
Dupuy, Charlotte

(1787?-?),

Carla J. Jones

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slave litigant, was born Charlotte Stanley on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the daughter of Rachel and George Stanley. Charlotte, commonly known as Lotty, spent her childhood enslaved, along with her mother and two siblings, by Daniel Parker in Dorchester County, Maryland. Whether George Stanley was born a slave is uncertain, but he was free by 1792 when he purchased Rachel and Charlotte's siblings Leah and Jonathan. He immediately manumitted his wife and stipulated the freedom of the two children upon their reaching the legal age. Charlotte, for reasons that are still unclear, remained enslaved in Parker's household until age nine, when she was sold to James Condon for one hundred dollars. Condon was a tradesman who lived nearby with his wife and at least one other slave. Rachel paid her daughter frequent visits, and the Condons may have promised Charlotte eventual freedom. Condon's apprentice later recalled that "I frequently heard Mrs. Condon say, at times when a little provoked with Lotty's conduct that she [Lotty] should not be free so soon as Lotty expected—I have also heard in Condon's family that Lotty was promised her freedom" (Records of the Court). Nevertheless, when Charlotte was about eighteen years old Condon moved her with his family to Lexington, Kentucky, and he made sure to register her as a slave in that state.

After her arrival in Lexington, Charlotte became acquainted with Aaron Dupuy, a slave at Ashland, the estate of then-twenty-nine-year-old Whig political titan, Henry Clay. Charlotte Stanley married Dupuy nearly a year later. Their marriage prompted Condon and Clay, one of the state's largest slaveholders, to agree to Charlotte Dupuy's sale. Clay purchased her for \$450 on 12 May 1806. The Dupuys worked as domestic servants in the Clay household—Aaron as Clay's personal body servant and Charlotte as a nursemaid to his children. While at Ashland, Dupuy gave birth to two children, Charles and Mary Ann, and the family apparently remained in Kentucky while Clay—elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1810—cultivated his political career in Washington. In 1817 or 1818, Clay, who had become the Speaker of the House almost immediately after his arrival in Congress, moved the Dupuys to the capital to help run his ever more impressive establishment. Upon his appointment as secretary of state in 1824, Clay moved his household to a grand brick townhouse situated adjacent to the White House on the President's Park. Here Dupuy likely interacted with the capital's most seminal political figures—as well as its burgeoning free black population, including former slave Alethia Tanner, who operated a grocery stand on the park. Also during her residence in the city, Dupuy paid at least two extended visits to her relatives on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

At the end of his term as secretary of state, Clay rejected an offer of appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court, opting instead to return to his Kentucky estate. Dupuy, perhaps unhappy to leave a city that afforded her independence and closer proximity to family, resisted the impending return to Clay's plantation. Her defiance took the bold form of a lawsuit against her owner. On 13 February 1829, Robert Beale filed a petition on Dupuy's behalf in the U.S. Circuit Court of the District of Columbia. The

suit asserted that she and her children “are entitled to their freedom and who are now held in a state of slavery by one Henry Clay (Secty of State) contrary to law and your petitioners' just rights” (Records of the Court). Dupuy based her claim on the contention that the free status of her mother and grandmother entitled her to her own freedom. She further cited Condon's assurances of emancipation when she reached the age of eighteen, thus rendering her transport to Kentucky and subsequent sale to Clay illegal.

Clay, who was accustomed to political conflict and controversy, insisted that Dupuy acted not on her own accord, but under the influence of political rivals bent on instigating scandal. Outraged, Clay wrote that the suit “has been instigated by motives distinct from the desire to liberating the petitioners, for the purpose of injuring and embarrassing this respondent” (*Clay Papers*, vol. 7, 623). In his correspondence with Clay regarding the suit, Dupuy's former owner James Condon similarly argued that her actions resulted from “some evil disposed person operating upon the mind of Lotty improperly” (*Clay Papers*, vol. 7, 632). Clay further asserted the impossibility of Dupuy's pretensions to freedom, recalling that she never exhibited any inclinations to run away, even when presented with such an opportunity when visiting her relations in Maryland. Condon also corroborated this notion, assuring Clay that while he did at one time promise her manumission, Dupuy “voluntarily relinquished [the possibility of emancipation] by marrying Your Servant Boy Aron [*sic*] and by her own pressing solicitations I sold her to you” (*Clay Papers*, vol. 7, 632).

With Clay and the remainder of her family in Kentucky, Dupuy continued to reside for the duration of the suit in Clay's former President's Park home, now assumed by his successor as secretary of state, Martin Van Buren. The court investigated her allegations for nearly a year, collecting the testimony of witnesses in Maryland and Kentucky. Her other previous owner, Daniel Parker, was deceased at the time of the lawsuit, but several residents of Dorchester County, Maryland, testified that he sold her to Condon as a “slave for life.” Based on such testimony, as well as the receipt of manumission of her mother and the bill of sale between Condon and Clay, the court finally rejected Dupuy's claim to freedom in mid-1830. Soon after, Henry Clay demanded Dupuy's return to Lexington, complaining that “her conduct has created insubordination among her relatives here, I think it high time to put a stop to it, which can be best done by her return to duty” (*Clay Papers*, vol. 8, 261). However, Dupuy remained reluctant to leave, further enraging Clay, who ordered her immediate imprisonment and transport to Kentucky. Dupuy was instead carried to New Orleans, arriving “very penitent” in December 1830 (*Clay Papers*, vol. 8, 309). She remained in New Orleans at the home of Clay's daughter in the years that followed, separated from her husband and children. His daughter wrote in 1832 that “I cannot thank my dear Mother enough for having spared Lotty to me, she is the best creature I ever saw and appears to be quite as much attached to the children as she ever was to yours” (*Clay Papers*, vol. 8, 441).

In time, Clay apparently regained his good opinion of Dupuy; on 12 October 1840, a decade after her failed fight for freedom, he emancipated Dupuy and her daughter Mary Ann, noting Dupuy's dedicated service as a nurse to his children and grandchildren. Her son Charles continued to serve as Clay's personal servant until his own manumission in December 1844. Dupuy's grandson Henry, the child of Mary Ann, was sold by Clay in 1848 under the condition that he would be freed at age twenty-eight. It appears that Clay never emancipated Dupuy's husband, as his family continued to refer to “old Aaron” in their correspondence through late 1850. What became of Charlotte Dupuy and her children following their emancipation remains unknown. In the 1960s Dupuy's home in Washington, D.C., where Clay lived during his tenure as secretary of state, was opened as the Stephen Decatur House Museum.

There, the history of Charlotte Dupuy's life and her fight to win her freedom are presented along with the history of the house's other residents, including its original owner Stephen Decatur, who died in a duel, and Clay, Van Buren, five antebellum U.S. congressmen, and a U.S. vice president.

Further Reading

Records of *Charlotte Dupuy vs. Henry Clay* are available in the records of the Circuit Court of the District of Columbia for Washington County, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Seager, Robert, II, ed. *The Papers of Henry Clay*, vol. 7 (1982).

Troutman, Richard L. "The Emancipation of Slaves by Henry Clay," *Journal of Negro History* 40:2 (Apr. 1955).

See also

Tanner, Alethia <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-37986>>