

The Wright Family: Claiming Freedom

Hudgins v. Wrights (Virginia, 1806) | Background and primary evidence

Your task: Read these two pages in class. Answer the three numbered questions in your notebook, using **2-3 sentences per answer**. Keep the answers for discussion and essay reference. All required reading is in this PDF.

October 21: Read page 1 together and start Question 1.

October 23: Read page 2, finish Questions 2-3, and discuss.

October 26: Opening catch-up time; finish the answers during class. Separately, submit your shared Word essay link by **3:25 p.m.** No advance reading or additional Wright-family homework is assigned.

1. What happened?

The Wright family lived under enslavement in Virginia. In 1806, the state's highest appeals court considered their claim to freedom. The published report described three generations of women: a grandmother, a mother, and a granddaughter. They argued that they descended through women from a free Indigenous ancestor called **Butterwood Nan**. Witnesses also identified Nan's daughter, **Hannah**. [1]

Their enslaver, Hudgins, intended to send them out of Virginia. The family pursued a **freedom suit**, a legal action challenging their enslavement, and obtained an order preventing their removal. Their argument depended on the **maternal line**: ancestry traced through mothers. [1]

This is an example of **agency**: purposeful action under conditions a person did not fully control. Bringing a legal claim challenged Hudgins's authority. The court still controlled the outcome. Judge George Wythe ruled in the family's favor; the appeals court upheld their freedom while limiting the reasoning behind that result. [1-2]

Source A | The family pursued a legal claim

"The appellant being about to send them out of the state, a writ of *ne exeat* was obtained from the chancellor, on the ground that they were entitled to freedom. - In their bill, they asserted this right as having been descended, in the maternal line, from a free Indian woman"

Original court report, printed p. 134. This excerpt ends before the sentence continues. **Appellant:** Hudgins, who appealed the earlier ruling. **Ne exeat:** here, an order preventing removal from the state. **Bill:** the family's formal legal claim. [1]

Question 1. What did the family want, and what did they do to pursue it? Use one detail from Source A to explain how their action showed agency. Cite **(court report, p. 134)**.

A Victory with Limits

2. Why did the ruling matter?

The appeals court left the Wright family free, but it rejected the idea that the same broad reasoning should free enslaved Africans and their descendants. The judges relied on racial classifications, ancestry, and physical appearance when deciding who could claim a presumption of freedom. Their reasoning helped preserve a system that treated some people as property. A victory for this family did not abolish slavery. [2-3]

Source B | The final decree

"This court, not approving of the chancellor's principles and reasoning in his decree made in this cause, except so far as the same relates to white persons and native American Indians, but entirely disapproving thereof, so far as the same relates to native Africans and their descendants, who have been and are now held as slaves by the citizens of this state, and discovering no other error in the said decree, affirms the same."

Original court report, printed p. 144. Decree: a court's decision. **Affirms:** upholds. In plain language: the court upheld this family's freedom while rejecting a broader argument that could threaten the enslavement of Africans and their descendants. [2]

Question 2. What did the family win, and what important limit did the court place on its ruling? Use Source B and cite (**court report, p. 144**).

3. Connect the case to Harriet Jacobs

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs described people trying to protect themselves and their families under slavery. Compare a specific action from a chapter you have already read with the Wright family's legal claim. An action can show agency even when it fails to achieve freedom.

Question 3. Identify one action in Jacobs and compare it with the Wright family's action. Explain **one similarity or difference** in their strategies or the constraints they faced. Cite the Jacobs chapter. If you need a starting point, use her father's attempts to purchase his children in **Chapter I, "Childhood."** [4]

Remember: This 1806 case is an earlier comparison for our 1830-1860 unit. The report does not establish a specific tribal affiliation or preserve the women's full personal accounts. Treat the judges' racial categories as evidence of power and prejudice, not valid biological tests of identity.

Sources and optional verification

[1-2] *Hudgins v. Wrights*, 11 Va. (1 Hen. & Mun.) 134 (1806), in William W. Hening and William Munford, *Reports of Cases...*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Smith and Maxwell, 1808), [p. 134](#) and [p. 144](#). [3] [William & Mary, Wythepedia: case overview and further sources](#). [4] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents* (1861), [Chapter I](#).

Background and explanations are a modern educational summary prepared for this unit, not the plaintiffs' own testimony. Source A and Source B reproduce the public-domain court report; line breaks and typography are normalized. Source links are for checking evidence, not extra assigned reading.