

Title:

Thomas Garrett and Delaware's Underground Railroad

Word Count:

499

Summary:

Thomas Garrett is one of Delaware's heroes, and a shining example of the tradition of righteous dissent in America.

Keywords:

Thomas Garrett, Underground Railroad, Wilmington, 15th Amendment

Article Body:

The Underground Railroad's last stop in the slave-holding state of Delaware was located on Shipley Street in Wilmington at the home of a Quaker merchant named Thomas Garrett. Over 2,700 runaway slaves were given safe harbor there before making their way to the free states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Garrett's passionate commitment to the abolition of slavery would cost him a great deal over the course of his life. Maryland authorities went so far as to offer \$10,000.00 for his arrest. In 1848 federal court fines bankrupted him, forcing him accept the charity of his abolitionist friends to stay in business. During the Civil War his life was in constant danger so that he had to be guarded by African-American volunteers. But throughout his trials, Garrett never wavered from his principled stand against the evils of slavery.

Though Thomas Garrett is today recognized as one of Delaware's most honored citizens, he was in fact born in Upper Darby Pennsylvania in August of 1789. Garrett's parents instilled in him a respect for human freedom at an early age by hiding runaway slaves on the family farm. When Garrett was a young man a family servant was kidnapped and forced into slavery. Garrett managed to track the family's friend and employ down and affect an escape, but the incident left an indelible impression.

He moved to Wilmington, Delaware in 1822, but his personal convictions and deep commitment to his Quaker religious beliefs put him at odds with the state's pro-slavery stance. It was only a few years before Garrett once again resumed his efforts to aid escaped slaves. For the next 40 years he did everything in his power to do so.

In 1848 Garrett and fellow abolitionist John Hunn were convicted of aiding the

Hawkins family in their escape from slavery in Maryland. The sentence, a bank-breaking fine that would leave both men virtually penniless, was handed down in the New Castle, Delaware courthouse by US Chief Justice Roger Taney. After the sentence was read and unrepentant Garrett gave an impassioned speech so moving that even a slave-holding juror offered him his hand, "I say to thee and to all in this court room, that if anyone knows a fugitive who wants shelter" he said "send him to Thomas Garrett and he will befriend him."

Garrett continued to fight against inequality even after the end of the Civil War, acting as an advocate for the rights of former slaves. When the 15th Amendment was passed in 1870, giving African-Americans the right to vote, Garrett was paraded through the streets by his grateful supporters. Some went as far as to refer to him as "out Moses".

On January 25th of 1871 Thomas Garrett died. His funeral, attended by friends from all walks of life, including many he aided in their fight for freedom. Garrett's coffin was borne from shoulder to shoulder to his final resting place in the cemetery at the Wilmington Friends Meeting House at 4th and West Streets in Quaker Hill.