

Sketch: Dorcus Callaway

Dorcus was born a slave in Virginia, about the year 1820. When she was very young, perhaps still an infant, she was purchased by the James Callaway family of Pittsylvania county Virginia. This was about the time that the Callaway family was preparing to move their growing family to the state of Missouri.

It is difficult to determine what role Dorcus (Dorcas) played in the Callaway family. James Callaway and his wife Catherine Markham Callaway both grew up in slave-holding families. But, census evidence suggests that Dorcus may have been the only slave they ever owned. Why did they purchase an infant slave?

It has been assumed that James Callaway was a planter, but whether he farmed for family subsistence or for profit is not known. In 1820 he sold several pieces of property on Pittsylvania county Virginia. In 1824 he received an appointment by Governor McNair of Missouri, to serve as Justice of the Peace for Cedar Township in Boone County Missouri. This may have been his primary occupation. There is no evidence that he was a slave holder in Missouri, beyond the one slave that appears with his family in the 1830 Census of Boone County Missouri.

The single slave that appears in the 1830 census must be Dorcus. By this time she must be a young girl of about ten. Did she grow up in the home with the Callaway children? In 1830 there were ten children in the Callaway family. Perhaps she helped with household and nursery tasks. Probably, as she matured, her duties changed.

James Callaway died in 1832, leaving his widow, Catherine Markham Callaway, with the huge task of raising up many children. Dorcus must have been a tremendous help and support. As a testament to the bond between Catherine Callaway and Dorcus, they remained together until Dorcus death in 1886.

As the census is followed, Catherine Callaway, appeared in a different place every ten years, from 1840 to 1880. She remained in Missouri for at least thirty years after her husband's death, and then moved with her son, William T Callaway, to Nebraska, where she appears in Platte county in 1870 and Butler county in 1880. By then she is almost ninety years old.

Following the war years, Dorcus has taken on the Callaway surname, and appears, along with her son Henry Callaway, in a home near Catherine Callaway in the 1870 Census of Platte county Nebraska. By 1880, Dorcus Calaway is shown as the head of household in the home where Catherine Callaway resides in Butler County Nebraska. The family was living in, or near, the small community of Bellwood.

1870 Census of Platte county Nebraska; Columbus
William Callaway; 39 (1831) Missouri; married Jan 1870
Ellen Callaway; 27 (1843) Illinois
Katherine Callaway; 79 (1791) Virginia
note - living nearby:
Henry Callaway (m); 29 (1841) Missouri; race - black
Henry Campbell (f); 24 (1846) Tennessee; race - black
Dorkis Callaway (f); 52 (1818) Virginia; race - black

1880 Census of Alexis, Butler county Nebraska; Alexis; pg 88
Dorcus Calaway; 63 (1817) Virginia; race - black; divorced; keeping house; parents born Virginia
Henry Calaway; 36 (1844) Missouri; race - black; farmer
William Calaway; 50 (1830) Missouri; race - white; farmer; parents born Virginia
Ellen Calaway; 37 (1843) Illinois; race - white; father born New Jersey; mother born Pennsylvania
Cathrin Calaway; 89 (1791) Virginia; race - white; father born Virginia; mother born England
B Adis (m); 7 (1873) Illinois; race - white; parents born Illinois
note - Dorcus Calaway is designated as Head of Household



Bellwood, Nebraska

The best account we have of Dorcus Callaway's life comes from her obituary, published in the Columbus Journal (Columbus, Nebraska), on the 19th of May 1886. Thanks to Shirley Bruhn Martys, who submitted the obituary to the FindAGrave website:

CALLAWAY--The Bellwood Gazette announces the death, on May 4th, of Dorcas Callaway, a colored lady 67 years old, and well known in this community. "Dorcas, when but an infant, was purchased by Mrs. Callaway, mother to W.T. Callaway, in Virginia, and has been in the Callaway family ever since. She was one of those lucky mortals who happened in with a good home and kind friends, and was always treated as a member of the family. At about the age of eighteen she got married, but shortly afterwards her husband was sold and sent south and has never been seen or heard tell of since. About twenty years ago she was converted and has been leading a good christian life ever since."

Bellwood is a village community in Butler county Nebraska. The cemetery was established in 1881. According to an article written about the Cemetery by Robert M Bell in 1980, Dorcas Callaway is the only "colored" person buried in the cemetery. Some attempt has been made to follow Dorcus Callaway's son, Henry Callaway, who was born about 1840 – 1845 while the Callaway family was living in Missouri. But, he has not been identified beyond his appearance in the 1880 census of Butler county Nebraska.

Do you want to know more?

[Link to Dorcus Callaway](#)

[Link to Catherine Markham Callaway](#)

Sketch: Dorcus Callaway; Pamela Hutchison Garrett, 2014.