

THE NEWSPAPERS AND THE CHRISTIANA RIOT

In the recent papers that have been written for our society on the subject of Slavery and the Underground Railway, up to the time of the Christiana Riot, we have been told in detail how the news was carried from station to station, and how messages were transmitted from the South to the North in the interest of escaping slaves, all, however, in a very quiet and cautious manner, and by the observance of every precaution to avoid these messages from being miscarried, or improperly conveyed.

I will now endeavor to show you how rapidly the news of the tragedy spread throughout the various parts of the country and what expressions were given through some of the newspapers of those times, showing the terrible opposition abolitionists and fugitives were obliged to face.

The gathering of this information has been a very trying undertaking. Many of the publishing companies which were then in existence cannot now be found and few have kept complete files of their papers. On the other hand, where the files do cover that period, and I have been in communication with the owners of them, there were comparatively few instances in which the owners appeared to be willing to look for references in files dating back sixty years ago. Some of the editorials from which I have taken extracts or which I have quoted are very emphatic in their expres-

sions, either in commending or condemning the Riot.

Although the newspapers all over the country were hotly agitating this tragedy for some days before our Lancaster papers took it up, yet that is no indication that our home people were not alive to the situation, for we find that on Friday, the day after the riot, District Attorney Thompson, of this city, was there and had issued warrants for the arrest of a number of suspected persons. Upon making inquiry at the office of the Lancaster Intelligencer, from which office the only daily paper was published in this city, at that time, I was told that the files for 1851 could not be found, and appeared to have been lost.

The "Examiner and Herald," at that time a weekly publication in this city, in their issue of September 17 had the following locals:

One and one-fourth columns describing the tragedy, two columns referring to the first twenty-four arrests which had then been made and the examination of witnesses and one-half column naming the additional arrests, including Samuel Williams, who is said to have carried the news from Philadelphia to Christiana of the contemplated raid by the Gorsuch party. This issue has also two editorials of five inches each and one of three inches.

In the next issue of this paper, September 24, one and one-half columns give further testimony by the witnesses, and a one-half column article gives an anonymous letter under date of September 22 by a resident of Christiana referring to the unjust criticisms that were made at home and abroad against the citizens of the town. He writes: "The public mind has been excited to a very great extent in this immediate neighborhood as well as

abroad, and from all that has appeared in public print an odium of an unpleasant character has been, either by design or otherwise, cast upon the inhabitants of this place. Now, it is said this murder was committed at Christiana, while the place at which it occurred is not within two miles from this village, and not a single white man from this place was at or near the place at the time, neither did one of them know that such an affray was in contemplation until after the occurrence when the first impulse was to hasten to the relief of the strangers." He then relates how the citizens offered all possible help under the trying circumstances, how Joseph D. Pownall, Esq., issued his warrant as soon as the facts were sufficiently known to justify him in so doing and placed it in the hands of the constable.

Concluding, he says: "We know humanity was outraged—life cruelly sported with and destroyed—our laws set at defiance and resisted, yet let us assure you we had neither heart nor hand in this matter until the painful intelligence of its fatal consequences reached our ears, and then did we co-operate manfully as good citizens and republicans with the officers in carrying out the grand object—the bringing to justice of the man-defying, law-breaking insurgents."

On October 1 this paper devotes two and one-fourth columns to the further examination of witnesses, after which, the witnesses all having been heard, one and one-third of a column gives the charge of Judge Kane in the United States District Court, one-third column on "The Law of Treason" and one-third column on the effect of this occurrence on the political situation, in which article Attorney Gen-

eral Franklin received a letter from Rev. J. S. Gorsuch, which was published in the "Baltimore County Advocate of September 18, in which Rev. Gorsuch assailed the Governor in the most vindictive terms and imputed to him and to the Attorney General inactivity and gross dereliction of duty in regard to the murder of his father. In a later letter, dated September 25, he retracts and apologizes for his charges against the Attorney General, but takes occasion to reaffirm his offensive imputations against the Governor.

Franklin, however, states that he cannot consent to be placed in a different position from the Governor in this matter, for they were in such close touch with each other in every move made that either one is entitled to the same criticism or credit which may be given.

The Weekly American, of Waterbury, Conn., in its issue of September 19, under its department headed, "The Week" says: "The deplorable effects of the 'higher law' agitationists have been carried out at Christiana, Pa., by the shedding of human blood and murder, in the late attempt of an owner of a fugitive slave to regain his property. These higher law men, like the Cuban agitators, are morally responsible for encouraging and inviting such resistance to the laws, and as such must account to God and their country." This same paper, under "Editorial Brevities," has an article about twice as long as the above account.

In a letter from Mr. Spafford, of the "Historical Society of Pennsylvania," addressed to Miss Clark, we learn that the Philadelphia Ledger on September 12, 1851, has a paragraph on the murder at Christiana under the

heading of "Local Affairs." On the 13th, under the same heading, there is a trifle less than a half column on "The Lancaster County Riot and Murder," and a brief editorial entitled "Fruits of the Higher Law." An editorial of more than a half column on "Cause and Effect" appears on the 15th, and in the issue of the 16th there is a short editorial on "The Christiana Tragedy." The 17th, under "News," has "The Christiana Tragedy," and quotes from the "Lancaster Tribune." This is merely a paragraph, but the same issue has two-thirds of a column, "Excitements," in an editorial, in addition to nearly a column under "Local Affairs" on "The Christiana Murder." A quarter of a column on "The Authors of Mischief," quoting from the "New York Courier" and the Lancaster Examiner, appears on the 18th under "News." The issue of the 19th has a column on the "History of the Christiana Tragedy by one of Mr. Gorsuch's Sons." On the 20th, in the news column, "The Governor of Maryland on the Christiana Riot," takes a half column to tell of the "Christiana Outrage," also under "News." A paragraph on the 23d is devoted to "Important Disclosures Anticipated," and on the 24th inst. a short account of "The Lancaster Authorities."

There are said to be two sides to all questions, but it is surprising to notice how little support the press of those days gave to the efforts of the Abolitionists, particularly so throughout the anti-slavery sections of the United States. Take, for instance, an editorial copied from one of the daily Philadelphia (Whig) newspapers, which reads as follows: "There can be no difference of opinion concerning the shocking affair

which occurred at Christiana on Thursday, the resisting of a law of Congress by a band of armed negroes whereby the majesty of the Government was defied and life taken in one and the same act. There is something more than even a murderous riot in all this. It is an act of insurrection, we might, considering the peculiar class and condition of the guilty parties, almost call it a servile insurrection—if not also one of treason. Fifty, eighty, or one hundred persons, whether white or black, who are deliberately in arms for the purpose of resisting the law, even the law for the recovery of fugitive slaves, are in the attitude of levying war against the United States, and doubly heavy becomes the crime of murder in such a case, and doubly serious the accountability of all who have any connection with the act as advisors, suggesters, countenancers or accessories in any way whatever.”

Another Philadelphia daily paper has this to say: “The unwarrantable outrage committed last week at Christiana, Lancaster county, is a foul stain upon the fair name and fame of our State. We are pleased to see that officers of the Federal and State Governments are upon the tracks of those who were engaged in the Riot, and that several arrests have been made. We do not wish to see the poor, misled blacks, who participated in the affair, suffer to any great extent, for they were but tools. The men who are really chargeable with treason against the United States Government, and with the death of Mr. Gorsuch, an estimable citizen of Maryland, are, unquestionably, white, with hearts black enough to incite them to the commission of any crime equal in atrocity to that committed in Lancaster county. Penn-

sylvania has now but one course to pursue, and that is to aid, and warmly aid, the United States in bringing to condign punishment every man engaged in the Riot. Let her in this resolve be just and fearless."

In the issue of the Indiana State Sentinel (weekly) for September 25, 1851, appears, under date September 18, an account of the Riot taken from the Baltimore Sun. Under date of September 19 is an editorial to the following purport:

"This is a most unfortunate event for the free colored population, and will produce great excitement in the country. They had, no doubt, been prepared and trained for the terrible deed by those white neighbors, who are equally guilty with the poor, misguided blacks. White men and Abolitionists prompted them to the deed. All engaged in the transaction are guilty of murder and treason. Such are the terrible consequences of preaching resistance to law and invoking the religious prejudices of the country against an institution which has existed since creation, and appealing to a law above the Constitution to justify every act of blood and slaughter. Unless the friends of law and order stand firm and united, a terrible war of races is to occur, which must exterminate the weaker."

Under date of September 20, in the same issue of the paper, is a copy of an editorial comment in the "Pennsylvanian" of September 13, and a short item consisting of quotations from various sources against the fugitive slave laws.

Mr. Bernard C. Steiner, librarian of the Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore, having inspected the files of newspapers at the Maryland Historical Society, writes the following: "There are three dailies for 1851, two

morning papers, the Sun (Democratic) and the American (Whig), also an evening paper named the Evening Argus (Democratic)."

On September 12 the Argus prints half a column from the Baltimore County Jacksonian, a narrative of the Riot. On the 18th it prints half a column of news from the Philadelphia Bulletin, and a quarter of a column editorial entitled "Now Is the Time For Action," stating "if Pennsylvania will not give redress, Maryland must redress her own wrong." On the 14th a third of a column of news, concerning the late "Abolition and Negro Outrages," is printed. On the 17th there is a quarter of a column editorial praising the remarks of Judge Z. C. Lee at a meeting held on the 15th. On the 23d J. S. Gorsuch's letter to Governor Johnston is printed.

The Sun for September 12 has a brief notice of a telegraphic dispatch concerning the Riot. On the 13th it prints two-thirds of a column of news, chiefly from the Baltimore County Jacksonian and the Philadelphia Inquirer, and a brief editorial speaking of the gross and murderous outrage at the instigation of that diabolical spirit. On the 15th two-thirds of a column on the Christiana outrage is printed, partly from the Columbia Spy and Philadelphia Bulletin, with reference to a meeting at Towson town. A brief editorial on the the murderous outrage says that Governor Lowe will doubtless take prompt steps in the matter. On September 16th a brief editorial praises the action of the Federal and Pennsylvania authorities, and nearly three columns of news gives the report of testimony before the commission and Coroner's jury, from the Philadelphia North American, as well

as the resolutions of the Philadelphia meeting, a letter from Mr. Cadwallader, etc., to Governor Johnston, and his response, his proclamation, and extracts from editorials in the Philadelphia Inquirer and Ledger, the Washington Republic, and the resolutions passed at Towson. On September 17th, editorially, the Federal and Maryland authorities are praised, and nearly a column of news is given from the Philadelphia Ledger and Statesman, with a letter from a correspondent from Columbia and abstract of testimony before a commissioner. On September 18th nearly two columns of news include the resolution of Gorsuch's friends at Slade's tavern, a letter to the Washington Union, probably from Henry May, Deputy Attorney General, and a long letter from J. S. Gorsuch. On September 19 a brief editorial on arrests, the correspondence between Governor Lowe and the President, resolutions in Bartlett township from the Lancaster Examiner and of the Philadelphia meeting, fill nearly two columns. On the 20th brief editorial and Gorsuch's letter to Johnston. On the 22d a brief note from the Baltimore County Advocate is reprinted, defending Pennsylvania from lawlessness. On the 23d we find a brief note from the Philadelphia North American; on the 24th, a statement that the trial will be on October 6; on the 25th, the Lancaster Union's reply to J. S. Gorsuch; on the 26th, a half column editorial on indictment for treason, the latter from J. S. Gorsuch, and a third of a column on examination of prisoners. The American on September 12th has a brief note; on the 13th, two-thirds of a column account of the horrible affray, gathered from individuals; on the 15th, a third of a column from

the Philadelphia Bulletin and other sources; on the 16th, a long editorial on the crime of treason, and nearly a column of the evidence from the Philadelphia papers and the Towson resolves; on the 17th, one-quarter of a column from the Philadelphia Ledger and the Lancaster Union; on the 19th, one-quarter of a column from the Boston Courier; on the 20th, two-thirds of a column from the Boston Courier; on the 21st, two-thirds of a column of Lowe's correspondence with the President and extracts from the Philadelphia Ledger and the Jacksonian; on the 24th, short notices from the North American and the Ledger.

Mr. Samuel H. Ranck, a former Lancaster countian, who is now librarian of the Grand Rapids library, of Grand Rapids, Mich., copies a very interesting article on this subject from "The Grand Rapids Enquirer," of September 24, 1851. It is interesting in that the facts, as represented therein, are very much distorted. The statement is here made that the Gorsuch party, on their way to Christiana, encountered a negro man and boy, one of whom Mr. Gorsuch immediately recognized as one of his runaway slaves. Both negroes ran, pursued by the Gorsuch party, into the village, where they took refuge in a strongly fortified house, from which one of the negroes dropped a heavy billet of wood out of an upper story window, on one of the pursuing party, felling him to the earth. It further states that the body of the elder Gorsuch was shockingly mutilated, having been beaten with clubs, by the infuriated wretches, even after life was extinct. After the melee it is stated that Mr. Gorsuch's nephew, quite seriously wounded, made his way to York, Pa., the same night, and that after the shooting, such was the

violence that none of the survivors could remain to care for the wounded. This article, which is quite lengthy, has been carefully preserved in the archives of the society, where it may at any future time be referred to.

Through the courtesy of Dr. H. J. Herbein, Secretary of the Schuylkill County Historical Society, we learn that the Miners' Journal, of Pottsville, in its issue of September 13 gives an account of the riot. In its issue of the 27th it gives an account of the trial of the rioters. In the same issue is a lengthy editorial in which it is shown how an attempt was made to make political capital out of this accidental circumstance. Governor Johnston was at this time canvassing the State in the interest of his re-election as Chief Executive of the State, and was severely criticised for some of his actions in connection with this matter. The writer of this editorial quotes from "The Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch" the following:

"It really seems as if no subject is safe from the 'pickers and stealers' of professed politicians. Even crime and misfortune are to the unscrupulous partisans windfalls which are eagerly seized upon as affording opportunities for manufacturing political capital." He then gives a plain statement of the facts of the case—the riot—the arrests—the vigilance and efficiency of the officers—the excitement and indignation of the people of Lancaster county and elsewhere, etc., etc. It was a terrible state of things indeed, and yet, instead of immediately waiting upon the Governor, who was in the town at that very moment, and had been all that day, instead of paying the honor due to the representative of the Government of the Commonwealth, instead of going to him in deputation and beseeching him to

send that military force to Lancaster county, the leaders, having signed the appeal, separated and went to their homes. It was not until twenty-four hours afterward, during which time the fearful insurrection was raging at Christiana, that a letter addressed to the Governor was left at the bar of his hotel and handed to him by a servant. He then alludes to the crushing answer of the Governor, and the abortive attempt of the "political cooks" to reply, in which they "confess and avoid the Governor's statements and endeavor to cover themselves with a cloud by asserting that the crime of which the negroes were guilty was high treason, a question wholly irrelevant to the matter in hand, whether the State authorities performed their duty or not." This editorial, being quite lengthy, cannot be fully copied here, but has been placed on file in the archives of our society, and at a later time is supposed to be bound into the current volume of our society's publications.

Elisa May Willard, Reference Librarian of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, has supplied us with considerable material from several of the Pittsburgh papers.

On September 13, under the head of Telegraphic News, the Pittsburgh Gazette gives three inches to a brief description of the Riot. On the 15th they give two inches under a similar heading, and on the following day two telegraphic despatches of two inches each, still further describing the affair. In this issue they also have an editorial of one-half column. On the 18th appears another editorial of one-half column, in which the author believes that a sufficient cause for the fearful act may be found in the infamous party tactics of the Locofoco

press of the State, which has endeavored to identify the Whigs with the Abolitionists, and charge them with hostility to the Union and the fugitive slave law. Though wasted on white men this silliness has made an impression on the minds of the poor, ignorant blacks.

On September 19 this paper gives one column under "General News" to quotations from various other papers on this subject; also, three-fourths of a column editorial commenting on the proclamation of the Governor.

On September 13, "Der Freiheits Freund" (Freedom's Friend), a German paper of Pittsburgh, has a half-inch item under "Telegraphic News." On September 17 they have an editorial of one column fully describing the tragedy.

Some of the articles herein referred to have been found too lengthy to embody in this paper, and have, therefore, been prepared so as to permanently preserve them with this paper in the archives of our society.

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