

2023 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History Student Creative Expressions Contest Western Region Winning Submission

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Although the story of Kitty Reynolds took place at a very well-known landmark in my county, I had never learned about her until I began searching for stories within my community that are not always told. She and her family had a large impact on all African-Americans and their right to a fair trial. It is crucial to share stories like Kitty's, and, while this seems like an immense undertaking, it can truly be achieved by simply telling the story. It is a great responsibility to tell the untold story, but it does not have to be a grand gesture. While impressive events can be held in remembrance of people with hidden stories, their anecdotes are best spread through plain actions, such as my short essay about Kitty. Sharing a story like Kitty Reynolds' is best accomplished by directly telling the story to others. I believe my written project recounts Kitty's life in a way that honors her courage and compassion, emphasizes the influence she had, and informs others of the notability of her life's story.

Kitty Reynolds, a formerly enslaved woman at Rock Spring Plantation, was the mother of two men whose court proceedings led to a significant change in civil rights. From the stories that have survived, Kitty was a compassionate, strong woman who, despite the challenges she faced, persevered. Her memory is kept alive by her descendants, and her portrait is displayed in the Reynolds Homestead, the plantation where she was enslaved.

Kitty was born in 1838 and, for the majority of her life, she was enslaved at Rock Spring Plantation, now the Reynolds Homestead. This plantation was built by Hardin Reynolds, the father of R.J. Reynolds, who created the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. One story of Kitty that has passed through the generations describes her distracting a bull charging Hardin Reynolds, the man under whom she was enslaved, thus saving his life. This act of kindness and courage secured her spot as the nanny of the sixteen Reynolds children.

Kitty's life changed exceptionally with emancipation. She became a free woman after living her entire life enslaved. After this substantial adjustment, the Reynolds children Kitty helped raise kept in close contact with her. One of these children, R.J. Reynolds, bought Kitty a house and consistently asked her to visit him and his family in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.



Kitty's family made history in 1883. Two white men were mocking the school that had recently been created for African-Americans, and two of Kitty's sons, Burwell and Lee, got into a fight with them. This resulted in Burwell stabbing one of the men and both sons being charged with murder. A son-in-law of Hardin Reynolds and another attorney defended Kitty's sons in their trial. Despite both being former members of the Confederate Army, the lawyers asked for a third of the jury to be composed of African-Americans. The judge refused this suggestion, and after an appeal and many other proceedings, the case made it to the Supreme Court. The court determined that race could not be a deciding aspect of jury eligibility and made the decision called *Ex Parte Virginia*.

Kitty Reynolds' family paved the way for African-Americans to have the right to a fair trial. In the anecdotes she is remembered by, it is clear that she was a capable, strong woman who possessed great amounts of courage, love, and forgiveness. She is inspiring, not just as the mother of a family that changed history, but as a formerly enslaved woman who had the resilience to live on despite the many obstacles laid before her. It is of the utmost importance that Kitty's story, alongside other untold stories, is shared. However, this does not have to be accomplished through a massive undertaking. Kitty's story exemplifies that small gestures are just as important as large endeavors.



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