

The Christia

By William C. Kashatus

\$200 Reward.

AWAY from the subscriber, on the night of Thursday, the 30th of September,

FIVE NEGRO SLAVES,

To-wit: one Negro man, his wife, and three children.
The man is a black negro, full height, very erect, his face a little thin. He is about forty years of age, and calls himself *Washington Reed*, and is known by the name of *Washington*. He is probably well dressed, possibly takes with him an ivory headed cane, and is of good address. Several of his teeth are gone.

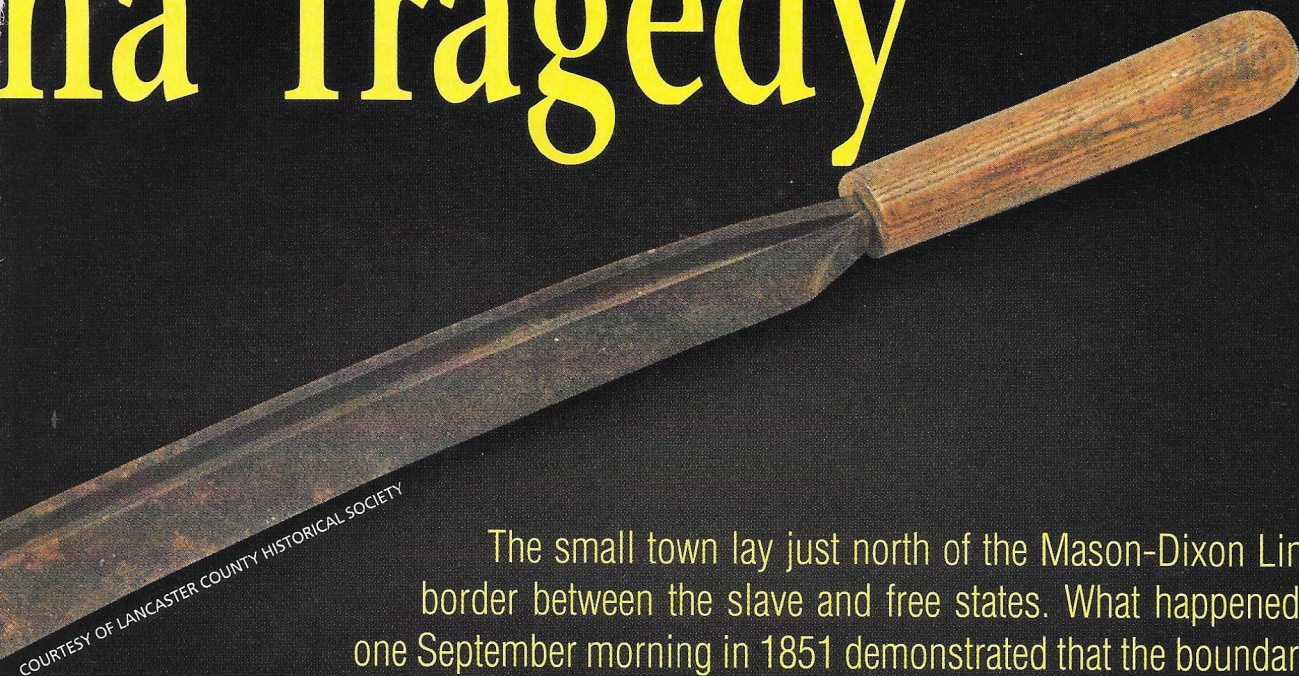
Mary, his wife, is about thirty years of age, a bright mulatto woman, and quite stout and strong. The oldest of the children is a boy, of the name of *FIELDING*, twelve years of age, a dark mulatto with heavy eyelids. He probably wore a new cloth cap.

MATILDA, the second child, is a girl, six years of age, rather a dark mulatto, but a bright looking child. The youngest is a boy, four years old, a lighter mulatto than the last, and has a blue navel. If examined, he will be found to have a swell in the neck.

They were last seen at St. Louis, with the subscriber, for about 15 years. The subscriber is now in Chicago, and that a white man accompanies them, that he will get them, if taken within one hundred miles of St. Louis, Mo. The subscriber is now at St. Louis, Mo. The subscriber is now at St. Louis, Mo.



Christiana Tragedy



COURTESY OF LANCASTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

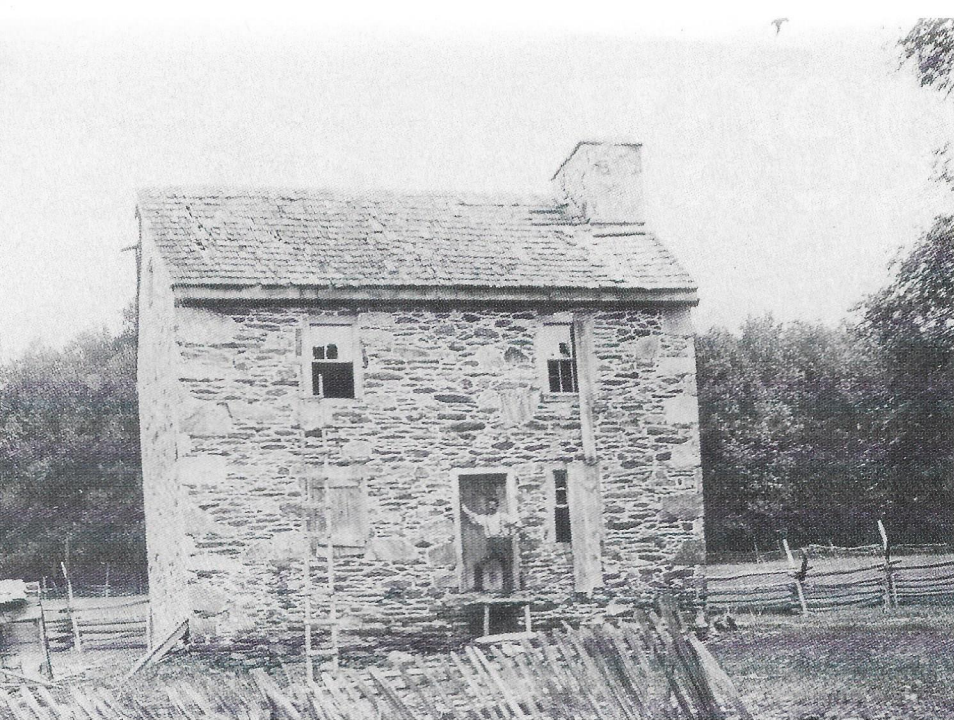
The small town lay just north of the Mason-Dixon Line, the border between the slave and free states. What happened there one September morning in 1851 demonstrated that the boundary also marked a widening philosophical chasm between North and South—one that threatened to fracture the nation.

Edward Gorsuch, a wealthy slave owner from Baltimore County, Maryland, reached William Parker's tenant house just before dawn on September 11, 1851. Parker was a fugitive slave who lived near the village of Christiana in southeastern Pennsylvania, and Gorsuch suspected that he was harboring four runaways who had escaped from his Maryland farm. Gorsuch came armed and prepared for a confrontation. "I will have my property or die in the attempt," he declared.

Gorsuch got his wish. Before the morning ended he lay dead, and his son was gravely injured. Parker was forced to flee to Canada, with a charge of treason hanging over his head. The deadly turn of events made the Christiana encounter a pivotal incident in the escalating national crisis over the institution of slavery. Indeed, some historians consider it to be the first battle of the Civil War.

Nineteenth-century African Americans did not passively accept the inevitability of slavery, or wait patiently while white abolitionists fought for Emancipation. Black resistance took many forms, including active involvement in antislavery societies, financial support for recently freed slaves, and participation on the Underground Railroad—the loosely organized network that helped slaves escape to freedom in the North. There were also isolated cases of armed resistance throughout the antebellum period, the best-known event being Nat Turner's 1831 uprising in Virginia. But Turner's bloody slave revolt was largely a Southern issue. The incident at Christiana, on the other hand, helped widen the growing division between North and South.

Left, top: This wanted poster is typical of notices placed for escaped slaves such as the four men who fled Edward Gorsuch's plantation and precipitated the violent clash at Christiana (left, bottom). Above: African Americans attacked the slave catchers outside William Parker's house with whatever weapons were handy, including this corn cutter.



COURTESY OF LANCASTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In the decades before the clash at Christiana, Pennsylvania had often been the front line in the national struggle over slavery. Not only was its southern border the Mason-Dixon Line, the boundary between free and slave states, but Pennsylvania's Quaker founders had also spearheaded the movement to end slavery in the United States. Inspired by a theological belief in the spiritual equality of all human beings, the Quakers abolished slavery within the Society of Friends in 1776 and then took their crusade to society at large by petitioning the state legislature to outlaw the practice. The Pennsylvania Assembly passed a Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, and the state soon became a popular destination for runaway slaves. Between 1820 and 1860, some 9,000 slaves were guided to freedom through southeastern Pennsylvania's Underground Railroad, helped by "station

William Parker's small stone house, pictured here around 1890, was the setting for the violence at Christiana.

abolitionists who wanted to protect fugitives and slave catchers intent on capturing them. Increasing the tension was a fugitive slave law the federal government passed in 1793 to guarantee slaveholders the right to reclaim their human property. Unscrupulous slave catchers, not content with capturing escaped slaves, sometimes kidnapped free blacks and sold them into bondage.

Still, slaveholders grew frustrated by abolitionist resistance to the fugitive slave laws. Maryland slaveholders, in particular, resented Pennsylvanians' routine circumvention of the law and what they believed to be lax federal enforcement of it. To combat the success of the Underground Railroad, the

self a "good" slave owner, a benevolent father to his 12 slaves. He was a devout member of the liberal Methodist Church, he did not beat his slaves, and he preferred to run his household with a balance of compassion and firmness. What's more, Gorsuch intended to free his slaves once they turned 28 years old. In November 1849 four of them—George and Joshua Hammond, Noah Buley, and Nelson Ford—stole five bushels of wheat and sold them to a free black man who lived in the area. When Gorsuch discovered the wheat was missing, the four slaves fled north to Pennsylvania.

During the next two years, Gorsuch seized on every clue that would lead him to the four escapees. Finally, in early September 1851, an informant living near Christiana named William Padgett wrote to Gorsuch and told him the fugitives were living in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Gorsuch immediately prepared for a trip north. First he recruited several friends and relatives—his son Dickinson, nephew Thomas Pearce, cousin Joshua Gorsuch, and two neighbors, Nathan Nelson and Nicholas Hutchings. Gorsuch then departed for Philadelphia, where he secured warrants for the capture of the fugitives and enlisted the support of Henry Kline, a United States deputy marshal.

Gorsuch's plans began to unravel in Philadelphia. A tavern owner there named Samuel Williams, who assisted on the Underground Railroad, heard about Gorsuch's mission and quickly spread word about the Maryland posse. The warning soon reached William Parker of Christiana, one of Lancaster County's most prominent stationmasters and a man who had previously resisted slave catchers with force.

Parker was "their leader, their protector, their Moses, and their lawgiver all at once."

masters" who fed and sheltered runaways in their homes or "stations," and "conductors" who guided fugitives between stations. The state's southeastern section, in particular, became a fierce battleground between

slaveholders called for even stronger federal measures. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 gave them what they wanted (see sidebar, page 53).

Edward Gorsuch of Retreat Farm in rural Baltimore County considered him-

Tall, thin, and muscular, Parker was regarded by his black neighbors as "their leader, their protector, their Moses, and their lawgiver all at once." He had been born a slave in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, in 1822,

but he ran away at age 17 and eventually settled in Christiana on the farm of Levi Pownell, where he found work at a threshing mill. "Now free, I felt like a bird on a pleasant morning," he wrote. "Instead of the darkness of slavery, my eyes were almost blinded by the light of freedom. When the work was done, the money was mine. I could go out on Saturdays and Sundays, and home when I pleased without being whipped." He also used his intellect and imposing presence to assist other runaways. But as a fugitive himself, Parker understood the limits of his freedom. "I found, by bitter experience, that to preserve my stolen liberty I must pay, unremittingly, an almost sleepless vigilance."

Lancaster County was an especially dangerous area because of the notorious "Gap Gang," a ruthless band that invaded the homes of free blacks at night and kidnapped its victims for bounty. Realizing that he could be seized at any time, Parker, in 1841, formed "an organization for mutual protection against slaveholders and kidnappers at the risk of our own lives." The members of this self-defense organization disdained any law that jeopardized their freedom. They practiced guerrilla warfare and gained confidence in their ability to fight anyone—whether Southern slave catchers, Northern white racists, or even fellow blacks who regularly betrayed runaways for money. Long before the incident at Christiana, Parker's group had established a reputation. When a gang of slave catchers tried to kidnap a black girl, Parker's group freed the girl and badly beat the kidnappers. "We learned afterwards that they were all wounded badly, and that two of them died in Lancaster, and the other did not get home for some time," Parker related. The group also beat a black man who had betrayed a fugitive to slave catchers, burned the barn of a white pro-slavery tavern owner, and chased off a local informer.

When the four runaways from Gorsuch's farm reached the region in Sep-



COURTESY OF LANCASTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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Top: Dickinson Gorsuch was badly wounded by a shotgun blast. Above: District Judge John K. Kane presided over the resulting trial with Circuit Judge John C. Grier.

tember 1851, they naturally sought assistance from Parker, and he readily obliged. He gave each of the fugitives an alias, helped them settle into the community, and kept a watchful eye out for anyone who might come after them.

Williams' warning "spread through the vicinity like a fire in the prairies." Messengers crossed the countryside

alerting others to arm themselves. When Parker returned home from work on Wednesday evening, September 10, he found one of Gorsuch's fugitives—Nelson Ford—waiting for him. The two men, along with Samuel Thompson, Parker's wife, Eliza, her sister, Hannah, Hannah's husband, Alexander Pinckney, and another fugitive, Abraham Johnson, "sat up late in apprehension of an attack." The Gorsuch party had lost the element of surprise.

Nelson Ford crept out of the house just before dawn and spotted the approaching posse. He immediately ran back inside to warn the others. The five men and two women in the house gathered up weapons and scurried upstairs so that the slave catchers could not get a clear line of fire from the ground.

Outside, four members of the posse staked out the corners of the two-story house to prevent the fugitives from sneaking through a back window. Gorsuch and Kline approached the front door and called for the owner of the house.

"Who are you?" demanded Parker from the second-floor landing.

"I am the United States Marshal," replied Kline.

"If you take another step," Parker warned, "I'll break your neck!"

Kline explained that he was there to arrest Gorsuch's slaves and began reading the warrants. Gorsuch shouted up to Ford that he had seen him take refuge in the house and that resistance would do no good. He came with the proper authority to claim him, Gorsuch said, and he would not leave without him.

Kline hesitated about entering the house and ascending the stairs, to Gorsuch's irritation. "I'll go up and get my property," the slaveowner announced. "What's in the way?" He started up the stairs.

"See here, old man," Parker warned, "you can come up but you can't go down again. Once up here, you are mine." One of the blacks pointed a rifle



Left to right: Castner Hanway, Elijah Lewis, and Joseph P. Scarlet were all present at Parker's house on the fateful morning.

at Gorsuch, who hastily retreated. Shots were fired, although accounts differ as to who fired first. Riots by their very nature are confusing events, and the sometimes contradictory nature of subsequent accounts makes it difficult to ascertain exactly what happened next.

At some point Parker's wife, Eliza, blew a horn to summon help. Kline fired his pistol at her, but she crouched below a window and con-

arrived unarmed and hoped to mediate the dispute. Elijah Lewis, a Quaker shopkeeper, also came, presumably for the same reason. The two white neighbors asked the slave hunters to leave peacefully. When Kline tried to deputize them, Hanway and Lewis refused, again pleading with the slave hunters to leave.

The situation appeared to be a standoff, and at one point even turned

tossed a shard of wood from a second-floor window, and it struck Joshua Gorsuch on the shoulder. More shots rang out.

As the morning advanced, Kline and Dickinson Gorsuch urged the posse to withdraw and return another day under more favorable conditions. The elder Gorsuch refused to budge. "My property I will have, or I'll breakfast in hell," he declared. Members of the local self-defense organization continued to arrive from every quarter, some on horseback, others on foot but all armed with whatever weapons they could muster. The deputy marshal finally accepted the wisdom of Hanway's advice and called for the posse to retire. He would not press any further in the arrest, the marshal said, but he would hold Parker responsible for the fugitives.

By this point Parker and the other people in the house had come downstairs to the doorway. As Kline and two of his group readied to leave, the elder Gorsuch confronted Nelson Ford. "Old man, you better go home to Maryland," said the runaway.

"You had better give up and come with me," said Gorsuch. Ford, enraged by the man's response, snatched a pistol and struck Gorsuch. When Gorsuch tried to regain his feet, Ford hit him again. Suddenly all the pent-up tension exploded into violence. Other blacks who had gathered set upon Gorsuch with corn cutters and rifles. Bullets

"My property I will have," Gorsuch declared, "or I'll breakfast in hell."

continued to sound the alarm. Within 40 minutes between 75 and 100 black neighbors responded to the call, armed with guns, pistols, corn cutters, staves shod with sharp iron, and whatever other weapons they could find. A few whites came as well, attracted by the piercing sound of the horn and the commotion of the impending melee. Among them was local miller Castner Hanway. He

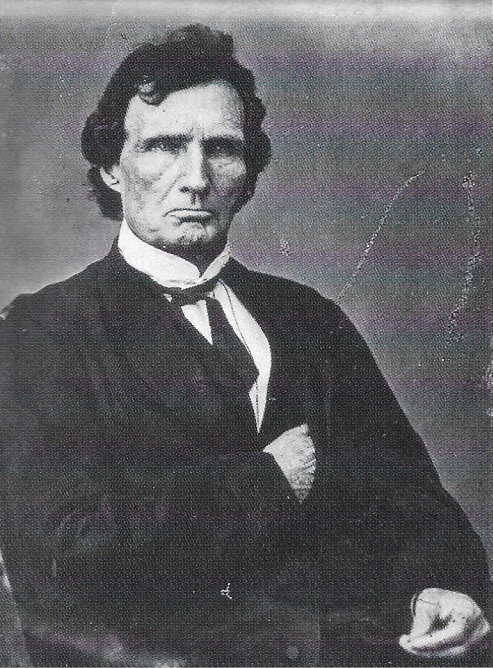
into a shouted debate about the Bible's stand on slavery. When Gorsuch attempted to climb the stairs again, the defenders leveled their weapons, and Dickinson Gorsuch implored his father to come back down.

The adversaries exchanged more threats. Somebody threw a metal projectile out of an upstairs window, and it caught Thomas Pearce above the right eye. Pearce shot back. Someone

poured into his body. When Dickinson Gorsuch rushed to aid his already dead father, Pinckney shot him as well. Dickinson staggered off, and one of the blacks saved his life by throwing himself on top of the younger Gorsuch while other infuriated resisters were hacking at his father's corpse.

When the smoke cleared, the fugitives had escaped, Gorsuch was dead, Dickinson lay near death from a shot-

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850



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Top: Thaddeus Stevens brought his formidable courtroom skills to aid the defendants. Above: John Ashmead headed the prosecution team. Right: Escaping slaves head north toward freedom on the Underground Railroad.

gun blast, and the others had run off in fear. Parker knew his life in Christiana was over. He took refuge at a friend's house and that night left with Pinckney and Johnson for Canada on the Underground Railroad. His wife and children would have to join him later.

The relationship between free and slave states had long been a source of friction in the United States. Tensions increased after the Mexican War of 1846-48, a conflict opposed by abolitionists who feared it would lead to an expansion of slavery into territory taken from Mexico. In order to defuse the situation, Congressman Henry Clay proposed a series of acts known as the Compromise of 1850. He suggested making California a free state, allowing other territories to decide the slavery issue for themselves, and abolishing the slave trade in Washington, D.C. To pacify the Southern states, Clay suggested a new fugitive slave act. Although the rights of slaveholders to reclaim runaways had been guaranteed by Article IV of the United States Constitution and by legislation passed by Congress in 1793, the South wanted a tougher law. The new act, passed in September 1850, tilted the playing field even more in favor of slaveholders. It mandated the recapture and extradition of escaped slaves, and citizens who refused a request to help capture a runaway would be subject to fines and imprisonment. Captured fugitives were not entitled to a trial by jury, and it was up to them to prove that they were, in fact, freemen and not escaped slaves. Furthermore, the act authorized that federal commissioners who ruled on the cases would receive a \$10 fee if they decided for a slaveholder, but only \$5 if they decided for a fugitive.

The Fugitive Slave Act may have pacified the South, but Northern abolitionists were outraged. Violence erupted in Boston following the arrest of an escaped slave named Anthony Burns in 1854, and outrage ensued again two years later following the case of fugitive slave Margaret Garner, who killed one of her children when facing capture in Ohio rather than let the child be returned to slavery. In reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act, several Northern states passed personal liberty laws intended to circumvent the federal legislation—a somewhat ironic reversal of the positions regarding states rights and federal powers that would lead to civil war. Intended to pacify the South, the Fugitive Slave Act only served to increase the national tensions over the issue of slavery.

—Tom Huntington

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On the way to Canada, the three men stopped in Rochester, New York, at the home of Parker's good friend Frederick Douglass, where they rested before continuing north to freedom.

Federal troops were called in to investigate the affair. With a posse of 50 locals, 45 United States Marines searched and terrorized the white and black citizens of Christiana. As a result of their investigation, 37 men were arrested, charged with treason for defying

team was Thaddeus Stevens, a Lancaster resident and a U.S. congressman. As a young lawyer in Gettysburg Stevens had once taken a case to keep a Maryland slave from claiming her freedom in Pennsylvania. The experience apparently left a bad taste in his mouth, for afterwards Stevens became a committed abolitionist known for defending fugitive slaves. Once elected to the House of Representatives in 1848, he had a national forum for his antislavery views.

Stevens' genius for courtroom drama

In 1853, Frederick Douglass urged free black people to arm themselves.

the Fugitive Slave law, and jailed at Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia. Among them was Castner Hanway, who was suspected of inciting the mob. The prosecution intended to demonstrate that the actions at Christiana "had been an armed and organized resistance to the execution of the laws of Congress," and hence an act of treason.

On November 24, 1851, the defendants were tried in federal court at Philadelphia. Heading the defense

dominated the proceedings. When the black defendants were led into the courtroom, each was wearing a red, white, and blue scarf around his neck as a show of support for Hanway. Deputy Marshal Kline suffered the worst under Stevens' attack. "Kline was the special target of severe and sarcastic cross-examination by Mr. Stevens, as he was the Atlas of the Government's case," read one account of the trial.

On December 11 Judge Robert C.

In a photograph taken around 1890, survivors of the Christiana affair reunite in front of William Parker's house. One of the men wields a corn cutter like the ones used 40 years earlier.

Grier instructed the jury and advised them that the charges against Hanway and the others did not constitute treason. The events at Christiana were an outrage, he said. "That the persons engaged in it are guilty of aggravated riot and murder cannot be denied. But riot and murder are offenses against the state government. It would be a dangerous precedent for the court and jury in this case to extend the crime of treason by construction to doubtful cases." The jury returned a "not guilty" verdict within 15 minutes. The verdict sent a signal to the South that the Fugitive Slave Act would not be enforced in the North and further emboldened abolitionists, black and white.

While some followed Parker's earlier example and organized armed groups to protect themselves and their families from kidnapers, others decided to leave the country altogether. They immigrated to Canada where the Imperial Emancipation Act of 1833 allowed them to enjoy greater equality under the law. Frederick Douglass went so far as to argue the "rightfulness of forcible resistance." In an 1853 address he urged free black people to arm themselves, insisting "the only way to make the Fugitive Slave Law a dead letter is to make a half dozen or more dead kidnapers."

Douglass's pronouncement reflected the alienation African Americans felt in a nation that was unwilling to ensure their fundamental rights as human beings. The incident at Christiana indicated that perhaps the issue of slavery could only be decided by violence—even civil war. ❁

William C. Kashatus is a professional historian at the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pennsylvania.