SLAVERY IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA *
By Edward M. Burns

Every person reasonably well acquainted with the history of our commonwealth knows that slavery existed for a time in Eastern Pennsylvania. But the average Western Pennsylvanian of Scotch-Irish antecedents rather fondly cherishes the opinion that his forbears were endowed with such high moral senses that they proscribed the institution from the first. Evidence is not lacking, however, to indicate that the western part of the state had its share of human chattels. According to the census of 1790 there were 3,737 slaves in Pennsylvania, and 878 of these were listed in the counties of Westmoreland, Fayette, Washington, Allegheny, and Bedford, the only counties that had been erected in Western Pennsylvania by 1790. (1) The fact that slavery had reached its zenith in Eastern Pennsylvania about twenty years before made little difference because of the wide disparity in population of the two sections. By way of illustration, at the time of the first census, in Western Pennsylvania the number of slaves was one to every eighty-seven of the population, whereas in Eastern Pennsylvania the ratio was roughly one slave to every four hundred inhabitants.

In 1780, largely through the instrumentality of George Bryan, the Pennsylvania legislature enacted a law providing for the gradual abolition of slavery in the state and also for the registration of slaves owned by the residents of the several counties (2). Included among the slaveholders in Westmoreland County who registered their human property pursuant to the requirements of this act were four clergymen. And by way of contradicting the current popular notion that the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian Church was the unrelenting antagonist of chattel slavery. Boucher in his *Old and New Westmoreland* makes the statement that at least six of the early ministers in and around Pittsburgh, and nearly all of the elders and church officers, were slaveholders. (3) Hugh Henry Brackenridge, in his book *Modern Chivalry*, says that many men in Westmoreland who would not "for a fine cow have shaved their beards on Sunday," held and abused slaves. (4)

* Paper read before the Historical Society, April 27, 1925.

So far as any official records are concerned, the beginning of slavery' in Western Pennsylvania seems to date from 1759. In that year Hugh Mercer wrote from the vicinity of Pittsburgh asking for two negro girls and a boy. (5) In 1800 the slaves in western counties numbered 436, four-fifths of them being in Westmoreland, Fayette, Washington, and Allegheny counties.

Advertisements culled at random from representative newspapers of the period reveal some significant conditions and facts. In the May 26, 1787, number, the *Pittsburgh Gazette* flaunts this notice in bold faced type:

"To be Sold to Any Person Residing in the Country,

A Negro Wench

She is an excellent cook, and can do any kind of work in or out of doors. She has been registered in Westmoreland County. Produce will be taken or cattle of any kind. Enquire of Col. John Gibson, Fort Pitt." (6)

July 5, 1788, the following notice embellishes the front page of the *Gazette*:

"Was committed to the gaol of Westmoreland County, a negro man who calls himself Joe, about five feet, ten inches high, slim made, about forty-five years of age. Notice is hereby given to the owner of said negro, if he does not apply in three months from the second Tuesday in July next, he will be sold for his fees.

William Perry, Sheriff." (7)

The *Pittsburgh Gazette* almost a year later contains the following announcement:

"Ran away on the 11th of April, a negro man about forty years of age, has lost two of his fore teeth, speaks middling good English . . . . . Whoever takes up said negro and brings him home or secures him so that his owner may get him shall receive Two Dollars reward and reasonable charges.

John Perry, Braddock's Field." (8)

The *Gazette* for May 9, 1789, is adorned with the following notice of sheriff's sale:

By Virtue of a writ of Fieri Facias, to me directed, will be exposed to public sale in Pittsburgh on

Tuesday, the 16th. day of next June, horses, cows,
sheep, stills, negroes, and household furniture.
Taken in execution as the property of John McKee,
and to be sold by, William Perry, Sheriff." (9)

On February 2, 1790, Robert Boyd advertised for sale
in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* a plantation of 365 acres, situ-
ated on the road leading from Pittsburgh to Washington,
about seven miles from Pittsburgh. The terms of payment
called for half in cash and the balance in negroes. (10)

But of course slave advertisements were not confined to
Allegheny County newspapers. The Greensburg *Farmers'*
Register for December 28, 1799, graciously informed its
readers that "a person who has a young negro wench to dis-
pose of will find a purchaser by inquiring at the printers."
(11) The Washington *Reporter* for March 8, 1813, adver-
tised for sale, "a negro boy who has 13 years to serve; he is
stout and healthy. Apply at the office of the *Reporter*."
(12)

Slavery conditions in a few of the older counties in the
western part of the state will serve to typify conditions in
Western Pennsylvania as a whole. On account of the fact
that until 1781, Westmoreland County embraced the whole
western section of the state, it must be understood that
facts concerning slavery in this county before the date ap-
ply to a vast area. For some years prior to and during the
Revolution, George Washington owned property in what is
now Perry Township, Fayette County, but at that time
Westmoreland County. His agent or overseer, Valentine
Crawford, worked the land, in part at least, with negro
slaves. By 1801 the number of slaves had dwindled to 136,
but part of this dimunition is explicable by the fact that
Washington, Allegheny, Fayette, and Armstrong Counties
had been carved out of Westmoreland since the 695 slaves
were registered in 1781. In 1810 the county contained only
twenty bondmen; in 1820, only five. One slave, a female, was
registered in 1840; and her name concludes the registry of
slaves in the county.

The slave trade was a common adjunct of slavery here
as elsewhere. Slaves were often sold at public outcry in
the streets of Greensburg. From a regular auction-block
on the court house square, negroes were "knocked down" to

the highest bidder. As late as 1817, George Armstrong, Greensburg's first chief burgess, auctioned off a negro girl belonging to a client of his. (13)

In Washington County, which was formed from a part of Westmoreland in 1781, slavery had a firm foothold from the beginning. In 1782, 155 slave owners registered a total of 443 slaves in the county. Through the operation of the Act of 1780 each succeeding decade witnessed the gradual process of extinguishing the number of slaves held. Two hundred and sixty-three were registered in 1790; eighty-four in 1800; thirty-six in 1810; five in 1820; one in 1830; two in 1840; one in 1845. (14) At least two instances of the slave trade are recorded in this county: In 1781 the estate of Alexander McCandless sold a negro girl for sixty pounds. And Reason Pumphrey, in 1795, sold three slaves at prices ranging from seventy to a hundred pounds. (15)

Fayette, the second county to be erected by the partition of Westmoreland, had a plentitude of slaves. During the first two years in which the Act of 1780 was operative, Fayette County slaveholders registered their slaves to the number of 244. And from February, 1789, to January, 1839, an aggregate of 354 human chattels was registered in the county. (16)

There is a decided paucity of Allegheny County statistics relating to the number of slaves in this county. The census reports show that the number of persons held in bondage was one hundred fifty-nine in 1790, seventy-nine in 1800, twenty-four in 1810, one in 1820, and twenty-seven in 1830. None are listed after 1830. No records other than the census reports are available.

We shall now consider conditions in Northwestern Pennsylvania. The counties in this section can be well grouped together for our purpose. According to the available evidence, slavery was introduced in the northwestern part of the state in 1799, when Matthew White brought with him three slaves and settled at Whitestown, Butler County. One of these slaves, "Black Nell," was listed in 1821 in the property assessment of Center Township. (17) To Mercer County goes the unenviable distinction of furnishing the second earliest instances of slaveholding. In 1804 John Calvin of Salem Township bequeathed a mulatto girl to his

wife. The same year John Sheakley migrated from Gettysburg and settled in Sandy Creek Township, bringing with him four negro slaves. John Young, who lived on Indian Run in Springfield Township, also owned slaves. In his will of April 20, 1825, he stipulates: "I do will that Peg, the old wench, is to be supported out of my farm, left to John and David." (18)

According to the census of 1830, Jefferson County contained one slave, brought into the county by James Parks in 1824. In 1833 William Jack was assessed with "one boy of color," valuation forty dollars; and three years later the assessment books attest the gallant efforts of a Presbyterian minister to prolong the life of the institution by keeping in bondage a mulatto, valued at fifty dollars. (19)

By the way of epitomizing the magnitude of slavery as as institution in Northwestern Pennsylvania, the following census figures for Beaver, Erie, Butler, Crawford, Jefferson, McKean, Mercer, and Venango Counties are submitted: aggregate number of slaves in these counties in 1810, thirty-two; in 1820, seven; in 1830, fifteen. (20)

The Act of 1780, previously referred to, had meanwhile been operating toward the extinction of slavery with a degree of efficiency such that after 1840 only a few isolated instances of slaveholding remained. The last official vestige of the institution appears in the records of Washington County for 1845, when James A. D. Henderson, a Cumberland Presbyterian minister of Morris Township, registered a mulatta girl, newly born of a slave mother. (21)

But even before the annihilation of the evil had been consummated by the Act of 1780, it had become palpable that the economic advantages of holding slaves in the Northern states were practically nil. As a consequence many of the Northerners began to assume that it behooved them to pose as champions of rectitude, divinely commissioned to free the negro from the cruel chains imposed by Southern masters. Accordingly in December, 1833, the American Anti-Slavery Society was organized in Philadelphia. And it took only a scant two years for the reforming spirit to prevade the bosoms of Western Pennsylvanians; in fact the very next year a local anti-slavery society was organized in Washington County.

The exact date of the formation of the first anti-slavery society in Allegheny County eludes discovery, but an organization known as the Pittsburgh Anti-Slavery Society held a meeting as early as July, 1835. The organization, however, was a kind of a hybrid, advocating both colonization and gradual abolition. This dual program seems to have precipitated the disruption of the society and the later recrudescene of the component elements as separate organization. The colonization societies took the attitude that the evils of slavery could best be eradicated by "stopping the slave trade by colonizing and Christianizing Africa through the direct instrumentality of colored emigrants from the United States, and by promoting the intellectual and moral improvement of the African race."

The abolition faction, on the other hand, demanded the immediate emancipation of all slaves in the nation, with the implication that they were to be allowed to remain in the country and to be given the rights of citizenship. The *Christian Advocate,* the *Presbyterian Advocate,* the *Daily Advocate,* the *Daily American,* and the *Pittsburgh Visitor* supported the Abolitionists; the *Pittsburgh Gazette* espoused the cause of the colonization advocates. The colonization scheme lapsed into obscurity by 1845, after having divided the camp of the anti-slavery forces for forty years. (22) The year 1835 witnessed the institution of anti-slavery societies in Beaver, Mercer, and Venango Counties. Erie County joined the crusade the following year. The inauguration of these societies was usually featured by drawing up resolutions, hurling invective into the teeth of slaveholders and slavery advocates.

The uncompromising and frequently inflammatory character of many of the abolition speeches and writings worked to the detriment of the organization. The early societies frequently met with receptions not very conducive to optimism. The formation of an anti-abolition society followed hard upon the organization of the anti-slavery unit in Erie County. In June, 1836, an abolition meeting in Little Washington precipitated a riot, and a few days later a town meeting, presided over by Burgess Griffith, decided to prohibit the abolitionists from holding meetings and attempting to intrude their "peculiar and offensive doctrines" upon

the people of the county. (23)

The schemes of the Abolitionists excited deep feeling in Pittsburgh. A party which stood for the integrity of the Union held meetings and denounced the propaganda of the Abolitionists as being "as capable of evil as effectual as the worst enemies of the Republic could wish; that it had sown wide the dragon teeth of discord, disunion, and civil war"; that the fanaticism of the North had produced fear and frenzy in the South; and that it was time every patriot should exert his utmost to convince the South that this agitation proceeded only from an insignificant, deluded, and irresponsible minority. Another set of resolutions was adopted, admitting the right of the people of the slavery states to "provide their own remedy in their own way," and that the federal government had no more right to interfere with the relations between master and slave in the southern states than with the domestic affairs of husband and wife in the northern states. (24)

The passage of the fugitive slave law by congress in September, 1850, provoked a deluge of denunciation in Western Pennsylvania as elsewhere throughout the north. Four days subsequent to the enactment of the law, a mass meeting of the citizens of Allegheny County convened in the Diamond and branded the law as "iniquitous and unconstitutional." (25) A little more than a month later a meeting was held in New Brighton to give expression to the popular sentiment of that section anent the recent statue. Resolutions were drawn up declaring that the law would be treated with contempt. (26) Other meetings of a like character were held. If there was any sentiment in favor of the law, it did not manifest itself.

Nor were the people of this section iterating mere bombast when they expressed contempt for the fugitive slave law. Siebert gives the number of underground railroad attaches in the various counties as follows: Allegheny, one; Beaver, three; Bedford, four; Blair, one; Butler, three; Clearfield, six; Crawford, three; Erie, five; Fayette, ten; Indiana, twenty-five; Lawrence, twenty-two; Mercer, fourteen; Somerset, two; Venango, twelve; and Washington, two. (27) Concerning lines of transit via the underground railroad, the same author relates: "At the western end of

Pennsylvania several routes and sections of routes were in use. Three well defined lines of escape entered the state from the contiguous counties of Virginia and Maryland and converged at Uniontown. Two courses led northward from Uniontown, both terminating at Pittsburgh. From this city fugitives seem to have been despatched by rail to Cleveland or assisted across the border of the state to the much used routes of the Western Reserve. East of the Allegheny River fragmentary routes extended from Greensburg through Indiana County to Clearfield and from Cumberland, Maryland, through Bedford and Pleasantville to Altoona. From Clearfield an important branch ran northwest to Shippensville and Franklin, and from thence to Erie, the place of deportation." (28)

Frequently the slaves elected to perform their hegiras unescorted. In so doing they met with varying degrees of success. The *Pittsurgh Gazette,* the day following the publication of the fugitive slave law, announced: "Forty fugitive slaves left Allegheny last evening for Canada. All were armed, declaring they were resolved to die rather than be carried again into bondage." (29) The same paper for November 9, 1858, quotes the *Morgantown Star* as recording the escape of "ten niggers who had run away in utter disregard of the Bible doctrine, the American Tract Society, or Jimmy Buchanan." The *Wheeling Intelligencer,* as quoted by the same issue of the *Pittsburgh Gazette,* conveys the intelligence that an attempt was made to re-steal these negroes at Bachelor Farms in Fayette County, but they fought desperately for "those glittering generalities called life and liberty" and succeeded in getting away from twenty-five men "who were after them with all sorts of deadly weapons too numerous to mention." (30)

The exact number of fugitive negroes who escaped to Canada through Western Pennsylvania in their dash for liberty, whether made unaided or faciliated by the underground railroad, and almost always staged with the acquiescence, and frequently with the connivance, of local officers sworn to enforce the law, will probably never be known; but certain it is that several hundred of them must have made their way to safety through this region.

During the last decade of the ante-bellum period, that

is, from 1850 to 1860, the question as to whether slavery merited justification or not was a dead issue in the states north of the Mason and Dixon line. The problem that now engrossed the attention of Northern politicians was whether the "peculiar institution" should be extirpated at one stroke, or whether it should be permitted to exist with its growth and influence curtailed. In Western Pennsylvania the latter view came largely to supplant the old uncompromising abolition movement. The local Liberty and Free Soil parties merged with the Whigs in forming the new Republican party, born in 1854. Six years later most of the counties of the western part of the state contributed their share toward ushering in the regime that was to sound the death-knell of slavery in the nation.

In conclusion, let us review briefly the salient facts concerning slavery in western counties. Implanted here by the Scotch-Irish almost as soon as the first settlements were made, the institution, supported by the best citizens, enjoyed a rapid growth, until, in 1790, one person out of every eighty-seven was a slave. Partly because of the gradual emancipation act of 1780, and partly because of economic influences, slavery declined rapidly after 1790 and finally disappeared about 1854. Anti-slavery sentiment developed rather late in Western Pennsylvania and was at first feeble and incoherent. The opponents of slavery were for a time divided into the abolitionists and colonizationists. The latter gave up their scheme about 1854, but they did not become abolitionists. The great bulk of the population up to this time, although not ardent proponents of slavery, nevertheless vigorously opposed any interference with the institution in the south and condemned the abolitionists.

After 1850 the fugitive slave law served to crystallize public sentiment in this as in other sections. Practically all elements of the population united in denouncing the law, some of them violating it at every opportunity, and none of them making any pretense of obeying it or aiding in its enforcement. Most of these same people joined the new Republican party. This party, it will be recalled, operating under a compromise program, was destined to bring about these very results for which the most irreconcilable abolitionists had been striving for thirty years.

REFERENCES

(1) *Fifth Census or Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, 1830.* Prefix, p. 8.
(2) *Laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania from 1780 to 1790,* pp. 838-843.
(3) I, 197.
(4) Pp. 184.
(5) Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania—Slavery-Servitude-Freedom,* p. 13.
(6) The *Pittsburgh Gazette,* May 26, 1787.
(7) *Ibid.,* July 5, 1788.
(8) *Ibid.,* May 9, 1789.
(9) *Ibid.,* May 9, 1789.
(10) *Ibid.,* February 2, 1790.
(11) Greensburg *Farmers' Register,* December 28, 1799.
(12) *Washington Reporter,* March 8, 1913.
(13) Boucher, *History of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania,* pp. 57-59.
(14) Crumrine, *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania,* p. 221.
(15) Creigh, *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania,* p. 360.
(16) Veech, *The Monongahela of Old; or Historical Sketches of Southwestern Pennsylvania to the Year 1800,* p. 99.
(17) Brown, *History of Butler County, Pennsylvania,* p. 68.
(18) McKnight, *A Pioneer Outline History of Northwestern Pennsylvania.* pp. 364-365.
(19) McKnight, *A Pioneer History of Jefferson County,* p. 272.
(20) *Fifth Census, or Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, 1830.* pp. 6, 7; 68-77.
(21) Crumrine, *op. cit.,* p. 223.
(22) Wilson, *History of Pittsburgh,* pp. 812 ff.
(23) Creigh. *op. cit.,* p. 363.
(24) Killikelly, *History of Old Pittsburgh Its Rise and Progress,* p. 182.
(25) *Pittsburgh Gazette,* September 30, 1850.
(26) Warner.*History of Beaver County, Pennsylvania.* p. 248.
(27) Siebert,*Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom,* p. 120.
(28) *Ibid.,* pp. 122, 123.
(29) *Pittsburgh Gazette,* September 25, 1850.
(30) *Ibid.,* November 9, 1858.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

(1) Albert, George Dallas. *History of the County of Westmoreland, Pennsylvania.* Philadelphia. 1882.
(2) Bausman, Joseph H. *History of Beaver County, Pennsylvania.* New York, 1904.
(3) Boucher, John N. A. *Century and a Half of Pittsburgh and her People.* III. New York, 1908.
(4) Boucher, John N. *History of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.* New York, 1906.
(5) Boucher, John N. *Old and New Westmoreland.* IV. New York. 1918.

(6) Brackenridge, Hugh Henry. *Modern Chivalry*. Philadelphia, 1908.

(7) Brown, R. C. and Company, Publishers. *History of Butler County Pennsylvania*. New York, 1895.

(8) Brown, Runk and Company, Publishers. *History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania*. Chicago, 1888.

(9) Creigh, Alfred. *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania*. Harrisburg, Pa., 1871.

(10) Crumrine, Boyd, Editor. *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, 1882.

(11) Dahlinger, Charles W. *Pittsburgh A Sketch of Its Early Social Life*. New York, 1916.

(12) Davis, A. I. *History of Clarion County, Pennsylvania*. Syracuse, N. Y., 1887.

(13) Ellis, Franklin, Editor. *History of Fayette County, Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, 1890.

(14) Killikelly, Sara H. *History of Pittsburgh Its Rise and Progress*. Pittsburgh, 1906.

(15) McKnight, W. J. *A Pioneer Outline History of Northwestern Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, 1905.

(16) McKnight, W. J. *A Pioneer History of Jefferson County, Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, 1898.

(17) Newton, J. H. Editor. *History of Venango County, Pennsylvania*. Columbus, O. 1899.

18) Sanford, Laura G. *History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, Erie, Pa., 1884.

(19) Siebert, Wilbur H. *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*. New York, 1899.

(20) Turner, Edward R. *The Negro in Pennsylvania Slavery-Servitude-Freedom*. Washington, 1911.

(21) Veech, James. *The Monongahela of Old: or Historical Sketches of Southwestern Pennsylvania to the Year 1800*. Pittsburgh, 1892.

(22) Warner, A. and Company, Publishers. *History of Beaver County, Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, 1888.

(23) Wilson, Erasmus. *Standard History of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*. Chicago, 1898.

(24) *Fifth Census, or Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, 1830. To which Is Prefixed a Schedule of the Whole Number of Persons within the Several Districts of the United States. Taken according to the Acts of 1790, 1800, 1810, 1820* Washington, 1832.

(25) *Laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania from 1780 to 1790*. Philadelphia, 1798.

NEWSPAPERS

(26) *The Pittsburg Commonwealth*. Pittsburgh, Pa.
(27) *The Pittsburgh Gazette*. Pittsburgh, Pa.
(28) *The Farmers' Register*. Greensburg, Pa.
(29) *The Washington Reporter*. Washington, Pa.