

Green, Sam

(c. 1802–28 Feb. 1877),

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preacher, farmer, and Underground Railroad agent, was born into slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Although details of his early life and parents are unknown, he probably spent his childhood and young adulthood laboring for white masters in Caroline and Dorchester counties, eventually settling near the town of East New Market with his owner, Henry Nichols. Of mixed race background, possibly American Indian and African descent, Green was eventually manumitted in 1832 by a provision in Nichols's will that required Green be sold for a term of five years and then set free. Green, however, purchased his own freedom within the year.

Green married an enslaved woman named Catherine, also known as Kitty, and they had two children who survived to adulthood. Though Kitty and their children were owned by a different man, it appears that they were allowed to live with Green in his home on historic Nanticoke Indian land near East New Market. By 1842 Sam had earned enough money as a farm laborer and part-time preacher to purchase his wife's liberty. His children's freedom remained out of his grasp. Ezekiel Richardson, their owner, sold the two children to another Dorchester County resident, James Muse, in 1847, taking them out of the Green household forever.

Taught to read and write while he was still a slave, Green became a highly respected lay preacher and licensed exhorter in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Dorchester County. In spite of severe restrictions on African American ministers in the slave states throughout the antebellum period, particularly after the Nat Turner rebellion in August 1831, Green preached to both free and enslaved African Americans in his community. White observers on the Eastern Shore of Maryland monitored black ministers closely, and Green was probably no exception. His stature within the community grew during the 1840s, however, and by the early 1850s he had taken on a leadership role among Dorchester County free blacks. In 1852 Green traveled to Baltimore as a delegate representing Dorchester County at the Convention of the Free Colored People of Maryland. The meeting was convened to discuss the present condition of civil rights and future prospects for free African Americans living in the state. The issue of emigration to Liberia was hotly debated during the convention, and it appears that Green opposed the idea. He attended the National Convention of the Colored People of the United States, held at Franklin Hall in Philadelphia in October 1855, as a delegate from Maryland. During the convention he mingled with many prominent Northern black abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass, Jacob Gibbs, Stephen Myers, William Cooper Nell, Charles Lenox Remond, John Stewart Rock, and Mary Ann Camberton Shadd Cary.

Throughout the antebellum period racial tensions escalated on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. While the free black population continued to expand due-to natural increase and manumissions, the slave population experienced tremendous destabilization. Eastern Shore slaveholders found a lucrative

market selling their slaves to the plantations of the Deep South, where labor needs continued to outpace existing supplies of workers. Like Green's family, many black families on the Eastern Shore included both free and enslaved family members. The constant threat of separation left many African Americans facing daily uncertainty. With the sales of loved ones a constant menace, efforts to protect those at risk became a high priority among some families. Escape to a free state was risky though often the only alternative to being sold away. Maryland's proximity to free soil, however, offered a better chance of success in reaching freedom than that in the Deep South. Slaves had been running away from Dorchester County since the earliest days of colonial settlement. During the early to mid-nineteenth century, the Eastern Shore began to experience a profound acceleration in the numbers of slaves taking their own liberty. By the early 1820s and 1830s a loosely organized network of sympathizers formed the foundation of a system that worked to aid runaway slaves in their quest to reach free soil. This network became known as the Underground Railroad, and whites and blacks in the North and the South maintained its operations.

In August 1854 Green's son Sam Green Jr., a skilled blacksmith, ran away from Muse after learning that he might be sold. Using instructions given to him by Harriet Tubman, he found his way to the office of William Still, Philadelphia's most famous Underground Railroad stationmaster, who forwarded him to the home of Charles Bustill, another prominent African American Underground Railroad agent in Philadelphia. From there he was sent along swiftly to Chipaway, Ontario, Canada, where he joined other Eastern Shore runaways living relatively safe and free lives. Once settled in Chipaway, Sam Green Jr. wrote to his parents, telling them of his successful journey to freedom. Tragically his sister Sarah Green was unable to flee. As the mother of two young children, Sarah may have been unwilling or unable to run away with her brother. Muse, angry over the escape of Sam Green Jr. and suspicious that Sarah might run off as well, sold her to a Missouri family, cruelly separating her from her family forever.

It is not known when Sam Green first became an agent on the Underground Railroad. Sam and Kitty Green sheltered Tubman and a group of her charges in November 1856, and they may have helped Tubman and others on several occasions before this date. Tubman was born and raised in the same county, and there is a possibility that she was related to Sam through her mother, Rit Green Ross.

By mid-March 1857 rumors were circulating that Green had played a role in the escape of the Dover Eight, a group of fugitive slaves who had successfully eluded capture in a dramatic flight from Dorchester County. Green had apparently been suspected of aiding in the escape of other slaves before this, but he was so highly regarded in both the black and white communities that he was able to deflect suspicions for some time. When it was discovered that the Dover Eight passed near his home during their escape, doubts about his innocence were raised. Adding to local whites' suspicions, Green had recently returned from a trip to Canada to visit his refugee son. On 4 April 1857 the Dorchester County sheriff Robert Bell arrived at Green's house with a search warrant. Green was promptly arrested when the authorities found a Canadian map, letters from Sam Green Jr. and other Dorchester County fugitives living in Ontario, various railroad schedules, and a copy of one volume of the two-volume set of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Green was charged with illegal possession of material that could rouse feelings of "discontent" and dissatisfaction among slaves, in violation of Maryland's Act of 1841, chapter 272, which stated that if any free black "knowingly receive or have in his possession any abolition handbill, pamphlet, newspaper, pictorial representation or other paper of an inflammatory character," which could "create

discontent amongst or to stir up to insurrection the people of color of this State, he or she shall be deemed guilty of felony," subject to a prison term of ten to twenty years (*Easton Gazette*, 28 Aug. 1858).

Prosecutors claimed that the maps, railroad schedules, and letters from Canada were abolitionist in nature and were used to create dissatisfaction among the local slave population. The court acquitted Green, though, ruling that those materials in and of themselves were not inflammatory publications. New charges were lodged against him, however, citing his possession of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and this time he was convicted. Though local newspapers acknowledged that Green never would have been charged with this particular crime if he had not been under suspicion for aiding slaves to run away, they congratulated themselves for "testing the applicability of the Act" to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (*Easton Gazette*, 28 Aug. 1858).

At fifty-five years old, Green represented what some slaveholders resented and feared the most: a literate, well-respected, free black who may well have encouraged resistance to the slave system. Green was sentenced to ten years in the Maryland State Penitentiary, officially for "having in his possession a certain abolition pamphlet called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," the first and only time anyone was ever convicted for such a crime (*Easton Gazette*, 28 Aug. 1858). Beyond the expected abolitionist outrage over the conviction, the case also created a firestorm of controversy, sparking intense debate about the Bill of Rights and a free person's rights to privacy in Maryland and beyond.

Appeals were made to Maryland's governor Thomas H. Hicks, a Dorchester countian who had himself known and respected Green, to pardon Green and set him free. In spite of significant pro-Green support in the northern press, Hicks and the Maryland courts remained determined and steadfast in their decision to keep him incarcerated. An exemplary prisoner, Green was spared the more arduous physical labor required of inmates at the prison when he was assigned to work in the warden's office, presumably because he could read and write. The expenses of the trial forced Kitty Green to sell the couple's property in Dorchester County. She followed her husband to Baltimore, where she found work as a launderer. Finally, in March 1862, after continued pressure from northern abolitionists, powerful Baltimore Quakers, and Methodist Episcopal Church officials, the newly elected governor Augustus W. Bradford pardoned Green on the condition that he leave Maryland immediately. On 21 April 1862 Green walked out of prison a marginally free man.

Sam and Kitty Green soon left Maryland for Philadelphia, where Still sheltered them. In June they traveled to New York City, where Green spoke at Henry Highland Garnet's Shiloh Presbyterian Church. During the following month Green was introduced to Stowe, who gave him a new copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The Greens spent the summer traveling to different northern communities, where they found ready audiences eager to hear Sam's story. Funds were raised throughout New England for their support as they made their way slowly to Canada and the home of their son Sam Green Jr.

The Greens returned to Dorchester County soon after the Civil War. Once again Green built a life around farming and preaching. He was an active member of the Delaware Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Centenary Biblical Institute in Baltimore. The Greens moved to Baltimore around 1874, presumably to devote more time to the institute. Sam Green died there.

Further Reading

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See also

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