

BOUND TO BE FREE: THE CASE OF POLLY STRONG*

(Although based on actual facts surrounding the case of *State v. Lasselle*, parts of this script may be the authors' fictional interpretation.)

(Mr. Kinney is seated at Attorney Table.)

(Students hold cue cards that say "Applause")

Setting: Outside the Capitol Building, Corydon, July, 1820

Students with Corydon, Indiana, July 1820 location card, Corydon, Capitol building picture card, Historic Indiana and Kentucky map, and Corydon Velcro Label walk to the front of the room. The students with location card, picture card, and map place on easels. Post-it person sticks Corydon post-it to Velcro on map.

Polly: I hope to soon be free! Please excuse my tears, but they are tears of worry! I hope that I will never be bound as a slave again! Inside this building, right now, Judges Blackford, Holman, and Scott are deciding whether I will be free or returned to bondage. Do you know who these men are?

The 3 students assigned biography cards for Judges Scott, Holman, and Blackford stand then loudly, clearly, and slowly read their cards. The students will be reading from a microphone in the middle aisle. Judge Scott biography first.

Please forgive my manners! Let me introduce myself. I am Polly, although I was baptized Marguerite. Have you heard about me? I have heard that my story has been talked about throughout the whole of Indiana and even the Northwest Territory!

(Allow for responses.)

* Although written for use by students in grades 4-8, the classroom teacher easily can adapt this script to accommodate either older or younger students. For example, high school students could search for more biographical information about the key players or about the relocation of Indiana's capitol from Vincennes to Corydon.

Did you know that at one time Indiana was a part of the Northwest Territory?

Do you know what I mean by the Northwest Territory?

Students with **definition card for Northwest Territory** and **map of Northwest Territory** stand up. The student reading the definition will be reading loudly, clearly, and slowly from a microphone in the middle aisle. The student with map stand at front and hold map up high while definition is read. Then all sit back down together.

Did you know that slavery was illegal in the Northwest Territory and in Indiana Territory?

(Allow for responses. Students hold **cue cards that say "Yes!"**)

Did you know that Indiana's first constitution forbade slavery?

(Allow for responses. Students hold **cue cards that say "Yes!"**)

Do you know when this constitution was written?

Group of students assigned to this response stand up and say together, "**1816**". Anyone in the audience can join in—so have all students practice this!

Yes, I have in my memory some words from that Constitution. It says, "That all men are born equally free and independent; and have certain natural, inherent, and unalienable rights; among which are, the enjoying and defending of life and liberty, and of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; and pursuing, and obtaining happiness and safety." And later on it says SLAVERY WAS ILLEGAL! So why, then was slavery tolerated in Indiana?

(Allow for responses.)

But let me continue my story, so you can understand why I am here outside this courthouse in Corydon waiting to see if I will be free.

I was born 22 years ago in Vincennes, Indiana. Do you know where Vincennes is?

Students with **definition card for Territorial Capitol of Vincennes; Vincennes, Indiana Location card; Vincennes, Capitol building picture card; and Vincennes Velcro Label** stand up. The student reading the definition will be reading loudly, clearly, and slowly from a microphone in the middle aisle. The students with picture and location cards stand at front and hold cards up high while definition is read. Then all sit back down together. When done reading, student with Post-it locates Vincennes on the map.

My mother's name is Jenny. She is standing right over there. (Point at audience member.)

Student assigned as Polly's mom stands up and waves/smiles – hold up sign saying **"Polly's mom"**—turn so whole audience gets a chance to read sign.

She was kidnapped in Kentucky by some Indians who eventually sold her to a Frenchman named Lasselle – Antoine Lasselle.

Student assigned to indicate Kentucky comes to front and attaches **Kentucky Velcro Label** to map.

Now don't be confused. This is my current master's uncle.

I suppose you have heard about this practice which put women like my mother and me at risk—stealing people and selling them as slaves. Mother Jenny had no choice in the matter – she was merely a slave and considered property.

My mother had two children. I have a brother named James. See, that's James over there next to my mother.

Student assigned as Polly's brother stands up and waves/smiles – hold up sign saying **"Polly's brother"**—turn so whole audience gets a chance to read sign.

Captain David Strong from Fort Wayne is thought to be our father.

Student assigned to locate Fort Wayne comes to front and attaches **Fort Wayne Velcro Label** to map.

Our mother was not married to Captain Strong, but in my baptismal record he is named as my father. I was given his last name, so I am Polly Strong.

Hyacinthe Lasselle was already one of the most prominent men in Vincennes when he bought my mother, James, and me. Lasselle owned a tavern, which served as the only hotel in Vincennes. That's him over there. (Point to Audience member.)

Student assigned as **Hyacinthe Lasselle** stands up and scowls as he slowly looks around at whole audience. Student with **sign saying "Hyacinthe Lasselle"** stands up with him—turning sign so everyone can see.

My mother works in Mrs. Lasselle's home – James and I worked in the tavern or at home. We weren't forced to work in the fields like I've heard slaves in the South are forced to do. However, we still had no freedom to choose what we wanted to do. Our time was planned for us and we had very little free time. James and I wanted to learn to read, and we were lucky because a kind man we met in the tavern helped to teach us. Do you know that in many places down south it is illegal to teach a slave to read! My mother taught me to sew and to make knots. Of course, we were allowed to go to church. As I stated earlier, I was baptized as Marguerite on April 11, 1819, at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Vincennes. There I was taught to pray and pray I do! Each day and

each night I pray for freedom. I pray that my mother and my brother, James, will be set free from bondage. Can you imagine what life would be like if you could not choose for yourself what kind of work you would like to do and whether you might wish to marry and to whom? What do you think – how would you feel if you could not choose for yourself?

(Allow for responses.)

Being a slave, being someone's property, makes me feel very sad and helpless!

But my sadness turned to hope when Mr. Osborn and Mr. Kinney moved to

Knox County. Mr. Kinney is my lawyer; he's working very hard on my case.

(Point to student seated at attorney's table)

Student assigned as **Mr. Kinney** sits at lawyer's table with a stack of law books, writing on paper. Student with **"Polly's lawyer" sign** stand by him and point. Turn so whole audience can see sign.

They are brothers-in-law and have strong anti-slavery views; they even publish a newspaper with articles opposing slavery. They are convinced that slavery like mine is illegal in Indiana. Do you know why they think that slavery is illegal in Indiana?

Group of students assigned to this response stand up and say together, **"Because the Indiana Constitution of 1816 says so"**. Anyone in the audience can join in—so have all students practice this!

Exactly. So, they convinced Colonel George McDonald and Moses Tabbs, who also live in the area, to bring a case in the local courts for my freedom. You see,

I was told one of the arguments that Hyacinthe Lasselle would use was that the privilege of holding slaves existed when this land belonged to the French and then to Virginia before it even became a part of the Northwest Territory or the free state of Indiana. Both Virginia and France allowed slavery. Do you think that after Indiana became a state, its citizens should still be allowed to own slaves if the Constitution says slavery is illegal?

(Allow for responses. Students hold cue cards saying “No!”)

That’s right . . . right there in Article 11, section 7 of the Indiana Constitution it says, “There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in this state otherwise than for the punishment of crimes, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.” These words are so important to me that I’ve memorized them! Do you know some of the words of the Constitution from memory?

Groups of students assigned to these responses stand up and read excerpt, just going one after the other:

- “We the People, of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union...” (sit down)
- (stand up) Freedom of Religion (sit down)
- (stand up) Freedom of Speech (sit down)
- (stand up) Freedom of the Press (sit down)

Anyone in the audience can join in—so have all students practice this!

Are you surprised that a slave knows about the law? Well, Mr. Moses Tabbs helped me to understand this important document. Can you understand why I remember these words and keep them close to my heart?

(Allow for responses. Students hold cue cards saying “Yes!”)

I was born into slavery. My mother, Jenny, was not free to choose for herself or for James and me. I have lived as a slave for twenty-two years. I hope after today all that will change. I hope I will be able to make my own decisions and I can help my dear mother, Jenny.

Perhaps, James, our mother, and I will move to another place to live. It may be difficult to live in Vincennes where Mr. Lasselle lives and where the courts of Knox County kept telling him he could keep me as a slave. I'm not the only slave or indentured servant living in Vincennes. I wonder what will happen to them if I'm set free? I wonder if people are still being held as slaves in other parts of Indiana? What do you think? Surely, there are none here in this lovely village, Corydon, are there?

(Allow for responses.)

I have heard about many black families who came to Indiana hoping to be free. Although they came to be free, I'm afraid that some may not have found freedom. However, if I am freed by this case, I hope they too will be free. Slavery will be outlawed once and for all time by the highest court in the State! Oh look, there's my lawyer, Mr. Kinney. I think he wants me to come inside.

(Polly joins Kinney standing behind one of the tables.)

Student assigned as **Kinney** stands up at lawyer's table and waves Polly over.

Student assigned as **Hyacinthe Lasselle** moves up and stands at the other table.

Student acting as **Bailiff** goes and stands at lower bench.

Student with **Corydon, Capitol building picture card** goes up to get card from easel.

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Children's Script

The student reading the **definition card for Indiana Supreme Court** will be reading loudly, clearly, and slowly from a microphone in the middle aisle.

The student with **Indiana Supreme Court Courtroom location card** place on easel.

Bailiff: (**Bailiff** pounds gavel.) **All rise. Hear Ye, Hear Ye, Hear Ye, the Supreme Court of Indiana is now in session**

(**Three students portraying judges** enter and are seated at the bench.)

Judge Scott: Please be seated.

Judge Blackford: We are gathered here today to hand down our opinion in the case between **Hyacinthe Lasselle and Miss Polly Strong. Are both parties present?**

Lasselle: Yes, your honor.

Polly: Yes, your Honor.

Judge Holman: (Reading an excerpt with the key point of the opinion) **“It follows as an irresistible conclusion, that, under our present form of government, Slavery can have no existence in the State of Indiana, and of course the claim of said Hyacinth Lasselle cannot be supported. It is therefore considered by the court now here, that the judgment of the said Circuit Court be in all things reversed, set aside, and held for naught; And that the said Polly be discharged from the custody.”**

(Audience: **Lasselle scowls**, and stomps away.)

Bailiff: **All rise.** (**Bailiff** pounds gavel, then goes back to seat.)

(**Judges** stand and leave bench.)

(**Kinney** sits back down at table.)

Bound for Freedom: the Case of Polly Strong was written by Dr. Elizabeth R. Osborn, Special Assistant to the Chief Justice for Court History and Public Education, and Maxine Brown, Leora Brown School of Corydon, Indiana, as a part of the Courts in the Classroom program. More information is available on this topic at www.in.gov/judiciary/citc/special/bound-for-freedom/. Dr. Osborn can be reached at (317) 233-8682 or eosborn@courts.state.in.us

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Children's Script

Polly: (Celebrates, hugs attorney, hugs audience members, family, etc.)

(Creates her own closing statement about how wonderful it is to be free.)

Polly: **Excuse me now, I want to go share the good news with my friends back in Vincennes.**

(Students hold cue cards that say "Applause")

Students with Historic Indiana and Kentucky map, Corydon, Indiana, July 1820 location card, and Indiana Supreme Court Courtroom location card goes up to get map and cards from easels.