

Anna Kingsley: A Free Woman

In the early years of the nineteenth century, the population of Spanish Florida was small but diverse. Americans and Europeans came seeking wealth by obtaining land and establishing plantations; furthermore, the forced labor of enslaved Africans secured that wealth. Those Africans who were freed by their owners or who purchased their own freedom became farmers, tradesmen, or black militiamen who helped protect the colony. On the frontier, away from the settlements and plantations, the Seminole Indians and the Black Seminoles kept an uneasy vigil on the encroaching development of Florida.

Among those striving for freedom and security in Spanish Florida was Anna Kingsley. Anna was the African wife of plantation owner Zephaniah Kingsley. At an early age, she survived the Middle Passage and dehumanizing slave markets to become the property of Kingsley. After manumission by her husband, Anna became a landowner and slaveholder. She raised her four children while managing a plantation that utilized African slave labor. She survived brutal changes in race policies and social attitudes brought by successive governments in Florida, but survival demanded difficult, often dangerous, choices.

Anna Kingsley was a woman of courage and determination. She is an example of the active role that people of color played in shaping their own destinies and our country's history in an era of slavery, oppression, and prejudice. She left, however, no personal descriptions of her life. She was not a famous or powerful person who figured prominently in accounts of that era. Today we must find Anna in the official documents of her time and in the historic structures that she inhabited. There her story may be discovered.

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On the first day of March 1811, in the Spanish province of East Florida, white plantation owner Zephaniah Kingsley put his signature on a document that forever changed the life of a young African woman. The document was a manumission paper which ensured her legal freedom. The young woman, a native of Senegal whom Kingsley had purchased in a slave market in Havana, Cuba, was his eighteen-year-old wife and the mother of his three children. That paper not only marked the beginning of the young woman's freedom in the New World, it was also the beginning of the written record of a remarkable life. Her name was Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley.

A free woman, Anna Kingsley petitioned the Spanish government for land, and land grant records show that in 1813 she was granted title to five acres on the St. Johns River. The property was located across the river from her husband's plantation, Laurel Grove, south of today's Jacksonville. Anna purchased goods and livestock to begin a business, and she purchased slaves. She became one of a

significant number of free people of African descent in East Florida. They included farmers, craftsmen, and members of a black militia. Some of these people, like Anna, owned slaves. Although slavery was supported, Spanish race policies encouraged manumission and self-purchase and slavery was not necessarily considered a permanent condition. The free black population held certain rights and privileges, and they had opportunities to take an active part in the economic development of the colony. Anna Kingsley was determined to be an independent businesswoman, selling goods and poultry to neighboring settlers.

Her blossoming business lasted only months. During an effort to wrest East Florida from the Spanish, armed American forces entered the province. Together, with a number of rebellious Floridians, they looted and occupied the homesteads of planters and settlers to obtain supplies and set up bases. If these insurgents succeeded and an American system replaced the comparatively liberal Spanish policies, what would become of the freed people and their rights? When the Americans approached, Anna herself lit the fire that consumed her house and property. Then she escaped with her children and slaves on a Spanish gunboat. The insurrection later ended in failure and, as it turned out, Anna's loss was not total. Although a Spanish commandant reported of Anna's property "the flames devoured grain and other things to the value \$1,500," the governor rewarded her loyalty with a land grant of 350 acres.

Laurel Grove was also destroyed as a result of the conflict. In 1814 Zephaniah and Anna Kingsley, along with their children and slaves, moved to Fort George Island, a sea island near the mouth of the St. Johns River. On this thousand-acre island with palm-fringed beaches, birds of every description, and ancient Indian mounds of oyster shell, they restored an abandoned plantation. In a fine, comfortable house with views of the tidal marsh and ocean beyond, Anna spent the next twenty-three years of her life.

During the years at Fort George, Zephaniah Kingsley's Florida landholdings increased to include extensive timberland and orange groves, and four major plantations producing sea island cotton, rice, and provisions. He also owned ships that he captained on trading voyages. Kingsley had managers at his various properties to whom he entrusted his business operations when he was away. At the Fort George plantation, Anna took this responsibility and, Kingsley later declared, "could carry on all the affairs of the plantation in my absence as well as I could myself." These "affairs" included overseeing the lives of about sixty men, women, and children who lived on Fort George Island in slavery. The labor of the Kingsley slaves provided the wealth of the Kingsley family.

Conditions for all of Florida's people of color, free and enslaved, changed drastically when Florida became a territory of the United

States in 1821. An influential planter, Zephaniah Kingsley was appointed to the 1823 territorial legislative council. He tried to persuade lawmakers to adopt policies similar to those of the Spanish, providing for liberal manumission and rights for the free black population. He published his opinions in *A Treatise on the Patriarchal, or Co-operative System of Society As It Exists in Some Governments, and Colonies in America, and in the United States, Under the Name of Slavery, with Its Necessity and Advantages* in 1828. But Kingsley's arguments did not convince Florida legislators.



The Kingsley plantation residence on Florida's Fort George Island, late 1800s. (Photo courtesy National Park Service.)

Legislative councils used fear of slave rebellion to justify policies that were increasingly oppressive. Legislation of the 1820s and 1830s reflects racial discrimination that blurred the distinction between freeman and slave until there was virtually no difference.

The cession agreement between the U.S. and Spain was supposed to protect the status of free people of color living in Florida in 1821, but the Kingsleys had reason to be concerned. Parish records reveal that a fourth child was born to Zephaniah and Anna in 1824. Their new son was subject to the harsh enactments that Zephaniah Kingsley called "a system of terror." Even Anna and her older son and two daughters were not necessarily secure as racism increased. Anna decided to leave Florida and go to Haiti. Slave revolution had made Haiti the first independent black republic of the New World, the "Island of Liberty" as Kingsley called it. Anna and her sons intended to start a plantation on the northern coast of the island. Their work force would consist of more than fifty of their former Florida slaves, freed to work as indentured servants to comply with Haitian law which prohibited slavery. In 1837 Anna Kingsley left Florida and sailed to "Mayorasgo De Koka," her new home in Haiti.

Zephaniah Kingsley described Mayorasgo De Koka as "heavily timbered with mahogany all round; well watered; flowers so beautiful; fruits in abundance, so delicious that you could not refrain from stopping to eat..." Roads and bridges were built and the Kingsley's planned a school for the community, but they did not live happily ever after in their tropical colony. In 1843, in his seventy-eighth year, Zephaniah Kingsley died.

With an estate worth a fortune at stake, some of Zephaniah Kingsley's white relatives contested his will and sought to deny Anna and his children their inheritance. After much dispute, courts upheld the rights of the black heirs, but the family suffered another loss. Anna's older son George was returning to Florida in 1846 to defend land interests, when the ship in which he was traveling was lost at sea. Her younger son, John Maxwell Kingsley, took over management of

Mayorasgo De Koka and Anna Kingsley, for unknown reasons, returned to Florida. She could not return to Fort George Island; that plantation had been sold years before. She settled near her daughters who had married and stayed in Florida. Once more Anna lived on the St. Johns River, this time in a young town called Jacksonville.

When the Civil War divided the country, Anna and her daughters' families supported the Union. With Florida's secession and hostility from Confederates intensifying, Anna had to leave her home again. In 1862, she

traveled with relatives to New York. They returned to Florida later that year, but, to be safe, lived in Union-occupied Fernandina until the end of the conflict. In 1865 Anna Kingsley returned to the St. Johns River for the final time.

Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley died in 1870. No intimate letters, diaries, or other personal reflections on her life are known to exist. No portrait or photograph of any kind remains of her. Even her grave is unmarked. Her story, however, endures. In the legal petitions and official correspondence, probate and property records, the details of her life emerge. And on Fort George Island, near the mouth of the St. Johns River, the house where she lived for twenty-three years still stands.

Lesson Procedures

To enhance this lesson plan, teachers may borrow a slide program of Kingsley Plantation. To request slides or to arrange a field trip, contact the National Park Service, Kingsley Plantation, 11676 Palmetto Ave., Jacksonville, Florida, 32226.

1. Students should read the Anna Kingsley article and receive copies of the two included documents.

2. Have students use maps to trace Anna's life and travels.

3. Ask students to draw a time line from 1775 to 1875. On one side of the time line students should identify important events of Anna's life and when they occurred and on the other side students should note the dates and major events of American and (with some research) Florida history. Discuss with your students events in Anna's life that were influenced by political or social issues.

3. The two documents represent the first and one of the last official records of Anna's life. Ask students to list information about Anna using only the two documents. What additional information can be *inferred* from the documents? Ask students to list official documents (not diaries or personal correspondence) that might be used to collect information about themselves. What, for example, does a drivers license reveal? Report card?

4. Field study at Kingsley Plantation or the classroom slide

program (described above) provides an important context in which to study Anna Kingsley. The site includes the original plantation house, kitchen house, barn, and extensive remains of twenty-three slave cabins. By studying these structures and the natural setting (plus further reading) students can do projects that relate the physical site to aspects of Anna's life. A project might compare and contrast living conditions of enslaved women and slaveholding women such as Anna; or explore the responsibilities (and implications) of a woman managing a large, remote plantation. □

Selected Sources

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Document A: Manumission Paper

1 March 1811

St. Augustine, Florida

In the name of Almighty God, Amen: Let it be known that I, Zephaniah Kingsley, resident and citizen of the St. Johns River region of this province hereby state: That I have as my slave a black woman named Anna, about 18 years old, who is the same native African woman that I purchased in Havana...

I recognize [her children] as my own; this circumstance, and as well considering the good qualities of the already referred to black woman, and the truth and fidelity with which she has served me, impels me to give her freedom graciously and without other interest, the same accorded to the aforementioned three mulatto children whose names and ages are for the record: George, three years and nine months old; Martha, twenty months old; and Mary, a month old...I remove my rights of property, possession, utility, dominion, and all other royal and personal deeds which I have possessed over these four slaves. And I cede, renounce and transfer [my rights] to each of them so that from today forward, they can negotiate, sign contracts, buy, sell, appear legally in court, give depositions, testimonials, powers of attorney, codicils, and do any and all things which they can do as free people who are of free will without any burden...

Excerpted from document in Escrituras, Reel 172, Bundle 378, 17A-B, 18A-B, of the East Florida Papers, Library of Congress (microfilm copy at P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida). Document is in Spanish; this version was translated by Caleb Finnegan.

Document B: Will

Know all men by these presents, that I Anna M. Kingsley of the County of Duval and State of Florida being of sound mind and memory but feeble in strength, do hereby, and by these presents constitute and appoint my daughter Martha B. Baxter my true and lawful attorney in fact and trustee...And I have and hereby place in her hand the full and undisturbed possession of the following amount of money and property, viz: three thousand dollars in cash and four Negro slaves viz: Polly a woman aged about 17 years, Joe a boy about 14, Elizabeth a girl about 12, and Julia a girl about 9 years. Also all my right title and interest in and to a certain claim I have as one of the Legatees of and under the will of Zephaniah Kingsley late of East Florida in which he the said Kingsley bequeaths and devises to me, one twelfth part of an amount or sum of money that shall be allowed his heirs by the government of the United States for losses sustained by him during the War of 1812 and 1813 by the operations of the American Army, the principal having been allowed, the interest money is now pending before the Congress of the U.S....Given under my hand and seal this 24th day of April, one thousand eight hundred and sixty.

—Anna M. Kingsley

Excerpt from trust/will of Anna Kingsley. Typescript of complete document in NPS files at Kingsley Plantation (made from Duval County probate file 1210-D).