BETSEY STOCKTON: A HISTORY STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Historical researchers quickly learn that the evidence they seek is often scarce, partial, misleading; and that it is always inconclusive. History-recorded is never as complete as history-lived. Piecing historical fragments together to form a whole personality or a whole series of events is marked by a sense of incompleteness, a feeling which persists even when all the "facts" are at hand. How do we mute our personal reactions to historical evidence in order to let the evidence speak for itself? Do we dare interpret and give significance to acts which originate in the intricate motives of a person no longer able to rebut or expand upon the conclusions we reach? And, if time is the only true touchstone, which of the many strata of that touchstone should we use to evaluate human events?

"Particularly it is difficult to write about women who lived long ago. [T]he history of women is much more complicated than the history of men, for male roles are free of the complexities that a subordinate position necessitates. A man — whether bachelor or father, widower or gentleman — is always primarily a man. A woman, on the other hand, is defined by the role she plays."

Yet, recognizing the difficulties and limitations of historians in general, and especially of writers of women's history, we researchers continue our work, compelled by complex forces toward truths which try to elude us. We try to cope honestly with our personal reactions and biases; properly handled, they need not violate the integrity of the history we write.

On a research subject such as Betsey Stockton's life in Hawaii and her later work in education on the Mainland United States, the first level of factual evidence is easily accessible. The Hawaiian Mission Children's Society lists the following information in its 1969 Missionary Album:

"Betsey Stockton, a black woman born in slavery around 1798, Princeton, N.J., arrived in Honolulu with the second company of missionaries on the ship, "Thames," April 27, 1823. Before her journey, Betsey lived with the family of the Rev. Dr. Green, president of Princeton College. She had access to the family library, read extensively, qualified as a school teacher, and took charge of domestic concerns in the Green household.

"Expressing a strong desire to serve in a mission, she was accepted by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and attached to the family of the Rev. and Mrs. Charles S. Stewart. Stationed with the Stewarts in Lahaina, Maui, Betsey conducted a school for Hawaiian commoners, a school which lasted until October 17, 1825, when the Stewarts and Betsey returned home. Betsey worked in Philadelphia, Canada, and at Princeton. She died in Princeton, on the 24th of October, 1865, but was buried in Cooperstown, New York, with the Stewart family."

Based on this factual evidence, immediate and inferential questions arise. Why was a black woman, born in slavery, sent with a group of missionaries to the Sandwich Islands? What were her qualifications and what duties did she assume? What was her status in the mission — at a time when slavery was an acceptable form of human relationship?

And, what about Betsey's school? Was it the first school for Hawaiian commoners? Where was it held and what was its curriculum? Did the education of commoners differ from the education of the elite chiefly class, the ali'i?

Provocative questions, which provided only partial answers and led to even more provocative questions!

The second level of factual data, in Betsey's case, was again readily accessible. Thomas French, in The Missionary Whaleship, a 1961
book which describes the second company and its voyage, devotes a chapter to Betsey, the most complete treatment of her life written so far. French bases his description on unpublished letters found at the time of his writing in the archives of the ABCFM, photostatic copies of which he purchased from the Houghton Library at Harvard University; on newspapers, unpublished diaries and correspondence housed with the New York Historical Society and also with Fenimore House in Cooperstown; and on the Reverend Stewart’s A Residence in the Sandwich Islands.

French adds the following facts about Betsey’s life: Betsey was given by her owner, Robert Stockton, to his daughter, who married the Reverend Ashbel Green. Betsey lived in the Green home, with the exception of four years spent with the Reverend Nathaniel Todd, Rev. Green’s nephew. Betsey, according to the Rev. Green, showed no “piety . . . or permanent seriousness” throughout most of her early adolescence. She was “wild and thoughtless, if not vicious.” It was to “save her from the snares and temptations of the city” that she was sent to the country to live with the Rev. Todd. Betsey returned to the Greens’ in 1816 and was publicly baptized in the Presbyterian Church at Princeton during the winter of 1817-1818. She was freed by the Greens about this time.

Betsey had often expressed the wish to go on a mission, with Africa her choice of destination. When she learned that the Rev. Stewart, who was about to be married, had applied for service with the Sandwich Island Mission, she “voluntarily and unsolicited, sought admission (to his family), as a humble friend and assistant.” Shortly thereafter, Stewart wrote to the ABCFM asking permission to have Betsey join him should he be accepted as part of the mission. His request, buttressed by letters of recommendation for Betsey from the Rev. Green and Mr. Michael Osborn of the Theological Seminary at Princeton, was approved.

Because of Mrs. Stewart’s continued ill health during her two years in the Sandwich Islands, Betsey returned with the Stewart family to Cooperstown, where Mrs. Stewart had lived before her marriage. According to French, Betsey remained with the family for the next ten years; after Mrs. Stewart’s death (in 1830), “Aunt Betsey” cared for the three Stewart children and became “the assiduous and unwearied attendant and pious instructor of the motherless children.”

French says that Betsey left Cooperstown about 1836-1837 to become a teacher in an infant school in Philadelphia, where “her labors were so satisfactory as to lead to an invitation from an English missionary among the Indians of Canada, to visit for some months with them, to introduce and establish the same mode of instruction in the field of their labors.” From 1840-1865, she “held an important position of usefulness as a teacher under the patronage of the State (N.J.), of a large school for people of her own color in her native town.”

After her death, The Freeman’s Journal of Cooperstown, which French uses as a source, gave an account of her life. Of the period Betsey lived in the Sandwich Islands, the journal stated that although her contributions to the Stewart household were invaluable, her “labors and her influence were . . . by no means limited to their household. The facility with which she acquired the native language was such as to enable her soon to exercise the influence of a missionary in daily intercourse with the natives, and it was her privilege to open and long conduct the first school ever established among the common people of the Islands.”

The journal, in describing her school in Princeton, continued its eulogy to Betsey: “The superintendent and visitors of the public schools unhesitatingly state that, in their inspections, they found no school better trained, better instructed, or with evidence of greater success than hers.”

Betsey’s hope, according to the journal, was to be buried with the Stewarts at Lakewood. The Stewart family erected a tombstone which reads:

The grave of
BETSEY STOCKTON
a native of Princeton N.J.
where she died
Oct. 24, 1865,
Aged 67 years
Of African blood and born in slavery she became fitted by education and divine grace, for a life of great usefulness, for many years was a valued missionary at the Sandwich Islands in the family of Rev. C.S. Stewart, and afterwards till her death, a popular and able Principal of Public schools in Philadelphia & Princeton honored and beloved by a large circle of Christian Friends.9
This second level of factual data answers some questions, but Betsey’s exact status in the mission is not yet clarified; nor is there yet any information about the nature of her school. But intriguing additional questions emerge. Was a black woman really principal of a state-supported school for blacks in the pre-Civil War period? Even in Massachusetts, center of the common school movement, was there not resistance on the part of districts to support public education for whites during this time?

Several other inferential questions and reactions arise. The Rev. Dr. Green assumes interesting dimensions. With a charity limited by the dour tenets of his faith, he frees Betsey, but only after she experiences a “saving change of heart.”10 To save her, he sends young Betsey away from the “city” of Princeton out of the same rigid, righteous sense of duty which he brings to his task of saving the wild young men at Nassau Hall, Princeton, apparently no small task.

“Vicious”, we find, was a common adjective to Rev. Green, who took his duties seriously. For example, he once experimented with a plan of inviting eight undergraduates at a time to his home for dinner. His conclusion was that it was not an effective way to deal with the students’ natural depravity. “I found that it had but little effect in reclaiming the vicious.”11 Of Princeton’s six student rebellions between 1800 and 1830, he wrote: “... the true causes of all these enormities are to be found nowhere else but in the fixed, irreconcilable and deadly hostility ... to the whole system established in this college ... , a system of diligent study, of guarded moral conduct and of reasonable attention to religious duty.”12 President Green was determined to carry out his tasks responsibly, feeling gratitude when things went somewhat well: “This morning the Faculty admonished four students and dismissed two. ... I took the examination of the senior class on belles lettres and wrote letters to the parents of the two dismissed students. The Faculty met in the evening and a pistol was fired at the door of one of the tutors. I ought to be very thankful to God for his support this day.”13

From his own description, this college president had a thankless task. His view of the young, though perhaps accurate, is less than generous. If his is the only negative comment on Betsey (when she was but fourteen), should the historian discount it?

Where was Betsey first exposed to the Hawaiian language? Could there have been any real link between her and students from Hawaii at the ABCFM school in Cornwall, Connecticut? Did Betsey ever teach the ali‘i? Or, in that day of clearly delineated gradations among the saved and the damned, the black and the white, male and female, was she considered unequal to the same tasks undertaken by the other missionaries?

The third level of research regarding Betsey Stockton consisted of the following steps: (1) finding and checking original documents or copies of documents used by French in his work; (2) uncovering other original material; (3) dealing with the historian’s tasks of selection, arrangement, and interpretation in an attempt to give a fair, balanced treatment to the materials at hand.

The Hawaii State Archives and Library house two newspaper articles pertaining to Betsey: the Pacific Commercial Advertiser, May 12, 1906, carries a reprint from The Press of Princeton, N.J., which describes services at the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church dedicating a tablet to Betsey’s memory; the Honolulu Advertiser, February 11, 1947, includes a brief article on Betsey.

The Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society yielded a great deal of original information. Besides the letters which French alludes to and quotes from in his chapter (letters from Osborn and Green to Evarts), other papers are available in the Mission Library:

• a December 25, 1824 letter from Betsey to Mr. Chamberlain written after her return to Lahaina from Honolulu, where she met with Chamberlain to discuss some matters;
• an October 27, 1899 letter written by Charles Seaforth Stewart, son of the Rev. C.S. Stewart, to Ann Chamberlain, Levi Chamberlain’s daughter, portions of which describe Betsey’s activities upon return to the Mainland and the attempts, after her death, to have a tablet cast at Princeton and placed in Hawaii;
• various correspondence and notes regarding the unsuccessful attempt to place the tablet at Lahaina (the same tablet was later placed in Princeton during the service mentioned above).

Finally, after hours of sifting through books, microfilms, and original papers, came the moment which researchers regard as a prize; that moment which makes all the tedious work worthwhile, which suddenly forges isolated details together and covers them with a meaning, like a patina
of burnished gold. The prize, in this case, found at the Mission Library, was a remarkable November 18, 1822 agreement signed by Betsey, the Rev. Stewart, and the Rev. Dr. Green, sent to Levi Chamberlain, Superintendent of Secular Affairs for the Mission in Honolulu. (French alludes to reports about this document but apparently was unable to find it in its original form.)

The agreement, concerning Betsey’s relationship to the mission, was written because “it is thought that it may be useful, as there is something peculiar in her case, to specify in writing the views of the undersigned in regard to her, and the part which she is to act in the sacred work in which she is to be engaged.” After stating that Betsey was to be under the direction of the ABCFM and assigned to the Stewart family, the agreement reads: “In this family, she is to be regarded and treated neither as an equal nor as a servant — but as a humble Christian friend, embarked in the great enterprise of endeavoring to ameliorate the condition of the heathen . . . .” Although she was to lighten Mrs. Stewart’s duties, particularly with respect to “the more laborious part of domestic concerns,” the document states that she is not to be called upon for menial work “more than any other member of the mission, or this might manifestly render her life servile, and prevent her being employed as a teacher of a school, for which it is hoped that she will be found qualified.” The agreement ends with the statement that Betsey and the Stewarts could, with the approval of the ABCFM, decide to separate.14

In its attempt to clarify Betsey’s position, the 1822 agreement merely places her in limbo, to be treated neither as a servant nor as an equal. Betsey is to assume no greater share of menial work than any other missionary, yet she is assigned the heavier work in the Stewart household. Does the ambiguous language of the agreement of 1822 reflect the ambivalent missionary thought about Betsey? Anti-slavery missionaries to the Sandwich Islands, later, in the 1830’s and 1840’s, resigned in protest against the fact that the ABCFM was supported in part by monies from slave states.15 How do we explain the presence of a black ex-slave in a mission group?

Once in Lahaina, Betsey had to wait a while before she could open her school. The Rev. Stewart, in his Journal, wrote on June 2, 1823, that while schools for the Hawaiian chiefs and a few of “the particular favorites” had commenced, the rulers had opposed the instruction of the common people in reading and writing, saying, “If the palapala — letters — is good, we wish to possess it first ourselves; if it is bad, we do not intend our subjects to know the evil of it.” He added that the commoners were only given religious instruction and that no more than two or three hundred Hawaiians had learned or were learning to read and write, fifty of them then in the school at Lahaina.16

His August 20, 1824, entry states that for some time the chiefs had decided to extend instruction in reading and writing to the whole population “and have only been waiting for books and an increase in the number of suitably qualified native teachers, to put the resolution, as far as practicable, into effect.” Learning of this, the maka-ainana, or commoners, of Lahaina applied for instruction, “and the first school, consisting of about thirty individuals, ever formed among that class of people, has, within a few days, been established in our enclosure, under the superintendence of B[etsey], who is quite familiar with the native tongue.”17

Betsey’s December 25, 1824 letter to Mr. Chamberlain shows that life was not without trouble and loneliness for her. Apparently, Betsey was called to Honolulu to discuss with Mr. Chamberlain some “remissness” in her behavior. Upon her return to Lahaina she wrote:

“I take my pen to redeem my character from a charge which I deserve should be brought against me; . . . I have indeed found that it is an evil and a bitter thing to depart from the living God. I thought of my remissness in duty, my want of faith and my constant [sic] inclination to sin, and the clouds gathered thick and black around me; it was then that I felt the want of some Christian friend in whom I could confide, but God has seen fit to deny me this privilege [sic].”18

Betsey ends her letter with a reference to Charles Seaforth, born to the Stewarts on the “Thames” a few days outside Honolulu Harbor. “My poor Charles has been sick for four weeks past, he is something better but very thin.”19

The third level of information answers some questions and leads to more tantalizing inferences. Is it any wonder that Betsey is lonely, without the supportive intimacy that only a friendship of equals can provide? Is Betsey’s tenuous status in the mission a reflection of values in Hawaii, a reflection of the missionary stance, or a combination of both? How do we explain Betsey’s educational attainments at a time
when all women were denied formal schooling in higher education? When all women were denied formal schooling in higher education?20

In 1899, "my poor Charles" writes to Ann Chamberlain. His letter is interesting in that it suggests a much different time pattern to Betsey's activities than that which French gives, a pattern which the 1906 article in The Press verifies: that is, Betsey conducted an infant school in Philadelphia in 1827 and part of 1828; she returned to Mrs. Stewart in 1828 and was sent the following year, 1829, to Canada to organize a school among the Indians; in 1830, she again joined Mrs. Stewart, who died in the same year; Betsey cared for the Stewart children for the next five years (1830-1835), moving them to Princeton in 1833 to be among their father's friends when Mr. Stewart, then a Naval Chaplain, went to sea; Betsey opened her school (later to become Witherspoon Street Colored School) around 1835 and ran it until her death thirty years later.

Betsey never married. The Press quotes a General Woodhull, who is identified only as speaker on behalf of donors of the tablet placed at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church. Woodhull, who gleaned his dedication remarks from the memories of her friends, says that to the end of her days, Betsey regarded the Stewart children as her children. The Stewart children visited her in Princeton whenever they could. Betsey nursed and cared for them when they were adults as when they were infants.

Woodhull's remarks give clarity to Betsey's later years:

"Although respected and welcome among the better white families, and frequently yielding them needed service of a higher grade, her daily work was that of a teacher of the colored youth and her example and counsel were efficient among the colored adults as well. In my youth I know that Aunt Betsey had the respect and regard of the whole town.... She lived in a one-story white cottage on a lot near the northeast corner of Green and Witherspoon, now built upon. The grounds and building were always neat and attractive and the interior of the house was a model of cleanliness and order."21

The Press goes on to quote comments read for the Rev. Lewis W. Mudge, absent because of pastoral duties. After describing the respect accorded her by the white community, Mudge elaborates on the feelings her own people held for her:

"Among her own people she moved a queen and her word was law. I still have her picture, given to me by herself, with her turban as she always wore it, her strong but placid face and her portly form. Her manner was deliberate and dignified and by the younger people she was both loved and feared. Among the older people her influence was supreme. The colored people are almost proverbially suspicious and jealous, but everybody trusted Aunt Betsey."22

Interpretation of historical facts is a delicate and difficult task. Especially is it so when there is little information, as there is here. However, on the basis of available material, two characteristics appear dominant in Betsey: first, a striking intelligence and curiosity; second, a devotion to and belief in education, especially in education for the Black.
There is ample evidence to justify the first conclusion. Mr. Osborn, in writing his letter of recommendation for Betsey, describes the curricula she mastered in his Sabbath School: "Her recitations have chiefly been from S. Scriptures, the larger catechism, Jewish antiquities, and sacred geography. She has a larger acquaintance with sacred history and the mosaic institutions than almost any ordinary person old or young, I have ever known. (By ordinary persons you will understand me to mean such as are not clergymen or candidates for the ministry.)" He goes on to give examples of her "love of study" and the understanding gained through it. Even the Rev. Dr. Green, who "did not favor educating his servants in books," recognized Betsey's abilities and allowed his sons to help her in her studies. He writes that Betsey learned English grammar, literature, composition, as well as arithmetic. He adds: "There is no kind of work in a family at which she is not very expert. She is an excellent nurse. But I think her well qualified for higher employment than domestic drudgery."

The Rev. Mudge gives further evidence as to the second conclusion. He says that Betsey did not confine her interest to the education of young colored children: she was also very interested in adult education for her people. At her urging, the Rev. Mudge started a night school for colored young men and women. The school was well attended and held in the building owned, at the time of the dedication services, by the Presbyterian parsonage. For this school, Betsey and Mr. Mudge were able to enlist the services of the College and Seminary teachers at Princeton.

Study of available material leads to the inescapable conclusion that Betsey was an uncommon woman for her time. In spite of her subordinate position many times over — as slave, as domestic, as woman, as unmarried Negro woman — she rises beyond these restrictions to assume many roles in the lives of many people: nurse, teacher, principal, surrogate mother, example to her community.

Many questions remain about Betsey Stockton, questions which may be answered by further research outside of Hawai‘i. There is still about her a sense of incompleteness — a sense of trying to read a book when some of the pages are torn out, or of trying to sing a song when some of the words are forgotten. Here is a curious and indeed "peculiar" life.

Footnotes

4The Freeman's Journal (Cooperstown, N.Y., November 3, 1865), as quoted by French, p. 114.
5Ibid., p. 116.
6Ibid., p. 117.
7Ibid.
8Ibid., p. 118.
9Ibid.
10Letter from Ashbel Green to Jeremiah Evarts, September 3, 1821.
12Ibid., p. 169, as quoted on p. 98.
13Ibid., p. 157, as quoted on p. 172.
14Agreement signed by Betsey Stockton, C.S. Stewart, and Ashbel Green; sent to Levi Chamberlain, November 18, 1822.
17Ibid., p. 197.
18Letter from Betsey Stockton to Levi Chamberlain, December 25, 1824.
19Ibid.
20The first experiment in college education for women was the Georgia Female College at Macon, charted in 1836 and opened in 1839. (Thomas Woody, A History of Women's Education in the United States, New York, 1929, I, 137, as quoted by Frederick Rudolph, The American College and University, New York, 1962, 311.)
22Ibid.
23Letter from Michael Osborn to Jeremiah Evarts, September 6, 1821.
24"Hawaii Once Had A Negro Missionary," op. cit.
25Letter from Ashbel Green to Jeremiah Evarts, September 3, 1821.
26"Hawaii Once Had A Negro Missionary," op. cit.

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