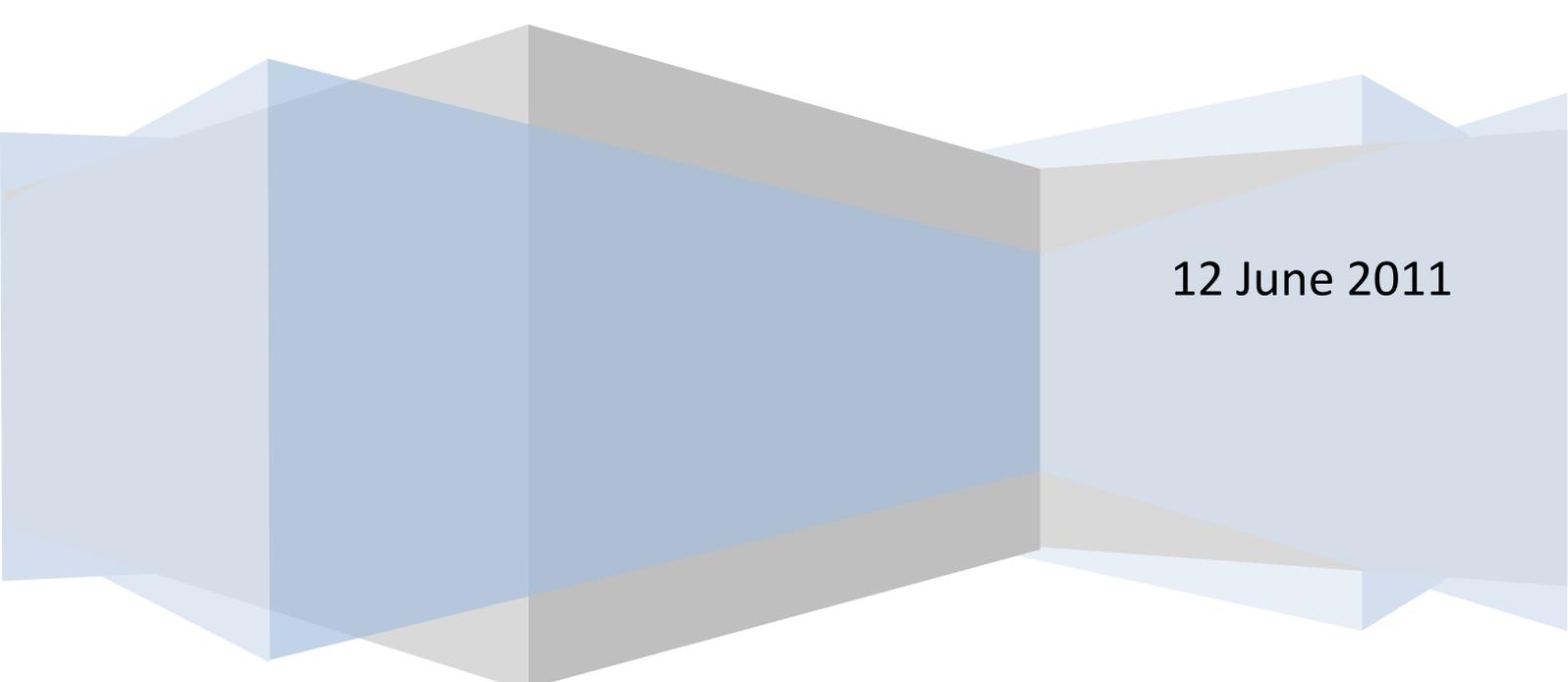


Prepared for the Historic Elk Landing Foundation

# **An Investigation of a Slave Woman's Role in the Defense of Elkton during the War of 1812**

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# Hetty Boulden

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## Introduction

As the Bicentennial of the War of 1812 nears, The Historic Elk Landing Foundation (HELFF) is developing historically accurate character interpretations of individuals directly associated with the British incursion on the Upper Elk River in April 1813. Beyond the large array of traditional contenders for such anniversary programming, the nonprofit museum seeks to present some underrepresented accounts involving people passed over by the customary, local historiography. While an assortment of individuals could be integrated into this cohort, including women, African-Americans, slaves, indentured servants and outcasts from society, HELFF has identified a slave-woman, Hetty Boulden, for consideration. This report prepared at the request of HELFF by a consulting public historian, thus investigates the life-story of this citizen of Cecil County, using customary, evidentiary guidelines to develop proof-points and flush out determinations supported by the historical record.

## Methods and Scope of Study

This investigation seeks to answer three basic questions about Hetty Boulden, an African-American slave woman who resided in the County during a large part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The questions are:

1. Is Boulden involved in activities associated with the British attack on the Upper Elk in April 1813?
2. If so what is the nature of that involvement; and
3. What is Boulden's life story?

This limited investigation uses a structured, sampling methodology, one involving the examination of manuscript sources most likely to yield insights on a 19<sup>th</sup> century African-American. Data were gathered by reviewing the commonly available published historical literature, researching manuscript records, and checking governmental data. With these questions framing the investigation, the study examines extant records to see if familial

relationships, ownership information, and accounts of her involvement in the incursion can be developed with credible evidence. This process involved examining public records in Cecil County Maryland and Delaware. Specifically key dates in all Cecil County newspapers were checked, as were the Decennial Census of the United States, and cemetery and burial records. From a legal perspective, the land, probate, and criminal records at the Cecil County Courthouse were studied, as were relevant probate and land records at the Delaware Public Archives. Records repositories used were the Cecil County Courthouse, the Historical Society of Cecil County, the Delaware Public Archives, and the Elk Landing virtual reference library.

## Background

Background information on events on the Upper Elk in 1813, are abstracted from the HELF interpretive guidance documents published on the non-profit's website ([www.elklanding.org](http://www.elklanding.org)). This data was not independently tested or validated, as that it is outside the scope of this report. The summary was largely abstracted from Johnston's History of Cecil County. In addition, briefing material on Henderson was abstracted from the files of the Historical Society of Cecil County as presented and independent testing was not conducted. The basics on Frenchtown, came from the National Registry Nomination Report.

On April 28<sup>th</sup> 1813, elements of the British fleet were detailed to destroy military stores and warehouses at Frenchtown, the western terminus of an important portage route across the top of the Delmarva Peninsula. At this location, there was a small fort mounted with three four-pounder cannons. When the enemy approached, the local militia fled to Elk Landing, a more defensible fort upstream about a mile, according to HELF. While part of the force plundered and burned storehouses, another contingent attempted to advance on Elk Landing. As those making an effort to navigate up the Elk River to the county seat encountered resistance at For Defiance, they turned back.

Here is how the HELF interpretive guidance document, *The War of 1812 and How It Relates to Elk Landing*, describes the events that follow:

Having been driven back by the local militia, guarding the water route to Elkton, the enemy attempted to advance on the county seat by land. At White Hall, the home of Frisby Henderson, they tried to induce Henderson to lead

them to town. . . . When he refused, one of his slave girls volunteered to be their guide. Instead of leading them to Elkton, the slave led them to Cedar Point, which was just opposite Fort Hollingsworth at Elk Landing. The British who were not up for a good fight hastily retreated back to the waiting barges and rowed back to their waiting schooner which retreated back to the rest of the fleet near Turkey Point. (Leith, 2010)

### *Frenchtown*

By 1812, Frenchtown was an important link in the north-south travel route. As early as 1775, there was regular stage service between New Castle, a jolting seventeen-mile passage over unimproved roads that connected with the relatively comfortable packet boats on the Delaware and Elk rivers. By 1809, the demand for an improved road between the two rivers led to the creation of the New Castle and Frenchtown Turnpike. When the war arrived on the Bay there were storehouses or depots with supplies useful to the military. (U. S. Dept. of the Interior, 1972)



Figure 1. 1803 Latrobe Map of Frenchtown, Showing possible placement of a canal (Latrobe, 1803)

### *Henderson*

Frisby Henderson, the son of Thomas and Hannah, was born at Frenchtown on June 16, 1767. His father was a Revolutionary soldier, a captain, who died while on Military duty in New Jersey in 1777. A member of Pencader Presbyterian Church, he maintained controlling financial and operational interest in the line of steamboats and stages between

Baltimore and Philadelphia. In the War of 1812 his warehouses at Frenchtown were burned by the British. Soon after the war he moved to Elkton, where he lived until his death in April 1845. His only son, Andrew F. Henderson, was killed in 1842 by the explosion of the steamboat Medona. (Cecil, 1950)

## The Data

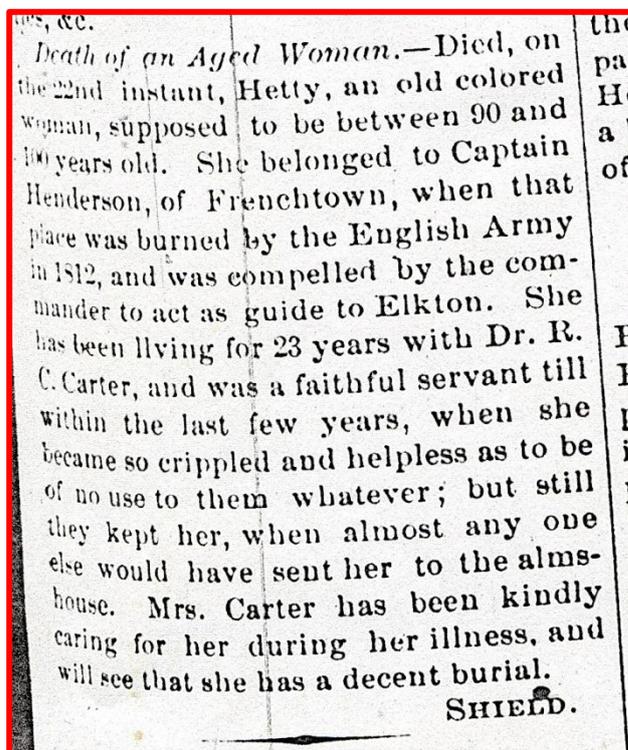
### *Newspapers*

Boulden first came to the attention of this researcher in county newspapers. As the nation edged toward Civil War in 1860, the *Cecil Whig* published an account of the burning of Frenchtown, as they had “lately heard it from a colored woman, named Hetty Bulden, about 70 years of age,” who lived with Dr. R. C. Carter at Cherry Hill. The servant of the “late Frisby Henderson, who lived at White Hall,” notes that there were a number of “American soldiers” at Frenchtown. When someone called out they’re coming, “they all took to their heels and scampered across the fields toward Elkton. The enemy came up in 12 or 14 barges, landing at White Hall to inquire about the way to Elkton. “The English officer then made him send Hetty to show them the way by land; she being afraid to go one of the officers told her she should not be hurt; and that he would give her more money than she could carry. She took the men across to Cedar Point, though she could have taken them on the direct road if she had wish do to do so. This was about noon in the day.”

When they saw the water at Cedar Point, they “concluded they had better go back, swearing they would burn all they could. She came back to White Hall with them, and heard them threaten to hang Mr. H. before his own door for deceiving them. Several of the barges went up the riverside near to Fort Defiance. “The English who remained at the Frenchtown, while the other were up the river, set fire to the warehouses, which burned and were filled with government goods, and also burned two vessels, which were lying at the wharf, one a schooner, and the other a sloop from Port Deposit. (Cecil Whig, 1860)

Figure 2. Cecil Democrat's Death Notice 1873

Thirteen years later (1873) *the Cecil Democrat* reported that “Hetty, an old colored woman, supposed to be between 90 and 100 years old,” died on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. “She belonged to Captain Henderson of Frenchtown when that place was burned by the English Army in 1812 (sic) and was compelled by the commander to act as a guide to Elkton.” She lived for 23 years with Dr. R. C. Carter working as servant until becoming so crippled and helpless that the Doctor’s family cared for her. “Mrs. Carter . . . will see that she has a decent burial. Other newspapers published at this time, including the *Cecil Whig*, were examined and none of those carried the death notice. (*Cecil Democrat*, 1873)



Without specifically mentioning her name, Hetty appears in a county newspaper one more time. A local columnist, Polk Racine, who made a living freelancing colourful stories published a piece in 1907 called, “The British Fleet on Elk River, or the Skiddoo at Old Cedar Point,” in the *Cecil Democrat*. “The English commandant had gone to Mr. Henderson and tried to prevail with the old gentleman, that he send one of his slaves of which he had several, to guide them, the British, to Elkton, by the highway. But the old patriot had said nay. . . The old man owned one family slave who was rather intelligent. She had heard what had passed between her master and the British officer and when she got a chance she told her master that she would like to play a trick on the hated British by pretending to lead them to Elkton, and get them trapped at Cedar Point. Meanwhile another slave was instructed to “ride for his very life, around to Fort Hollingsworth, and tell Captain Bennett to keep a close watch on Cedar Point, because the English will be there tonight sometime.”

Racine’s account of how the “slave risked her life to save Elkton by leading them to the stone house at Cedar Pont, where Captain Bennett and his boys poured in their shot,”

causing them to cut and run, contains a great amount of colourful, engaging narrative, which had was produced for commercial purposes and was surely strengthened with generational retellings. The author stretched this column out over four weekly issues. (Racine, *The British Fleet on Elk River or the Skidoo at Old Cedar Point*, 1907)

In Racine’s highly embellished pieces, he adds some narrative about her manumission, which wasn’t picked up by other sources. The people of Elkton raised a thousand dollars to purchase the slave girl’s freedom from Henderson. When the delegation met Mr. Henderson and the girl in his coach, “Mr. Henderson said, too late gentlemen, too late, the girl can’t be bought from me because I have given her to herself and I am on my way to Elkton now to now to have the papers prepared in this case. But if the people of Elkton want to show their appreciation of her service to them, they can place the purchase money in trust for her until she is twenty one years of age. And so it was fixed, and her former master was made her guardian and besides paying her the interest of the thousand dollars, he paid her wages as upper servant in his magnificent home. (Racine, *The British Fleet on Elk River, or the Skidoo at Old Cedar Point*, 1907). There are significant validation problems with the Racine’s narrative as an attempt was made to verify it in the Clerk of the Court’s office in Cecil County, without success.

### *Census*

The census was the next place examined for the study. Prior to 1850, only the head of the household was enumerated. The following table summarizes the data.

**Table 1. Decennial Census Data (U. S. Census Bureau, 1840-1870)**

Census	Name	Location	Notes
1840	Milly Boulden	District 2 (Chesapeake City area), Cecil County, MD.	Single free female living in household; Age between 55 and 99 (wide ranges were used). This is the closest match based on surname, locality, and age for other listings are less probable.
1850	Hester Boulden	4th District (Fair Hill area), Cecil County	Living with family of Dr. Carter, Age 55 POB Maryland

1860	Hetty Boulden	1870, 4 <sup>th</sup> District, PO Fair Hill, Cecil County, MD.	Living with family of Dr. Carter. Age., 70; POB not listed
1870	Hettie Boulden	1860, 4th District Cecil County, MD.	Living with family of Dr. Carter, the almshouse physician, POB MD, Age, 90

### *Governmental Record*

A logical records group are probate, equity, and land records, but recordations for an appropriate candidate were not found. The land records were checked for manumissions of a Hetty (or similar name) but produced no results. In addition ownership documentation for Hetty Boulden were not found in Henderson recordations at the Clerk of the Court's office, although Henderson owned a number of slaves and was manumitting them in the 1840s. Records of her life were not found in the slave and tax records of Cecil County. A similar, but less comprehensive search strategy was used at the Delaware Public Archives. There the tax and land records for Pencader Hundred were checked. Frisby Henderson is involved with one slave, a male and there are a number of Boulden slave holders, but none of them have candidates that are appropriate for this study. (Pfeiffer, 2002)

Using a broader strategy, the land records were searched for other slaves Henderson manumitted. Four, Phillis, Sullivan, Sarah Anderson, and Peter Lewis, were freed in the 1820s by their owner. None of them appear to be qualified candidates for consideration. (Clerk of the Court, Cecil County, 1810 - 1838)

### *Secondary Sources*

George Johnston's *History of Cecil County* notes a slave woman's involvement in the skirmish. Failing to advance on Elkton by way of the Elk River, the author says the English landed at White Hall, where they tried to induce Frisby Henderson, Esq., to show them the road to Elkton. ". . . but failing this, they took one of the female slaves, with them, and tried to bribe her to act as their guide. She took them to Cedar Point opposite Fort Hollingsworth, then in command of Captain Henry Bennett, who opened fire upon them and they made a hasty retreat . . ." (Johnston, 1881)

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another Cecil County writer, Alice Miller, uses a similar narrative:

“They landed on the other side of the river at White Hall, then owned by Frisby Henderson. Here they bribed the female slave to act as their guide to Elkton. She fooled the British by taking them to Cedar Point opposite Fort Hollingsworth at Elk Landing. The militia immediately opened fire and the invaders beat a hastily retreat. The attempt upon Elkton had been frustrated. (Miller, 1947)

## Conclusions

This investigation confirms that an African-American, female lived in Cecil County for most of the 19th century. Multiple sources, including newspaper accounts, census records, and a death notice, strongly support the conclusion. There is also sufficient data to make a reasonable assumption that she is present when the British come up the River and is involved in the advance on Elkton. Two competing, independent newspapers report the story in similar ways at different times. When the first account was published, there were people alive who would have remembered the incident and challenged the framework, if there were major errors. The competing newspapers were cross-referenced for verification, but nothing opposing or supporting the narratives were found. These papers were fiercely competitive and would usually challenge major errors produced by opposing weekly. Racine’s story is problematic and should not be accepted as validated evidence, despite its colourful narrative. As for her life’s story, Hetty appears to have been born in the 1790s. There are indicators that she worked as a slave for Henderson, but harvested data as not concretized that assumption. By 1850 she is living with Dr. Carter and routinely shows up in the Decennial Census. The elderly woman dies in 1873.

**Table 2, Timeline**

1790 - 1795	Hetty born, according to census records
1813, April	Hetty is present when British burn Frenchtown and has involvement with enemy
1850	Hetty lives wih Dr. Carter (census)

1873

Hetty dies at the age of 90 or 100

## Recommendations for Additional Research & Discussion of Study

1. To serve as a baseline for happenings at Elk Landing during late April 1813, HELF should examine its sources and develop an interpretive guidance document, one that outlines the basics of the incursion at the Landing and provides standard, core information to serve as talking points for guides and interpreters. The data presented was not independently evaluated. HELF has many readily available documents, which will allow it to come to an agreement on what happened at the confluence of the Big and Little Elk creeks. That examination is central to the development of characters.
2. A significant problem with this story is the gap created by missing evidence associated with her ownership and manumission, data which one would expect to find.
3. A careful attempt was made to locate supporting evidence of slave ownership, but none was found. Perhaps a more comprehensive, broader, more universal search will unearth something in the future in the local records in Delaware and Maryland. Both states must be considered as Boulden is a common surname across the state line and Henderson has interests in Delaware. In addition, he worships at Pencader Hundred.
4. Alice Miller cites some sources that should be checked. Specifically in her telling of the slave story she cites the papers of Governor Groome, without indicating the location of the files. The Society was checked, but the manuscripts are not located there. It is recommended that searches be made of the Maryland Archives and the Maryland Historical Society.

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