

Leiper, Fanny

(1811-?),

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free woman of color, property holder, and washerwoman, was born into slavery in Natchez, Mississippi. The exact date of her birth is not now known. She was born to an enslaved woman, Hannah Frey, and to J. S. Miller, a white planter who lived outside of Natchez near the small town of Washington. Mrs. Margaret Overaker, a white woman, and her husband, George, owned Leiper and her mother. While Leiper was still a young girl, her mother was manumitted, but Leiper herself remained enslaved. Sometime around 1831, when Leiper was approximately twenty or twenty-one, she was freed, reportedly at the insistence of her father, who paid her owner \$300. In 1834 or thereabouts, following the instructions of her white father, she was taken by boat up the Mississippi River to Cincinnati, Ohio, in the footsteps of her mother.

As was the case with most property-holding free women of color in Natchez, Fanny Leiper was of mixed race. As one Natchez resident put it, “She appears at first to be of pretty near white blood, but when you come to converse with her you discover the contrary” (*Leiper v. Huffman*). Since Leiper was known in Natchez as a free woman of color, her occupational choices were quite limited. She was employed at one point as a washerwoman. Her white father contributed to her support as well, and it is likely that her father financed her purchase of a house and lot in Natchez.

In 1834 Leiper paid \$100 to John R. Wells for a city lot located near the bluff, with the agreement that she would pay an additional installment of \$75. She next contracted with the firms of Neibert & Gemmel and then Bryant & Luke to construct a six-room wood-frame house. She hired Daniel Lippencott to build the brick chimney and piers upon which the house was supported. The property additionally consisted of a kitchen, an outhouse, and enclosures that, including the house, cost Leiper \$1,562. It appears that she paid at least another \$100 for fruit and ornamental trees to adorn the yard. All in all the property that Leiper paid taxes on and occupied from 1834 until 1845 cost her nearly \$2,000.

Fanny Leiper's relationships with men had a significant impact on her experience as a free, propertied woman. Apparently in her young adulthood she married a free mixed-race man, who gave his wife her surname of Leiper. It appears that he died shortly thereafter. She then became involved with a man named Gustavas Howard, who may have been white. It is unclear precisely when they began their relationship, but Leiper laundered his clothes and he lived with her periodically. There was a rumor circulating in Natchez that they were married, and it is quite possible that when Leiper moved to Cincinnati in 1845, Gustavas Howard went with her.

One relationship Leiper had with a man proved to cause her considerable grief. Some time in the mid-1830s Leiper began an association with Joseph Winscott, a white engineer on the steamboat *Hail Columbia*. He periodically passed through Natchez for a day or two at a time on his way up the Mississippi River from New Orleans or on the return trip. Some Natchez residents claimed to see him staying at Leiper's home quite comfortably when he was in town and it was understood that she was his mistress. For a number of possible reasons, his name and Leiper's appeared together on the deed of the property, and this issue became a central question concerning the ownership of the lot and the house that sat upon it.

In 1845 Leiper decided to move from Natchez to Cincinnati, Ohio. She hired an agent, Samuel R. Hammet, to manage her property, rent it out, and collect the monthly rent of \$8 for her. It was not long after her departure that Malvina Huffman, another free woman of color and Leiper's next-door neighbor, recognized the opportunity to take advantage of Leiper's absence in Natchez. In the latter part of 1846, Malvina Huffman's white lover, Oliver Bemiss, disclosed to Hammet that he had purchased the property for Huffman from Joseph Winscott of New Orleans for \$100 or \$125. Later Huffman requested Hammet to send her the keys. At that time Hammet, not realizing that the transaction had occurred without Leiper's permission, surrendered the keys to Huffman, who took possession of the house.

In the next year, 1847, Leiper filed a petition against Huffman and her three associates for fraudulently cheating her of her property. Leiper charged that Huffman, with full knowledge of Winscott's name on the deed, falsely informed him that Leiper was in actuality a slave who could not hold property. She then convinced him that Leiper had fled Natchez and that the property was going to ruin. She maintained that since the property fully belonged to him and his name was on the deed, he could sell it to her. He did.

Leiper informed the court that she had paid more than \$1,700 for the property and could have sold it for at least \$1,000. Huffman refused to remit the house and lot to Leiper, and further, she questioned Leiper's legal freedom. Leiper lost the case she brought before the Southern District Chancery Court in Natchez and was not entitled to any relief. However, she appealed the decision before the Mississippi High Court of Errors and Appeals and eventually won her claim that she had been wrongfully defrauded of her property. After this point, Fanny Leiper is lost in the historical record.

Further Reading

Mississippi High Court of Error and Appeals, *Leiper v. Huffman et al.*, case #6185 (1851).

Sydnor, Charles. "The Free Negro in Mississippi before the Civil War," *American Historical Review* 32 (1927).