

The case of Isaac Brown: fugitive slave

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Résumé de l'article

La riche histoire de l'Ontario offre peu de sujets aussi fascinants d'un point de vue de l'intrigue et du drame humain que celle du « Chemin de fer souterrain ». Une épopée particulière qui illustre ce fait est celle d'Isaac Brown, commençant dans une plantation du Maryland et se poursuivant dans une vente aux enchères à la Nouvelle-Orléans, puis dans un tribunal de l'état indépendant de la Pennsylvanie, à Philadelphie. Rien n'est sans doute plus émouvant que la séparation d'Isaac Brown, sous la menace du fouet d'esclavagistes, de sa famille, ou que, plus tard, leur réunion. À cette époque, les circonstances faisaient de l'ouest du Canada le seul lieu possible où sa famille pourrait trouver paix et liberté au terme d'une longue odyssée.

The case of Isaac Brown: fugitive slave*

by Bryan Prince

Few topics in North America's rich history rival that of the Underground Railroad in terms of human drama and intrigue. Long thought to be primarily an American story, the importance to Canada's past – and particularly to Ontario's – has more recently been recognized. Although the number of fugitives from slavery who overcame tremendous odds and safely reached Canada can never be accurately known, many contemporary observers as well as present day historians believe that figure to be between thirty and forty thousand. Although runaway slaves fled to all parts of British North America, by far the largest number came to the province of Canada West (eventually renamed Ontario). Contrary to popular belief, many escaped unaided. Reaching deeply within, they found the courage to overcome their fears, the stamina to overcome physical and emotional exhaustion and the ingenuity to overcome the unknown. Many others, no less resourceful and determined, received the help of evolving

networks of sympathizers who became known as conductors and stationmasters. Those who safely arrived in Ontario brought with them their experiences and their dreams, and applied them to building new lives. The actions of the former slaves as well as those who supported their quest for freedom would have a great impact on the evolving character of the province.

Far too many of their stories have been lost to history. Of necessity, the secrecy that shrouded these episodes dictated that few written records were kept. Tracking the paths of individual slaves has long been both a genealogist's and historian's nightmare. Afforded no more rights than barnyard animals or inanimate personal possessions, families were divided at public sale, by the will of their master and by court order. Generally denied a surname in the written records, it is easy to confuse or to lose them completely. Even runaway slave advertisements that were scattered throughout southern newspapers often identified the

* The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Pat Melville, Archivist for the Maryland State Archives and Karen James from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission who generously shared their research on the case of Isaac Brown. A special word of appreciation to Charles Brewer, an historian from Washington D.C. who tirelessly dug for information and provided insight into many American records that most researchers could not have guessed existed. Thank you all.

Abstract

Few topics in Ontario's rich history rival that of the Underground Railroad in terms of human drama and intrigue. One of those individual stories that graphically illustrate that point is that of Isaac Brown. His epic story unfolded through time and place from a Maryland plantation to a New Orleans auction block to a Philadelphia courthouse in the free state of Pennsylvania. The separation from his family at the end of a slave-traders whip and their later tearful reunion stretched the emotions to its extremities. But the times and the circumstances dictated that Canada West would be the only place where this family could find freedom and where this international thriller could peacefully end.

Résumé: *La riche histoire de l'Ontario offre peu de sujets aussi fascinants d'un point de vue de l'intrigue et du drame humain que celle du « Chemin de fer souterrain ». Une épopée particulière qui illustre ce fait est celle d'Isaac Brown, commençant dans une plantation du Maryland et se poursuivant dans une vente aux enchères à la Nouvelle-Orléans, puis dans un tribunal de l'état indépendant de la Pennsylvanie, à Philadelphie. Rien n'est sans doute plus émouvant que la séparation d'Isaac Brown, sous la menace du fouet d'esclavagistes, de sa famille, ou que, plus tard, leur réunion. A cette époque, les circonstances faisaient de l'ouest du Canada le seul lieu possible où sa famille pourrait trouver paix et liberté au terme d'une longue odyssée.*

fugitive only by first name.

Fortunately there are the occasional stories that can be reconstructed by a careful and dogged pursuit of a variety of records. They afford the generations that follow a rich and poignant glimpse at a melancholy chapter of our past. These include court records, newspapers, private correspondence by abolitionists and the occasional public address by elected

officials. County courthouses and state archives in the United States can be treasure troves of information regarding Blacks. They may include registrations for free people of color, manumission documents and wills of owners dictating the distribution of slaves. Occasionally the sale, or the placing of slaves as collateral for a debt, was registered among the deeds and mortgages for land. This was not always the case, as slaves were often considered “chattels” rather than “real property.” Whereas the latter had to be registered to keep a clear title on land, chattel property included livestock, furniture, tools, and other personal belongings that need not be recorded by the county clerk. Nevertheless, some masters wished to have their transactions officially recorded so as to leave no doubt of legal ownership.

The rapidly emerging trend of digitizing primary records is invaluable to the historian. Utilizing these resources can save thousands of hours (and thousands of dollars). One of the most useful is the initiative undertaken by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Their free, word-searchable website “Documenting the American South” contains dozens of slave narratives, many of which are long since out of print. The U.S. Library of Congress also has a very useful website with transcribed, full text primary documents. “American Memory,” as the site is called, is online at <http://>

LOOK AT THIS!

Public Sale

OF LANDS AND SLAVES.

BY virtue of a decree of the Court in Circuit Court, rendered at the September Term, 1838, in the suit in Chancery herein pending—John Samuel's infant heirs against said Samuel's adult heirs, and administrator—I shall, as Commissioner appointed to carry said decree into effect

On Monday, the 11th day of Dec. next,

at the Court House Door, in the town of Frankfort, proceed to sell the following

LANDS AND SLAVES,

(the Lands on a credit of one and two years, and the Slaves on a credit of one year, the purchaser giving bond with good security) viz:

A HOUSE & LOT

in the town of Frankfort, fronting St. Charles Street, and adjoining the Farmer Printing Office.—129 Acres of Land lying in Franklin County, on the waters of Elkhorn, on which, there is a *Tan Yard*.—194 Acres of unimproved Land in said County, on the waters of Sulphur Lick.—A tract or tracts of Land in Owen County, deced to John Samuel, deceased, by the heirs of Thomas Bryan, deceased, (by Commissioner,) under a decree of the Franklin Circuit Court.

SLAVES:

Reuben, aged 45 years; Jerry, aged 40 years; Greenville, aged 38 years; Abraham, aged 15 years; Fleming, aged 10 years; Malinda, aged 20 years; Esther, aged 27 years, and her child, and four other children: Harrison, aged 7 years; Willie, aged 6 years; George, aged 5 years; Jack, aged 1 year; Smith, aged 6 years; Anthony, aged 4 years; Malinda's Abraham, aged 15 years. All of them are likely, and some of the boys have been accustomed to work in a Haggis Factory.

PHILIP SWIGERT, Com'r.

FRANKFORT, NOVEMBER 31, 1838.

A. G. Hodges, Printer.—"Commonwealth" Office.—Frankfort, Ky.

1838 sale poster. Afforded no more rights than personal possessions, slaves were often divided at public sales by the will of their master and by court order. J. Winston Coleman collection, Margaret King Library, University of Kentucky.

1845, in Calvert County in the State of Maryland, where Isaac Brown, his wife Susanna and their large family were enslaved. On that particular autumn evening, Somerville was sitting in his home, reading the newspaper. His young daughter was in the same room playing, as was one of his “servant” girls who was clearing away the supper dishes. (The term “servant” was often used as feeble attempt to put a softer connotation on the stark and harsher word “slave.”) Up to that point, it was an unremarkable autumn evening. However, that was about to come to a dramatic end.

The barrel of a rifle slowly, silently slid onto the sill of an open window. The gun was loaded with large squirrel shot. Although designed to bring down small game, it was potentially lethal to much larger prey. Engrossed in reading his paper, Somerville was oblivious to what was about to befall him. Without warning, the trigger was pulled and the newspaper was instantly shredded in his hands. As it was intended to do, the squirrel shot scattered, striking its target in the shoulder, neck, tongue and side of the head. Although the extent of Somerville’s wounds raised serious fears as to his survival, he would eventually recover.¹

The plantation overseer was imme-

memory.loc.gov. One segment is subtitled “Slaves and the Courts, 1740-1860,” and covers several legal cases that ultimately have an Ontario connection. One such document appearing in this category is the *Case of the Slave Isaac Brown: An Outrage Exposed*. Using this as a foundation, we are afforded the opportunity to reconstruct some of the details of the sufferings and triumphs of the members of one slave family and the anti-slavery activists who aided them.

This story begins on the plantation of Alexander Somerville on 23 October

¹ *Maryland Republican*, New Series – Vol. IV, Number 9, 1 November 1845.

diately sent for following the first report of the gun. As he approached the house a second shot was fired. Fearing that he might be the intended victim, the overseer dove for cover and remained hidden. This delay prevented him from actually seeing the fleeing assailant. There were no other witnesses. If the slave girl who was clearing the table did see anything, she was not talking. Suspicion immediately was placed on her father, Isaac Brown. Somerville shared that same thought as soon as he was able to summon the strength to speak. Perhaps it was not an unreasonable assumption.² For an enraged master bent on revenge and for inhabitants of a country who were ever wary of slave rebellions, reason mattered little.

Isaac Brown had been promised his freedom upon reaching age 35, but the master had reneged on his promise. Fourteen years previously, their master had murdered Brown's brother, who had been engaged to be married and had received Somerville's permission to leave the plantation one Sunday to have the ceremony performed. The brother returned home late the following day. When questioned as to the reason for his tardiness, the groom replied that he had overslept. This led to a heated argument that quickly evolved into violence. The enraged master plunged a dagger into the side of his slave, who died shortly af-

ter. Because Blacks were not allowed to testify against whites in court, and there were no whites present, no charges were laid. These many years later, the master had been shot and Isaac was suspected of being an adherent to the philosophy that "revenge is a dish best served cold." Lucinda Brown, one of Isaac's daughters, was also arrested and held in the Prince Frederick County jail for several days, in the hope that she could be induced to testify against her father. She steadfastly refused to implicate him. Both she and her mother, Susanna, insisted that Isaac was with the two of them, three miles away when the shooting took place.³

Isaac Brown's own sworn statement revealed that being innocent did not necessarily prevent a slave from being severely punished. Trust that had been hard earned over the course of a lifetime disappeared in a moment. And slavery, already a life sentence, had special ways of crushing the heart, as Brown continuously discovered. Described as quiet and dependable, he had been the manager of Somerville's plantation. Concurring with the testimony of his wife and daughter, he reiterated that he was on the plantation which was situated about three miles away from his master's residence when he heard about the assault on Somerville. Upon receiving the news, he immediately grabbed his horse and rode to the scene of the shooting. He was then

² *Ibid.*

³ *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 13 May 1847. Further mention of the killing of Isaac's brother appears in the deposition of Susanna Brown to a Philadelphia court on 10 May 1847. The deposition of Lucinda Brown, dated the same day, gives her recollection of the events. These documents are in the Pennsylvania State Archives.



Slave family in the Carolinas. Library of Congress, 303943. Isaac Brown was sentenced by his owner to being separated from his family and sold to the distant cotton fields of the Lower South where conditions of life were very harsh.

arrested by a large group of armed men and charged with the crime. He was held in jail for thirty-three days. His hands and feet were bound twice, his clothing stripped away and he received 100 lashes from a cow skin whip administered by Sandy Buck, the jail-keeper, on two different occasions within a week's time. Despite this torture, Brown steadfastly maintained his innocence. No evidence could be produced to the contrary. The charges were dropped. Lucinda Brown recalled that even the Governor of Maryland consented that her father should be released, as there was nothing to prove his guilt. A Pennsylvania newspaper reporter

opined, "an acquittal of a colored man in such a region of the world, must be held as a most convincing proof of his innocence."

But the unfortunate slave was released from one prison only to be transported to one far more devastating. Innocence aside, Isaac Brown was sentenced by his owner to the most feared of all punish-

ments – being separated from his family and sold to the distant cotton fields of the Lower South. Conditions there promised to be much harsher. Life expectancy promised to be much shorter. Everything that had any meaning for him was to be left behind.

Brown was first sold for \$500 to the slave trader Samuel Harris. Quickly turning a handsome profit, Harris soon sold Brown to Hope Hull Slatter of Baltimore for \$665.⁴ Slatter was one of the largest and most notorious traders in all of Maryland. His newspaper advertisements trumpeted that he had a "wish to accommodate his Southern friends" and would

⁴ Coverage of Isaac Brown's sworn affidavit appeared in *The Baltimore Sun*, 25 May 1847.

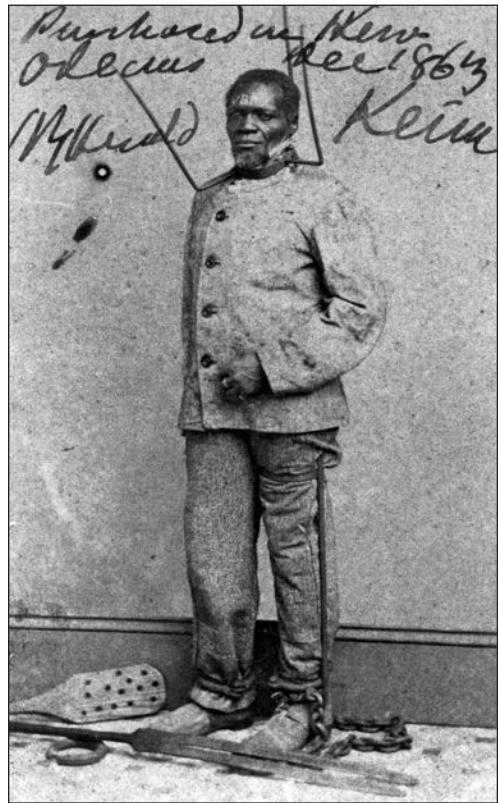
pay the highest prices for slaves who were destined for the New Orleans market. Brown joined others who shared his bleak future in a two-story brick building with barred windows. There was an enclosed courtyard, approximately twenty-five square feet where the slaves were allowed to spend the daylight hours. The brick walls surrounding the yard were about twenty feet high. A large bloodhound helped to serve as a sentry for those held within. They were allowed to play cards or dance to fiddle or banjo music. Occasionally on-lookers would throw pennies to them though the tall stockade gate. However these benign images belied the harsh reality of their situation. According to one of the slaves who had been owned by Slatter, the slaves were rubbed with grease to “brighten” their appearance up for resale. If the behaviour of any male or female was deemed unruly, they were stripped and tied to a bench. While two or sometimes four men held them flat, Slatter would take a broad leather strap and flog them. One hundred lashes was the common punishment. A strap was used rather than a cowskin whip to prevent cutting through the flesh and thereby lessening their resale value.⁵

A northern newspaper reported his first hand observations of Slatter’s slave pen:

About half of them were females, a few of whom had but a slight tinge of African blood in their veins, and were finely formed and beautiful. The men were ironed together,

and the whole group looked sad and dejected... In the middle of the car stood the notorious slave-dealer of Baltimore, Slatter... He had purchased the men and women around him and was taking his departure...this old, grey-headed villain, – this dealer in the bodies and souls of men...

Some of the colored people...were weeping most bitterly. Wives were there to take leave of their husbands, and husbands of their



Wilson Chinn, a slave from Louisiana, shows some of the instruments of torture used to punish slaves. This image was entered, according to Act of Congress, 1863. Library of Congress collection, 303943.

⁵ William Still’s handwritten notes containing the interview with Slatter’s slave, Robert, are in Pennsylvania Abolition Society; “Journal C of Station No. 2 of the Underground Railroad (Philadelphia, Agent William Still) 1852-1857,” in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collections (microfilm).

wives, children of their parents, brothers and sisters shaking hands perhaps for the last time, friends parting with friends, and the tenderest ties of humanity sundered at the single bid of the inhuman slave-broker before them.⁶

Isaac Brown was denied even this heart-wrenching parting with his loved ones, who remained enslaved at his former home in Calvert County, many miles away. In mid-December of 1845, he was placed on board the slave ship *Victorine* along with 169 other slaves and transported to the great southern slave port of New Orleans.⁷ In January 1846, he was sold to a planter in Louisiana. Somehow, almost miraculously, Brown managed to escape and make his way to the free State of Pennsylvania. Assuming the name “Samuel Russell,” he made plans to retrieve his wife and nine children. Not daring to travel there himself, he made the mistake of writing a letter to a confidante in Maryland, using his real name and current address – Isaac Brown, 172 Pine Street, Philadelphia. His hope was to make some clandestine arrangement to bring his family to the north. Tragically, the letter fell into the hands of Alexander Somerville, his old

master. Despite the fact that Somerville had already had his revenge on Isaac and had pocketed the money for his sale, the former owner wanted more. He turned to Governor Pratt of Maryland for assistance.

Maryland and other southern states were becoming increasingly outraged at the blind eye that northern states such as Pennsylvania often turned when it came to returning runaways. They were determined to put an end to this and Isaac Brown was intended to be a precedent-setting case. Governor Pratt wrote to his Pennsylvania counterpart, Governor Shunk, and demanded that Brown be seized and handed over to an agent of the State of Maryland. Shunk acquiesced to this requisition and ordered the arrest in early May of 1847.

The Philadelphia newspapers eagerly covered the story, as did the *Baltimore Sun*. They described the “great excitement” that affected the Black population as a result of Brown’s arrest. The old charges of assault and battery with intent to kill his master were resurrected, as well as the new charge of being a fugitive from justice. Despite being in a free state, under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, it was

⁶ Daniel Drayton, *Personal memoir of Daniel Drayton, for four years and four months a prisoner (for charity's sake) in Washington jail* (Boston: B. Marsh and New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1855). <[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/llst:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(llst008\)\):@@@REF\\$](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/llst:@field(DOCID+@lit(llst008)):@@@REF$)> (accessed on July 30, 2006).

⁷ Ralph Clayton, *Cash For Blood: The Baltimore to New Orleans Slave Trade* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 2002), 174. The original manifests for the *Victorine* and other ships from the port of Baltimore to New Orleans are in the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, U.S. Customs Service Records, Port of New Orleans, Inward Slave Manifests, Record Group 36. Clayton gives a glimpse of Slater’s slave pen and of his business dealings on pages 83-101 of this same book. Further information is in the classic work by Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst Company, 1931; reprint, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 38, 121, 372-75.

perfectly legal to carry a runaway back to the South. Most people seemed to sense that this was a ruse, designed simply to carry Isaac back into slavery.⁸ The charges against Isaac for being a fugitive slave from Maryland were ludicrous because the same people who laid the charges were the people who had earlier been responsible for sending him to Louisiana. The Court of Common Pleas, presided over by Judge Parsons who had issued the writ of *habeas corpus*, was crowded as Brown appeared. Members of The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and several of their female friends joined a large delegation of Blacks crammed into the courtroom.

Qualified members of the abolitionist society served as counsel for the defense. They argued that a gross fraud was being perpetrated and that their governor had not been in possession of the true facts of the case when he issued the warrant. Judge Parsons could not believe that the governor would have acted without being quite certain that the charges against Brown were justified. But in a gesture to ensure that justice was indeed being done, he allowed a recess until all of the facts could be acquired and presented to the state executive. Brown was returned to jail without bail.

Court resumed the following day. The Maryland delegation was well prepared. They had gone to the trouble of bringing

in two different men – both slave traders – to positively identify Brown. One was Hope Slatter's agent who had delivered Brown to the Baltimore slave pen in 1845. The other was Samuel Harris who had purchased Brown from Somerville. Harris had traveled 185 miles to Philadelphia, supposedly just to confirm the identification. It took little imagination to realize that these men were expecting to be handsomely reimbursed for their travel by being given the reward of being able to resell Isaac Brown yet again. The legal maneuvering continued, both in the forefront and behind the scenes. Governor Shunk sought the advice of the Attorney General for Pennsylvania in interpreting the 1793 Act of Congress that concerned the apprehension and delivery of fugitive slaves. The court case began to drag on. Brown was still in jail, nervously awaiting his fate. The Black population of Philadelphia was becoming increasingly agitated. The editor of *The Pennsylvania Freeman* tried to incite its readers into a frenzy of indignation over the trampling of the rights of one of the God's creatures. The principal penny newspapers of Philadelphia, the *Sun* and *Spirit of the Times*, did likewise.⁹

The May 24th edition of the *Baltimore Sun* reported that the Maryland officials had tidied up any loose legal threads and had attempted to prepare a foolproof offence. Her governor again presented a

⁸ Details of the case provided for this portion of the story appeared in many newspapers, including *Baltimore Sun*, 5, 6, 7, 12, 15, 24, 25, May 1847. *The National Era*, (Washington, D.C.) 13, 27 May, 1, 8 July 1847. *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, 6, 13, 20 May, 3 June 1847. *The Star & Banner* (Gettysburg) 28 May 1847.

⁹ *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, 13 May 1847.

requisition to Pennsylvania's governor, with all of the formal requirements of the law addressed. Shunk revoked the previous warrant and instructed Judge Parsons that a new one had been issued. The following day's newspaper reported that something had gone terribly wrong for the prosecution. Parsons apparently saw no need to issue a new arrest warrant because he believed that Brown was still secured behind the prison bars. As the court opened for the day, Judge Parsons sent for the prisoner to be brought forward. But there was no longer a prisoner to bring. Isaac Brown had been released from jail! The vigilant defense lawyers who were working into the wee hours of Saturday night had taken advantage of a small window of opportunity that was contained in an obscure and long disused law to have their client freed.

An angry Parsons ordered that Anthony Freed, who was the keeper of the prison, be committed to jail himself for allowing the prisoner to make his escape. In an almost comic twist, Freed had to take himself into custody. Because of his position as the head of the prison, there was no one else authorized to do it. To ensure that Freed did not allow himself any special liberties with his own liberty, bail was set at \$1,000. Freed protested that he had released the prisoner under the direction of a writ that bore the seal of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. Judge Parsons dismissed this argument, stating that "no court on earth has power

to discharge a prisoner committed under a warrant" from his own court. Parsons admonished poor Freed, who had unwittingly placed himself in the legal cross-fire, saying that he should have consulted with his court before taking any action.

At the same session, Brown's lawyers decided to go on the offensive. Confident in their case and emboldened by their ingenuous defensive tactics that led to the release of their client, they wished to make a further statement that former slaves were not fair game in the State of Pennsylvania. They introduced a civil suit against Alexander Somerville, both of the slave traders who had testified against Brown in court and against John Zell, who was the agent of the Governor of Maryland. The charge was conspiracy. By then, the accused as well as everyone else who followed the case knew that Brown was not a fugitive from the State of Maryland. Of course he actually was a fugitive from Louisiana, the state to which he had been sold. Fortunately that had no relevance to this particular case. Somerville and his cohorts had spent a great deal of money on their bogus case and suddenly found the tables completely turned against them. They knew that the Sheriff was waiting outside the courtroom to place them under arrest. They appealed to Judge Parsons to allow them to leave the courthouse unmolested. Their request was so granted. They prudently used the first public conveyance to return to Maryland¹⁰

¹⁰ *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, 27 May 1847. See also *Public Ledger*, 25 May 1847, as noted in the pamphlet *Case of the Slave Isaac Brown: An Outrage Exposed*.

While all of this was playing itself out, the *Sun* newspaper gleefully suggested that Brown would no doubt be safe in Canada.¹¹ Although the details were not spelled out in the numerous articles that were written, somehow Susanna Brown and all nine of the children had joined their husband and father. Theirs must be a fascinating story all its own.

The case continued to stir a great deal of interest. Newspapers from various parts of the country carried the story in detail. A group of seven or eight individuals from Pennsylvania published twenty thousand copies of an eight-page pamphlet that outlined the history of the case. The anti-slavery office in the city passed them out at no charge. This is the same pamphlet entitled *Case of the Slave Isaac Brown: An Outrage Exposed* that is now online at the Library of Congress website that first drew my attention to this captivating story. However, this pamphlet ends the story with Brown's escape from Pennsylvania. The previously unwritten chapter that led to Canada reveals that the drama had not yet ended.

By the time of the Brown family's escape in 1847, the networks of anti-slavery sympathizers known as the Underground Railroad were becoming more firmly established. Philadelphia, New York City and Boston were important stations for these activities along the

route to Canada. Isaac Brown and family were "passengers" who were beneficiaries of the generosity of spirit that involved "conductors" and "agents" in all of these places. In historical lore there are several well-known heroines and heroes such as Harriet Tubman, William Still and Levi Coffin who devoted themselves to assisting runaways. There were countless others whose contributions go unrecognized. One such person was the Reverend Samuel Young, a Congregationalist minister from Williamsburg, Long Island, who made a tremendous personal sacrifice to accompany the Browns to Canada.

The Brown family had been whisked away from Philadelphia and secretly sent to New York City and thence to Boston where abolitionist friends awaited their arrival. It was in New York that the Reverend Young agreed to travel with these fugitive slaves until they were safely in Canada West. After having passed through Boston, the large group continued on to Detroit where they were met by the Reverend Hiram Wilson who was a missionary to the Blacks in Canada and the co-founder of the Dawn Settlement near what is now Dresden, Ontario. William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of Boston's *The Liberator* and one of the premier leaders of the anti-slavery movement, had written ahead to arrange the meeting with Wilson. On 28 July 1847 after a journey that began in mid-May, the former slaves

¹¹ *Sun* 25 May 1847 and *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, 27 May 1847.

Hiram Wilson to Brother (George) Whipple, 6 August 1847, in the American Missionary Association Papers (Canada). Originals are at Tulane University, New Orleans. Microfilm copies are in the Robarts Library, University of Toronto.

along with the Reverends Young and Wilson reached the Dawn Settlement. On 6 August, an excited Hiram Wilson wrote to the American Missionary Association in New York: "You will rejoice to learn that Isaac Brown (alias Sam'l Russell) with his numerous & interesting family of wife & nine children from the house of bondage reached Dawn on the 28th ult. in good health & spirits."¹² Wilson continued in his letter to shower praise upon the Reverend Young. In addition to the latter's dedication to the Brown family, he had also made a very great impression on the other fugitive slaves whom he had met in several places in Canada West. Young also spoke at Sabbath services of the First Nations Mission at Moraviantown.¹³ All were so moved that they wished for him to remain as a permanent missionary. Wilson appealed to the American Missionary Association, which already supported several missions in Canada West, to find the funds to support Young and to bring his own large family to join him.

But this appeal was only a part of the message in the letter. The Reverend Young had not yet completed his private mission with the Brown family. There

was a prevailing suspicion that Alexander Somerville and the Governor of Maryland would not rest easily with their defeat in having Isaac Brown returned from Pennsylvania. The British provinces were also a constant thorn in the side of the southern states, as more and more of their slaves found a safe haven within its boundaries. Extradition agreements existed between the two countries to return those charged with certain criminal offences. Perhaps the attempt that had failed so miserably in Philadelphia would be more successful in Canada West. In a pre-emptive move, Samuel Young decided to go to Montreal, which was then the seat of government for both Canada East and Canada West and lay the entire case before Lord Elgin, the Governor General. He went equipped with the details of the case, including the pamphlet that had been printed by the Pennsylvania abolitionists.

Armed with letters of introduction and support from prominent men from Canada and the United States, the Reverend Young met with a chilly official silence from Attorney General Sherwood from Canada West, who offered no assistance.¹⁴ Undeterred, Young received

¹² Elma E. Gray, *Wilderness Christians: The Moravian Mission to the Delaware Indians* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1856; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell a division of Antheneum Press, 1973), 292.

¹³ *Globe*, (Toronto) 11 December 1847 carries a rebuke of Sherwood and praise for Badgley. This was written by a delegation of forty-six people from Toronto, including local Black leader, Wilson Ruffin Abbott. The men who gave letters of support for Young's character included Hiram Wilson; Colonel John Prince, representative for Essex County in the provincial legislature; Charles H. Stewart Esquire from Detroit, and several other American abolitionists, including Isaac Hopper.

¹⁴ *New York Daily Tribune*, 1 October 1847, (reprint of article that originally appeared in the Canadian newspaper *Galt Reporter*). *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 39 September 1847, and 7 October 1847, *Toronto Banner*, 17 September 1847, *The Liberator*, (Boston) 15 October 1847, *The North Star*, (Rochester, New York) 7 September 1849.

a warm reception in Montreal by both Lord Elgin and Attorney General Badgely of Canada East. Both assured him that Brown “was as safe as he would be in London, England” and would not be surrendered to Maryland officials. The timing was fortuitous. Within two days, two emissaries of the Governor of Maryland appeared in Montreal and demanded the surrender of Brown. They were rebuffed. A defiant Young met the dejected men as they left the office of the Governor General and told them of the part he had taking in rescuing the slave. “At this announcement they were as fierce and ravenous as wild beasts, and said they would soon lynch him if they had him in Baltimore.” Young invited them to display their bravery on the spot, but the southerners discerned a rising tide of indignation among the crowd of Canadians who were gathering and decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Still seething, they went on their way.¹⁵

Samuel Young left Montreal in triumph. After joining Hiram Wilson, the Long Island minister was able to relay the story of Isaac Brown to large groups in Toronto and Hamilton before taking a stagecoach to Waterloo. The two men visited some of the Black settlements in the area then known as “Queen’s Bush, which was north of the Guelph-Waterloo area. In a tragic twist of fate, the Rever-

end Young was overcome with typhus or “Ship fever” as it was called. He had contracted the illness while in Montreal. Within two weeks he died, and was buried “among his colored brethren” in Mount Hope Cemetery at Wellesley, about sixteen miles from Waterloo. Hiram Wilson made the arrangements. Young left behind a widow and eight children.¹⁶ Hiram Wilson was already in the throes of grief himself. Earlier that summer, his beloved wife, Hannah, had died at the Dawn Settlement. During her final illness, her friends asked if they should not immediately send for her husband who was many miles away. She refused, knowing that he was busy attending to the final leg of the rescue of Isaac Brown and his family. She stated that “he was engaged at his post, pleading the cause of the poor and despised descendants of Africa” and that for the sake of doing good she would sacrifice his company.¹⁷

Isaac, Susanna, their daughter Lucinda and the other eight children of the Brown family slowly moved away from the spotlight that had focused upon them for so long and faded into the mists of Ontario’s historical record. We can only hope that their lives were full and rich as they became a part of Canada’s large Black community that helped to shape the nation. Their ordeal had a lasting effect on all who were involved. It had driv-

¹⁵ The death of Samuel Young was widely reported in newspapers on both sides of the border. In addition to those newspapers mentioned in the previous footnote, *The Toronto Mirror* of 15 October 1847 reprinted the notice that had appeared in the *Galt Reporter*. *The Liberator* of 15 October 1847 published the most comprehensive account based on details that had been provided by Hiram Wilson.

¹⁶ Hannah Wilson’s obituary was printed in *The Christian Guardian*, 25 August 1847.

¹⁷ *Toronto Sun*, 17 September 1847, (reprinted in *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, 30 September 1847).

en wedges deeper between the American North and the South and between parts of the United States and Canada. Now they were safe to live out their lives in the way that it was intended. It took a long time for their story to disappear from the public memory and from the pages of North American newspapers. The *Toron-*

to Banner left its readers with words of warning to remain vigilant to spread the story of the case of Isaac Brown. "Let it never be said that there is a single magistrate in the length and breadth of British North America so ignorant, or so indifferent as to surrender a fellow man into the hands of the relentless slaveholder."¹⁸



¹⁸ *Toronto Sun*, 17 September 1847, (reprinted in *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, 30 September 1847).