

HISTORIC ROOTS

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THE ROAD TO FREEDOM: THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN VERMONT

By RAY ZIRBLIS

On June 10, 1843 Jane Hicks, a Bennington farm girl, wrote to her sister Eliza in Manchester:

My dear Sister,

It rains very hard here I was interrupted last evening by a loud rap at the door A gentleman came in and said you would not turn a man out of doors such a night as this. Father told him no It was Mr. Van Housen with a black man, his wife, and three children, escaping from slavery They stayed until morning when Henry went and carried [took] them to Mr. Bottum's Please burn this as soon as you read it yourself. Let no one see it.

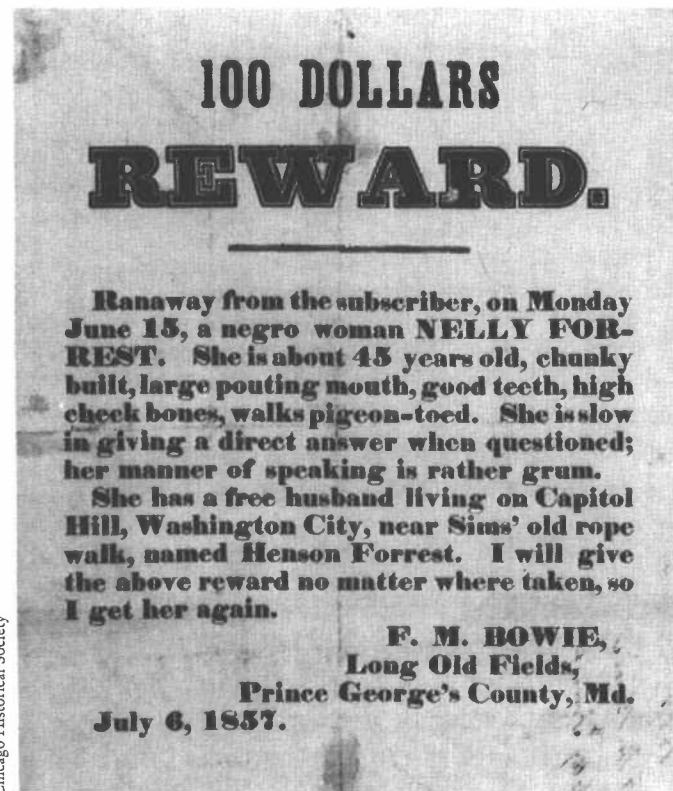
Because Eliza did not destroy the letter we

still have this description of a stopover in Vermont on the road to freedom called the Underground Railroad. Such information is hard to find because the Underground Railroad was secret. Many slaves were trying to escape to Canada, where slavery was outlawed in 1834. Quite a few came through Vermont.

There is very little proof of where runaways stayed and who helped them. This is because it was against the law for slaves to try to escape and against the law for people to help them. Mr. Hicks might have been fined or sent to jail for giving shelter to this family. If the slaves had been caught, they would have been sent back to their owners and maybe painfully punished. So we don't really know how many came or how many others helped them on their way. We do know that there are lots of stories of hiding places in houses on the way north and that Vermonters are very proud of their part in the Underground Railroad.

Vermont's constitution was written in 1777. It was the first in the country to forbid slavery. New York State did not abolish¹ slavery until the 1820s, so until then, escaping New York slaves headed for Vermont. In 1807 a New Yorker asked Judge Theophilus Harrington what proof of ownership he would need to get his slave back. The judge, who did not approve

¹ Abolish means to do away with. People who wanted to abolish slavery were called abolitionists.



Chicago Historical Society

Owners of a runaway slaves often offered rewards for the return of their "property."

of slavery, answered that "Nothing short of a bill for sale from God Almighty" would do.

Not all slaves who came to Vermont went to Canada. Some stayed here, and we know more about them. Pompey Vanderburgh² was born a slave in New York State in 1792. He was bought and sold many times. In 1816,

² Many owners named their slaves after people from ancient times. Pompey was a famous Roman general. Slaves' last names were the same as their owners'.



Rokeby Museum

Rowland and Rachel Robinson housed fugitive slaves at their home, Rokeby, in North Ferrisburgh. Some went from there to Canada. Others stayed on and made new lives in Vermont.

when he was 24 years old, he was owned by a man in Hoosick Corners, New York, right near the Vermont border. His owner was about to trade Pompey for a horse. Pompey escaped to Bennington. There he settled, just miles from his former home. He married and had nine sons. When he died in 1883, he was the oldest living man in Bennington. The whole town mourned him.

The Underground Railroad began in the South, where most of the slaves were. Many slaves traveled a long way to freedom. Often they left their families behind. On the way they slept in barns and fields. They were sometimes sheltered by abolitionists. They were always in danger. By the 1830s Rowland T. Robinson and his wife, Rachel, were sheltering fugitives³ at Rokeby, their sheep farm in Ferrisburgh. They

³ A fugitive is someone who is running away.

never tried to hide their guests because they believed that what they were doing was right. In 1837 they got a letter from Oliver Johnson, a Vermonter who was traveling in Pennsylvania, telling them about Simon:

He is very trustworthy, of kind disposition, and knows how to do almost all kinds of farm work He intended going to Canada in the spring, but says he would prefer to stay in the U.S., if he could be safe. I have no doubt he would be perfectly safe with you It would be a great [very long] way for him to walk, but not worse than going to Canada. He can be furnished with the names of abolitionists on whom to call upon the way, and I think may reach Vermont in safety.

A year later Charles, a young runaway, was picked up from Rokeby and taken to Montpelier by Chauncy L. Knapp, who was then the Vermont Secretary of State. Charles had escaped from his southern owner who was vacationing in Saratoga, New York.

In Reading, a woman named Aunt Charlotte Tumble came to spend one night with the Denisen family. She never left. The Denisens gave her land for a cabin. She was a



skilled herbalist and a midwife.⁴ It is said that no one was born or buried in that area without Aunt Charlottie being there.

There is no proof that any slave catchers came to Vermont, although there are many stories about them. But slaves were always in danger of recapture. Not everyone in Vermont believed that slavery was wrong. Some people believed that helping slaves to escape was the same as stealing from their owners.

In 1844 Col. S. T. Bailey from Georgia was visiting family members in Hartford, Vermont. One of his female slaves escaped. With the help of a justice of the peace, Bailey found the house where she was staying. He tied her up and took her back to Georgia.

Henry Adams escaped from New Orleans to Boston by ship in 1847. From there he went from safe house to safe house on his way to Canada. In Vermont he stayed in Randolph, Brookfield, Roxbury, and Northfield Farms. He then got on a stagecoach to Montpelier, but he never got there. No one knows what happened to him.

Only one Vermonter was ever tried for helping slaves escape, but it was not in

⁴ An herbalist is someone who grows and collects herbs for medicine. A midwife helps deliver babies.



Rokeby Museum

A poster announcing "GREAT MEETINGS to examine the question of American Slavery." The meetings took place in July 1843 in North Ferrisburgh. Among the speakers was Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave himself, who became a spokesman for all black people, slave and free.

Vermont. Delia Webster, who was from Vergennes, ran a school for girls in Kentucky. In 1844 she drove Lewis Hayden and his family to freedom in nearby Ohio. She was arrested and convicted, but was pardoned. Lewis Hayden visited her when she returned to Vermont. He himself became very active in the Underground Railroad.

After the Civil War started in 1861, many more slaves escaped. Some made their way to Union camps. Thornton Jackson Kerry, born a slave in Virginia, is said to have made friends with a young Vermont soldier. Later he came

to Vermont. He settled in North Bennington, where he married and became a farmer.

Most of what happened along the Underground Railroad will never be known. There are hidden rooms and closets in houses throughout Vermont where slaves are said to have stayed on their flight to freedom. But because of the need for secrecy, we have no proof. What we do know is that Vermont's history is enriched by people who were born in chains and risked everything to be free. And by Vermonters in high places and low who thought that slavery was evil and helped them.

Rooting Around

William John Anderson, Jr., who settled in Shoreham, was another escaped slave who met and made friends with a Vermont soldier during the Civil War. You can read about him in "Growing Apples in Vermont," in the April 1997 issue of *Historic Roots*.

Rokeby, the home of the Robinsons, where many escaped slaves stayed, is now a museum. It is in Ferrisburgh on Route 7. Call 802-877-3406 for directions and hours.

Please send any stories about the Underground Railroad in your town to us at P.O. Box 1228, Middlebury, VT 05753.