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Seeking 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness', 1848-55

In November and December 1850, William and Ellen Craft, the two fugitive slaves who so attracted British audiences, had been smuggled out of Boston into Canada, and then to the United Kingdom. Their romantic story and ingenious escape from slavery in Georgia had already become famous in Britain as well as the United States. It was publicised soon after they first reached Boston, where a meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society welcomed the couple and committed to their defence, ending with this ringing pronouncement from the eminent lawyer and abolitionist Wendell Phillips: 'We would look in vain through the most trying times of our Revolutionary history for an incident of courage and noble daring to equal that of the escape of William and Ellen Craft; and future historians and poets would tell this story as one of the most thrilling in the nation's annals.'[1]

William and Ellen Craft had been owned by different masters near Macon, Georgia. Ellen was born in 1826 following the rape by her owner, James P. Smith, of her African-European mother, Maria. As William wrote in 1860, 'My wife's first master was her father, and

1. *The Liberator*, 2 February 1849. Cited by R.J.M. Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers: Biographical Essays in Nineteenth Century Afro-American History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), p. 89.

her mother, his slave, and the latter is still the slave of his widow.'[2] Since her ancestry was no more than one quarter African, Ellen's skin was so fair that she was often taken to be 'a child of the family' (as indeed, she was), a fact that intensely irritated her father's wife and provoked her to treat Ellen even more cruelly than other children of slaves. Despite Ellen's fair skin, green eyes and straight hair – indeed, because of these features – Mrs Smith made a point of frequently reminding Ellen that she was 'just a little nigger'.

To avoid seeing Ellen, the constant reminder of her husband's infidelity, Mrs Smith gave her at the age of eleven as a wedding present to her daughter, Eliza, Ellen's half-sister, who lived with her husband, Robert Collins, in Macon. There Ellen became one of the 102 enslaved people, together valued at $438,000 and claimed as the property of the Collins family. Although she missed her mother and the other children back on the Smith plantation, and although she was now put to work for long hours as a maid for her new mistress, Ellen found it a relief to get away from Mrs Smith's constant hostility and frequent punishments. Her new mistress kept her busy but did not mistreat her. Still, there was always a certain tension since neither Eliza nor Ellen could allow themselves to acknowledge that they were half-sisters.

A relatively new and prosperous city in the middle of Georgia, Macon, with its wide tree-lined avenues and spacious central park, seemed a different world to the rural plantation surrounded by cotton fields where Ellen had spent her early childhood. The city's location beside the Ocmulgee River, once the well-established home of the Creek Native American peoples, allowed it to become an important base for shipping cotton and other goods. In 1843, its importance as a base for transport was enhanced by the construction of a railway line, which five years later would enable William and Ellen to make their journey north to freedom. The line had been built by slave labour.

Born in 1825 near Milledgeville, about thirty miles north-east of Macon, William was also separated as a child from his parents, seeing their despair as they were sold to different owners 'never to behold one

2. William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), p. 3. Future references to this edition will be indicated *RTMF* and included in the main text.

another again'. Soon afterwards his brother and sister were also sold. William's new owner lived in Macon and apprenticed him to a cabinet maker so that he could be hired out and his earnings of about $300 a year given to his owner, a common practice in the southern states. However, when William was nearly sixteen, he and his fourteen-year-old sister were mortgaged to a bank so that their master could raise money to speculate in cotton. When the mortgage loan became due and remained unpaid, William and his sister were put up for sale on the auction block. His sister was sold to a planter some distance away in Georgia, and William became the property of the bank's cashier, Ira Taylor, who sent him back to work with the cabinet maker in Macon.

William and Ellen met in Macon, perhaps when William was doing carpentry work for Robert and Eliza Collins. At first, they hesitated to ask their owners for permission to marry, given the real possibility that they and their children might be sold and separated. The risks involved in trying to escape seemed insurmountable. All too often they had seen those who attempted escape hunted down by professional slave catchers with dogs, then cruelly whipped or killed as a warning to others. At the very least, they could expect demotion from house slave (in Ellen's case) or hired-out artisan worker (in William's case) to punishing and arduous labour in the fields or, worse still, being sold to harsher masters.

So, in 1846, they asked their owners for the necessary permission to marry, which involved, traditionally, a brief secular ritual where each person stepped (or jumped) over a broomstick. Yet, because they were both devout Christians, they felt this ritual marked a commitment, rather than a proper marriage. When their first baby was born, their tender concern for the infant was intensified by the fear that it later might be taken from them and sold. Nor could they stay and watch over it when it was unwell, as both parents were continually forced to be at the service of their owners. One day, when the baby was teething and slightly feverish, Ellen returned from anxious hours responding to the unceasing demands of Eliza Collins to find her little child had died.[3]

3. Immediately after her escape, Ellen told the story of her first child's death to Georgiana B. Kirby, who included it in her book, *Years of Experience* (1887), from which an extract was published in the *Hartford Courant* (25 December 1886, p. 6). We are not told whether the baby

William and Ellen had often dreamed of freedom. The death of their first child and William's experience of seeing his family sold convinced them that freedom was an absolute necessity before they could become parents again. Now they began thinking of ways to escape together, 'and prayed and toiled on till December 1848' (*RTMF*, p. 16), when the Christmas holiday would make it credible for them to ask their owners for passes allowing them to be absent for a few days. Ellen came up with the plan to disguise herself as a white slave master, with William acting as her slave. At first, William thought the plan too risky, for he did not see how they could carry out the imposture for four days while travelling through the slave states.[4] However, after more detailed planning, he agreed and William set out to purchase the items needed for her disguise. Thanks to being hired out, he was relatively free to come and go in the town, and he had managed to save and hide away twenty dollars by taking a second job working as a waiter in a Macon hotel in the evenings.

To avoid suspicion, William bought each item – jacket, white linen shirt, cravat, a top hat, gloves, spectacles, boots, shawl – from different sellers at different times. These Ellen stored in a locked chest of drawers William had made for her. A favoured house slave and lady's maid, she had her own room in a cottage next to the Collins' home. Ellen was a skilled seamstress and made the trousers so that they would fit her slight frame properly. Early in the morning of their departure William cut his wife's hair 'square at the back of the head and got her to dress in the disguise and stand out on the floor'. He found that 'she made a most respectable looking gentleman' (*RTMF*, p. 19). As it was illegal to teach slaves to read or write, both Ellen and William were illiterate.[5] In order to avoid exposure if she were asked

was a son or a daughter. I have not found mention of this first child in any other account of the Crafts' story.

4. In his autobiography William Craft describes himself as originator of the plan, and Ellen as in need of persuasion. However, Josephine Brown, who knew the Crafts well in Boston and Britain affirms Ellen came up with the plan and all the details of the disguise. Josephine Brown, *Biography of an American Bondsman* (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1856), pp. 75-77.
5. After the slave revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831, all slave states except Maryland, Kentucky and Tennessee passed laws against teaching slaves to read and write.

Map showing the Crafts' escape journey.

to sign a receipt for tickets or verify William's pass, Ellen wrapped her hand in a poultice so that she could ask an official to sign on her behalf.

Very early in the morning while it was still dark, they crept out of the cottage, William swiftly making his way to the railway station and the 'negro car'. He carried a small trunk, containing a dress and shoes for Ellen and, tucked into a corner, the tiny shoes and a small toy that had once belonged to their little baby. Consciously trying to walk like

a man in her black trousers and jacket, and holding her top-hatted head high, Ellen made her way separately to the ticket office to buy tickets for herself and her 'slave' to Savannah, before getting into one of the first-class carriages. To her horror the seat next to her was almost immediately occupied by a close friend of her master, a man who had known her as a slave in the household for many years. He tried to strike up a conversation with the disguised Ellen, but she turned her head to the window and feigned deafness until her companion got off at the next stop.

The train journey took a long 165 miles to Savannah, where William and Ellen disembarked and boarded a steamer, the *General Clinch*, which would take them to Charleston, South Carolina. Ellen went to her berth, while William, along with other slaves accompanying their masters, sat all night on a pile of cotton bags next to the funnel of the steamer. At the breakfast table next morning, Ellen was seated beside the captain, who 'inquired very kindly' after her health. Because of 'his master's' supposedly injured hand, William needed to cut up Ellen's food for her. As he left the dining room, he heard the captain say, 'You have a very attentive boy, sir; but you had better watch him like a hawk when you get to the North. He seems very well here, but he may act quite differently there. I know several gentlemen who have lost their niggers among those d----d cut-throat abolitionists' (*RTMF*, p. 24).

From Charleston the pair took another steamer to Wilmington, 175 miles further north and, then, the train to Richmond, Virginia, where the 'invalid' was ushered to a compartment shared with two young ladies and their father, all of whom expressed their concern for her health and comfort. Each change brought renewed fears of being exposed and captured. Increasingly, Ellen's illness became less feigned and more physical as the apprehension and strain almost overwhelmed her. As they travelled further north from the warmer southern states to the colder northern ones, Ellen's shawl became a welcome protection against the unfriendliness of both the weather and the too friendly inquisitiveness of her travelling companions.

By Christmas Eve they had travelled nearly eight hundred miles and had reached Baltimore, 'the last slave port'. Here, to their dismay as they shivered on the station, William was told by an officer that the rules would not let him allow a slave to proceed past Baltimore unless his master could prove ownership and the right to travel with him.

The disguised Ellen protested, several passengers expressed annoyance because the train was being delayed and, at the last minute, they were allowed to board the train, reaching snow-covered Philadelphia and freedom on Christmas morning, four desperately anxious days after their departure from Macon.

It had been a very risky and precarious journey, during which Ellen almost faced discovery on several occasions. On the steamer that took them from Savannah to Charleston was another passenger whose interest was aroused by the couple. When the story of their escape became public, he reported his observations in the *Newark Daily Mercury*, concluding that the couple must have been William and Ellen Craft:

> My attention was attracted by the appearance of a young man who entered the cabin supported by his servant, a strapping negro.
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> The man was bundled up in a capacious overcoat; his face was bandaged with a white handkerchief, and its expression entirely hid by a pair of enormous green spectacles. There was something so mysterious and unusual about the young man, as he sat restlessly in the corner, that curiosity led me to observe him more closely.

The next morning, sitting in the sunshine on the deck, this fellow passenger was able to see the couple more clearly, noting that 'he was a slightly built, apparently handsome young man, with black hair and eyes, and of a darkness of complexion that betokened Spanish extraction'. The invalid's servant told the curious passenger 'in a bold, offhand manner', that his master's name was Mr Johnson and that he was travelling to Philadelphia to seek a cure for his 'rheumatism' and other illnesses. The passenger thought that Mr Johnson 'walked rather too gingerly [meaning his walk was too lively] for a person afflicted with so many ailments'. On arrival at Charleston, the fellow passenger 'lost sight of Mr. Johnson, an acquaintance at my elbow remarking that he was either "a *woman* or a *genius*"'.[6]

6. Barbara McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), pp. 76-77.

This report reveals how very near William and Ellen came to discovery and recapture, for Ellen's disguise and impersonation were not altogether convincing. What saved them was the inability of most of their fellow passengers to conceive that two slaves would be capable of such a clever plan, or that any slave could take the place of a white person.

As soon as they reached Philadelphia, they made their way to an inn recommended to William by a black traveller on the train. One of the many secret agents for the Underground Railroad, who found safe houses and managed onward travel for fugitive slaves, was Mifflin Wistar Gibbs. In his memoir, *Shadow and Light*, he records how he was:

> summoned one day to a colored boarding house [and] was presented to a person dressed in immaculate black broadcloth and silk beaver hat, whom I supposed to be a young white man. By his side stood a young colored man with good features and rather commanding presence. The first was introduced to me as Mrs. Craft and the other as her husband, two escaped slaves.[7]

Ellen soon shed her disguise, emerging as a woman and free. The dramatic effect of her physical and psychological transformation is eloquently described by William Still, organiser in Philadelphia of the Underground Railroad for people escaping slavery:

> Scarcely had they arrived on free soil when the rheumatism departed – the right arm was unslung – the toothache was

7. Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, *Shadow and Light: An Autobiography with Reminiscences of the Last and Present Century* (Washington, DC, 1902), p. 12. Born in Pennsylvania, Mifflin Gibbs (1823-1915) was a free African American, who guided many escaped slaves to Canada. He emigrated to California and then British Colombia, where he became a successful merchant and the first elected black representative in British Columbia. Gibbs later studied law at Oberlin College and settled in Arkansas. In 1873 as a Republican he was elected city judge in Arkansas, the first black judge in the United States. His brother, Jonathan, was secretary of state in Florida after the Civil War, sometimes sleeping in the attic when threatened by the Ku Klux Klan.

> gone – the beardless face was unmuffled – the deaf heard and spoke – the blind saw – and the lame leaped as an hart, and in the presence of a few astonished friends of the slave, the facts of this unparalleled underground railroad feat were fully established by the most unquestionable evidence.[8]

William Still also noted how the constant strain and pressure on Ellen's nerves had so affected her that for days afterwards 'she was physically very much prostrated, although joy and gladness beamed from her eyes, which bespoke expressible delight within'.

The couple were given refuge by Barkley Ivens and his wife, a Quaker family, on a farm near Philadelphia. There they also became friends with the family of William Purvis, an African American inventor and abolitionist, who lived nearby. Georgiana Kirby, who was visiting the Purvises in January 1849, described the young couple in terms of contemporary notions of attractiveness: 'William Craft was a fine-looking man, very dark, with African features toned down to comeliness. … Ellen was a medium-sized woman with an olive complexion, European features and straight, dark hair, refined and intelligent looking.'[9]

After three weeks, during which they learned to read a little and sign their own names, William and Ellen travelled two hundred miles further north to Boston, where the actively anti-slavery community and further distance from the slaveholding states might make them safer from slave hunters and kidnappers, either those employed by their masters to bring them back or freelance hunters who captured free black men and women in the North and sold them in the South.

8. William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), pp. 376-77. William Still (1821-1902) was born in New Jersey, the son of formerly enslaved parents. He moved to Philadelphia in 1844 to work for the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery and became chairman of the Vigilance Committee which had been established to support enslaved people who reached the city. He is credited with helping more than 800 people to escape to freedom, working with a network of agents. In order to help reunite formerly enslaved families, he kept careful records, which form the basis of his book.
9. Georgiana B. Kirby, *Hartford Courant*, 25 December 1886, p. 6.