

0. TRIAL of CELIA, A SLAVE - Story Preface

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Robert Newsom died in Callaway County, so Celia - a slave accused of his murder - was tried in the Callaway County Courthouse. This view of the Courthouse (located in Fulton, Missouri) is from the 1930s. The Courthouse was constructed c. 1856 (about the time Celia was tried). Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

Celia, the slave, was accused of killing Newsom, the "master."

Even the charge against her was inconsistent with the evidence. Before Celia was represented by a lawyer, she told investigators she tried to burn Newsom's body after he was already dead. Instead, she was charged with:

... casting, throwing, pushing and holding of him, the said Robert Newsom in the fire. (See [Slavery and Crime in Missouri, 1773-1865](#), by Harriet C. Frazier, at pages 188-190.)

Burning someone to death is more painful and gruesome than hitting someone with a stick - then realizing the force of the blow was enough to cause death. For whatever reason, the government's lawyers twisted the charging facts against Celia to make them appear even worse than they were in her confession.

At her trial, Celia's lawyers were unable to adequately defend their client. They had multiple issues:

- How could Celia tell her story when slaves could not testify?
- How could Celia defend her actions when the judge said the law prohibiting rape did not apply to slaves?
- How could Celia's lawyers ever point to Newsom as the wrongdoer when Missouri law held that slaves were "owned" property - and - Newsom "owned" Celia?

In fact, the only person protected by Missouri's law - when it came to the rape of a slave - was the slave owner. At the time, a slave owner was allowed to sue a rapist for trespass on his property. "His property" would be the violated slave.

During Celia's trial, time-honored rules of evidence were ignored. Hearsay, which is disallowed to prove the truth of an assertion, was used to make the case against the defendant. But even hearsay was twisted to suit the prosecution's point of view.

The defense did get the following testimony, on cross-examination, from Newsom's daughter, [Virginia Wainscott](#):

Celia had been sick. Took sick in February and had been sick ever since. She had not been able to cook since February. The cook-house joins the dwelling house.

Newsom, like his family members, knew that Celia had been unwell. Her condition was apparently of no consequence to him.

The only defense witness whose testimony was allowed - [Thomas Shoatman](#) - told the court Celia struck Newsom a second time because she thought he was going to catch her:

...When she struck the first time, he fell and appeared to throw his hands up. The reason she gave for striking him a second time was that he threw his hands up. That she was afraid he would catch her.

She said she did not intend to kill him when she struck him, but only to hurt him. She was neither at or towards his back - not immediately before him. She struck down, on or towards a stool. After she struck the second blow, she examined to see whether he were dead.

He was dead. Waited a long time, did not know what to do. She thought she would try to burn him, and pushed him into the fireplace and burned him.

Two medical witnesses - Dr. Smith and Dr. Young - testified that bones found at, or near, the slave cabin were human.

The prosecutor's evidence against Celia seemed insurmountable. Would it be enough to convict her?

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/TRIAL-of-CELIA-A-SLAVE-Celia-A-Slave>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/TRIAL-of-CELIA-A-SLAVE-Celia-A-Slave>