

**Louisa and Elizabeth:  
Emancipation Day April 16, Continued**

**Terence Walz**

Mary Digges Galloway Ringgold, the first-born daughter of Tench Ringgold and Mary Christian Lee Ringgold, inherited a mouthful of “old Maryland family” names when she was born in 1800, and she was always known as “Mary D. G. Ringgold.” On her mother’s side, the Digges were a Catholic enslaving family that Thomas Sim Lee, Tench’s father-in-law, married into. Their estate in Prince George’s County was called Melwood Park. The Digges entertained George Washington at various times, and their daughter, Mary Digges Lee, sent supplies of clothing to the troops during the Revolution.<sup>1</sup> When Mary Digges Lee was four years old, she inherited four slaves from her father when he died.<sup>2</sup> On her father’s side, Mary D. G. Ringgold descended from



Melwood Park in 1974, now owned by the Melwood Park Foundation,  
was built by Ignatius Digges, Mary D. G. Ringgold’s grandfather.

Samuel Galloway. The Galloways were a rich merchant family on Maryland’s Eastern Shore made wealthy by the trade in tobacco and African captives.<sup>3</sup>

Mary D. G. Ringgold’s grandfather was Thomas Sim Lee, twice governor of Maryland, and a rich planter with an estate in Frederick County, Maryland, and a house in Georgetown that still stands. He owned more than 200 people, many of whom are identified in his will – by first name.<sup>4</sup>

Despite her “illustrious” heritage, we know surprisingly little about Mary, other than the fact she inherited properties in Georgetown from her grandfather and that she never married. In addition to land and houses, she also was given by her grandfather “by verbal understanding” a young woman named Betsy who was sent to live in the Ringgold household in 1806 while Mary was a little girl. She may well have been the daughter of enslaved parents inherited from the Digges or among the many enslaved workers at the Lee estate. It is logical to think Betsy was

tasked with raising Mary in addition to other duties in the house. Betsy gave birth in 1822 to a daughter named Louisa, and in 1844, Louisa had a daughter whom she named Elizabeth after her own mother who, by this time, had probably passed on. Thus, three generations of this Black family worked as enslaved members of the Ringgold family.

Both Louisa and her mother would have been working in the house when Ringgold hosted John Marshall and four other justices of the Supreme Court in 1832 and 1833. They were there when ex-President Monroe and his wife and daughter came for stays in the house. In 1833, when Ringgold was forced to sell the house to pay for a debt he owed his daughter Sally, Betsy and Louisa may have been taken across the river to work on the farm that Ringgold purchased in Alexandria (Arlington) County where Mary seems to have lived until he died in 1844.<sup>5</sup>

Mary – with Louisa and Elizabeth in tow – returned to live in Washington City after Tench Ringgold's death where, as a single woman and a spinster, she faced hard times. She did what many slave-owning women did at the time and in such circumstances: she hired her slaves out.<sup>6</sup> According to the papers filed by Mary in 1862 seeking compensation for emancipating Louisa and Elizabeth,<sup>7</sup> Mary described them both as “accomplished House Servant (s) & Cook(s) & seamstress(es)” whom she rented out for \$14 a month for Louisa and \$6 a month for Elizabeth. Their salaries would have gone into Mary's pocket, not the workers. Then, in 1853,

**P E T I T I O N .**

To the Commissioners under the act of Congress approved the 16th of April, 1862, entitled "An act for the release of certain persons held to service or labor in the District of Columbia."

Your Petitioner, *Mary D. G. Ringgold* of *Dist. of Columbia* by this *her* petition in writing, represents and states, that *she* is a person loyal to the United States, who, at the time of the passage of the said act of Congress, held a claim to service or labor against *Louisa, aged about 10 to 12 years* *by virtue of right purchase* *by Phila. Eliza both aged a few months* *of African descent of the name of* *Martha Ringgold*

for and during the life of said *above described persons*

and that by said act of Congress said *persons* have been

discharged and freed of and from all claim of your petitioner to such service or labor:

that at the time of said discharge said *Louisa was about 10 to 12 years of age and Eliza both* *of the age of* *eight to ten years*

and of the personal description following: *(1) Louisa is a big fat Malatto, about 5 feet high, straight black hair, dark eyes, small regular features and inclined to fullness; her daughter Eliza both is not so bright in color, taller and much more slender, with her hair short & more African in its character - neither has any distinct marks or blemishes*

Louisa and Elizabeth's compensated emancipation petition filed by Mary D. G. Ringgold in 1862. Louisa once worked in the Ringgold house during the stays of Chief Justice Marshall and ex-President James Monroe.<sup>8</sup>

she began to harass a Black woman named Rosetta or Rose Herbert, a mother of seven children, claiming that she was her slave when in fact Rose had been living as an independent Black woman for some years.<sup>9</sup> She may have wanted to hire her out as well. Rose hired or persuaded the well-known Washington lawyer, Jonathan Bayard Harrison Smith, son of Samuel Harrison Smith, the publisher of the *Daily National Intelligencer*, to represent her. The legal petition against Mary went unanswered, and so it seems she desisted from this effort. Fortunately, about this time, her half-brother Thomas Lee Ringgold made a will shortly before his death that left her the use of investments during her lifetime from a trust his grandmother, Fanny Carter Lee, left in a bequest to him.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, he felt responsible for helping Mary in her hour of need. This may have eased her financial straits for the remainder of her life, though it didn't stop her from renting out the enslaved Louisa and Elizabeth.

This is how Mary described the two women:

Louisa: aged, 40: "a bright Mulatto about 5 feet high, straight black hair, dark eyes, small regular features and inclined to fullness." Her body bore no marks or blemishes.

As for Elizabeth, aged 16: "not so bright in color, taller and much more slender, with her hair shorter & more African in its character." She, too, lacked marks or blemishes.

For compensation, Mary asked for \$2,000 for the pair. The government would have awarded her up to \$600.<sup>11</sup>

Maddingly – but typically for the time – their last names are never given. This means we may never be able to find out what happened to them after they were freed. Did they stay in Washington? Did they find a home with relatives outside the District?

Mary D. G. Ringgold's sworn statements and affidavits seeking compensation were done in Frederick, Maryland, where she was then staying – most probably with her uncle or aunt, John Lee or Eliza Lee Horsey. They lived on lands once owned by Mary's deceased grandfather, a huge estate known as Needwood, which was outside Frederick. Mary's lawyer was John Carroll Brent, of the old Washington family, and her witnesses were Admiral Joseph Smith and Miss Sarah Thomas Peterson.<sup>12</sup>

Mary may have gone to stay with her aunt or uncle in Frederick because she was ill. According to Mildred Schoch, a biographer of the Ringgold family, Mary made a will in Baltimore in December 1862 and is said to have died there soon after.<sup>13</sup> Her grave has not yet been located.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshallfame/html/mlee.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Digges will: <https://www.colonial-settlers-md-va.us/getperson.php?personID=I9169&tree=Tree1>.

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<sup>3</sup> On this family,

<https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/015900/015910/html/15910bio.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Jennings Lee, ed. and publ., *Lee of Virginia, 1642-1892: Biographical and Genealogical Sketches of the Descendants of Col. Richard Lee. With Brief Notices of the Related Families...* (Philadelphia, Franklin Printing Company, 1895), 307-10.

<sup>5</sup> Mary's home remains uncertain. She bought a farm in Alexandria County near her father's place. But did she actually live there? She appears to have returned to Washington City after his death and lived there or in Georgetown.

<sup>6</sup> For other examples: <https://gloverparkhistory.com/population/slaves-population/local-slaveholders/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://civilwardc.org/texts/petitions/cww.00450.html>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://civilwardc.org/files/figures/petitions/1200px/cww.00450.001.jpg>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://earlywashingtondc.org/doc/oscys.case.0294.004>. We have no information on the prior enslavement of Rose by the Ringgolds, or whether in fact she had been enslaved.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Lee Ringgold Will and Probate, filed in Northampton County, Virginia, on Ancestry.com. Fanny Lee died in Alexandria in December 1850: *Alexandria Gazette*, January 1, 1851, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2012/12/26/emancipation-proclamation-freedom-in-washington-dc/>.

<sup>12</sup> William Brent was one of the earliest inhabitants of the City of Washington and Clerk of the Circuit Court; Admiral Smith was chief of the Bureau of Docks and Yards at the Navy Yard for many years. Miss Peterson is unidentified.

<sup>13</sup> William D. Reeves, *Paths to Distinction: Dr. James White, Governor E. D. White, and Chief Justice Edward Douglass White of Louisiana* (Thibodaux, La: Friends of the Edward Douglass White Historic Site, 1999), 92, footnote 21.