

" . . . FREEDOM, OR THE MARTYR'S GRAVE"

Black Pittsburgh's Aid to the Fugitive Slave

R. J. M. BLACKETT

*When the sun comes back and the first
quail calls,
Follow the drinkin' gourd,
For then the old man is a-waitin' for to
carry you to freedom,
If you follow the drinkin' gourd*

FOLLOW THE DRINKIN' GOURD

THE history of antebellum northern black urban communities is one of resistance to racial oppression and the development of institutions to cater to the needs of blacks in a rapidly expanding industrial economy. Between 1830 and 1860, black communities from Boston to Cincinnati forged, nurtured, and sustained their own institutions in their battle to survive in what, in many instances, were extremely hostile environments. They created their own churches as a protest against segregation in white churches and founded black newspapers to air their views, literary societies to improve skills, temperance and moral reform societies, masonic lodges, and secret societies to protect their communities from outside encroachment. By mid-century, these institutions were well developed through decades of involvement in the Negro Convention, abolitionist and anti-colonization movements, and local efforts to improve the lot of black communities. Just as well that they were, for on September 18, 1850, President Millard Fillmore signed into law the infamous Fugitive Slave Law, which guaranteed to southern slave interests the return of their escaped chattels. Black communities rose to the occasion and with the support of white abolitionists stood four-square against attempts to enforce the new law. This article will examine the efforts employed by the black community in Pittsburgh to aid fugitives and to resist the Fugitive Slave Law.

In 1830, Pittsburgh's blacks numbered 472, and there were 1,193 in Allegheny County. By 1850, the black population of the city had increased to 1,959, and the county's rose to 3,431, representing

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a slight rise in the number of blacks from 3.8 percent to 4.2 percent of the city's population, with the heaviest concentration in the East Ward, and 2.4 percent to 2.5 percent throughout the county.¹ If one could gauge the black community's cohesiveness by the number of organizations and associations catering to the needs of the black population, then the 1830s and 1840s witnessed the emergence of a relatively close-knit black community in the city.

In January 1832, blacks, disillusioned by the city's failure to provide their children with adequate schooling, came together to form the African Education Society, which aimed to disperse "... the moral gloom, that has long hung around ..." the black community.² Later that year they formed the Theban Literary Society which in 1837 joined the Young Men's Moral Reform Society, founded in 1834, to form the Young Men's Literary and Moral Reform Society. The first temperance society was formed in 1834 to eliminate "the demon booze" and aid in the moral elevation of the community. As in other communities throughout the North, black Pittsburghers were actively involved in abolitionist and anticolonization movements in the 1830s. In 1831, a public meeting of blacks issued a stinging condemnation of the American Colonization Society's efforts at Liberian colonization and called on all blacks to remain in their native land and fight against slavery and racial prejudice.³ The debate over immediate emancipation and colonization was well-aired in southwestern Pennsylvania. Erasmus Wilson estimated that there were twenty colonization societies in the area at the end of the decade. After a rather fitful existence, local antislavery societies came together to form the Union Antislavery Society of Pittsburgh and Allegheny in January 1839.⁴ In July 1838, young blacks formed the first Juvenile Antislavery Society in America.⁵

By 1837, there were four benevolent societies catering to the needs of and providing services for the black community. Towards the end of the decade blacks formed the Philanthropic Society,

1 Clarence Rollo Turner, "Black Pittsburgh: A Social History 1790-1840. A Census Compilation" (Paper prepared for the Urban Historians' Group, University of Pittsburgh, March 1974), 2, 5, 13.

2 *The Liberator*, Feb. 25, 1832.

3 William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization*, Part 2 (1832; reprint ed., New York, 1968), 34-35.

4 Erasmus Wilson, *Standard History of Pittsburg Pennsylvania* (Chicago, 1898), 816-17; see also Robert Wallace Brewster, "The Rise of the Antislavery Movement in Southwestern Pennsylvania," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 22 (Mar. 1939): 1-18 (hereafter cited as *WPHM*).

5 Victor Ullman, *Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* (Boston, 1971), 24.

which, as its name suggests, duplicated some of the efforts of the benevolent societies, but at the same time acted as the defensive arm of the community. Evidence suggests that it was a secret society whose main objectives were the protection of the community, the abduction of slaves from slaveholders visiting the area, and a link, if not the most important arm, in the Underground Railroad in Pittsburgh and Allegheny City. The prominence of the Philanthropic Society may account for the marked absence of attacks on the black community by white mobs. In comparison with other cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati, there were only two race riots in antebellum Pittsburgh — in 1834 and 1839. In 1839, the society and a contingent of the Mayor's Police led the defense of Hayti, as the Hill District was then called.⁶

These local activities were linked to the wider state and national activities of blacks in the 1830s and 1840s. Black societies sent representatives to state and national meetings of the Negro Convention Movement, participating in and contributing to the burgeoning efforts among blacks to forge a national movement. When in 1837-1838 the Pennsylvania legislature moved to restrict the franchise to whites, local blacks convened a meeting to condemn the move and issued a memorial calling on the legislators to reconsider their actions. Although blacks were removed from the voting rolls, the Pittsburgh Memorial showed both the level of political sophistication and cohesiveness of the community.⁷ Over the next few years blacks continued to pressure for the reestablishment of their voting rights. In August 1841, they convened the State Convention of Colored Freemen of Pennsylvania in the hopes of coordinating state-wide efforts for the restoration of the vote. The all-black convention worried some of the city's fathers. Rumors spread that the blacks were gathering to defy whites and there were threats of attacks. The Reverend Lewis Woodson in a politically astute and forceful public declaration forestalled any attacks by whites. Blacks, he said, had no intentions of parading, for that sort of public demonstration was outmoded, but they did intend to meet to discuss their particular problems. "The participation of others is not rejected out of any disrespect to them," he observed, "but because it is natural and right. Every man knows his own affairs

6 *Ibid.*, 27; Frank A. Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany* (1883; reprint ed., New York, 1969), 43.

7 *Memorial of the Free Citizens of Colour in Pittsburg and its Vicinity Relative to the Rights of Suffrage Read in Convention July 8, 1837* (Harrisburg, 1837).

best, and naturally feels a deeper interest in them than anyone else, and therefore on that account ought to attend to them.”⁸ The meeting was held, and the convention once again condemned the exclusion of blacks from the electoral rolls.

Between the years 1831, when young Martin Delany arrived in the “Smoky City” — or as a contemporary called it, “Hell without the lid on” — to the founding of his newspaper, *The Mystery*, in 1843, blacks had continued to develop a cohesive and supportive community. Their numbers were augmented by newcomers from Virginia, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and eastern Pennsylvania seeking a niche in the rapidly developing industrial city. A significant sector of the community also consisted of fugitive slaves, mainly from Virginia and Maryland, who soon married into and were protected by the community. By 1840, blacks were mainly employed in menial services, on the rivers and canals, and in the large city hotels. Towards the middle of the decade they were investing extensively in real estate and establishing small businesses. In Allegheny City they organized the Moral Lever Association as the vehicle for procuring real estate. By the end of the decade the “Allegheny Institute and Mission Church” was founded on the North Side with funds donated mainly by the Reverend Charles Avery and supported by a grant from the Pennsylvania legislature.⁹ The institute, which in 1858 changed its name to the Avery Institute, continued to provide education for local black youths for the rest of the century.

To a large extent the cohesiveness of the black community was forged from determined efforts to defend fugitive slaves from possible recapture and, where necessary, to aid them on their journey farther north. Their efforts were boosted by the passage of an 1847 state law which prohibited the kidnapping of free blacks. The law prohibited justices of the peace and aldermen from acting in support of the 1793 fugitive slave law. It also protected fugitives from unlawful seizure, gave judges the power to issue writs of habeas corpus in fugitive cases, and, more importantly, banned the use of state jails for the detention of fugitives.¹⁰ To Pittsburgh’s commercial and industrial inter-

⁸ *The Pittsburgh Gazette*, n.d., quoted in Ullman, *Martin R. Delany*, 41-43.

⁹ Martin Delany to Frederick Douglass, *The North Star*, July 6, 1849.

¹⁰ *Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Passed at the Session of 1847* (Harrisburg, 1847), 206-8. Section 6 of the law, banning the use of state jails to hold fugitives, was repealed during the Democratic administration of Governor William Bigler as a sop to “national interests.” See also *Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Passed at the Session of 1852* (Harrisburg, 1852), 295; Mary

ests, this law was particularly alarming, for it could seriously affect the city's important contacts with the South. Pittsburgh lay at the head of the rising internal trade along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, and by the late 1840s its industrial goods were in great demand in New Orleans, Memphis, and Natchez. In 1848, Delany observed that antislavery activity in the city was being seriously undermined by this contact, "The Mississippi valley and its connecting rivers, are but the train of communication, or the great telegraphic medium which binds Pittsburgh, New Orleans and St. Louis together in interest; merchants here, being interested in trade, vessels and shipping houses there, families here being intermarried and consanguineously allied to families there, until they have . . . become one." *The Pittsburg Post*, Delany warned, was the watchdog of southern interests in the city and ". . . the Judges of Pennsylvania Courts, with a few honorable exceptions, are but the *pledged* minions of the slave power in this country."¹¹

Notwithstanding Delany's views, blacks and white abolitionists continued to use the courts to undermine the efforts of slave catchers. One month after the passage of the 1847 act, Pittsburgh's abolitionists tested its application in the famed Lockhart case. Daniel Lockhart was born a slave in Virginia and escaped to Pittsburgh sometime in the 1840s where he worked as a casual laborer in the city. In April 1847, he was approached by a stranger and employed to take a trunk from the Monongahela House. When Lockhart arrived at the hotel he was seized by his owner and two constables from Virginia. He put up a fierce struggle, all the time shouting that he was being murdered. Many of the blacks working at the hotel ran to his aid, but his captors resisted. Word quickly spread throughout the community that a fugitive had been captured and a large crowd of blacks greeted Lockhart and his captors when they left the hotel. The crowd converged on the slave catchers, seized Lockhart, and took him into hiding. He was subsequently sent to Canada.

But the slave catchers' troubles were not over, for they were soon charged, under Section 4 of the 1847 act, with the tumultuous and riotous arrest of a slave. Logan, Lockhart's owner, and his companions filed a writ of habeas corpus before Judge Lowrie, a prominent

Florence Durkin, "William Bigler, A Pennsylvania Democrat" (M.A. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1937), 11; *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1852) 1: 71.

11 *The North Star*, Feb. 11, 18, 1848; Catherine E. Reiser, "Pittsburgh, the Hub of Western Commerce 1800-1850," *WPHM* 25 (Sept.-Dec. 1942): 121-34.

supporter of the American Colonization Society. In his opinion Lowrie argued that the return of a slave was not only recognized by federal law, but was also an important guarantee for the survival of the Union: "We must not at least, while claiming the benefits of union, refuse the performance of the duties arising from it. While union exists we must honestly perform the covenant of union; and let us not dishonestly begin our nullification by claiming the blessings and rejecting the burdens belonging to the relation." Lowrie dismissed the charges brought against Logan and his companions.¹² Even if Pittsburgh's blacks and their abolitionist supporters failed to win a verdict against Logan, they sent out a warning to slave catchers and their local supporters that it was exceedingly difficult and expensive to kidnap a fugitive from the area.

Western Pennsylvania had few famous fugitive cases to compare with the Latimer, Crafts, and Shadrach cases in Boston, or the Jerry case in Syracuse, either before or after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. This in large measure was the result of the well-organized system, devised by blacks and white abolitionists, for protecting fugitives in their community. Only the Anthony Hollingsworth case in Indiana, Pennsylvania, gained any national prominence. In 1845, Hollingsworth and two other fugitives from Virginia found a sanctuary and employment at Dr. Robert Mitchell's farm just outside Indiana. Their master, Garrett Van Metre, and two assistants followed them to Mitchell's farm where after a struggle Hollingsworth was taken prisoner. Mitchell immediately filed for a writ of habeas corpus for Hollingsworth's release on the grounds that no evidence had been submitted to prove that slavery did exist in Virginia. Hollingsworth was released and returned to his job on Mitchell's farm. Two years later another attempt was made to take Hollingsworth, and after a bloody struggle he fled to Canada and settled in Windsor. Frustrated by Hollingsworth's successful resistance and determined to destroy the small pocket of abolitionists in Indiana, Van Metre brought suits against Mitchell, the first of which was heard by Judge Grier in United States Circuit Court in Pittsburgh in November 1847.¹³

Judge Grier was no friend of the "extremist" and "fanatical" abolitionists. He insisted on a strict interpretation of both the 1793

12 *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, Apr. 17, 19, 20, 1847; see also Benjamin Drew, *A Northside View of Slavery* (New York, 1968), 45-50, for Lockhart's account of his experiences as a slave and fugitive in Pittsburgh.

13 For an account of the incidents, see Sarah R. Christy, "Fugitive Slaves in Indiana County," *WPHM* 18 (Dec. 1935): 255-66.

and, later, the 1850 fugitive slave laws, and dismissed peremptorily any attempts by abolitionists to employ the niceties of state laws designed to subvert the efforts of slave catchers. In the 1853 Wilkes-Barre slave case, Grier warned abolitionists who had three local officers arrested for "riotous behavior" and used undue force to capture a fugitive (who later escaped) that, "If this man Gildersleeve [an abolitionist] fails to make out the facts set forth in the warrant of arrest, I will request the Prosecuting Attorney of Luzerne county to prosecute him for perjury. . . . If any two-penny magistrate, or any unprincipled interloper can come in and cause to be arrested the officers of the United States whenever they please, it is a sad state of affairs." A successful prosecution of this kind, in his view, would only make those who celebrated the "Syracuse riot" and "the Christiana murder" rejoice. At the opening of the United States Circuit Court in Pittsburgh in November 1849, Grier observed that the time had come for the country to put paid to the actions of the abolitionists and their black supporters, ". . . when their railings and vituperations were becoming successful as means of intimidation against the honest and sane portion of the community; when mobs of negroes were urged on to madness, and counselled to arm themselves for the purpose of rebellion against the laws, and were hounded on to murder its officers, such diseased members of the body politic could no longer be treated with contempt or indifference."¹⁴ It is no surprise that blacks and their abolitionist supporters put little faith in men like Grier.

Van Metre's cases against Mitchell were not finally resolved until 1853. In the series of cases Van Metre won an award for \$500 plus costs in November 1851 and subsequently sued for action of debt for penalty under the 1850 act. Under the act a slaveholder was entitled to \$500, plus ". . . saving moreover to the person claiming such labour of service his right to action of the said injuries, or either of them." In his charge to the jury Grier observed that no Pennsylvania law aimed at restricting the slave master's right to recapture his slave could supersede federal law. Moreover, he said ". . . illegal harbouring is not to be measured by the religious or political notions of the accused, or the correctness or perversion of his moral perceptions. Some men of disordered misunderstanding or perverted conscience may conceive it a religious duty to break the law, but the law will

¹⁴ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Nov. 21, 1850; *Frederick Douglass Paper*, Oct. 28, Nov. 11, 1853; *Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle*, Oct. 8, 1853.

not tolerate their excuse." The jury found in favor of Van Metre, and, according to Christy, Mitchell had to sell a large part of his pine forest to defray the expense of the \$10,000 suit.¹⁵

But while the series of suits by Van Metre followed a tortuous course through the federal courts blacks continued to protect fugitives in their community. In January 1847, three men from western Virginia attempted to capture a fugitive named Briscoe in Allegheny City. In this case it appears that the police supported the efforts of blacks who rescued Briscoe and sent him north.¹⁶ Three months later a slaveholder from Mississippi arrived with four slaves at the Monongahela wharf on his way to Maryland. A large crowd of blacks soon gathered and tried to persuade the slaves to leave their master, but only one accepted. When it appeared that their efforts would fail to win the freedom of all the slaves, they attempted to rush the boat, but the Mayor's Police intervened and prevented a successful rescue of all the slaves.¹⁷ A pattern of action is discernible in both these attempts to rescue fugitives and slaves from their masters. It appears that blacks had a carefully organized system of communications that quickly transmitted news of any danger, and when necessary, they had the ability to bring together a large crowd to attempt rescues of slaves traveling with their masters. A similar pattern was followed in the rescue of Lockhart. We will discuss this issue more extensively later.

The 1850s dawned with ominous rumblings of southern nullification. This threat had been made before, but now the South seemed determined to fulfill its dire warnings on the future of the Union if the North continued to ignore its demands for extension of slave territory. During the debate on the Wilmot Proviso there were many reports from the South of movements calling for a cessation of trading with northern firms. Unless northern merchants recognized the seriousness of the South's intentions, one pamphleteer warned, ". . . they might very soon discover, to their dismay, that the valuable Southern trade had passed into the hands of foreign merchants."¹⁸ Pittsburgh's business interests kept a close watch on developments in Congress. The

15 Christy, "Fugitive Slaves," 285; for Van Metre v. Mitchell cases, see *Federal Cases. Circuit and District Courts, 1789-1880* (St. Paul, 1896), 1036-44.

16 *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, Jan. 28, 1847.

17 *Ibid.*, Apr. 21, 22, 1847. For another instance of blacks preventing slave catchers from recapturing their slaves, see the *Pittsburgh Daily Commercial Journal*, July 7, 1848, and *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 8, 1848.

18 Philip S. Foner, *Business and Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irrepressible Conflict* (Chapel Hill, 1941), 22-23.

Gazette's New York correspondent reported on the efforts of New York merchants to win support for Henry Clay's Compromise Bill, which conceded to the South the need for a more stringent and enforced fugitive slave law. Moses Hampton, congressman from Allegheny County, observed that ". . . to the question of the reclamation of fugitive slaves, we all acknowledge the obligation imposed by the Constitution, and all are willing to fulfill those obligations." But Hampton raised the specter of sectional interests when he concluded that the North had also lost considerable revenue following the repeal of the tariff in 1842. What was necessary, therefore, was ". . . proper legislation for the protection of property. . . ." ¹⁹

Unlike other northern communities, Pittsburgh remained relatively quiet throughout the long debate leading up to the passage of the bill. Blacks, however, were adamant in their opposition to any increased concessions to the South. At a mass meeting held in June at the Wylie Street A.M.E. Church, resolutions were passed condemning the proposed fugitive bill and calling on blacks to consolidate their associations to ensure their protection. A memorial issued by the meeting and sent to Congress stated in part that "We the colored people of Allegheny County, in the State of Pennsylvania, do most respectfully and solemnly remonstrate and Petition against the provisions of the Act of Congress, 1793, relative to the recapture of Fugitive Slaves, and against all and every Act, Bill, or Provision now in existence or that may hereafter be introduced into either Houses of Congress of the United States, in any way or manner infringing upon our liberties as American citizens." ²⁰

In spite of similar appeals from other northern communities, the Compromise Bill was signed into law in September 1850. Of all its sections the Fugitive Slave Law met with the most sustained opposition from blacks and white abolitionists. The law was composed of ten sections. It created commissioners to supervise the execution of the law who were to receive \$10 if fugitives were remanded to their owners and \$5 if they were not. Owners of fugitive slaves, or their agents, were empowered to pursue and reclaim fugitives either by procuring a warrant from a judge or commissioner, or by simply seizing the suspected fugitive. The fugitive could then be taken before a judge or commissioner, and if his identity was established a certificate was to be issued authorizing his removal to the slave state from

¹⁹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, June 6, 1850.

²⁰ *The North Star*, July 11, 1850; U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 1850, 21, pt. 2: 1390.

which he escaped. The right of habeas corpus did not extend to fugitives, for under no circumstances was their testimony to be accepted as evidence. Molestation of slave catchers in their attempts to return fugitives south by courts, judges, magistrates, or any other person was strictly prohibited. If a slave catcher suspected that an attempt would be made to rescue a fugitive, the officer who made the arrest was authorized to employ as many persons as necessary to prevent the rescue. The expenses for such an effort were to be paid out of the federal treasury.²¹

Northern black communities were thrown into a panic by the passage of the bill. In Boston, New York, Syracuse, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, blacks left in large numbers for Canada. By September 25, 100 fugitives had already left Pittsburgh for Canada. On the twenty-fourth, forty fugitives living in the upper part of Allegheny City had joined the exodus. *The Liberator* in a report of the flight from Pittsburgh observed that all the waiters in one hotel had fled. By October, almost 300 fugitives had departed the community in which they had established firm roots. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* reported that since their escape these fugitives had “. . . intermarried with free persons of color but they are thus once more compelled to sever all the family ties.” They left in small parties armed with rifles, revolvers, and bowie knives, all pledged to defend one another to the death. The *Gazette* was relieved that so many had decided to leave for the safety of communities farther north, “. . . since there would most assuredly have been bloodshed had their masters endeavored to recapture them.”²² When the Reverend William King and a Dr. Burns visited Pittsburgh in November to raise money for the black community of Buxton, Canada West, they found that “there was a large number of well to do colored people living in Pittsburgh who wished to come to Canada and buy themselves a home in what was really a free country.” Blacks continued to leave the area throughout the decade, and by 1860 the census reported a loss of 800 blacks from Pittsburgh and 706 from Allegheny. Many joined the estimated 15,000 to 20,000 blacks entering Canada from the United States between 1850 and 1860.²³

21 Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (Chapel Hill, 1970), 23-25.

22 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Sept. 24, 25, 26, 1850; *The Liberator*, Oct. 4, 1850.

23 Fred Landon, “The Negro Migration to Canada After the Passing of the Fugitive Slave Act,” *The Journal of Negro History* 5 (Jan. 1920): 22; Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (New Haven, 1971), 235, has questioned Landon’s estimate of the number of blacks entering Canada in

Meetings were called throughout southwestern Pennsylvania to protest the Fugitive Slave Law. The "citizens of Allegheny" met at the Diamond on September 28 to voice their opposition to the law. The Reverend Avery condemned the act as unconstitutional for its suspension of habeas corpus and the right to trial by jury. It would force ministers, he said, ". . . whose duty it was to proclaim peace in the world, and let the captive go free . . . to aid and assist the bloodhounds of slavery, and, trample under foot all Devine Authority, to join in this work of infamy and crime." He argued that Pennsylvania congressmen should be pressured to repeal the law and that anyone who accepted a commission under the law should be ". . . shunned as though he were a leper." All the candidates in the November congressional election, with the exception of Salisbury, the Democratic Workingman's candidate, attended and spoke against the law. Howe, the Whig candidate, promised to fight for repeal if elected to Congress and the crowd shouted "we'll send you." The meeting pledged to work for repeal of the law by "all lawful means," not to vote for candidates who did not commit themselves to work for repeal, called on editors to publish the names of those who accepted positions as commissioners, and condemned all those Pennsylvania congressmen who voted for the bill.²⁴

The second meeting in the Allegheny market house followed a similar pattern. The crowd condemned Salisbury for not participating in the first meeting where they had pledged their support for Howe. He was, therefore, forced to explain his absence. In his address he condemned the law because it made slave catchers out of the free men of Pennsylvania. He was not only in favor of the emancipation of the black slave, ". . . but for the freedom of the white slaves in the Northern workshops. . . ." When he commented on child labor in the cotton factories of the city there were shouts of "stick to the questions." The meeting then degenerated into a heated debate over larger issues — the repeal of the tariff and the failure of the National Bank — as politicians jostled for position and votes. But Delany soon brought the meeting back to the issue of the Fugitive Slave Law with a rousing speech of defiance:

the 1850s. However, by 1857 blacks comprised about two-thirds of the population of Chatham, Canada West, *Chatham Tri-Weekly Planet*, Dec. 11, 1857; Turner, "Black Pittsburgh," 2; Rev. William King, "Autobiography" (Unpublished mss.), 112, National Archives, Ottawa, Canada; Victor Ullman, *Look to the North Star: A Life of William King* (Boston, 1969), 169-74.

24 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Sept. 30, 1850; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, Sept. 30, 1850.

Under the operation of this Bill . . . no colored person is safe . . . Who is there to swear that I was not born a slave? . . . Here I am a freeman, liable at any time to be taken away and kept forever in bondage . . . Honorable Mayor, whatever ideas of liberty I may have, have been received from reading the lives of your revolutionary fathers. No, my course is determined should the slave pursuer enter my dwelling, one of us must perish. I have treasures there: there are a wife and children to protect; I will give the tyrant timely warning; but if the sanctuary of my home is violated, if I don't defend it, may the grave be to my body no resting place, and the vaunted heavens refuse my spirit. . . .

The meeting reaffirmed its pledge to oppose the law.²⁵

But while blacks and white abolitionists were seeking ways to stymie the law's operation, men like Howe and his supporters sought political capital. Howe was elected to Congress in November at a time when the fortunes of the Whigs were exceedingly low in Allegheny County. It is quite reasonable, therefore, to assume that his public commitment to oppose the law may have won him significant support. Yet soon after his election he wrote General William Robinson that "It is well known, to the citizens of this District, that I regarded its [the slave law's] provisions, under the most favorable construction of which they seem susceptible, as exceedingly severe, difficult of execution, and eminently calculated to inflame the Northern mind. . . . They have, however, received all the necessary sanctions required by the Constitution, and are the law of the land and as such, must be respected and obeyed." He condemned those who were committed to oppose the law, for the Union, in his view, ". . . is obedience to the laws."²⁶ Indeed, Howe was articulating the views of the city's prominent citizens. The *Gazette* called for a modification of the law to reflect the public's regard for ". . . the personal rights and liberties of their own citizens . . .," for it wished to see the provisions of the Constitution regarding fugitive slaves carried out to their fullest.

While the *Gazette* was taking a middle ground, the *Washington* (Pennsylvania) *Examiner* would brook no opposition from ". . . the whole body of Northern *niggerdom*, embracing the colored and their white advisers and accomplices, [who] have banded together and established a precedent which, if sanctioned and observed, would eventuate in the utter destruction of all law and drench . . . the

25 For Delany's speech, see J. Ernest Wright's unpublished manuscript, "The Negro in Pittsburgh," 65-66, which was produced under the auspices of the WPA. Professor Clarence Rollo Turner found it in a dusty box at the state archives in Harrisburg, and it is in his possession. For a different version of Delany's speech, see Rollin, *Life and Services of Martin Delany*, 76; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Oct. 1, 1850; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, Oct. 1, 1850.

26 *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal*, Dec. 2, 1850.

whole land in blood." Of all the local newspapers only the *Saturday Visiter*, an abolitionist weekly edited by Jane Grey Swisshelm, uncompromisingly opposed the Fugitive Slave Law and called for total resistance to its implementation.²⁷ Attempts by the Church of Unity to win approval from the annual meeting of the Pittsburgh Presbyterian (Old School) Synod in October resulted in the most amazing display of intellectual gymnastics. Replete with non sequiturs, the meeting's resolution stated that ". . . while strictly, for conscience sake, rendering all due honor to civil government, as the obedience of God, and yielding all due obedience to the civil rulers as the minister of God to men for good, yet on no account to yield compliance with any enactments or commands, if such compliance involve any violation of principle or duty."²⁸

In the face of the new law and the calls for obedience to the Constitution, blacks and their white supporters harnessed their energies and employed their associations for the protection of the fugitive and the black community from the slave catchers. In fact these men and women had a particularly formidable record, for few fugitives were returned from Western Pennsylvania in the 1850s. The Underground Railroad, comprised of whites and blacks, was one of the amorphous associations employed to subvert the enforcement of the slave law in the area. Two of its lines met at Uniontown bringing fugitives from Virginia and Maryland. From Uniontown, two lines led north to Pittsburgh and a third to Indiana. From Pittsburgh they traveled by rail to the Western Reserve and Cleveland or followed the Allegheny River and its tributaries north. Another line followed the Wheeling Creek to West Alexandria and then to West Middletown, from where fugitives were sent north.²⁹

But the major burden of support for the fugitive was shouldered by the black community. As we have seen they had developed a well-organized system long before the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law. After 1850, they employed an array of methods against the law: quiet or forceful abductions; organization of large crowds to resist returns; and where these failed, utilizing the full range of legal devices to pre-

27 *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, Nov. 16, 1850; *Washington Examiner*, Oct. 26, 1850; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Oct. 17, 1850.

28 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Oct. 30, 1850; *Presbyterian Advocate*, Oct. 30, 1850.

29 Earle R. Forrest, *History of Washington County Pennsylvania*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1926), 1: 424; Boyd Crumrine, *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1882), 261-62; Wilbert H. Seibert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1892; reprint ed., 1967), 122-23; Irene Williams, "The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania," *WPHM* 4 (July 1921): 151; Christy, "Fugitive Slaves," 279.

vent the kidnapping of fugitives. In this, their methods reflected those employed by other northern black communities. Through the Philanthropic Society and an extensive network of communications centered on the city hotels they brought together large crowds of blacks to resist the return of fugitives or to abduct and send suspected slaves north. Slaveholders and slave catchers were always amazed by the speed with which news of their presence in the area spread and by the determination of the crowds to resist their efforts. As soon as a suspected slave arrived at a hotel, blacks employed in the establishment quickly met to plan the slave's capture and to inform the Philanthropic Society of his presence.

Thomas A. Brown, one of the employees at the Monongahela House, left a vivid account of their efforts to capture a slave from the hotel: ". . . half a dozen determined men held a brief but decisive consultation. Mrs. Crossan [the proprietor's wife] and the chamber maid on the third floor were taken into our confidence. Watches were stationed in the several halls and on the stairways; a special one was placed to observe the movements of the planter. The headwaiter was instructed to delay serving the courses at dinner. With all speed messages were dispatched to friends in the city. The word soon came that a closed carriage would be at the door at 9 p. m." ³⁰ The effort was successful. Blacks were not reluctant to use force when necessary. In capturing the suspected slave of a Mr. Slaymaker in March 1855 a large number of blacks stormed into the City Hotel's dining room and removed the slave. A report of the incident stated that "Several individuals who were breakfasting at the same time state that the whole affair was so sudden and precipitate, that it was difficult to tell how many colored persons were present or who positively laid hands on the woman." ³¹

Sometimes even free blacks accompanying whites were abducted. The suspected slave of Slaymaker, Caroline Cooper, turned out to be a free black. After she was captured the crowd hurried her through a private alley to Third Street and then to the barbershop of Mr. Davis, from where she was taken to a safer hiding place in another part of the city. Slaymaker subsequently proved to the mayor that Cooper was free, and Delany was brought in to inspect the evidence. Once Delany was convinced that Cooper was free, he agreed to have her returned. Accompanied by an officer he went to Webster Street where

³⁰ Hallie Q. Brown, *Tales My Father Told and Other Stories* (Wilberforce, Ohio, n.d.), 6.

³¹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Mar. 8, 1855.

a small group of blacks were meeting to plan her escape north. They agreed that Cooper was free and returned her from a house "somewhere near the intersection of Cherry Alley and Strawberry Alley" to the City Hotel. In order to ensure Cooper's safe passage, Delany issued Slaymaker with a letter addressed to "The Friends of Liberty."³²

The abduction network also extended beyond Allegheny County. In May 1853, Pittsburgh's blacks and abolitionists received a letter from J. Lindley of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in Philadelphia informing them that Thomas Adams of Nashville was traveling to Pittsburgh with a black youth named Alexander Hendrckure and requesting them ". . . to have the matter investigated, and we will pay all expenses." A large crowd met the train and Hendrckure was taken. A writ of habeas corpus was filed, and Adams was taken into custody and only released when he promised to give up the youth who was then handed over to Delany. As it turned out, Adams had persuaded Hendrckure, a Jamaican, to accompany him to America with promises of opening riches to him in California. It appears that his intention was to sell the youth into slavery in Kentucky.³³ Three months later, blacks were informed by telegram that a white man from Missouri was traveling from Crestline, Ohio, with a black woman and her three children. When the man left the station in Allegheny City to go in search of a hack, the woman and three children were taken and driven to the mayor's office. When he returned, blacks threatened to tar and feather him or dunk him in the canal. Pleading that he was the father of the three children, he fled across the river to Pittsburgh and quickly left the city when a warrant for his arrest on charges of kidnapping was issued. According to the *Evening Chronicle* the man was on his way to Baltimore where he intended to sell the woman and her children into slavery.³⁴

Where necessary the courts were used to protect fugitives. In March 1850, two slave catchers from Louisville arrived in Pittsburgh intent on taking a fugitive named Woodson who had made his home in Beaver. A warrant for Woodson's arrest was issued by Commissioner Sweitzer and the fugitive was arrested. Fearing an abduction attempt, the slave catchers called for and got protection from Mayor Joseph Barker. At the trial before Judge Irwin, blacks testified that

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, June 11, 1853; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 30, 1853; *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, May 31, 1853; *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal*, May 31, 1853.

³⁴ *Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle*, Aug. 12, 1853; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Aug. 12, 1853.

they had known Woodson, or Paul Gardner as they called him, since the spring of 1848. The slave catchers argued that Woodson had escaped from his mistress in 1848. They described him as a very black person which did not tally with Woodson's obvious mulatto complexion. Irwin, ignoring this blatant discrepancy, decided in favor of the slave catchers. Again fearing that blacks might attempt to prevent Woodson's return, he was slipped out of the city jail and taken to a steamer. But before Woodson and his guard of police could reach the wharf a large crowd gathered. The strength of the police prevented any capture, and the *Gazette* thankfully commented, "Thus terminated the first fugitive slave case in Pittsburgh, not the slightest riot or confusion having been excited by it." Immediately plans were drawn up to raise money to purchase Woodson's freedom. The \$600 was soon raised, and Woodson returned in triumph to Pittsburgh in April, less than one month after his capture.³⁵ Two years later, Calvin Jones, a waiter in the city, was arrested as a fugitive from Memphis. David Reed, J. M. Kirkpatrick, and other leading white lawyers defended Jones. There were so many glaring holes in the slave catchers' testimony that Jones was released.³⁶

All these efforts met with a large measure of success. The feeling of defeat over the Woodson case was quickly alleviated by his purchase and return. Blacks and their supporters suffered only one major defeat in the 1850s — the failure to capture the Boyd slave. Lloyd Boyd of Kentucky, former Speaker of the House, arrived at the St. Charles Hotel with his family and a female slave in March 1855. As in the Slaymaker incident, which took place two days earlier, the black employees of the hotel attempted to capture the slave. But their attempt was foiled by a group of whites in the hotel. Fearing another attempt, Boyd decided to leave Pittsburgh immediately. News of their presence spread throughout the community, and a large crowd of blacks gathered at the wharf to attempt a rescue. Boyd eluded his pursuers and got on board the steamer before the crowd could get to him. Frustrated by their failure, the crowd threatened to storm the steamer if the slave was not handed over. But they were forced to allow Boyd to leave with his slave when the captain threatened to shoot anyone who attempted to cross the gangway.³⁷

This failure was particularly galling. Following the passage of

³⁵ For accounts of the Woodson case, see the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Mar., Apr. 1851; *Pittsburgh Saturday Visitor*, Mar. 22, 29, 1851.

³⁶ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 14, 1853.

³⁷ *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, Mar. 12, 1855.

the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which annulled the Missouri Compromise of 1820 prohibiting slavery above the thirty-sixth parallel, blacks and their abolitionist supporters had redoubled their efforts and determination to abduct slaves from their masters. As occurred in other northern communities, the new act met with a rising chorus of protest against further northern acquiescence to southern interests. The Allegheny County Whig convention adopted a strong antislavery platform at its annual meeting in 1854. Condemning slavery as a sin, the Whigs called for the total abolition of slavery, open opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law, and demanded that there should be ". . . no more slave states, no slave territory, no nationalized slavery, [and] no national legislation for extradition of slaves."³⁸ Efforts were already being made by a small group of local businessmen, concerned that the expansion of slavery and the growth of southern political power was affecting business in the city and posing a threat of competition between slave and free labor, to form a local political party, known as the Pittsburgh Republicans. They took issue, as Leland Baldwin points out, ". . . with the extension of slavery more because they were seeking the welfare of industry than because they were concerned about farmers and free laborers."³⁹ But others were afraid that rising sectional antagonism and increasingly bold attempts to capture slaves from their masters would do inestimable damage to the city's business future. The *Post*, in a bitter denunciation of blacks and abolitionists following the Boyd case, commented:

Millions of dollars have been invested in our railroads and canals; and it is proposed to invest millions more in the improvement of the Ohio river. The aim of this outlay is to bring through out city and State a large share of the travel and trade of the South and West. These efforts to increase our prosperity will be useless if travelers are to be assailed by lawless mobs, and forced to fly from the city to escape personal violence, and prevent the kidnapping of what they hold as their property under the laws of their States. . . . Shall our prosperity and reputation as a community be given over to the control of an irresponsible mob of negroes, who do little for the prosperity of the city themselves.

The *Post* concluded with the hope that similar actions in the future would ". . . be suppressed by the strong arm of the law; or met with plenty of well charged revolvers in ready and resolute hands."⁴⁰

But even the *Post's* blustering could not deter the joint efforts of

³⁸ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, June 2, 1854; *Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle*, Jan. 31, 1854.

³⁹ Leland D. Baldwin, *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City* (Pittsburgh, 1937), 308.

⁴⁰ *Pittsburgh Daily Morning Post*, Mar. 14, 1854.

blacks and abolitionists. Throughout the decade, blacks continued to abduct slaves passing through the area and to assist fugitives on their way north. "The wind blows from the South today" was the warning informing them of the presence of slaves and fugitives in the area. Immediately the black secret society, which so tormented the *Post*, and the Underground Railroad were put into action, and very rarely did they fail. Following the Drennen case in July 1850, McD. Crossan, proprietor of the Monongahela House, warned southern slaveholders against bringing their slaves to Pittsburgh where there "... is a secret and powerful organization of free negroes to promote escapes. . . ." ⁴¹ By the middle of the 1850s, it had become increasingly expensive for slave catchers to recapture fugitives from the area, and foolhardy for slave masters to travel through Pittsburgh and Allegheny with their slaves. In fact, after 1855 there were no instances of attempted rescues simply because masters left their slaves at home. At the same time the Underground Railroad continued to aid escaping slaves north.

The study of blacks' and abolitionists' aid for fugitives and the abduction of slaves is a study of resistance to southern interests and political power. Unlike New York and Philadelphia, there was no organized vigilance committee in Pittsburgh. Nonetheless, the Philanthropic Society, operating as a small, but very active secret society, and working as part of the Underground Railroad, had the same effect as its New York and Philadelphia counterparts. It formed part of a larger, albeit uncoordinated, national network of associations organized by blacks and white abolitionists to resist slavery. In spite of the dire warnings that their activities threatened the stability of the area's economy, the society and its white supporters continued to oppose the notion that slaveholders had a right to hold other men as property. Their activities, like those of other northern urban communities, particularly in the early 1850s, heightened the sectional conflicts between the North and South that led finally to the abolition of slavery.

⁴¹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 11, 1850.