
Green, William

(1820s?-?),

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writer and laborer, was born a slave in Oxford Neck, Maryland, to an enslaved mother named Matilda Jackson. Green lamented throughout his life that he was born too early, because his mother was freed by the terms of her owner's will three months after his birth. Because he was born to a slave mother, he was a slave by law regardless of how little time remained in her tenure as a slave. Green still had hopes of being free in his lifetime because Molly Goldsbury, his owner, bequeathed to him a gradual emancipation by which Green could be freed when he turned twenty-five years old. However, she was not alive to ensure the proper execution of her will, and when he was sold after her death, there were no explicit provisions regarding his emancipation.

In his early years, then, Green was sold from owner to owner, working as a body-servant, a waiter, and even a horse racer. Because he was surrounded by family members and friends who were emancipated, freedom was always foremost in his mind, and his imagination often dwelled on escape plans. Though Green reported in his slave narrative that he was treated more humanely than most of those enslaved in the South, he witnessed severe brutality enacted upon his family members and close friends and experienced mistreatment himself, all of which added to his certainty that he must resist his bind of enslavement. After defying his owner's insistence that he always remain on the premises of the plantation, for instance, Green was confronted by his owner, Dr. Solomon Jenkins, and threatened with whipping. Green, determined not to be beaten, fought Jenkins and won. Not to be shaken by his slave's resistance but cowardly in the face of Green's power, Jenkins attempted to trick Green into going to the jail to be whipped by a professional. Cleverly, Green avoided the punishment and ran away the same night.

Green's narrative of his escape provides some details regarding the operation of the Underground Railroad at the time of his flight, around 1840. He hid for a few days in the home of a fierce slave owner, assured that no one would ever suspect that he would run to find his safety there. After the search for him cooled, he proceeded north, across the river and through fields to several homes of people he heard had safehouses. At some homes he was only hesitantly welcomed because some abolitionists were being watched carefully to prevent their participation in the emancipation of runaways. Green however, was heartily aided and welcomed by many, black and white, and he was surprised to find such generosity in the hearts of white people. He followed the trails suggested by those abolitionists he met, which led him to an "Aunt Sarah," who helped him finally to cross to Philadelphia. He then traveled to New York City, where he felt relative safety, but still moved on to Hartford, Connecticut, and then to Springfield, Massachusetts. There he was married to Parthena Peters by the prominent abolitionist Dr. Rev. Samuel Osgood, and subsequently had at least four

children. In his narrative, Green recalled fondly both Rev. Osgood and Dr. David Ruggles , also an abolitionist who led the New York Vigilance Committee, for their enthusiastic assistance in his journey out of slavery and in his life as a free person.

In 1853 Green decided to record his life story, but carefully protected the lives and work of those abolitionists who provided his route to freedom and continued to do the same for many others who sought to leave the South for the emancipation awaiting them in the North.

Further Reading

Green, William. Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, (Formerly a Slave.) Written by Himself (1853)

See also

Ruggles, David <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34690>>