

Margaret Garner

1834-1858

Margaret Garner, an enslaved African American woman in pre-Civil War America, was born on June 4, 1834, at Maplewood plantation in Boone County, Ky. Her parents were slaves belonging to the owner of Maplewood, so this made her a slave from the moment she was born. When she was old enough, she became a household domestic, waiting on the family and performing cleaning chores. Her married master A. K. (Edward) Gaines forced her into a relationship with him. People said he was more than likely the father of at least two of her children.

Garner became widely known when she and her family rebelled against their bondage and made a brave escape to freedom. In the winter of 1856, she and her husband Robert, their four children, and Robert's parents carried out their bold plan. The family fled the plantation and got away by crossing on foot the frozen Ohio River from Covington, Ky., to Cincinnati, Ohio. They sought out their family friend, a black freeman named Elijah Kite, for protection. He turned to noted Quaker abolitionist, Levi Coffin, for help. Many referred to Coffin as the president of the Underground Railroad. He later wrote that Garner's case was one that he remembered with deepest sympathy.

The family meant to hide in Kite's home until a guide could secret them to the free North, but within hours after their arrival, federal marshals stormed in and captured them. In a shocking instant of grief and mental torment, the mother quickly attempted to take the lives of her children as well as her own. They would be better off dead than forced to live as slaves, she screamed at her captors. When the marshals found her in a back room, she had killed her two-year-old daughter with a knife. The other children lay on the floor, wounded but alive. The unfathomable tragedy placed squarely in the public eye the atrocities of slavery and its existence as a cruel institution.

In January 1856, the Cincinnati Enquirer ran a sensational article about the Garners' arrest, which described the angry crowd that gathered to condemn the family as they were being driven from the scene of the crime. The author remarked, however, that the incident also produced ample material for abolitionists who claimed the crime was a testament to the injustice of slavery.

The Garners became defendants in one of America's most widely publicized fugitive slave trials. The couple lost the escape case in which they pleaded for freedom. They had to continue as slaves.

Even after capture, Margaret defied the institution of slavery. She wanted to be tried in Ohio as a free person even if it meant she would receive the death sentence for killing her child, but authorities refused and tried her in Kentucky as property; therefore, she was not charged for the child's death. Authorities later decided to charge her with the death, but could never locate her as Gaines hid the family in various locations and moved them from the state.

In 1870, five years after the U.S. Civil War ended slavery, the Cincinnati Chronicle interviewed Robert Garner. He was living with his two grown sons. He had fought for the Union in the war. He told the paper that after the trial, Gaines had sent the couple in 1857 to work as household servants for one of his friends in New Orleans, La. Later, Judge Dewitt Clinton Bonham purchased them for plantation labor at Tennessee Landing, Miss. Robert said that his wife, still a slave, died in Mississippi in 1858 of typhoid fever. Robert Garner's death, recorded in 1871, probably resulted from a chest injury sustained while working aboard a ship. Most likely, his final resting place is a potters' field in Cincinnati.

Over the years, Margaret Garner's tragedy became the subject of theatrical productions and a variety of works of art, including a painting by Thomas Satterwhite Noble, called *The Modern Medea*, the novel *Beloved* (1987) by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, and the opera, *Margaret Garner* (2005), composed by Richard Danielpour.

Her husband said that before she died, Margaret urged him to "never marry again in slavery, but to live in hope of freedom."



Denyce Graves playing the title role of Margaret Garner seen here on trial in the opera of the same name (2005)



Thomas Satterwhite Noble's painting, *The Modern Medea* (1867), of Margaret Garner having killed her child upon capture from an attempted escape from slavery.

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