

# NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

## FUGITIVE SLAVES IN INDIANA COUNTY<sup>1</sup>

IN THE early decades of the nineteenth century included between 1810 and 1860 there was perhaps no question more hotly discussed by the citizens of Indiana County than the rapidly growing problem of human slavery. Between 1835 and 1860 those citizens most intense in their desire to secure the immediate emancipation of the blacks were termed abolitionists. Among the most conspicuous leaders of the abolitionists throughout the country were William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Gerrit Smith, Lucretia Mott, Lydia Maria Child, and James G. Birney. In Indiana County a group of abolitionists was led by Dr. Robert Mitchell, James Moorhead, William Banks, James Hamilton, Judge Thomas White, and many others whose descendants are residents of the county at the present time. In some of the northern states these enthusiastic workers for human freedom adopted a system for aiding fugitive slaves to escape from their masters and to elude the pursuit of those sent out to reclaim them. By being furnished shelter and food, good advice and personal aid, thousands of runaway slaves were helped across the border to Canada beyond the reach of the fugitive slave law. The most favored routes led through Ohio and Pennsylvania. The houses along these routes where aid was given came to be known as stations of the underground railway; those who directly assisted the escaping fugitives were known as conductors; those who contributed money and clothing were known as "stockholders" in the enterprise. Levi Coffin was usually styled the "president" of the concern, and he claimed to have been actively engaged in the business during thirty-three years and to have received into his

<sup>1</sup> These stories were read at Indiana, Pennsylvania, on July 13, 1935, in connection with the fourth annual historical tour under the auspices of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and the summer session of the University of Pittsburgh. The grandparents of the author, Mrs. Sarah R. Christy, were among the first settlers in Indiana County, and the material for these stories was gathered from pioneer residents, some of whom were participants in the events recorded. *Ed.*

house one hundred fugitives annually. Many thousands of runaways found their way to Canada over this underground railway in the forty or more years of slavery just preceding the Civil War.

The underground railway entered Pennsylvania by way of Greene and Fayette counties. There were several stations on the route to Johnstown, Cambria County. Mechanicsburg in Indiana County was the next station, and after that Dixonville. From there the trail struck over to George Atchison's in Clearfield County, near Burnside, thence north to the home of Jason Kirk, a Quaker in northern Clearfield County, and on north over the Grampian Hills into Allegany County, New York. Pennsylvania was also entered from the southwest corner, and a trail following the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was used. This trail led to Blairsville, from there directly north to Indiana, and thence to the Diamond, a heavily wooded tract of land about nine miles east of Indiana on which several cabins had been built by the owner, Dr. Robert Mitchell, to shelter fugitive slaves. This was the route used by the slaves whose adventures are recounted in the following narrative:

One evening in April, 1845, young Bob Mitchell and several companions sat on the steps of the old academy then standing on the ground now occupied by Memorial Hall, in Indiana. As the boys, none of them yet out of his teens, sat there in the gathering dusk talking about their sweethearts, three figures coming up the Blairsville road approached them.

One was of medium height, broad-shouldered, and well built. The second was small of stature, thin, and wiry. The faces of both were ebony black. The third, more than six feet in height, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, straight as an arrow, with a splendid physique and hair as straight as that of any man who ever trod the earth, stood a king among men. The only mark of negro blood in his veins was the telltale hue of the octoroon. With the elegant ease and self-possession of a polished gentleman, the latter addressed the boys and asked to be directed to the office of the editor of the *Clarion of Freedom*, Mr. James Moorhead.

Bob Mitchell then hied himself home to tell the news of the arrival of three fugitives. His father, Dr. Robert Mitchell, at once sought the office of the little antislavery paper. Dr. Mitchell, James Moorhead,

James Hamilton, William Banks, and a few others were in hearty sympathy with the antislavery cause and often met in this office. A conference was held and it was decided to let the fugitives remain in the office all night and to take them to Dr. Mitchell's farm, nine miles east of town, in the morning. This plan was followed. Dr. Mitchell sent directions to his tenant, John Shields, to allow the negroes to occupy a little cabin on the premises, to furnish them with bedding, cooking utensils, and other necessities, and to find work for them to do on the farm. The men continued to make the cabin their headquarters all summer while they worked from day to day for the neighbors on the adjoining farms.

Anthony Hollingsworth, the small one, secured a job on the farm of James Simpson, near Home, and worked there for some time. One day while working in a field near the public road, he was surprised and horrified when a rough hand was placed on his arm. Too well he knew what had happened, and all the horrors of the whipping post, the rack, and torture crowded before his excited brain with lightning rapidity. Van Metre, master of the slaves, with two companions, Cunningham and Tilden, had tracked the runaways, and by mere accident had discovered Anthony in that place. The party, taking Anthony along, proceeded to Indiana and secured accommodations for the night at the Indiana House. The hotel was then owned and operated by David Ralston, the sheriff of the county and a strong proslavery man.

The news that one of the runaways had been captured and was locked in a room at the Indiana House spread like wildfire over the town. People gathered in excited groups in the streets. Ominous threats rose above the mingled voices of the crowd. Cries of "Down with the man hunter" pierced the ear. The whole town poured its populace into Philadelphia Street. The crowd was fast becoming a mob, and cries of "Tear the house down over his head and set the man free!" were heard.

The little band of abolition fathers quickly congregated in a secret place to confer. They fully realized that unless Anthony could be rescued from his captors all of the fugitives would be taken back to Virginia to meet a horrible death. William Banks, a redoubtable old lawyer, counseled the protection of the law. On his advice Dr. Mitchell was to apply for a writ of habeas corpus, and William Banks was to present the

petition and was to raise the point that no evidence had been produced to prove that the institution of slavery existed in Virginia. Hence Anthony Hollingsworth could not be claimed as the personal property of Garrett Van Metre. The time appointed for the hearing of the application for the writ was the following morning. Dr. Mitchell then went into the crowd, and, promising them that the negro would be protected by law, he succeeded in persuading them to disperse.

The next morning as Judge Thomas White took his place to hear the case, a steady stream of people poured in through the courthouse doors. On the bench Judge White sat with the dignity of a Cæsar. Within the bar on one side were Anthony Hollingsworth, in the custody of the sheriff, and Van Metre with his friends. On the other William Banks and Dr. Mitchell were well flanked by their co-laborers in the antislavery work. William Banks presented the petition and, after his opponent had been heard from, raised his point. After carefully going over the case the judge granted the petition. Then turning to David Ralston he commanded, "Sheriff, release that man from custody." Then old Jimmie Hamilton cried out, "Shout, the Lord bids you shout, he is saved." And a deafening roar went up from the crowded room, as cheer after cheer was given, while men threw their hats in the air and women waved their veils and handkerchiefs.

On the steps of the old courthouse stood the boys, Alex and Dick White, Bob Mitchell, and a score of others. As the sheriff appeared with Anthony a great shout went up, and the boys grabbed the little fellow and carried him over their heads. Young Mitchell mounted his horse, Anthony was behind him in a trice, and the negro was soon set down at his cabin door. Finding himself foiled by the superior wit and wisdom of the judge and lawyers of the Indiana County courts, Van Metre made no further attempt at that time to look for his lost property.

The summer wore on, and a more industrious, well-behaved, happy set of laborers than the three colored men could not be found anywhere. Jared Harris and Charles Brown were always to be found at the cabin at night; and many were the tales they recounted of their old life on the Virginia plantation.

Brown became a general favorite. But nineteen years of age, of a most

daring disposition, and possessed of a splendid courage, the fellow seemed born of the stuff that conquers worlds. He had belonged to Van Metre, but on the eve of his escape he had been sold to a slave dealer named Brady for two thousand dollars. His history, here recounted, is one of thrilling interest:

As Brady and Van Metre sat on the veranda of the latter's handsome residence in Virginia, Charlie was called up for inspection. When they had counted points of excellence and demerits, his hands and feet were tied with rope and he was locked in the smokehouse. With his hands tied behind him he rubbed the rope over the blade of an old ax. Then he freed his feet. With one great blow of the ax he shattered the door to atoms, and then bounded over the mountain side like a hunted stag. After hiding in the mountains for several days, he was joined by the two friends with whom he traveled to Indiana.

The kindnesses with which these men met and the drop of liberty they tasted during their short stay in Indiana County served to vivify the horrors of the slavery they had left. They became imbued with a strong desire to return to the plantation to tell their relatives what a glorious thing this liberty was and to help them to secure it.

Charles Brown longed to free his old mother. Possessing to an unusual degree native force, daring, and courage, he decided to return to the plantation to persuade her to escape. Dr. Mitchell tried to dissuade him, showing him plainly the risk to his own life, but to no avail. Accordingly, one night in August, after a long discussion on the subject, he was entertained as a guest for the night in Dr. Mitchell's town house at Indiana. In the morning, having, as he hoped, disguised his birth and condition in a white shirt, standing collar, swallow-tailed coat and stove-pipe hat of the doctor's, he started for Virginia. In two days he had cleared Pennsylvania soil and was traveling the turnpike eight miles south of Cumberland. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was then in process of construction. Brown was challenged by a laborer on the road to show his passport. He quickly replied, "I am a free man and need no passport." He was seized and thrown into the Cumberland jail. The confinement was torture to him and at the end of two weeks he was forced to give the name of his master.

Van Metre went to Cumberland and delivered Brown to Brady, who took him to his own home, tied his hands, put chains on his feet, and locked him in the garret to sleep. For a time he lay where he fell when thrust into the garret. Despair at the hopelessness of his condition, remorse over the failure of his attempt to rescue his mother, and a rapidly increasing bitter hatred towards his captors swept in quick succession through his dizzy brain. He was not, however, of a disposition to succumb without an effort. As his eyes became accustomed to the partial darkness he began to investigate his quarters with the hope of finding some means of escape. By rare chance he found an old file on the floor, and he soon filed the chains from his feet. Further investigation produced some strips of cotton from old quilting frames. These he tied together, fastened them to the window frame in the gable, and let himself down to the ground, cutting the flesh on his hands to the bone by being compelled to hold fast to the string.

Surprising to say, Brown continued his journey to the plantation. For three weeks he went about among the negro cabins, telling of the delightful place where he had spent the summer and of the sweets of liberty and urging the slaves to try to secure it. One day while sitting in his mother's cabin pleading with her to trust herself to his care and let him make her free, he saw through the open door ten men approaching the cabin over the turnpike. Fearing discovery, he jumped through the opposite window and, swift as an arrow, shot for the mountain again. This time nature favored him but little in his wanderings. He was unarmed and could procure no game. He was obliged to live mainly on green corn.

The dews were falling one September evening as Dr. Mitchell and young Bob drove slowly home from the farm. Peering through the twilight gloom they beheld the tall attenuated form, the large, shining, sunken eyes of a starved man. Charlie Brown had returned.

The retreat at the cabin was well known to the community about Indiana, as no attempt was made to conceal it. The place was, in fact, one of the stations of the famous underground railway, over which thousands of fugitive slaves found their way to Canada and freedom. Upon the arrival of two newcomers about the time of Charlie Brown's return,

it is thought that some northern sympathizers became active in securing information for the benefit of the deserted slaveholders. At any rate, one night during the September court session eight mounted men arrived at the Indiana House. At any other time such an occurrence would have excited curiosity. But during court week there was such a constant stream of people coming to town on horseback that no particular notice was taken of it. About midnight, when the town was wrapped in slumber, these men, accompanied by the sheriff of the county and two deputies, Andy Shank and Bob Flemming, started out the pike in the direction of the cabin. As they passed Jimmie Hamilton's place the old man heard them talking and knew they were after the negroes. Stopping on a hill above the cabin, the men paused and each cut a stout stick of hickory for himself. It was not yet daybreak. The day before, the farmers had cut their corn, and Anthony Hollingsworth had come over from Simpson's to spend the night with his friends. There were thus five fugitives in all.

Hollingsworth, who was a light sleeper, was awakened by a gleam of light shining through a crack between the logs. Ere he could rouse the others, the door was broken open and the posse of eleven men was in the little cabin. The negroes had their knives and pistols on the floor nearby, but in the darkness could not find them. Jared Harris, a powerful fellow, threw man after man off his chest and worked his way on his back to the door. Then springing out he escaped into the woods and was shielded by the dense undergrowth. Anthony Hollingsworth, agile as a cat, sprang unnoticed up the ladder into the loft, where he quickly concealed himself between the clapboards of the loft floor. The two newcomers made little resistance, but Charlie Brown, true to his nature, fought like a demon. Oaths and curses of the attacking party mingled with the shrieks and wails of the slaves. Horrible threats of vengeance were hurled at the negro who now defended himself with the fierceness of a lion. Crash of steel and noise of pistol shots sounded above the hoarse roar of angry voices. Overpowered at last by the great odds against him, Brown was tied on a horse's back. His feet were bound together under the horse and his hands were tied behind his back. As they carried him off through the woods he called back, "Tell Dr. Mitchell I

have tasted the sweets of liberty and I will never live my life in slavery." Then bursting into a loud wild song, he disappeared among the trees and was never heard of more. Anthony and Jared proceeded at once to Canada, and for many years were faithful citizens in the town of Windsor, opposite Detroit. The ambush and the subsequent capture of the three fugitive negroes was commemorated in a song that the children of the neighborhood used to sing:

In the clouds of the night when honest men sleep  
They pounced on the poor slaves like wolves on the sheep.  
Assisted by church-going Ralston they say  
Three poor helpless creatures were carried away.

Shortly after this occurrence suit was brought by Garrett Van Metre of Hardy County, Virginia, against Dr. Robert Mitchell of Indiana County, Pennsylvania, for harboring a fugitive named Jared Harris, the property of Van Metre. The case was tried in the United States circuit court at Pittsburgh before Judge Grier. He was a violent proslavery man, and his charge to the jury is one of the most remarkable documents in the portrayal of bitter personal prejudice on the pages of court history. Dr. Mitchell was convicted, and a part of the magnificent pine forest in which the slaves had found shelter was sold under the sheriff's hammer to defray the expenses of the ten-thousand dollar suit.

Another fugitive-slave story of Indiana comes from Mr. Samuel Jamison, now of Utah, whose father, Mr. J. A. Jamison, was, in 1848, the proprietor of a hotel known as the "Eastern Inn." The old brick house, formerly a popular resort for the traveling public, still stands near the eastern end of Philadelphia Street, two doors west of Fourth Street, on the north side.

Samuel Jamison was then a young man and numbered among his friends the Caldwell boys, whose family resided on the farm, now owned by the McHenrys, on the eastern edge of the town. One summer day Mr. Caldwell had hired a number of boys from town to help cut his oats harvest, which lay on the western side of the hill, facing the town. As Sam Jamison passed the barnyard gate, Mr. Caldwell beckoned him to a secluded spot and told him in whispers that two fugitives had been dis-

covered on the hill about dawn. They had been stowed away in the barn for safety during the day. They were sure they were closely pursued. A sharp lookout was to be kept for passing strangers and the presence of the negroes concealed from the threshers, who were proslavery men.

Young Jamison's sympathy and interest were so strongly with the fugitives that he could not refrain from visiting a little with them on his frequent trips to the barn that day. In telling of their escape, the spirit of adventure grew apace in the dusky brethren from the cotton fields, and in the afternoon they begged Jamison to take them out into the field in the wagon and let them see the novelty of a grain harvest.

From their hiding place in the uncut grain, the negroes watched the rhythmic movement of the mowers with wonder and enjoyment. Growing enthusiastic, the men began to bob their heads above the grain all too frequently for safety to themselves, and Jamison began to repent that he had gratified them. Turning from a rebuke to them for their carelessness, his ear caught the sound of horses' hoofs on the road at the foot of the hill. His heart almost stopped beating as he gazed upon two unfamiliar forms traveling towards the lane that led to the barn. Could it be possible that they were the slave hunters! What in the world should he do! Standing there midway between pursuer and pursued, with the law against him, and companions around him only too ready to betray him, what wonder if his senses seemed to leave him and an eternity of emotion seemed crowded into one short moment. But the harvesters worked on, not thinking he was more than resting a little. The strangers rode leisurely past the lane without the least concern for the harvesters in the field. When they were out of sight, Jamison lost no time in smuggling the fugitives back into the barn; but he was a very uneasy young man who found his way back to the "Eastern Inn" that evening.

Towards bedtime, old Mr. Jamison instructed Sam to keep the house open for two strangers who had engaged lodging for the night, but had not yet returned to claim their room. These gentlemen came in at about eleven o'clock. Something about their bearing rather added to young Jamison's already uncomfortable sensations. Carrying the candle, he preceded them into their room. No sooner were they all inside the

door than one of them turned down the lock. Sam grew very pale, but a determined look settled on his face. His intuition told him something was coming, and he meant to meet it like a man.

"In what direction are the negro slave quarters of this place?" inquired one of the strangers. Jamison pointed to the location asked for.

"Then where does Mrs. McLeash live?" inquired the other. Again Jamison gave the desired information.

"Do you know of any strange darkies being around these places today?" asked the first. Jamison said he did not.

"See here young man," began the leading speaker, "we might tell you we are after two runaway darkies and we have reason to believe you know where they are. If you will tell us and hand them over to us, that roll of bills is yours," and he placed a sum of several hundred dollars on the table in the full light of the candle. Sam made no reply.

"We have been watching the negro quarters since dark but find no trace of them," the man continued. "We know they are not far away. Come now, you know where they are. Tell us. The money is yours and no one but ourselves need ever know anything about it. Come! One good turn deserves another. Now then young man, tell us all about it."

White as a sheet, but in tones firm and steady, Jamison replied, "Keep your money. I would not touch it. If I knew where the men were I would not tell you."

"Oh come now, don't be afraid. No harm would ever come of it," argued the second speaker.

"Just this little bit of confidence between us, and you get the money and we get the niggers," urged the first.

"I tell you I will have nothing to do with you or your money. Let me go," wrathfully replied the much-tried man. After urging him again, the men, feeling sure that had he really known anything of the slaves, the great sum they offered would have unsealed his lips, released him. Once clear of the room Jamison lingered only long enough to make sure his unwelcome guests were fast asleep. Then tearing up the alley he struck into the building on the site of the Savings and Trust Company. There he encountered James Taylor, whom he knew to be a loyal

friend of the black men and to whom he quickly confided his adventure. Taylor sent him back to the inn to keep watch over the sleeping slave hunters, while he proceeded to provide a way of escape for the slaves. He secured the assistance of an unidentified man who had assisted in many such escapades and was as eager for the undertaking as a hound for the hunt. By some chance he learned that the fugitives had been removed at dark to Jimmie Hamilton's barn, there to remain for a much-needed rest. The unknown deliverer started for the woods in a direction at right angles to the road to Hamilton's, for the purpose of misleading any lurking spies. By this route he arrived at the house of David Myers to the north of Indiana. Mr. Myers accompanied the midnight traveler through the woods to Hamilton's, where they aroused the slaves and took them back to the Myers' home. After hiding at this place for some days, the runaways were passed beyond harm's way through the aid of the Joneses, the Suters', and the Ewings, in the northern part of the county, and finally reached the longed-for paradise in Canada.

*Indiana, Pennsylvania*

SARAH R. CHRISTY