

Spring 1987

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Recommended Citation

Poole, Stafford C.M. (1987) "The Legend of Jane Renfro," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol8/iss1/3>

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The Legend of Jane Renfro

by
Stafford Poole, C.M.

When speaking of local slaveholding in their book *Cape Girardeau: Biography of a City*, Snider and Collins relate the following anecdote.

The story is told of one famous slave trial held here. Saint Vincent's College was planning to sell Jane Renfrow [sic] 'down the river' because it no longer needed her services. One consequence of the trial was a ruling by the Pope that no Catholic institution could sell a slave. The slave should be set free or kept as long as he or she should live.¹

The authors gave no source for the story but it was apparently based on a long-standing oral tradition. A somewhat different account, however, was given in the *Cape Girardeau Southeast Missourian* for Monday, 16 July 1928, on the occasion of Jane Renfro's death.

Cape Negro Woman Freed from Slavery By Pope Succumbs

Mrs. Jane Renfro, 90 years old, a negro woman who was born into slavery and freed prior to the Civil War by order of the Pope, died suddenly at 5 a.m. today at Briarwood, the C. G. Juden country home on the Bloomfield Road... Despite her advanced age, the woman was a tireless worker and on the day before her death carried out her customary duties. From birth until freed by papal decree, she was the property of Saint Vincent's Catholic College here and was born at the college. When the order of the Pope was issued freeing all the slaves owned by Catholic institutions, she, like many others of the slaves, was placed in a Catholic family, living for a number of years with the Burns family...

¹Felix Eugene Snider and Earl Augustus Collins, *Cape Girardeau: Biography of a City* (Cape Girardeau, Missouri, 1956), 69. I wish to express my appreciation to Father John Rybolt, C.M., for his help in researching this article.

The two accounts agree in stating that Jane Renfro had been a slave of Saint Vincent's College and that she was freed through some kind of papal intervention. The Snider-Collins history says that the intervention came about as the result of a suit for freedom and that the papal prohibition was concerned primarily with the sale of slaves. The obituary does not mention the suit but merely a papal order freeing all slaves held by Catholic institutions.

How true is this tradition? An examination of Vincentian slaveholding patterns and of other pertinent sources leads to the inescapable conclusion that the story of Jane Renfro's papal emancipation is a legend.

Saint Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, was founded in stages between 1837 and 1843 by priests of the Vincentian Community. That community had first come to the United States in 1816 at the invitation of Louis William Valentine Dubourg, the bishop of Louisiana, and two years later had founded Saint Mary's Seminary at the Barrens Settlement, now Perryville, Missouri.² The college was a natural extension of the seminary, for the latter had also functioned as a lay college. The new foundation was intended to handle the instruction of lay students while Saint Mary's would concentrate exclusively on the education of future priests.

There were slaves connected with Saint Vincent's College from its earliest beginnings. In 1836 a Vincentian lay brother, Daniel Harrington, was sent to Cape Girardeau to begin work on the farmlands that were to support Saint Vincent's Male Academy, the predecessor of Saint Vincent's College. He was

²Stafford Poole, C.M., "The Founding of Missouri's First College: Saint Mary's of the Barrens, 1815-1818," *Missouri Historical Review*, LXV (October 1970), 1-22.

instructed to stop at Brazeau in Perry County in order to purchase slaves for the farm. When Saint Vincent's College opened in 1842 it was a slaveholding institution in its own right, though never on the scale of Saint Mary's Seminary.³

If the age given in Jane Renfro's obituary is accurate (and that may be questionable), she was born about 1837/1838. The 1850 and 1860 federal censuses for Cape Girardeau County offer the possibility that she was even older, having been born about 1832. If, however, the obituary is correct in stating that she was born at Saint Vincent's College, a much later date would be indicated. The Missouri state census of 1876 records only that she was between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five. The 1900 federal census lists her birthday as unknown. Though she was born and raised a Catholic, there is no record of her in any of the Catholic Church records of Cape Girardeau. Probably her religious obligations were fulfilled at Saint Vincent's College. It can be surmised that Jane Renfro did not have an accurate idea of her own age.

Did Jane Renfro sue for her freedom? The court records of Cape Girardeau County in Jackson, Missouri, contain no mention of any suit filed against Saint Vincent's College or any of its superiors by a slave seeking to gain freedom or avoid sale. Such suits can be found in other court records. Thus, for example, the Saint Louis Circuit Court has records of two suits for freedom filed against Bishop Joseph Rosati, C.M., of Saint Louis, one in 1837, the other in 1840.⁴

Was there a direct papal intervention? Throughout the

³In 1841 the slaves were described as old and sickly. John Brands to John Timon, 1 February 1841, Archives of Notre Dame University, Vincentian Collection, Box 5, unnumbered.

⁴Archives, Saint Louis Circuit Court, 4-23-40-392; 4-27-40-12-318; 5-56-46-10-460; 7-11-36-8-244.

nineteenth century the church in the United States was under the authority of a Roman commission called the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, more commonly known as Propaganda. The published calendar of its papers pertaining to the American church contain no reference to any such papal decision, either in general or in a particular case.⁵ In 1839, it is true, Pope Gregory XVI issued a condemnation of the international slave trade, *In Supremo Apostolatus Fastigio*, that was so sweeping in its terms that some southern bishops felt obliged to defend it against the charge of abolitionism. It did not, however, free a single slave in the United States.⁶

The tradition of Jane Renfro's papal emancipation collapses entirely on a close examination of how the Vincentian Community, including Saint Vincent's College, actually did lose its slaves. In 1840 Father John Timon, C.M., the provincial superior, initiated a policy of phasing out slaveholding by all Vincentians and their institutions.⁷ Those slaves who could no longer be active workers were to be kept by the institutions owning them. The others were to be sold to good Catholic families. This policy was quickly implemented in the years 1840 through 1845.

At the time that the policy was undertaken, Jane Renfro was, at most, no more than a child. It would have been impossible for her to have filed suit to avoid sale. Nor would it

⁵Finbar Kenneally, O.F.M., ed., *United States Documents in the Propaganda Archives: A Calendar* (Washington, D.C., 1966), 7 volumes.

⁶A summary of the brief and the reaction to it can be found in Joseph D. Brockhage, *Francis Patrick Kenrick's Opinion on Slavery* (Washington, D.C., 1955), 127-29.

⁷Timon to Jean-Baptiste Étienne, 1 August 1840, original in the Archives of the Curia Generalizia della Missione, Rome.

have been necessary. In at least one known case, when a slave refused to be sold away from Saint Mary's Seminary, the Vincentian superiors acquiesced.⁸ Vincentian owned slaves were sold locally, not out of state, and so it is most improbable that she was in danger of being sold "down the river." As a matter of fact none of the slaves owned by the Vincentians was freed, not even after 1840. They were all sold to local Catholic families. Wes Lee, a former slave who lived in Cape Girardeau in the 1930s, recalled "Mammy's name was 'Lizabeth and old mastuh bought her from de Catholic priests."⁹ Of special significance is the fact that the buyer of Lee's mother was Peter Burns.

In all probability, Jane Renfro was sold to or placed with a Catholic family, most likely the Burns, as part of the implementation of Timon's policy. The fact that it occurred in the wake of the furor caused by the brief of Gregory XVI could have created an association of her change of status with the papal pronouncement. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*. In the course of time this could have given rise to the legend that Jane Renfro had been freed by the direct order of the Pope.

⁸The slave's name was Clement. He and his wife later accompanied Bishop John Mary Odin, C.M., to Galveston (1847). Burlando to Timon, 4 August 1841, Archives of the University of Notre Dame, Vincentian Collection, Box 5, no. 8692; Ralph Bayard, C.M., *Lone-Star Vanguard: The Catholic Reoccupation of Texas* (Saint Louis, 1945), 383-84.

⁹George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn., 1971), 11:227.

What is sorrow, what is death? They are but sounds when at peace with Jesus.

Mother Seton



We must consider great whatever is done for God and be persuaded that there are no lowly duties in his house; consequently, the least of them when entrusted to us are still too honorable for us.

Saint Vincent de Paul



The perfection of love consists not in ecstasies, but in faithfully fulfilling the will of God.

Saint Vincent de Paul