

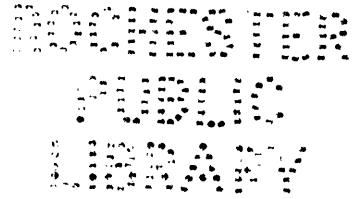


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A REMINISCENCE
OF
ANTI-SLAVERY DAYS

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A Reminiscence of Anti-Slavery Days.

In a recent conversation with a distinguished member of the Rochester Historical Society, I had occasion to refer to the fact that during my life I had come in contact with two notable events in history. It was at his suggestion that this paper was prepared. The events referred to are "The Jerry Rescue" and the interview between Frederick Douglass and John Brown, prior to the raid at Harpers Ferry.

As a boy of nine years of age I was employed by an afternoon paper, published at Syracuse, to carry a route. I had just left the office with my papers to be delivered to the subscribers when I witnessed the flight and the capture of Jerry McHenry, the colored fugitive slave.

Before describing the scene then enacted, let me briefly refer to the anti-slavery agitation of that period.

Zachary Taylor, the twelfth president of the United States, died July 9, 1850, and was succeeded by vice-president Millard Fillmore. Mr. Fillmore was from Buffalo, N. Y. and was the first president of its Historical Society. In September following the succession of Mr. Fillmore, the Congress passed, among other of the so-called "Compromise Measures," the Fugitive Slave Law. By its provisions a fugitive slave could be arrested in any State and returned to his master. The marshals were allowed a fee for each arrest, doubtless to induce vigilance in searching for and apprehending the fugitives. The "run-away slave" was not permitted to testify in his own behalf nor was a trial by jury allowed him. At the time of the passage of the act the anti-slavery men believed Mr. Fillmore himself, a northern man, would not approve and sign the bill. He did, however, and Mr. Thurlow Weed in his autobiography, referring to that fact, says:

"The act was so revolting to every sentiment of justice and humanity, it was thought impossible that it should find approval with Mr. Fillmore. In signing it, he signed his own political death warrant, and having served out President Taylor's term, Mr. Fillmore passed into retirement from which he never emerged."

An eminent authority has said that the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and the several attempts to enforce its provisions in the Northern States, "had as much to do with bringing on the Civil War as did the controversy over slaves in the territories." It was not until 1864 that this odious law was repealed.

The small, but exceedingly active Abolition Party, were importuning Congress for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and in the territories of the United States. This party was bitterly opposed

to the Fugitive Slave Law and did all in its power to prevent the passage of it by the Congress. These so-called Abolitionists denied that any man should do violence to his conscience in obeying this law when passed. They publicly declared that they would not assist in the surrender of a fugitive slave, but on the contrary felt it a duty to assist him to escape to Canada, there to obtain the freedom which Great Britain declared should be the lot of every man within its possessions.

In 1851 Daniel Webster, having become a member of Mr. Fillmore's cabinet, came to Syracuse and delivered an address before a great audience of his political friends. In the course of his address he urged upon all citizens to observe the Fugitive Slave Law and denounced the Abolitionists as "traitors, traitors." He predicted that fugitive slaves would be arrested, even in Syracuse, and returned to their Southern owners.

Prominent among the men thus denounced by Mr. Webster were Gerrit Smith, Charles A. Wheaton, Rev. Samuel J. May of Syracuse and vicinity, and such other men as Wendell Philips and William Lloyd Garrison.

Mr. James G. Blaine, in his "Twenty Years in Congress," thus refers to the men so publicly denounced by Daniel Webster in his Syracuse address.

"They challenged the respect of thinking men and even compelled the admiration of some of their most pronounced opponents. The party was small in numbers, but its membership was distinguished for intellectual ability, for high character, for pure philanthropy, for unquelling courage, both moral and physical, and for a controversial talent which has never been excelled in the history of moral reform. In the early days of the agitation they were a proscribed and persecuted class, denounced with unsparing severity by both the great political parties, condemned by many of the leading churches, libeled in the public press and maltreated by furious mobs. Caring nothing for prejudice, meeting opprobrium with silence, shaming the authors of violence by meek non-resistance, relying on moral agencies alone, appealing simply to the reason and the conscience of men, they arrested the attention of the nation by arraigning it before the public opinion of the world and proclaiming its responsibility to the judgment of God."

A convention of the Liberty Party (Abolitionists) was called to meet in Syracuse, October 1, 1851. The day before the convention was to meet, Jerry McHenry, a colored man, residing in the city and engaged at work at his trade as a cooper, was arrested as a fugitive slave and taken to the city police station. While there he slipped out of the hands of the officers and out into the street making a dash for his liberty. It was the custom of the farmers of the vicinity to bring to the city loads of "good body beach and maple wood," a cord to a load, and stand near the Canal and Packet Landing in the center of the city. On this day there were a large number of loads of wood there standing awaiting purchasers.

With my papers under my arm, I saw the colored man handcuffed, dodging his pursuers, among the loads of wood. Boy like, neglectful I fear of our subscribers, I followed the crowd and witnessed the fight. Jerry fought with a determined effort to be free, but was over-powered, his clothing badly torn, his face covered with blood and one of his ribs broken. A passing wagon was impressed into the service of the officers and Jerry thrown into it, one of the officers sitting on his breast and another on his legs and others leading the horses as they drove the prisoner back to the police station.

That evening a meeting of the Abolitionists was held at the office of Mr. Hiram Hoyt and plans made for the rescue of Jerry before he could be gotten out of the city. Gerrit Smith was among the number present. It was ascertained that precautions against a rescue were made by the city authorities and every road leading out of the city guarded and additional guards placed about the police station. The friends of liberty also made plans. A pair of the fastest horses in the city was contributed by one friend with his enclosed light carriage. Near midnight the Abolitionists to the number of two thousand or more began to assemble at the Packet Landing. Mr. Charles A. Wheaton, who kept a hardware store in the vicinity, admitted his friends to his store to arm themselves with iron bars and axes to the extent of the stock on hand. At a given signal a rush was made upon the guard and the prison doors, the former were over-powered and the latter broken down and Jerry hurried into the awaiting carriage. As agreed, the friends of liberty, having thus accomplished the rescue, immediately scattered in all directions to their homes. With Jerry in the carriage were the two men selected to outwit the officers. The "liberty-team" so-called soon outstripped the officers pursuing and, driving in and out among the dark streets of the city until sure they were not observed, delivered Jerry in the house of a friend. There he was secreted for five days, his wounds dressed and suitable clothing provided. By relays of fast horses he was subsequently taken by night to Oswego and again secreted in the house of a "friend of the cause." After some days a captain of a schooner, a man to be trusted, agreed to take Jerry over to Kingston, Ontario. The schooner sailed out of the harbor of Oswego at sundown, but as the darkness came on returned towards shore to meet the small boat, pulled out by faithful friends, with Jerry. The captain of the schooner kept his promise and the run-away slave under the British flag became a loyal and respected citizen of Canada, where he resided until his death.

In your minds, return with me to Syracuse and the morning of October 1, 1850. The "Liberty Party Convention" convened as called and the first business transacted was the adoption of the following:

"Whereas, Daniel Webster, that base and infamous enemy of the human race, did in a speech, exultantly and insultingly predict that fugi-

tive slaves would yet be taken away from Syracuse, and the attempt was defeated by the majestic and mighty uprising of two thousand five hundred brave men; therefore be it:

“Resolved that we rejoice that our beloved and glorious city of Syracuse, still remains undisgraced by the satanic prediction of the Satanic Daniel Webster.

“Resolved that notwithstanding the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law and the general acquiescence in it, under the influence of the devil-prompted speeches of politicians and devil-prompted sermons of priests, we derive some hope from the resistance of yesterday that a patient and long suffering God has not left this superlatively wicked nation to perish.”

The young men of this day may characterize the language of the above resolutions as both fanatical and intemperate, but men whose memory goes back to those times, who lived then and shared anything of the feeling that prevailed sixty-five years ago, will bear testimony that the sentiments expressed are no stronger than was usual with anti-slavery men.

As illustrative of the character of Gerrit Smith, one of the great anti-slavery leaders of that day, it is related he wrote a letter which has been compared to the letter of St. Paul to Philemon about the slave Onesimus. Paul wrote to the master of the slave saying: “I beseech thee for my son Onesimus. If he hath wronged thee or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account.” Gerrit Smith wrote to the slave William Lee saying:

“William, your master writes me that you are a very bad man, and that the best thing to do with you is to sell you to a severe Southern master. I take pity on you as my brother man, and send your master one hundred and sixty dollars. Ten of this amount I ask him to give to you to cover expenses here. The remaining one hundred and fifty is for himself. He consents to part with you for that sum. Do not return a single dollar of the \$160 you cost me. I don't believe the best thing to do was to sell you to a severe Southern master: Now, William, show your old master what a good man a bad slave is capable of becoming when he has his freedom. Come and see me. The Lord bless and guide you and give you a good heart. Gerritt Smith.”

The other incident to which I now briefly refer, occurred in 1859. My family had removed from Syracuse, my birth place, to Rochester, and I, a young man, was employed in the printing office of Mr. Frederick Douglass. The office was on Main Street in the old Wilder Arcade building or one that preceded it and adjoined the rooms of the Rochester Democrat. I had worked for a while on the Democrat, then owned and published by Alvah Strong, father of Rev. Augustus H. and Mr. Henry Strong. It was through the kindness of Mr. Alvah Strong that I obtained employment with Mr. Douglass. My duties were of a varied character. I was at the office at six-thirty A. M. to make the fire and sweep out. I set type, did errands and tried to make myself generally useful. It was

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no unusual thing to find colored persons, refugee slaves sitting on the stairs as I came to open the office in the early morning. I became conversant with the location of the stations of the so-called under-ground railroad. The house of Mr. Douglass on South Avenue was the principal station here. Trusted men and women did not hesitate to open their houses and secrete these fugitives from slavery. Among the friends in Rochester were Isaac Post, William Hallowell and Samuel D. Porter. At night these black people were taken on their way to Charlotte or Oswego or Lewiston, going as far as possible during the darkness and stopping at day light to be again secreted in the houses or barns of men known to be of the Abolition Party. It is related that a family of five persons, colored fugitives, were hidden in the barn of Mr. Samuel D. Porter on the corner of Fitzhugh and Spring Streets. The officers had searched Mr. Porter's house and barn but had failed to look under the hay.

The office consisted of but a single room, in one corner of which was Mr. Douglass' desk and around the sides of the room were the cases of type where his son Frederick, Jr., and sometimes his daughter Rosa, with my help set the type for the paper formerly "The North Star," then "Frederick Douglass' Paper." When the forms were locked up we carried them into the office of the Democrat where the edition was printed. We then folded, single-wrapped and mailed the papers to the subscribers. I remember the occasion of a call, early one morning when I was alone in the office. The visitor was a tall white man, with shaggy whiskers, rather unkept, a keen piercing eye and a restlessness of manner.

"Like one who on a lonely road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on
And turns no more his head."

I asked the stranger to be seated and informed him Mr. Douglass would be in soon. As Mr. Douglass was out of town much of the time giving lectures, it did not occur to me then as strange that this white man did not inquire whether or no Mr. Douglass was in town. Since then I became convinced the interview was by appointment. This visitor was John Brown, whose soul is said to be marching on. When Mr. Douglass came in, the greeting between the white man and the former slave was very cordial. They had been friends for years. These two men talked freely and I recall only enough of the conversation to have been convinced that in most earnest terms Mr. Douglass entreated his friend to abandon some project. This was several months prior to October 16, 1859, when this same white man, John Brown, was arrested and put to death for his ill advised raid at Harpers Ferry.

It is a matter of history that only a few weeks before the raid, John

Brown urged Douglass to visit him at Chambersburg, that there for two days Douglass tried to convince Brown of the folly of the attempt. That on that occasion John Brown said to Mr. Douglass:

“Come with me, Douglass! I will defend you with my life. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm and I shall want you to help hive them.”

Notwithstanding the refusal of Mr. Douglass to join the John Brown raid he was an object of suspicion and so great was the fear of his arrest his friends urged flight. Accordingly Mr. Douglass took refuge in Canada and went from Quebec to England.

The author of the biography of William Lloyd Garrison says: “The refusal of Frederick Douglass to accompany John Brown should have taught Brown’s educated advisers how hopeless was his project.”

As I stood beside the last resting place of the body of John Brown, near Lake Placid in the Adirondacks, I could not think of him as a martyr to a great cause, but rather a misguided enthusiast. It is true he was obsessed with the wickedness of human slavery. His error lay in the means of its final extinguishment. The conflict between freedom and slavery had raged in Congress for years and was “irrepressible.” It could only end by the extermination of the evil. To this proposition all of Brown’s friends agreed. None thought an armed invasion of slave territory could accomplish the end. It did come finally in a way not then anticipated. The secession of the Southern states from the Federal Union and the firing on Fort Sumpter, in Charleston harbor, brought about a civil war, took away from the rebellious south, the slaves as contraband of war. The proclamation of President Lincoln, freeing the slaves, was issued only after the southern men had refused to lay down their arms.

If the soul of John Brown did indeed “march on.” If it became conscious of the awful price in blood and treasure this irrepressible conflict cost the nation. That to save to themselves, as they unwisely thought, the institution of slavery, they shot down our flag and deserted the Union of States. It is a comfort to believe this marching soul did see the new South arise from the blackness and desolation of a Civil War into a marvelous peace and material prosperity. To see a new generation of southern men as loyal to the flag of our Union as we ourselves. To see a race of black men, whose fathers and mothers had been slaves, now being educated into good citizenship, occupying positions of trust and professional responsibility, and owning and tilling the very soil formerly drenched with blood.