Sidedoor S7 Ep. 8 The Fugitive Brewer Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: Hey, Sidedoor listeners. We are really excited to share this true story of an incredible woman. But wanted to give a quick warning. It does include some hard truths about American slavery, including sexual assault and violence. All right, here's the show.

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Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from this Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

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Lizzie Peabody: Like many of us, Theresa McCulla begins her day by reading the news, but it's not the kind of news you might be thinking of.

Speaker 2: Died at his plantation in Rutherford county, Dr. Joseph Hamilton, native of the county of Tyrone.

Lizzie Peabody: She's reading newspapers from the early 1800s.

Speaker 3: For sale. In the village of Chapel Hill.

Speaker 2: A teacher wanted in Farmwell Grove academy, Halifax county.

Speaker 4: Married on the 17th at the residence of WM Harrison in Franklin county.

Lizzie Peabody: Theresa is a beer brewing historian at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Yes, that is a real job. One day she was having a cup of coffee, reading through these old newspapers on her computer when suddenly an advertisement jumped off the page at her.

Theresa McCulla: It was this column of text under a big title, said $100 reward. And as I read it, I realized it was just this very extensive story of a young woman named Patsy Young, who lived in North Carolina in the early 1800s.

Lizzie Peabody: Patsy Young was an enslaved African American woman. Her enslaver put an ad in the paper because she had run away. This was the Raleigh register in North Carolina. It had other ads for enslaved people who'd run away, but this one was by far the longest. And the man who was searching for her, Nathaniel Hunt, was offering a much bigger reward than anyone else.

Theresa McCulla: It read to me immediately as frustration and desperation and anger. At the same time, it was such an amazing treasure trove for me as a historian, because it was just this... He vomited up all of these details about this person.

Speaker 2: She is a tall, sparse woman, thin face and lips, long sharp nose. She is an excellent seamstress. Can make ladies and gentleman's clothes. Is a good cook. Weaver and beer brewer.

Lizzie Peabody: And this final detail stood out to Theresa. She is after all a brewing historian, and it looked like Patsy Young and could brew a pretty good beer.

Theresa McCulla: She brewed well enough to establish a reputation that was valuable enough for Hunt to name it in this ad. So, in other words, he surmised that she might be identified by her beer brewing.

Lizzie Peabody: This ad was a tiny window, maybe the only window into the life of a woman Theresa wanted to know more about. So, she set out to learn as much as she could about Patsy Young. A woman who because of her race could not write her own story, but whose story lay scattered through the documents written about her and what Teresa found amazed her. So, this time on Sidedoor, we bring you a story of discovery as we trace the life of this early American beer brewer. Who was Patsy Young? And did she brew her way to freedom? That's coming up, after the break.

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Lizzie Peabody: We've all done our fair share of amateur sleuthing online. Most of it probably starts the same way. You type a few words into your search engine. See what pops up. Well, this process was going to be a lot harder for Theresa McCulla. She had Patsy Young's name, a few details about her physical appearance. She knew she was an enslaved woman who could brew beer. That was about it. Personally, I would be daunted, but Theresa thrives on this kind of thing.

Theresa McCulla: Oh, it feels like a treasure hunt to me.

Lizzie Peabody: Theresa started by scouring through census data, newspapers, land deeds, journals, old photos, maps. She says the first step was to create a timeline of Patsy Young's life.

Theresa McCulla: But then build into that same chronology what's happening in the region. What's happening in the US?

Lizzie Peabody: In the early 1800s, North Carolina's economy was based on slavery. But unlike some other slave states, it wasn't home to massive plantations. The state was full of small farms scattered throughout its dense forests. There were no railroads, no cars, obviously. People traveled by foot horse, or if you were really in a hurry by boat. Rivers were like turnpikes of the day. And Patsy lived right next to one.

Theresa McCulla: This is a wonderful map that is at the Library of Congress. It was completed in 1770. And this is when North Carolina was still a colony. A British colony. It was not a state yet. The Tar river is pictured kind of winding its way from the upper left to the bottom right corner of this map. And you see Osborne Jeffries named here.

Lizzie Peabody: Osborne Jeffries was the grandfather of Patsy's enslaver, Nathaniel Hunt. When he died, he left Hunt more than a thousand acres of land, just a little northeast of Raleigh.

He also left his grandson dozens of enslaved African American people, making him one of the largest slave owners in North Carolina at the age of 11.

Theresa McCulla: Imagine being an 11-year-old and having this kind of a wealth, human wealth, and land be given to you.

Lizzie Peabody: When Hunt became a slave owner, he inherited an enslaved infant girl named Piety. This was Patsy's given name while she was growing up on Hunt's farm. And we don't have any written record to know what her life was like when she was enslaved, but based on her skills, she probably worked in the house on domestic chores like baking and sewing. What we do know for sure is that on the night of June 22nd, 1808, at the age of 16, she stepped off Hunt's property and disappeared into the surrounding forest, leaving her enslaved life. And the name Piety behind.

Lizzie Peabody: If you've ever been in North Carolina in the summer, you know it's hot and it stays hot. Even at night. Bugs all around. The humidity drains your energy like carrying a hot wet blanket over your shoulders. But Patsy would've known that she had to keep moving.

Mary Elliott: Enslaved people were fully aware of what could happen to them because other people who escaped were used as examples to prevent other folks from attempting to escape.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Mary Elliott, curator of American slavery at this Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Mary Elliott: Naming someone. Cutting off limbs or fingers or toes, or cutting someone's Achilles tendon or cutting off their foot. So, they physically have a hard time trying to escape.

Lizzie Peabody: It's obvious why anyone would want to escape slavery. But Mary says we have some clues to explain why Patsy might have risked her life to run away. A big one is in her description in the ad.

Mary Elliott: She's described in the runaway ad as the term from the period is mulatto.

Speaker 2: A bright mulatto woman. About 16 years old. She has a scar under one of her eyes occasioned by a fall. Rather slim made, but tall of her age.

Mary Elliott: But she's also described as very fair and very keen features, right? I mean, you can read between the lines. She likely appeared more so white than black.

Lizzie Peabody: Mary suspects Patsy's father was a white man and Patsy was 16 years old at the time of her escape. Around the age she might start having children

Mary Elliott: Think about her being conceived and her appearance. And then think about her being in close proximity and her mother likely having been in close proximity, and the the likelihood of you being sexually abused, raped, and having children who are then going to face the same. Or just the fact that they're going to be enslaved.

Lizzie Peabody: Mary says there is some evidence to suggest Patsy was fleeing sexual abuse. One clue is the scar under or Patsy's eye. Maybe it was from a fall as the ad says, but maybe

not. Hunt also spent extra money to run a newspaper ad that was longer than any other. And he ran it for months.

Mary Elliott: The effort that he put into getting her back and put ads over and over and over again. Right. Why did that matter? And remember, what was life like for a young woman in a household in close proximity to the enslaver?

Lizzie Peabody: I'm ashamed to admit that I read Nathaniel Hunt's ad, as you know, wow. She must have been like really good at baking cakes and really good at brewing beer. And I didn't really connect those dots until you put it that way, Mary.

Mary Elliott: Right. And it may not have been the case with him. It may have been the case with him. But my point is, it was not an unusual situation that oftentimes this was why someone was of so much value. And think about particularly this woman who worked as a domestic worker.

Lizzie Peabody: Theresa kept digging to find out what happened to Patsy after her escape. And she found that she emerged in the North Carolina town of Halifax.

Theresa McCulla: Which was the biggest town in the area and had long been known for its taverns. It was a place where travelers passed through.

Lizzie Peabody: Halifax was along the Roanoke river, close to Virginia, only 50 miles from where she'd escaped. There she pretended to be a free person of color and got to work.

Theresa McCulla: She developed a reputation for her work, for her brewing, for her baking and sewing. She developed social contacts too. She had many acquaintances in this area. And so, she really built a life for herself as an independent person.

Lizzie Peabody: But even as her days of freedom turned into months, Patsy could never really live as a free person. And it wasn't just Hunt she had to worry about. She really couldn't trust anyone.

Mary Elliott: Even with her escaping and establishing herself as a free person in the environment, there are the jurisdictions where you had to carry freedom papers. You had to register your freedom, carry freedom papers. Because if someone questioned your freedom, they could challenge it. And you'd have to prove that you were free.

Lizzie Peabody: Like anyone who suspected she was a fugitive could have questioned or detained her.

Mary Elliott: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: Not only that, but legally they were kind of obligated to.

Mary Elliott: Yes, but what might be overlooked by people is someone's going to get some money for helping to find this person. Identify this person who is a fugitive freedom seeker.

Lizzie Peabody: Mary says the system of slavery had tentacles that reached far beyond the farms and plantations. The law stated that a person could be a piece of property. And a slave owner had a legal right to own and try to retrieve his lost property. Even people who weren't slaveholders were legally bound to follow these laws. And there was a whole piece of the economy built on recapturing escaped slaves.

Mary Elliott: There was a whole business of people seeking fugitive enslaved people, freedom seekers. There are people who even sold dogs-

Lizzie Peabody: Oh my gosh.

Mary Elliott: Who were trained to do this work.

Lizzie Peabody: Despite the constant threat of being found out, Patsy slowly established herself as a brewer. And in North Carolina in the early 1800s, beer brewing was a valuable skill to have because there weren't a lot of breweries outside of New England. Most of the brewing in the south happened inside the home, and women were doing the brewing.

Frank Clark: Mostly mom typically, or Tavern keeper's wives. People such as that. It is probably majority of the brewers in this period are female. Many of them are enslaved.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Frank Clark. Master of historic food ways at Colonial Williamsburg. He's been brewing 18th and 19th century beer recipes for nearly three decades. He says beer was seen as the safe alternative to hard liquor back then. People would drink it for lunch, dinner, and even breakfast.

Frank Clark: Especially if you have a difficult chore. They talk about the porters of London. Porters are hauling stuff. You know, if you need a desk moved from someplace to another, or if you want to pick up a barrel or something from a ship, the porters are going to take all that stuff and move it all around for you. And they're typically drinking two to three gallons of Porter every day as they doing their job.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh my gosh. Is that where the name Porter comes from?

Frank Clark: Yes. That is where the name comes from. Because it became very popular with these working people who were doing this heavy work.

Lizzie Peabody: So, these hard-working folks in Halifax, North Carolina may have been drinking gallons of beer a day. And that demand must have created some job security for someone like Patsy, who knew how to brew. And it's likely she was one of the hardest working people in Halifax. Frank says Patsy's brew days would've started by carting wheelbarrows of wood to build a fire to boil water. And not only do you need to gather water to brew the beer, you need to get water to clean all the tubs you're brewing in.

Frank Clark: That's a number of trips to the well, or if you're really lucky, a pump. But in most cases, it's probably a well. And you've got to lower these buckets down into the well, get the water, bring it up, carry it to wherever you're, you're brewing and then put it in the kettle and start to boil it. Plus, you've got to cut all that wood.

Lizzie Peabody: Once you've got a clean kettle of water, you add in grain that you have ground by hand and slowly start heating it, because you want it hot but not boiling. So, you have to stand over the hot liquid stirring and stirring to make sure it doesn't boil for up to three hours. Once that's done, you strain all the heavy grain out to create a liquid called wart. And then you boil that with hops and then you start the process all over again. Two more times.

Frank Clark: So, a full brew day, if you're following the English process basically is about 16 to 18 hours.

Lizzie Peabody: Frank says brewing wasn't just brute force though. There was an art to it. Remember a brewer like Patsy would not have had thermometers or refrigeration. She had to do it all by sight, smell, intuition. And just like a cream sauce can curdle if it's too hot, beer can also break and be ruined if it's mishandled. It's a delicate process. And Frank says it took him 20 years to get the feel for it without modern technology.

Frank Clark: We don't, as a modern brewer, have to rely so much on our senses and our feel on these things because we can have scientific and analysis whereas the 18th century person doesn't have that option.

Lizzie Peabody: For more than a decade, Patsy earned a living as a fugitive brewer, moving from town to town along North Carolina's Roanoke river. As Theresa pieced together Patsy's life, she kept sifting through historical records, searching for any mention of Patsy's name. And one day she came across an amazing discovery.

Theresa McCulla: This was one of the most exciting finds of my research.

Lizzie Peabody: Theresa found Patsy Young's marriage license.

Theresa McCulla: In June of 1822, Patsy Young married a free man of color and Halifax. His name was Ackil Johnson.

Lizzie Peabody: 14 years after she escaped from her enslaver, to the month, Patsy signed her own marriage license. Something she would not have been able to do if she were enslaved. And not only was Patsy married, Theresa found out that she'd given birth to a daughter just two years earlier. And she gave her the name Eliza. A name she chose and gave to a daughter born into freedom, not bondage.

Lizzie Peabody: Once she learned about the marriage, Theresa found Ackil in the 1810 census. He had worked on boats along the Roanoke river. She figures he probably met Patsy while she was living in one of those river towns. And knowing Ackil's name was a game changer from a research perspective. Now Theresa could search for documents in his name as well. Though it wasn't as simple as all that.

Theresa McCulla: In various databases his name is transcribed with a variety of spellings and so in different databases, he appears as Arnell Johnson, Ackil, Crail, Ario, Arkel, Ikel.

Lizzie Peabody: Whoa.

Theresa McCulla: And so, there's many different spellings.

Lizzie Peabody: But eventually Theresa struck gold. She found a land deed in Ackil's name shortly after his marriage to Patsy. He had leased a piece of property in a town close to Halifax called Scotland Neck. Nearly 15 years had passed since Patsy took her first steps toward freedom. She was 31. She had a husband, a daughter, and a place to settle down and call home. But it didn't last long.

Theresa McCulla: No, and that's a devastating aspect of her story in that she was married June 15th, 1822 and less than a year after her wedding, she was recaptured by Nathaniel Hunt.

Lizzie Peabody: We'll have more on Patsy's story, after the break.

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Lizzie Peabody: In 1808, 16-year-old Patsy Young escaped from Nathaniel Hunt's property. She made a living brewing beer, had a daughter and got married. But after 15 years of living free, her enslaver, Nathaniel Hunt tracked her down. She was forced to return to his plantation. And so was her three-year-old daughter, Eliza.

Speaker 3: And that's a terrible facet of this story, that Eliza who had never been enslaved was suddenly enslaved as a very young child.

Lizzie Peabody: It didn't matter that Eliza's father was a free man of color. Just like it didn't matter that Patsy's father was likely a white man.

Mary Elliott: Because why? Regardless of what the father was, that the father was white and free. If the father was black and free. The status of the child followed the status of the mother.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Patsy found herself in the position of bringing her child born into freedom back to the place of her own childhood enslavement. There's no record of how she felt, but we have historical examples of how others in her situation reacted. Curator Mary Elliottt says it reminds her of the story of Margaret Garner.

Mary Elliott: Who was a freedom seeker and was able to run away from her enslaver. But then her enslaver finds her and attempts to bring her back. And she, at that point has three children and she begins to try and kill her children in the process of them trying to take her back. So, she kills one of her children and it's this psyche of a mother who says, "I will not let my child go through what I went through. I would rather them not be here than to have them go through this hell on earth."

Lizzie Peabody: God, that's heartbreaking.

Mary Elliott: It is the basis of the story written by Tony Morrison called Beloved. And it is a true story.

Lizzie Peabody: In the book, Beloved Tony Morrison writes the following passage.

Speaker 8: For I used to be slave woman, to love anything that much was dangerous. Especially if it was her children, she had settled on to love. The best thing he knew was to love

just a little bit. Everything just a little bit. So, when they broke his back or shoved it in a croker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one.

Lizzie Peabody: Mary says Patsy and Eliza's capture highlights. The unique experience that black women faced under the system of slavery in America.

Mary Elliott: So, you're valued as an individual as the person who can get due labor, but you're also valued in your ability to give birth to more people who can do more labor. And that went to the value of a black woman's body.

Lizzie Peabody: But Theresa knew that Patsy had escaped once. Maybe she could do it again.

Theresa McCulla: That is where this story, I think, takes another amazing turn.

Lizzie Peabody: Just 14 months after being recaptured, Patsy vanished from Hunt's property.

Theresa McCulla: Patsy Young ran away again and brought her daughter with her.

Lizzie Peabody: Nathaniel Hunt was livid. He stormed to the newspaper almost immediately.

Theresa McCulla: He waited just 12 days before publishing this. The first time she had run away, he waited months and months before publishing it. And that too told me that he understood how skilled she was at living in freedom and supporting herself.

Lizzie Peabody: Hunt knew Patsy could support herself brewing beer, and he knew she had friends and a husband. So, he also put a bounty out for Patsy's husband, Ackil Johnson. This is from the ad, ran in the paper

Speaker 2: I have but little doubt that Johnson has contrived to seduce or steal her and child out of my possession and will attempt to get them out of the state and pass as free persons. Should this be the case, I will give $65 for his detection and conviction before the proper tribunal in any part of this state.

Theresa McCulla: Clearly Hunt is now going after the entire family.

Lizzie Peabody: Hunt knew that Patsy and Ackil met while they were working along the Roanoke river. And that they probably had friends who either had boats or worked on boats. So, Hunt figured Patsy would try to escape using the nearby river.

Theresa McCulla: And actually, the advertisement concludes with this warning. Hunt rights, quote, "I forewarn all owners of boats-"

Speaker 2: Of boats, captains, and owners of vessels from taking on board their vessels or carrying away this woman and her child Eliza under the penalty of law.

Theresa McCulla: And so certainly an escape on a boat was the most expedient means of putting distance between themselves and him at the time.

Lizzie Peabody: After their escape, Nathaniel's ad ran in every new edition of the Raleigh Register. Theresa, scouring each edition, took each return of the ad as good news. If it was up, Patsy and her family were still free. But after four months, the ad stopped running. The trail went cold. Patsy and her family disappeared from the historical record.

Lizzie Peabody: How do you feel about not knowing the end of this story?

Theresa McCulla: History is not a tidy operation. It's not something in which conclusions should be expected. It's certainly not our right to know how or where her life ended.

Lizzie Peabody: That said, Theresa searched Hunt's property records and pored over old census data through the end of the civil war. And she couldn't find any evidence that Hunt ever enslaved another person who fit Patsy's description.

Theresa McCulla: In a way I'm encouraged not to find any indication that she was recaptured. And so, I certainly hope that's an indication that she and her family were able to slip into a life of freedom.

Lizzie Peabody: But even though Patsy's story ends here for now, it's not over. Mary Elliottt says it's uniquely difficult to find the histories of African Americans because the institution of slavery tore families apart. Legal documents recorded only the age and gender of an enslaved person. But the pieces are there if we know where to look. They're scattered through family Bibles, journals letters, old photos, and yes, newspapers.

Mary Elliott: I always say when I did my own family research, it's as if someone took our story, tore it up into little pieces and blew the pieces into the wind. And now our generation has to go out and grab these scraps of papers and start to piece together that document that tells fuller story. That's what it feels like. But the point is the pieces are out there for us to find.

Lizzie Peabody: And eventually more of these pieces will emerge. Families are constantly discovering old boxes of documents that grandma had sitting in the attic. These little bits of history are being collected and digitized every day, helping us stitch together the stories that have been scattered to the winds of history. And maybe someday we will know what happened to Patsy. But when I think of what might have happened, I can tell you the answer I'd hoped for. I'd like to think that she and Eliza were reunited with Ackil and that together, they made their way aboard a ship heading far from her enslaver. I'd like to imagine the joy they must have felt. A family reunited. Freedom of head and bondage behind.

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: To learn more about the life of Patsy Young, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor. We'll include a link to Theresa McCulla's article about Patsy Young, which is definitely worth a read. We'll also share tips for preserving and possibly donating your own family's historical documents like old photos and journals.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: One quick tip. You should almost always keep these treasures out of any type of light. For help with this episode, we want to thank Theresa McCulla without whose primary research over the course of the pandemic using entirely digitized records, we would not know the story of Patsy Young. We also want to thank Mary Elliott, Frank Clark and the people who so kindly gave voice to those old newspaper ads: PJ Tabit, Elaine Miller, Sharon Bryant, and James Morrison.

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Lizzie Peabody: For more stories of important women in history, be sure to look into this Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. To learn more, go to womenshistory.si.edu, or join the conversation using #becauseofherstory on social media.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Kotch and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor a show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

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Lizzie Peabody: How does beer from this era taste?

Frank Clark: Sometimes people describe it as horse blanket and other terms such as that.

Lizzie Peabody: Did you say horse blanket?

Frank Clark: Yes. Actually, brewers use that term sometimes to describe that particular flavor.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait. As like a good thing?

Frank Clark: Well, if you like it, I mean...

Lizzie Peabody: They're advertising this?

Frank Clark: It's not necessarily a derivative term. It could be... You know, there's a lot of horse blanket in that beer. It's got a real good bite to it.