

SLAVERY IN GRANT COUNTY WISCONSIN

By Dennis Wilson –September 3, 2011



When we talk about the scourge of slavery in the history of this country we tend to view it as a strictly southern phenomenon. I often hear people from Wisconsin say; “we had nothing to do with slavery”. Nothing could be further from the truth, for Wisconsin was home to a number of slaves and a large portion of them lived in bondage in this area. Some of the most revered founders of Grant County were from the south. George Wallace Jones, John Rountree, James R. Vineyard, and Rev. Samuel Mitchell and his family were all southerners. Jones, who became a Senator, was from Missouri and held slaves at Sinsinawa Mound. He referred to himself as a "Democrat in politics and a southerner by instinct." Vineyard, who shot and murdered his friend and fellow Territorial Senator Charles C. P. Arndt in typical southern fashion for the affront of a slap in the face, was born in Kentucky. Military men from the south often brought slaves with them to help in the barracks of the northwest frontier, as you can discover by reading Juliette Kinzie’s excellent book “*Wau-Bun; The Early Day in the Northwest*”. The earliest settlers came from the south via the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Only later, with the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes open for travel, and the trails from Ohio cleared of hostile natives, did the Yankees from New York and New England come.

In the book ‘Negro Slavery in Wisconsin’ John Nelson Davidson writes that Jones came “from St. Genevieve, Missouri, to what is now Wisconsin. Here from 1828 until 1844 he made his legal residence at Sinsinawa Mound. Thither it was, as I have said, that he brought slaves, "a dozen or fifteen," according to his own recollection. Ten is the number of his "family" as reported in the Territorial census of 1836. Others reported slaves that year; he did not. Yet some of the ten, it is almost certain, were Negroes who had not then asserted their legal right to freedom.” It was one of Jones’s slaves who was the plaintiff in a lawsuit for back wages (and a tacit acknowledgement of his freedom) in 1838. This slave, referred to as “old yellow-black Paul” was denied his claim by a jury more interested in viewing a wolf fight than holding out for the petitioners’ freedom. The story can be found in the history of Grant County, page 484, as told by Free Williams, foreman of that jury, and is called “Graham’s Wolf Fight”.

We have the Rountree and Mitchell families from Virginia via Kentucky and many more from those territories. Major John Rountree’s wife Mary Grace Mitchell, daughter of Rev. Samuel Mitchell, had several brothers who were itinerant Methodist ministers. One of these, James Mitchell was, as his father Samuel, a minister in the Platteville Church, and the surrounding area. His wife received as a wedding present two slave girls. He was a member of the Rock river conference of the Methodist Episcopal church, and was charged with “Unchristian, Immoral, and Inhuman Conduct” in regard to his “sending from free territory two colored girls into a slave state and leaving them there to be treated as slaves, and neglecting to care for them, and permitting them to be reduced again to slavery, or treated as slaves.

Outraged, Rev Edward Mathews, working for the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society and knowing that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had specifically prohibited slavery in Wisconsin ("There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory") made appeals to Gov. Dodge, a former slave owner, and Judge

Charles Dunn (another native of Kentucky) who did nothing at all against Mitchell or other slave owners Mathews had identified in southwest Wisconsin and Galena who possessed slaves or had kidnapped negroes and shipped them south into slavery for profit.

This account is given in A. W. Kellogg in "A Brief Historical Sketch of the First Methodist Church of Milwaukee": "In 1844, seventeen years before the secession in the nation, the Church was split in two on this question (slavery) and there was no power of armed coercion to prevent. James Mitchell's wife... had two slave girls, family servants in the home, and they followed the Mitchell family fortunes to the free territory of Illinois and Wisconsin. As the times grew hot and the lines tightly drawn, Conference called him to account for permitting his wife to hold her servants and refusing to emancipate them, and at one session, after a hot controversy, suspended him, and at the next, I think, expelled him, or he withdrew and joined the Church South in Arkansas."



Rev. Isaac Erving Heaton told J. N. Davidson that Mitchell sent his slaves back to the south and slavery; "I have these evidences that Mr. Mitchell sent his slaves back: "First. This was confidently reported. But I think it occurred after I left that region, probably about

1842. "Second. I presume it was never disputed. Certainly I never heard of any such pretense. "Third. The slave dealer to whom Mitchell consigned these slave girls at St. Louis did not forward them to their destination. An anti-slavery paper was published I think at Prairieville (Waukesha). Wisconsin. I cannot now recall the name of either the paper or the editor. You can ascertain these. The legal owner of these slaves (I think in Virginia) inserted in a paper (printed I think at St. Louis) an article at some length, explaining the case, and complaining of the fraud."

Davidson also records the testimony of John Meyers of Platteville who stated that he remembered a slave woman "Aunt Rachel" at Major Rountree's home.

In the book "The Life and Labours of the Rev. W. E. Boardman" his wife tells of his time as a Presbyterian Missionary in Potosi. She relates an incident that happened in "this wicked country":

"This was a lawless place, and there were terrible forms of sin with which to contend. Though Wisconsin was not a slave state, men, in spite of the law, held slaves in bondage, and they were so hardened in heart that it did not seem possible to approach them. The pro-slavery feeling was very strong; many people having come from the south, full of prejudice against abolition. Potosi was accessible to the slave holder; he would come up the Mississippi river bringing his slaves with him, and, in this lawless place, be protected by public sentiment which is often stronger than law.



“One case grieved us greatly, that of a Mulatto woman who took in washing. She was most valuable in the community, where it was almost impossible to get anything of the kind done. She had been converted, and was a great favorite with all whom she served. Hearing that her master was going back to the South, she became alarmed, and we had promised to protect her from this cruel man. He however, seeing that she was afraid, told her that she could be quiet; he should not take her back with him. Thus he managed to lull our fears, and then carried his point in this way. He waited until the steamer was at the landing, then took the mother and children by night, and driving furiously down the river, held a whip over her head, threatening to kill her *and his own children* if either uttered a word.



Thus she was dragged back into the darkness of slavery with her little ones, and to what, God only knows! What notes of gratitude rise from the hearts of those who have witnessed even a very little of the evils of slavery, knowing it is done with; Praise the Lord!”

How abolitionists’ were treated in Grant is further evidence of our historic complicity with slavery. Rev. Edward Mathews, in his account “An Abolitionist in Territorial Wisconsin” gives many accounts of being doused with water, pelted with eggs, and physically threatened when he spoke against slavery. He was run out

of Fairplay, Potosi, and Lancaster by mobs after his speeches. He said; “My design was to continue my efforts for the liberation of the slaves held in western Wisconsin: to do this I must labour among Vineyard’s constituents; and if he could take the life of a fellow legislator with impunity (he was tried for manslaughter and acquitted), it would not be surprising if the mob should count on the same impunity in taking the life of an anti-slavery lecturer. I felt confident, however, that the work would go on, and if my life were sacrificed. Providence would raise up and send into the field more labourers”.

Meeting William Schuyler Hamilton, the son of Alexander Hamilton was an all too familiar episode of abuse as Mathews related; “I returned to the grand jury room after dinner and while waiting outside, William Schuyler Hamilton, a son of Alexander Hamilton, who fell in a duel with Burr, came up to me. He is a small man with a cadaverous complexion, and has a sharp, shrill voice. The editor of the *Genius of Liberty* said of him, “He often boasts of his descent, without considering how great that descent is.” The following dialogue occurred between us:

“I understand you are an abolitionist.”

“I am.”

“Now, if you don’t leave the town at once you shall be tarred and feathered, and I will be the leader of a mob to do it.”

“I think I can endure it.””



Not all immigrants from the south followed so tawdry an allegiance to the slave powers. Judge J. T. Mills of Lancaster, though born in Kentucky, was an ardent opponent of slavery. When the mob threatened Mathews, Mills stood by him. Mathews wrote: "When I commenced the second lecture at the Court House the audience was small, the window being open, some one threw a stone at me from the outside—which struck me with great force on the leg. On coming out the mob came near me and poured forth a torrent of mingled oaths, abuse, obscenity, and blasphemy. It was horrible, and indicated the depth of that depravity without which slavery cannot be tolerated in any community. Mr. J. T. Mills, who assisted me in the debate at Potosi, kindly invited me to his house. I digress a moment to record with gratification that Mr. Mills is now a Judge." As Mr. Mills and myself walked along, large stones, thrown by the mob rumbled by without striking either of us. After conversing some little time on the overawing influence of the slave power, I retired to bed, but could not sleep on account of music and singing, which I supposed proceeded from a public-house near by. It seemed, however, so near the front of the house that I got up, and opened my room door to ascertain the cause. To my surprise, Mr. Mills was standing as guard at the door. He said, "Don't be alarmed, no one shall touch you in my house!" The music and singing were from the mob who had gathered round the street door. The serenading of Negro songs having ceased, a young man came into the house, who stated that the performers had gone to "the groggery to liquor up, and that they designed to bring down a cannon to fire off." We put up all the windows to prevent the panes of glass from being broken by the report. A cannon belonging to Mr. Banfils was brought, but the men were so intoxicated that they had some difficulty in firing it; at last they did so several times to their satisfaction. One of them then boasted that he had been engaged in the scrape when Lovejoy was killed, and wished to be engaged in just such another scrape."



Elijah Lovejoy was killed in Alton, Illinois protecting the warehouse where his printing press was hidden

"As they were proposing to enter the house and take me, I thought it prudent to retire to the house of a friend at some distance. Mrs. Mills was as calm and self possessed as her husband. I wished them both good night, and opening the window of a back-room on the ground floor, escaped into the garden and, unobserved by the mob, crossed the garden and reached a grove of trees. By a circuitous route I reached the house of Mr. Mahood, a Virginian, and an abolitionist." When I left him he said, "The people in Lancaster are anxious to sell their town lots, but I shall tell them that if they act in this disorderly way, no one will buy their town lots." You can read more about the frail but courageous Judge Mills in Jon Angeli's blog "The Grant County Historian" at:

<http://www.grantcountyhistorian.com/2004/02/judge-jt-mills-part-3.html>

In the book "*Slavery in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1787-1865*" By Christopher P. Lehman the capstone is placed upon Grant County's early history of disinterest in human slavery: "By 1840 the culture of slavery in Wisconsin had dramatically shifted away from its military roots. No slaves appeared in that year's census for Crawford County, which meant that soldiers no longer kept bondservants there. Now Grant County was the undisputed center of slavery in the territory. As a result nearly all of the slaveholders possessed considerable wealth. The census recorded Edward Laffor, John Rountree, Jonathan Craig of Virginia, and Thomas Parish as the county's masters that year."