The Impact of the Fugitive Slave Law on Harrisburg: A Case Study

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 contributed to the growing antagonism between North and South in the final decade before the Civil War. Embittered by abolitionist agitation and a steady trickle of runaway slaves to the North, Southerners insisted that a strong federal fugitive slave law be included in the Compromise of 1850. In the end, the new measure did the Southern cause more harm than good. The failure of the law to stanch the flow of runaways disappointed slaveholders. The problem, they believed, was that Northerners in general refused to obey the law and that militant Northern extremists actively obstructed its enforcement. In this the Southerners were largely mistaken. Despite exceptions—some notorious—the law was enforced. A 1968 study of more than 330 fugitive slave cases from all parts of the North between 1850 and 1860 revealed that federal commissioners remanded South over eighty percent of all alleged fugitives brought before them. They released only six percent as free blacks. The other blacks escaped, or sympathizers "rescued" them from the authorities.

Despite the high percentage of returned fugitives, relatively few slaveholders whose slaves ran away ever got their property back. Most did not pursue runaways far and, of course, the law applied only to captured fugitives brought before federal commissioners. It could not prevent runaways in the first place and did not require Northerners, on their own, to search out, recapture and take blacks who might be

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1 Kenneth M. Stampp, The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War (New York, 1980), 237; Page Smith, The Nation Comes of Age, IV, A People's History of the Antebellum Years (New York, 1981), 1074. The problem of runaway slaves appears to have been much exaggerated in the Southern consciousness. The federal census of 1860 reported only 803 fugitives nationwide as against a total slave population of four million. Ludwell H. Johnson, Division and Reunion: America 1848-1877 (New York, 1978), 22. Johnson contends that if the number of runaways were twice what the census showed the problem would still have been relatively insignificant, amounting to four-hundredths of one percent of all slaves.
fugitives before federal commissioners for examination. Meanwhile, growing numbers of Northerners witnessed instances of Southern slaveholders invading their communities to hunt down runaways and return them South by force. The process soured many Northerners on enforcing the law and turned them against slavery and, ultimately, the Southern cause as well.

This detailed study of the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 in a single Northern community, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, confirms that officials vigorously executed the law at least until mid-1853. It also reveals the extent to which vigorous enforcement produced a marked shift in public opinion in the community regarding the return of runaway slaves. When Congress enacted the measure in 1850, Harrisburg newspapers either expressed indifference to the law or saw it as beneficial. Two-and-a-half years later, the town’s two Whig newspapers opposed enforcement of the law; the citizens of Harrisburg voted out three of the town’s four elected constables for serving the federal commissioner as slave-runners; and the federal commissioner, under community pressure, resigned his office. Reaction to the fugitive slave incidents in Harrisburg may even have contributed to the ending in 1854 of the local political hegemony of the Democratic party.

Harrisburg was neither typical of Northern towns in the 1850’s nor representative in its experience with the Fugitive Slave Law. Harrisburg’s distinction as a state capital separated it from other Northeast centers. Its chief interests tended more to politics and commerce and less to industry than those of most Northeastern towns of comparable population. Located on the Susquehanna River, it early became a trading center. By 1850 canals ran east, west, north, and south from the borough. A decade later a half-dozen railroads

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2 Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers, Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 207. According to Campbell, (vii-viii and 110-112), historians for most of a century accepted the myth that the Fugitive Slave Law was not enforced.

fanned out in all directions. Harrisburg served as entrepot for an extensive hinterland, with agriculture thriving in the valleys, and lumbering and mining in the mountain ranges to the north, northwest, and west. Not surprisingly, Harrisburg housed many forwarding and commission merchants, lumber and coal dealers, and merchant tailors. The town's governmental functions accounted for its disproportionate share of lawyers, printers and newspaper editors. Although factories (a cotton mill, a railroad car manufactory, and some iron works) appeared in 1850, the community never became a major manufacturing center.

Between 1850 and 1860 the population of Harrisburg grew from 7,834 to 13,405. Over eighty percent were born in Pennsylvania, chiefly of English, German, and Scotch-Irish stock. About five percent were migrants from other states and a tenth claimed foreign birth. The town's most obvious ethnic minorities were Irish and German (about five percent each) and blacks (eleven percent). Of the 892 blacks living in Harrisburg in 1850, nine out of ten claimed to be Pennsylvania born. Ninety percent of those born in other states came from Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware. How many were free blacks who migrated legitimately and how many were fugitive slaves cannot at this point be determined.4

Until comparable studies are made of other Northern communities, it will not be possible to determine whether Harrisburg's experiences with the Fugitive Slave Law were unique or common. Certainly each community's situation differed. A town's location—its nearness to slave states and to principal North-South transportation routes, for example—and its reputation for sympathy or hostility towards runaway slaves, influenced the number of fugitives and slave pursuers coming to it. Harrisburg's location drew both. The Maryland border was within forty miles and Harpers Ferry, the nearest point in Virginia, only eighty miles away. The town stood on the main trade and travel route north from the central and western valleys of Maryland

4 For transportation, see William Henry Egle, History of the Counties of Dauphin and Lebanon in the Commonwealth of Pa. (hereafter History of Dauphin County) (Philadelphia, 1883), 319-22. For industries, see 355-59. The data on population and ethnic proportions are based on computerized files of the manuscript federal census returns of Harrisburg, 1850, 1860, and 1870 (hereafter Computerized Ms Census), developed by the author and in his possession.
and Virginia. The borough’s nine hundred blacks and handful of white antislavery activists offered succor to fugitives. This was in part offset, however, by the lack of organized antislavery activities. For example, Harrisburg had no Quaker meeting; in other communities such groups often served as nurseries of abolitionism. Thirteen Harrisburg residents had been delegates to the founding meeting of the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society in the borough in 1837, but between 1849 and 1854, none of the town’s half-dozen newspapers reported any meetings of antislavery groups. Nor did Free-Soil presidential candidates attract Harrisburg voters. In 1848, Van Buren received 11 of 1,160 votes cast and Hale, four years later, drew 15 of 1,371. Such abolitionism as persisted took the form of quiet individual or impromptu group actions.

Harrisburg’s first encounter with the new fugitive slave law came less than two weeks after enactment of the measure and was one of the earliest proceedings under the law in the nation. The affair that occasioned this early use of the law began prior to the act’s adoption, in mid-August 1850, just as the United States Senate opened debate on the measure. On August 17, Solomon Snyder, a Harrisburg constable, arrested three blacks. William Taylor, a white planter from Clarke County, Virginia, claimed two of the men as his slaves who had fled north on horses taken from him. Along the way the third black, a slave belonging to a Mr. Page also of Clarke County, joined them. Charged with horse theft, the blacks were jailed. Six days later,

5 For election returns, see Keystone, Nov. 14, 1848 and Pa. Telegraph, Nov. 11, 1852. As will be seen, a few Harrisburg whites actively supported fugitives, providing legal services, bail money, and funds for redeeming a Harrisburg black remanded South as a runaway. A few families, such as the Rutherfords, worked as “conductors” on the Underground Railroad in Dauphin County. See Egle, History of Dauphin County, 557.

6 This and all subsequent incidents are based on accounts of the incidents reported by the following Harrisburg newspapers: Pennsylvania Telegraph (Whig), Keystone (Democrat), Daily American (1830-51), The Whig State Journal, and the Morning Herald (1853-55). Because of its detailed treatment of many of the incidents, I also used the Pennsylvania Freeman (published in Philadelphia by the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society until July 1854). These papers often printed extracts from still other papers which provided additional information. All ardently partisan, these papers’ accounts of fugitive slave incidents were biased by political considerations. The various accounts of the same incident often differed in detail and sometimes in substance. I have tried to write fair accounts from the conflicting data, taking known biases into consideration. To indicate the differences among the various accounts would have required far more space than is available and would not materially have altered the results.
on August 23, police officers brought them before Dauphin County's President-Judge, John J. Pearson, on writs of habeas corpus. A considerable array of lawyers was present. Charles C. Rawn and Mordecai McKinney, Harrisburg attorneys who, in the months ahead, would frequently defend alleged fugitive slaves, appeared on behalf of the blacks. According to Rawn, William M. Jones, a fifty-nine year old "doctor" and leader of Harrisburg's black community, and Edward Thompson, a thirty-four year old mulatto laborer, hired him to represent the accused. The planter Taylor, meanwhile, engaged three other Harrisburg lawyers to represent his interests. Clearly the case involved more than simple horse theft.

At the hearing, Taylor testified that seven of his slaves, including two of the three men on trial, had escaped on horseback. Although he later recovered his horses when the slaves abandoned them, Taylor and his party of nearly a dozen men continued to pursue the fugitives to Harrisburg. The defense called to the stand a succession of five black residents of the borough, the most prominent of whom was "doctor" Jones. He and the other blacks, two of whom roomed at Jones's home, testified that the accused were living and working in Harrisburg prior to the date of the alleged theft of Taylor's horses. A white man confirmed this, swearing that the accused had worked for him on and off since June 22. In rebuttal, Taylor's lawyers produced witnesses who had talked with the accused on August 17, the day they arrived in Harrisburg.

Because the hearing occupied the entire day, Judge Pearson reserved judgment overnight. When day dawned, an excited crowd of blacks and some whites stood in the streets around the jailhouse where the hearing was held. Constables and special constables, the sheriff, his deputy, and a posse, stood by to preserve order. As the crowd grew, the sheriff summoned a company of fifty militiamen to clear the street immediately in front of the jailhouse. Inside, Judge Pearson handed down the court's ruling. The use of the horses by the fugitive slaves to effect their escape did not constitute horse theft. That charge,

7 Manuscript Journal of Charles C. Rawn, XXII, entries for Sept. 24, 28, 1850, Dauphin County Historical Society, Harrisburg, Pa. The information on Jones and Thompson comes from the Computerized Ms Census. In successive decennial censuses, Jones was listed as "doctor," "I. [Indian?] doctor," and "druggist." He probably had no formal training in medicine, but used herbs and folk remedies in treating patients.
the court held, was "only a pretext" for recapturing the runaways as fugitives from labor. Accordingly the court released the men from custody, "intimating at the same time, that the owners had a right to [take] their property . . . provided it was not accompanied with any violence."8

Expecting the noisy crown outside to attempt a rescue, Taylor and his men left the courtroom ahead of the blacks and waited in an outer vestibule to seize and handcuff them as they emerged. When Taylor and his men fell upon the runaway slaves, the blacks cried out and resisted. The Southerners began beating them, using fists, canes, and whatever else came to hand. At that point Joseph Poeple, a thirty-one year old mulatto laborer from Harrisburg, ran from the crowd to assist the fugitives.9 "A heavy yellow man," Poeple rushed up the stone steps, pried open the iron gate to the jail entryway with his stick, and crowded in. "The masters were too much, and Poeple got a tremendous beating," a witness later testified. Emerging from the melee "bloody as a butcher," Poeple, by his effort, had made it possible for the slave who belonged to Page to escape. The fugitive "run [sic] like a deer with assistance of some twenty colored men, who occasionally gave him a push forward up Walnut street over by the Capital hill. . . ."

Had "three of like pluck" assisted Poeple, one observer declared, all the fugitives would have gotten away despite the greater number of Southerners. With Poeple ejected from the entryway, Taylor and his men, after a fierce struggle, subdued and handcuffed the remaining fugitives. At that point the sheriff's posse, on orders from the court, arrested both the runaway slaves and their captors and brought them back into the courtroom. The court also issued warrants for the arrest of black leaders who had created the disturbance in the street. Constables not long after brought Poeple, Jones and one of his sons, and six other Harrisburg blacks before the bench.10

Judge Pearson noted that while the Southerners had an "undoubted right to take their property if they found it in Pennsylvania," his

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8 For each incident the most detailed and informative accounts will be cited. For the hearing and riot of August 1850, see Pa. Telegraph, Aug. 28, 1850, and Pa. Freeman, Aug. 29, 1850.
9 Computerized Ms Census.
10 All quotations from Pa. Telegraph, Aug. 28, 1850.
object in releasing the blacks from the court's custody had been “to
give both parties a chance. . . .” Apparently he meant that because
the horse theft charge had been groundless, he wished to restore the
situation to what it had been prior to the blacks being taken into
custody. In any event, he continued, the blacks were not yet out of
the custody of the court when the whites fell upon them. Although
the state of Virginia might allow “brute force in lashing slaves,”
Pennsylvania recognized “the colored man as a human being” and
did not permit assault and battery on anyone to coerce them into
going anywhere against their wishes. Accordingly he charged Taylor
and his men with producing a riot in violation of the 1847 Penn-
sylvania statute against kidnapping blacks and using unnecessary force
in the capture of runaway slaves.\footnote{Ibid.; Laws of Pennsylvania, Session of 1847, #159, 206-08.}
Taylor, to prevent his slaves from
being released, preferred charges of assault against them. Poeple and
the Harrisburg blacks were charged with riot and assault and battery.
Ten Harrisburg whites (including a merchant, a lawyer, a physician,
a wagonmaker, a scalesmaker, and a blacksmith) and two blacks
provided bond money to help the local blacks secure release on bail.
The blacks from Virginia remained behind bars while their master,
Taylor, departed for the federal court in Philadelphia to secure a writ
authorizing him to carry his slaves home.\footnote{Sessions Docket, VIII, 278-81, Dauphin County Court Records, County Building,
Harrisburg; Computerized Ms Census.}

As these events transpired at Harrisburg, the United States Senate
in Washington debated the fugitive slave bill that would soon be part
of the Compromise of 1850. Debate ran from the 19th through the
23d of August and the Senate passed the bill on August 26. The
House adopted the measure without debate on September 12, and
President Millard Fillmore signed it into law on September 18.
Among other reasons, Southern members of Congress had insisted
on a new and stronger fugitive slave law precisely because opponents
of slavery used state laws such as the 1847 Pennsylvania statute to
obstruct the existing fugitive slave law.\footnote{Congressional Globe, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., XXI, 1659-60, 1810, 1815. For the debate,
see Appendix, 1581-1630.}

The new law, among other things, aimed at ending the rash of
state court trials in cases involving the return of runaway slaves. The
federal courts were to appoint special United States commissioners before whom slave owners or their agents could bring alleged fugitives for certification for removal home. A simple hearing, not a trial, would be held to determine whether or not the black in question was a runaway slave belonging to the claimant. In the absence of contrary evidence, the sworn affidavits of the claimants constituted proof of ownership. The law specifically forbade taking testimony from alleged fugitives and recognized no right of the accused to an attorney or to call witnesses. To be heard at all, those in custody had to be represented at the hearing by whites (or possibly by blacks whom the commissioner recognized as free) who volunteered to testify in the matter. Since no notice had to be given and hearings often were held as soon as alleged runaways could be hurried into the presence of a commissioner, the accused frequently had little chance of securing help.

When a commissioner found for a claimant, he collected a ten dollar fee for every fugitive returned because each required a document. If he denied a claim, he received only five dollars, no document being needed. The act required “all good citizens” to assist federal commissioners and other law officers in executing the law. Anyone who obstructed enforcement or assisted or harbored fugitives could be fined or imprisoned. Slave owners could also seek civil damages up to $1,000 per escaped slave against such persons. If it appeared that an effort might be made to free a fugitive, a commissioner could provide, at federal expense, as large a force as needed to return the slave safely home.\footnote{U.S., \textit{Statutes at Large}, IX, 462-65.}

The measure, though controversial in many places, stirred little excitement in Harrisburg. Once the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted, the town’s newspapers, regardless of political shading, accepted it along with the rest of the compromise of 1850. Whatever the town’s misgivings about the act, obedience to the Constitution and laws of the nation seemed small enough a price to pay for preserving the union. A few federal commissioners in Pennsylvania resigned so as to avoid being parties to the return of runaway slaves. One explained to the federal court in Philadelphia that “as a man of honor” he could “not hesitate to refuse to perform.” Others, however, solicited
commissionerships. John C. McAllister wrote to United States Supreme Court Justice Robert Grier (whose circuit included Pennsylvania), urging that his son, Richard McAllister, a Harrisburg lawyer, be named commissioner for Dauphin County. Ironically, the McAllisters had been the last family in Harrisburg to own a slave. The appointment, signed by Roger B. Taney, Chief Justice of the United States, took effect on September 30, 1850.15

Taylor's return to Harrisburg that same September 30 to pick up his slaves under the new fugitive slave act proved to be anti-climactic. After dropping the assault charges against them, he manacled his slaves while still in their cells, and took them before Commissioner McAllister. There he swore that the blacks were his property, after which the commissioner, contrary to the provisions of the law, asked the blacks "what they had to say." Without legal assistance or volunteer witnesses, they made no reply; they "only looked sheepish and tried to look innocent," one newspaper reported, "but this could not go down under the late act [the new Fugitive Slave Law]." "The law is an abomination and the hearing a farce," attorney Rawn noted in his journal. Because of the disorders in August, McAllister authorized a posse, including Harrisburg constables Henry Loyer and Solomon Snyder, Michael Shaffer (a plasterer by trade who soon became one of McAllister's officers), and a Mr. Kinger, a newcomer to Harrisburg, to "carry [the fugitives] back to old Virginy" at federal expense.16 The trial in November found Taylor and his men innocent of provoking a riot. Judge Pearson postponed the trial of the Harrisburg blacks accused of rioting until January, then nol prossed the matter in response to a petition, signed by several of the town's leading citizens, asking for leniency and dismissal of the case.17


During the next fifteen months, Harrisburg residents had several opportunities to see the new fugitive slave law in action. They also learned of its potential for abuse. Between October 1850 and December 1851, nine incidents, involving seventeen blacks, took place. Some provoked minor public disturbances; a few considerably distressed at least part of the community. In most instances the blacks appear to have been runaways and all requirements of the law met. That such proceedings were entirely lawful made them all the more objectionable and exasperating to many people.

Four incidents presented no problems whatever. David, "a boy" from Virginia, when captured by his master and taken before Commissioner McAllister in January 1851, confessed to being a runaway, said he was "tired of Pennsylvania," and wished to return home. During November and December 1851, McAllister remanded three other blacks to their masters without incident. The Bob Sterling case in August 1851 proved less easy. There was no question but that he had run away some six years before. Nonetheless, a number of curious whites conversed with Sterling as they waited for the proceedings to begin. Meanwhile a crowd of blacks milled about in the street outside the commissioner's office. Sterling's owner, fearing an attempt would be made to rescue her slave, asked the commissioner for help in taking him home. Because the Pennsylvania statute of 1847 forbade the use of public jails to detain fugitives from labor, Sterling's owner housed him overnight in a local hotel. During the night someone set the place on fire, apparently hoping to effect a rescue during the confusion. The ruse failed, the fire was put out, and Sterling left for the South on schedule.18

Probably the most unsettling case for some whites involved a runaway slave family. The husband, Daniel Franklin, belonged to a Maryland physician; the wife, Abby, and their daughter, Caroline, belonged to woman living in Baltimore. Having escaped to Pennsylvania in 1849, the Franklins settled in Columbia, a town on the Susquehanna a few miles below Harrisburg. There they had a second child in 1850. On April 14, Solomon Snyder, a Harrisburg constable, and Michael Shaeffer, who frequently assisted at slave-catching, ar-

rested the Franklins and took them to Commissioner McAllister in Harrisburg to be certified for return to their owners. There the black community rose in protest. "The thoroughfares of this usually demure borough were again thronged, early this morning, with an excited and threatening populace—the colored portion of the community," wrote a reporter from the Philadelphia Ledger. "From the clenched teeth of one and all was hissing forth the news that a man and wife, and a baby, had arrived in their midst in custody as fugitive slaves, and were about being remanded by the Commissioner."\(^{19}\) Aroused at 6:45 A.M., attorneys Rawn and McKinney, who previously had represented Taylor's slaves, rushed to McAllister's office. There they requested an hour in which to make inquiry. McAllister refused and within thirty minutes the blacks, except for the infant born in Pennsylvania, were on their way South. Friends of the Franklins agreed to keep the baby, which because born in Pennsylvania, was free and not subject to return. "The proof was uncommonly satisfactory," observed the Harrisburg Telegraph sarcastically. "Besides thirty dollars allowed by law in such cases for a right decision, a young man of 17 or 18 years of age, representing himself to be the son of the owner, and who of course knew all about it, swore to the identity and ownership." Meanwhile, blacks, led by "Old Father Jones" (the black physician), "rushed around the corners a little" in a state of consternation, powerless against the law.\(^{20}\)

Two incidents raised suspicions that enforcers of the new law were using their positions to turn a profit by returning slaves to their owners. The first involved an outright violation of the law; the second, if charges made at the time were true, impeached the integrity of Commissioner McAllister. In November 1850, McAllister issued warrants for the arrest of four fugitives. Constable Solomon Snyder, assisted by John Sanders, arrested the men on a Sunday morning as they were chopping wood outside Harrisburg. Instead of taking the men before McAllister as provided by law, they simply hustled them directly off to Baltimore where, it was alleged, they hoped to collect a $1,000 reward. Whether or not the blacks were fugitives was not

\(^{19}\) Quoted by Pa. Freeman, May 1, 1851.

\(^{20}\) Rawn Journal, XXII, entry for Apr. 22, 1851; Pa. Telegraph, Apr. 22; Daily American, Apr. 23; Whig State Journal, Apr. 27, 1851.
known, the *Telegraph* commented, “but then, they had no right to be poor and black!” Edward Thompson and James A. Williams, black residents of Harrisburg, subsequently brought charges of kidnapping against Snyder and Sanders, and employed Rawn to assist in the case. In April, the jury found the two guilty only of assault. Because the court found the blacks to be runaway slaves who had resisted capture, it set the judgment aside.

An even more serious incident involved four other black fugitives. One Michael Lenty, a white, had the four arrested, bound, and taken before a Harrisburg magistrate where he accused them of complicity in the celebrated Christiana riot and murder in September 1851. (In that affair a white master from Maryland had gone to the black community of Christiana, Pennsylvania, to find runaway slaves and had been shot and killed.) Again attorneys Rawn and McKinney appeared, petitioning for writs of habeas corpus. Judge Pearson, at the request of Commissioner McAllister, delayed the request one day. At the hearing next day, Pearson summarily dismissed the case, charging the magistrate with gross dereliction of duty in confining the men with no evidence other than Lenty’s charge that they had committed a crime. Both McAllister and District Attorney James Fox, who were present, admitted the illegality of the commitment. Nonetheless, immediately afterwards, and within arm’s length of Judge Pearson who was recording his disposition in the court’s records, McAllister’s men handcuffed the blacks and marched them off to the Commissioner’s office. The *Whig State Journal* succinctly reported what followed: “after a lengthy examination the fugitives were remanded to their owners, who were present. The negroes very promptly acknowledged their masters and expressed a desire to return to their service.”

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21 *Pa. Telegraph*, Nov. 20; *Pa. Freeman*, Nov. 21, 1851.
24 Sept. 30, 1851.
A fuller account of the "lengthy examination" (supplied anonymously by "YZ") appeared in the Pennsylvania Telegraph. Rawn and McKinney repeatedly raised objections to the proceedings which took place behind closed doors in McAllister's office. Just as often, McAllister overruled them. Throughout, his conduct was marked "by evident determination, accompanied by haste and impatience," to end the proceedings as quickly as possible. He cut off cross-examination of witnesses by the blacks' lawyers and "peremptorily" blocked answers to some questions. He "positively forbade and prevented" one witness from explaining how he had found out about the arrest and custody of the blacks at Harrisburg. Further, the commissioner frequently directed insulting remarks at McKinney: "McKinney, you're enough to make a dog sick (clapping);" "McKinney, you're a hard one;" and, when the blacks, after coaching by their owners, grudgingly said they did not want the help of an attorney, "Why, McKinney, you ain't popular with the niggers."

In the end, McAllister certified the blacks for return. Because a large crowd had gathered outside his office, he designated a posse consisting of the borough's High Constable, Henry Lyne, two of Harrisburg's three elected constables, Solomon Snyder and Henry Loyer, and two men who frequently assisted in tracking down fugitives, Michael Shaeffer and John Sanders, to accompany the slaves and owners to Baltimore. The next day the Telegraph received a lengthy letter, allegedly from the slaveowners, praising McAllister and his men for helping return their property. They had learned from newspaper accounts that their slaves were being held in Harrisburg, the letter said, which accounted for their being present at the moment the four were released by Judge Pearson.

YZ raised a number of questions and offered a quite different interpretation of events. There had been too little time and no reason for the owners to have written the letter to the Telegraph. Its tone, content, and praise for McAllister all pointed to the commissioner as its inspiration, if not author. Similarly there had been too little time between the initial arrest of the blacks and the hearing before Judge Pearson for a news account to have reached the owners in Maryland and for them, in turn, to travel to Harrisburg. Rather, a poster offering a reward of $800 for the four runaways had been circulating in Harrisburg. Apparently McAllister's men, recognizing the fugitives and having no lawful way to hold them until the owners
could be notified, had the blacks imprisoned on false charges of complicity in murder. McAllister, meanwhile, interceded to delay habeas corpus proceedings until he could telegraph the owners to come immediately to Harrisburg. Further, YZ charged, McAllister himself had accompanied the posse, slaves and owners to Baltimore. The next day the slaves were sold to a slavetrader for $3,400 and McAllister, after receiving the $800 reward, returned home. If these accusations were false, they certainly were detailed and plausible. McAllister made no response whatever and they remained unproven but lingering suspicions.

Instances in which slave-catchers were foiled lent support to fears of some that the fugitive slave law provided a guise for kidnapping free blacks. Shortly after passage of the law, white men, on two occasions, seized young black women on the streets of Harrisburg, apparently with the intent of carrying them into slavery. One, Ellen Robinson, the wife of a black laborer, had proof with her that she was free. The screams of the second woman brought neighbors to her rescue. Both went free. A year later, a slavehunter from Maryland named Hutchinson, assisted by Michael Shaeffer of Harrisburg, called at the quarters of John Dunmore, a black waiter. Pretending to have business with him, they lured him into the street where they seized and handcuffed him. His cries brought out several citizens who demanded that the matter be examined legally. Enroute to McAllister’s office, Shaeffer allegedly threatened to shoot Dunmore if he did not confess that he was Hutchinson’s slave. Dunmore, however, insisted he was free and the slave-catchers, finding they were attracting too much attention, decided that they had mistaken Dunmore for someone else. Writs were issued next morning for the two as kidnappers. Hutchinson had already taken the train for home, leaving Shaeffer alone to face charges of assault and battery and false arrest.

Whether the number of fugitive slave incidents declined sharply after 1851 or the newspapers no longer reported them is not certain. Whatever the reason, only three affairs received notice in 1852. Those

27 Pa. Freeman, Oct. 2; Pa. Telegraph, Oct. 1, 1851. I have found no reports of the outcome of these charges.
three incidents could not have served the cause of antislavery better had they been scripted and acted out as morality plays. Their combined impact inflamed both blacks and whites and produced an about-face among whites regarding enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. The first, on April 30, involved an officer Ridgely, from Baltimore, and Harrisburg constables Henry Lyne and Solomon Snyder, who were acting as deputy U.S. marshals. Ridgely came to McAllister's office to obtain a warrant for the arrest of an alleged fugitive, William Smith, who lived and worked in nearby Columbia. Ridgely, Lyne, and Snyder found Smith at work in a lumber yard in that community. Ridgely and Snyder, one on each side, seized Smith by the arms. A struggle ensued during which Ridgely drew a pistol from his belt, and shot and killed Smith. After declaring he would turn himself over to local authorities, he instead left Columbia and returned to Baltimore. A coroner's jury subsequently concluded that Smith had been killed, perhaps accidentally, but without excuse, while being held by the officers. With Ridgely out of state, it appeared the matter would be dropped. A part of the press throughout Pennsylvania clamored for Governor William Bigler to demand the return of the officer to stand trial. The Governor of Maryland, instead, sent two commissioners to investigate the affair. They uncovered witnesses who gave testimony favorable to Ridgely: at the time of the shooting, Smith had the officer's thumb in his mouth and was chewing on it. Also, although Ridgely was to receive a reward for returning Smith, he would get nothing if he did not return the slave alive. The Attorney General of Pennsylvania ruled that the case would not be pursued. An agitated press continued to complain that justice had been denied, that a prima facie case of manslaughter had been made, and that a trial should be held.

In the midst of this controversy, John "Buckie" Johnson, "a little colored boy" from Harrisburg turned up in Maryland. Some months before he had mysteriously disappeared, having wandered or been lured to Baltimore. There he was arrested, advertised in the newspapers and finally bound out to a master till the age of twenty-one.

The boy’s mother, meanwhile, employed a Harrisburg lawyer who traced the boy to Baltimore. Buckie’s new master agreed to free the boy, asking $100 to repay his expenses. They boy’s mother went door to door, first in Harrisburg and then in Lancaster, but could raise only $50. In desperation she appealed to Commissioner McAllister for aid. Apparently seeing in the situation an opportunity to quiet the clamor provoked by the killing of Smith, McAllister contacted the Maryland officials who had investigated the slaying at Columbia. He persuaded them that by returning Johnson, they could demonstrate that slave states, and Maryland in particular, wanted only the return of their fugitives and were as scrupulous of the rights of free blacks as any Northern community. Moreover, he wrote them, freeing the boy would “cultivate the most fraternal feeling between the people of the two states.” The Maryland commissioners redeemed the boy without cost to his mother; his owner bought him a new suit for the occasion; and Buckie returned home by train. However thankful the black community that the boy was safe at home, the incident could not have but increased their fears of kidnapping.

The third incident shocked blacks and whites alike in Harrisburg even before young Johnson reached home. James Phillips, a well-known, well-liked, thirty-two year-old black teamster, was arrested on the streets by Constable Loyer and Deputy Marshal Sanders and taken before McAllister to be remanded South. Two Virginians, claiming to represent Phillips’s alleged owner, declared that the black had run away some fifteen or sixteen years before. He was about sixteen and they eleven or twelve years old when last they saw him, they admitted, but they recognized him on the streets because he closely resembled their other slaves to whom he was related. Attorneys McKinney and Rawn once more rushed to McAllister’s office to defend an accused fugitive. Again the commissioner overruled their every objection, traded insults with the lawyers, and forbade witnesses to tell who had written them recently that Phillips was living in Harrisburg. At length, taking an already filled out writ (“to save time”) from his desk, McAllister turned Phillips over to the claimants who conveyed him to the local jail for the night, the section of the

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30 *Keystone*, May 26; *Whig State Journal*, June 3, 10, 1852. The quotation is from the *Keystone* and paraphrases the reply of the Maryland Commissioners to McAllister.
1847 statute forbidding such use of jails in Pennsylvania having in the meantime been repealed. Phillips's wife (he was married and the father of two small children) remained silent throughout the proceedings. When, in the end, her husband was led to jail in chains, she broke down and began screaming.

Although a noisy crowd, mostly blacks, assembled outside McAllister's office and around the jail, no disorder broke out. The next morning the owners took Phillips to Richmond where he was sold to a slave dealer for $505. Outraged, a group of Harrisburg whites began raising money, Phillips's employer alone contributing $300. A few weeks later they dispatched Attorney Rawn to Virginia where he redeemed Phillips for $800 and returned him to his family and friends in Harrisburg.\(^{31}\)

Between enactment of the law in September 1850 and the end of August 1852, the major fugitive slave incidents in Harrisburg had exposed, one by one, some of the uglier aspects of returning runaways: the difficulty of determining whether accused blacks were free and therefore entitled to protection or runaway property without rights; the frequent resort to violence when fugitives resisted re-enslavement; the separation of husbands from wives and parents from children; the possible kidnapping of free blacks; the absence of any statute of limitations on the return of runaways; and the opportunities for law officers to turn the business into a racket for personal gain. Given the smallness of the town and number of incidents, few residents of Harrisburg could have gone untouched by these events, whatever their reactions. And as the incidents drove home the consequences of the law and its enforcement, attitudes in Harrisburg began to change.

The first evidences of change occurred in the press. Because Harrisburg was the capital of Pennsylvania, the Commonwealth's various political factions sought to maintain newspapers there. In September

1850, only the *Pennsylvania Telegraph*, edited and owned by Theophilus Fenn since 1831, spoke for the Whigs. By January 1851, two rivals appeared, another weekly, the *Whig State Journal*, and the *Daily Herald*. The *Herald* lasted only until May 1851. In November 1853, to restore party unity, a single owner purchased both Whig weeklies, merged the *Journal* into the *Telegraph*, and appointed a new editor. Harrisburg Democrats, who considerably outnumbered Whigs at the polls, also enjoyed two weeklies throughout the early 1850's, the *Democratic Union* and the *Keystone*. Regularly on the eve of national political campaigns new papers appeared, but rarely survived elections.\(^3\) Extremely partisan, Harrisburg's newspapers, except for the *Telegraph*, devoted little space to local events. Each concentrated on representing the views of its faction on key national and state political issues.

In August and September 1850, as the Fugitive Slave Bill made its way through Congress, Harrisburg newspapers reported the process but offered remarkably little commentary. The *Telegraph*, in printing the final version of the bill in its entirety, complained "the South have it all their own way, through the subserviency of Northern doughfaces."\(^3\) Once the measure became law and fugitive slave incidents began to occur in the borough, the papers, regardless of political shading, took the position that the law was a necessary part of the Compromise of 1850 and must be obeyed.

Theophilus Fenn of the *Telegraph* was the editor least comfortable with the new law. Even so, he urged obedience and reluctantly supported the return of runaway slaves. At the time of the jailhouse riot in August, the *Telegraph* noted that whites in the crowd, and in Harrisburg generally, appeared "anxious to uphold the Constitution and laws and they will not interfere in the matter."\(^3\) On October 2, it observed that the town looked "almost deserted of black fellows, since they have heard of the new law. It is supposed that more than

\(^3\) For Harrisburg newspapers, see Egle, *History of Dauphin County*, 352-55; George H. Morgan, *Annals of Harrisburg* (Harrisburg, 1906), 366-68; George P. Donehoo, *Harrisburg and Dauphin County* (Dayton, O., 1925), 122-26. I have been unable to locate any extant *Democratic Union* issues after 1849.

\(^3\) Sept. 18, 1850.

\(^3\) Aug. 28, 1850.
a hundred have left for Canada and other parts. They had better go—that is those who are not well known here.”

When the Pennsylvania Freeman, an antislavery newspaper published in Philadelphia, asked for the names, characters, and standing of the “official miscreants” responsible for returning Taylor’s slaves, the Telegraph happily obliged. “Commissioner McAllister is the late Deputy Attorney General for this county, a lawyer of good standing, a respectable citizen, member of the Episcopal Church of this borough, and one of the Vestry. He is an aspiring man.” Fenn was in a position to know, since he too that year had sat on the vestry at St. Stephen’s. Responding a week later to hostile questions raised by the Free Presbyterian regarding the Taylor case, Fenn commented, “why . . . make such a fuss? That case was only about a couple of niggers among several millions. Would you have Mr. Taylor lose his property?”

The Telegraph was the first paper to shift its position, beginning October 16. Apparently comments in the Charlestown, Virginia, Free Press and by Constable Loyer about returning Taylor’s fugitive slaves, provoked Fenn. The Free Press declared it “a novel, though gratifying spectacle, to see two fugitive slaves homeward bound, and in the charge of officers from a free state.” A number of Pennsylvanians were no less “gratified,” the Telegraph observed wryly. Commissioner McAllister received ten dollars each for remanding the fugitives and would have got only five dollars had he decided differently. The “other gentlemen” involved, namely the town constables and others who accompanied Taylor and his fugitives, “were exceedingly well pleased with the trip and the hospitality shown them, but especially with the per diem and mileage.” The Telegraph itself was “gratified” to learn from Constable Loyer that the fugitives were “exceedingly gratified upon their return to their friends and families—and the delicious climate which they had incautiously left.” It could only be gratifying, however, to those who looked upon slavery as “‘a divine institution,’ . . . to see men, women, and children ironed, manacled, and escorted by armed Marshalls’ [sic] through the country, for no

35 Passage of the law led over two hundred blacks to flee the Pittsburgh area between Sept. 20 and 26, 1850. Irene E. Williams, “The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania from 1850 to 1860,” Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine 4 (1921), 152.

36 Pa. Telegraph, Oct. 9, 16, 1850; Records of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Harrisburg.
crime but that of desiring to be free.” While it would not lag behind others in supporting the Fugitive Slave Law and in sustaining those who were duty-bound to enforce it, the *Telegraph* could not “comprehend the construction of mind” of those who took pleasure in depriving others of the privilege of liberty which they themselves enjoyed.

The same issue carried a guest article attacking the Fugitive Slave Law as unconstitutional, and an article on “Blood-Hounds”—slave-catchers who prowled the streets hunting down fugitive slaves either for the sport of it or for bounties.37 In the weeks that followed, the *Telegraph*, first indirectly, then by name, attacked McAllister and the Harrisburg constables who worked for him. It was one thing to enforce the law, the paper declared, but quite another to do it for profit or to go out of one’s way to find runaways.

In early 1851, the rival *Whig State Journal* began publication. The *Telegraph* enthusiastically supported the Whig Governor of Pennsylvania, William F. Johnston, but had never warmed to the Millard Fillmore administration in Washington. Johnston, like Fenn, opposed slavery and disliked the Fugitive Slave Law; Fillmore solidly supported the Compromise of 1850. The new *Whig State Journal*, on the other hand, vigorously supported Fillmore and in return received patronage in the form of payment for publishing presidential proclamations and other public documents.38 Taking its cue from Washington, the *Journal* noted that “the great mass of Whigs, and the people of all parties in Pennsylvania,” were “sound” on the question of the Compromise. Like Fillmore, they saw it as “a final settlement” of the dangerous slavery controversy and were determined “to sustain the Compromise measures earnestly and heartily, in good faith, in all their parts, as an agreed settlement, upon the successful maintenance of which hangs the hope of the union, the preservation of the Constitution, and the priceless boon of civil liberty which it guarantees.”39

When Commissioner McAllister divided the Franklin family, sending the husband, wife, and child to Maryland, but leaving the free-

37 Oct. 16, 1850.
38 See *Whig State Journal*, Sept. 16, 1851.
39 Ibid., July 15, 1851.
born infant in Pennsylvania, the *Journal*, in contrast with other papers, insisted that the affair "created no excitement. Our citizens are determined that the laws shall be enforced, and every attempt at resistance or violence will be indignantly frowned down."\(^{40}\) It denounced as "treasonable" the attempt to rescue the fugitive, Bob Sterling, by setting fire to the hotel that housed him overnight.\(^{41}\) The *Journal* usually ended accounts of slave incidents positively, noting that officials had "successfully and energetically" enforced the law and that Harrisburg citizens remained calmly determined to obey the measure.\(^{42}\)

Officer Ridgely's slaying of the fugitive, William Smith, at Columbia and the remanding of Jim Phillips to servitude, however, brought an abrupt change in the *Journal*'s position. Referring to the Columbia incident as "that disgraceful affair," the *Journal* observed that its support of the "faithful execution of the Fugitive Slave Law" did not include giving "slave-catchers license to shoot men down in cold blood, without provocation, and without proof that they are fugitives from labor."\(^{43}\) Its headline in the Phillips case read: "Arrest of an Alleged Fugitive Slave. Great Excitement." "So intense was the excitement," the *Journal* reported, that at one point "we feared an attack upon the Commissioner's office." Its long account of the affair ended on a touching note: the victim had not even been permitted "to see and bid his wife 'a last, long farewell . . . .'." Instead, he was "hurried off to prison, and the wretched mother returned to her desolate home, with a sorrowful heart, to comfort, as best she might, the little ones thus suddenly deprived of the protection of a kind and provident father. The scene was calculated to excite deep sympathy, and to melt the hardest heart."\(^{44}\)

The hearts of Democratic editors, unlike those of Whigs, remained unmelted. The *Keystone*'s relatively brief account of the Phillips case reported that there had been no doubt whatever but that the Virginians had identified their man and proven their case. The paper reprinted a much longer account of the affair by a correspondent to the *Penn-
sylvanian, a Democratic paper published in Philadelphia. That report emphasized the same points as the Keystone, but failed to mention that Phillips had lived and worked in Harrisburg for a decade and a half. It also roundly denounced the “immense crowd of blacks and their white allies, and other curious people having nothing else to do except to attend to other people’s business.” As for the screaming of Phillips’s wife when she saw her husband led to jail in chains, that was “for the evident purpose of adding to the excitement and as a signal” for an attempt to rescue him. Subsequent issues of the Keystone made no mention of the town’s ransoming of Phillips.

This was completely consistent with the Keystone’s position since adoption of the Fugitive Slave Law in September 1850. Throughout the period it devoted less space than the Whig papers to local fugitive slave incidents, preferring to carry accounts of escaped slaves elsewhere who found no happiness in freedom and either returned to their masters voluntarily, or fervently wished they could. It often ignored incidents altogether and events such as the slaying of the fugitive Smith at Columbia received terse coverage. “Arrest of a Fugitive Slave—The Slave Shot,” read the headline. Only the barest facts appeared in the article and the Keystone reported none of the subsequent controversy over Officer Ridgely’s failure to face a coroner’s jury. On the other hand, it went into great detail regarding the generosity of the Marylanders who returned “Buckie” Johnson to his mother.

The impact of Harrisburg’s fugitive slave incidents on newspapers appeared to be wholly partisan. Just as some papers reported those affairs to expose the evils of the Fugitive Slave Law, others tried to turn such incidents to partisan advantage. In 1851, when enthusiasm ran high for the Compromise of 1850 as the “final settlement” of the slavery controversy, the Pennsylvania Legislature voted to repeal that portion of the Pennsylvania law of 1847, which prevented slave catchers from using public jails to hold their victims. At that point the Whig State Journal, still siding with the Fillmore Administration in Washington, approved. That law was “illiberal and unjust towards the South, and in direct conflict with the laws of Congress upon the

45 *Keystone*, May 26, 1852.
subject.\textsuperscript{48} When Whig Governor Johnston allowed the measure to lie on his desk unsigned, the *Keystone* complained that everyone knew that “the heroic Taylor and nine other reputable citizens of Virginia” had “barely escaped slaughter from an infuriated negro mob” because of the 1847 statute. The same two papers used the August 1851 firing of the hotel in which Bob Sterling’s owner housed him overnight, to denounce the Governor and his “abolitionist” sympathies for delaying his decision. The *Keystone* charged that “some base abolition incendiary set fire to the hotel . . . ,” and urged lovers of law and order and patriotic Whigs to unite to defeat Johnston’s upcoming bid for re-election.\textsuperscript{49}

The Christiana Riot in September, at which a Maryland slaveowner was killed by blacks while trying to flush out runaway slaves, further exacerbated the question. Johnston, who appeared to be winning his race for re-election until that event, came under increased fire, and in the October election, Democrat William Bigler won handily. Before leaving office, Johnston finally vetoed the still-pending repeal bill, only to have the incoming legislature re-enact it and Bigler sign it into law in early 1852. With Bigler, a Democrat, in office, *Keystone* reports of fugitive slave incidents included such remarks as, “everything went off quietly and not the least disturbance was manifested.” One ended, “verily we believe the fugitive slave excitement is dead, and we regard this as the legitimate result of Col. Bigler’s triumphant election.\textsuperscript{50}

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to conclude that the Harrisburg press, on the matter of fugitive slaves, reflected only the stances of their respective political factions. That certainly would not explain why the shifts of each of the Whig papers coincided with one of Harrisburg’s dramatic fugitive slave incidents. Local events and local opinions seem to have played at least a part in those shifts.

Proof that a substantial part, if not a majority, of the people of Harrisburg changed their minds about the Fugitive Slave Law and its enforcement would not come until March 1853. In the beginning,
according to newspapers that opposed the law, Harrisburg residents appeared to be on the side of the masters, not of the fugitives. When Taylor and his men were acquitted of using excessive force to recapture their runaways in late 1850, the Pennsylvania Freeman complained that “the most disgraceful part” was “the exultation with which the bystanders received the verdict” and the “congratulations” they “heaped upon” the masters.  

When McAllister remanded a fugitive South in January 1851, the Telegraph observed that a crowd watched the proceedings and then marched with the party to the trains “apparently as much gratified as though they [rather than the Commissioner] had made the ten dollars, each, by the operation.”

That some people came to disapprove of the Fugitive Slave Law and the manner in which it was enforced must not be taken to mean that they ceased to be prejudiced against blacks or favored freeing the slaves. Even the “pro-black” Telegraph, at the time of the Christiana Riot, declared that the blacks’ “act of defense was of course atrocious.” It concurred with national Whig publications that the action was “treasonable,” and concluded that “the blacks who are tolerated in this state have no right to raise a riot, and tarnish our soil by bloody insurrection.”

Indeed, the press and many residents of Harrisburg would have preferred evasion of the issue. Repeal of the 1847 statute’s prohibition against using Pennsylvania jails to house runaways was seen as one way of reducing the number of attempts to free fugitives from their owners. Another measure introduced in the legislature aimed at containing the growing racial issue by halting the further migration of free blacks into Pennsylvania. “It is demanded in self-defense,” the Keystone declared, “and is necessary to prevent Pennsylvania from becoming the grand recepticle for the free colored population of the whole Union.” The paper noted that several Western states already had enacted such bans. The Whig papers in Harrisburg ignored the issue, and the measure died without coming to a vote in the legislature.

Yet another way of evading racial controversy that found favor among many whites in Harrisburg was the colonization of blacks in

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51 Pa. Freeman, Dec. 5, 1850.
52 Pa. Telegraph, Jan. 25, 1851.
53 Ibid., Sept. 17, 1851.
54 Keystone, Aug. 12, 1851.
Liberia. All Harrisburg newspapers endorsed efforts of the Colonization Society to raise funds, as one paper put it, to find a home for “the horde of fugitive negroes—scamps or slaves—” who currently came North or moved on to Canada.\(^5\) When the legislature voted $2,000 per annum “to facilitate the emigration of free people of color within the state,” the various denominations of Harrisburg and across the Commonwealth began drives for additional funds. Although the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society denounced colonization, even some blacks favored it.\(^5\) In February 1853, Harrisburg blacks formally debated the issue, “Which holds out the greatest inducement for a permanent home to the colored people, Africa or America?” Thomas Early (a thirty-five year old waiter who had been arrested for involvement in the August 1850 riot), John Price (a twenty-eight year old shoemaker) and Thomas Morris Chester (a nineteen year old who would become one of Harrisburg’s most distinguished blacks) argued in favor of Africa. Chester, soon after the debate, left for Liberia where he lived for nearly a decade before returning to the United States for a career in writing, diplomacy, law, and education. Speaking on behalf of America in the debate were Samuel Bennet (a twenty-seven year old servant), John Wolf (a thirty-two year old school teacher), and John Pierson. Except for young Chester, who was not married, and perhaps Pierson, who was not recorded in the 1850 census, all the debating blacks can be identified as employed heads of families.\(^5\)

None of these evasive moves, however, could have solved the immediate problem of abuses, real or potential, posed by enforcement of the fugitive slave law. The most dramatic evidence that Harrisburg residents had changed position on that issue occurred in the borough elections of March 1853. Since the days of Andrew Jackson, Harrisburg, like the State of Pennsylvania (but unlike Dauphin County of which it was county seat), had regularly supported the Democratic Party. Although 1848 had been an exception, the tradition of Democratic victories continued until the mid-1850’s when both major

\(^{5\text{Whig State Journal, Feb. 12, 1852.}}\)
\(^{6\text{Ibid., Dec. 2, 1852.}}\)
\(^{7\text{Pa. Telegraph, Feb. 5, 1853. The data on the debaters is from the Computerized Ms. Census, 1850.}}\)
Elections for borough offices were held each March. The Chief Burgess, the Assistant Burgess, the High Constable, and three regular Constables, were elected for one year terms by popular vote. The nine members of the Borough Council enjoyed three-year terms, with three council members being elected each year. Although Harrisburg's newspapers were partisan, elections for local office tended not to be. A week or two before election day, party caucuses met in each ward to nominate candidates for office. Some years, no formal caucuses were held and candidates often ran without labels or as "independents." This was most common among candidates for high constable and constable. The town's newspapers usually (but not always) reported on caucuses, but rarely endorsed or campaigned for any candidate. Each year between 1849 and 1854, two-thirds or more of the persons elected to office were Democrats (see Table 1).

Although the offices of high constable and regular constable

\[ Coleman, \textit{Disruption of the Pennsylvania Democracy}, 13-79. \]

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### TABLE 1

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<th>OFFICE</th>
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changed frequently in this period, the jobs in fact rotated back and forth among only a few candidates. The high constable and three regular constables elected in 1852 (Henry Lyne, Henry Loyer, Solomon Snyder and James Lewis), all sought re-election in 1853. All four were Democrats. Lyne and Lewis had served only one year in office; Loyer, first elected in 1849, and Snyder, first elected in 1850, had won re-election each year since (see Table 2). All except Lewis had been involved in running down fugitive slaves for Commissioner McAllister. Snyder’s record was particularly notorious. Indeed, he had figured prominently in several of the troubling incidents. In April 1851, Snyder stood trial for kidnapping four blacks, but the jury acquitted him. His reputation as a slave catcher, the kidnapping charges, the stories that he employed black spies to ferret out fugitives in the black community, and the fact that he had only one hand, made him an object of particular dread among Harrisburg blacks.\(^{59}\)

As early as November 1850, letters to the editor began to complain that the borough’s elected constables were more interested in capturing fugitive slaves than in guarding the town against “burglars, incendiaries, and other villains.”\(^{60}\) Complaints increased, usually just ahead of borough elections. Loyer and Snyder won re-election in both 1851 and 1852, but by reduced margins. Snyder, indeed, won in 1852 by a single vote. The dramatic events immediately following the 1852 borough election (the killing of Smith at Columbia, the disappearance and return of Buckie Johnson, the remanding and subsequent ransoming of Jim Phillips) apparently turned the tide of public sentiment against the slave-running constables. The *Telegraph*, in July, pointed out that “no man can serve two masters,” and wondered how “one corps of police can perform services to the borough and to the Slave Inquisitor.” The *Whig State Journal* suggested that if the constables would “attend to their legitimate business, instead of sneaking about the country, scenting out and running down runaway negroes, they would occupy a more honorable position in the community.”\(^{61}\)

\(^{59}\) On kidnapping, see above 13; on Snyder having one hand, see *Pa. Freeman*, May 20, 1852; on his being dreaded throughout the black community, see *Pa. Telegraph*, Feb. 28, 1855.

\(^{60}\) *Pa. Telegraph*, Nov. 13, 1850.

## Table 2

### Annual Election for the 11 Constabulary Constables

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### Notes

- D: Date
- W: Week
- N: Number
- L: Last name
- T: Total
- J: Job
- S: Status
- B: Branch
- M: Month
- T: Time
- V: Vote
- J: Job

### Election Results

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### Additional Notes

- D: Date
- W: Week
- N: Number
- L: Last name
- T: Total
- J: Job
- S: Status
- B: Branch
- M: Month
- T: Time
- V: Vote
- J: Job

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**P.S.:** I hereby ratify W. Whistler's action. 
I also declare the result.
drumbeat of criticism continued in the Whig papers until the next election.

Inasmuch as the offending constables were Democrats, the attack might be attributed to mere partisanship. But the Telegraph ordinarily took no position on candidates in borough elections, had violated that policy in past elections to endorse Loyer, a Democrat, and said nothing ahead of the 1853 election against Lewis, also a Democrat, who had not been involved in slave catching.

Nor can there be any doubt but that the citizens of Harrisburg objected to their constables serving the slave commissioner. In the March 1853 election they voted Lyne, Loyer, and Snyder out of office. “Our citizens have . . . redeemed themselves from the mortification and disgrace of having a police that were engaged as the marshals' of the Slave Commissioner, in hunting up fugitive slaves,” the Telegraph exulted.62 More votes were cast than in any previous borough election; the 730 votes for high constable were 182 (33%) more than the previous high and the approximate 756 votes cast for each of the three constables amounted to 137 (or 22%) more than ever before. Lyne received 167 (23%) of 730 votes cast for high constable, while Loyer received 153 (20%) and Snyder 83 (11%) of 756 votes cast for constable. That these defeats were not simply part of a Whig sweep in the 1853 election is proven by the fact that Democrats carried all other offices in the election and that Lewis, the one constable who did not run slaves, won re-election with 596 (79%) of 756 votes in spite of being a Democrat. The number of persons voting in borough elections returned to the previous levels in 1854 and 1855 and rose to new heights only in 1856 when the Know-Nothing craze swept Harrisburg.

The change in public sentiment reflected by the election was not transient. The town, for example, never forgave the three defeated constables by re-electing them to office in subsequent elections as often happened to other defeated candidates. Lyne ran for constable in 1854, 1855, and 1856, and lost each time by larger margins (see Table 2). Neither Snyder nor Loyer again offered themselves as

62 Pa. Telegraph, Mar. 23, 1853. The same paper on 2 Mar. reported that Snyder, “it is understood, retires voluntarily, and will devote his leisure hours, hereafter . . . to the catching of colored gentlemen on their way through Pennsylvania.” Other papers and the voters seem to have regarded him as a candidate.
candidates. On April 19, about a month after the election, a grand
jury in Lancaster County indicted them and three others, including
John Sanders of Harrisburg who had often worked for Commissioner
McAllister, on charges of kidnapping a free black. Sanders fled the
state. On May 13 Snyder and Loyer were taken into custody, and
unable to make bail, were imprisoned until their trials. "Even the
commissioner does not step forward to help them out," the Telegraph
noted. On August 16 Snyder, Loyer, and the two other accused
men pleaded not guilty and asked for and were given separate trials.
All four cases were heard by the same jury that same day and in
each instance the defendant was declared not guilty.

Two years later, in February, Snyder and two black accomplices
tried to kidnap George Clark. The intended victim's outcry brought
help, which resulted in the arrest of Snyder and one of his helpers;
they were charged with kidnapping. A few days later, to the con-
sternation of blacks, Snyder appeared on the streets of Harrisburg,
his brother having furnished bail. At the insistence of blacks who
feared that Snyder planned to escape, the justice of the peace who
accepted the bail, looked into the financial standing of Snyder's
brother. Finding the man's net worth half what he had claimed, the
justice revoked bail and ordered Snyder rearrested. At the trial in
April, the jury found both Snyder and his accomplice guilty as
charged. The judge fined Snyder $1,000 and costs and sentenced
him to six years in prison. According to court records, he had served
a little over three years before being released in May 1858.

Commissioner McAllister first came under criticism soon after
having accepted office in September 1850. Although the remanding
of slaves South abruptly halted after the Phillips case in May 1852,
attacks on McAllister continued. In June 1852, rumor had it that
he was about to resign. The Telegraph did not believe the story;
McAllister was making too much money in fees for returning run-
aways to consider such a move. If he did step down, the paper declared,

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63 Ibid., May 18; Whig State Journal, May 19, 1853.
64 Sessions Docket, XVII, 1851-1853, 533, Lancaster County Court Records. These and
all other county court records prior to 1902 have been deposited with the Lancaster County
Historical Society, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.
65 Pa. Telegraph, Feb. 28, Mar. 10, 17, Apr. 26, 30, 1855; Sessions Docket, IX, 86,
Dauphin County Court Records.
“no decent man in Harrisburg will accept the place.” While McAllister and his family were vacationing in July 1852, someone bored a hole in the front door of their home, poured in camphene, and set it afire. Although the door and some flooring were badly charred, the fire failed to take hold. For several years McAllister had been active and successful in the Democratic Party. In an election in August 1852, for delegates to the State Democratic Convention, McAllister received only fifty votes, losing in every ward in Harrisburg.

The election of Franklin Pierce, a Democrat, to the presidency in November, gave the Commissioner hope of a federal appointive office somewhere other than Harrisburg. A native of the Keystone State and related to some of Harrisburg’s leading families, McAllister had studied law with an uncle in Savannah, Georgia. From that quarter came newspaper support for his appointment to high office. According to the Savannah Georgian, McAllister was “a sound national Democrat” who “stood by the South.” “No man in the whole North,” it asserted, “has done more for the faithful execution of the fugitive slave law.”

McAllister went to Washington in person, as one detractor put it, “crouching for some crumb from Slavery’s table to make amends for his losses at home by his devotion to his nefarious business.” Although newspaper rumors reported he would settle for less than a cabinet position—perhaps the governorship of Minnesota Territory—he returned home empty handed. Shortly afterward he resigned his Commissionership. The position remained unfilled.

The election of 1853 which displaced the slave-running constables appeared to do the Democratic party in Harrisburg no particular harm; they still held six of nine borough offices. However, 1853 marked the end of the party’s long-time local dominance. Democrats would continue to run and sometimes win, of course. In 1854, however, they about evenly split borough offices with Whigs. In 1855 and 1856 Whig and American (Know Nothing) candidates respec-

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66 Pa. Telegraph, June 16, 1852.
67 Ibid., July 28, Aug. 18, 1852.
68 Quoted in Pa. Freeman, Jan. 20, 1853.
69 Ibid., Mar. 24, 1853.
70 Whig State Journal, Mar. 31 and Apr. 7, 1853; Pa. Telegraph, Apr. 9, 1853. I have been unable to establish the date of McAllister’s resignation. The Whig State Journal, May 19, 1853, referred to McAllister as the “late” slave commissioner.
tively won most offices. By 1860 new anti-slavery factions further eroded Democratic leadership.\textsuperscript{71}

The mix of personal, ethnic, religious, local, state, and national considerations that broke the long hold of the Democrats over Harrisburg cannot be known with certainty. When Stephen Miller became editor of the \textit{Telegraph} at the end of 1853, he subjected readers of that paper to strong doses of anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, nativist doctrine. The surprise victory of the Know-Nothings in 1855 local elections suggests that Miller's stance touched a tender spot in the psyche of Harrisburg residents even though the borough had relatively few Catholics or immigrants.\textsuperscript{72}

Many elements may have contributed to the demise of Democrat rule in Harrisburg, but this does not eliminate the importance of the slavery question. Certainly Harrisburg residents were not immune to the growing controversy over the expansion of slavery that was sweeping the nation. In early 1854, Congress began debate on the Kansas-Nebraska bills, overturning the Missouri Compromise which had barred slavery "forever" in those territories. In Harrisburg, at the same time, a troupe of travelling actors performed "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to a full house every night for two weeks.\textsuperscript{73} During the play's run, unknown persons called a public meeting "to take into consideration the admission of the Territory of Nebraska, etc." When a crowd assembled at the Court House at the appointed hour, the mystery ended. Supporters of Senator Stephen A. Douglas took charge and elected a presiding officer. A motion to name a committee to report resolutions on the sense of the meeting lost overwhelmingly. So did a second motion empowering the presiding officer to appoint a committee to prepare resolutions for a later meeting. When the

\textsuperscript{71} Election returns, \textit{Pa. [Daily] Telegraph}, Mar. 24, 1858; Mar. 19, 1859; Mar. 21, 1860; \textit{Keystone}, Mar. 24, 1858. In 1858 several candidates were listed as Anti-Lecompton Democrats.

\textsuperscript{72} Michael Fitzgibbon Holt, \textit{Forging a Majority, The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860} (New Haven, Conn., 1969), convincingly demonstrates the complexity of factors other than national issues that broke up and restructured the major parties in Pittsburgh in the mid- and late 1850s. In 1850, 20% of Pittsburgh's population was German-born and 31% Irish-born. By contrast, the combined German and Irish immigrant population of Harrisburg was 10%. Given these figures, it seems safe to conclude that Harrisburg's Catholic population was also relatively low.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Morning Herald}, Feb. 25 and Mar. 3, 1854.
presiding officer adjourned the meeting, Anti-Nebraska people took over and reorganized the meeting, naming C.C. Rawn president and Mordecai McKinney one of the vice presidents. By five to one majorities, the meeting adopted resolutions declaring that Pennsylvania had “ever been loyal” to the great compromises of the slavery question in 1820 and 1850, and that Senator Douglas’s attempt to put Nebraska “within reach of Slavery,” met with the meeting’s “decided disapprobation.” A second pro-Nebraska meeting called for the next week failed to produce the demonstration hoped for by Douglas supporters. “The stillness that reigned in the Court House,” declared the Morning Herald, provided “emphatic evidence of the unpopularity of the cause.”

Reaction to runaway slave incidents in Harrisburg began a political transformation of the town. The community no longer was indifferent to the treatment of fugitive slaves, nor would it tolerate law officers who made slave-running a business, nor entrust its political governance to the Democratic party. Many residents were taking stands against further concessions to slaveholders. Harrisburg’s experience with enforcement of the fugitive slave law pushed it far along the road to “irrepressible conflict.”

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74 Ibid., Feb. 27, 1854.
75 Ibid., Mar. 3, 1854.