

# No Questions Asked

*Editor's note: Devoted to historical research, journalist August Richter preserved early accounts of antislavery activities in Davenport. Richter credits the following account to "that sturdy, honest philanthropist" William H. Holmes. The story begins with the arrival of Erastus Ripley, one of the Iowa Band.*

Sometime in 1852, I was awakened at daylight by Professor E. Ripley (of Iowa College) who asked the loan of a peddling wagon, the box of which, back of the front seat, made it easy to conceal a few persons in the rear by adding a canvass flap from the top of the back of the driver's seat. Mr. Ripley said he was in charge of a family—man, wife and three children—who had been brought here by their owner, who designed crossing Iowa to Northwestern Missouri!

While [the party] was stopping over at the LeClaire House [Hotel], some waiters of the same hue told the man that his family were lawfully free, because [they were] brought by their master to a free State, but that he could not trust to that, because the people would stand by the master. . . . Being one of the exceptional slaves who would leave his master if he could, he trusted to his black brethren. . . .

The professor relied on John L. Davies for a pair of horses, and Mr. Tade, a young student of Theology, was willing to practice his theory of helping humanity, by [crossing the Mississippi and] driving to Galesburg, [Illinois,] the nearest known station on the "underground station," an organization whose chief actors did not parade their names and official titles. . . . Mrs. Holmes hastily prepared a day's rations for the travelers, while I was adding an extra curtain to the wagon. Believing in a proper use of . . . weapons, I inquired of the man if he was armed, and found his LeClaire House brethren had furnished him a pistol and a small amount of money.

Before these arrangements could be completed, the negroes were missed; handbills were circulated over the city describing the property lost and offering a liberal reward, and we had grave fears about getting

over on the ferry-boat. But my wagon had crossed frequently, and its appearance excited no suspicion. Unfortunately the boat had just left the dock, and the half hour standing in the street seemed a long time. During the delay it occurred to me that more money might be needed, and I had but two dollars with me. I was passing by Mr. Thomas [Gilbrath?], whom I knew to be safe. He had just two dollars with him, but said he would borrow more if necessary, and volunteered to stand on Front street, near the wagon, to keep off possible intruders, and probably no one man could or would have kept off more than he, had occasion required.

The next passer-by was Hiram Price, then an honored leader in a party prompt to prove its pro-slavery zeal, but I knew him to have a humane heart beneath the surface garb of a partisan, and that he did not suffer his sympathies to evaporate in words alone. I accosted him, saying, "I want some money for a benevolent purpose, and no questions asked." He promptly took out his pocket-book, lifted the top note—five dollars—without a word as to the object, only asking, "is that enough for my share?" but with a look that suggested he knew the general direction it would take, and if he had seen the handbill I presume he inferred the specific use; but it is probable he does not till this day know he was a contributor to the flight of this family from a State too weak to interpose in favor of freedom.

Soon afterwards Mr. Ripley called to say he had heard from Galesburg that, under the banner of a Queen our fugitives had found in Canada what the boasted "Flag of the Free" would not give—personal liberty!

. . . I listened to many speculations as to who hid them and where, as also to countless curses on the fanatics who would seriously damage business here, because the LeClaire House would not be filled with summer boarders from St. Louis. The majority of the talkers, at least, sympathized with . . . the slave owner—who supposed that every man in Iowa belonged to the bodyguard of slavery. No day of my not unhappy life has given higher satisfaction than that in which I heard of the safe exodus of this humble family. ❖

Source: August Richter Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City). The text has been broken into additional paragraphs for ease of reading.