QUAKERS AND ABOLITION IN WESTERN NEW YORK.

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Quakers were forbid any act that acknowledged the right of slavery. Quaker meetings in western New York advised Friends not to use any product—no cotton cloth, no white sugar—made with the unpaid labor of slaves. Good Quakers used maple sugar in their coffee. When the government passed laws to make aiding fugitive slaves a crime, the Friends’ quarterly meeting in Western New York [Farmington] declared that "any acknowledgement of obligations to such laws is a violation of our testimony against slavery." There are family stories of Quakers from East Hamburg (now Orchard Park) taking fugitive slaves by wagon to Williamsville or Buffalo, and, in the winter when the lake had frozen, across the ice to Windmill Point in Canada. Laura Smith Haviland, when a young Quaker girl living near Lockport, read about the horrors of the slave trade, and saw with her own eyes the mistreatment of African-Americans in her own community. She moved to Michigan, became a well-known conductor on the underground railroad and opened the first inter-racial school in Michigan. Lyman Spalding, another Quaker from Lockport, acted as an agent for Austin Stewart, head of the Wilberforce Settlement in Canada. Quakers had helped Sojourner Truth win her freedom, and Sojourner Truth was a frequent visitor to Quaker homes in western New York. She said she would have become a Quaker, only Quakers didn’t sing in their meetings—and she loved to sing. Quakers were opposed to slavery. However, Quakers were not always agreed on what was to be done. Some Quakers, like Lucretia Mott, were active in the abolitionist societies, giving public lectures against slavery. Other Quakers, did not approve of mixing with the "world" in political causes. Some felt that God would end slavery in his own time, others that men and women were the necessary agents for the ending of slavery.

The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad that escaping slaves rode to freedom is a part of American folklore. Local historians proudly point out houses and churches that were reportedly used to harbor fugitives from slavery on their way to freedom. It is sometimes difficult to separate fact from fiction. I was asked a couple of years ago if the story that the Quaker meeting house on Allen Street in Buffalo was used on the Underground Railroad. I said I very much doubt it, because it wasn’t even built until 1868, which was after the abolition of slavery. I am going to tell some true stories about the Underground Railroad. Remember as I tell these stories, that the Underground Railroad ran straight through Buffalo to Canada.

William, the Fugitive

One man who traveled on the underground railroad was William, who had been born a slave in Kentucky in 1817. William resolved on freedom and headed for Canada, by himself, in winter, living on whatever food he could find in barns and fields. Finally,

"after many days of weary travelling, and sick from exposure, I determined to seek shelter and aid; and for this purpose, I placed myself behind some fallen trees near the main road, hoping to see some colored person, thinking I should be more safe under the care of one of my own color. Several farmers with their teams passed, but the appearance of each one frightened me out of the idea of asking for assistance. After lying on the ground for some time, with my sore, frost-bitten feet benumbed with cold, I saw an old white-haired man, dressed in a suit of drab, with a broad-brimmed hat, walking along, leading a horse. The man was evidently walking for exercise. I came out from my hiding-place and told the stranger I must die unless I received some assistance. A moment’s conversation satisfied the old man that I was one of the oppressed, fleeing from the house of bondage. From the difficulty with which I walked, the shivering of my limbs, and the trembling of my voice, he became convinced that I had been among thieves, and he acted the part of the Good Samaritan. This was the first person I had ever seen of the religious sect called "Quakers," and his name was Wells Brown. I remained here about a fortnight, and being fitted out with clothes, shoes, and a little money, by these good people, I was ready to resume my journey. I entered their house with the same nation that I was known by at the south, "William;" I left it with the one I now bear." [William Wells Brown, The Black Man. New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863, pp. 24-25.]

In slavery, William had only one name, but he understood in freedom that people had both a personal name and a family name, so William named himself William Wells Brown, honoring the Quaker who gave him shelter. It turned out to be quite an honor. Wells Brown is one of the many good men whose deeds are mostly forgotten. William Wells Brown, who would later live right here in Buffalo, became first a temperance lecturer, then an anti-slavery lecturer, a playwright and an author. His book, Clotel, Or the President's Daughter, is considered to be the first novel written by an African-American.

Joseph Hathaway, Quaker Underground Railroad Agent

William Wells Brown also lived for a time in Farmington, New York, a largely Quaker community east of Rochester. He undoubtedly knew Joseph C. Hathaway, a Quaker abolitionist from Farmington. Now those aided slaves escaping from the
South to the North or Canada were working outside the law, and risked fines and imprisonment for their efforts, but nevertheless, Hathaway was quite open about his activities.

On May 5, 1842, a letter from Hathaway was published in the National Anti-Slavery Standard giving the story of one recent traveler on the Underground Railroad. This individual, a nineteen year old from Virginia headed for Canada after his master wagered him against $1000 in a cock-fight. "He thought it best to use the physical and intellectual powers that God had given him, in finding a country where an immortal being is considered of too much value to have his destiny hang upon a chicken's foot." The same letter told of another fugitive slave, living openly in Geneva, New York, and working as a barber, when his old master walked in for a shave. "He shaved him with a trembling hand; and the moment he left the shop, hurried out of the back door, and immediately fled to Canada." Later that summer, Hathaway wrote about another visitor, who, after seeing reward posters offering $600 for his capture, had not dared to seek assistance until near the end of his journey. Without any assistance, he had traveled, presumably on foot, at least the entire breadth of Pennsylvania and half of New York State, before boarding the Underground Railroad.

Lorenzo Mabbert, Quaker Agent from Collins

Lorenzo Mabbert, from Collins Center, in southern Erie County, was another conductor on the URR. In 1849, he wrote to the North Star, published by Frederick Douglass in Rochester:

"A few hours since Anna G. Mabbert was seen upon one of our back roads with a horse and wagon containing besides herself a fugitive slave, and his wife, all in women's attire. The slave was about to commence school on the Reservation with the Indians, when his friends learned that the base ministers of Slaveocracy were on his track and close upon him, but [their] being put upon the route to Canada-- and not in this instance the right route-- he is safe.... The people of this place and vicinity are giving such indications of their love of Liberty, that we may safely conclude the time is near, if not already at hand, when this region of Western New York will be a safe retreat for the poor panting fugitive." (North Star, Sept. 29, 1849)

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 stiffened the penalties for assisting escaping slaves. A "Mass Meeting of the Colored Citizens of Buffalo" resolved that "the fugitive slave bill, recently passed by Congress, not only violates the sacred guarantees of the Constitution, but is Anti-Republican, Anti-Christian, and unworthy of the support of enlightened freemen" and further that "we consider the fugitive slave law no law to govern our actions, but will be resisted by us at all times, at all places and under all circumstances." (North Star, Oct. 24, 1850). The sentiment was echoed by a meeting at Collins Center: "in its principles it contravenes our highest obligations of duty, one to another, or that higher law than the Constitution that impels us to relieve suffering humanity without respect to color." (North Star, Jan. 23, 1851).

Elizabeth Comstock's Story

This is a story told by Elizabeth Comstock, a Quaker who lived in Michigan, and later moved to New York State. A young woman had escaped from slavery, but was being pursued by two men on horseback. With her feet bleeding, and dress soiled and torn, she rushed into a barn, where a plainly dressed Quaker was busy at work. She hurriedly told that slave catchers were close behind. "Don't be alarmed," the Quaker said. He led her through the barn and out small door at the back, and pointed to a house. "Go to James Green at that house and tell him that he must take thee on immediately by the Underground Railway. I will detain the pursuers here, until thou art on the way to Canada. They will never catch thee." So saying, the Quaker went out again by the large barn doors, and had only just time to fasten them, and nail up three or four boards across them, when the slave-catchers rode up, and demanded the slave whom they had seen enter his barn. The Friend went on steadily with his work, paying very little attention to them. They dismounted, hitched their horses to the fence, and began trying to get the door open. One of them took an axe that was lying near, and was about to break the door open, but the Quaker told him, "Young man, thou art now in a free state; we have laws, and thee could go to prison for breaking into another man's premises. I assure thee I have none of thy property there, but if thou wilt not take the word of an honest man and art determined to search my barn, thou must do it legally. Thou wilt have to bring a policeman and a warrant." The two men considered what to do, and after a few wordy words to the Quaker, agreed that one should stay there and watch that the girl did not make her escape, while the other went to get the warrant. This took some time. First, someone had unhitched their horses. Then, no one seemed willing to tell them to find a policeman. Finally, the Quaker told them that they had to bring a carpenter as well, since his barn just been painted and he didn't want them to make any marks when they took off boards. After two or three hours, the man returned with the policeman, warrant and a carpenter. During all this time, his companion had kept careful watch on the barn, too see that the girl did not escape. All this time, the Quaker kept nailing up his boards. Finally, after some more discussion about who was going to pay if the barn was damaged, the work was completed and the barn opened. The two men rushed in, only to find the barn empty. They were quite upset. The Quaker waited for them to calm down, and because it was now nighttime, and there was no hotel for miles, he invited the two men to dinner and to stay the night. He also gave them breakfast, but that morning the family ate at nine rather than six as usual. As the men were leaving, the Quaker suggested that it was useless for them to continue, as the girl was probably near Canada by now. However, if they were ever back in the area that they were invited to seek rest and shelter beneath his roof as his house was very open to those who needed it of either race.

The girl did make it to Canada, where she earned her a comfortable living as a skilled dressmaker. (Account adapted from C. Hare, ed. Life and Letters of Elizabeth L. Comstock, 1895, pp. 66-70)
In the era before the Civil War, Christians argued about whether the Bible permitted slavery. I think for Quakers and others, the question was much simpler, and all this talk about what Paul may or may not have meant was irrelevant. In 1863, Sojourner Truth addressed a white audience:

"Children who made your skin white? Was it not God? Who made mine black? Was it not the same God? Am I to blame, therefore, because my skin is black? Does it not cast a reproach on our Maker to despise a part of his children, because he has been pleased to give them a black skin?" (National Anti-Slavery Standard, June 3, 1863)

When I read this, it brought to mind a sermon delivered by the Quaker Elias Hicks forty years earlier:

"We are not to consider a coloured man or woman as below us; because if we do, we give an evidence, that self-love still domineers in our souls.... If we admit for a moment, that a coloured man or woman is inferior to us, do we not at the same time [in]criminate the Almighty, and declare that he is not the God that we profess to believe that he is; that he has made a distinction in colours; and that these blacks are not his creatures to the same extent that whites are?" (Elias Hicks, A Series of Extemporaneous Discourses..., 1825, p. 237)

Sojourner Truth and Elias Hicks were not arguing theology. They simply saw no reason why such an incidental matter as race should divide people, particularly those who professed to follow the teachings of Jesus. All men and women were brothers and sisters.

Farmington Quarterly Meeting, 1836

Let me close by reading a few lines from an 1836 "Address" from Farmington Quarterly Meeting to Quakers in Western New York.

"A mere theoretical belief in Christ is of no avail. Living faith calls for the exercise of active virtues. The practical christian... considers all mankind... as his brethren, and himself under solemn obligations to use all in his power, to ameliorate the condition of his fellow men, of every color and every condition in life.... When a plain and positive duty is enjoined, no excuses... can shield us from responsibility."