

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Pennsylvanian Visits the Richmond Slave Market

The following account of a visit in July 1852 to the slave mart in Richmond, Virginia, graphically describes the reactions of an educated Northern professional man to one of the less pleasant aspects of the "Peculiar Institution." The original appears in Vol. 23 of the Personal Journal of C.C. Rawn, now in possession of the Dauphin County Historical Society, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Charles C. Rawn, born in Washington, D.C., was left fatherless at the age of eight. His widowed mother moved with her family to Delaware County, Pennsylvania, where young Rawn attended the West Chester Academy. In 1826 he moved to Harrisburg to read law in the office of his uncle, Francis L. Shunk, who later became Governor of Pennsylvania. Admitted to the bar in 1831, Rawn specialized in criminal law.

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 resulted in a number of slave incidents in Harrisburg. Blacks alleged to have been runaway slaves were taken before the United States Commissioner, Richard McAllister, for hearings. A small group of Harrisburg abolitionists employed Rawn, who had strong anti-slavery sympathies, to defend the blacks. Defense in most instances was futile. Under the law, accused blacks could not testify in their own behalf and the courts accepted as conclusive the sworn statements of Southern whites that the captives were their property, unless evidence to the contrary was provided. With few exceptions, McAllister certified blacks brought before him to be runaways and remanded them to the custody of their alleged owners.

The case of Jim Philips, a 32 year old black teamster who had been picked off the streets of Harrisburg and hauled before Commissioner McAllister, provoked unusual public sympathy. A hard-working family man, Philips had reported Pennsylvania as his state of birth to the federal census taker in 1850. If he were a fugitive, as accused, he had escaped fifteen or sixteen years before and had

lived and worked in Harrisburg since 1836 or 1837. Even so, no statute of limitations applied to runaway slaves. When McAllister declared Philips a runaway and returned him to slavery, the alleged owner promptly sold Philips to a slave trader for \$505. Philips's employer, John H. Brant, a commission merchant, Dr. William W. Rutherford, and a Harrisburg coal merchant, Ely Byers, launched a drive to redeem Philips and hired Rawn as their agent. Rawn travelled to Fauquier County, Virginia to visit Philips's former owner to satisfy himself and his clients that no mistake had been made in identifying the fugitive. Then Rawn made his way to Richmond where he located the slave trader, William A. Branton, and Jim Philips. Branton was willing to allow the Harrisburgers to buy Philips, but demanded \$800. While negotiating with Branton, Rawn visited the slave mart three times and watched the proceedings. The only change in transcribing the journal has been the inclusion of paragraphing for clarity.

10 July 1852:

" . . . at 6 P.M. Telegraphed to Dr. R[utherford] & Mr. Ely Byers that I have seen *Jim Philips* & think they had better *at once* raise the \$800 At 8 1/4 to 8 1/2 A.M. Mr. Carrington called and we walked a couple of squares or so from my Hotel to see Mr. Branton Jim's present owner. Found him at one of the auction Marts or Hells for the sale of human beings. Disclosed my business in relation to Jim Philips. He was opposed to letting me see him unless I would agree to purchase him at \$800 as the lowest cent. We had several conversations about and in that auction mart & another mart just across the way from it.

While looking round I witnessed the most horrible, and Heaven defying scenes of the inspection & sale of 5 or 6 females ranging from 17 to 26 or 30 yrs old, 3 of them with infant children, one perfectly white & the mother quite black another stout strong looking man 40 to 44 yrs old all put up 'warranted sound' and title perfect, as was the first pronouncement made. The man was taken behind a screen, his trowsers stripped down to his feet and his shirt pushed up on to his waist as though his *private parts*, behind & spine and thighs and legs were the parts most desirable to be perfect. I saw the fellows laugh as they looked at his privates. He was put on the "block" as they call it, being something like a large table or platform abt 6 ft

by 4 mounted by 4 or 5 steps where the slave stands while the auctioneer sells him when, except that they are once and awhile made to get down and walk smartly up and down to show their movement. Every one sold is made to move once and sometimes twice in this way.

They are carefully examined by the hardened looking dealers who appeared to be there in numbers from 50 to 100. Their arms and legs are felt, and looked at up toward the knees, I mean the women while selling. The feet and ankles especially looked at frequently by raising the petticoats, &c, teeth examined by requiring them often to open wide their mouths. Throats, heads & necks felt &c, one female was taken behind the screen for more special examination—several men going and any one that chose to, to look at her. They undid some part of her dress about the shoulders & chest. I understand since that this is frequently for the purpose of examining their backs, shoulders &c to see if they have been *much injured* by whipping. I saw them undo her dress and look at her about the back & shoulders.

The dealers or traders *generally* are the most hardened looking countenances and many if not a majority of them have faces like demons or evil spirits and look as if devoid of any feeling or sentiment except that of gain & gratification of the senses. The Poor creatures sold and to be sold are of course perfectly submissive to every order and indignity, appearing as if obliged to show off in the best manner possible. The females appeared to be *dressed* rather *foolishly* fine and tawdry with gimp bindings on dresses, gauze or thin sleeves &c &c, as if to enlist the eye to their personal appearance.

Before the sale commenced I saw some of the more [brutish?] looking dealers looking at the babies especially the white straight-haired ones and better looking and laughing with the mothers, and I judged from the uneasy laugh, putting the hand to the face, &c they were talking about things connected with their having children—after being sold they are taken off to the private jails of the several purchasers where they are kept till he sells again or gathers a drove with which to move South. There is an elderly hardened looking large Negro who officiates at the sale in taking the subjects behind the screen, showing them to walk up and down; where and when to stand on the block, &c,—I suppose he cant help it or I should have despised him more than the abominably detestable traders.

15 July 1852:

“ . . . Saw one col.d man (25 or 30 yrs old). Another & his wife, smart, pleasant looking couple & a little girl (not theirs) sold at Hills. The first for abt \$730 to 50—man & wife for \$1570 & the little girl some 8 or 9 yrs old for \$450. The sales being done here the buyers are then invited across the way to Dickenson & Dickensons, where there were some 15 to 20 men women & children to be sold. I saw one very fine tall & large looking yellow woman (about 25 or 30 years of age) long, straight black Indian looking hair & Indian face & soft & sorrowful expression. She looked permanently pensive & sad & when put on the “block” while the sale of her was going on, I saw the big tears slowly & as if imperceptibly to her trickling down her cheeks—she seemed instinctively modest & disdainful about free examinations usually made of their ancles [sic] & legs and when the black man whose business it was to show them off &c was on one and the only one raising her dress & clothing, she jerked them out of his hand with decided promptness & an unaffected exhibition of genuine modesty.

After she had been sold I heard several questions asked of her as to where she came from & why sold &c. She said she came to this place from Washington within a day or two but was raised in some county she named in this state I think—and that the only reason she knew for her Master selling her might be the want of money. She had had 3 children but all dead as she said. Her appearance, and serious & sad expression of countenance were very interesting. I heard her inquire once very anxiously if the man that bought her was a ‘trader.’ They appear to have a horror of being sold to traders. These sales are attended by some 75 to 100 persons who look to me to be generally traders—one of the girls above mentioned being some 18 yrs of age and a very smart, and good natured looking girl sold for over 800 say about 830 dolls. The men & women generally sold from 6 to 800 Dolls.

After this I went down to Branton’s Jail about 11 1/4 A.M. Saw Jim—he was called out of Jail Yard & had hobbles on—a chain about as heavy as an ox chain link of some 8 to 10 links from one leg to the other. I told him in their presence that I had heard from H[arrisbur]g. and that they expected to send me money to buy him in about 2 weeks, and that Mr. B[ranton]. had promised to give them that chance. He seemed greatly affected but as if he *feared* to exhibit

his distress by much expression or indulging freely in tears though they seemed to come against his terrors & his consent. I cheered him with the prospect of soon getting to Penna. and that for certain, and he seemed satisfied. I saw him again in the Evg. about 6 o'clock when Mr. B. by my request took me through his Jail.

He has some 25 or 30 negroes in there altogether Men & Women, boys & girls & some few babies—the Males & females are kept separate as he informs me although the Yards seemed to be communicating by a gate open when I was in. The Males have a large room down stairs with a number of windows strongly barred & a strongly barred door to sleep in on the floor without any beds that I saw but old clothing, blankets &c. and the females a like room over it. He showed me 3 boys, 2 abt 12 yrs old that he said he gave 700 apiece for & another abt 8 or 9 \$600 and a man a brick layer who had lost an eye & perhaps near 50 yrs old he said he would not take less than \$1000 for.

The more I see however the More I detest & abhor the *accursed* business. That it is *accursed* of Heaven I as firmly believe as that I believe in the Justice and goodness of God. And this Nation will yet weep over this National sin of slavery & a slave trade in sackcloth & ashes and the severer Judgment of a righteous God who will surely visit us as a Nation with our National sins.”

Rawn made a final visit to the slave mart on 30 July 1852 when he returned to Richmond to redeem Jim Philips.

“ . . . I then went to Auction house to see Mr. Branton where I found him. I waited and witnessed the sale at 3 different houses of some 15 to 20 men, women & children and find the sight and business and the incidents become more & more disgusting & odious the more I witness them—saw them sell from 300 dolls up to \$1000, saw the men's nakedness exposed from shoulders to feet and the womens legs above the knees shown particularly and their bellys, bosoms &c. felt. The belly of one woman very rudely & roughly by the Auctioneer to see I believe if she was with child,—between 11 & 12 went with Branton to his private Jail. Saw his negroes some 30 or more men, boys, women, girls & babys drawn up in line to exhibit to a man then in there, also saw Jim Philips who was of course delighted to see me, —abt 12 noon.

Branton & his son Geo. & myself & Jim came up Street to Mr.

Cannon's office. Mr. Branton then made Bill of Sale to Jno. H. Brant, Wm. W. Rutherford & E. Byers for said James Philips at \$800 and I handed him the \$800 dft. deld. to me by Dr. R. 28 inst. in payt for Jim. He then agreed to leave and did leave the bill of sale from J. Timberlake as agent for A.G. Hudson to Wm. A. Branton for \$505, with Mr. Cannon to procure acknmt. of Timberlake thereto that the same may also be recorded here, as is that from Branton as aforesaid, for Mr. Cannon. Branton & myself then walked to the City Hall & Clerks office of Hustings court where I got sd. bill of sale from B[ranton] to B[rant], R[utherford] & E[ly Byers] recorded & pd. Clerk \$1.50 therefor (v. Receipt). I ret'd. with Mr. Cannon from sd. Clks. office to his office and then took copy of said Timberlake Bill of Sale compared by Mr. Cannon & Myself & certificate of said comparison signed by us, Jim followed us by my direction, on these sundry walks. I then returned about 1 1/4 P.M. to my Boarding House and with Mrs. Harwoods leave & approval took him to my room to remain till I am ready to take the cars this evening at 9 P.M. for home. Got dinner near 2 P.M. and then went to said City Hall for my sd. Bill of Sale

While we viz Cannon, Branton, self & Philips were walking to City Hall as above Branton remarked to Mr. Cannon that Jim was now a happier man he presumed since his release than he Branton ever expected to be. This showing his, B's own convictions that such a release from servitude furnished ground & reason for rather unusual joy & happiness as such as even he B. in his excited and quasi cheerful whirl as a trader never expected to experience. Thus furnishing the strongest evidence against the positions of these gentlemen that the negroes are really better off in this bought & sold & slave condition than when free."

Rawn returned to Harrisburg with Philips where blacks received them with a tumultuous welcome. Philips, of course, was now a free man. He resumed his life as a teamster and appeared with his wife and children for the last time in the federal manuscript census of Harrisburg in 1860. That year he listed his place of birth as Virginia. Attorney Rawn died in 1865.