

NEW SERIES : Price 1 dollar : VOL. XXVII No. 4

VERMONT *History*

Formerly the Vermont Quarterly



October 1959

The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



SLAVERY AND THE VERMONT CLERGY

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VERMONTERS take pride in the record of its citizens who abetted the escape of runaway slaves via the Underground Railroad before the Civil War. The routes leading to the Canadian border and freedom were a "glory road" for many while they operated and, whether obscured by time or dimly memorialized at "Rokeby" in Ferrisburgh or the Rodman Marsh House in Brandon, still constitute one of the exciting chapters of Vermont's past.

But local tolerance to Negroes antedated the system of "stations" which facilitated passage through Vermont of hundreds of liberty-seekers. What is more impressive, it continued when the emotional involvement of escape and pursuit along the eastern and western "trunks" ceased to fan the fervor of humane aspiration.

As early as 1777 Captain Ebenezer Allen presented a certificate of emancipation to a slave named Dinah Mattis and her infant Nancy. Both had been captured earlier in a raid near Ticonderoga. But Captain Allen, who had already received permission from his men to free the common prizes of war, thought it "not right in the sight of God to keep slaves."¹ The town clerk of Bennington recorded the certificate accordingly—in full consonance with the state constitution soon to be adopted, the first in the United States expressly to prohibit slavery. At Middlebury, after the turn of the century, Judge Theophilus Harrington refused to remand a runaway on the grounds that nothing short of a "bill of sale from God Almighty" would persuade him to recognize the validity of such property titles.² At Middlebury also some years later (February 18, 1835) Mr. Oliver Johnson, Secretary of both the Addison County and the Middlebury Anti-Slavery Societies, anticipated Seward's enunciation of the "higher law" in justifying aid rendered to fugitive slaves in defiance of the Constitution.³

Allen had issued his statement to a town clerk. Judge Harrington had spoken from the bench. Mr. Johnson was speaking from the pulpit of the Congregational Church. All of them had resolved their stand on slavery by referring it to religious principle.

The resolution in itself should occasion no surprise. Slavery, which

was universally accepted throughout the ancient world, disappeared slowly but surely after the advent of Christianity. Rarely was emancipation legally proclaimed. The atmosphere and environment of the New Testament evangelized the dignity of man in a subtler, more efficacious way than legal pronouncement. The institution of slavery withered away for want of nourishment in a society where it could not take root. Years later in the New World William Byrd, in his *History of the Dividing Line*, explained the singular success of the French with the Indians (in contrast to those English who "fell first on their knees and then on the aborigines") by the same application of basic Christianity.

The Natives could, by no means, persuade [sic] themselves that the English were heartily their friends, so long as they disdained to intermarry with them. . . . For, after all that can be said, a sprightly Lover is the most prevailing Missionary that can be sent amongst these, or any other infidels.

And in recent controversy the most impressive stand on the integration problem has come from official pronouncements of assemblies of Catholic and Protestant clergy. On November 14, 1958 the Bishops' Administrative Council of the American Roman Catholic Hierarchy reaffirmed that the race problem is fundamentally a moral and religious one. Facing the segregation question squarely, the bishops declared that one cannot reconcile compulsory segregation of any kind with a Christian view of man's nature and rights.⁵ Less than two weeks later, from Atlanta, three hundred Protestant clergymen (supported by Southern rabbis) issued their "Manifesto" calling for limited integration. Seventeen denominations joined in acknowledging that the churches are the most promising hope for a just settlement.⁶

It is not the religious reference and resolution of the slavery problem by soldier, judge, and secretary alike which surprises us by its unanimity. That was a consistent extension of a pervasive cultural pattern operative in the Western world for centuries—now overt, now subconscious, but deeply imbedded in the *habitus* of a common conditioning. What does impress one reviewing Vermont's record on the race problem—so sharply, perhaps, as to assume the vividness of a surprise—is the degree to which local ministers were prominent in movements to benefit slaves and the unmatched scope which ex-slaves found locally in the service of religion.

This is not to say that the clergy were alone in this cause or that they were unanimous in advocating it. The liberalism of eighteenth-century Enlightenment was conspicuously humanitarian, although its spirit and expression was often the secular residuum of Christian tradition.

The churches, officially at least, were frequently as divided on this issue as on the substance of sectarian creeds. The fundamentalist groups (notably the Baptists) were openly active in anti-slavery agitation. The more conservative denominations held so aloof from abolitionism that the report of the State Anti-Slavery Society for 1838 complained that only one of its approximately forty officers was a clergyman.

Nor was there absent from the general Vermont scene a considerable element quite out of sympathy with anti-slavery aspiration. As late as 1855 there were sufficient pro-slavery men in Montpelier and Randolph to disperse anti-slavery meetings. Earlier (October 22, 1835) violence reached such a pitch that the Rev. Samuel J. May, attempting to address a gathering in Representative's Hall, Montpelier, in the cause of anti-slavery, was barely rescued from assault when a mob bombarded the building with stones and eggs.⁷ Yet, by and large, anti-slavery sentiment ran so high in Vermont that public opinion combined with the law to frustrate the activities of slave hunters.

Moreover, "factionalism" among anti-slavery groups distorts proper interpretation of the State Society's charges of clerical indifference. One should remember that anti-slavery affiliation was divided between extremists pressing for immediate and unqualified emancipation and conservative "colonizationists" who recommended gradual amelioration of the slavery problem within the Constitution. The latter proposed resettlement of Negroes in such African republics as Liberia. As alleged betrayers of the Abolitionist aims, they were often reviled by the abolitionists more bitterly than slave-holders. Yet it was not unnatural for traditionally responsible social units such as the churches to adopt a moderate position. (Under scathing misrepresentation the Right Reverend John Henry Hopkins, first Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Vermont, maintained the colonizationist stand even after the Emancipation Proclamation.⁸) In retrospect it is patent that all these parties, from their differing viewpoints, directly contributed to the ultimate common success by denouncing the evils of slavery and dramatizing the imperative to efface it.

Significantly, the "exceptional" clergyman referred to in the Anti-Slavery Society's general indictment of alleged clerical indifference, the Reverend H. F. Leavitt, was president of that organization. And, if in his capacity as President of the State Anti-Slavery Society he was not acting in the official capacity of a minister, he was acting in a manner which, far from being peculiar to him, was shared by an impressive company of clergymen who crossed denominational lines

in support of a community cause. The influence exerted by their prestige and their sensitive role can never be computed. Their names, for the most part, have been dimmed by oblivion. But any roster of them must include: Reverend John Kendrick Converse, prominent among the Underground operators in Burlington; Reverend Joshua Young who forfeited his pastorate of Burlington's Unitarian Church by preaching the funeral sermon of John Brown; Reverend John ("Lame") Smith, Methodist minister at Hartland; the Reverend Joseph Tracey, Windsor's Congregational minister and editor of *The Vermont Chronicle*; Reverend J. C. Aspinwall, first editor of *The Green Mountain Freeman*; Reverend Alvah Sabin of Georgia, Reverend Kiah Bailey of Hardwick, Reverends J. C. Gleed and Reuben Baker of Morrisville, Reverend Mr. Green of Montgomery and the Reverend George Putnam of Albany, Vermont. That this list is hardly a complete record of ministerial contributors to the cause of anti-slavery is attested by Siebert's claim that in 1827 (eight years after its establishment) seven ministers sat on the board of governors of the State Colonization Society, and that for the next thirty years clergymen constituted nearly fifty per cent of the society's officers.⁹ A survey of the Society's records also evidences that the majority of Vermont colonization groups were organized in local churches (*viz.*, the Baptist Society of East Bethel, the Congregational Society of Montpelier, the Methodist Society of Pittsford) and that agents for funds to support them were usually clergymen.¹⁰

Clearly religious motivation was prominent, if not paramount, in dynamizing local effort to ameliorate the condition of slaves. It was unequalled in the fullness of opportunity extended to ex-slaves. Only in the service of the Church did the former slave rise locally to a position of honor and authority over white men, founded upon an unquestioned title of merit transcending the barrier of blood. The handful of Negroes settling in Vermont or returning here from Canada after the Civil War remained in lowly circumstance less because of uncongeniality in an overwhelmingly white population (though that operated—as it still operates, particularly in matters of housing) than because of the circumscription of their previous training. The two notable exceptions were the Reverend Lemuel Haynes, who became a Congregational minister, and Sister St. Mary Magdalen of the Congregation of Notre Dame.

The story of Lemuel Haynes, known in Vermont history as "the mulatto minister," is still so widely circulated as to require only the broadest summary here. Born in Connecticut of a Negro slave and a

white girl, he served with the Minute Men of Massachusetts and with Arnold's Ticonderoga expedition during the Revolution. After regular ordination in Massachusetts following the War, he traveled through Vermont preaching in 1785. His first church, however, was in Torrington, Connecticut, where unfriendliness in his white congregation prompted him to accept a call to Rutland's West Parish in 1788. Here he remained as pastor for thirty years, preaching fifty-five hundred sermons and solemnizing more than a hundred marriages. During this tenure his vigor and ability won him numerous invitations to preach throughout the state. In 1805 Middlebury College honored him with the degree of Master of Arts. In 1809 he was made field director of the Vermont Missionary Society. In 1814, as delegate of the General Convention of Ministers in Vermont, he addressed a convocation of Connecticut clergymen including President Timothy Dwight of Yale. Although his political conservatism and die-hard attachment to the ebbing fortunes of the Federalist Party ultimately alienated him from his Rutland congregation (1818), he remained in Vermont as pastor at Manchester for three more years. From 1822 to 1833—except for occasional preaching in Massachusetts and New York—he served as Congregational minister in Granville, New York. When illness at eighty incapacitated him, the Rutland Consociation of Churches gratefully assumed his care until his death in 1833. Reviewing his achievements in 1837, the *Colored American* (March 11) declared that he was "the only man of *known* African descent who has ever succeeded in overpowering the system of American caste."

Sister St. Mary Magdalen's story is hardly known at all. Father Albert S. Foley, S.J., of Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama, mentions her several times in his biography of her brother, the second Roman Catholic Bishop of Portland, Maine, and the first Negro bishop of the Catholic Church in the United States (*Bishop Healy: Beloved Outcaste*, Farrar, Straus, and Young, New York, 1954). Yet this remarkable woman, born on a Georgia plantation in 1846 of a marriage between a white father and his mulatto slave, became Superior of the Congregation of Notre Dame Convent and School (Villa Barlow) at St. Albans from 1903 to 1918, where her saintly character and executive capacity are still attested by former students and colleagues. As superior of a teaching community of white nuns, she was, like her brother, a "first"—the first of her race to occupy such a position in a Catholic convent in Vermont.¹¹ Vermonters are entitled to take the same pride in her recognition which they rightfully take in the honor accorded to Lemuel Haynes.

But it is unlikely that the full story of Sister St. Mary Magdalen (née Eliza Healy) will ever be told. The life of a nun is deliberately self-effacing in its complete dedication to the service of God and the religious community. Purely personal records and possessions are discouraged—an aid to spiritual growth, undoubtedly, but a source of embarrassment (if not frustration) to the scholar searching for records. The special circumstances of the Healy family in *ante-bellum* South also complicate reconstruction of any detailed biography.

The father, Michael Healy, was literally the log-cabin pioneer, an immigrant from Ireland who carved his own plantation from the Georgia backwoods in the legendary success pattern of the American frontier.¹² He prospered, eventually acquiring 1600 acres on the Ocmulgee River tenanted by upwards of seventy slaves. But because he had married one of his slaves (Eliza Clark) and had had ten children by her, the family position in a hypersensitively race-conscious region necessitated the utmost discretion. Georgia statute allowed neither manumission of slaves nor legal recognition of offspring had by them. When circumstances permitted, Mr. Healy sent the children north where they were enrolled in good schools or tutored in private homes. The boys first attended Quaker schools in New York and New Jersey and then newly-established Holy Cross College in Worcester.¹³ After the death of their parents in 1850 and the protracted settlement of the family estate, the girls (Martha, Josephine, and Eliza) were sent to the best pensionnats in Boston, St. Johns, and Montreal, the latter then the traditional finishing schools for the daughters of New England gentry, Protestant and Catholic alike (c.f. the case of Fanny Allen, daughter of General Ethan Allen, and the daughters of the Honorable Bradley Barlow of St. Albans).

Eliza was enrolled in 1851 as a boarding student with the Congregation of Notre Dame at St. Johns, Quebec; and, following completion of the courses there, she enrolled at Villa Maria, Montreal. After 1861 she resided with other members of her family in Boston (on East Springfield Street) until the Healys purchased a "farm" in West Newton some nine miles from the heart of Boston. At the age of twenty-eight she returned to Montreal to enter the Congregation of Notre Dame as a postulant, now under the patronage of Archbishop Williams of Boston whose predecessor, Bishop Fitzpatrick, had extended the tutelage which had facilitated her earlier enrollment as a young internat at Villa Maria.¹⁴ Thereafter, with the literal renunciation of the nun, she retired from the world. She received her habit on December 22, 1874, made her profession in 1876, and took her perpetual vows in 1882. Routine teaching assignments in Canada

followed: St. Patrick's and St. Anthony's in Montreal, Brockville and Ottawa in Ontario, Sherbrooke and Huntingdon, Quebec. At Huntingdon she was superior for the first time. At the Mother House in Montreal she served (1898-1900) as Directress of English Studies. For three years before coming to St. Albans she taught in the Congregation's Normal School.

St. Albans was Sister St. Mary Magdalen's longest and (if an obedience-observing nun could be brought to confess personal preference) most cherished assignment. She came to Villa Barlow as superior in 1903, assuming the administration of the convent and school during its most straitened period. As an executive she demonstrated the same indefatigable energy and progressive spirit which had marked her brothers singularly. She not only salvaged the precarious community, she revitalized the school and refurbished the physical plant—as she had some years before (1895-1897) restored prosperity to the establishment at Huntingdon. Parish and diocesan officials, no less than her community and pupils, learned to respect her strength and skill. Former pupils (a few of whom still live in St. Albans), when asked to describe the dominant impression which she made on them, reply with a smile: "Strict!" Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame who knew her and worked beside her recall her "holiness" most of all—long hours in the chapel, voluntary assumption of the onerous and menial tasks of the community. Her one indulgence, it seems (which must have intensified the wrench of leaving Villa Barlow after fifteen years), was her joy in the convent garden, then spacious and, by all accounts, beautiful. But notwithstanding her seventy-one years the *New Code of Canon Law*, alert to check attachments, required that she be transferred. Obediently she went as superior to Staten Island, in the words of the *Annales* "*avec le courage et l'ardeur de sa jeunesse.*"¹⁵ Apparently the septuagenarian still managed things so competently that, come springtime, the community enjoyed its first comfortable surplus (*Annales*, p. 323).

Unlike the definite and repeated assertions of the unmistakably "African" aspect of the Reverend Lemuel Haynes, there are contradictions in eye-witnesses' descriptions of Sister St. Mary Magdalen although she was in Vermont as recently as thirty years ago. It is a well-known fact that her brother, the bishop, was discernibly negroid, so much so that some of his ruder Portland parishioners circulated the gossip: "Glurry be to God, the Bishop is a Nee-gar!"¹⁶ Those who knew both the bishop and his sister liken her to him—but only in stature (petite) and aristocratic bearing. In any event, nuns do not ordinarily leave pictures. None of Sister St. Mary Magdalen is

available, so unsparing has been the nun's effort at self-effacement. The picture of her which time cannot darken nor the nun's veil obscure is shining saintliness in a Vermont setting.

NOTES

¹ In his edition of *Records of Governor and Council of State of Vermont, 1775-1777* (I, 93), E. P. Walton reprints this first deed of emancipation to be recorded in Vermont as it was copied from Book No. 3 of the Bennington town records, recorded by Moses Robinson, town clerk.

² Rowland E. Robinson, *Out of Bondage and Other Stories* (Rutland, 1936), 5-6.

³ "An Address Delivered in the Congregational Church in Middlebury, February 18, 1835" (reprinted in the same year by Knapp and Jewett, Montpelier), 6-7, 9.

⁴ *A Journey to the Land of Eden and Other Papers* (Vanguard Press, 1928), 13-14. See also Byrd's similar entry, 101-102.

⁵ Washington, D. C., Nov. 11, 1958.

⁶ Atlanta, Georgia, Nov. 22, 1958.

⁷ Ralph Nading Hill, *Contrary Country* (New York, 1950), 159-160.

⁸ Wilbur H. Siebert, *Vermont's Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Record* (Columbus, Ohio, 1937), 21-22.

⁹ Siebert, *loc. cit.*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹ Before Sister St. Mary Magdalen there had been Negro Superiors in two all-Negro sisterhoods (the Sisters Oblates of Providence founded in Baltimore, 1829; and the Sisters of the Holy Family founded in New Orleans, 1842). One Sister, Mother Mary Theresa Maxis, also of Negro ancestry, became in 1845 co-foundress of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at Monroe, Michigan, a white religious community.

¹² It is interesting to note that Sister St. Mary Magdalen's obituary in the *Annales de la Maison Mère* (No. 9, 1919, 319) reads as follows: "*Elle appartenait à une famille de riches planteurs du Texas.*" Her baptismal record from St. Francis Xavier Church, New York, dated June 13, 1851, records more exactly that she was born at Macon, Georgia, December 23, 1846. The interval between her birth and baptism is not surprising considering the paucity of Catholic clergy and parish records in pre-Civil War Georgia. The discrepancy between the baptismal record and the official biography of the *Annales* derives, undoubtedly, from the general loss of archives at the Mother House in Montreal in the fire of 1893 and the dependence for much data thereafter on hearsay recollection.

¹³ James Healy, Bishop of Portland (1875-1900) was the first graduate of Holy Cross.

¹⁴ Of such protection, invaluable for an orphaned girl of mixed parentage at this period, the *Annales* (p. 323) say with characteristic understatement: "*... elle ne manqua pas de protecteurs parmi le haut clergé des États Unis.*" Besides Bishops Fitzpatrick and Williams, she could rely on the influence of three prominent brothers: Patrick, the Jesuit, President of Georgetown University; Sherwood, the Rector of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston; and James, soon to be consecrated Bishop of Portland. Her sister Josephine was also in Montreal, in the habit of a Religious Hospitaller of Hotel Dieu. Her eldest sister, Martha, had recently withdrawn from the convent (Congregation of Notre Dame) after eleven years of religious life. All in all, the Healys were a conspicuous instance of a family which had found hospitality and scope proper to their talents within religion.

¹⁵ *Annales, loc. cit.*

¹⁶ Albert S. Foley, S.J., *Bishop Healy; Beloved Outcaste* (New York, 1954), p. 128.