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VERMONT AND THE SLAVERY
QUESTION

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Columbia University Library

Dean Siebert's scholarly and valuable study of the slavery question as it affected Vermont answers definitely a number of important and perplexing problems which have been raised at various times concerning the actual and not legendary phases of Vermont's reactions to pre-slavery doctrines and proposals in the momentous pre-Civil War days. In view of the importance of the book it seemed best to give it more extended discussion than could be offered in the usual review; and Mr. Charles E. Tuttle, Jr., who has himself made a special investigation of the questions indicated, was invited to discuss the book and its significance in the general field of the topic. Editor.

VERMONT'S ANTI-SLAVERY AND UNDERGROUND RAILROAD RECORD. By WILBUR H. SIEBERT. 113 pp. Illustrations—Map of Underground Railroad in Vermont, Seven Photographs of Operators, Three Photographs of Stations. Index. Columbus, Ohio. The Spahr and Glenn Co. 1937. \$2.75.

Topsy: Stop Miss Feeley; does dey hab any
oberseers in Varmount?
Miss Ophelia: No, Topsy.

Topsy: *Nor cotton plantations, nor sugar factories, nor darkies, nor whipping, nor nothing?*

Miss Ophelia: *No, Topsy.*

Topsy: *By golly! de quicker you is gwine de better den.*

MR. SIEBERT'S recent study, *Vermont's Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Record*, makes it plain that Topsy was right. Vermont in pre-Civil War days was a welcome haven to many a runaway Sambo, Quimbo, and Dinah who sought its hospitality. But more than that, the state as a unit carried the antislavery struggle beyond her borders till its very name in the South came to be a byword expressing, in the words of the Georgia Legislature of 1857, "the maniac ravings of hell-born fanaticism." Mr. Siebert's book, as its title indicates, presents this antislavery record through organized societies, newspapers, state and national legislatures, and the Underground Railroad. To tell the high lights of this fascinating story together with some possible additions and interpretation of the facts is the purpose of this article.

Resistance to slavery seemed to be an instinct present at Vermont's frontier beginnings. In 1777, Captain Ebenezer of the famous Allen family nipped the rear guard of Burgoyne's retreating troops near the Bouquet River. Among the captured prisoners was Dinah Mattis, a Negro slave, whom Allen forthwith freed because it was "not right in the sight of God to keep slaves." Only two months later in January, 1778, when the State Constitution had gone into effect, Dinah Mattis would have been a free woman on Vermont soil without grace of a deed of emancipation. The Constitution which would have freed her is the first general emancipation act passed on the continent of North America. Nor was it a philosophical generality of the sort found in the Declaration of Independence. Vermont legislators meant business. In 1786 a law was in effect fining any person one hundred pounds who carried a Negro out of the state to sell. With typical frontier justice it provided that the fine be paid not to the state but to the injured Negro.

Our forefathers' love of liberty is, of course, an old story to most Vermonters, but it may be surprising to learn that a Negro took advantage of this free frontier atmosphere and became one of the most prominent men in the state. It is gratifying to see printed in Mr.

Siebert's book the amazing story of Lemuel Haynes. Haynes was born in West Hartford, Connecticut, July 18, 1753, the illegitimate son of a white hired man and the pure Negro slave of a neighboring family. He first saw Vermont, romantically enough, as a volunteer under Arnold on the expedition against Fort Ticonderoga. After the war, with his neighbors' encouragement, Haynes studied for the ministry. He married a white girl in 1783 and in 1785 was officially ordained in the Congregational Church. Two years later he accepted the offer of a parsonage at West Rutland, where he was destined to win fame as preacher, controversialist and author—a mulatto minister to a white congregation for over thirty years.

Haynes was a remarkable man in his own right. Under his administration the parish tripled in size. He was appointed field missionary by both the Connecticut and Vermont missionary societies. Middlebury College gave him the degree of Master of Arts. Prominent men liked to honor him. Royall Tyler, Chief Justice of Vermont, playwright, poet, journalist, certainly one of the brilliant intellects of the day, was his particular friend. In 1814, when a delegate from Vermont to the General Association of Connecticut, Haynes delivered a sermon to an audience including eighty ministers. Doctor Timothy Dwight, then President of Yale, is said to have been moved to tears.

On two other occasions Haynes' name was broadcast beyond the state. The Ballou affair demonstrates his natural aplomb and readiness in debate. Hosea Ballou was a part of the movement away from the strict iron-clad Calvinist religion that swept over New England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; this movement was most apparent in the growth of Unitarianism. In 1805 he was preaching his Universalist version of the new freedom in Woodstock, Hartland, Bethel and Barnard. One Sunday Ballou substituted at Rutland, and after his sermon gave Haynes a chance to reply. The extemporaneous speech Haynes delivered became a famous document to confute the doctrines of Universalism. It went through six American editions in two years and finally through more than twenty, including some in Great Britain. The notorious Boorn trial at Manchester again gave Haynes a national reputation. Haynes was spiritual adviser to Stephen Boorn, and his account of the trial, written in a concrete narrative style, was a contemporary best seller.

That Haynes was a Negro gives him significance in a study of Vermont's antislavery record. All accounts of his appearance empha-

sized the African cast and color of his countenance. Yet these characteristics would be forgotten after fifteen minutes of conversation with him or even while sitting as a member of his congregation. There is the key to the importance of Lemuel Haynes. He was, according to the *Colored American* for March 11, 1837, the "only man of *known* African descent who has ever succeeded in overpowering the system of American caste." Haynes, then, is important in a study of the psychological reasons underlying race prejudice in America. It was in Vermont that he found refuge as did many another political or religious black sheep. He was an actual example of what radical abolitionists were to consider all Negroes—a white man with a black skin, and an example, doubtlessly inspiring to the generation growing up which was to take an active part in the Abolitionist cause.

Mr. Siebert does not neglect the story of organized formal movements within Vermont aiming toward the alleviation of slavery. He gives a fairly complete picture of both the Colonization and Anti-Slavery Societies. The state presents on a miniature scale a sad picture common to the whole country in the first half of the nineteenth century. These two societies, each with the same idea of helping the Negro, were at each other's throats. It seems to be the rule in reform movements that the radical leaders hate their less purge-minded brethren with a greater hate than they honor the exponents of the system they attempt to destroy. Thaddeus Stevens in 1866 would have liked to see Andrew Johnson dangling from the sour apple tree reserved for "Jeff" Davis. Vermont antislavery reform was no exception. The Anti-Slavery group inspired by Garrison gave no bouquets to the older, more conservative Colonization clique.

Both societies, however, had an honorable record in Vermont. The Colonization group founded in 1819 was the first state organization in America. On the list of its officers alone in 1827 appear the names of Van Ness, Butler, Galusha, Buck, White, and Seymour, all of whom served either as Senator or Governor in the course of their careers. By 1857 it had contributed \$31,000 to the National Society, paid the expenses of six hundred emigrants to Liberia, sent over four hundred volumes to the school and public library in Monrovia, besides aiding in the purchase of territory. Backed by the clergy and less ardent reform element in the state, it continued to function and issue reports as late as 1868. The Anti-Slavery Society for its part was second in order to only Massachusetts on the roll of

state organizations. Of a more secular nature than its rival, it was, after 1830, more active in getting speeches delivered, collecting money, and keeping the issue constantly before the people. Anti-Slavery, rather than Colonization, rode the crest of the reform wave in Vermont which swept the whole Country during the thirties and forties.

In retrospect, it is plain to see that both Societies were on marshy ground. Colonization, attempting to avoid sectional friction, side-stepped the realistic issue that the South's largest capital investment was in slaves which she would not free on any basis of sacrifice of her own interests; neither would she consider purchase of her slaves by the North. Despite statistics, removal of all Negroes in the United States would have been impossible. Liberia was just another Utopia. On the other hand, the Abolitionists' program of immediate freedom, when it did come, proved to be the greatest crime committed against the Negro. Abolitionists blindly refused to recognize a race problem and did not realize that freedom suddenly granted rather than gradually earned is a calamity. The bitter struggle of the two societies in Vermont, however, shows clearly the various impulses at work to help the slaves.

Inoculated with the virus of reform, even dull legislative proceedings became exciting. The keynote to the action of Vermont's representatives at Washington was consistency. They were eternally opposed to any action, direct or indirect, which smacked of the interest of slave holders. Senator Bradley in 1805 introduced the bill which finally abolished the slave trade. Any move to gain additional slave territory brought Vermont's representatives to their feet shouting. Admission of Missouri, Texas and Arkansas was fought to the last ditch. Their clashes with the southern champions led to some exciting scenes on the floors of Congress. On December 18, 1837, Senator Swift presented a petition against slavery adopted by the Vermont Legislature. That December, the Senate had been flooded with similar petitions from individuals and societies. But this was different. An uproar followed. Finally, Calhoun took the floor and said in part:

A great step has been taken in the progress of events. I have never heard that the resolutions in question have been passed by the Vermont Legislature, but I might have anticipated as much . . . Vermont has struck a deep and dangerous blow into the vitals of our Confederacy.

Calhoun's perturbation was caused by the fact that to deny this petition reception and debate would have exploded his own state's rights theory, since it was the memorial of a sovereign state. Swift made the patriotic gesture of moving that the papers be laid on the table without printing. Their immediate purpose was thus accomplished and a crisis avoided.

State politics in these years were largely occupied with the slavery issue. It was rather an odd situation. Everyone was opposed to slavery, but political pressure kept many in line with the Whig or Democratic party. The pure as snow Anti-Slavery Group, whether at the moment Liberty Men, Barnburners, or Free Soilers, had only the satisfaction of throwing elections into the legislature, since neither major party could count on a majority. In 1852 the impossible occurred. The election, as usual, was thrown into the legislature and at the end of twenty ballots, John Robinson, Democrat, with the help of Free Soilers, was elected Governor. There had been no Democratic Governor in Vermont for twenty-five years, and there never has been one since. Wonders are wrought by the crusading spirit. The electorate which was making the Anti-Slavery party a force in state politics, however, should have had little complaint as to the activity of successful Whigs. Finally, in 1854 even they failed to swallow the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Abolitionists were in supreme command. Their myriad laws and resolutions so incensed Southerners that the Georgia Senate of 1857 passed the following act:

Resolved, that his Excellency President Pierce be requested to employ a sufficient number of able-bodied Irishmen to proceed to the State of Vermont and dig a ditch around the same and float the thing into the Atlantic.

Recent proposals merely to cede the state to Canada exhibit humanitarian advances in the last three-quarters of a century. Mr. Siebert's history of this period shows that before all arguments were silenced by the cannon at Fort Sumter, Vermont's position was clear. Her representatives at Montpelier had ceaselessly spoken, voted, and acted for the antislavery cause.

To many of us the antislavery movement and the Underground Railroad Movement are practically synonymous. Congressional speeches or Societies' reports soon flag the interest, but the idea of a man-hunt thrills us all. It is obvious that this is the section of his theme on which Mr. Siebert has done most research. Since there has been very little published on the subject, he has culled his material

directly from letters of the operators or their descendants with credible results. Breaking the law has its own appeal; the added spiritual glow of rescuing a hunted human being from wicked slaveholders doubled the thrill of suspense. The Underground Railroad was an adult game of hide-and-seek where liberty hung in the balance. Breaking the law for liberty was a game Vermonters had played since the price was set on Ethan Allen's head.

Many prominent men took part in this clandestine business, including Rodney V. Marsh of Brandon, Lawrence Brainerd of St. Albans, Joseph Poland, and Colonel Jonathan Miller of Montpelier. It was the one phase of Vermont's antislavery fight carried into contemporary literature. Most Vermonters are already aware of the stories in Rowland Robinson's *Out of Bondage*. Robinson's father was an active antislavery leader in the state, and he himself could remember some of the scenes he describes. Two of the most famous antislavery plays ever produced also made use of Vermont's reputation as free soil. Dramatizations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* always contain Yankee characters who express (usually humorously) their willingness to help any slave to freedom. Another play, *Neighbor Jackwood* by John Townsend Trowbridge, based on the author's experiences in Wallingford the summer of 1854, was a protest against the Fugitive Slave Act and the tragedy of mixed blood. Popular in its own day, the scene is laid in Vermont with Vermont characters. According to Mr. Siebert's investigation, Vermont deserved her fame as a haven for runaways. Six hundred Negroes were handled by one agent alone in Norwich off of the main line. Traveling gentlemen of dark complexion found courteous service, free passes, and good accommodations on their way to Canada through Vermont.

Even in Vermont, however, it was not always smooth sailing for the antislavery cause. Although the ballot proves that a large majority favored some method of attack on the particular institution, certain elements in society, as elsewhere in New England, were disposed not to agitate the question. In Vermont the elements that fervently agreed on this point were otherwise strange bedfellows. Their main recruits were disgruntled Democrats, and some among the comparatively wealthy and firmly conservative, who were not disposed toward politics in terms of office for themselves, but who doubtless voted the Whig ticket. The last group became more prominent in the later years of the struggle, centering their forces in congregations of socially prominent city churches. Two incidents will serve to

show what pressure these groups were able to apply. Doubtless more famous is the riot caused by the attempt of the humanitarian Samuel J. May to speak at Montpelier in October, 1835. On two successive evenings rotten eggs and stones outweighed the arguments of free speech and abolitionists. Mr. Siebert for the first time has collected all the available information in regard to the affair and its reactions within the state. Less violent but equally significant was the forced resignation of Joshua Young from the Unitarian Church at Burlington. Young, who was devoted to John Brown, attended his funeral at North Elba in the Adirondacks. The family asked him to perform the last rites. Young consigned the moldering body to the grave with the following text:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is made up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.

The choice of text proved hardly a happy one when six prominent families in his parish immediately retired. They, together with a large number of the congregation, considered Brown a felon and traitor and consequently subjected Young to a strict social ostracism for his tribute. At length he resigned, victim to some degree of anti-abolition persecution.

Despite these two incidents it is evident that antislavery was the pervasive feeling in the state. Mr. Siebert has given a thorough record of how this impulse organized societies, directed legislators, and aided fugitives. But what created the impulse? In a day when historians are forever crying economic determinism two solutions are open. Vermont with the rise of Merino sheep and other native industries was the most whole-hearted exponent of protective tariff in the Union. In coming to blows with the South over tariff policies, some of the bitterness might have been carried over to the antislavery struggle. Another possible influence was the Free Soil question. In the thirties and forties especially, Vermonters were migrating to the north central states by thousands. The desire to keep this land open and free from competition of slave labor might have given those who stayed at home additional reasons for opposing the South.

The true springs of Vermont's resistance, however, are deeper and less tangible. They are most briefly expressed in another favorite phrase of the historian, "climate of opinion." Vermont's tradition has always nurtured a love of liberty. It is a part of the same incen-

tive which made Vermont cast her electoral vote for William Wirt, the Anti-Masonic candidate in 1832, and keep the secret society issue alive in state politics long after it was dead in the Union as a whole. Four famous men of the day offer more concrete evidence of this democratic atmosphere. William Lloyd Garrison, who edited his first paper in Bennington, said abolitionism was indigenous to the soil. Horace Greeley, after witnessing the rescue of a fugitive slave in Poultney, called the deed impromptu. Thaddeus Stevens, champion of free education, and Stephen Douglas, defender of popular sovereignty, paid tribute to their early Vermont environment as directing them toward ideals of liberty. In a study of the anti-slavery movement within her borders, Vermont emerges as a positive personality consciously proud of an independent spirit. Mr. Siebert's book is a welcome documentation of this record.

