

Chapter XV

SLAVERY
ANTI-SLAVERY
THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Slavery

Before we censure too severely the founders of colonies in America for tolerating slavery and engaging in the slave trade, we should consider the social and political conditions in the world at that time. Up to the time when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, there was no country where slavery was not sanctioned by law. Emory Washburn, LL.D., in a Lowell Lecture delivered on January 22d, 1869 said, "Not only was slavery then prevailing in England, and the trade in slaves held to be an established branch of commerce, but this had been true of every nation of whose affairs we have any knowledge."

The slave system concerned not alone the negro race; captives of wars and those who sold themselves could be reduced to slavery. Poor debtors were sold for servants with a stipulated time limit. The sale of Indian captives at the close of King Philip's War seems not to have disturbed the consciences of our forefathers but before this time and thirty-four years before Matthew Boomer settled here,¹ there was evidently some moral aversion to slavery, for in the "Bodies of Liberties", a code of laws which the General Court of Massachusetts adopted in 1641 is found under Article 91, the following: — "There shall never be any Bond Slavery, Villinage or Captivity amongst us unless it be lawful Captives taken in Just Wars, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us. *And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God, established in Israel concerning such persons doth morally require.* This exempts none from servitude who shall be judged thereto by authority."

In the eighteenth century, Newport was the principal slave market in New England. It is not likely that many negro slaves were owned within

¹ Fascicle I, p. 85.

the Fall River area for it continued to be thinly settled and negro slaves would be of little use for the labor required, even if the settlers could afford to purchase them. Then again the Quakers and others who came from the middle class of English folk with a puritan background would be generally opposed to the system.

It is true that economic factors did not foster slavery in Massachusetts but there was a sincere and ever increasing aversion to the system. Before the Revolution, no laws could be enacted contrary to those of the mother country. In 1780, Massachusetts, freed from all such restraint, in adopting its constitution set free all slaves within its borders. "A decision of the Supreme Court in 1783 settled the status of the black, and made him the equal of a white citizen."

While few slaves were held in this region, a goodly number were held in Rhode Island. In 1774, there were over 3700 slaves in that colony, "when the General Assembly ordained for the future no negro or mulatto slave should be brought into the colony, and that all previously enslaved persons on becoming residents of Rhode Island should obtain their freedom." Newport and Bristol were important shipping ports and were largely engaged in the slave trade. It has been reported that one sea captain of Bristol netted as much as \$27,600 on a single voyage.

Anti-Slavery The Underground Railroad

Anti-slavery agitation in Fall River is best told by the book entitled "Two Quaker Sisters" from the diary of Elizabeth Buffum Chace. Her father was Arnold Buffum, who lived in Smithfield, R. I. and whose family originally came from Salem, Massachusetts. Elizabeth Buffum Chace was born in 1806 and after her marriage to Samuel B. Chace lived in Fall River for a few years. Her sister, Lucy B. Lovell, often mentioned in the diary, married Nehemiah Lovell, a Baptist minister. They also lived in Fall River for a short period of time. Another sister Sarah married Nathaniel B. Borden. She was a lifelong resident of Fall River. All in the family were abolitionists. Arnold Buffum sought the abolition of slavery by peaceful methods and all his family followed his views. The Quaker meeting at Smithfield did not oppose slavery and when Arnold Buffum was called before them, the Society disowned him on account of his views and his daughters were similarly disowned by another Society for the same reason.

Elizabeth B. Chace and her husband moved to Valley Falls from Fall River in 1839 but the exodus of slaves through the underground railroad

was already in operation. Soon after 1839 the Buffums maintained what was called a "station" on the railroad at their home at Valley Falls (now Central Falls, R. I.).

By 1851, after the Fugitive Slave law had come into effect, a very large percentage of the negro colony in New Bedford left by the underground route for Canada. This exodus was through Fall River where forwarding stations had been actively in operation since 1830. Fall River became an important "way station" although it was only one in a great number of "railroad systems" through which escape was possible. Fall River was ideally adapted for this purpose because it was not on any direct line and slaves who were able to escape by sea from southern ports to New Bedford and towns on the cape were "doubled back" to Fall River as a means of concealment. From Fall River they were shipped to Canada by way of Valley Falls and Worcester. Those who assisted in their escape were called "conductors". As early as 1840, Arnold Buffum was prominent in this railroad system.

The Buffums, the Chaces, the Robesons and many others, mostly Quakers, had much to do with the Fall River station. Robert Adams, a Quaker sympathizer, was the best known conductor of the underground trains in Fall River, though neither he nor Mrs. Adams were members of the Quaker meeting. Mrs. Chace's sister Sarah maintained a place of concealment for the slaves when they arrived in Fall River and cared for them until they were ready to proceed to Valley Falls. A very prominent Quaker, Israel Buffinton, was very active in this work. Mr. Buffinton kept three horses, two of which were in continuous use in the railroad service between Fall River and the next depot. His son Benjamin Buffinton, who was a very prominent figure in Fall River, helped in the transportation of the fugitives. In the present building of the Fall River Historical Society there is a secretly concealed panel and stairway which led to the basement room in which the slaves were hidden. At that time the house was the property of William Hill, a Quaker.²

² See page 41.

