

*The Kidnapping
of Dr. Rufus
Bratton*

Fred Landon

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THE KIDNAPPING OF DR. RUFUS BRATTON

In the *Journal of Negro History* for January, 1925, Mr. Louis F. Post makes reference to the kidnapping in 1872, at London, Ont., of Dr. Rufus Bratton, a South Carolinian, by United States secret service officers. The story of the kidnapping and its consequences, which has not hitherto been told, substantiates that opinion of Canadian regard for justice which Mr. Post expresses in his article. The incident itself is but one of many which related Canada to the issue of slavery in the United States and it may be noted that in this case the protection and justice accorded a white Southerner charged with crime was neither less nor more than the protection and justice accorded in earlier days to the black man who escaped from slavery and made his way to Canada.

Dr. Rufus Bratton, a fugitive from the justice of the reconstruction government in his state, came to London, Ontario, from York in May of 1872, probably choosing this inland city for his place of retreat because of the presence there of some people from his own state. They, with many others, had come north at the outbreak of the Civil War and some had remained when the collapse of the Confederacy ruined their prospects in the South. It was to a South Carolina man, Gabriel Manigault, that Bratton came asking aid in finding retired lodgings. He was then going under the name of James Simpson and called on Mr. Manigault several times during the next two weeks. The latter showed him a letter from the Canadian department of justice giving full legal directions for a political refugee to follow in case of arrest in Canada. Manigault was probably guarding his own safety in having such a letter. In court later Manigault stated that he had refused to take the oath of allegiance in South Carolina and thought Bratton had probably also refused.

On the afternoon of June 10, 1872, while strolling near his lodgings, Dr. Bratton was suddenly attacked, handcuffed and placed in a hack which conveyed him to the railroad depot. Here he was placed aboard a train for Detroit. There was a wait of an hour or more for the train, but the man does not seem to have made any attempt to attract attention or secure aid, the inference being that he was drugged. Very few people saw any part of the episode and the only witness of the actual assault was an eight-year-old girl, Mary Overholt by name. She called to a Mrs. Dixon who saw the handcuffed man being placed in the hack.

The Manigaults quickly learned what had taken place and notified the police. Charles Hutchinson, clerk of the peace, was astonished to find that his deputy, J. B. Cornwall, was mixed up in the affair and had actually assisted the American secret service men in securing Dr. Bratton. This Cornwall eventually admitted, but said that he assisted in securing Bratton thinking that he was a Major Avery for whom a warrant had been issued by the Canadian authorities on a demand from the United States, the charge being murder. He further stated that it was not until the train had left London that the mistake was discovered, but that on arrival in Detroit Bratton was recognized as one also wanted and was accordingly sent under arrest to South Carolina.

The kidnapping excited widespread interest in Canada. The Manigaults and others indignantly repudiated the idea that Dr. Bratton was guilty of crime and held that his offences in South Carolina were entirely political. In the Canadian press there was a demand that the government act at once, require the immediate return of the missing man, and make certain that no further molestation of this kind could occur.

The incident was brought up in the House of Commons at Ottawa on June 11th, when Hon. Edward Blake asked if the government had anything to communicate on the matter and "whether the Atlantic cable had been used in order that speedy justice might be done in the matter."

The prime minister, Sir John Macdonald, answered that he had asked for particulars of the outrage, that these had been received and that communications had gone to the British ambassador at Washington, and to London, England.

Prompt action was taken in dealing with the offence of Cornwall. He was arrested and lodged in jail. His plea was that he had acted on the supposition that the warrants shown him were sufficient authority for an arrest and for extradition without the formality of examination before a magistrate. This plea was not accepted and there was sufficient evidence presented to commit him for trial.

Meanwhile the *Toronto Globe* published a despatch from Washington stating that Bratton had been discovered to be in custody of a United States Marshal in South Carolina, having been delivered up, so it was stated, in mistake for one Avery. The latter was said to be wanted for violation of a Ku Klux Act but Bratton was also charged with having committed murder in the state. "Our government will send him back to Canada without delay," the despatch said, "and will indemnify him for the arrest."

Cornwall appeared before Judge William Elliot on July 16th, and his counsel was prepared to fight the evidence that might be presented against him. The defence fell flat, however, when there appeared suddenly and dramatically in court no less a person than Dr. Bratton himself, who promptly took the stand and told his story. The further proceedings were brief and Cornwall was at once sentenced to serve three years in the provincial prison.

Dr. Bratton remained in London for a year or two afterward, bringing his family to London and practicing his profession. He is described as being a man of about five feet, ten inches in height, erect in bearing, of spare frame, his complexion dark and hair and beard black. A London newspaper spoke of him as genteel in appearance, though giving the impression of a country dweller rather than a city man.

In none of the press comment on the case was there any mention of the actual events in South Carolina which caused Dr. Bratton to take refuge in Canada. The explanation given by the Manigaults, that he was a political offender, was accepted and he and his family enjoyed the friendship of many people in London. A family that was thus intimate recently placed in the hands of the writer of this article photographs of both Dr. and Mrs. Bratton taken while they were living in London more than half a century ago.

FRED LANDON

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Kidnapping of Dr. Rufus Bratton* by Fred Landon]