
Batallas, Angela

(c. 1800-?),

Camilla Townsend

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an enslaved Afro-Ecuadorian who confronted Simón Bolívar in order to secure her freedom, was born in the cacao-producing Guayas region in the first few years of the nineteenth century. Batallas was not famous in her own day nor is she now, but she provides an excellent example of the strategizing Afro-Ecuadorians often engaged in to gain their own freedom during the Wars of Independence, a time of political flux. Nothing is known of her childhood, but in November 1821, when she was a young woman living as a slave in Guayaquil, she attracted the attention of a 27-year-old merchant named Ildefonso Coronel. He purchased her from her master and placed her in a house he secured for her. She later said that he did not force himself upon her, but rather courted her, promised to free her, and waited for her to respond voluntarily to his advances.

In these years, the Wars of Independence against Spain, led by Simón Bolívar, were raging throughout the continent. Coronel—like most men of his class and generation—was actively involved in the patriot cause. In 1820 the optimistic and liberal gentlemen of Guayaquil declared their region's independence and established the "Republic of Guayas." The new government, amid a spate of Enlightenment reforms, immediately passed laws prohibiting the import of any further slaves to the region. It then declared that as of 21 July 1821, all children born to current slaves would be freed on their eighteenth birthday. In 1822 Simón Bolívar's lieutenant, Antonio de Sucre, won a great victory near Quito at the Battle of Pichincha, permanently freeing the region that is now the country of Ecuador from Spanish control. Bolívar subsequently established his headquarters in Guayaquil. There, he met with José de San Martín, the leader of the rebel forces from the south, and together they planned the liberation of Peru.

Meanwhile, during these exhilarating times, Batallas had entered into a relationship with Coronel and given birth to a daughter, María del Carmen. Coronel legally recognized the child, thus implicitly declaring her free, but he did not free Batallas, as he had promised. Instead, he took up with another woman and moved Batallas into that woman's house as a slave. Batallas, who could write her name and probably could read a little, secured allies, both white and black, and went to court. She used the language of liberation then in vogue in addressing the judges. "I do not believe that this tribunal will justify [my enslavement], nor that the meritorious members of a Republic that, full of philanthropic and liberal sentiments, has given all necessary proofs of liberalism, employing their arms and heroically risking their lives to liberate us from the Spanish Yoke, would want to keep me in servitude even against the promise that Coronel made to me the first time he united himself with me." The court removed Batallas from Coronel's possession, but rather than freeing her, it appointed a temporary master to care for her. This was, in fact, an outcome highly typical of lawsuits brought by slaves, dating to long before the establishment of the independent government.

Batallas was not satisfied. She clearly knew of the current political developments and understood their significance. One day in March 1823, she walked to Bolívar's headquarters, asking to meet with him and insisting she would not leave until this happened. Her words, and story, were compelling. Bolívar shortly thereafter dictated a letter and sent it to the court, demanding justice on her behalf and stating that the integrity of the new government was at stake. Most likely Bolívar was motivated by not only the desire to have his cause remain true to its ideals, but also by a recognition that the struggling young government desperately needed the support of the populace, including the enslaved. Batallas, like many other slaves in this era, had used her knowledge of the struggle for independence to further her own case, and was able to vocalize the connections between her own individual plight and the broader plight of peoples and nations who were not free. Within a generation, in 1851, slavery ended permanently in Ecuador.

[See also Bolívar, Simón and Díaz, María Chiquinquirá.]

Bibliography

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See also

Bolívar, Simón <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-50901>>

Díaz, María Chiquinquirá <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-73800>>