

## THE ARREST OF JOHN AND JIM LEWIS.

This account of the arrest of two African American men in Plymouth Meeting is taken from Hiram Corson's; Abolitionists of Montgomery County and the Work done by them in Favor of giving freedom to the slaves of the Southern States.

It was written in 1894 by him as the last remaining abolitionist of Montgomery County.

### THE ABOLITIONISTS OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY.

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In order to have a better understanding of some parts of their history yet to follow, I may state that they were brothers, the slaves of Christian Miller, who lived a few miles beyond Harper's Ferry, in Virginia. At 3 o'clock Sunday morning, March 12, 1826, John, Jerry and Wesley Sinclair, their names then, and Anderson, a trusted friend, placed their heads together in their home at Christian Miller's and swore a solemn oath that they would not surrender to any eight men or a less number who might attempt to capture them. They would have started much earlier in the night, but that Jerry and Anderson lived 12 miles away and could not reach there sooner. The sister-in-law of the Sinclair's (widow of their eldest brother), a free woman, had provided John, who was the leading spirit, with a ham, two roasted chickens and a bag of biscuits. Armed with knives, pistols and corn-cutters, they started for the nearby Shenandoah river, where they found a small batteau. In it they floated downstream a mile to where it joins the Potomac; crossed it to the Maryland side, left the boat and started for Hagerstown. The father and mother of the three Sinclair's' lived in Hagerstown and were free. It was about break of day when they were near Hagerstown, and were anxious to see the old folks, but were fearful of detection, being too near the home they had left, so kept on at a rapid pace all day, then rested all night in a woods a few miles above Hagerstown. After the first day they traveled at night and hid during the day. As they knew nothing of the geography of the country, and in travel by night, they made a zig-zag, tortuous course, but finally reached Harrisburg. Without stopping then they took a more easterly course, came down through Norristown and finally brought up at the old Brant Tavern-the Seven Stars tavern in Plymouth township. Here was the first place that they inquired for work. Then they stopped at the store of Harman Yerkes, I have been told by Mrs. Morgan R. Wills, his granddaughter, who referred them to Mr. Peter Dager, also grandfather of Mrs. Wills, both of whom were anxious for their safety and encouraged them, and probably were instrumental in getting them work. It was a cold, disagreeable Sunday, and they were doubtless warmed and fed at Mr. Dager's. Afterward they got employment. Anderson with David Wilson: Ben, now John Lewis, with Hughes Bell, son-in-law of Ezra Comfort, all Friends. After a short time, Wesley Sinclair-now changed to Jim Lewis hired with Solomon Jones, living near Frankford.

Ben, now John Lewis, after working one year with Hughes Bell, on the place now owned by Daniel Williams, engaged to drive team for Samuel Davis, a neighbor; stayed there one year, then hired with Peter Dager. Here he had a good time and became well acquainted with the colored people for miles around. Among these friends was one, an enemy in disguise, from his own master's neighborhood. John loved him and shared bed and board with him whenever he needed them.

In the Independent, a weekly newspaper printed in Norristown some 20 years ago, there is, beginning on June 17, 1869, and running through eight numbers, a detailed account of the arrest of John and Jim Lewis, from which I will copy, not only to show that fiendish transaction but also to show the power slavery had in the Northern states. In a century hence it will scarcely be believed there ever was a time when a man could be seized by slave masters and their tools, bound and taken before Justices of the Peace, and Associate Judges. and there members of the Society of Friends would send him back as a slave.

#### THE HISTORY OF JOHN LEWIS; Or, AN AMERICAN SLAVE AND HIS STRUGGLES FOR FREEDOM.

One cold morning in February 1829, Ben and another colored man named George Sullivan, were thrashing with the dead thunder of alternate flails in Peter Dager's barn, in Whitmarsh township. On the morning in question the old gentleman was at a neighboring funeral. Ben had stopped a moment to clap his hands against his sides, right and left, to warm them up, when a man entered the barn door, whom he recognized as a Constable named Mat Haas. The officer asked, "Which is John Lewis?" Ben answered "Dat's de name of dis chile-what's yer will?"

Haas spoke: "I have a warrant for your arrest, sued out by a girl in Germantown." Poor Ben thought there must be some mistake. But he concluded after a moment's deliberation that perhaps he had better go quietly with the Constable and confront his fair accuser. "You had better come over to 'Squire Shoemaker's and try to settle it," proceeded the valiant Constable.

"Neber fear to meet anyone, man or woman," answered Ben, and he threw down his flail, and turned to put on his coat. When he had his great arms outstretched to drive them into the sleeves of his jacket, the Constable at his back flew upon him, crying "Help! help! help!" when in rushed the aiders and abettors from every door of the barn, near which they had carefully concealed themselves.

Then the terrible situation flashed upon him, and in an instant he resolved to resist unto death. He kicked and struck and fought as never man fought; but ten men overpowered him, bound him with ropes and carried him out to the hack. Here was a sight to sicken the human heart! Covered with blood, bound in fetters, and threatened with knives and pistols, and, worse than all, with thoughts of slavery and the scourge of an infuriated master; but what added to his startled condition of sudden surprise was when thrown into the wagon to find already there, a passive captive to the slavecatchers, his brother Westley, in charge of his old master, Christian Miller! How had Miller found Westley? How had he found either of them? Had they not been secure for years in this secluded place, with their names changed and their history unknown? How had Christian Miller found them and how had they brought the two brothers together again who for years had lived miles asunder? All these questions Rashed instantly across Ben's mind, and drawing his great legs up as he lay upon his back, with one gigantic surge he drove the whole hind part of the carriage out, and kicked his great heels out through the very top of the hack. But the guardsmen mounted him and the word "go" was given. Out the road to Yerkes' corner, Harmanville as it is now known, down through the tollgate to Bisbing's (now Kirkner's) tavern as hard as they could drive went the gang-Ben "kicking up ahind and afore" and screaming murder at the top of his voice.

It seems that Christian Miller and his gang had arrived at Bisbing's tavern, at Barren Hill, the evening before the arrest, and had made inquiry as to their bearings and distances, so as to make no mistake in the morning. After breakfast they started and driving up as far as the tollgate they stopped to procure

warrants of arrest for the fugitives, Westley and Benjamin, of Jonathan Shoemaker, a Justice of the Peace, then residing at the corner near the toll-gate, on the Ridge road, where the road turns in to Dr. Hiram Corson's residence. Whilst waiting here one of the Loudon county men saw Westley coming up the pike on his way to pay a visit to Ben at Dager's. It was a most wonderful coincidence! For Westley had been sick for some time past and had not seen Ben for months. Why should he happen to come on that day? Why should the Fates throw him right into the claws of the kidnappers without any efforts on their part to entrap him? But, perhaps, as the sequel will show, it was all for the best.

Westley was recognized by his peculiar walk. They hailed him, and he fell an easy prey to their clutches. He asked them what they intended to do with him and they said "carry you safely back home." This was at the tollgate, almost in sight of the spot where Ben was unconsciously flinging his flail and imagining himself as safe as St. John. Oh, if he had known it! How he would have rallied an army of rescue, and not only snatched his brother from their fiendish grasp but driven the slaveholders like chaff before the wind from the sacred soil of old Montgomery! But he did not know it.

When Ben was being borne from the barn amid his screams of murder and his desperate efforts of resistance, the workmen were hurrying to and from the house and would soon have come to his relief, but Mat Haas and his crowd hurried away with lightning speed. The workmen despatched a messenger for Peter Dager. The kidnappers had found him on the road, but Mr. Dager did not know that Ben was up to them at Bisbing's tavern, he demanded that the colored man should be taken to Norristown for trial; and although Miller and his party made many excuses, they had a freeman now to deal with, and one who was able to defend himself. Christian Miller feigned ignorance of the English language. and spoke in German; but finding that Peter Dager was perfectly at home in German and could swear as loud in Dutch as Miller could, the scared slaveholder passed at length an English accent suited to his tongue, dropped his German, and drove towards Norristown under guard of Peter Dager and his friends. By this time large crowds of quarrymen and neighbors had assembled, and no such excitement was ever known in Whitemarsh since the days of the Revolutionary War. The claimants were forced to throw the prisoners in jail for safekeeping.

It may be asked how did Christian Miller know the whereabouts of his slaves? The answer is, through the treachery of a free colored man, formerly of Loudon county, but who was in Philadelphia, and meeting Ben came out on one occasion to share his hospitality and friendship. Oh. ingratitude, ingratitude! Yet how often are falsehood and treachery, backbiting and deceit, the cause of the most fearful woes and misery!

The trial at Norristown took place before Judge Jones, without jury, as none was required by the law, as it then stood. The short notes of the Judge give some idea of the spirit and energy with which the great contest for the captives was fought by the lawyers; but they scarcely give an adequate idea of the legal acumen and depth of learning for which the counsel engaged were so eminent in their day.

Those notes of the hearing, on file in the Prothonotary's office, show that it took place on February 6th, 1829, before Hon. Richard B. Jones, Assistant Judge of the courts. The counsel for the claimant were Wm. B. Powel, B. Bartholomew and Thomas M. Jolly, Esquires. The counsel for the prisoners were John Freedley and J. W. Rowland, Esquires. The warrant of the 'Squire, issued on application of plaintiff claiming the: prisoners as his slaves, was offered in evidence to show the authority for the arrest. Testimony of four witnesses was heard on part of the claimant, identifying the prisoners, and proving them to be the property of the claimant, that they with two other slaves had escaped from their masters

in Virginia, and that a reward of \$100 each, \$400 in all, had been offered by hand-bills and advertisements for their recapture.

Their arrest and the manner of their arrest was described in detail. All this evidence was taken under objections, and with much legal sparring. Four witnesses came forward to give such testimony as they could on behalf of the prisoners.

At the argument the plaintiff's attorney cited the act of Congress of 1793, and the law of Pennsylvania of 1826, authorizing the arrest of fugitive slaves in this state, and setting forth the legal proceedings by which they should be returned to their masters in other states.

The prisoners' counsel made such defense as they could, but without avail.

The Judge decided that the said Westley and Benjamin were fugitive slaves from the state of Virginia, and that they owed service or labor to Christian Miller, and he therefore issued his decree authorizing said Christian Miller to return his slaves to Virginia, from whence they had fled.

After the trial was over and the poor fellows had been adjudged the property of other men, according to law, they all met at the hotel, then standing at the corner of Main and DeKalb streets, now Baker & Grady's drug store. Here were Christian Miller, James Doyle and Joseph Mead, of Virginia; Peter Dager, George Egbert, Thomas Egbert, Samuel Davis, George Cress, Nathan Detterer, Morris Righter, Harman Yerkes, Joseph Shepard and others of the vicinity of the tragedy, who showed some signs of fight and indications of a rescue. Ben's old master asked him for the wages he had earned while playing freeman. Ben did not like the idea of handing over his hard-earned wages, and consequently he told a lie, and said he had spent his money, although he had about \$250. gold and silver watches, a gun, and good clothes.

Peter Dager could not stand the thought of allowing them to return to slavery, and John Lewis would have died rather than allow himself to wear again the galling yoke of bondage. What was to be done? Peter Dager knew what was to be done and he did it. He promptly bargained for John Lewis at the price or sum of \$600, and Ezra Comfort bought the brother for \$300. After the bargain had been made all parties parted friends. Mr. Dager told John he might have twenty years to buy himself in, but John went to work with the old gentleman, and in short order the debt was liquidated, and John Lewis was a free man.

Miller told John that if he had not been so violent when captured he would not have been so hard on him. but he made him a small present. John Lewis soon married, and with his wife and children lived many years on a little lot near Spring Mill, which they bought of Isaac Williams, respected by all who knew them. James Lewis, the brother, lived on the adjoining lot, bought by him from the same Mr. Williams, whilst Christian Miller and the infamous slave laws have passed away forever.