape the sale. Damian Pargas discusses that slaveholders are selective while purchasing slaves from slave markets:

Dejected and morose specimens hardly stood a chance of being sold quickly.... (Pargas 105)

David McCoy brings her back to Luray. He decides to work with free Negroes on the pike. Rosemarijn Hoefte and Jean Jacques Vrij, talks about how these free blacks emerged:

The majority of free blacks and coloreds were former slaves who had benefited from manumission. (Gaspar 148)

David McCoy takes Bethany Veney intending to prepare food for the free Negroes. One of the free negros is Frank Veney who helps her by bringing water from the spring. Bethany Veney explains that after losing Jerry, her first husband, it is on Frank, she has a soft corner and he becomes her second husband.

After a gap of four years, David McCoy returns to Luray. Here David McCoy permittes Bethany Veney to hire her time with the condition that she shall pay thirty dollars a year. Rosemarijn Hoefte and Jean Jacques Vrij, observe that:

Owners who had more slaves than they actually needed in their households or businesses often compelled them to earn a living. Every week they handed over a fixed amount in cash to their masters. (Gaspar 152)

Bethany Veney's narrative does not present every detail. Her narrative is written in 1889 though she is manumitted in the year 1858. McCarthy reasons out why Bethany Veney leaves out many details:

If Veney, for example, does not tell us all that we want to know, that is not necessarily a sign of failure. A mass of detail does not create a life: our historical headnotes show how much was not included. A person is created by selecting and shaping a whole out of the evidence, a whole that is directed towards a specific end, a particular audience. (McCarthy xlix-l)

Bethany Veney gets a child with Frank Veney by name Joe. She rents a little house at Dry Run; it is near the mountain which is rich in copper mineral. One day Lorenze Prince comes to her and tells her that two gentlemen from northern states have come to start the copper mining again. He asks Bethany Veney, if she is willing to keep the house for them. She rejects at first

but later agrees as she is going to be paid one and a half dollars a week. The two gentlemen are Mr. G. J. Adams and his companion Mr. J. Butterworth. She never thought that hard work at the Stony Man copper mining will set her free, the life she always dreams for:

... a life where I should need no pass written by a human hand to ensure my safety as I went from place to place, but where the stamp of my humanity, imprinted by the Infinite Father of all, should be an all-sufficient guarantee in every emergency. (Veney 23)

A brief period Mr. Adams and Mr. Butterworth go to their hometown and come back to the Stony Man for mining again. One night Bethany Veney is at Mr. Aulman's store in the village. Old Mr. Aulman enquires Bethany Veney about the number of slaves owned by David McCoy. That struck her like an earthquake and she thinks David McCoy must be in debts. Damian Pargas agrees that slaves are aware of the financial conditions of their masters:

...bonds people were generally all too aware of the financial state of affairs on their plantations and of the consequences thereof for their domestic arrangements. (Pargas 59)

Bethany Veney will soon be separated from her little boy any moment by sale. After a few days Bethany Veney is surprised when Mr. Adams decides to purchase her and her son from David McCoy. She thinks that Miss Sara Brown wife of Mr. Adams may have arranged money to bring Bethany Veney to the North. Mr. Adams and Mr. Butterworth stopped work at the mining and are heading home along with Bethany Veney and her son. They tell her that they will come back after a couple of months but that does not happen. Before they set off to the North, John Brown the abolitionist invades Virginia. After that, the American Civil War breaks out. Mr. Adams takes her to his house; Mrs. Adams approach towards Bethany Veney is friendly. Bethany Veney feels at home at once, "At any rate, she made me feel that I was with friends". (Veney 27) She is happy for her wildest dreams have come true. Bethany Veney states that:

I was in a land where, by its laws, I had the same right to myself that any other woman had. No jailer could take me to prison, and

sell me at auction to the highest bidder. My boy was my own, and no one could take him from me. (Veney 27)

The little communication that she is having with her relations at Luray stopped with the Civil War. Bethany Veney makes friends with both whites and African Americans in the North. Bethany Veney is struck with tragedy, the death of her son Joe due to sickness. The Civil War ends and after confirming that it is safe to go to the South, Bethany Veney goes to Luray. Bethany Veney finds her daughter who is now married and blessed with a child. She then meets her old masters David McCoy and David Kibbler who enquire her about life in the North. She is sad to see her mistress Miss Lucy who is paralyzed. She gifts a pair of clothes and shoes to Miss Lucy. Bethany Veney heads to the North along with her daughter, son-in-law and her grandchild. She altogether makes three journeys to the South and brings nearly sixteen of her relatives to the North. People always help her when she is in need. She is always grateful to God:

I have great reason to speak well of my fellow-men and to be most thankful to the overruling Providence that brought me up out of the “house of bondage”. (Veney 31)

Bethany Veney shares an interesting account of her old master David McCoy in the North. One day Bethany Veney is asked to meet Mrs. Warner and she goes out without wasting much time. She is surprised to see her old Master David McCoy there. It is David McCoy who separated Jerry from her and also takes her to Richmond to auction her in the slave market. After talking for some time he invites Bethany Veney to Waverley House Office where he stays. She meets him at Waverley House Office and they talk for a very long time. Bethany Veney invites him to dine at her place the next day. David McCoy comes to her place and is happy with the food. Before leaving he asks Bethany Veney about the pair of kid gloves she wore when she came to Luray. He expresses his desire to buy one from the shop. She goes along with McCoy and buys a pair of kid gloves:

...I had the pleasure of paying for them, and then presenting them to him, as a remembrance of his visit to the north, as well as of me. I never saw him again, for it was not long after that he died. (Veney 31)

Later Bethany Veney comes to know that both her old masters David McCoy and David Kibbler pass away. She later receives her Methodist friend Jerry Kibbler who lives with them for many days. Jerry Kibbler returns to the South with the hospitality of the North. He always regrets that the South for being blind to human rights and development. Bethany Veney says her life is filled with many experiences with both sad and happy. She serves both Mr. and Mrs. Adams at their dying bed. Bethany Veney's gratitude towards Mr. Adams:

His recognition of my poor service gladdens me now, for I can never express the satisfaction it gave me to minister to his wants. For I was a stranger, and he took me in: I had fallen amongst thieves, and he had rescued me. (Veney 32)

Bethany Veney has the family of her daughter occupying the next house which is also owned by her. She has three grandchildren who are as free as the white child. Bethany Veney concludes her narrative:

My back is not so straight not so strong, my sight is not so clear, nor my limbs so nimble as they once were; but I am still ready and glad to do whatsoever my hand findeth to do, waiting only for the call to "come up higher". (Veney 32-33)

Bethany Veney agrees that she is not as strong as she once was. At seventy-four years of age, she is waiting for the call from the Almighty. She trusts God so much that, it is her faith that makes her life better and gets freedom much before the American Civil War.

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