

Dinah's Story

Written by Robert Branch

Welcome to Stenton. My name is Dinah, I've lived here for more than 60 years and, I'm here to share *my* story with you.

My story started many years before I came here. The first place I remember being, as a young girl, is Emlen House. Don't remember much about my parents. I had to do whatever Hannah Emlen told me to do like: comb her hair, help her get dressed, clean floors/walls, dust, laundry, wash dishes even, empty those awful smelling chamber pots.

Hannah's father, George, had given me to Hannah as a special gift. Young African girls and boys were very valuable, because, with proper training, their owners hoped to make them into good and faithful servants.

But, I always knew I was more than just a servant. I wanted the same things every other young girl wants; freedom, parents... family. I never gave up the hope that someday I could be a wife, a mother, have a family of my own.

Well, eventually, I grew up to become a young woman. There weren't many African young men around, but I did meet one who became my friend. Then the time came when we started talking about how we'd get married when we got older.

Now, Hannah was an attractive young woman, from a wealthy, respected, Quaker family. So, many men sought her favor. William Logan, also from a wealthy highly respected Quaker family, won her favor and she agreed to marry him. This marriage made me William Logan's property as part of the dowry property. George Emlen gave me to William. I would continue to be Hannah's personal servant just in a different place.

So, when Hannah left Emlen house to live in William's fancy townhouse in Philadelphia I went with her, leaving the man I hoped to marry behind. My plans for a family seemed to be wiped away as I spent most of my time looking after the needs of the Logans, especially after they started having children.

William seemed to be a good father, and he also liked to visit his father in the country at Stenton Plantation. After William's father died, William inherited Stenton and decided to move here. Once again, I found myself taken to live in another place.

The Logan family would continue to grow at Stenton. They eventually had 6 children. Sadly, 2 of them died. I did my best to comfort Hannah in those times, as one woman to another.

Now, Stenton was so big, the plantation required at least 10 servants to look after it. I was one of the Africans servants, but there were also paid and indentured white servants.

Although African and white servants often did much the same work, walked up and down the narrow back staircase, shared sleeping space in the bare attics; white servants sometimes had fancy clothing, came into closer contact with the Logans and their guests during their celebrations.

I found out that the indentured servants were working only to settle a debt, like, paying off what it cost them to come here by ship. Well, my ancestors were forced to come here by ship. Didn't cost them a thing, except their freedom. Hardly seems fair, but I've heard that there are some Africans who managed to work, earn money and buy their freedom. Heard about Richard Allen, who was owned by Benjamin Chew at Cliveden House who managed to do just that. He even started an African church in Philadelphia.

Couldn't imagine the Logan's letting me earn money so I could buy my freedom, thought about other ways I could get it. Didn't think running away was for me although, I understood why others made that choice. I was at Stenton, when a young African boy ran away, and hasn't been seen since.

Now the Logan's and others in the area didn't want their Africans, who usually worked from sun up to sun down, to run away. They seemed to know we needed time to ourselves. So, they allowed us to gather together, usually Saturday nights and Sundays. Even African servants from nearby properties found ways to come together. We'd share news, stories, food, enjoy each other's company. New families were formed. One of those families would be mine.

The boy I knew at Emlen house was now a young man, and we managed to meet once again. Our love could no longer be denied, but we knew we had to get our owner's permission first. We did and wasted no time jumping the broom, celebrating our marriage. Wasn't long after that I started to get sick in the mornings, sometimes having to run away from Hannah covering my mouth, desperately looking for a chamber pot.

Now, I somehow managed to get my work done until the day finally came when I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Wish my husband could have been there. The Logans named her Bess. They seemed pleased to have gained another lifelong servant.

Anyway, the day finally came when my love saw his daughter for the first time. We met as a family as much as we could. Then, suddenly he became weak, could no longer work. His owner offered him his freedom. My love wisely refused since he couldn't take care of himself. I feared

his owner would get tired of taking care of him, sell him for whatever he could get or just chase him away.

I had to do something. I decided to do what I never thought I'd do; ask the Logans to buy my husband. So, I pleaded with them to buy my love. They told me if they did the Quakers would disown them. But, after I told them how I couldn't sleep, was tired all day, the Logan's agreed to buy my love. Think they knew I couldn't be much of a servant with a broken heart.

I cared for my husband as best I could, and Bess always seemed to brighten his spirits. I treasured every moment we shared. But, eventually, he died leaving Bess and me behind.

We clung to one another for strength, and I was pleased to see Bess grow to be a beautiful young woman, and have her own child, a son named Cyrus.

Now I was a grandmother. I did what I could do to spoil him just as any grandmother would. But, sometimes I wept for him since he was born into bondage, just like those before him were. Will freedom ever come?

Years passed, and I would sometimes overhear Quaker leaders urging the Logans to free their Africans because the bible said to 'do unto others as you would want them to do to you'. They told them they didn't need to own Africans for life. If they needed servants, they should hire them or use indentured servants instead.

I noticed more and more Quakers were freeing their Africans. Hoped the Logans would do the same.

One day Bess came running up to me in tears, telling me the Logans had freed her, and that she would be leaving Stenton. Surely, I would soon be free. There were even small communities of newly freed Africans being started nearby.

Days passed, then months and the Logans had still not freed all their slaves. Why not me? Did they think not offering me freedom was in my best interest since I was getting older? Or, was it because I'd been with them so long, they saw me as a permanent part of their household?

Whatever their reason, the time had come for me to demand my freedom. I remember it was springtime, 1776. New life could be seen bursting forth everywhere, and I was determined to live a new life free from bondage.

So, I looked William and Hannah straight in their eyes, and told them I wanted freedom. They seemed surprised. They wanted to know if they had done anything to make me want to leave. I

explained my desire for freedom had nothing to do with anything they had done, I was born with this desire, just like every other person.

After a long pause, they agreed to give me "full Liberty to go and live with whom & Where I may Chuse." They even promised to put my freedom in writing so it could never be challenged or undone. Finally, I was free to make choices in my life.

I made the choice that was best for me. As a widow, I have no appetite to be in a strange place working for strange people. Been here so long. Staying here with the Logan's wouldn't be too bad, as long as they paid me like every other free person gets paid for their work. The Logans agreed to pay me 12 pounds every year. Now I can buy my own clothes, food, whatever I choose.

Now, I had freedom and money, so I could choose to buy my own clothes, food, whatever I had enough money to buy. Yet, I soon found out that my new freedom and money weren't enough to keep me from being right in the middle of a war I never chose to be involved in.

By the time the hot summer days in 1776 came, I heard learned that independence was declared; everybody was talking about war against England. Tensions between the colonies and England had been building for quite some time. Now, the Logans were devout Quakers, who refused to participate in wars, so they choose to stay out of the conflict as much as possible. William's eldest son, George, had left the year before to study medicine in Scotland.

William Logan chose to stay at Stenton, but by the fall of that year his long illness finally overcame him, and he died. I had done my best to help Hannah keep him as comfortable as possible. I mourned his loss, and remember him as a man who, at times, tried to do what was right. After he set me free, he set free an African man, who had a peg leg, so he could learn a trade.

As for Hannah, she was never the same after Williams death. She became very sickly and weak; so I was by her side, seeing to her every need. But, despite the best efforts of doctors, she died on a bitterly cold day, January of 1777. I wept; I had known her so long, and there were times I felt a closeness to her, as one woman to another.

Hannah's death made George the legal heir, but he was still in Scotland. I remained at Stenton, working for other members of the Logan family who stayed here in George's absence. We tried to keep the place as clean and orderly as possible until George arrived. Logan family members came and went, keeping an eye on the estate as they could. They really didn't want to be anywhere near fighting and war. I often found myself left alone to look after the place, and face whatever the war would bring.

Well, on a hot August day in 1777 a "George" came to Stenton, not Logan but Washington. Many soldiers came with him. He used Stenton as his headquarters. They finally left. I was glad. I worried what would happen to me if I got caught in the middle of a fight between Washington's army and the British.

Soon afterwards, I could hear loud explosions coming from Philadelphia. It was the British. Buildings were being set on fire. Clouds of smoke rose up to the sky. I knew it wouldn't be long until the British found their way here.

I was right. British General Howe came here with his soldiers. Who was I to try to stop them? They left after much commotion. I thought, surely, the worst is over.

I was wrong. Soon after that, I heard the sound of horses coming on the road. Not again. It was mean looking British soldiers with flaming torches in their hands. They told me they had orders to burn the place down and demanded to know where the barn was. I knew they wanted to bring hay, light it on fire, to make the mansion burn much quicker.

I thought, if I don't tell them they might beat or even kill me so, I pointed them in the right direction. After they went to the barn, another group of British soldiers with an officer seemed to come out of nowhere. Asked me if I had I seen any deserters. Told them I saw some men that looked like they were running away from something. Pointed them to the barn. The soldiers from the barn said I was lying. They had orders to burn this place down. The soldiers looking for runaways believed me.

I laughed as they all rode away. Never thought I'd see the day when the word of an African woman was taken above the word of not one, but two white men. Those British soldiers never came back, and the place I had called home for so many years was saved.

Years passed. We, who remained, did our best to take care of the place, but the mansion needed lots of fixing. There were overgrown plants and trees everywhere.

Around 1780, George returned to Stenton. He would get married and have 3 children. He made many repairs, built new buildings, tore down those awful walls. The mansion became surrounded by beautiful green grass, with some trees here and there. He would also have what many people called a farm, that everyone seemed to admire. Didn't much look or feel like that plantation that was here from the beginning with its Africans in bondage. Stenton changed for the better over time.

Well, my time to leave this world is coming, and I sometimes think about what I'll leave behind. No fancy houses or riches, that's for sure. All I can leave behind is my **name** and my **story**.

So, don't forget my name, Dinah. Found out it comes from the Bible. I heard there were 2 African Dinahs over there in Cliveden House. Seems like whites liked to give many African women that name, as if we are all the same, property to serve at their master's pleasure.

But, my story, along with the stories of all those other Dinahs, show no one can put out the fire of freedom that burns in us all. That same fire of freedom burst forth from James Logan's African servant, Sampson, who burned down a building in his angry protest.

May my story inspire every one of us to embrace freedom and equality for all, to keep the house we all share from burning down.

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