

# Belmont Mansion

## CORNELIA WELLS Life of a Freed Slave at Belmont Mansion

I come to tell you the story of my life - the life of a freed slave who lived and worked at Belmont Mansion. I am Cornelia Wells. I earned my freedom through three years' services as a cook for the Peters Family. Judge Peters bought me, and my daughter, from Thomas Morgan in 1811. He made me an indentured servant to repay him for my freedom. Praise God, he kept us together and freed my daughter, too. It was my misfortune to live in that dark time when men had the right to buy and sell our people - to take the fruits of our labor and give us nothing in return. Yet I was among the fortunate ones, to come to this place - Philadelphia - where men saw the wrong of holding a person in slavery. Judge Peters was one of those men.

Though the judge himself was a member of St. Peters Episcopal Church, he was one of the non-Quakers who joined the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. He spoke against the laws that let Southern slave owners capture fugitive slaves who had found their way to freedom in Pennsylvania, and he a judge charged to enforce the law. He was careful to protect my freedom by making sure all my papers were in order. My indenture was recorded in the book of the Justice of the Peace here in Blockley Township. In those days of bounty hunters looking for profit by returning runaway slaves to their former masters, every freed slave had to have papers to be safe.

When I first came to Belmont, Judge Peters's daughter Sally was struggling to manage that big house and entertain all his worthy guests without any mother to guide her. Through the years, the greatest of men had come to visit Judge Peters at his Belmont home - Washington, Lafayette, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison. The Peters received their guests in the great hall. All the visitors enjoyed viewing the fine paintings and the white-plastered ceiling showing violin, lute, horn, flowers and seashells. Outside they took their pleasure among the grand gardens and trees planted by the judge's father. From the front of the big house, you could see down the Schuylkill River all the way to Philadelphia and the Jersey hills beyond. But I had no time to linger, admiring such fineries, with all the cooking to be done.

Sally was grateful for my help; she even gave me thirty dollars when my time in service was past. After that the Peters gave me regular work, doing all the household washing. Taking in washing, sewing, and cooking were the few kinds of work open to women like me who had been slaves and were never given a chance to learn reading and writing. Every quarter of the year Judge Peters would

settle his accounts with me - fifteen dollars. I was paid - and every payment carefully written in his daybook. My daughter Jane helped me and, as she grew to be a woman in her own right, Judge Peters paid her for her own share of our labors. Wages for my work! Slavery and servitude were behind us.

I settled in the cottage down by the river, the one they said the Farmer Boelsen built, before the Peters came to this land. To get to the cottage from the big house, you cut through the tenant farmer's fields or followed the road to the limekilns down by the river. There they burned limestone to make the lime fertilizer for the fields - one of the many experiments that made the Peters farm at Belmont famous while he was President of the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Agriculture. He returned the land around the big house to orchards of apple, peach, and cherry trees and to pasture for dairy cows and sheep for wool. Down along the river, too, were the quarries where they cut stone. Those stones were taken down river to be the piers for the great bridge across the Schuylkill which Judge Peters helped build. With the opening of the bridge, everyone here west of the river no longer depended on ferries and floating bridges to get across to Philadelphia.

When the neighborhood boys came down to the river to go fishing, they gave me a few pennies from their pocket money to let them dig around the cabbages in my garden for worms. "Old Cornelia" they called me. My small garden served me and my daily needs. Judge Peters had the grandest gardens and farm at Belmont; people came from all over to see. And I ran my little tavern at the cottage, selling spruce beer and ginger cakes. The boys liked the horse-shaped cakes. Fishermen would mark my tavern by the sign above the door - beer flowing from bottle to mug in a rainbow. Shad fishermen rented the island down below in the river from Judge Peters - Peters's Island they called it. And for every day of the shad season, the fishermen brought Judge Peters a fresh fish.

A few years after the Judge died in 1828, I too passed to the other side. But I left a legacy to my daughter and to all women in the generations to follow - a legacy of freedom. No woman should suffer the cruelties of slavery - to take no benefit from her work, to have no home to call her own, to have her own children taken from her. My daughter will carry with her the memories of a mother who found her way to freedom, not only through the kindness of a just man but also through hard work and self-reliance. I leave a legacy of a free woman who can do for herself, make the most of her life, and take care of her own.