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a slave executed for killing her master, was probably born in central Missouri. The names of her parents are unknown. Practically all the information that is known about Celia is taken from court records and newspaper accounts of her trial for the murder in 1855 of Robert Newsom, a farmer and slave-owner in Calloway County, Missouri. Newsom had purchased Celia in neighboring Audrain County, Missouri, some five years earlier. Celia was the only female slave in the Newsom household; the five others included a young boy and four young adult males who herded the livestock and harvested the eight hundred acres of prime land that had helped elevate Robert Newsom to a position “solidly among the ranks of Callaway's residents who were comfortably well-off” (McLaurin, 8). Newsom's wife had died in 1849, and it may have been that he purchased Celia, a cook, to assist his thirty-six-year-old daughter, Virginia, in the management of the household.

It immediately became apparent to Celia, however, that Robert Newsom had purchased her primarily to serve as his concubine. At some point on the forty-mile return journey from Audrain County, Newsom, then seventy years old, raped Celia, who was at that time around only fourteen. Court records indicate that over the next four years Newsom repeatedly forced Celia to have sex with him against her will, and fathered at least one, and possibly both, of the children born to Celia between 1851 and 1854.

Perhaps to keep his liaison secret from his daughters Virginia and Mary, but certainly to provide easy access to his concubine, Newsom provided Celia with her own cabin, a relatively spacious and solid brick structure located a mere sixty paces from his own home. Newsom may have also deliberately separated Celia, the only black woman on the Newsom farm, from her fellow slaves to prevent her from forming friendships or alliances with them. Sometime after the birth of Celia's second child in 1854, however, she began a sexual relationship with one of Newsom's slaves, a man named George. When Celia became pregnant again, in early March of 1855, she did not know whether George or Newsom was the father. George then demanded that Celia abandon Newsom. Such a request may well have appealed to Celia in an ideal world, but, as George must have known, the reality of slavery gave her no such control over her master, or over her own body.

Recognizing that a direct approach to Newsom might jeopardize the lives of her children and George, as well as her own, Celia at first approached Virginia and Mary Newsom in the hope that they could persuade their father to end his sexual advances, at least while she was pregnant and sickly. That undertaking was itself dangerous, since it is unlikely that the sisters would challenge their father, the sole breadwinner in the family. The historical record also suggests that women in slaveholding families were are no less pro-slavery than men, and that there was little gender solidarity between slave-

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owning and slave women, particularly when slave women were engaged in sexual relationships with white men. The Newsom sisters do not appear to have come to Celia's defense, or if they did they failed to persuade their father to leave his female slave alone.

Sometime around 23 June 1855 Celia, who had been poorly throughout her pregnancy, confronted Newsom, begging him to leave her alone. When Newsom refused and promised to return to her cabin later that night, Celia warned him that she would resist his advances, and later found a large stick, "about as large as the upper part of a Windsor chair, but not as long," with which to defend herself (McLaurin, 30). Ignoring her imprecations Newsom duly returned to her cabin later that evening, again demanding that Celia submit to his wishes. When she resisted he advanced toward her, prompting Celia to grab the stick and bring it down heavily on his head. Although the blow knocked Newsom to the ground, he raised himself and attempted to lunge at Celia, who again struck him on his head, this time fatally. Upon discovering that Newsom was dead Celia attempted to cover up the crime, fearing that the courts would show her little mercy, even in her pregnant state. She burned Newsom's body, and kept the fire burning throughout the night, until only his skeleton remained. She then crushed his smaller bones and hid the larger ones under the hearth. The following day Celia offered Newsom's twelve-year-old grandson two dozen walnuts to dispose of the ashes from her fire.

When Robert Newsom did not arrive home, his daughters roused their neighbors to search for him. They also informed William Powell, the leader of the search party, of their suspicion that the slave George was involved in their father's disappearance. It is unknown whether Celia had informed George of her actions, but he probably deduced that she had followed through on her threat to kill Newsom. Fearing for his own life George told Powell that he had last seen Newsom heading towards Celia's cabin. A cursory search of the cabin uncovered no body, however, and Celia flatly denied knowledge of Newsom's whereabouts. Powell then threatened to take Celia's children away from her if she did not confess, and also threatened to lynch her if she remained silent. After intensive questioning, and aware that George had abandoned her, Celia finally confessed that she, alone, had killed Newsom to defend herself from his sexual advances, and that she had burned his body and hidden the remains. The Newsome family and the Callaway County authorities continued to believe that a sickly pregnant woman must have had an accomplice, at least in destroying Newsom's body, but Celia insisted even under extensive questioning that she had acted alone.

Celia was indicted for Newsom's murder on 25 June 1855 and remained in the Callaway County jail until her trial, which began on 9 October 1855. The hearings took place during a period of growing national divisions about slavery, and about whether the institution should be expanded into the western territories acquired during the Mexican War of the 1840s. Tensions were especially high in 1855 in the borderlands between Missouri, a slave state, and Kansas, originally a free state but which at that time had two state governments, one supported by pro-slavery forces, the other by slavery opponents. As Celia's trial began, armed pro- and anti-slavery forces were engaged in daily skirmishes on either side of the Missouri-Kansas border, a portent of the full scale Civil War that would begin six years later.

As was the case in many other slave states Missouri law did not allow slaves to testify on their own behalf, but the court did provide Celia with counsel for her defense. The man chosen was John Jameson, a former speaker of the Missouri House of Representatives and a respected trial lawyer with more than thirty years experience in the courts. Jameson may have been selected to deflect any charge that Celia had been provided with inadequate counsel, a decision that reflected the growing legal challenge to slavery in the border states. Most courtrooms in the Deep South would have been less

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inclined to observe such legal niceties. Jameson did not deny that Newsom had died at Celia's hand, but he argued that the killing was “necessary to protect herself against a forced sexual intercourse” and that Newsom's actions had placed her in “imminent danger” (Higginbotham, 682). The criminal laws of Missouri, Jameson argued, made no explicit distinctions between the races, when it came to victims of rape. Section Four of the Missouri Criminal Statutes of 1845 stated simply that “homicide shall be deemed justifiable when committed by any person resisting” a felony such as rape (Higginbotham, 682). Jameson also hoped to earn sympathy for his client by informing the court of Newsom's history of forced sexual assaults on Celia. At some point during Celia's incarceration and trial, she gave birth to a child, which was stillborn.

In spite of Jameson's efforts, the trial judge, William Hall, advised the jury that they could not acquit Celia on the grounds of self-defense, and all but instructed them to find her guilty of murder in the first degree. The all-white jury duly found Celia guilty on 10 October 1855; three days later Judge Hall sentenced her to be hanged on 16 November of that year. Five days before Celia was due to be executed, however, she and another slave on death row, named Matt, escaped from the Callaway County jail, but she was subsequently recaptured. The historian Melton McLaurin has speculated that Celia's attorneys may have aided her escape in order to force the Missouri Supreme Court to hear her appeal. On 14 December 1855 the court unanimously rejected the defense appeal for a stay of execution.

Interrogated on the eve of her execution Celia continued to insist that she had acted alone and that she had not intended to kill Newsom that night. Pregnant, ill, and having suffered from Newsom's abuse for more than five years, something inside her had simply snapped. “As soon as I struck him,” she confessed, “the Devil got into me, and I struck [Newsom] with the stick until he was dead, and then rolled him in the fire and burnt him up” (McLaurin, 114). Celia, still only nineteen years of age, was executed by hanging on 21 December 1855. Her case, according to the legal historian and federal judge A. Leon Higginbotham, was even more “venal and racist” than the more famous Missouri slave case, *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857). Unlike Scott, who was ultimately freed and who died of natural causes, Higginbotham argues, Celia was executed because the Missouri courts held that “a slave woman had no virtue that the law would protect against a master's lust” (Higginbotham, 694).

## Further Reading

Higginbotham, A. Leon, Jr. “Race, Sex, Education and Missouri Jurisprudence: Shelley v. Kraemer in a Historical Perspective,” *Washington University Law Quarterly* 67 (1989).

McLaurin, Melton A.. *Celia: A Slave* (2002)

### See also

Higginbotham, A. Leon, Jr. <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34454>

