

The Penalty Of Seeking Freedom

by Lynne Belluscio

Recently I received a request for information about the penalties for helping an escaped slave.

Prior to 1850, there wasn't much concern in the North if you provided shelter or food for a fugitive slave, but in 1850 Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, also known as the Compromise Act. It was now illegal to harbor and help slaves. People who had been sympathetic to the Underground Railroad and the efforts to help slaves live free in the North, were now torn between their moral views and the need to obey the law.

The local newspapers carried articles about people who were caught helping slaves. There were also articles that easily inflamed the abolitionists, with stories of families torn apart and sold back into slavery.

On October 1, 1851, a group of people in Syracuse rescued William Henry, a slave known as "Jerry". He had come north from Tennessee but had been caught in Syracuse. One of his rescuers, William Salmon, who was white, was acquitted. But Enoch Reid, a black man, met another fate. His trial was reported in the *LeRoy Gazette*: "The first conviction for violating the Fugitive Slave Law was had at Albany on Monday. This conviction was against Enoch Reid, alleged to have been one of the rescuers of Jerry at Syracuse some two years ago. N.K. Hall late Post Master General, a ranting Silver Gray*, was recently appointed by Mr. Fillmore at the trial of those who sympathized with Jerry for committing the crime of seeking



his own personal freedom, was before this Mr. Hall.

The telegraph says the jury were all right Friday, unable to agree, but were not discharged by the Judge. The Judge sent them back when the Court adjourned until Monday morning. It is understood in the City Hall that the jury at one time stood four for conviction and eight for acquittal and at another period were equally divided. P.S. The jury came in about 11 o'clock and rendered a verdict of guilty. Reid was then held to bail in the sum of \$4,000 for his appearance in Court on Monday morning."

So far I haven't been able to find out what happened to Enoch Reid, however I found another

article in the *Gazette* in 1854 that mentioned that in Milwaukee a person convicted of helping an escaped slave could be fined up to \$1,000 and imprisoned for six months. In addition, a \$1,000 fine could be levied for each fugitive slave "lost".

The stories about the Underground Railroad in LeRoy were recorded by Elijah Huftelin. He was just a young man when he began helping Daniel McDonald on the Underground Railroad in the 1850s. For years he kept the work a secret, until, he published

two small books. He recalled several stories about the slaves that came through LeRoy seeking freedom but he never mentioned people getting caught. He did allude to the situation after 1850: "So it will be seen that feeling ran high in our town for many years before the enactment of the fugitive slave law, but upon its passage, there was almost a complete revolution of public sentiment. Then a citizen could not do a plain duty without danger or being fined or imprisoned, perhaps both. - - The years between 1850 and 1860 were years of such fear and trembling among men as those who are old enough to remember them will never forget and will ever be thankful that they came through that period of time when it seemed as though one half of the nation must be killed for performing a duty and the other half for not performing it."

*Silver Grays were a faction of the New York State Whig Party, including President Millard Fillmore, who supported the Compromise of 1850. The main portion of the Whig Party, led by William Seward and Thurlow Weed opposed the Compromise Act. At the 1850 New York State Whig Party convention in Syracuse a group of delegates, led by silver-haired Francis Granger of Canandaigua, walked out in protest of the party's opposition to the Compromise Act and became known as the "Silver Grays."

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