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Price, Nelly (fl. 1780–1790)

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free woman of color, property-holder, and trader in Natchez, Mississippi, was most likely born in the mid-eighteenth century. Very little is known about the early life of Eleanor, or Nelly, as she was often called. She testified in a court document in 1786 that she had been in America for twenty years, although her country of origin is unclear. In the same petition, she was identified as an “English mulatto woman,” suggesting perhaps she was born in the British-held West Indies or in the American colonies. As the Natchez District was under British rule from 1763 until 1779, it is possible that she was the daughter of an enslaved woman and a British man who subsequently manumitted his daughter and furnished her with property.

Most of the biographical details concerning her life surface in court documents from the Natchez District, which was controlled by the Spanish from 1779 to 1795. Eleanor used the courts to protect her liberties as a propertied free woman of color on at least seven different occasions spanning the period of eight years. Kimberly Hanger noted in her research of New Orleans's free women of color during the Spanish period that “many slave and free black women did not hesitate to use the legal system, along with kinship and patronage networks, to improve their status and material circumstances” (Hanger, 172–173). The majority of the cases she brought to the court's attention involved the recovery of money or property, usually from white individuals in Natchez.

In approximately 1782, Eleanor moved to a plantation in the Grand Gulf area in the Natchez District where she occupied herself in a great many pursuits. In addition to farming, she operated a trading network with settlers and local Native Americans. A few suits she initiated before the courts involved the repayment of goods or services. For instance, in 1782, she brought a suit against James Barfield and his wife for failing to recompense her for provisioning the couple with food while he was imprisoned for forty-eight days at the expense of \$38. The court responded in Eleanor's favor and the Barfields were ordered to reimburse her. Another case she initiated was against John Stowers who owed her \$4 in “sundries” and \$2 for a plow she furnished him with.

Eleanor was also a healer of sorts as well as a midwife. In the Stowers case, in addition to merchandise, he owed her \$8 for delivering an enslaved woman's baby. In that same year of 1783, she brought suit against another man, John Stanley, who did not fulfill his obligation to repay her for attending to a wounded Indian. He promised to pay her with a cow for her services. She sent a hired man to collect the cow, but he was only able to bring Eleanor three quarters of the meat, which she then sold to the local garrison. Thus, she brought suit for the remainder of the value of the meat as well as the hire of the man that Stanley owed her.

As with many free women of color, Eleanor formed a partnership with a white man, Spaniard Miguel Lopez. This relationship commenced at approximately the time that she moved to Grand Gulf in 1782 and continued until Lopez's death in 1788. She lived with him as his housekeeper while remaining engaged in the abovementioned activities. As a woman of color, Eleanor was vulnerable to some challenges, such as physical abuse. Indeed, she used one act of violence committed against her to her advantage.

In 1788, she brought a claim against the estate of Lopez, who was then deceased. She petitioned the court to allow her to claim the house that she had constructed at her expense on a lot given to her by Lopez. She additionally requested to be paid out of the estate wages that she had accrued over the years, at \$10 a month, and money that she had spent on her own to settle Lopez's accounts, all totaling \$967.

Witnesses testified for her that in June of 1782 while Nelly and Miguel lived together they had quarreled and that Lopez beat her. One of the witnesses, Patrick Murphy, recounted that he encountered Eleanor crying and when pressed for an explanation as to why, she informed him that Lopez had beaten her. Eleanor subsequently moved out of his house and resided at another domicile in the city and refused to return even after Lopez entreated her to come back. She eventually did, but only on the promise that he would recompense her for her trouble at \$10 a month. In spite of the fact that she endured a beating, she was able to recover from it and turned it to her gain.

During the course of this litigation, Eleanor produced five witnesses, all white men, who corroborated her story and agreed that Eleanor had been held in Lopez's employment for wages. Three of them confirmed that they heard Lopez say that her monthly wage was \$10. William Irwin related that Lopez told him that a part of the house belonged to Nelly. It was not enough, however, as a few weeks after these proceedings took place the house was put up for sale by the court. On every Monday for three weeks, the house was exposed to sale, but no one bid on it. On 14 February 1789, five months after the house had initially been offered to the public, Nelly outbid Robert Abrams by a few dollars and purchased the house for \$335. Unfortunately, she lost the house by June 1789 when she was not able to produce funds for it, and it defaulted to Abrams. Evidently, she had not been successful in her bid to be rewarded the wages and accounts from Lopez's estate. Eleanor disappears from the records after this case.

Further Reading

Hanger, Kimberly. "'The Fortunes of Women in America: Spanish New Orleans' Free Women of African Descent and Their Relations," in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, ed. Patricia Morton (1996).

McBee, May Wilson. *Natchez Court Records 1767–1805*, in the May Wilson McBee Collection (1953).