



Polly Strong

Vincennes, Knox County

ca. 1796 – ?

Polly Strong was born about 1796 to Jenny, a fifteen-year-old black slave seized by Native Americans and held prisoner. The Native Americans took her to Detroit where she was sold to Isaac Williams. She then was sold to Antoine Lasselle. Later, Lasselle's nephew, prominent Vincennes resident Hyacinth Lasselle, purchased Polly Strong from a Joseph Baron about 1806.

Strong and Hyacinth Lasselle later engaged in multiyear legal battle known as *State v. Lasselle* to determine her freedom. Several edicts affected the lives of Strong, her mother, her brother James, and, ultimately, the outcome of *State v. Lasselle*. In 1787, the Northwest Ordinance prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory, from which Indiana would be formed nearly thirty years later. In addition, adhering to the Northwest Ordinance, Indiana's 1816 Constitution prohibited slavery or involuntary servitude.

Court documents show Strong's bid for freedom was not resolved quickly. Sometime before 1816, Judge John Johnson of the General Court of the Indiana Territory gave the opinion that Strong and her brother, James, were slaves. A freedom suit was filed, and Lasselle was ordered to present Strong and her brother to the Knox Circuit Court in July 1818. Sometime before July 22, 1818, Knox County Circuit Court Judge Jonathan Doty ruled in Lasselle's favor, and Strong was obligated to remain Lasselle's property.

On July 22, 1820, the Indiana Supreme Court reversed the judgment of the Knox Circuit Court. The Court's opinion stated that, "...under our present form of government, slavery can have no existence in the State of Indiana, and, of course, the claim of the said Lasselle can not be supported." The Supreme Court declared Polly Strong a free woman.

Outside of court records, little is known about Strong. The last known direct reference to Polly Strong was in a letter to Hyacinth Lasselle dated June 17, 1825. James Lasselle who is apparently Polly's brother states that he will deliver a bureau belonging to Polly when requested. However, the 1830 U.S. Federal Census indicates a woman of Polly's age is in residence with Lasselle.

For more information about Polly Strong, go to: <http://www.in.gov/judiciary/citc/2654.htm>.

For more information about *Writing Her Story*, go to: <http://www.in.gov/icw/2440.htm>.

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