

In the book *Celia A Slave* Melton McLaurin describes in great detail the true story of a female slave who murdered her master and then disposed of him by burning his body on June 23, 1855. This shocking event took place in Calloway County, Missouri during a tumultuous period in antebellum America in which the neighboring territory of Kansas was in the midst of the debate over if it would become a slave state or a free state. Coupling this turbulent political climate with a crime of this magnitude committed by a slave against a master provides the reader with a microcosm of race relations of the period. McLaurin takes great pains to describe the trial process, the impact of the political climate of the time on the trial, and the lessons Celia's experience teaches about slavery and the antebellum period in general.

Owning slaves defined a person's level of wealth in antebellum America, and Robert Newsom was no exception, and at the time he purchased Celia, he owned five other slaves. "While it is possible that Newsom harbored some moral ambiguity about slave ownership, it is far more likely that he regarded it as a fitting reward for his years of labor, an indication of the social status he achieved through his own efforts" (McLaurin 8). Celia's entrance to the Newsom farm occurred in 1850 when at age fourteen she is purchased by Robert Newsom. The reader learns that on the trip home, she is raped by her new master, and it is speculated by McLaurin that Celia is purchased as a substitute for Newsom's wife who had passed away. "A healthy sixty years of age, Newsom needed more than a hostess...he required a sexual partner." (McLaurin 18). It would have been a scandal to strictly have Celia as a sexual slave, and so Newsom makes her the household cook. Celia is working in the house under the instruction of Robert Newsom's daughters, Virginia and Mary, and proceeds to have two children believed to be fathered by

Newsom. Due to her role as Robert Newsom's sexual partner, she is granted certain entitlements, including her own cabin on the property very close to the family home. Typically, slaves lived in small quarters, and had little privacy, so Celia's unusual living situation highlights the unique circumstance of her place on the Newsom farm, as well as the need for Newsom to keep her separate from other slaves for his nighttime visits. "Life for Celia would entail continual sexual exploitation by her master." (McLaurin 22) This is Celia's life for five years, and then an amorous relationship develops between Celia and a male slave named George who also belongs to Robert Newsom. Celia turns up pregnant with her third child in 1855, and the father of the child could be either man. George, also a slave, cannot control his own life's destiny and in frustration over the situation he is in with Celia, he issues an ultimatum to Celia that she must somehow stop the physical relationship she is embroiled in with their master. This cannot be done easily due to the fact that Celia has as little control over her life as George does over his. "Testimony given at Celia's trial suggests that Celia's pregnancy had placed an emotional strain upon George that he could not accept. Celia was his lover...yet he could not protect her from the sexual advances of the man who owned them both." (McLaurin 25)

Although George issues his decree out of frustration in having been forced to share Celia, he sets into motion a series of events that ultimately end with the murder of Robert Newsom and Celia's execution.

On June 23, 1855 Celia, a slave, committed the crime that would bring to light the plight of all slaves, but in particular young females, and force the white populace of a small Missouri town to grapple with the boundaries of slavery. Celia is powerless to comply with George's request to stop engaging in a sexual relationship with her master,

particularly due to the fact that she has no real support system in the small county in Missouri where they are living. In larger counties in the east, slaves had more of a support system, and could even go to law enforcement to complain about physical violations, but in a place as far west as Missouri in the mid 1800's, no such support existed. Celia tried the only avenue she had available to her in the isolation in which she lived and appealed to Mary and Virginia, the adult daughter's of Robert Newsom.

“Whether or not Virginia or Mary attempted to intervene on Celia's behalf, Newsome's behavior did not change. He continued to make sexual demands of Celia.” (McLaurin 28)

Celia goes so far as to plead with Newsom directly to leave her alone, using her pregnancy as an excuse. All of her efforts are in vain due to the belief of Robert Newsom that, “as her master he considered sexual relations with her his privilege.” (McLaurin 28-9)

Newsome was intent on hammering the point home to Celia when he told her “he was coming to her cabin that night”. (McLaurin 29)

On the evening of June 23, 1855, Newsom went to Celia's cabin, and she physically repelled him by hitting him over the head with a tree branch she had procured for this very occasion. He reached up to grab at her, and she hit him with a second fatal blow. Celia fearing she would be executed should his body be discovered determined that she needed to get rid of the body. “She decided to burn Newsom's body in her fireplace. With his body consumed by flames, there would be nothing left to connect her with her master's disappearance, nothing to indicate that he had come to her that night” (McLaurin 31). This is the crime of a desperate young woman, and although her efforts to conceal it were valiant, they failed. Local neighbors began questioning the family and slaves, starting with George, which is an indicator that some, may know of Celia's relationship with George. George tells the authority that he

doesn't know where his master is, but he knows Celia is involved. Celia breaks after many hours of interrogation, and confesses how and why she killed her master. Celia maintained throughout all interviews that her intent was to stop the sexual violations, but not to kill her master. At her indictment Celia reported, "she did not intend to kill him when she struck him but only wanted to hurt him." (McLaurin 43) On June 25, 1855 the case of *The State of Missouri vs. Celia A Slave* began, and it was held during particularly tumultuous political times in Missouri due to the troubles in the neighboring state of Kansas.

Around the time of Celia's crime and trial, the neighboring state of Kansas was enmeshed in a battle over whether it would be admitted to the union as a free or slave state, and the eyes of the nation were on Kansas. Both abolitionists as well as slave supporters were helping to sway the vote in Kansas via illegal voting methods. Abolitionists in New England funding an expedition of free soil party members sought to sway the vote in Kansas to a Free State government, while pro slave Missourians snuck over state lines to vote their conscience. Neither group had any business voting in Kansas at all, but it did not stop them and the result was a division in Kansas into two governments. Free State supporters recognized the free government, and pro slave forces recognized the pro slave government. Missouri was greatly affected by the turnout in Kansas. "Thus on the eve of Celia's trial, the reverberations of an increasingly violent struggle over slavery in Kansas had disrupted the public tranquility in Missouri and threatened with discord, the state's basic political, legal, and social institutions" (McLaurin 67).

Celia's trial began on October 9, 1855, and had the potential to be a powder keg, but the justice in charge, Judge Hall, made every effort to insure that all procedures were followed appropriately. He knew how precarious the situation was because of the situation in Kansas, and the overall mood of the country with regards to the topic of slavery, and he wanted to stay as far away from controversy as was possible. He assigned a competent legal defense team for Celia comprised of three men. The senior attorney had held political office, and it had been well documented that he did not hold strong opinions on anything, but particularly not on slavery, and two junior associates fresh out of law school with excellent research skills. Celia's defense team approached the trial not to prove Celia was innocent of the crime, but instead to prove her motive for committing the crime. It was felt by the defense that if they could introduce the forced sexual relationship between Celia and Newsome to the jury, they would also gain compassion for their client, and perhaps some leniency. The prosecution for the state designed their strategy around the goal of keeping the motive out of the jury's thoughts, and as a result, they objected to every question regarding the sexual nature of Celia's relationship with Robert Newsome. The Judge favored the prosecution, and made the job of the defense difficult. In describing Celia's attorney Jameson, McLaurin points out "Whatever his motives, his performance revealed that, in this case at least, Jameson believed even a slave accused of her master's murder deserved the best possible defense" (87). Each side presented their argument, and when both had rested, the jury was given their instructions, and not surprising they returned a guilty verdict, and Celia was sentenced to death by execution on November 16, 1855. Jameson and the rest of Celia's legal team felt the judge had not acted impartially as he was required to do by law and so they applied for an

appeal. Judge Hall denied the appeal, and Celia's team decided to take it to the State Supreme Court. It was feared that Celia would not live to see her appeal heard, and that was cemented by Judge Hall's next action. "In a move that must have astonished the defense, judge Hall refused to issue the requested order for a stay of execution" (McLaurin 103). The reasons for Judge Hall's actions are unknown, but McLaurin speculates, "the judge wished to dispose of the case as quickly as possible because of political tensions within the state resulting from the ongoing debates over slavery and Kansas" (103). Whatever his reasons, this action pushed Celia's situation into uncharted territory that brought to light the moral issues involved in her case. Although not unheard of, it was frowned upon for masters to engage in sexual relationships with slaves, and in a desperate attempt to procure justice for Celia, someone arranged for her to escape before her execution could take place. "Evidence in Celia's file indicates that the escape was planned, that Celia was removed from the jail to prevent her death before a ruling from the supreme court, and that her attorneys, if not involved in her actual escape, were at least aware that she had been freed for that purpose" (McLaurin, 104). Celia was not returned until after her original date of execution November 16, 1855, and although no one knows who aided her, it can be deduced that people in the sheriff's office, as well as townsfolk also supported her mission for justice given that she was hidden for at least 6 days. Once Celia was returned, a new date of execution was issued for December 21, 1855, and her attorney's requested the state Supreme Court consider her case as soon as possible. Their request was granted, and the Missouri Supreme Court ruled that after reviewing the case, there was no reason for an appeal, and "...an order for the stay of execution in this case be refused" (McLaurin 113). Celia's execution took place as

planned on December 21, 1855, Celia, a slave was hanged in Calloway County, Missouri. As was common of the time, people went to see the execution, and one witness aptly described the scene as he perceived it. “Thus closed one of the most horrible tragedies ever enacted in our county” (McLaurin 114). McLaurin ends his book with a description of what Celia’s experience can teach. He describes that this tale not only exposes the relationship between master and slave, slave and slave, but also mistress and slave. Celia had dealings with Robert Newsom, George, and Virginia and Mary Newsom, and each relationship was a careful balance at all times for this young girl. “The events in the last year of Celia’s life, although extraordinarily dramatic, demonstrate the nature of the moral choices individuals faced and indicate that some individuals had great difficulty making them” (McLaurin 121).

Overall McLaurin does a thorough job of telling Celia’s story, and although much can be learned from his portrayal of her experience, there is also a lot left unknown. The book was easy to read, and for an advanced placement student wanting to research the influence of slavery on politics, to what extent regular people were following the slave debate raging in the country, or what life was like for female slaves on small farms, this book would be helpful. Even for students who are not advanced placement, parts of the book are very readable, and much can be derived with regards to antebellum society. The story is a great hook and wrap up of a unit dealing with the topic of slavery, and a high school teacher can use this personal story to create the big picture for students when dealing with slavery. It gives a face and personal identity to a slave, and that is essential in helping a teacher garner empathy for slaves with modern high school students who are desensitized to issues like slavery. Teachers are up against the lack of compassion that

exists, and the lack of the ability to shock modern students with different historical scenarios such as slavery because they are so far removed from it, particularly on the south shore of Massachusetts where there is so little diversity. It has become commonplace to here students say, “Why do we have to learn about slavery again?” This phrase never ceases to amaze, but it also tells me that I must up my game when painting this brutal picture for these students and Celia’s life is an excellent tool to use. The cons of McLaurin’s book exist in the lack of factual information, and the amount of speculation inserted. The conclusions are logical and within realistic parameters, but at times they are without factual support. This is especially true when McLaurin is discussing how different white people involved felt about slavery, or when he is interjecting what he perceives the motive for an action or even inaction may be. Since there are no facts in documents, transcripts, or court filings, one must concede some of his points are simply educated guesses, and may not be true at all. Also, because he is using this one experience, he tends to get very detailed in his description of local politics, and it would be more helpful at the high school level to stick with the more famous names involved with the political scene of the times. Overall, the book was readable, and could teach broad lessons about antebellum America through a very specific example.

The overall point of Melton McLaurin in telling the story of Celia is to use the experience of one family and slave to draw larger conclusions about slavery in society as a whole. He also points out the underlying political climate of the times and just how occupied everyone was with slavery on the eve of Civil war America. He uses this desperate situation of one slave to highlight the life of many slaves, and he exposes all to the level of justice afforded slaves in antebellum America.

Works Cited

McLaurin, Melton. *Celia A Slave*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press., 1991. Print