

## Bassett, Sarah “Sally”

(?-1730),

Quito Swan

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an African woman enslaved in Bermuda in the sixteenth century, was the grandmother of a young woman named Beck, who was enslaved by Thomas and Sarah Foster. Bassett was convicted of attempting to kill both the Fosters and their enslaved domestic woman Nancy (spelled by some sources as Nancey), by poison, in June 1730. Her story significantly chronicles how African communities, and black women in particular, resisted slavery in Bermuda and the wider Americas. In 2008, Bermuda’s Progressive Labour Party government erected a monument, “The Spirit of Freedom,” to honor Bassett’s fight against slavery. This launched a racially polarized debate about race and the memory of slavery in Bermuda.

During her trial, it was claimed that Bassett gave Beck several types of poison, including ratsbane, white toad, and manchineel root, along with specific instructions on how to apply them—one as a powdered inhalant, the other to be placed in food. The chief justice found that she did not have “the fear of God before her eyes” and was “moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil.” Bassett was valued at one pound four shillings and six pence. The justice sentenced her to be fastened to a stake and “burned with fire” until her “body was dead” (Bermuda Archives, pp. 221-222).



**Sarah “Sally” Bassett.** Statue erected in 2008 in Hamilton, Bermuda.

Photo courtesy Andrew Baylay/Bermuda Archives.

Bassett, described in the records as an elderly “mulatto,” informed the court that “she never deserved it,” and did not accept her sentence willingly. Bermuda’s black oral tradition claims that Bassett was executed at the foot of Crow Lane, which is a very public intersection at the entrance of Bermuda’s Hamilton City. However, it is just as plausible that she was executed in Gallows Island, St. George’s Parish. It is asserted that as she was walked to the site she told the watching crowds that the “fun would not start until she arrived” at the scene of the burning. It is also claimed that a purple flower, the Bermudiana, emerged out of her ashes. This day is remembered as being exceptionally hot, and older black generations continue to refer to a hot day as a “Sally Bassett day.”

The Bassett incident was perhaps the climax of a poisoning plot that occurred in Bermuda between 1727 and 1730. Africans in Bermuda fought back against slavery through the use of poison, and many whites were injured. Bassett was well versed in these pharmaceutical techniques of poisoning, which appear to be based on West African/Saint-Domingue medical techniques, and she was perhaps initiated in one of the spiritual traditions of West Africa, such as an *okomfo* of the Akan.

In 1712 Bassett had been charged with the mysterious deaths of a white proprietor’s cattle. She received “three lashes well laid on her naked back at the end of every thirty paces” throughout Southampton Parish. Bassett’s associate, Indian Tom, was also charged for his involvement. Tom was reputed to be a notorious thief who took up arms with French privateers. Scholarship suggests that Tom was possibly the source of Bassett’s poisonous “white toade,” which was found in Africa, northern South America, and Saint-Domingue (among Vodou practitioners), but it did not appear in Bermuda until the nineteenth century.

The 2008 statue to Bassett, the “Spirit of Freedom,” depicts Bassett standing above flames and “pregnant with freedom.” It was Bermuda’s first public monument in honor of an enslaved person. Under Bermuda premier Ewart Brown, it was part of a larger project by the PLP government to publicize Bermuda’s history through programs such as the African Diaspora Heritage Trail and National Heroes Day. Bermuda’s minister of education, Dame Jennifer Smith, felt that the monument helped to give a full view of Bermuda’s history, and that it overturned a biased master narrative that suggested that slavery in Bermuda was “benign.”

Controversy ensued when the Corporation of Hamilton refused a government request to place the *Spirit* at Hamilton’s City Hall. A racially polarized debate about these issues emerged across Bermuda’s radio talk shows, social media, and online newspaper outlets. Blacks were generally in support of the monument. The community activist “Nana Peggy,” for example, felt that it could be a teaching aid to combat historical amnesia. Some members of the white community, however, felt that the monument glorified a criminal and was designed to make whites feel guilty. In addition, during the official unveiling of the statue, the British governor Richard Gozney compared it to monuments of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee, South Africa’s Blood River Monument, and a statue of Oliver Cromwell. Many felt this comparison to Bassett via white symbols of exploitation was insulting, bizarre, and offensive.

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