Rufina 🔓

(c. 1820s–?),

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an African woman illegally enslaved twice, first in Africa and then in Uruguay. Although it cannot be known precisely, it is likely that Rufina was born between 1820 and 1825, and that she gave birth to a daughter, Francisca, when she was between 15 and 20 years of age. After being kidnapped in northern Uruguay and brought to the Brazilian Empire, she succeeded in bringing her case to the provincial president of Rio Grande do Sul, who ruled for her release and her return to Uruguay.

In March 1854, Rufina, a free African Mina woman residing in Passo de Peira (near the Río Negro in Tacuarembó, Uruguay, on the border with Brazil) was kidnapped along with her partner, Matheus, also a free African Mina, and four of their children: Francisca (14 years old), Maria do Pilar and Pantaleão (ages unknown), and a newborn, Brum. Her other two children, Ignácio and Catharina (ages unknown), were with a neighbor at the time of her abduction. Rufina and the others were taken by a group of four men led by Fermiano José de Mello. After walking for a whole night, one of the kidnappers separated from the group, taking Matheus, while the others continued with Rufina and her children.

After three weeks of walking during the night and hiding in the brush during the day, Rufina and her children arrived in Canguçu, where they were delivered to Joaquim da Silva Soares. Two months later, Rufina, Francisca, and Brum were sold to José Laurindo da Costa, while Maria do Pilar and Pantaleão were sold to the city of Piratini.

It is not clear how Rufina managed to reach the police, but somehow while passing through Porto Alegre she caught the attention of the authorities, and she was imprisoned with her two children and her captor, Laurindo José da Costa. The latter was released soon thereafter on the false promise that he would return with his papers of ownership of Rufina. Once Laurindo was gone, Rufina and Francisca told the story of their capture. Rufina explained that she had been a slave of Colonel José Cabral and his wife Francisca, and that she had been freed with the abolition of slavery in Uruguay in 1846.

This would have been the second illegal enslavement of the African Rufina. As Rufina later told the judge, she remembered arriving in Uruguay at a time when slavery was still legal, and it is probable that her arrival in the Americas took place sometime in the early 1830s. As Rufina called herself a Mina, we can believe that she was shipped somewhere off the coast of West Africa, most likely in Lagos (present-day Nigeria), the main exporting port of the region after 1825. This is north of the equator, where the trafficking of slaves had been prohibited since 1815, due to British pressure on Portugal and Spain during the Congress of Vienna.

After 1850, with the prohibition of the Atlantic slave trade to Brazil, bush captains and slave raiders tried to capture and then sell free blacks, including those who resided outside of Brazilian territory. The British were informed by the Uruguayans of a new form of enslavement and human trafficking on the southern border of the Brazilian Empire. Once seized by the police in the province of Rio Grande do Sul, then, Rufina became the subject of intense correspondence between authorities in Uruguay, Brazil, and England.

To prove to the British that the abolition of slavery was being enforced in an exemplary fashion, Brazilian foreign minister Paulino José Soares de Souza (1807–1866) and João Luis Vieira Cansansão de Sinimbu (1810–1906), president of Rio Grande do Sul Province, made every effort to locate Rufina's two sons and to return them to Uruguay. In 1855 the entire family—with the exception of Matheus, who was never found—was returned home.

The story of Rufina is one of dozens of criminal cases of kidnapping and enslavement of free people that occurred on the Brazilian border with Uruguay in the second half of the nineteenth century, mostly in the 1850s and 1860s. But while Rufina was eventually able to return to her home, her case was an exception. Most captured blacks remained slaves in Brazil. Almost all cases ended with the acquittal of the kidnappers by popular jury, which demonstrates the deep roots of slavery in nineteenth-century Brazilian society.

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