

***Henry Bibb, A
Colonizer***

Fred Landon

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HENRY BIBB, A COLONIZER

The underground railroad has been characterized by one historian of the Negro race as a “safety valve to the institution of slavery” since it tended to remove from the slave States those Negroes whose special abilities and leadership might have involved them in insurrections.^[1] Their abilities frequently found an outlet in another land, under different conditions and in an entirely orderly way. Negroes who fled to Canada were given considerable material aid by the government of Canada and treated with sympathy by its people. Their own leaders, however, played no small part in the progress that they made in the British provinces and the names of Josiah Henson, Martin R. Delany and Henry Bibb stand for intelligence, energy and high qualities of service on behalf of the race in Canada.

Henry Bibb, born in slavery and without more than the barest rudiments of education, became prominent in the anti-slavery crusade, was actively associated with the Liberty Party in the State of Michigan during the forties and when the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850 drove thousands of his people out of the North and into Canada he set himself vigorously to the task of settling them on the land, providing schools and churches, and through his paper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, exercised a good influence upon them at a time when their minds might be expected to be unsettled. Garrison and others who were active in the anti-slavery movement paid tribute to his services in that cause.

Bibb’s career in slavery is told in his narrative published in New York in 1849.^[2] He was born in Shelby county, Kentucky, in May, 1815, the son of a slave mother and a white father, and his childhood he sums up by saying that he was “educated in the school of adversity, whips and chains.” Of his early life he writes:

“I was a wretched slave, compelled to work under the lash without wages and often without clothes enough to hide my nakedness. I have often worked without half enough to eat, both late and early, by day and by night. I have often laid my wearied limbs down at night to rest upon a dirt floor, or a bench without any covering at all, because I had nowhere else to rest my wearied body, after having worked hard all the day. I have been compelled in early life to go at the bidding of a tyrant through all kinds of

weather, hot and cold, wet or dry, and without shoes frequently until the month of December, with my bare feet on the cold frosty ground, cracked open and bleeding as I walked.”

From the slaveholder’s standpoint he was a most unsatisfactory servant, being an incorrigible runaway, a blemish on his moral character which probably accounted for the frequency with which he changed owners, six separate sales being recorded at prices ranging from \$850 to \$1200. The plantation punishments had no effect upon him save to increase his desire for freedom.

As with many another slave the very evils of the system served a purpose in Bibb’s life. Denied education of a normal kind he became observant and his mind was enlightened by what he saw and heard. “Among other good trades,” he says, “I learned the art of running away to perfection. I made a regular business of it and never gave it up until I had broken the bonds of slavery and landed myself in Canada where I was regarded as a man and not a thing.”

Ill treatment was the incentive to the first attempt of Bibb to secure his freedom. This was in 1835 and the next few years were occupied with repeated unsuccessful efforts to get away and to take his wife and child with him. He had heard of Canada and his thoughts ever turned in that direction. On several occasions his flights led him as far as the Ohio River, the boundary of freedom, but some force seemed always at hand to drag him back. At the end of 1837 he managed to reach Cincinnati and spent that winter at Perrysburg with a community of Negroes settled there. The next summer he risked his freedom in attempting to bring his wife North, was captured, lodged in jail at Louisville, and managed to escape within a few hours after being locked up. A year later he renewed the attempt, was again captured, and this time was sold, together with his wife, to a trader who dealt in the New Orleans market. It was in the fall of 1839 that the man and wife were exposed for sale in a slave yard on St. Joseph Street and in the narrative there is an interesting account of the trade in this southern city. Newly arrived blacks were taken before a city official who inspected their backs to see if they were scarred and also examined their limbs to see if they were sound. To determine their age the teeth were examined and the skin pinched on the back of the hand. In the case of old slaves the pucker would remain for some seconds. There was also rigorous examination as to mental capacity. Slaves who displayed unusual intelligence, who could read or write or who had been to Canada were not wanted. Bibb notes that practically

every buyer asked him if he could read or write and if he had ever run away. Of the slave yard itself he writes:

“All classes of slaves were kept there for sale, to be sold in private or public—young or old, males or females, children or parents, husbands or wives. Every day, at ten o’clock, they were exposed for sale. They had to be in trim for showing themselves to the public for sale. Everyone’s head had to be combed and their faces washed, and those who were inclined to look dark and rough were compelled to wash in greasy dish water in order to make them look slick and lively. When spectators would come in the yard the slaves were ordered out to form a line. They were made to stand up straight and look as sprightly as they could; and when they were asked a question they had to answer it as promptly as they could, and try to induce the spectator to buy them. If they failed to do this they were severely paddled after the spectators were gone. The object for using the paddle in the place of a lash was to conceal the marks which would be made by a flogging. And the object for flogging under such circumstances is to make the slave anxious to be sold.”^[3]

The Bibbs were eventually sold to a Red River planter with whom they had a most miserable existence. For attending without leave a religious meeting on a neighboring plantation Bibb was ordered to receive five hundred lashes. To avoid this he took his wife and child and they hid in a swamp. Dogs tracked them down and every slave on the plantation witnessed the punishment that was given. Shortly afterwards the planter sold Bibb to a party of southern sportsmen but refused to sell the wife whom Bibb never saw again. The new owners quickly resold him to an Indian from whom he managed to escape and successfully made his way through the Indian Territory, Missouri and Ohio to Michigan and Detroit.^[4] He was never in the South again.

Bibb’s arrival in Detroit came at what proved for him a most opportune time, since it gave scope for his abilities to be utilized in the anti-slavery cause, particularly in the State of Michigan. The Detroit Anti-Slavery Society had been formed in 1837 and by the end of 1840 there were similar societies all over the State. Michigan, at this time, was probably better organized and more united in sentiment than any other of the Northwestern States. It was the era of the Liberty Party whose platform “asserted the over-mastering importance of the one question of the existence of slavery, and the

necessity of bringing about a separation of the national government from all connection with the institution.” This third party was facing in 1844 a crisis over the question of the annexation of Texas for which the South was a unit and on which the political organizations of the North were divided. Bibb had attended a convention of free colored people held in Detroit in 1843 and the next year he began to give addresses throughout the State in the interests of Liberty Party candidates, a full ticket for both Congress and the State legislature having been nominated. It was a bitter contest in which he engaged. The Whigs pointed out that they were standing out against the annexation of Texas, a slave empire in itself, and that votes for a third party would but pave the way for a Democratic victory. This is exactly what happened. In Michigan the Liberty Party polled six and a half per cent of the votes, but even this added to the Whig vote would not have brought victory.

[5] Bibb continued to work for the Liberty Party during 1844 and 1845, going also into Ohio with Samuel Brooks and Amos Dresser. They were more than once mobbed and their meetings broken up by rowdies. Of their work Bibb writes:

“Our meetings were generally appointed in small log cabins, schoolhouses, among the farmers, which were sometimes crowded full; and where they had no horse teams it was often the case that there would be four or five ox teams come, loaded down with men, women and children to attend our meetings. The people were generally poor and in many places not able to give us a decent night’s lodgings. We generally carried with us a few pounds of candles to light up the houses wherein we held our meetings after night; for in many places they had neither candles nor candlesticks. After meeting was out we have frequently gone three to eight miles to get lodgings, through the dark forest where there was scarcely any road for a wagon to run on. I have travelled for miles over swamps where the roads were covered with logs without any dirt over them, which has sometimes shook and jostled the wagon to pieces where we could find no shop or place to mend it. We would have to tie it up with bark, or take the lines to tie it with and lead the horse by the bridle. At other times we were in mud up to the hubs of the wheels.”

Bibb found his real work when, with the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, there began a trek of colored people out of the Northern States into Canada. [6] Before the end of 1850 several thousand of these people had

crossed the border and the situation was one that called not only for the aid of generous Canadians but for all that leaders among their own people could do for them. It was Henry Bibb's belief that the future of the people of color in Canada depended upon getting them settled on the land and his mind turned to the possibilities of establishing a distinctly Negro colony on land that might be secured as a grant from the Canadian government or, if necessary, purchased from the government as had been done in the case of the Buxton settlement established by Rev. William King in what is now Southwestern Ontario. Bibb succeeded in organizing his colonization society, its object being "to assist the refugees from American slavery to obtain permanent homes and to promote their social, moral, physical and intellectual development." It was proposed that 50,000 acres of land should be purchased from the government at an estimated cost of about two dollars an acre, the purchase money to be derived partly from contributions and partly from the sale of the land. Each family settling was to receive 25 acres, five acres to be free of cost provided they cleared and cultivated it within three years from the time of occupation. The remaining twenty acres was to be paid for in nine annual installments. Only landless refugees were to receive grants, transfer except after fifteen years occupation was forbidden and all lands vacated by removal or extinction of families were to revert to the parent society. Money returned to the society was to be spent on schools, for payment of teachers and for the purchase of new land. The whole business of the organization was to be in the hands of a board of trustees.^[7]

At the beginning of 1851 Bibb had established a little newspaper, published bi-monthly and known as *The Voice of the Fugitive*. In the issue of March 12, 1851, he raises the question as to what the fugitives stand most in need of and holds that charity is but a handicap to their progress and that they must work for their own support, preferably on the land. The recommendation of a recent convention at Sandwich is quoted to the effect that the refugees should go into agriculture, and that to this end an effort should be made to secure a grant of land from the Canadian government, this land to be disposed of in 25-acre plots. Bibb suggested that there should be at least 20,000 acres secured at once.

To aid in forwarding the plans Bibb enlisted the support of a number of Michigan people and at a meeting held in Detroit on May 21, 1851, the Refugee's Home Society was organized with the following officers: president, Deacon E. Fish, Birmingham; vice-president, Robert Garner; secretary, Rev. E. E. Kirkland, Colchester; assistant secretary, William Newman. It was decided that an effort should be made to secure 50,000 acres of land. New officers appear to have been elected almost immediately

after the society had started operations, the new executives being as follows: president: J. Stone, Detroit; vice-president, A. L. Power, Farmington; secretary, E. P. Benham, Farmington; treasurer, Horace Hallock, Detroit.^[8] The whole movement was heartily approved at a convention of colored people held at Sandwich on May 26, 1851. The Canada Land Company offered to sell large blocks of land to the Society at from two to four dollars an acre but no large purchases were immediately made. Instead, the society began a canvass for funds, sending out Charles C. Foote of Commerce and E. P. Benham of Farmington for this purpose. A letter from Foote in *The Voice of the Fugitive* of July 30, 1851, says “The plan seems popular and he looks forward to the day when the colored people will nestle in the mane of the British lion.” In the latter part of 1851 a purchase of land was made from the Canada Company and a contract was entered into for further purchases as soon as the funds should be available.^[9]

At the meeting of the Society held in Farmington on January 29, 1852, the following officers were elected: president, Nathan Stone, Detroit; vice-president, A. L. Power, Farmington; treasurer, Horace Hallock, Detroit; recording secretary, E. P. Benham, Livonia; corresponding secretary, David Hotchkiss, Amherstburg; and Henry Bibb, Windsor, Mrs. Mary Bibb, Windsor; executive, William Lolason, Detroit; Colman Freeman, Windsor; Elisha Vanzant, Detroit; Vanzant and Bibb were appointed trustees, the latter reporting the purchase of 200 acres of land at three dollars an acre. It was decided to reserve ten acres for school purposes, to send out J. F. Dolbeare as agent to collect funds and to make Bibb’s newspaper the official organ of the society.^[10]

The second annual report of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada (1853) reported that at that time the Refugee’s Home Society had purchased 1328 acres of land of which 600 acres had been taken up by settlers. The scheme was considered a good one but it was emphasized that good management would be needed. The progress of the Elgin or Buxton settlement showed that success was possible.

When Benjamin Drew visited Canada in 1854 he found that the Society had purchased nearly 2,000 acres of land, that forty of the 25-acre plots had been taken up and that there were 20 families located. A school was being maintained during three-fourths of the year, intoxicating liquors had been completely banned and a society known as the True Band had been organized to look after the best moral and educational interests of the colony.^[11] The colony was fortunate in the first teacher that was engaged for the school. This was Mrs. Laura S. Haviland, who came in the fall of 1852

and began her work in the frame building which had been erected for general meeting purposes. So great was the interest in her Bible classes that even aged people would come many miles to attend. Similar success attended her experiment of an unsectarian church. In her autobiography she tells something of the conditions in the colony while she was there. In their clearings the settlers raised corn, potatoes and other vegetables while a few had put in two or three acres of wheat. Mrs. Haviland's account of the colony is much more favorable than some of the adverse stories that were sent abroad regarding it.^[12]

Rev. W. M. Mitchell, who was a Negro missionary among his own people in Toronto, makes the following reference to the colony in his "Underground Railroad":

"About ten miles from Windsor there is a settlement of 5000 acres which extends over a large part of Essex county. It is called the Fugitives' Home. Several years ago a very enterprising and intelligent fugitive slave . . . bought land from the government, divided it into 20-acre plots and sold it to other fugitives, giving them five to ten years for payments. Emigrants settled here in such large numbers that it is called the Fugitives' Home. The larger portion of the land is still uncultivated, a great deal is highly cultivated and many are doing well."

The writer goes on to point out the evidences of the material advancement of the colony. There were two schools, the government paying half the salary of the teacher and the other half being collected from the parents. The school he found was also used for the church services, though the spirituality of the people seemed low.^[13]

The record of Henry Bibb's activities in Canada show that he took a broad view of the refugee question. He associated himself actively with the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada at its formation in 1851 and at the first annual meeting held in Toronto in 1852 was elected one of the vice-presidents. In the reports of this organization will be found several references to his work. He was also the first president of the Windsor branch of the Anti-Slavery Society and made several tours through the western end of Upper Canada visiting the Negro communities and speaking on the slavery issue. In his newspaper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, he chronicled every movement that would aid in the uplift of his people and set forth their needs in an admirable way. Its columns give a large amount of information concerning the fugitives in Canada after 1850.

Bibb's colonization plan was a well-meant effort to improve the status of the Negro in Canada. While it lacked the permanence of the Elgin settlement, which even today preserves its character, it opened the way for a certain number of the refugees to provide for their own needs and it lessened to some extent the congestion of refugees in border towns like Windsor and Sandwich. It is a debatable question whether segregation of these people was wise or not. At that time it seemed almost the only solution of the very pressing problem. After the Civil war many of the Negroes in Canada returned to the United States and those who remained found conditions easier. There was usually work for any man who was willing to labor and it is a well-recorded fact that many of the fugitives, entering the country under the most adverse of circumstances, succeeded in getting ahead and gathering together property. Benjamin Drew's picture of the Canadian Negroes as he found them in the middle of the fifties is favorable and when Dr. Samuel G. Howe investigated the Canadian situation on behalf of the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission in 1863^[14] he was able to report:

“The refugees in Canada earn a living, and gather property; they marry and respect women; they build churches and send their children to schools; they improve in manners and morals—not because they are picked men but simply because they are free men. Each of them may say, as millions will soon say, ‘When I was a slave, I spake as a slave, I understood as a slave, I thought as a slave; but when I became a free man I put away slavish things.’”

FRED LANDON

[1] Williams, G. W., *History of the Negro Race in America*, N. Y., 1883, Vol. II, p. 58.

[2] See *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, written by himself, with an introduction by Lucius Matlack*, New York, 1849. I am indebted to the Brooklyn Public Library for the loan of this book.

[3] Compare with this description of a New Orleans slave pen the descriptions of Richmond auctions by W. H.

Russell, *My Diary North and South*, N. Y., 1863, page 68, and William Chambers, *Things as they are in America*, London, 1854, pages 273-286.

- [4] He says that his object in going to Detroit was to get some schooling. He was unable to meet the expense, however, and as he puts it: "I graduated in three weeks and this was all the schooling I ever had in my life." His teacher for this brief period was W. C. Monroe who afterwards presided at John Brown's Chatham Convention in May, 1858.
- [5] See Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest*, New York, 1897.
- [6] See *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. V, No. 1, January, 1920, pp. 22-36.
- [7] This plan was recommended by a convention of colored people held at Sandwich, C. W., early in 1851. See *The Voice of the Fugitive*, March 12, 1851. A file of this paper for 1851-2 is in the library of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.
- [8] *The Voice of the Fugitive*, June 4, 1851.
- [9] *The Voice of the Fugitive*, Nov. 19, 1851.
- [10] *Ibid.*, Jan. 29, 1852. See also *The Liberator*, June 11, 1852.
- [11] *Ibid.*, *The Refugee, or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada related by themselves*, Boston, 1856, pp. 323-326.
- [12] Haviland, *A Woman's Life Work*, Grand Rapids, 1881, p. 192.
- [13] Mitchell, *Underground Railroad*, London, 1860, pp. 142-149.

[14] Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West, Report to the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission*, Boston, 1864. The Freedmen's Inquiry Commission was instituted by Stanton in 1863 to consider what should be done for slaves already freed. The members of the Commission were Dr. Samuel G. Howe, Robert Dale Owen and James Mackay.

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 *Henry Bibb, a Colonizer* by Fred Landon]