

Introduction

On March 4, 1811, an East Florida planter named Zephaniah Kingsley Jr. asked Spanish authorities to issue emancipation papers for an enslaved “black woman called Anna, around eighteen years of age, bought as a *bozal* [newly arrived from Africa] in the port of Havana from a slave cargo.” Kingsley praised the “nicety and fidelity” and “good qualities” of the young woman. Kingsley also freed her “three mulatto children: George, about 3 years 9 months, Martha, 20 months old, and Mary, one month old,” and identified himself as their father.¹

Had Kingsley known more about the childhood and family background of the *bozal* he purchased at Havana, he might also have told the Spanish official who considered the emancipation application that Anna had been a royal princess in the Kingdom of Jolof in Senegal before she was captured and sold into the transatlantic slave trade. In her homeland she had been known as the Princess Anta Madjiguène Ndiaye, whose mother, Madjiguène Ndiaye, was the daughter of a Buurba (king of) Jolof, and whose father, Mba Buri Nyabu Ndiaye, was the likely choice to become the next ruler of the Kingdom of Jolof at the time of the tragic incident that permanently separated Anta from her family and homeland.

Within a year of her emancipation, Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley, as she was known in the Americas, was living at a homestead of her own. She had survived captivity, a harrowing trip across the Atlantic Ocean in

the hold of a slave ship, followed by five years of enslavement, and she was again free, the owner of a five-acre farm, and in charge of a small retail store on the east shore of the St. Johns River. Her property adjoined the Horse Landing at Mandarin Point, across the river from Kingsley's Laurel Grove Plantation. Kingsley sent carpenters to build a home and outbuildings for her, and he placed title to twelve slaves in her name. Anna Kingsley would continue to own slaves until 1861.

Soon after Anna moved across the river to Mandarin Point, East Florida was engulfed by the Patriot War of 1812–14. Insurgents and land-hungry adventurers from Georgia and other American states, supported by invading American troops, attempted to drive the Spanish out of Florida and annex the territory to the United States. The invaders seized slaves and free blacks alike and sold them to planters in Georgia. Threatened again with enslavement, Anna protected herself and her children by torching the buildings at Kingsley's Laurel Grove Plantation and at her own homestead, thereby denying shelter to the marauding invaders. Only after the buildings at her homestead were aflame did she seek safety aboard a Spanish gunboat.

In 1814 Anna and Zephaniah Kingsley began a twenty-five-year residency on Fort George Island, an Atlantic barrier island located near the mouth of the St. Johns River. Their son George and daughters, Martha and Mary, grew to maturity and married during these years, and a fourth child, John Maxwell Kingsley, was born. The years at Fort George Island would be the only prolonged period of tranquility that Anna Kingsley would know in her lifetime.

In 1839, when Anna's freedom was again threatened, Kingsley transported her and John Maxwell to Haiti to escape the discriminatory race policies legislated by the Americans after they gained control of Florida in 1821. In Haiti, a black republic formed in 1804 after enslaved Africans overthrew their French rulers, Zephaniah purchased a huge rural tract and established an agricultural colony. As a white man, Kingsley was prohibited from owning land in Haiti. Title to the property was therefore placed under the name of his and Anna's eldest son, George.

Kingsley continued to recognize Anna's good qualities throughout their life together. During an 1842 interview with the American abolition-

ist Lydia Maria Child, Kingsley said that Anna was “a fine, tall figure, black as jet, but very handsome.” He continued, “She was very capable, and could carry on all the affairs of the plantation in my absence, as well as I could myself. She was affectionate and faithful, and I could trust her.” One year later, nearing the end of his life and worried about how “the law may consider my acknowledged wife” (they had never been officially married by church or state) Kingsley wrote in his Last Will and Testament, “She has always been respected as my wife and as such I acknowledge her, nor do I think that her truth, honor, integrity, moral conduct or good sense will lose in comparison with anyone.”²

Following Zephaniah’s death in 1843, his youngest sister, Martha Kingsley McNeill, filed a lawsuit to disinherit her brother’s heirs of African ancestry. In 1846, Anna returned to Duval County, Florida, to lead the family’s fight to retain control of Zephaniah’s extensive Florida properties. The racial odds were stacked against her, but the Florida courts eventually decided in her favor.

Anna Kingsley remained in the United States after the trial concluded and became the matriarch of the Kingsley clan in Florida. She purchased a small farm located between the plantation residences of her two daughters and helped found a unique free black community on the eastern shore of the St. Johns River, in what is today the Arlington neighborhood of Jacksonville. In 1860, more than eighty free persons of color lived in the community, most of them Kingsley family members or their former slaves. In defiance of the race hysteria that intensified throughout the 1840s and 1850s, the community survived until Florida seceded from the United States. Finding no safety in the pro-slavery Confederate States of America, the Kingsley kinship group and many of the free blacks sought safety in free states to the north. Anna Kingsley was again in search of a place of refuge.

After the war ended in 1865, Anna Jai returned to northeast Florida with her daughters Martha Baxter and Mary Sammis to what remained of their estates. Her wealth, like the fortunes of the others in her family, had vanished. She resided with one of her daughters, holding on to life during a half decade of declining fortunes and the deaths of several of those close to her.

In June 1870, Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley's life ended. She was buried in a family cemetery near the dwelling of her daughter Mary Sammis. Anna Kingsley's final place of refuge is an unmarked grave in a peaceful grove in what is today the Clifton Cemetery in the Arlington neighborhood of Jacksonville, Florida. Nearby are the graves of her daughters and grandchildren.