Margaret Garner was born enslaved in Kentucky. In January 1856 she made a dramatic escape for freedom. She fled Kentucky with her husband Robert, her four children and Robert's parents, Simon and Mary. Robert and his family escaped on his owner's horse drawn sled to Covington and then walked across the frozen Ohio River. They were among a total of seventeen slaves who became fugitives that Sunday night. The Garners were pursued and captured by their owners and local law enforcement at the home of Margaret’s freed cousin near Mill Creek in Cincinnati. The other nine slaves found safe houses and were successful in their escape.

Resolving to kill her children rather than see them returned to slavery, Margaret nearly decapitated her two and one half year old daughter Mary with a butcher knife and injured the two boys. Robert fought bravely and inflicted a gun shot wound on a member of the posse before they were captured.

The Garners were imprisoned and stood trial in Cincinnati. The prolonged trial received national press coverage and the attention of renowned abolitionists, the President of the United States and the Governors of both Ohio and Kentucky. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was upheld by the federal judge and the slaves were remanded back to their owners. Before Margaret was requisitioned to be returned to Ohio to stand trial for the murder of her daughter, the Garners were “sold down the river”. Margaret’s baby daughter Cilla drowned in a steamboat collision during the trip south. Margaret had recently joined the Presbyterian Church and evidenced the depth of her religious convictions by rejoicing that her two daughters were in heaven when they died. The dramatic story galvanized abolitionist sentiment and polarized the feelings of the North and the South over states rights and slavery.

No requisition was sent to any other southern state for Margaret to be returned to Ohio to stand trial for murder. Robert was never charged for assault with a deadly weapon. The money collected during the trial to buy their freedom was not used for this purpose. Peace was restored to the streets of Cincinnati and the Garners were forgotten.

Speculation about the paternity of the Garner children has multiple theories – from sexual abuse to the genetic possibility of mulatto parents having both black and mulatto children. Robert was enslaved on an adjoining farm, was never sold and or separated from his family. He was hired out twice to Covington both times prior to his marriage to Margaret. Robert and Margaret fled as a family.

Margaret’s possible reasons for killing her daughters and attempting to kill her sons are complex. Her stated reason was that she would rather kill her children than allow them to be returned to slavery. Her motivation might include her mental status, her religious beliefs, as well as vengeance toward her owner who had thwarted her escape. She was described as having a violent temper. Margaret maintained control of her own destiny through a desperate act of destruction.
Margaret died of typhoid fever two years later on a plantation in Mississippi where the Garners had been sent. Her last words to Robert were to not marry again in slavery but to wait for freedom which she thought would soon come. Robert joined the Union Army and returned to Cincinnati a free man after the Civil War where he died of consumption in 1871. The two sons remained on a small farm in Arkansas.

During the winter of 1856 almost two hundred slaves fled Northern Kentucky and became fugitives. Why? There was opportunity - the Ohio River was frozen. There was the contagion of hope for freedom spread through the slave community by African Americans and abolitionists. For the Garners there was an organizer - apparently Robert. There was a resource - the owner’s sled and horses. There was timing - Sunday was their day off. There was rebellion against oppression. There was motivation - family unification. Simon had been separated from his family for many years and only bought back within the year. Margaret stated that she fled for freedom. Implicit in her statement was the universal and enduring quest for freedom.

Margaret’s story became the basis for a novel by Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1983) which was made into a movie by Oprah (1998) and became the inspiration for an opera, *Margaret Garner* (2005). Both are fiction, not historical accounts. Steven Weisenburger’s *Modern Medea* is seriously flawed with factual errors and false assumptions in what is promoted as a historical account. The two articles published in historical journals are:


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