THE OPERATION OF THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA, FROM 1850 TO 1860

By

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Negro slavery engrossed the whole attention of the country during the decade from 1850 to 1860. The "Underground Railroad" was a form of combined defiance of national laws on the ground that they were unjust and oppressive. The Underground Railroad was the opportunity for the bold and adventurous; it had the excitement of piracy, the secrecy of burglary, the daring of insurrection; it developed coolness, indifference to danger and quickness of resource." (1)

In the course of the sixty years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Rebellion, the Northern states became traversed by numerous secret pathways leading from Southern bondage to Canadian liberty. Even in colonial times there was difficulty in recovering fugitive slaves because of the aid rendered them by friends. (2)

For the acceptance and adoption of the ordinance of 1787 and the United States constitution, clauses relative to the rendition of fugitive slaves were necessary. In 1793 the first Fugitive Slave Law was enacted. This was rendered nugatory in 1842, by the judicial decision in the famous case of "Prigg versus Pennsylvania." Incorporated in the compromise measures of 1850 was the Fugitive Slave Law. (3)

Under this law the alleged fugitive was denied trial by jury; was forbidden to testify in his own behalf; could not summon witnesses, and was subject to the law though he might have escaped years before it was enacted. Should the judge decide against the negro his fee was ten dollars; should he decide for the accused it was but five. To "hinder or prevent the arrest" or to "harbor or conceal a fugitive" was punishable with a fine of one thousand dollars or six months imprisonment. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 stimulated the work of secret emancipation. The Underground Railroad alone serves to explain the enact-

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ment of that most remarkable piece of legislation, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. (4)

The origin of the name Underground Railroad came into use first among the slave-hunters in the neighborhood of Columbia, in Lancaster county, Pennsylvania. The pursuers seem to have had little difficulty in tracking slaves as far as Columbia, but beyond that point all track of them was lost. The slave-owners are said to have declared that "there must be an underground railroad somewhere." (5)

In 1851 a serious riot occurred at Christiania in Lancaster county, one of the stations of the Underground Railroad, which caused a profound sensation all over the country. The Quakers definitely aided fugitives and maintained numerous Underground Railroad centers in Southeastern Pennsylvania. (6) The Western part of the state also contained regular routes of travel. The most important of these roads resulted from the convergance of at least three well-defined lines of escape at Uniontown, from Virginia and Maryland. Two courses led northward, both of which terminated at Pittsburgh. From this place fugitives seem to have been sent to Cleveland by rail, or to have been directed to follow the Allegheny River and its tributaries north. Friends were not lacking at convenient points to help them along to the main terminals for this region, namely Erie, Buffalo or across the state line to the much used routes of the Western Reserve in Ohio. East of the Allegheny River significant traces of the Underground Railroad were found running in a northeasterly direction from Greensburg, through Indiana County to Clearfield, a distance of seventy-five miles. From Clearfield an important branch ran north-west to Franklin and Shippensville and thence to Erie. (7)

Many of the communications relating to fugitive slaves were couched in guarded words. There were messages written in figurative language. The following are examples:

"Please forward immediately the U. G. baggage sent to you this day."

"Dear Sir:—By tomorrow evening's mail you will receive two volumes of the "Irrepressible Conflict" bound in black. After perusal, please forward."

Another message was in these words:

"Uncle Tom says if the roads are not too bad, you can look for those fleece of wool, by tomorrow. Send them on to test the market, no back charges." (8)
Characteristic of the Underground Railroad were the covered wagons, closed carriages and deep-bedded farm wagons, which hid the passengers. The routes were far from straight. They are best described as zigzag. The ultimate goal was Canada. (9)

In September after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law the colored people of Pittsburgh and vicinity who had escaped from Southern masters, began to leave in squads for Canada. On the twenty-fourth of that month, forty negroes left the Third Ward, Allegheny (now part of Pittsburgh) in one squad for that haven of safety. By the twenty-sixth over two hundred fugitives had departed from Pittsburgh. The newspapers expressed great surprise that there should be in the city so many fugitive slaves. The negroes were well-armed with rifles, revolvers and knives. Each company had a captain, and before starting all made a firm resolve to die rather than be taken back into slavery. (10) Both the Whig Gazette and the Democratic Post in editorials declared that the effect of this law would be the strengthening of the anti-slavery sentiment in the North. The Commercial Journal another Whig paper said: "The passage of the Slave Bill has caused more excitement than we anticipated. The opinion that the law must be repealed seems to be universal in this neighborhood." (11)

The situation at this time was exciting in the extreme and numerous meetings were held denouncing the enactment of the law. On September 28, 1850 a meeting of colored people and their friends opposed to the Fugitive Slave Law was held in the Pittsburgh Diamond. A tremendous concourse of people assembled. Rev. Charles Avery, who presided made an eloquent address. He said that the Fugitive Slave Law was calculated to suspend both the right of habeas corpus and trial by jury; that good citizens would never suffer such a law to go into effect in Pennsylvania. Thomas M. Howe, a candidate for Congress, also spoke, and expressed strong anti-slavery sentiments saying: "Our constitution otherwise so perfect contains one blot, and we should not allow ourselves to be turned from men into slave-catchers." His remarks were greeted with tremendous applause and cries of, "We'll send you to Congress!" Other speakers were; John Farral, John A. Willis and General William Larimer. The following resolutions were adopted by the meeting.
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FIRST: That the editors of the newspapers be requested to publish in a conspicuous place the names of all persons who accept nominations as commissioners under the Fugitive Slave Law.

SECOND: Members of the Pennsylvania delegation in Congress, who voted for the passage of the Slave Bill are unworthy of the support of their friends.

THIRD: The Fugitive Slave Bill recently passed by Congress is unconstitutional, and aims a deadly blow at Liberty under the pretext of vested rights.

FOURTH: We will unite and stand shoulder to shoulder until with the blessing of God, the Fugitive Slave Bill shall be expunged from the statute books, and every supporter of the abominations be driven from the national councils.” (12)

Two days later a meeting was held in the Allegheny market-house at which Hugh S. Fleming, the mayor of Allegheny, presided, and made a forcible speech in favor of the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law. Thomas M. Howe, Mr. Salisbury, the Democratic-workingman’s candidate for Congress, and Israel Cullen, also spoke in opposition to the law. Strong resolutions were passed denouncing slavery in the severest terms. (13). The Commercial Journal said of the gathering: “We have never seen a larger or more enthusiastic meeting in Allegheny. The demonstration is proof that the indignation of the people is deeply aroused.” (14)

The first case to arise in Pittsburgh under the Fugitive Slave Law was that of George White, a mulatto boy. On January 14, 1851, he was apprehended at the instance of a Mr. Rose of Wellsburg, Virginia, who recognized the lad as his former slave. At this time he was apprenticed to J. B. Vashon, a barber, who paid the owner two hundred dollars rather than see the boy taken back into slavery. (15) The Post commended Mr. Vashon in these words: “This act of Mr. Vashon’s is that of a good law-abiding citizen, and is more praiseworthy and more philanthropic than the coined professions that emanate from mad fanaticism, whose great love for the colored race begins and ends in words, words, words. (16)

Robert M. Riddle, the editor of The Commercial Journal held much the same views as the editor of the Post, and
while he deprecated the existence of the law, yet counseled obedience to its mandate. The Rev. Dr. David H. Riddle, the pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church preached a sermon to the same effect, which was printed in pamphlet form and largely distributed. The stand taken by the two Riddles aroused the ire of Mrs. Jane Grey Swisshelm, who commented sarcastically on their effusions in her anti-slavery paper, the *Saturday Visitor*, part of her diatribe being republished by the *Commercial Journal*, prefaced by the following explanation:

"Alluding to the fact that some acquaintance has applied to us for assistance to a Southern gentleman in catching a slave, she says:

'Any of our Southern friends, who want business done in their line in our dirty city, should direct their communications to our good friend, Robert M. Riddle, or Judge Baird, with a special request for prayers for their success from Rev. Dr. Riddle.'" (17)

The first case to be tried in Pittsburgh under the Fugitive Slave Law was called before Judge Irwin on March 13, 1851. It was claimed that a colored man, named Woodson, was the slave of Mrs. Byers of Kentucky, and that he had escaped two years before. The defense tried to establish a different identity but the case was decided in favor of Mrs. Byers, and the slave was ordered kept in irons until delivered to the owner. As soon as the decree was handed down Mr. Sproul the clerk of United States Court headed a subscription for the release of the negro. Several other subscription papers were circulated, and it was evident that if Woodson could be retained a few hours, the requisite sum would soon be obtained to purchase his freedom. When the prisoner was taken to the boat, a crowd gathered until from two hundred to three hundred persons had collected. A guard accompanied the slave to the boat. The newspapers generally insisted that the law must be maintained. (18) The *Post* said: "Contrary to the expectations of many persons, the case was determined without the slightest effort being made to resist the law of the land. The claimant fully proved title to the fugitive slave, and after a fair hearing, he was given up, and taken to Kentucky by his owner. We think the result of this case will show that the citizens of Pittsburgh are not disposed to follow the example of the
fanatics of Boston and other places in a treasonable opposition to the law of the land." (19)

The slave Woodson had been captured at Beaver, where he had preached for two years. He had bought a house, and was a thrifty mechanic. He was finally freed by subscriptions raised in Pittsburgh and Beaver. The people in Beaver alone collected two hundred and fifty dollars for the purpose. (20)

On August 1, 1851, the colored people of the vicinity celebrated in Oakland, the emancipation of eight hundred thousand negroes in the West Indies. Woodson, the former slave, was the orator of the day. The meeting was held in a beautiful grove, on the property of James Craft. (21)

The newspapers readily acknowledged the existence of the Underground Railroad. The Gazette which appears to have been the only Pittsburgh newspaper which was sincerely anti-slavery in sentiment, spoke sarcastically on the subject: "The Underground Railroad seems to be doing a good business. Southern chattles seem disposed to imitate their masters, and migrate to a cool climate before dog-days. It is wonderful that chattelized humanity is so foolish as to wish for the privilege of taking care of itself when it has such kind, tender masters to take care of it." (22)

In March, 1855 Leonard Boyd accompanied by his wife and a colored nurse, stopped at the St. Charles Hotel. The servants attempted to liberate the girl, but were prevented from doing so. Mr. Boyd had intended to remain in Pittsburgh three days, but fearing the loss of his property, left by boat at once. On the way to the landing, desperate attempts at rescue were again made, but upon the presentation of arms by the police, the rescuers were driven back and the slave was safely placed on the boat. During the progress of the last attempt, severe struggling and rioting occurred. It was stated that the undertaking for boldness had never been surpassed in Pittsburgh. The Post made the disparaging comment: "The character of this city should not be stained, nor its business injured by negro mobs. Its business has suffered severely enough from other causes within the last year, without adding the curse and disgrace of negro riots. We hope that the next riot of the kind will be met with plenty of well charged revolvers in ready and resolute hands." (23)
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“The Wind blows from the South today,” was the unique heading of an article in the Gazette of June 20, 1855. It appears that a Southern planter had freed his slaves and sent them in care of an agent to a place of safety. While in Pittsburgh the agent having them in charge refused to make known their destination. In the minds of the officers of the Underground Railroad, a suspicion arose that the agent might take the negroes beyond the place designated in the will. So they were induced to leave the boat, and their agent. The Gazette said of the negroes: “They had more sense than to trust themselves and their liberty to the uncertainty of a trip on a Western steamboat bound for the Southwest.”

The Slaymaker case was a notable one. Colonel Slaymaker's wife visited friends here on March 6, 1855, accompanied by a colored female, presumed to be a slave. However the information was given out that she was free. This was denied by the colored people who attempted a rescue in the diningroom of the hotel, one morning at breakfast. The colored waiters and a colored barber seized the girl and hurried her out through the rear of the hotel. A meeting was held to consult about the girl, the following being the account of the gathering which appeared in the Gazette.

"As far as we can learn, it was a meeting of an organization, which has for its object the seizure of slaves passing through the city, and is probably what it known as the Underground Railroad. At the assemblage it was decided that the woman should be rescued at the hotel."

The Slaymakers declared that the girl was already free, and produced papers showing such to be the case. In two hours time the girl was reproduced and returned to Mr. Slaymaker.

On July 14, 1855 a report to the effect that a slave-catcher was stopping at the Monongahela House, occasioned great excitement among the colored people. The abolitionists and colored people called meetings and appointed a committee to wait upon the gentleman to ascertain the nature of his visit. He proved to be H. B. Northrup of New York, one of the most active anti-slavery agitators of the day. He had rescued from slavery the colored man, Solomon Northrup, author of "Twelve Years of Slavery." So great was the fear at this time that slave-owners and slave-catchers would descend upon the community that Mr. North-
rup had great difficulty in convincing the people of his identity. In fact, so obstinate were the anti-slavery people that Mr. Northrup finally took offense and declared it was mortifying to him, who had spent so many years in the cause of anti-slavery to be so considered. But he declared that Pittsburgh, at least, was on the right side of the question. What made the excitement greater was the fact that two runaway slaves had reached the city the day before the arrival of Mr. Northrup, and the fears of the community led to the conclusion that the stranger at the hotel might be a slave-catcher in pursuit of them. The Gazette in commenting on the matter, said: "The prompt action taken by our anti-slavery friends, shows that the mass of our citizens are sound on the slavery question, and are fully resolved that no fugitive slave shall be taken from this city without an effort to resist it." (26)

The Post took a different view of the occurrence and published a leading article headed "Great Cry, and No Wool, another Nigger." "The select committee of the Underground Railroad appear to think they are a smart set of fellows—, but it is about time they began to profit by the old law, look before you leap. Several of the committee heard of Mr. Northrup's visit to the city, and conceived at once there was a "nigger in the wood-pile," and quickly sent word to their brethren in all parts of town that there was a negro-catcher in our midst. The excitement ran high and some of the colored preachers even went so far as to announce the news from the pulpits accompanied by the warning that if any fugitives were present they should conceal themselves. After hearing Mr. Northrup's statement they went away with a very big flea in each of their ears." (27)

The Gazette of July 13, 1855 announced that six fugitive slaves had a few days previous been in the city, and had then taken a train on the Ohio and Pennsylvania (now the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago) Railroad enroute for Canada. (28)

In July, 1855, George Ferris who had left Pittsburgh for St. Louis with a band of singers was captured by a Mr. Shaw and returned to Mr. Raglan, who claimed to be his owner. A short time after this Mr. Shaw, who turned out to be a professional slave-catcher, was arrested here while trying to kidnap Ferris' three year old child. Five informa-
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The famous Dred Scott Case attracted great interest in Pittsburgh. Meetings were held denouncing the decision. In an editorial published in the Gazette on March 7, 1857, the editor commented on the decision as follows: "The Supreme Court has aimed a blow at state sovereignty, which is baser and more iniquitous than anything we had before conceived of. It is not law and it has no binding force on either the people or the government. It is not an authoritative interpretation of the constitution, nor is it legally a decision entitled to any weight whatever. The constitution was ordained to establish justice and secure the blessings of liberty to the people, and it will be worth one struggle at least to prevent it from thus being turned from its high aims to subserve the lust of tyranny. The constitution was made by the people and for the people, and to the people, the sovereign power in this Confederacy, we appeal from this decision. They understand the charter of liberties, we hope, well enough to rebuke and defeat this effort to give the whole country up to the domination of the slave power." (30)

Pittsburgh was renowned both in the North and South for the care it took of fugitive slaves coming within its limits. Various devices were resorted to by the abolitionists to conceal them. There were in and about the city immense hollows and ravines with steep banks overgrown with underbrush and vines, and the surrounding hills were covered with tall trees, some of which may yet be seen in Schenley Park. Many a slave was concealed in these ravines and with meals carried to him by members of the Abolition societies, he was able to evade the watchful eye of the slave-catcher, until pursuit was abandoned. They were then driven through the city in carriages with double bottoms, under which the slave lay on his back, and to all appearances the carriage was empty, save for the driver. There were secret recesses built in houses, with the entrance so thoroughly concealed, that it required an accurate eye to discover them. Into these, the slaves were thrust in an emergency. Pittsburgh because of the strong abolition sentiment was the one place a slave-catcher feared to enter, and the fugitive felt that "as soon as he entered the city on his way towards the North Star," he was safe.
William Stewart, a prominent business man of sixty years ago has written a description of how the Underground Railroad was operated; "The bridge at Niagara Falls is the haven to which we send all hunted slaves," said Mr. Stewart. "On a Sunday morning I was just starting for church when a well known knock touched my door. I knew at once that church for me was in another direction. I opened my door leisurely, went out and turned to the right towards the east. About a block away, there was a little covered carriage that was very much in use in Pittsburgh at that time. They were called dearborns. When I left my own house there was a gentleman walking between the carriage and me. We did not speak to each other, but he turned down the first street. The curtains of the dearborn were all rolled up, and no person but the driver could be seen. It was made with a double bottom and the slave was lying flat between the upper and lower bottoms. The driver kept going on very leisurely. There was a ferry about where the Fortieth Street bridge is. We all got on the same ferry, but the driver never exchanged words with us. He was one of our wealthiest citizens and was wearing a fine pair of false whiskers. After we crossed the river the driver drove on the tow path of the canal. Finally the dearborn turned on a road running across Pine Creek below Sharpsburg. There another man came out of a house. The new man took the driver's place, while the other man took another direction, no one having spoken a word since we started. The dearborn was then driven into a lonely place in the woods, where there was a "station" provided with all manner of disguises. Provided with these the slave was started on his way to Niagara. After leaving Pittsburgh, they were scarcely ever captured." (31)

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