

Let's honor county's black history

One-hundred-and-sixty-five years ago, William Thomas, a runaway slave who settled in Wilkes-Barre, made history trying to protect his freedom from three federal marshals intent on returning him to slavery.

The event resulted in a national controversy over state sovereignty in the prosecution of the federal Fugitive Slave Law and heightened the tensions between North and South that led to the Civil War. Yet there is no marker honoring Thomas's courage or the history-making event itself on the site where it occurred.

On September 3, 1853, Thomas, a bus boy, was clearing tables at the Phoenix Hotel on River Street when U.S. Federal marshal George Wynkoop and two of his deputies spotted him. The fugitive tried to defend himself with a fork and carving knife, but the marshals beat him severely and shackled one of his wrists before he broke free.

Thomas dashed outside and waded into the Susquehanna River up to his chin. The marshals stood on the riverbank, their colts revolvers drawn, threatening to shoot if he did not surrender. The

runaway refused, declaring that he would "rather die than be returned to slavery."

When the marshals began shooting, the gunfire attracted a crowd of black residents who created a diversion. It was long enough for the wounded Thomas to wade to the other side of the river. With the aid of William Gildersleeve, a white Underground Railroad agent, Thomas escaped to Canada.

The Wilkes-Barre sheriff, Gilbert Burrows, arrested the marshals, charging them with "inciting a riot" and "assault and battery with the intent to kill." But Judge Robert C. Grier issued a writ of habeas corpus to bring the sheriff and his prisoners before the U.S. Circuit Court in Philadelphia.

In early October, Grier, who identified with the Southern wing of the Supreme Court, heard testimony from Burrows, Gildersleeve and the three federal marshals among others. Afterward, he ruled that a federal officer could not be prosecuted by state authorities while enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act, a

federal law, and dismissed the case on the grounds of "insufficient evidence" against the marshals.

Known as "Maxwell v. Righter," the Wilkes-Barre Fugitive Slave Case caused bitter consternation among abolitionists across the country because it brought into question whether or not

slavery was limited to the South and if a Northern state had a legal right to challenge a federal law it considered unconscionable.

Calling upon all abolitionists to "come to the rescue of liberty," Frederick Douglass, a former slave and the most renowned black orator of the antebellum period, made Wilkes-Barre synonymous with the patriotic stand against the British during the Revolutionary War.

Twelve years later, Douglass's vision came to fruition with the establishment of the Thirteenth Amendment, an enduring legacy of William Thomas's personal struggle to preserve his freedom. Yet there is still no public acknowledgement of that legacy on



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the site where it occurred.

Of the 64 Pennsylvania historical markers located in Luzerne County, not one is dedicated to an African American. The only marker that references the 1853 Fugitive Slave case is located at 20 East Ross Street in Wilkes-Barre, where the home of white abolitionist William Gildersleeve once stood.

Having served on the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's Marker Committee, I realize that the existence of the Gildersleeve marker will discourage PHMC from agreeing to another one dedicated to the African American role in the 1853 Fugitive Slave incident.

I am not saying that Gildersleeve is unworthy of being honored for his heroic efforts as an Underground Railroad agent, only that the state or the county has an obligation to acknowledge publicly the African American role in that significant historical event.

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