

Slavery in Washington County, Maryland Mid- 19th Century (1845–54)

Washington County's geographical location played a significant part in the slave trade in the region. The county was situated between slave-free Pennsylvania to the north and slave state Virginia (West Virginia in 1863) to the south. The narrow boundaries of western Washington County at Hancock and Williamsport provided a convenient route for runaway slaves from Virginia and Maryland to Pennsylvania. This was further enhanced by the east–west corridor of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, the major north–south and east–west roadways, and by 1841, the Franklin Railroad (and subsequent railroads) providing a link to Chambersburg, PA and beyond.¹⁷ As a result, there were several slave markets in the county and a considerable presence of slave catchers inserting Washington County residents directly into the slavery/state's rights battle playing out on the national scene.



American cartoon print filing series (Library of Congress) Published in: American political prints, 1766-1876. Bernard F. Reilly, Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991, entry 1830-1. In the public domain.

By the 19th century, slavery in Maryland was not as prominent in the western, central and northern counties as it was in the southern counties of the state. This was due to the strong tobacco economy in southern Maryland. Tobacco was a labor–intensive crop that wore out the soil. The other regions of the state, including western Maryland, began to diversify their farming and grow grains and livestock that did not require year–round labor. Slave labor became uneconomical, and paid seasonal labor—black and white—dominated the agricultural labor pool. One of the results was that African Americans were able to learn diversified skills, and those who were still slaves had more opportunity to hire themselves out and save money to buy their freedom.¹⁸ African Americans were able to establish communities, more stable family units, and social organizations because they were not part of the more isolated plantation structure the lower southern states set up to

encourage isolation and discipline. The different emphasis on slave labor in many regions of Maryland led to a change in the state constitution in 1850, which was made in order to safeguard the master-slave relationship. A clause was inserted stating that the legislature could not change the existing relationship between master and slave.¹⁹

Due to its location between north and south, Washington County was a microcosm of the slavery issues, which was played out in the Hagerstown newspapers. In Washington County, the slave population dropped from 3,201 in 1820 to 2,090 in 1850. In March of 1853, the Hagerstown *News* published an assessment of the slave population in Washington County made by a Mr. Harbaugh. It was reprinted in the 16 March 1853 *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light* newspaper detailing the population of males, females and children and the total value for each of the districts in Washington County. The total number of slaves in the county is listed as 1,788 with

¹⁷ William J. Switala, Underground Railroad in Delaware, Maryland, and West Virginia (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004), 74.

¹⁸ A Guide to the History of Slavery in Maryland, MD State Archives and University of MD, 2007 p. 12; James S. Van Ness, “Economic and Cultural Changes: 1800-1850” in *Maryland: A History 1632-1974*, Richard Walsh and William Lloyd Fox, editors (Baltimore, Maryland: Maryland Historical Society, 1974), 219.

¹⁹ Richard R. Duncan, “The Era of the Civil War” in *Maryland: A History 1632-1974*, Richard Walsh and William Lloyd Fox ed. (Baltimore, Maryland: Maryland Historical Society, 1974), 360.

total value of \$317,000.²⁰ In 1850, the southern tobacco counties in Maryland had 48,000 slaves: over one half of the slave population in the state (90,368).²¹ Although Washington County had only about 2.5 percent of the slaves in the state and 2.5 percent (1,828) of the 74,723 free African Americans in the state at this time, Hagerstown was a noted regional slave market and a Mecca for slave catchers due to the close proximity to Pennsylvania and freedom to the north via the C and O Canal, turnpikes and the railroad.²² There were four slave markets in Washington County: Sharpsburg, Beaver Creek, and two in Hagerstown at the Court House and on Jonathan Street. In Hagerstown, the slaves were sold mainly to the southern states.²³ Two of the slave agents operating out of the area were William Frenner and Elijah McDowell. According to the *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light* of 30 January 1850, the South lost \$150,000 with Washington County losing \$10,000 per year to runaway slaves.

There were five escape routes through Washington County according to William J. Switala in his book Underground Railroad in Delaware, Maryland, and West Virginia. These routes were Boonsboro to Waynesboro, PA; Hancock to Mercersburg, PA; the Potomac River to Rouzerville, PA; Hagerstown to Cumberland; and Hagerstown to Chambersburg, PA.²⁴ The Virginia Path (roughly today's Route 11) started at Williamsport and paralleled the Conococheague Creek north to Chambersburg, Shippensburg, Carlisle and Harrisburg.²⁵ The Hagerstown newspapers are full of notices for runaway slaves from Virginia and Maryland. One in the 23 August 1854 *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light* reported the commitment to the jail in Hagerstown of Charles and Sarah Johnson (a.k.a. Sandy and Matilda Welcome). They escaped from the vicinity of Leesburg, VA. Another ad from the *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light*'s 4 October 1854 issue advertises Daniel Dailey (a. k. a. Charles Scott) committed to jail in Hagerstown after being caught escaping from William S. Haslum of Howard Co, Maryland. The notices provide detailed descriptions of the runaways. For example, Charles Johnson, of Virginia, is described as being "about 5 feet 5 or 6 inches high, stout made, of a dark copper complexion, and about 32 years of age, had on a pair of dark mixed sattinett pants..."

The influx of escaped slaves from Virginia was so heavy in 1845 that an editorial from the *Herald of Freedom* on 18 February 1846 stated that "it is very evident to our minds, that the abolitionists of the North have some sort of secret influences at work amongst the slaves in Maryland and Virginia" to induce the slaves to find freedom and liberty in the north. Citizens in Clarke County, Virginia, held a meeting 31 January 1846²⁶ to

RUNAWAYS.

WAS committed to the Jail of Washington County, on the 19th August inst., a Negro Man who calls himself CHAS. JOHNSON, alias SANDY WELCOME. He is about 5 feet 5 or 6 inches high, stout made, of a dark copper complexion, and about 32 years of age, had on a pair of dark mixed sattinett pants, black cloth coat and drab linsey over-coat, and says he belongs to Miss Grady of Surcker's Ferry, Va.

Also—SARAH JOHNSON, alias MATILDA WELCOME his wife, and child about a year old. Sarah or Matilda is 5 feet 4 or 5 inches high, black complexion and from 28 to 30 years of age. Had on a dark calico dress, a plaid woollen shawl, besides other clothing—the child is of copper color.—She says she belongs to Dr. Cross of Leesburg, Va. and left from his farm about 5 miles from Leesburg.

The owner or owner's of the above described negroes are desired to prove property, pay charges, and take them away, else they will be discharged according to law.

Aug. 23, 1854.

WM. LOGAN,
Sheriff.

* * Balt. Clipper, Easton Gazette and Nat. Intelligencer, publish 3t.

Herald of Freedom and Torch Light, 1854

²⁰ "Slave Statistics," Hagerstown *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light*, 16 March, 1853.

²¹ A Guide to the History of Slavery..., 13.

²² Max L. Grivno, "There Slavery Cannot Dwell": Agriculture and Labor in Northern Maryland, 1790-1860 (Dissertation Abstract, University of Maryland, 2007), 207. For a personal account of escape using the canal see "Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave," from *The Liberator*, January 10, 1840, found on <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/curry/curry.html>.

²³ Heritage Resource Group, Inc., "Heritage Preservation Project, Jonathan Street, Hagerstown, MD" (Cambridge, MD: November, 2002), 13.

²⁴ Switala, Underground Railroad in Delaware Maryland, and West Virginia, 100-104.

²⁵ William J. Switala, Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001), 104-105.

²⁶ *Herald of Freedom*, 11 February 1846.

discuss resolutions on how to stop runaways and those who aided and abetted them and how to increase the effectiveness of the slave patrols. They also resolved to encourage surrounding counties to do the same. This was a continuing problem in spite of the tightening of the law with the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

The citizens of western Maryland, as slave holders, expected Pennsylvania and the other non–slave states to uphold the Fugitive Slave laws and return runaway slaves. Pennsylvania and many northern states passed personal liberty laws to protect free African Americans from being kidnapped into slavery.²⁷ Earlier in 1847, the Pennsylvania legislature had passed a personal liberty law addressing the constitutionality of the state’s obligations in restoring fugitive slaves to their masters. The Federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 required that states, specifically free–states, return runaway slaves to their masters. The 1847 Pennsylvania law was “an act to prevent kidnapping, to preserve the public peace, and to prohibit the exercise of certain powers heretofore exercised by Judges, Justices of the Peace, Aldermen and Jailors, and to repeal certain slave laws.” State officials could not aid in the recovery of fugitive slaves nor house them in state prisons. The law “authorized judges to issue writs of Habeas Corpus.” This resulted in a marked decline in the value of slaves.²⁸

An editorial in the 18 March 1847 Hagerstown *Torch Light and Public Advertiser* accused the state of Pennsylvania of “agitating” the question of reclaiming fugitive slaves and disturbing the harmony and good relations between Pennsylvania and its southern neighbors. It further accused Pennsylvania of infringing on the constitutional rights of the slave-holding states. The editor also believed that this stance would actually retard the cause of emancipation,²⁹ an issue of debate in the slave-holding states.



Part of: American cartoon print filing series (Library of Congress), New York: by Hoff and Bloede, 1850. In the public domain..

The volatility of the slave issue is illustrated by the events surrounding the riots in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the death of James H. Kennedy of Hagerstown. In June of 1847, Kennedy, a prominent citizen and slave holder from Hagerstown, went to Shippensburg with several other gentlemen to reclaim ten to twelve fugitive slaves.³⁰ At Carlisle, where the fugitives were being held, Kennedy was fatally wounded by a mob of African–American men and women as he tried to recover his property.³¹ As the majority of local residents did not try to prevent the riot, a bitter controversy was touched off between Washington County (through the Maryland legislature) and the Pennsylvania legislature over the handling of runaway slaves. Maryland newspapers denounced Pennsylvania for allowing the murder of Kennedy to happen. By January of 1848, resolutions were being drawn up by members of the Maryland legislature to be addressed to

the Pennsylvania legislature asking for repeal of the 1847 personal liberty law. The Pennsylvania legislature did not comply.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 placed the returning of fugitive slaves to their masters under Federal jurisdiction. This was an attempt to preserve the Union, but northerners were quick to resist whenever possible by not cooperating in arrest, court actions and by assisting in escapes.³²

²⁷ Slavery and Freedom in Pennsylvania, 150 Pennsylvania Civil War website,

<http://www.pacivilwar150.com/Understand/SlaveryandFreedom>.

²⁸ Grivno, 204.

²⁹ Hagerstown *Torch Light and Public Advertiser*, 18 March, 1847.

³⁰ Hagerstown *Herald of Freedom*, 2 June, 1847.

³¹ Grivno, 206.

³² Fugitive Slave Acts (1793, 1850), eNotes.com, from Major Acts of Congress, Gale Cengage, 2004.

The 1850 act necessitated new personal liberty laws in the Free states. Pennsylvania did not change its law until 1860. Generally, these laws

“prohibited the use of the state’s jails for detaining fugitives; provided state officers, under various names, throughout the state, to act as counsel for persons alleged to be fugitives; secured to all such persons the benefits of *habeas corpus* and trial by jury; required the identi[ty] of the fugitive to be proved by two witnesses; forbade state judges and officers to issue writs or give any assistance to the claimant; and imposed a heavy fine and imprisonment for the crime of forcibly seizing or representing as a slave any free person with intent to reduce him to slavery.”³³

This served to further antagonize the slave holding–states. The editor of the *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light* wrote in the 5 January 1853 issue, “But the original wrong, which has been the theme of so much heated discussion in the halls of legislation, and the occasion of so much fierce excitement among the people, still exists to a very great extent, although the Fugitive Slave law is in full force.” The editor goes on to say that the South would continue to feel alienated as long as the North “practically fail[ed] to fulfill its obligations to the South...”³⁴

Within this atmosphere, Harriet Beecher Stowe published, in 1853, Uncle Tom’s Cabin. This fictional story added fuel to the slavery issue during the 1850s and elicited responses from the international, national and local newspapers including the *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light*. Its publication also precipitated a number of “anti-Tom” novels including Aunt Phillis’s Cabin and The Planter. Abolitionists employed a variety of means to communicate the immoral, degrading and cruel institution of slavery. Newspapers, slave narratives and lectures were very useful in getting the message across, but Mrs. Stowe’s novel about slavery, based on her own experiences and those told to her by former slaves, reached the widest audience. Stowe wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which placed authority of returning fugitive slaves to their masters under Federal jurisdiction, in an effort to make a strong statement against slavery. She had grown up in an abolitionist family although she was not an active abolitionist.³⁵



Harriet Beecher Stowe
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Stowe published her manuscript as a serial in the *National Era* in June 1851. It was so well–received that she published it as a book in 1852. It was read worldwide. In the first year, 300,000 copies were sold in America and 200,000 copies in England. Dramatizations of the story continued well into the 20th century. Although well– received by the anti-slavery faction and by most black Americans, southerners were enraged, calling her portrayal of slavery criminal, defamatory and false.³⁶ The pro-slavery authors, north and south, responded with novels and publications showing how happy the slaves were in contrast to northern white workers’ wretched living and working conditions. One such book was Aunt Phillis’s Cabin; or, Southern Life As It Is, by Mary Henderson Eastman published in 1852 by Lippincott, Grambo and Company of Philadelphia. This novel, like others of its kind, was a direct response to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s portrayal of slavery.³⁷

The Hagerstown *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light*, a pro-slavery Whig newspaper, ran only one advertisement for Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin but increased the number of editorials supporting the

³³ Alexander Johnston, “Personal Liberty Laws,” The Online Library of Liberty (Liberty Fund).

³⁴ “A Mark of No Good Neighborhood,” Hagerstown *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light*, 5 January, 1853.

³⁵ “Slave narratives and Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” Africans In American Resource Bank, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2958.html>.

³⁶ “Slave narratives and Uncle Tom’s Cabin;” Proquest Historical Newspapers, *Baltimore Sun*.

³⁷ “Anti-Uncle Tom Novels” and “Aunt Phillis’s Cabin,” in Stephen Railton, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sitemap.html>.

popular southern view that blacks were much better off as slaves in the south than free in the north. It ran three notices for the pro-slavery publications - The Planter, written by a northern man; Aunt Phillis' Cabin; and Life in the South as It Is, Uncle Tom's Cabin. The only bookseller in Hagerstown openly advertising the sale of Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin was William Stewart on West Washington Street at the Square. In 1852, *The Baltimore Sun*, not surprisingly, followed this general pattern as well. *The Chicago Tribune* advertised the play, and *The New York Times* published prolific advertisements for the play along with good and bad reviews.³⁸

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN; or life among the Lowly, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, 2 v.1. For sale at June 16. STEWART'S Book Store.

AUNT PHILLIS' CABIN!
AT STEWART'S BOOK MART.
DEFINITION OF ABOLITIONISM.—Born in fanaticism, nurtured in violence, and exists in disorder. Turning aside the institutions and commands of God, treading under foot the love of Country, despising the laws of nature and the nation, it is dead to every feeling of patriotism and brotherly kindness; full of strife and pride, strewn the path of the slave with thorns, and of the master with difficulties, accomplishing nothing good.
Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life in the South, as It Is, by Smith—with a large number of other new publications—will be received in a few days.
 August 25, 1852.

The editorials reinforced the theme that northerners were misguided in their belief that slaves were better off free. The runaway slave was abandoned in the North to be abused, cheated and discarded until he “[sank] to the lowest depths of degradation, crime and poverty...”³⁹ The editor reprinted a piece from the *Martinsburg Gazette* titled “Facts for the Next Edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin,” in which the writer provides evidence that freed slaves prefer to return to their masters and calling Mrs. Stowe's book exaggerated fiction.⁴⁰

Herald of Freedom and Torch Light, 1852

The controversy over enforcing the fugitive slave laws, locally and regionally, continued until the end of slavery (1864 in Maryland by state Constitutional Amendment) in spite of the passage of federal laws to prevent individuals from interfering with the return of slaves to their masters. Although Washington County had relatively few slaves, its citizens were connected to the issues of slavery, abolition and states' rights on the national stage through local newspaper accounts, editorials and advertisements. Many were personally affected because they lived and worked in a relatively narrow geographic area providing a convenient conduit for both runaway slaves and those seeking to prevent them from attaining freedom.

³⁸ Proquest Historical Newspapers, *Baltimore Sun*; *Chicago Tribune*; *New York Times*.

³⁹ ‘Runaway Slaves in the North,’ *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light*, 8 December 1852.

⁴⁰ “Facts for the Next Edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin,” *Martinsburg Gazette* in *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light*, 8 December 1852.

**Population of Hagerstown, Washington County, and Maryland,
total, slave and free African Americans**

(Slavery abolished in Maryland 1 November 1864)

| | Total population | | | Slaves | | Free African Americans | |
|------|------------------|-------------------|------------|----------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| | Maryland | Washington County | Hagerstown | Maryland | Washington County | Maryland | Washington County |
| 1790 | 319,728 | 15,822 | N/A | 103,036 | 1,286 | 8,043 | 64 |
| 1800 | 341,543 | 18,650 | N/A | 105,635 | 2,200 | 19,587 | 342 |
| 1810 | 380,546 | 18,730 | 2,342 | 111,502 | 2,656 | 133,927 | 483 |
| 1820 | 407,350 | 23,075 | 2,690 | 107,398 | 3,201 | 39,730 | 627 |
| 1830 | 447,040 | 25,268 | 3,257 | 102,994 | 2,909 | 52,938 | 1,082 |
| 1840 | 470,019 | 28,850 | 3,754 | 89,737 | 2,546 | 62,078 | 1,580 |
| 1850 | 583,034 | 30,848 | N/A | 90,368 | 2,090 | 74,723 | 1,828 |
| 1860 | 687,049 | 31,417 | 4,132 | 87,189 | 1,435 | 83,942 | 1,677 |
| 1870 | 780,894 | 34,712 | N/A | 0 | 0 | 175,391 | 2,838 |

Source: Geospatial and Statistical Data Center University of Virginia Library,
<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php/county.php>

Slavery was abolished in the United States with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on December 18, 1865