


# "I am to be sold"

## The Freedom Saga of Nancy and Mary Ann Steele of Bourbon County, Kentucky

**When American Ancestors Trustee Brenda Johnson sorted through her late mother's effects in Superior, Wisconsin, she found an old cigar box that had sat for decades at the back of a little used drawer. Affixed to the outside was a small note in her mother's handwriting: "Slave Letters." In early 2026, Brenda brought the contents of the box home to Minnesota to review.**

Inside was a wealth of material, including 100-year-old land records, funeral programs, and a wedding invitation. But the most intriguing discovery was a set of approximately 200-year-old letters that referenced court cases centering on two enslaved people, Nancy and Mary Ann of Bourbon County, Kentucky. Most of this correspondence was addressed to a John Steele.

The find remains puzzling. Brenda has no Steeles in her ancestry and no Kentucky connections. She doesn't know why the box was in her mother's possession. Brenda quickly decided that this collection belonged with American Ancestors and the 10 Million Names Project. "I wasn't sure exactly what story these documents told, but I knew the researchers at American Ancestors could figure it out," she said. Under scrutiny, the cigar box's contents would reveal a complicated family drama that spanned two decades, crossed state lines, and held two human lives in the balance.

Using the information in the letters, I began researching the relevant Steele family of Bourbon County, particularly keeping an eye out for any mentions of enslaved people. In early 1821, James and Catherine Steele had four adult children: John, Solomon, William, and Mary (Steele) Riley/Ryley. A fifth son, Jacob Steele, had died, leaving a widow, Roseanna, and their son, Greenberry Steele. Patriarch James Steele died on May 19, 1821. Bourbon County probate records preserve his estate inventory, which lists horses, hogs, sheep—and nine enslaved people, including Nancy, valued at $300, and Mary Ann, valued at $100.[1]

Steele's will bequeathed most of the estate to his wife, Catherine. James referred to his human property mostly as nameless "negroes" destined for the auction block—with one significant exception. At the very beginning of his will, James specified that at Catherine's death, "the old negroe woman named Nancy and a young child named Mary Ann" should either be kept in the family and given to one of the children or be freed. Ultimately, he left the decision to Catherine.[2]

On the day James died, Catherine called Ely R. Thomas to her home to draft her will. Ely was familiar with the estate, having written James's will. With only the two of them present, Ely drew up the will, which made two major provisions.[3]

First, Catherine left her entire estate to her deceased son's widow, Roseanna, and their child, Greenberry, leaving out her four children, John, Mary, William, and Solomon.[4] Second, she provided for the emancipation

*Above:* The cigar box that Brenda Johnson found among her mother's things.



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of Nancy and Mary Ann. Noting "the good conduct of our old worthy servant," the will stated that Nancy was "to be entirely free from involuntary servitude forever to serve no other person after my death without her own consent." After noting that Mary Ann would turn two on July 25, 1821, the will stipulated that Mary Ann would be "entirely and clearly set free" only after reaching 18. In the meantime, Mary Ann was to live with Catherine's daughter-in-law Roseanna and grandson Greenberry.[5]

Ely informed Catherine that her will required a second witness signature to meet legal standards. "I then advised her to send for Mr. Oden her neighbor to attest said writing and she said she disliked to trouble her neighbors, that Mr. Oden generally comes to see her about twice a week, and she would get him to attest it when he came over."[6]

The next piece of the evidence came from a letter I found in the cigar box. On December 10, 1822, Solomon Steele of Lexington, Kentucky, wrote to his brother John Steele of Chillicothe, Ohio, to share the news that their mother, Catherine, died on November 27, 1822, about a year and a half after her will was created.[7]

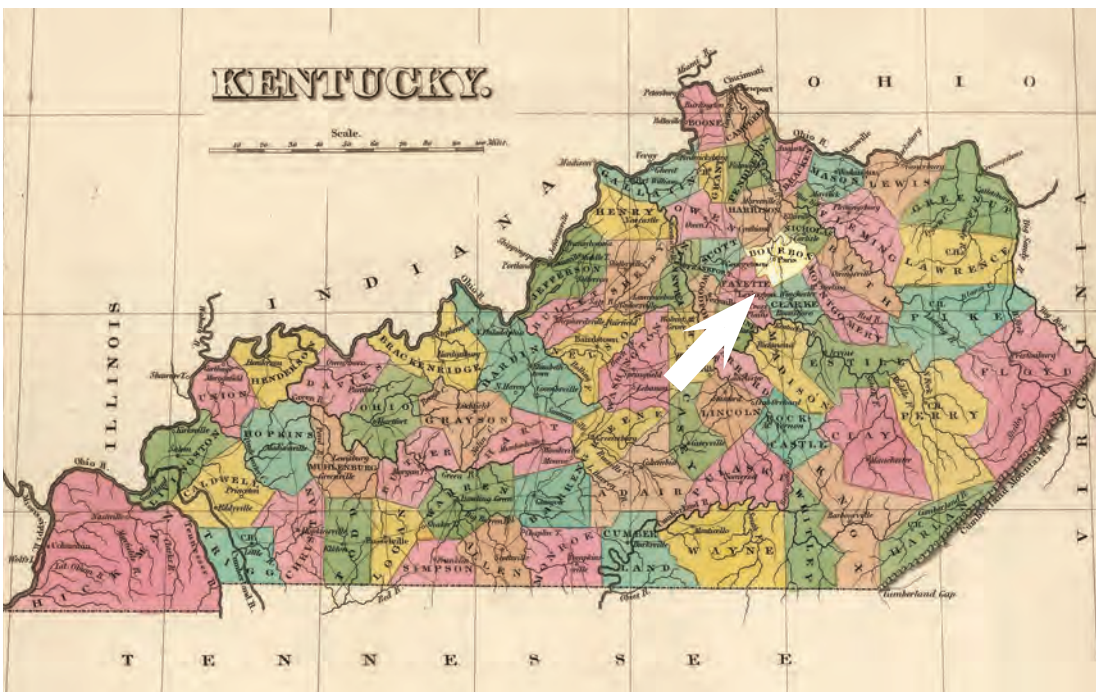
Upon Catherine's death, the instructions in her will should have emancipated Nancy immediately, and freed Mary Ann upon her eighteenth birthday on July 25, 1837. But a major issue emerged: no second witness ever signed the will.

When Charles Lander, the will's executor, attempted to record the will in Bourbon County, the court refused "on the ground that it was not sufficient to emancipate the negroes, there being but one witness to the will when by the act of 1798 two were required."[8] The court called Ely R. Thomas, the writer of the will and sole signatory, to testify on the matter, but he could not be immediately located.

Meanwhile, records show that two of the Steele siblings, John Steele and Mary (Steele) Ryley, wanted to honor their parents' wishes and emancipate Nancy and Mary Ann. However, the other two siblings, Solomon and William, believed that Nancy and Mary Ann were the family's property, and wanted their fair share of their monetary value.

Shockingly, six months later, still with no testimony from Ely Thomas, brothers Solomon and William filed a lawsuit against their siblings John and Mary, as well as estate executor Charles Lander. Their suit, dated July 14, 1823, stated that the "purported" will only had one witness and was therefore "invalid to emancipate said negroes." Furthermore, they claimed that their mother "at the time of making said pretended will, if made by her, was incapacitated by mental disability and extreme old age." Their suit requested "that said negroes be given up for division, or that they may be sold and the proceeds of the sale be divided equally" amongst Catherine's children.

The case moved slowly and Nancy and Mary Ann remained in bondage throughout the dispute. Over a year and a half passed before Ely Thomas was located. Ely, an enslaver himself, was in Natchez, Mississippi, trying to retrieve four of his own enslaved people who, he claimed, were sold without permission.[9] When he was finally deposed, Ely reported that Catherine told him,




*Kentucky*, by Young & Delleker (Philadelphia, 1824). David Rumsey Map Collection. Bourbon County is indicated with an arrow.



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Second Bourbon County Courthouse, Paris, Kentucky, before 1872. Photographer unknown. Reproduction held by the Hopewell Museum; location and repository of the original photograph unknown.

"it had been the will of her deceased husband that the negro woman Nancy and the little negro girl MaryAnn should be set free…it was her desire to comply with her husband's wishes on that subject, that she wished [Ely] to write her a will or other instrument of writing by which said Nancy and said child Maryanne should be emancipated."[10] Ely's deposition also revealed that Nancy was Mary Ann's mother.[11]

Ely's testimony proved powerful, and in the May 1825 court session, the case was dismissed. "Nansey optained her freedom in Chanserey," wrote estate executor Charles Lander to John Steele.[12] But, in his letter, Lander speculated "…whether Soloman & William Steel will take it to Cort of appeals."[13] His hunch was correct. On February 2, 1827, Charles Lander updated John Steele with the news that "Nanseys sute is taken to the Cort of appeals."[14] The appeal cast Nancy and Mary Ann back into legal bondage, their freedom back on trial. However, little may have changed for the two. No documents or letters describe how Nancy and Mary Ann were treated between their freedom verdict in May 1825 and February 1827 but because an appeal was expected, Nancy and Mary Ann may have continued to be treated as enslaved throughout the entire process.

Another lengthy wait ensued. Over two years later, on March 20, 1829, Charles Lander wrote to John Steele that "the sute in Chansery Respecting oald Nansey and Maryann is Desided and they are both kept in slavery—and I shall have to sell them both."[15] Lander was eager to settle the estate—Catherine had died six years earlier—but he encountered a major hitch: "Rosanna and Greanbery Steel has gon to Missouri and has taken the girl with them—unbenowns to me and Contrary to my possitive orders."[16] In other words, 9-year-old Mary Ann had secretly been taken to Missouri, while her mother, Nancy, remained in Bourbon County.

At this point in the research, I began to look at the cigar box as a treasure box, given our next discovery. A March 30, 1829, letter, written ten days after Mary Ann was taken to Missouri, was penned by Nancy herself. She appealed to John Steele, advocating for her freedom: "I am to be sold. You [k]now that it was you[r] father & mothers wash that I should be free at thare death and I served them faithfully." She asked John to purchase her, then free her, and she offered to pay him back, despite being "old & wore out and much afflicted."[17]

Given widespread antiliteracy laws for both enslaved and free Blacks in the antebellum period, letters written by enslaved people are incredibly rare. While Kentucky was one of few slave states that did not pass antiliteracy laws, literacy among the enslaved was uncommon and widely seen as a dangerous skill.

However, Nancy's missive to John Steele did not produce results. Four months after her plea, the next cigar-box letter revealed that Charles Lander was preparing to sell Nancy, as well as Mary Ann, who he had retrieved from Greenberry Steele in Missouri. "Expect I shall sell them on the 29 Day of Augest next," he wrote, asking John's advice on whether to sell them for cash, or possibly command a higher price by selling them for credit.[18]

But the sale did not happen. Lander had been wrong about the outcome of the lawsuit; it had not actually concluded but instead been sent back to Bourbon County court.[19] In December 1830, nearly a year and a half after he planned to sell Nancy and Mary Ann, Charles Lander admitted this to John Steele:

> I think when I rote to you late, I informed you that Nansey sute ware desided in the Cort of appeals and that she was to Continue a slave but I was Rong informed by the



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shereff… but the sute ware sent back to this Coart (bourbon)… I Expect the sute will be tride next may cort.[20]

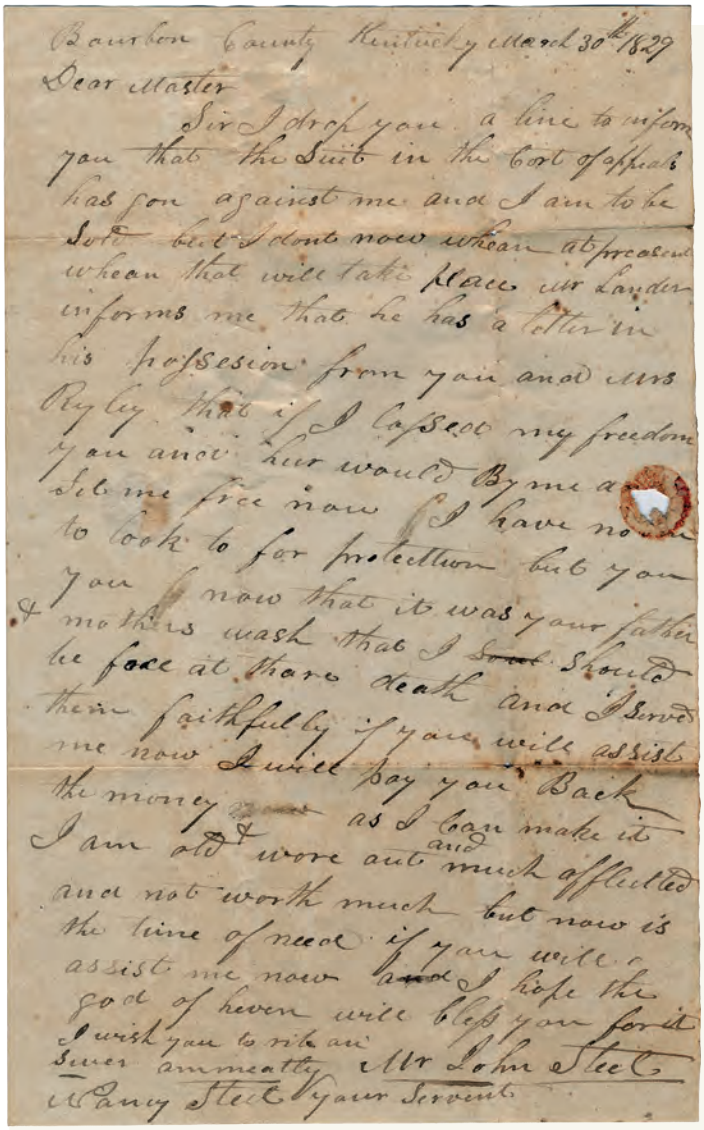
Heading into the eighth year of her freedom being disputed, Nancy again advocated for herself, sending a message to John Steele through Greenberry Steele, who had returned to Kentucky from Missouri. Greenberry's letter, dated January 26, 1831, shared that, "old nancy remembers hir love to you all and ses she is not free yet and wants you to send in your letter if you have any objections to hir being free and if you ever heare your father say she should be free or not."[21]

No record of John's answer exists. The case was heard again, one final time, in the court's May 1831 session. Ely Thomas testified again, and a final judgement heralded the end of Nancy and Mary Ann's legal battles: "1831 May — Bill dismissed with costs."

With Solomon and William Steele's appeal dismissed, Nancy and Mary Ann should have been emancipated. I immediately searched for evidence of Nancy's emancipation in vital, court, census, land, and newspaper records. Unfortunately, our search to date has found no trace of Nancy after the court case. Given that Nancy had been "old & wore out and much afflicted" nearly two years before the suit's resolution, perhaps she did not live to see freedom.

I then turned my attention to Mary Ann, focusing on 1837, when she would have turned 18 and gained her freedom, and the years afterward. After significant searching and utilizing the full-text search feature on FamilySearch, I found a stunning document.

In a Bourbon County court record dated July 5, 1841, and labeled "Mary Ann proof," the court formally



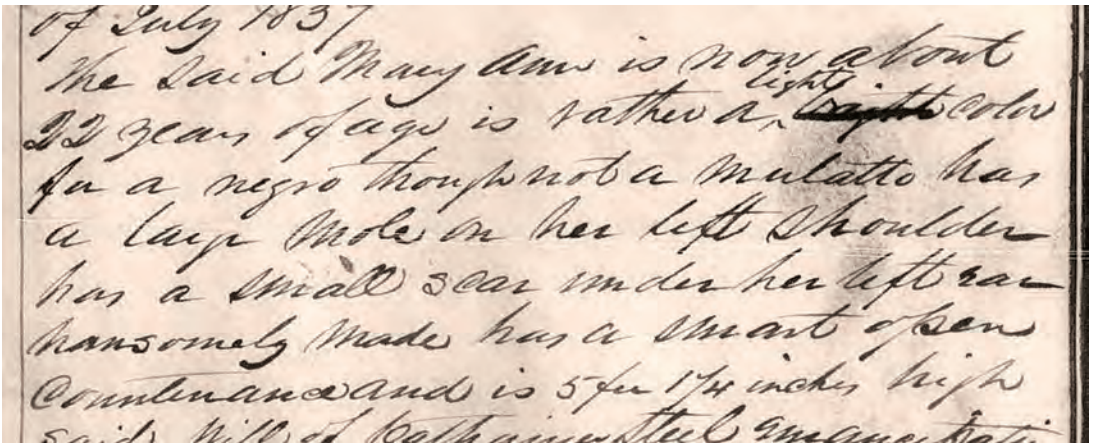
Nancy Steele's 1829 letter to John Steele. Steele Family Papers (Mss 1447), R. Stanton Avery Special Collections.

### Nancy's Letter to John Steele

Bourbon County Kentucky March 30th 1829
Dear Master
Sir I drop you a line to inform
you that the suit in the Cort of appeals
has gon against me and I am to be
sold but I dont now whean at preasent
whean that will take place Mr Lander
informs me that he has a letter in
his possesion from you and Mrs
Ryley that if I lossed my freedom
you and hur would By me and
set me free now I have no one
to look to for protecttion but you
you now that it was you father
& mothers wash that I should
be free at thare death and I served
them faithfully if you will assist
me know I will pay you Back
the money as I Can make it
I am old & wore out and much afflicted
and not worth much but now is
the time of need if you will
assist me now and I hope the
god of heven will bless you for it
I wish you to rite an
swer ammeatly Mr John Steel
Nancy Steel you servent



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The description of Mary Ann Steele in the July 5, 1841, Bourbon County court record that recognized her emancipation. FamilySearch.

recognized Mary Ann's emancipation just twenty days shy of her twenty-second birthday. This last court document offered us a description of Mary Anne for the first time, a fleeting glimpse of her in freedom. "The said Mary Ann is about 22 years of age[.] [I]s rather a light color for a negro though not a mulatto[.] [H]as a large mole on her left shoulder[.] [H]as a small scar under her left ear[.] [H]andsomely made[.] [H]as a smart open countenance and is 5 fee[t] 1/4 inches high."[22]

Seemingly against all odds, after eighteen years, eight years of court battles, a secret move across state lines (and back again), and one astonishing letter from her mother pleading for freedom from their enslavers, Mary Ann Steele was finally free. ◆

**The contents of the cigar box, now preserved as the Steele Family Papers (Mss 1447) at American Ancestors, are a moving example of how forgotten documents in family homes can not only aid genealogical research, but bring untold stories about enslaved individuals to life. If you have materials that may mention enslaved people, please consider donating originals or copies to the 10 Million Names project at American Ancestors. For more information, please email 10mn@americanancestors.org.**

### Notes

1. Bourbon Co., Kentucky, Wills, F: 424–25, FamilySearch, DGS 4818820, image 473 of 501. James Steele's estate inventory.
2. Bourbon Co., Kentucky, Circuit court case files, case number 15033, FamilySearch, DGS 8346601, image 1465 of 2197. James Steele will.
3. Ibid., image 1482 of 2197. Deposition of Ely R. Thomas.
4. Ibid., image 1463 of 2197. Catherine Steele will.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., image 1482 of 2197. Deposition of Ely R. Thomas.
7. Steele Family Papers, Mss 1447, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, American Ancestors. Letter from Solomon Steele to John Steele, 10 December 1822. Item 03_Recto.
8. Bourbon Co., Kentucky, Circuit court case files [note 2], image 1478 of 2197. Reply from Charles Lander, 22 October 1823.
9. Ibid., image 1484 of 2197, Commonwealth (case of Thomas) vs. Inlaws (defendant's bill of exceptions), 24 August 1825.
10. Ibid., image 1476 of 2197. Deposition of Ely R. Thomas.
11. Ibid.
12. Steele Family Papers [note 7]. Letter from Charles Lander to John Steele, 25 November 1825. Fol 2, 003.
13. Ibid.
14. Steele Family Papers [note 7]. Letter from Charles Lander to John Steele, 2 February 1827. Fol 2, 005.
15. Steele Family Papers [note 7]. Letter from Charles Lander to John Steele, 20 March 1829. Fol 2, 007.
16. Ibid.
17. Steele Family Papers [note 7]. Letter from Nancy Steele to John Steele, 30 March 1829. Fol 5, 001.
18. Steele Family Papers [note 7]. Letter from Charles Lander to John Steele, 28 July 1829. Fol 2, 009.
19. Bourbon Co., Kentucky, Circuit court case files [note 2], image 1495 of 2197. Appeals court decree, 18 October 1828.
20. Steele Family Papers [note 7]. Letter from Charles Lander to John Steele, 28 December 1830. Fol 2, 011.
21. Steele Family Papers [note 7]. Letter from Greenberry Steele to John Steele, 26 January 1831. Fol 3, 001.
22. Bourbon Co., Kentucky, Order Book, M: 404–05, FamilySearch, DGS 8337946, image 420 of 738. Mary Ann proof.



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