Safe Harbor
Fugitives among Friends

By Kathryn Grover

In February of 1854, New Bedford merchant Andrew Robeson asked a neighbor in Fall River for a favor--he needed help in hiding a man on the run, identity unknown. The man had come from Norfolk, Virginia by vessel. By that time slaveholders in more than one southern city had reached the limit of their endurance with New Bedford, Massachusetts.

"The descendants of John Smith, out in Virginia . . . are lashing themselves into a furry [sic] in regard to our quiet little city of New Bedford," commented the local newspaper, the *Republican Standard.* A group of Norfolk slaveholders had come to Massachusetts to search for runaway slaves.

Details emerged in the Norfolk newspaper. The paper, the *American Beacon*, reported that Major Hodsdon, James M. Binford, Mrs. Smiley, and others had come "in pursuit of their property." One man visited New Bedford on a scouting mission, went back to Boston, and then returned to New Bedford with "two or three assistants."

Meanwhile, the major had hired a Boston attorney, who sent a letter to Deputy Marshall John D. Hathaway in New Bedford directing him "to keep a lookout, to make his plans for securing the fugitives, and to write him by every mail of the progress he made in the prosecution of his duty." Hathaway failed to respond despite the fact that the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 mandated his cooperation. With that, Hodsdon himself and his party went to New Bedford--"that den of negro thieves and fugitive protectors," as Norfolk's *Beacon* described it.

In the major's account to the *Beacon*, he says the deputy marshal reported that he "had recognized the negroes, and told the street he found them upon, but told them they were gone. He would give them no further satisfaction, except to let them know where the black friends of the negroes at present resided. Going there, the negroes were not to be found."

The frustrated Hodsdon told the *Beacon* that he and his fellow slave owners had done everything they could to keep their mission and its purpose secret. They "disguised themselves, went in different directions and used every endeavor in as silent a manner as could be, to discover the whereabouts of the fugitives." Yet their careful procedure was fruitless in New Bedford, he charged, "so generally was the matter bruited and so well posted was every citizen upon the subject."

Hodsdon said their efforts "had been made a topic from the pulpits on the day before." Moreover, bells were chiming all over the city when they arrived, "the tolling being a species of telegraph they use in that sink of iniquity and lawlessness, to let the inhabitants know that masters or officers are in search of their slave property."

The *Beacon* was outraged by the treatment the Virginians had received in the North and equally angry with Edmund Anthony, the editor of the *Republican Standard*, for referring to Hodsdon and his associates as "scoundrels." To the *Beacon* and other Virginia newspapers, the *Standard* was "the organ of the Black Guards, black fugitives, and rowdies

and Negro stealers of that rank stew of fanatics and outlaws."

"It cannot be denied," local poet and author Daniel Ricketson had written in 1853, "that a highly respectable portion of the citizens of New Bedford have ever been the firm and constant friends of the Temperance, Peace and Anti-Slavery enterprises."

Certainly fugitives saw the city as a sanctuary. In 1855 William Still of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee tried to persuade the Norfolk slave Thomas Bayne, alias Sam Nixon, to head for Canada because it was, in his view, "the safest place for all Refugees; but it was in vain to attempt to convince 'Sam' that Canada or any other place on this Continent, was quite equal to New Bedford. His heart was there, and there he resolved to go." For George Teamoh and other fugitives slaves, New Bedford was "our magnet of attraction," "the fugitive's Gibraltar."

Abolitionists of both races agreed. Samuel J. May reflected that when Frederick Douglass escaped from Baltimore in 1838, New Bedford was "the best place, on the whole, to which he could have gone," and Douglass himself stated in his first autobiography in 1845 that of all the evidence of industry, beauty, and prosperity that impressed him during his first days in the city, "the most astonishing as well as the most interesting thing to me was the condition of the colored people, a great many of whom, like myself, had escaped thither as a refuge from the hunters of men. I found many, who had not been seven years out of their chains, living in finer houses, and evidently enjoying more of the comforts of life, than the average of slaveholders in Maryland."

Many contemporary writers attributed these facts to the influence of the Society of Friends, who, though much diminished as a sect by 1850, were believed to have set an enduring tone in New Bedford. "There is, and there ever has been, in New Bedford since its origin, a strong leaven of the old fashioned Quaker principles," Ricketson wrote in 1853, "and though not so ardently represented by the 'peaceful sect' as it was wont to be in past and more prosperous days of the Society of Friends, still the most casual observer will perceive the influence of their principles upon this community."

The normally critical Douglass felt less apprehensive in New Bedford when he saw "the broad brim and the plain, quaker dress, which met me at every turn . . . 'I am among the Quakers,' thought I, 'and am safe.'"

New Bedford's heritage of dissent is a strong one. The city chafed from the beginning at the kinds of towns Separatists and Puritans established. It did not have a central common with a meetinghouse at one end; it had no meetinghouse at all for the first thirty years of its existence. Those who initially inhabited the township of Dartmouth, from which New Bedford was set off, settled in scattered fashion on large farms or along the tidal rivers and among bands of the Apponagansett, Acoaxet, and Acushnet peoples. By 1686 enough Quakers had settled in the township to establish a meetinghouse. In the 1750s their population grew rapidly with residents from Nantucket who left the island to find a harbor deep enough to float the heavier whaling ships needed to go further afield for whales.

The handful of abolitionists in this country before the American Revolution were largely Friends or thought of themselves as Friends--even if the sect itself, as historian Jean Soderlund points out, tended to set a "gradualist, segregationalist, and paternalistic" tone.

The situation began to change in the early 1830s when William Lloyd Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society began to call for immediate abolition.

Narratives document that a number of escaping slaves believed antislavery reform was vital among the religious group that called itself the Friends.

One of the earliest fugitives, Robert Voorhis, known as "the Hermit of Massachusetts," said that he had heard much "of the hospitality of the Quakers (or Friends,) . . . as a class who were zealous advocates for the emancipation of their fellow beings in bondage." He relied on their assistance in his two attempts in the 1790s to escape from Charleston, South Carolina.

Yet numerous documents attest to the fact that abolitionism among Quakers was a personal decision, as it was among Americans of other creeds, and depended on one's interpretation of principles. The Quaker historian Thomas Hamm has pointed out that the Friends tended to oppose slavery on two grounds--the suffering that slaves endured and the fact that unfree people were kept from understanding and living their lives "according to the light within them." But these beliefs did not always, or even usually, impel Quakers to embrace the notion that blacks were whites' "social equals," as Jean Soderlund puts it in *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit*.

Samuel Ringgold Ward, a fugitive slave and Congregationalist minister, noted, "They will give us good advice. They will aid in giving us a partial education--but never in a Quaker school, beside their own children. Whatever they do for us savors of pity, and is done at arm's length."

Some New Bedford Quaker families were deeply committed to antislavery. One of those people was William Rotch, Sr., who was a member of a committee appointed by the New England Yearly Meeting to visit all Friends' meetings in the region and "investigate their antislavery testimony." The committee advised in its 1770 report that Quakers should set free all slaves they owned unless they were too young or too old to support themselves.

Rotch, then living on Nantucket, frequently purchased the indentures of men for his whaling crews. In 1785, trying to arrange the passage of the *Canton* from Nantucket to London, he directed his son William, Jr. and son-in-law Samuel Rodman to secure "the Indentures of the Masters of some of the Blacks, with their full power, not only to retain their present voiges, but to secure those whose apprenticeship may not have expir'd in future vizt."

Although the black recruitment brought much-needed crew on the labor-scarce island, Rotch's interest in antislavery was more than pragmatic. In 1787 he wrote Moses Brown, a Quaker merchant and abolitionist, about the proposed federal Constitution:

> Thou queries how friends can be active in establishing the new form of government, which so much favours slavery, alas in this point I must refer thee to some advocate for it, as to my own part my heart has been often pained since the publication of the doings of the Convention; and much disappointed I am as I had entertained some hope that so many wise men, would have found some system of Government, founded on equity & justice, that thereby it might have acquir'd some strength and energy, and that it might be on such a

> basis that we as a Society might lend our aid in establishing it so far as it tended to peace and morality; but we may say in truth that the wisdom of man (as man) can or shall not work the righteousness of God; and whatever high encomiums are given to it (the Constitution) it is evident to me it is founded on Slavery and that is on Blood, because I understand, some of the southern members utterly refused doing anything unless this horrid part was admitted.

At the time Rotch and Samuel Rodman were involved in the case of Cato, a black slave whom Rodman had hired two years earlier from his Newport owner, John Slocum. Cato had come to look upon Nantucket and his life in the Rodman family as his "asylum," and Rodman and Rotch tried to convince Slocum to free the man. Slocum refused, but after much "friendly" persuasion he finally agreed to manumit him in a year's time.

By the late 1780s Rotch's son, William, Jr. had taken up the cause and was if anything more willing to "spend and be spent." In 1789, on behalf of the Providence Abolition Society, but largely with his own funds, he sued the owner and master of the brigantine *Hope* on the charge of having fitted out as a slaver in Boston in June of 1788, three months after the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had passed a law banning the slave trade. After selling its cargo of 116 slaves in the West Indies in February and March of 1789, the vessel put ashore at Westport. Its crew fled to Rhode Island to escape the Massachusetts law, and the *Hope*'s captain came to New Bedford to clear the vessel's cargo for Newport, where its owner lived. Rotch hired Boston attorneys to prosecute the case and in March 1791 the Court of Common Pleas at Taunton found for the Abolition Society. The *Hope*'s owner appealed. In October the Supreme Judicial Court upheld the lower-court ruling, as did the court at Boston in February 1792.

Rotch by this time was heavily involved in collecting information on instances of cruelty aboard New England ships to "slaves & crew" and in supporting antislavery in any way he could. To Rotch, the uprising of slaves in Santo Domingo in 1791, in which the recently freed Toussaint L'Ouverture took an active part, was an event to be applauded. Among "the thinking people of New England whose minds are unclouded with the dark seeds of slavery," he wrote to his uncle Francis, "it is looked upon that the struggle on the part of the Negroes & Molattoes is just as was the American struggle for liberty."

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