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INTRODUCTION

On a mid-December evening in 1851 in rural Chester County, Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Parker walked out of Matthew Donnelly's kitchen and into the farmyard. Donnelly, the man for whom she was working, had sent her out to find the slop bucket. Elizabeth went, even though she thought it was an odd request. Donnelly had just come in from spending fifteen minutes out in the yard; why hadn't he brought in the bucket himself? Elizabeth found the bucket, but she never made it back into the house; she was grabbed by two men, bound and gagged, and hurried off to a Baltimore slave pen. Two months later, Elizabeth, who was not yet a teenager, was in New Orleans; two weeks after that, she had been sold and put to work as a slave. Shortly after Elizabeth's abduction, her seventeen-year-old sister Rachel was taken from the home of another Chester County farmer and rushed to the same Baltimore slave pen. This time, the abductor—the same man in both cases—was pursued to Baltimore and arrested before Rachel could be sent away and sold. The pursuit, however, cost the life of Rachel's employer, Joseph Miller, who was more than likely murdered but whose death was never officially resolved. The abductor of Elizabeth and Rachel, Thomas McCreary, was indicted but never convicted. He

went free, while the two girls, who had committed no crime, both spent months in jail.[1]

The stories of the kidnappings of the Parker girls are remarkable. The stories that surround the kidnappings are also remarkable—stories of the exasperated white citizens of Chester County who determined to bring the two black girls home and of the legal and political machinations that let a known kidnapper and possible murderer go free. These are stories that belong to a particular place and time, the midcentury border between North and South, between slavery and freedom. The landscape of the border became increasingly tense, especially for its black inhabitants, as the debates about slavery and the rights of states became more contentious. By the time of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (or Fugitive Slave Law) of 1850, the border country had become a dangerous place to be for most black people. Both fugitive slaves and free blacks were targets for the slave catchers, since both could be taken across the state line and sold. Living in a free state like Pennsylvania in the 1850s did not guarantee freedom for anyone who was black.

The people who watched the Parker episode unfold could find it hard to describe or account for without comparing it to the most sensational fiction. The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society called the story of the Parker sisters "so tragic, so deeply pathetic, that, were they the theme of a romance, they would thrill the soul of every reader." A local Chester County newspaper referred more specifically to Elizabeth Parker's case as "extraordinary," "a story of Romance," one that "would almost afford a subject for another 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'" Harriet Beecher Stowe did in fact put the Parker story into one of her books, although not into her famous novel. In *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the book in which she collected a mass of historical evidence to support the picture of slavery she had constructed in the novel, she gave a brief account of the Parker abductions to illustrate her point about the reality and extent of the kidnapping of free blacks. The Parkers' story became known, Stowe pointed out, but others did not: "Around the [slave] trader are continually passing and repassing men and women who would be worth to him thousands of dollars in the way of trade,—who belong to a class whose rights nobody respects, and who, if reduced to slavery, could not easily make

their word good against him. The probability is that hundreds of free men and women and children are all the time being precipitated into slavery in this way."[2]

In 2012, the Chester County township of East Nottingham erected a commemorative sign as a reminder of the events comprising what came to be called the "Parker case": the kidnappings, the death of Joseph Miller, and the extraordinary communal effort that ultimately led to a successful rescue of the two girls. The marker reads:

> Emboldened by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, Maryland slave catchers kidnapped Rachel and Elizabeth Parker from the Nottingham area in 1851. Rachel's employer Joseph Miller was murdered in a failed attempt to rescue her from Baltimore. Public outrage led Pennsylvania officials to seek the sisters' release in a Maryland civil court case that secured their freedom in 1853. The forcible enslavement of two young free black women galvanized anti-slavery sentiment.

As the township's marker suggests, this is a story about how a disastrous law affected the small farming communities of Chester County in ways that had significant, widening consequences for the state and the nation as well. But it is also a story about families, especially the Parker family, whose lives and fates were deeply embedded in the daily rounds of their community and, at the same time, in the madness and violence consuming all of antebellum America. The marker is one effort to do justice to the people involved in the "Parker case" and to recognize their place in a crucial and dangerous moment in U.S. history.

Chester County lies on the southeastern border of Pennsylvania, adjoining the northern boundaries of both Maryland and Delaware. In the late eighteenth century, those state boundary lines became part of the longer and more famous line drawn by Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon; Chester County therefore found itself on the border between the free states north of the line and the slave states south of it. That border was enormously significant, and slavery made all the difference in defining its meaning, to whites as well as blacks. As an early historian of the

region put it, the "Mason and Dixon line was the imaginary demarcation between two wholly antagonistic social and political orders." Pennsylvania had been effectively free since it instituted gradual abolition in 1780 through the country's first emancipation law. The law had stipulated that while no more slaves could be brought into the state, anyone who had been born into slavery before 1780 would remain in bondage for life; children born to slave mothers after 1780 would serve until the age of twenty-eight, when they would be freed. The immediate impact of the change was limited, since the slave population of Pennsylvania had always been comparatively small (which made gradual abolition relatively easy to accomplish). At the time the abolition law was passed, there were 470 slaves in Chester County; in 1800, that number had decreased to 58, and by 1840, the federal census could count only 64 slaves in the entire state.[3]

In neighboring Maryland, by contrast, even though the slave population had begun declining around 1830 and even though many Marylanders were declaring the institution of slavery moribund, more than eighty-seven thousand slaves remained in the state in 1860. Many of these were in the northern counties, where the state line might be only a few miles, or even a mile, away. The knowledge that stepping across a county line could mean the whole difference between being completely subject to a master and being at least relatively free to choose one's own movements must have been constantly on the minds of the slaves of border states like Maryland. Of course, that knowledge was also very present in the minds of slaveholders in those states and in the minds of the "borderers," slave catchers who roamed the area looking for runaways or, often, for anyone they could plausibly claim to be a runaway and who seemed vulnerable—such as the young Parker sisters.

Not surprisingly, many Maryland slaves took advantage of the proximity of the Pennsylvania line to flee across it, in spite of the dangers of getting there. Runaway slaves began coming north into Chester and neighboring counties early. Enough had come by the 1820s that an organized but clandestine network of local people had formed to assist the fugitives—a network of the kind that would later be called the Underground Railroad. Most of these fugitives had not traveled far. In the records of runaways who were captured in Chester County and returned to claimants between

1820 and 1839, 96 out of 119 came from Maryland, and of those, 20 were from Cecil County, just below the Pennsylvania line.

The stream of runaways who left Maryland for Pennsylvania prompted years of friction between the two states. The Parker kidnappings tapped into a sectional history that had become increasingly acrimonious. Maryland did not like that Pennsylvania sheltered its runaway slaves and suspected that Pennsylvanians were enticing them away. Pennsylvania did not like that Maryland had slaves in the first place or that Marylanders felt free to come into Pennsylvania and seize suspected runaways, sometimes by violence. Quakers in Pennsylvania, already troubled by the number of kidnappings, had organized a Society for the Protection of Free Negroes Held in Bondage as early as 1775, with the stated purpose of protecting free blacks from abduction and redeeming those who had already been taken. By the nineteenth century, the two state legislatures were putting a lot of time and energy into efforts to make life difficult for each other. The legislature of Maryland produced a series of resolutions after 1816 addressing what it called in an 1823 report "the growing evils occasioned the citizens of [Maryland], by the encouragement runaway slaves receive from some of the citizens of Pennsylvania." The Pennsylvania legislature responded by instituting new state laws that made it even harder for Maryland slaveholders to retrieve runaways who had crossed the border. The interstate conflict over the legal status of fugitives and those who harbored them would continue until 1850, when the Fugitive Slave Law took the issue out of the states' hands and put the rendition of fugitives under federal control.[4]

While the two state legislatures squabbled and resolutions went back and forth, the fugitives kept coming. Determining the number of runaway slaves who crossed into Pennsylvania from the South is impossible, as one researcher after another has had to acknowledge. Documentation and reporting were seldom unbiased; in places less friendly to the return of fugitive slaves, the press was likely to report only successful escapes or rescues. In other places, the arrest of a runaway was unlikely to make it into the news (or into the records) unless the arrest had turned violent. The evidence that can be pieced together, however, suggests that the numbers were very large, that they only increased as the country moved

toward civil war, and that the consternation of slaveholders across the South was wide and deep. The flight of slaves out of Maryland led the governor of South Carolina to declare in 1850 that, on the question of its future as a slave state, "Maryland is hopeless." Some Pennsylvanians were disturbed by the influx of fugitives into their state, some outraged enough to try to stop it. G. A. Doyle of Carlisle circulated a prospectus, in 1846, for a newspaper with the express aim of helping slaveholders, especially those from Maryland and Virginia, to find their fugitives who had fled to Pennsylvania. Doyle proposed locating men strategically along the Pennsylvania border to supply him with information about runaways and those who helped them. (Apparently, Doyle's plans never came to fruition.)[5]

Many of the runaways who made it to Pennsylvania were directed to safe houses, the places that were becoming known as stations on the Underground Railroad, most of them owned by Quakers. In one of these houses in Chester County, Nathan Evans, the son of an active Quaker agent, kept a diary in which he recorded for a time the number of refugees who arrived at the Evans home seeking aid and were helped to make their way north. For the four months of 1842 in which Nathan kept records, a total of ninety people found their way to the Evans home or were brought there. They came in groups, some as small as two and others as large as sixteen. All ninety were kept until they could be safely sent on to the next agent or station. Scattered evidence from other Underground Railroad agents suggests that the Evans numbers were not unusual; people fleeing slavery came through southeastern Pennsylvania in a steady stream until the beginning of the Civil War. An early historian of Chester County attested that there was so much traffic on the southern route of the Underground Railroad through the county that "it became necessary to have several branches, and these branch routes interlaced the more northern lines in several places."[6]

The number of escapees from Maryland roused slaveholders around the state to take action. A "Mutual Protection Society for the Eastern Shore of Maryland" was proposed as early as 1825 with the intention of cracking down on free blacks, who were thought to encourage slaves to abscond. At a slaveholders' meeting in Annapolis in 1842, attendees

requested that the state legislature post guards at railroad stations and steamboat docks to catch fugitives and offer rewards for the identification of anyone encouraging or helping a slave to run away. Their legislative package did not pass, but two years later the legislature did put into place a system of bounties that included $100 for anyone who successfully captured a runaway slave in a free state. In 1846, the citizens of Queen Anne's County held a meeting "for the purpose of asking further action in reference to the frequent loss of their slaves by absconding, and of adopting such measures as might be deemed advisable for the better security of such property in future." In that same year, slaveholders in neighboring Kent County organized their own "Mutual Protection Society." A similar organization was formed in Frederick County in 1849 and another in Baltimore County in 1850.[7]

Any newspaper, of whatever political persuasion, could find exciting copy in the number of escaping slaves. An antislavery paper in Ohio reported in September that the flight of slaves from Maryland was causing "great commotion" among slaveholders. The paper noted with satisfaction the "absconding of whole gangs and families of slaves, who are seldom ever caught." Three months later, the same paper again reported on the excitement in Maryland, this time referring to the "panic" among slaveholders, "especially on the state's Eastern Shore." The *Village Record* in Chester County reported early in 1850 that "every day but swells the number of absconding slaves from Maryland." About the same time, a Delaware pro-slavery newspaper, the *Blue Hen's Chicken*, also reported on the increasing number of runaways from Maryland and Delaware, though with alarm rather than complacency. Noting that slave property was "insecure" in both states, the paper concluded, "[Soon] we shall not have a slave worth keeping. The young and hearty who are able to work, run away, leaving behind the old and children, too young to be of much service." A newspaper in Maryland's Cecil County, the *Elkton Democrat*, directed blame for some of the state's trouble squarely at next-door Chester County. Reporting on the recent flight of eight slaves from Cecil, the *Democrat* announced that the owners were offering a reward of $1,000. The money was being put up, however, not for the apprehension of the slaves, but for the arrest of "the individual who enticed them

away, who is believed to be a well-known abolitionist of Chester County, Pennsylvania." The money apparently went unclaimed.[8]

One runaway who fled slavery in Maryland and made it safely to Chester County was a young man from Kent County named Isaac Mason. In a memoir written late in his life, Mason recounted making the decision to run away in 1846, when he learned that the man who claimed him as his property intended to sell him south. Mason fled, making his way through Delaware and into Chester County. Like many others who were fleeing from Maryland and states farther south, Mason stopped running when he got to Pennsylvania, believing that he had reached a place of safety. He recalled that, in crossing from Delaware to Pennsylvania, he felt that he had "stepped from bondage into liberty, from darkness into light." (Some fugitives relaxed after crossing the line into Pennsylvania because they thought they had made it to Canada.)[9]

Mason had in fact found safety, at least for a while, and, like many other fugitives, he seems to have had little trouble finding work among the farmers of Chester County. He was hired by at least four different employers over three years, the last a farmer named Joshua Pusey who hired him in 1849. Mason felt secure enough in his contract with Pusey to plan to marry and set up his own household. Before the wedding could take place, however, one of Mason's neighbors and friends, a fellow runaway named Tom Mitchell, was kidnapped by three men who dragged Mitchell from his house at night and drove away with him, leaving his frantic wife and children behind. One of those men who took Tom Mitchell was the same Thomas McCreary who would abduct the Parker sisters two years later. After Mitchell's kidnapping, Mason decided to postpone his marriage, get out of Chester County, and head for Canada: "That kind of work thoroughly frightened me, and I resolved that I would break the Pusey bargain and leave that region immediately. Mitchell's captors were drovers, and they knew him as a slave and of his whereabouts, and they made good use of their knowledge; they got fifty dollars for him."[10]

Isaac Mason's experience as a runaway was typical in several ways. In the first place, like most of the other fugitives who passed through Chester County, he came across the Pennsylvania border from Maryland. Second, Mason stopped in Chester County and planned to stay there because it

seemed welcoming; he, Tom Mitchell, and many others found assistance, work, other fugitives, and a sense of relative safety—as short-lived as it turned out to be for both Mason and Mitchell. Finally, Mason's primary reason for leaving both Maryland and Pennsylvania was a common one: he feared being sold south, a prospect that was realistic and understandably terrifying. In the plantation areas of the Deep South, slaves from the Eastern Shore of Maryland were considered especially valuable. Sidney George Fisher, the owner of Cecil County's Mount Harmon plantation, who was himself strongly opposed to slavery, noted in his diary in 1846 that a neighbor had just "sent some of the negroes off to Baltimore on their way to his estate in Georgia. The negroes here dread nothing on earth so much as this and they are in great commotion about it. . . . They regard the South with perfect horror and to be sent there, is considered as the worst punishment inflicted on them, & is reserved for one offence alone by the custom of the neighborhood, an attempt to run away." Historians of slavery have not failed to note the irony in Fisher's seemingly detached observation: slaves often ran away because they feared being sent south, and to be sent south was a frequent punishment for running away.[11]

Although Mason and others found refuge among the rural populations of the southern counties of Pennsylvania, very few in that population would describe themselves as being antislavery, much less as being sympathetic to abolitionism. Southern Pennsylvania was, in fact, more sympathetic to the fugitive in practice than in theory. In 1847, Isaac S. Flint wrote to the *Pennsylvania Freeman* about his problems in trying to bring the antislavery message to the small towns of Chester County. Flint found the town of Oxford to be "the most pro-slavery corner of Chester County," where the hostility to the antislavery cause was "ignorant and bitter." Flint noted that it was difficult to find meeting spaces anywhere around Oxford for antislavery gatherings. Another antislavery activist, Charles Burleigh, consistently encountered opposition to his lectures in Chester County. A member of the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends, Burleigh was an ardent supporter of the Meeting's principles, campaigning with equal passion for temperance and vegetarianism and against the death penalty and slavery. He lectured frequently in the towns and villages of the state, especially on the anti-

slavery message. At a meeting in West Chester in 1837, Burleigh's speech was interrupted twice: the first time when cayenne pepper was thrown on the stove, producing fits of coughing and wheezing throughout the hall, and again when the audience was pelted with eggs.[12]

Burleigh continued to be met by eggs as well as by less material forms of resistance in the years he traveled the county. He learned to expect limited support and to value whatever support he did find. After a meeting in 1846 at the Little Elk Meeting House in Nottingham, Burleigh wrote that "abolitionists are not very numerous there, and pro-slavery is rather bolder to show its brassy front than in many communities." Yet Burleigh found an encouraging sympathy for the slave and especially for the fugitive even among those who had little sympathy for the antislavery movement and its representatives. He especially appreciated the honesty of the farmers and working men of the county: "It was gratifying to hear those unlearned men pouring out their strong indignation against tyranny—and generous sympathy for the needy. There were no orators there, but plain, blunt men, who talked right on what they felt was true. They were men too much in earnest to polish their speech, and round off their sentences." It was these Nottingham men, or their compatriots, who would a few years later offer the remarkably courageous resistance that kept the Parker sisters out of slavery.[13]

Burleigh did not have such ready sympathy for the elite of the community, especially the ministers. Nor, apparently, did some of them feel warmly toward him and his intrusions onto their turf. On a visit to Oxford in 1847, Burleigh found his abolitionist message resisted by the local Presbyterian minister, John Miller Dickey, who was at that time deeply involved in the colonization movement, an organized effort to encourage blacks in the United States to relocate to Africa. Probably at Dickey's instigation, Burleigh was arrested for selling antislavery literature, not because of its content but because he was violating the Sabbath by selling it on a Sunday. While the local constable was taking care of the details of the arrest, Burleigh addressed the crowd that had gathered, defending his actions and his cause. Dickey responded, speaking, according to Burleigh, "partly in defense of his church from the imputation of being pro-slavery, and partly in a personal attack upon myself as a disor-

ganizer; an enemy of the Government, the Church, and the Sabbath; a rejecter of the Old Testament and as much of the New as does not suit my notions, etc." The constable finished his paperwork, the back-and-forth speeches ended, and Burleigh spent six days in jail in West Chester, a stay that he declared to be quite restful and comfortable. On a return visit to Oxford a few years later, when he spoke against the Fugitive Slave Law (which he called the National Kidnapping Law), Burleigh was once again greeted by an egg-throwing audience. This time, however, he was satisfied that Dickey, whom he called "the clerical ruffian," had no part in the demonstration, since he was out of town that evening. (Dickey may never have lost his disgust with abolitionists, but he did rouse himself to action when the Parkers were kidnapped and Joseph Miller was killed. Along with other prominent citizens of the county, he would be instrumental in securing the return of the two sisters to Chester County.)[14]

One place near Oxford that was open to antislavery gatherings, and eventually suffered for it, was Hosanna Meeting House, a small black church that hosted speakers like Burleigh, Flint, and Frederick Douglass. According to local legend, Harriet Tubman used the church as a pick-up or exchange station for runaways crossing into Lancaster County. Free blacks from nearby communities and from as far away as Philadelphia would come to Hosanna on Saturday evenings, when the church meetings were held. Fugitives could mix with the congregation and then conceal themselves in one of the visitors' wagons, to be transported to the next friendly reception. The antislavery activity at Hosanna ceased, however, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. A new minister who arrived shortly after the passage of the law disapproved of harboring fugitives, an activity that had become illegal and punishable under the new law. His stand split the congregation, and the minister and his supporters were accused by the rest of the members of being complicit with the kidnappers and slave catchers. The church was forced to close.[15]

The influx of fugitive slaves raised fears among many in Chester County about the possibilities for violent conflicts between the fugitives and the people who came into the state looking for them. These fears were exacerbated by the Christiana "riot" of 1851 in neighboring Lancaster County. There, a Maryland slaveholder, Edward Gorsuch, was

Hosanna Meeting House.
(Photo by the author.)

killed in a confrontation with a group of African Americans, many of them fugitives themselves, who were protecting the men Gorsuch had come to capture. A West Chester newspaper suggested, nervously, that the flood of fugitives into Chester County could produce another Christiana if nothing were done to stop it: "Runaway slaves are generally voted not only a nuisance, but a danger to the peace and good order of a community wherein they may locate. That such an immigration engendering scenes like the late Christiana murder, will be tolerated for any length of time, in Pennsylvania, can hardly be expected."[16]

Fear of violence was only one reason for resisting the influx of runaways. Many in Chester County also had political and economic reasons for being concerned. John Swayne, a county farmer, wrote to state senator William Jackson in 1843 that the county was becoming a dumping ground for the wrong kind of people, who were crowding out the right kind:

> It is obvious that an increasing prejudice is abroad against those of a dark skin. . . . Their numbers are rapidly increasing by the ingress of perhaps the worst class the slave states produce—the idle or infirm who are sent away, the vicious and insubordinate who run away. Thus the interests of masters and slaves concur in throwing into this state perhaps this naborhood [*sic*] in particular those who as working men are driving away working citizens, for whom they are a very inferior substitute.[17]

Swayne might have had reason to be concerned about population *trends* in his part of the world, but the actual population *numbers* were quite small. There were only 5,223 African Americans living in all of Chester County in 1850, out of a total population of over 61,000. Swayne's township of East Marlborough had only 121 black residents in 1850. Of these, 39, or about one-third, were born outside Pennsylvania and were thus part of the "ingress" of undesirables from slave states that disturbed Swayne: 17 were born in Delaware, 20 in Maryland, and 1 each in Virginia and the District of Columbia. The numbers were higher for the neighboring township of New Garden. There, of a total black population of 284, 104 were born outside the state: 70 in Delaware, 30 in Maryland, 2 in Virginia, and 2 in New Jersey. In these two adjacent townships, then, out of a total black population of just over 400, nearly 150 were born outside Pennsylvania, and all but 6 of those came from the slave states of Delaware and Maryland. It is reasonable to assume that many of those born outside the state, if not most, were fugitives.[18]

John Swayne worried that unreliable immigrants were taking jobs away from more dependable local workers. To others in the county, especially among its Quaker and free black populations, the same trends that bothered Swayne were taken as encouraging signs of success. In spite of a general distrust of abolitionists and concern about runaways coming into the state, the large number of free blacks, former slaves, Quakers, and others with antislavery sentiments made Chester and the other border counties of Pennsylvania—a state founded by Quakers—more receptive than most to fugitives from slavery. In 1850, there were 37 Quaker meetings in Chester County alone, with large numbers in the

adjoining counties as well. In all of Pennsylvania there were 142 meetings (as opposed to a total of 26 in Maryland). By the 1770s, the Yearly Meeting of Philadelphia had voted to disown any slaveholding members, and the Quakers remained the religious group most closely identified with antislavery sentiment in Pennsylvania, especially after the network of stations on the Underground Railroad was established. Many Quaker homes became stations, or safe houses, and many Quaker men and women became agents who supplied funds, hid runaways, or otherwise aided fugitives in their flight to the North. Of the 132 agents who were known to have been active on the Underground Railroad in Chester County, at least 82 were Quakers. An additional 31 known agents in the county were African American. Less is known about this latter group, but at least some of them were former slaves themselves, such as Benjamin Freeman, who moved to West Chester and settled there after being manumitted in Queen Anne's County, Maryland.[19]

It was individual Quakers who were politically active. The Society of Friends, in general, did not condone any kind of conflict or law breaking, including violation of the laws regarding slavery. As one historian has put it, "Moral opposition to slavery was a core Quaker tenet, although political action was not." Another has characterized the majority of Quakers as viewing slaveholding "as a sin to be banned from the Society, not as a condition from which Afro-Americans must be delivered." The Baltimore Yearly Meeting of Friends had made its position clear in 1842, stating that its membership would "avoid involving ourselves with the associations that have sprung up around us, for the avowed purpose of promoting the abolition of slavery in our country by political or other means of a coercive nature. . . . The Society of Friends, in thus taking up a testimony against slavery, publicly and openly, did not desire to invade the privileges of their neighbors, nor in any way improperly to interfere with them. With us it is purely a religious concern." Even though Quakers made up a very large percentage of known Underground Railroad agents in the area, those activist Friends were a small minority of the total population of Quakers. An 1881 history of Chester County noted that "nearly all" of those who "assisted the fugitive to freedom were members of the Society of Friends, although the majority of that

society, while averse to slavery, took no part in the labors, and, with few exceptions, refused the use of their meeting houses for anti-slavery lectures." When the London Grove meeting quietly ignored a request from the Chester County Anti-Slavery Society to use its house, a member of the Society wrote to the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, the newspaper of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, complaining that the London Grove Friends were "lamentably ignorant in relation to the great questions which are now rocking with agitation the civilized world, and it is the duty of abolitionists to endeavor to enlighten them." (London Grove evidently remained unmoved.)[20]

Disagreement about the response to slavery split the Society in Pennsylvania, as it split other religious organizations, including tiny Hosanna Meeting House. Quakers attending the Marlborough Conference in Chester County in 1845 raised the possibility of separating from the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting on the grounds that it was not progressive enough; by 1853, the dissatisfied members had organized as the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends, which would continue to meet for more than eighty years at Longwood, near Kennett Square. The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, an organization whose founders were primarily Quakers, also became increasingly irritated by the Friends' timidity when it came to endorsing the abolitionist cause. In a statement signed in 1851 by J. Miller McKim and James Mott (a prominent Quaker), the Anti-Slavery Society accused the state's Quakers of having lost their fervor and become soft on slavery. "The hostility of the Friends to slavery," the statement declared, "is a thing of the past."[21]

The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting defended itself against the criticism, declaring that "our Society has steadfastly maintained a testimony against all wars and fightings, tumults, violence and shedding of blood, and against forcible resistance to oppression." The statement continued with an endorsement of black passivity that brought to the boiling point much abolitionist blood, including that of some Quakers. "[We] have counselled [slaves] to endeavor to serve with patience and fidelity while in bondage, and to commit their cause into the hands of a merciful and omnipotent Father in heaven." Clearly, many Quakers did not take nearly as strong or as public a stance as the Anti-Slavery Society would have

liked; they even disagreed among themselves about what that stance should be. At the same time, their doctrinal opposition to slavery, the documented aid given to fugitives by some of their number, and their generally tolerant ways continued to draw both runaways and free blacks to communities with large Quaker populations. Their presence contributed significantly to creating in Pennsylvania's southern counties what one scholar has called an "anti-slavery borderland" that was "an early version of the Civil War emancipation borderland."[22]

Isaac Mason thus had good reasons to stop running when he reached Chester County and to contemplate a settled life there. But he had equally good reasons to change course abruptly—to leave the county and go north as quickly and as quietly as possible—when his neighbor Tom Mitchell was kidnapped. If the proximity of Chester County to the northern counties of Maryland, especially Kent and Cecil Counties, made it easy for slaves in that region of Maryland to cross the line between slavery and freedom without traveling very far, the slave catchers and kidnappers could cross with equal ease—in both directions. A captured fugitive or a kidnapped free black person taken in Pennsylvania could be spirited across the state line and into slave territory quickly. As Elizabeth Parker would discover, if the abduction was carefully planned, it might even go unnoticed until after the kidnappers and their victim were well away.

Elizabeth and her sister Rachel would also discover that free blacks kidnapped in Pennsylvania were likely to find themselves quickly handed over to a slave trader, often in Baltimore, and sent south to be sold. By the 1840s, Baltimore had become the busiest slave-exporting port in the upper South. For the kidnapper, Baltimore thus offered not only a conveniently located slave market but also a choice of experienced traders who were always looking for good, quick deals. Many of the people who were shipped out of Baltimore were destined for the slave markets of New Orleans. Two of the largest exporters, Hope Slatter and Austin Woolfolk, each sent more than twenty-five hundred people to New Orleans over the course of their careers. Joseph S. Donovan shipped more than twenty-one hundred, and the Campbell brothers, to whom Thomas McCreary brought both Elizabeth and Rachel Parker, sent a

total of nearly thirteen hundred people, including Elizabeth Parker, between 1844 and 1856. Elizabeth was among many free persons who were shipped off from Baltimore to slavery in the Deep South. Occasionally a slave trader would refuse to take someone who was known to be kidnapped and arrange to send the person home, especially if the law or the Quakers were sniffing around. The evidence suggests, however, that many, like Elizabeth, were simply merged in the crowd and found themselves exchanging a slave pen in Baltimore for one in New Orleans.[23]

Some slave catchers who came into Pennsylvania from the South were looking for particular runaways for whom they had warrants. Others came in search of anyone, fugitive or free, whom they might successfully claim to be a slave and thus sell for profit, probably to a slave trader. The kidnappings in the state began early. A group of seventy-three African Americans in Philadelphia sent a petition to Congress in 1800 protesting the kidnapping of free blacks in their city. R. C. Smedley notes that there were reports of "some cases of kidnapping and shooting of fugitives who attempted to escape" in the small town of Columbia as early as 1804. Since the town had been founded in 1787 by a strongly antislavery Quaker, Samuel Wright, who specifically encouraged both emancipated and fugitive slaves to harbor there, it became a particular target of the slave catchers and kidnappers. Columbia was only one of many small communities with primarily African American populations that came to dot the southern Pennsylvania border, including some in Chester County: all of these villages attracted the attention of kidnappers. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society declared in 1822 that the taking of black people had become such a lucrative business that the kidnappers were "emboldened to keep up a regular chain of communication and barter from Philadelphia to the Eastern shore of the Chesapeake." The number of kidnapped people sold into slavery was great enough to lead at least one scholar to describe the trade as "the other underground railroad"—the one going from north to south.[24]

By the 1840s, the kidnapping problem had worsened. The *Cincinnati Gazette* noted in May 1843 that kidnapping "is increasing all along the border of the free states. Several instances have occurred lately in which wives and children, born free and known to be so, have been torn

from their homes, and forced into slavery. We suppose this is a sort of retaliation for the free states allowing abolitionists to steal slaves." The reports of kidnappings continued through the 1840s, although only a few of those instances were prosecuted or otherwise became public. Among the few documented cases in the five years between 1844 and 1849, Pennsylvania had its share: in 1844, two Maryland men were arrested and tried for kidnapping a black man from West Chester; in 1846 Thomas Finnegan was convicted of kidnapping a free black family from Adams County; two men were arrested in 1847 for kidnapping Mary Whiting from Chambersburg and selling her to a Baltimore slave dealer; in 1848, a woman and her several children were kidnapped from Pine Grove Forge in Lancaster County, three men tried to kidnap a girl from Downingtown, and a seventeen-year-old boy was kidnapped from Chester County and never seen again. In 1849, one white man and one black man kidnapped a free black boy from Chester County and took him to Baltimore to sell him, and in the same year, Thomas McCreary and two others kidnapped Tom Mitchell in Chester County.[25]

Not surprisingly, the raids into southeastern Pennsylvania to arrest or steal people produced resistance, some of it armed, much of it violent. However, the troubles caused by slave hunters before midcentury were not disturbing enough to prevent Chester County from enticing visitors and potential new residents by presenting itself as a bucolic and peaceful paradise. This boosterish account of the town of Oxford was sent to the *Baltimore Sun* in May 1847 by a correspondent signing himself "Rudolph":

> Gentlemen—Have you ever been here in this county? If you have not, you certainly have missed visiting one of the freshest and best looking, most highly cultivated, and most healthy parts of creation. This town is beautifully situated, being high and dry, and having a paradise of country all around it. . . . Indeed it is one of the freshest looking and most beautiful and picturesque villes I have ever visited. It contains about 300 hospitable, industrious, prudent, temperate, good looking, progressive, intelligent people; three good sized stores, with excellent assortments of goods and

> No. 1 owners; a handsome Presbyterian church; an excellent temperance hotel; and the "Oxford Female Seminary"—an institution of the very first class—the principals of which are the Revs. John M. and Saml. Dickey. . . . This is, according to the recent law and election, a temperance town.[26]

Five years after Rudolph's rhapsodic description, the aura of physical and moral healthiness that he found so desirable in the neighborhood of Oxford was diminished, at least temporarily, by the abduction of the Parker sisters and the murder of one of the county's white citizens. Because of the kidnappings, the Dickeys, especially John, would become embroiled in a distressing and frustrating legal battle; Oxford and its rural environs would attract unwelcome attention from the national press; and the people of Oxford and neighboring communities, especially the black people, would live with increasing anxiety.

A major reason for the changes between 1847 and 1852—and, arguably, a major reason behind the kidnapping of the Parker sisters—was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in September 1850. The act effectively took the fugitive slave issue away from the states and put it into the hands of the federal government. Among its provisions was the requirement that the citizens of any state must, by law, cooperate in the identification and arrest of fugitives. By making the taking of fugitives easier and the protection of them more difficult, the new law outraged opponents of slavery across the country. It was this law, especially its stipulation that every citizen was legally bound to assist in the remanding of fugitive slaves, that pushed Harriet Beecher Stowe to publish *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Anyone who could even consider supporting the new law, she wrote, could not possibly understand the realities of slavery; her novel would therefore put it before them in "*a living dramatic reality*." Eber Pettit, an Underground Railroad agent in New York, spoke for many when he declared that "slavery in the United States after the Fugitive Slave Act assumed its most hideous aspect. . . . [The Act] was undoubtedly the most barbarous law enacted by any civilized nation in the nineteenth century." Since the new regulations also made kidnapping easier, they changed, practically overnight, the landscape for all African Americans,

The town of Oxford, Pennsylvania, 1866.

(Photo by Alexander McCormick; courtesy of the Chester County Historical Society.)

both free and fugitive, especially along the borders between free and slave states. As one Pennsylvania writer put it, the act "made every white man of the North a blood-hound and negro-hunter for the white men of the South."[27]

In southeastern Pennsylvania, the act narrowed or closed down possibilities for many African Americans, producing widespread fear, costing some their freedom and some their lives, at the same time that it opened up irresistibly lucrative possibilities for people like Thomas McCreary. McCreary had been an active slave catcher and occasional kidnapper before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, but, according to much local opinion at the time, he got bolder after 1850. His abduction of Elizabeth and Rachel Parker in 1851, within two weeks of each other, was by all accounts a very bold act.

In an area grown increasingly used to the disappearance of black people, the kidnappings of the Parker sisters were different. They stirred up what the newspapers liked to refer to as "high excitement" along the border and generated editorial comment far beyond it. William Still, in his history of the Underground Railroad, wrote of the kidnappings that "it may be said, without contradiction, that Chester county, at least, was never more aroused by any one single outrage that had taken place within her borders, than by these occurrences." The *Massachusetts Spy* expressed its astonishment at the brashness of Thomas McCreary's action: "We do not believe that the annals of crime, outrage, and wrong, legalized or otherwise, ever furnished a more startling picture of slavery in this country, than does the case of Rachel Parker, and the other collateral circumstances attending it." What made this case so shocking, in a time when kidnapping had lost some of its ability to shock, was the mysterious death of Joseph Miller. It was from Miller's house that Rachel Parker was abducted; it was Miller who organized the search party that pursued McCreary and Rachel to Baltimore; it was Miller who filed kidnapping charges against McCreary. A few hours after filing, Miller went missing from the train taking him home from Baltimore. A few hours after that, his body was found hanging from a tree near the tracks at a place called Stemmer's Run, not far from Baltimore. No one knew how he had gotten to that tree, or why, but everyone had an opinion. Miller's death

was immediately read by some as a brazen, cruel murder; by others as an unexpected but explicable suicide; and by still others as a legitimate move in the war, as yet undeclared but still deadly, between slave and free states.[28]

The excitement over the Parker case lasted through two trials, five burials of Joseph Miller with four exhumations in between, a battle between two governors, many accusations that the security of the entire Union was being threatened, much fist shaking across state lines, the involvement of dozens if not hundreds of people, the expense of large sums of money, and the passage of a full year in which Rachel and Elizabeth Parker were kept enslaved or in jail.