WILLIAM PARKER,

THE HERO OF THE CHRISTIANA RIOT.

To understand the full significance of the Christiana riot, so insignificant in itself; it is necessary to have a thorough knowledge of where we were and whither we were drifting as a nation at the time.

An English statesman sojourning in France some years before the great up. heaval of 1793 wrote, "I discover here all the symptoms of revolution that I have ever met with in history;" at the same time a weak, conservative, purblind, vacillating, well-intentioned King sat upon his throne and saw nothing of all that. If any intelligent stranger had been sojourning in merica in the year 1851, possessed with ordinary powers of penetration, able to see with his eyes and not with his prejudices, he might have said, " I see in the United States a young and growing nation, peopled with the best blood of the Caucasian race, self-deceived, however, by their marvelous growth, standing at the crater of a volcano, trying to keep back the lava by rolling another rook down its throat."

Both immediately before and after the formation of the constitution the representative men of the country, south as well as north, regarded slavery as au evil greatly to be abhorred. General Gates, the hero of Saratoga, had liberated his slaves; Washington, as all people know, did the same ; Jefferson had uniformly borne his testimony against it, and manumission societies were formed in the years 1789 and 1791, respectively, in the States of Maryland and Virginia. Among the members of the Maryland society were Samuel Chase, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and Luther Martin, one of the framers of the Constitution; in Delaware the movement was favored by such men as Hon. James A. Bayard, grandfather of the present Minister to England, and Caesars A. Rodney, alterwards Attorney General. In the north the first anti-slavery society formed, that of Pennsylvania, was pre-

sided over by Benjamin Franklin and then by Benjamin Rush. The New York Manumission Society had for its first president John Jay, and for its second, Alexander Hamilton. Further examples might be given, but this is enough to prove that the leading enterprising, patriotic men of the country did not regard slavery at that time as a blessing, nor even as something to be looked upon with indifference.

These men must either have had a very poor conception of the kind of government they had been forming and the character of the work they were engaged in, or else their children afterwards woefully misconstrued them. For, in process of time, the discovery was made under the more rapacious lead of the cotton States that such societies were at war with the constitution, with good citizenship, and that it was treasonable and seditious to even petition Congress for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. Relatively speaking, about the same time, the discovery was also made by a young man heretofore unknown to fame, publishing a small sheet from *a* garret loft in Boston, "That the Constitution of the United States was a covenant with death and an agreement with hell." These two, not to say remarkable, at least most diametrically opposite, interpretations of the fundamental principles of our National Union ought to have convinced the most obtuse mind that the "irrepressible conflict" was at hand.

The truth is, the more clear-sighted and candid leaders of the one or the other side did see it, but the great mass of people were too eagerly engaged in making money, too anxious to avoid any unpleasant relations, and too busy developing the great resources of the Nation to worry themselves about the ethics of the question.

There is neither time nor necessity to review the long legislative history in the great struggle, only this brief prelude is necessary to get a faint idea of the moral forces of the issue. Of all the acts of Congress in the entire drama, none had been so strenuously insisted upon by the South for the moral effect it would have in forcing a proper recognition of the

species of property as the fugitive slave law of 1850. None, on the other baud, had come so directly in open conflict with the conscience of the North. By the provisions of the Act, every citizen was at once made a slave catcher. If he refused to obey the Marshal in assisting to return a fugitive he was guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to fine and imprisonment. The person claimed as a slave could be arrested upon the warrant of the United States Commissioner, sworn out by any person claiming him as his slave ; he was denied the right of trial by jury, the Commissioner could deliver him to the alleged master at his own discretion, and the slave was not allowed to testify in his own behalf.

Such was the law that Daniel Webster said he was willing to vote for "with all its provisions to the fullest extent," because "neither in the forum of conscience or in the face of the constitution are we justified in disregarding it." Such was the law which caused Thaddeus Stevens to exclaim from the other side of the Capitol : "Can the tree North stand this? Can Pennsylvania stand it ? Great God I can New England endure it? " It was a close question on which side of Mason and Dixon's line the rebellion would first appear.

Such was the condition of things on the eleventh of September, 1851, about one year atter the passage of the Act, when Edward Gorsuch, a Maryland slave holder, and his son, Dickinson Gorsuch, Joshua M. Gorsuch, his nephew, Dr. Thomas Price, and two other men from Maryland, with the United States Marshal, H. H. Kline, arrived with warrants regularly issued by the United States Commissioner at Philadelphia, about daylight, at the residence of William Parker, a colored man and an escaped fugitive, about a mile and a-half from the village of Christiana, this county.

The community was settled principally by Quakers and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, but it would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the anti-slavery sentiment of Southern Lancaster county was so strong at that time as to have prevented the peaceable enforcement of the fugitive slave law in ordinary cases. Public opinion there might properly be divided into three classes, as was probably the

case throughout the most of the North. First, the more ultra abolitionist or anti-slavery people, who made no concealment of the fact that they never intended to obey the law. Seconds, the professional slave hunters and nigger haters, who obsequiously followed the leaders of the South and obeyed their slightest impulse. Third, the great conservative and far more numerous class, who doubtless felt a pang at the hard service imposed upon them by the law, and who ostensibly and Tor political reasons would profess to support it, but who would secretly aid the fugitive in his flight. To this latter class Castner Hanway, the sometimes recognized hero of the riot, belonged. He doubtless sympathized on that morning with the negroes and desired them to win the battle, if one should commence, which they did. But he would much preferred to have had the Marshal and his posse, or rather Gorsuch and his posse, accept his advice and leave without a struggle, as Kline would have done, (he being pronounced by all parties as the most consummate coward ever seen in battle). This being done, he doubtless would have consulted with the negroes and aided them to escape. But that he ever gave the insolent answers to the Marshal or resisted his authority, as Kline, the champion liar as well as coward, testified on the trial, was not correct. Hanway himself never claimed that he did, and Parker's only regret, as he read Kline's testimony or had it read to him after his escape to Canada, was that he had not killed him on the spot. That Hanway was the first of the white neighbors on the ground was not because he started first, but because Elijah Lewis, when on his way to the place, stopped at his (Hanway's) residence, the brick mill in the valley, now abandoned, and asked him to go along. Hanway, instead of accompanying him on foot, mounted his horse and arrived some few minutes before Lewis on the scene of action. Instinct, stronger than reason, doubtless told the negroes that he was not their enemy, and hoped that he might be turned to account as a friend. But he was there by no prearrangement with them, nor had they regarded him as a special counsellor. Neither was he a member of the Society of Friends as has

been so frequently asserted. He simply lived there in a Friends' community ; was indicted for treason with Lewis and Joseph C. Scarlet, both of whom were members of the Society, and thus historians have naturally fallen into that error' one recent writer in the Philadelphia *Times* calling it the riot led by three non-resistant Quakers. Elijah Lewis, as already stated, arrived some minutes later than Hanway, and when commanded by the Marshal to assist in the arresting of the fugitives, is reported to **have** said : "That my conscience will not allow me to do." Joseph C. Scarlet, the other white man who enjoyed the distinction of being indicted for treason and of being shipped to Philadelphia in a cattle oar with a lot oT negroes *to* answer the charge, was not on the ground at all. His treason consisted in notifying the blacks of their danger and admonishing them to prepare for it. He seemed to be one who actually did have some intimation in advance of what was likely to happen. He was a man of mighty strength and brawn, and had he been upon the ground, and had occasion, he doubtless would have proved a very good man for slave hunters to keep away from, notwithstanding his Quaker principles.

With this brief mention of these actors in the drama, let me say a word about the real hero of the tragedy. His name was William Parker, the man in whose house the fugitives were concealed, some four in number, for whom the Marshal had warrants. Parker, born himself a slave in Maryland, had made his escape in his early manhood some years before to Pennsylvania, and had settled in southern Lancaster county. Whether he had drifted into that section through that mysterious and invisible agency, the underground railroad, I am not able to say ; at all events, he there lived and worked for several years among the farmers, never deeming it necessary to advance on to another station. He at once impressed himself not only upon his own race, but upon the whites with whom be came in contact as well, as a man of wonderful force of character. I remember seeing him but once, and that was as far back almost as memory goes ; but his personality is distinctly impressed upon my mind. He was at my father's house

the day of the riot, after it was over, but I did not see him on that occasion, nor did my father, as he was away from home. He was a dark mulatto of medium height, wonderful muscle, and possessed of resolution, courage and action. The neighborhood was rife with stories of his physical feats. He could walk leisurely up to an ordinary post fence, leap over it without touching it with his hands, work hard all day, and travel from ten to fifteen miles during the night to organize his people into a society for their protection against the numerous kidnappers who were constantly committing depredations through the community, or rescue one of their number that had been captured, flog the villain who was carrying him away, and return to his labor in the morning with a bullet in his leg, apparently unfatigued and keep his secret well to himself: He was by common consent recognized by his race Ain the neighborhood as their leader. They depended upon him with abiding confidence to keep them from being taken back to slavery. They regarded him as their leader, their protector, their Moses, and their lawgiver all at once. The white people of the neighborhood knew that he possessed these qualities, that he was the Toussaint L' °overture of his people; that he could have commanded an army bad he been educated, and he challenged the universal respect of all of them who did not have occasion to fear him.

He of all the mch of his despised race along the border in that slave hunting era could have led the riot. Without him there would have been no riot. The rest would have fled upon receipt of the news that their masters were coming, or would have surrendered and gone back with them to slavery. When he was approached by the United States Marshal with his warrants on that eventful morning, his revolvers and his armed assistants, clothed with all the panoply of authority, this colored Spartan stood at the threshold of his humble home and bid him defiance. And in this, be it remembered, lies the real significance of the Christiana riot. In all the slave hunting era, during all the period of mob violence attending the anti-slavery struggle up to that time, there had been no open resistance to the authority of the govern-

ment. This man advanced out in his yard and struck the United States down in open battle in the person of Edward Gorsuch. It was this that caused the matter to be published in every paper in the land, to be noticed even in England, and made the entire slave power tremble from the Potomac to the Rio Grande. It was not because Gorsuch was killed, or that his son and nephew were badly wounded, that the community was scoured for weeks by bandits disguised as United States Marshals, or that the United States Marines were sent to a quiet, peaceful neighborhood to terrorize it ; but because one brave man, preferring death to slavery,said, "I don't care for you or the United States ; there will be no slaves taken back from here while I am alive."

It is easy for a white man sitting in the Executive Mansion of a great State, with a powerful public sentiment behind him, to say on a question largely sentimental, "There will be no flags returned while I am governor ;" but it required nerve of the stronger quality to utter Parker's words in the face of his powerful and venerated enemy. Gen. Taylor said at Buena Vista to a lot of half-Spanish Mexican drones, " Gen. Taylor never surrenders," and the people made him President, General Sheridan arrived at Winchester in time to say to his brave educated Saxon American army, "Face the other way, boys, you are going the wrong direction," and by his inspiring presence changed defeat to victory, and poetry has made him immortal. General Parker, this representative of a despised race, held his little band of ignorant followers together by the imperial command, "The first man that offers to surrender I will shoot." It was his will and his alone that laid Gorsuch still in death, whom he always spoke of as *"a* fine soldier and a brave man." And by the aid of that God who notices even the sparrow's fall and sometimes condescends to uphold and strengthen the good right arm of him who strives for the liberties of himself, his wife and children, he made his way through every obstacle to Canada.

And now, when the Lancaster County Historical Society visits this most tragic spot of all within our borders ; when they propose to erect some small monument to mark the spot where occurred this first

battle of the American conflict ; while we all stand reverently at the memories of Grant, of Sherman and of Sheridan, of Reynolds, of Hancock and of Meade, **men** from whose well-decked brows I would not take a single flower, let us not forget to make one small niche in our tablet of heroes for this Afro-American, **William** Parker.

Author: Whitson, Thomas.

Title: William Parker, the hero of the Christiana Riot / by Thomas Whitson, Esq.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Parker, William.
Riots--Pennsylvania--Christiana.
Christiana (Pa.)--History.
Christiana (Pa.)--Race relations.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1896-97

Description: [27]-34 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 1, no. 1

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.1
Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

==========

++
Institution Name
Institution Address
Institution Phone Number
Institution E-mail Address