

Nazir Sayed

May 13, 2009

History 17A US History Honors Project

Professor Marrujo-Duck

A Runaway's Struggle: Revealing the Circumstances of the Underground Railroad

Slavery is the evil practice of forcing another human to work against their will for no payment or reward. The practice has been around for thousands of years, used by various races including Arabs, Native Americans, and Africans but the practice never reached such large and evil proportions as it did in the United States beginning in the 1640's. The United States developed on the backs of slaves, using enslaved African Americans to develop industries and expand the country. With the amount of profit the nation was deriving from slavery, the dream of a slave to become free in the U.S. became more and more unreachable. But as long as slavery existed in antebellum America, slaves attempted to gain their freedom. And as the level of difficulty increased, so did the resolve and struggle to be free. "The Autobiography of Henry Parker"¹ written by a runaway who traveled the Underground Railroad to attain the freedom of his family and himself illustrates this struggle. Through his autobiography, Parker reveals to us the many hardships he faced and ideas and emotions that he felt. The man eventually

¹ Henry Parker, "Autobiography of Henry Parker," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, published 2000; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/parkerh/parkerh.html>; accessed on April 30, 2009.

accomplished his goal but at a significant price. Parker was a slave in Western Virginia. Born in 1835, he began his journey through the Underground Railroad in 1859. But along the way, he lost his sister to disease and his eyesight to disease as well. The struggle was not easy by any account. Along the way, he found both bad and good people. Some assisted him and others set him back. But with the help of faith, Henry Parker and many runaways continued despite enduring many hardships as they traveled the Underground Railroad to gain the freedom they yearned for. The “Autobiography of Henry Parker” reveals the conditions and struggle of a society of runaways traveling the Underground Railroad to reach freedom in the North. Through this autobiography, the infrastructure of the Underground Railroad is revealed. The autobiography reveals a political war between the South and the North at the time. It also reveals the conditions in the South that led to many runaways falling ill or dying. The autobiography reveals the type of work that was available to runaways as they traveled north and shows evidence of a strong belief in God and Christianity.

Henry Parker’s narrative reveals his travel through the Underground Railroad. Crossing the Ohio River was the first difficult step for slaves especially with family. With family, it sometimes meant swimming back and forth across the river carrying weaker family members on one’s back. Parker wrote,

“I was compelled to cross two rivers. One was called Big Hocking and the other Little Hocking. These I waded, and carried my mother and sisters across on my back; my mother weighed, one hundred and ninety odd pounds. I first carried my mother across, then returned and carried one of my sisters across, and, after I had got my mother and one sister over, I felt that I would be compelled to give up, so near was my strength exhausted. But I could not leave my sister, and I returned and re-crossed the river with her on my back, doubly resolved for freedom or death.”²

² Ibid., 1.

Parker had escaped on his own, without outside help. He was first helped by a black man named John Williams, who then took him to another house. Slaves could only travel at night for fear of being detected. Parker wrote about his journey, “John Williams, where we rested during the day; for we were compelled to travel at night and rest during the day.”³ It is unclear whether Parker wished to cross into Canada or just settle into a free Northern state. Every fleeing slave had his or her own destination. Parker accounted traveling through three major cities; Putnam, Ohio, then to Franklin, Michigan, and Pontiac, Michigan. He said, “conveyed on from one kind friend to another until we reached Putnam, Ohio”⁴ and then he said “We were thus conveyed from one kind friend to another, until we reached Franklin, Michigan,”⁵ after that he moved further north to reach Pontiac, Michigan. The travel was very difficult because one could only travel at night. Even at night they had to keep very secret of their operation.

In fact, the Underground Railroad had to be traveled in such secrecy that they had code names for everything. The travel was filled with hurdle after hurdle and runaways would often take years to reach their final destination if they ever did. These slaves were restricted to travel only by night and could only travel a few miles before having to stop again at the next resting spot. As more and more runaways journeyed to freedom, the process gave name to something called the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a system of individuals working locally to assist slaves in moving to free states or Canada. These individuals were not governed by any one system and none controlled the entire operation. They would simply help these runaways for one day or night and pass them along to the next person. Some estimates say

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

that anywhere from 100,000 to 300,000 people gained their freedom with the Underground Railroad.⁶ Often, a free black would pose as a slave and enter a plantation and guide the slaves to the first step to their freedom. Once off the plantation, these slaves were carefully helped by numerous individuals that had never seen them before and would never see them again, and also would take no payment for their services. Though slaves had attempted to escape since the beginning of slavery, the somewhat organized system of the Underground Railroad had transported a significant portion of slaves to freedom during the years 1810 to 1850. Contrary to popular perception, the majority of those assisting in the Underground Railroad were former slaves themselves. Some participants of the Underground Railroad were abolitionists from the North, some had grown up as children of slave-holders in the South and wanted to correct their family's sins, and others were religious and felt compelled by their religion like the Quakers. Though whites played an important role, most of the faces that these runaways were looking up to as a hand reached over to help them were black just like them. The term Underground Railroad might make people think that runaways traveled underground and on a railroad. This is definitely not the case, the mode of travel was mostly a mule drawn wagon and this was very much above ground. The name was coined because runaways traveled like a train, stopping during the day and traveling approximately ten to twenty miles until stopping again.⁷ It was the appropriate name because the steam railroad was emerging and on everyone's mind at the time. The Underground Railroad used terms in railroading to avoid detection, after all they were committing a federal crime. The houses and businesses where runaways stopped and were given

⁶ Larry Rivas, "The Underground Railroad," PBS Resource Banks Africans to America June 2006; available from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html>; accessed on April 30, 2009.

⁷ Ibid.

food and beds were called "stations" and "depots."⁸ The host for these runaways were called "stationmasters." The ones that donated money to the cause were called "stockholders" and the person moving the slaves on a horse or mule drawn caravan was called a "conductor."⁹ Although Parker did not specifically use any of these words in his autobiography, we do see evidence of the different roles being executed by various individuals along the Underground Railroad. Though it seemed that the organizers of the Underground Railroad ran a very sophisticated operation and were covering all angles to not be discovered, they were hardly safe. Assisting a fleeing slave was very risky.

In Henry Parker's autobiography, he mentioned a few names of people that helped him. He mentioned John Williams, Jonathan Lee, Komines, Elder Warner, and a house of a Quaker. These individuals assisting in the Underground Railroad were under constant threat of being caught and imprisoned. At the time Parker was fleeing slavery, the south was being backed by the federal government. Southerners were granted the right to pursue their runaways in any state even if it meant going into another state to look for their slaves. Parker explains,

"We reached his house near daylight, tired and hungry. There, to our great sorrow, we learned that four slave holders were there, and had reached Putnam the day before, looking for us, and when we were surrounded with spies, who were seeking to convey us back to slavery, our only hope was in Christ, knowing that he had given us grace to lead us thus far, and if we trusted him he would lead us to freedom. While we were waiting at Mr. Cooper's I saw one of the pursuers from the room window, and could have spit on the rim of his hat. The slaveholder said that he knew we were there, and would have us or follow us to hell."¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Parker, "Autobiography of Henry Parker, 3.

Though it did not deter the Underground Railroad, the Federal government made it illegal to help runaways. This made it extremely risky to be helping slaves to freedom.

In fact, traveling using the Underground Railroad meant trusting individuals a fleeing slave had never met and likewise, stationmasters were taking a big risk by trusting hundreds of runaways through their house. Runaways and rescuers were under constant fear as they traveled the Underground Railroad. It was a common tradition that women and men would be kept in separate areas, often in separate houses as well.¹¹ Though these runaways were assured they were in the hands of a trusted person, often being caught was lurking. While hiding in the attic or basement during the day, any footsteps heard would alarm these runaways, frightened of being caught. Arrival at a station or depot did not mean one was safe by any means. A fleeing slave caught would definitely be whipped and as a punishment could also be separated from his or her family.

Federal laws made it risky for anyone, white or black to be involved in the freeing of slaves. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 was part of a compromise between the South and North.¹² It was probably the most controversial act that favored the South and ultimately created a nation that the North was afraid of. It further proved to the North that there was a 'slave power conspiracy.'¹³ It made it illegal to aid fugitive slaves escaping their slave-holders and declared that all runaway slaves be given back to their masters. The law was passed twice, the first time as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, but was challenged in individual Northern states. Some

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Stanley W. Campbel, "Fugitive Slave Law of 1850," Wikipedia.org The Free Encyclopedia 2002; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fugitive_Slave_Law_of_1850; accessed April 30, 2009.

¹³ Ibid.

Northern states passed "personal liberty laws" requiring a jury trial.¹⁴ They contended that free blacks could be dragged into slavery if no trial was heard. Some states forbade their local government from aiding the return of the runaways. The Missouri Supreme Court ruled that any slave-holder that voluntarily brought his or her slave into a free state automatically made them free. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1842 that "states did not have to offer aid in the hunting or recapture of slaves."¹⁵ This ruling, *Prigg vs. Pennsylvania*, greatly weakened the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1793. But the act was passed again as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and reversed individual Northern states' and the U.S. Supreme Court's attempt to better the situation for the runaways. It also reasserted the South's power when it came to slavery. The South heavily influenced the U.S. Congress and bullied Congress into passing laws favorable to the institution of slavery. They further flexed their muscles by adding a clause of a \$1,000 fine to any Federal marshal who did not aid in the arrest of a runaway slave. The same punishment was given to anyone aiding in the Underground Railroad as well as six months imprisonment.¹⁶ The clause also gave a bonus to federal agents who captured runaway slaves. These new laws overrode any state laws. As a result, many free blacks were being captured and put into slavery, regardless whether they were runaways or had never been a slave before. Such circumstances created a great deal of risk to be involved in the Underground Railroad. Many of the participants, such as Harriet Tubman had to keep very strict control over runaways as to not get caught. She was quoted as saying "Dead men don't talk"¹⁷ when one slave wanted to turn back and return to his

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Guy Dequella, "Anti Slavery Movement the Underground Railroad," Coral Gables Senior High multimedia textbook 1999; available on http://cghs.dadeschools.net/slavery/anti-slavery_movement/underground_railroad.htm; accessed on April 30, 2009.

slave-holder. But hardships and fear could be dealt with, the biggest hurdle for runaways traveling the Underground Railroad was falling ill or contracting a disease.

Henry Parker's narrative reveals a society that had to deal with many diseases and illnesses. Many died from diseases or were left permanently disabled. The fleeing slave community, as illustrated in Parker's autobiography, suffered from malnutrition. As a result of malnutrition their immune systems were very vulnerable to diseases and many times they would have to stop on the way to freedom to receive medical attention. And often, like in the case of Parker, an incompetent doctor would worsen the condition. Henry Parker had a sister on his trip with him that did not survive. He wrote, "Not long after this I received the painful news that my sister, whom I left in Michigan, had gone to that world from whose shore no traveler returns."¹⁸

Henry Parker also talked about how he went blind. He wrote,

"I am now about to tell you the sad story of my blindness. On the morning of the 12th of June, 1862, I arose, with my eyes feeling somewhat heavy and very hot, but I still went round, until about eleven o'clock A. M., when all at once the hot water began to run out of both my eyes. This was the indication of a powerful inflammation, and by night I could not see my own way. And then I met with a greater misfortune; for, in great distress, I employed a doctor who recommended himself as a great eye doctor, but whom I found, when, alas! too late, to be nothing but a quack. He, in his extreme ignorance, by using hot poultices and other poisons to the eye, has, I greatly fear, made me to grope my way in blindness until I shall receive sight in the spirit world."¹⁹

Henry Parker was a victim of a fake doctor.

Like Parker, many runaways would contract a disease or illness that would disable them from continuing to their final destination. Runaways were not given an opportunity to rest when sick. Actually, getting sick without any medical attention could lead to death for many slaves.

¹⁸ Parker, "Autobiography of Henry Parker," 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Some diseases were common because of the similar circumstances these runaways endured. Temporary blindness was common among slaves and would leave them inadequate to work. It was caused by lack of water intake, malnutrition including Vitamin A deficiency, no clean water, and bad hygiene.²⁰ Like Parker described, the person would feel a burning sensation in their eyes, water would leak, and they would lose their vision. They would panic not knowing that this was not a permanent disease and that they could get their eyesight back with proper medical attention. For runaways, being impaired was equal to being dead and the fleeing slave would take any medical advice given to them. This would hurt them further because at that time anyone could claim to be a doctor and be a fake. Since the beginning of colonial America, doctors and nurses had very little competency and had very little understanding of infections and diseases. Doctors were hardly professionals and had no degrees from any medical school. Fake doctors or phony doctors would take money from desperate runaways and worsen the temporary blindness to permanent blindness in some cases as what happened to Henry Parker.

Runaways were more susceptible to diseases because of a few factors. First, they suffered from malnutrition, often eating only corn and pork. Second, they often lived in very unsanitary living conditions. Third, when on big plantations they were often overworked and given little time to sleep and rest.²¹ The diet of a slave was sufficient in calories, meaning they would receive 3000 calories a day, but eating just calories is not enough to stay healthy for a long time. More than four-fifths of the slaves' calories came from only corn and pork.²² They got very few

²⁰ Postell, William D., "Slave Health On American Plantations," Wikipedia.org The Free Encyclopedia 2003; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_health_on_American_plantations; accessed on April 30, 2009

²¹ Pete Fitch, "Medicine and Slavery," J STOR Trusted Archive for Scholars, March 2005; available from <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1904799>; accessed on April 30, 2009

²² Ibid.

proteins and too many fats and sugars. Their diets were low in iron and vitamins. Slaves were not given the luxury of drinking milk or foods containing calcium. A common problem in the slave community was weakened eyesight caused by having too little vitamin A. Intestinal diseases were also very prevalent among slaves. Anemia caused by low iron and rickets caused by low vitamin D were all problems we now know are caused by malnutrition. Because losing a slave to disease is very costly and slave-holders did not want their slaves to die early, slave hospitals were created but could not save slaves that were probably dying from heart diseases and cholesterol problems. Slave-holders did not realize the reason their slaves got sick or died early was because of their diet. Years of malnutrition then caused runaways to have extremely weak immune systems and as conditions were very hard on the Underground Railroad, many did not make it, including the sister of Henry Parker. Henry Parker had stopped in Michigan to take up work, leaving his family a few miles away from him. As he worked long hours, two griefs hit him. The news of his sister dying and the incurable state of his eyes. And at the same time, Henry Parker still needed to earn money to continue on his long journey and feed his family.

The journey to reach a final destination was not a short one. Once runaways went through the Underground Railroad with the help of strangers, they were not done. If they were still in the United States, they could be captured and returned under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Also, the stockholders, those who donated clothing to runaway slaves, were not paying the entire way. Once they crossed into Northern territory, freed slaves were on their own. They would find sympathetic people in the North, but now they had to rely on themselves. Often, these freed slaves had medical expenses as well and were forced to take up work on the way. The jobs that were available to them were treacherous. Many of these former slaves found

themselves stuck working long shifts many hours a week to support their family. Sometimes they would keep these jobs for years before they were able to travel further North according to their original intention. Some came this far only to die before they could reach their final destination. Former slaves could take jobs that were very similar to what they were doing in the South. They would work on farms or perform other menial jobs. Henry Parker had to work very hard,

During the cold winter I was compelled to get up at four A. M., and feed eighteen head of cattle; and the snow was about two feet deep, and remained on the ground for nine weeks; and, also, fourteen head of horses and one hundred and fifty head of sheep, and had to be preparing wood to run two fires, and this wood had to be prepared from trees that were standing in the woods, two miles from the house; and besides this, my regular work.²³

Parker had a dream of moving father north but with the little pay that he was receiving and the mounting bills he had to pay, it seemed as if he would never reach his final destination of which he dreamed and prayed for so long. But Parker does eventually settle down enough to have been able to write this autobiography. Throughout his journey, Parker never gave up hope.

Slaves were very religious and perhaps religion helped inspire hope for them to keep moving on. The fleeing slave, Henry Parker, had a strong devotion to the will of God and perhaps accomplished his task to cross the Ohio River and bring his family to freedom in the North through his strong belief that God was protecting him. He often referred to the “Almighty God” and made faithful comments like “Travel on, believers! we will get to heaven by and by.”

24

²³ Parker., “Autobiography of Henry Parker,” 4.

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

Africans that were brought on the Atlantic Slave trade had their own religion and did not believe in Christianity. It is hard to believe that Southern plantation owners would teach slaves Christianity for many of their very practices contradicted Christianity. But in 1780, Methodists began to openly criticize slavery and slave holders. They deemed it "contrary to the laws of God, man and nature."²⁵ They also promised to excommunicate any slaveholder. The Methodists wanted to see black people be taught Christianity. But plantation owners resisted until Nat Turner's rebellion. A major push to educate slaves about Christianity happened after the rebellion of Nat Turner in 1831 because some white Southerners feared that slaves might take revenge on them. They feared for their lives, their investments, and the civil peace. White Southerners thought that if they converted slaves to Christianity, slaves might learn to turn the other cheek. They believed teaching slaves Christianity might give slaves the strength to overcome old memories, assimilate, and forgive.²⁶ For these reasons, even Southern states passed laws to address the "needs"²⁷ of the souls of black folks in the 1800's. There were organized evangelistic efforts on plantations to let slaves congregate for religious purposes. Preachers and planters gave lessons of Christianity and some plantation owners built "praise houses".²⁸ Under white supervision they allowed black preachers to proclaim the Lord's name. Reverend Charles Colcock Jones, a large slaveholder, created a Christian primer for slave leaders to train other slaves in Christianity in a manner that discouraged any uprising, insurrection, or

²⁵ Dr. Matthews, "Lecture Twelve: The Religion of the Slaves," Independent Website, 1995-1996; available from <http://www.wfu.edu/~matthetl/perspectives/twelve.html>; accessed April 30, 2009

²⁶ Davis Swartz, "The African American: A Journey from Slavery to Freedom: Nat Turner," Long Island University, 2000, available from <http://www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/aaslavry.htm#turner>; accessed April 30, 2009

²⁷ Matthews, "Lecture Twelve: The Religion of the Slaves."

²⁸ Ibid.

revolution.²⁹ But whites were far from letting blacks join them in their Churches. Even in the North, the Methodist Churches were not letting any black practitioners to worship in their churches. The creation of a black church was necessary and in 1816, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was formed by free Northern blacks.³⁰ This Church helped blacks that were sick and in need. African Americans were either still in the process of fleeing slavery or already free but too poor to eat and feed their families. Many were living on the streets and had no where to turn to. The African Methodist Episcopal Church opened its doors for believers to pray and also created a relief community for African Americans. Many came to church to make friends with people similar to them and the Church was a positive place of support and community. The fugitive slave this autobiography, Henry Parker, came here for help when he was most desperate. Elder Warren, who gave Parker "spiritual and temporal goods," might have been the pastor for this Church. Parker, when blind, got his money to go see an eye doctor with contributions from the congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Pontiac, Michigan.

Our nation has a mixed history of great and shameful eras. The autobiography of Henry Parker represents a very shameful era in United States history when a man had to go through many hurdles and hardships, face one tragedy after another, simply to attain a natural right. The desire for freedom and equality is a feeling, I believe, every human is born with and would attempt to attain at any cost. As we see in the case of Henry Parker, who ultimately achieves his dream to be free, freedom is human nature. But Henry Parker did not achieve his dream without paying the price of losing his family members that he worked so hard to save and also losing his

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

eye sight. This analysis of the era that created a story like that in the autobiography of Henry Parker should be used as a mirror for our society today. If we can reflect and learn anything today from the struggle of Henry Parker is that as much as we suppress the rights and freedom of a group today, the more the group will struggle. Other groups today like Arabs, Mexicans, and Gays are being treated as subhumans in our society. One group, Gays, have been struggling to gain equal rights in our country for decades. Many Americans come to the street to oppose and mock these people. As we read the autobiography of Henry Parker, we must say to ourselves that we do not want our children reading autobiographies of the same manner about us. I believe that our society should not attempt to infringe on any groups' rights. It is important to allow everyone to be equal, no matter what race, religion, sex, or orientation they are. This is what America was suppose to be about but has not completely adhered to it yet.