

Betsey Stockton – A Slave Who Dreamed of Greatness

Betsey Stockton was born into a slave family around 1798. Her parents were the property of Elizabeth (Stockton) Green, the daughter of a wealthy landowner in Princeton, New Jersey.

Betsey was characterized as a restless child growing up, but she underwent a remarkable change following her conversion during a revival that hit Princeton in 1816. She was accepted for membership in the First Presbyterian Church and was baptized.

After Betsey was emancipated in 1817, she continued to work in the Green home as a paid servant. She was allowed to use the family's extensive library and was personally mentored by Ashbel Green, who later became the president of Princeton University.

One of her dreams was to journey abroad on a missions trip, particularly to Africa. A second was to have a school for black children.

Betsey worked hard at her studies and acquired vast knowledge in English, literature, math, geography, Jewish antiquities and the Bible. In 1821, the Rev. Charles S. Stewart, an associate of Ashbel Green's, planned a missions trip to the Sandwich Islands, now known as the Hawaiian Islands. Betsey was asked to join him, his wife and several others on the trip.

The missionaries set sail on November 20, 1822. Five months later, they landed in Honolulu and proceeded to Lahaina on the island of Maui. There they met the Hawaiian king, whose son asked Betsey to teach him English.

Prior to this time, only members of the royal family were allowed to receive formal education. But Betsey and her companions believed that if the common people of Hawaii could understand the Scriptures, it would have a positive influence on the society.

Betsey set up a school for the islanders, to whom she taught English, Latin, history and algebra. Within two years there were more than 8,000 students attending 200 island schools.

After 2-1/2 years, problems with Mrs. Stewart's health forced the family to return home. But Betsey's work continued through the efforts of others.

Following Mrs. Stewart's death in 1830, education became the focus of Betsey's life. For three decades, she worked as a teacher in Princeton, New Jersey, where she established the Witherspoon Street Colored School.

As the first nonwhite woman missionary in the Sandwich Islands, Betsey inspired hundreds of other single women to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. She died in 1865 and was buried in the Stewart family plot in Cooperstown, New York.