

A Gamble for Freedom

Frances Overton and the Underground Railroad in Grinnell

by Rebecca Conard

In the spring of 1887, Amos Bixby sat down to write a letter to his old friend Leonard Parker. Parker had asked for Bixby's memories of a dramatic event in which they both had been involved three decades earlier.

For readers today, Bixby's letter offers a rare glimpse into Iowans' participation in the Underground Railroad prior to the Civil War. That glimpse frames a young woman, a teenager really, who, in a gamble for freedom, abandoned the familiar to become a fugitive slave in unknown territory, literally and figuratively, where she was utterly dependent on the kindness of strangers.

The metaphor "underground railroad" came into use as railroad companies were building a tangible network of iron rails throughout the young, expanding nation. After Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 (which required Northerners to assist in capturing runaway slaves), abolitionists intensified their activities, more runaway slaves sought and received aid from antislavery sympathizers, and "underground railroad" entered the common lexicon. Modern usage assigns the capital letters "U" and "R," signifying in part the legendary quality this vast, nebulous, conspiratorial movement assumed after the Civil War.

During the late 1850s, the time period Bixby recalls in his letter, the

nation was polarizing on the issue of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in 1852, strengthening the opposition to slavery on moral grounds; the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act institutionalized the slavery debate into westward expansion; the 1857 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the Dred Scott case denied citizenship to escaped slaves and free blacks alike and ruled unconstitutional the Missouri Compromise, thereby denying Congress the power to prohibit slavery in any U.S. territory; and the zealous abolitionist John Brown relentlessly agitated in Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa. Until the Civil War was decided, slaves who managed to unloose the chains of human bondage were never truly free in U.S. states and territories, which is why the various routes of the Underground Railroad led to Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

Iowa was a stopping place on the Underground Railroad. Although some escapees made Iowa their permanent home, those who provided aid expected fugitive slaves either to move on or to make it on their own once they were out of danger. The new town of Grinnell, which attracted both staunch abolitionists and outspoken anti-abolitionists, became a microcosm of the nation's turmoil. Antislavery activists in Iowa often had ties to Oberlin, Ohio, one of the

staunchest abolitionist communities in the country. In Grinnell, those ties included Leonard F. Parker and his wife, Sarah, both graduates of Oberlin College. After teaching for a few years in Pennsylvania, the Parkers had ventured west and settled in Grinnell in 1856; shortly thereafter, Leonard became the county superintendent of schools. In Grinnell, the Parkers rejoined former Oberlin classmates: Samuel F. Cooper, a newspaper editor, and his wife, Jane. They also found kindred spirits in Amos and Augusta Bixby, social reform advocates who had come to Grinnell from Maine. Amos was a lawyer. Together with Josiah B. Grinnell, the Parkers, the Coopers, and the Bixbys helped to establish Grinnell as a center of progressive education.

Leonard Parker's long professional career included teaching at Iowa College (now Grinnell College) and at the University of Iowa; serving with the 46th Iowa Volunteers in the Civil War; and serving a term in the Iowa House of Representatives. The Bixbys eventually continued westward, moving to Colorado and then on to California. But in the late 1850s they were core abolitionists in Grinnell and advocates for racial equality in education. The fugitive slave Frances Overton played an unwitting part in their bid to integrate the Grinnell public school, which led to a community

riot in 1860. In 1858 the Bixbys gave Frances harbor in their home, employed her as a maid, and began to school her.

Frances proved to be an eager and fast learner. This prompted the Bixbys to seek her enrollment in the public school, which she attended without incident as long as she was the only black student. However, when another abolitionist attempted to enroll four more fugitive slaves, all young men, mounting tension in the community escalated to open hostilities, and the school directors closed the school before the end of the term in order to avert bloodshed. Fearing that the incident would attract slave catchers, the abolitionists moved Frances and the four male fugitives from Grinnell to an unspecified Quaker settlement about fifty miles away, possibly near Oskaloosa, where evangelical Quakers resided.

Primary documents such as Bixby's letter open our senses to the past because they communicate human thoughts and emotions across time and space. But they must be examined as pieces of a complex historical puzzle and as creations tied to particular moments in time. In this case, Bixby's paternalistic tone hints at the subtle as well as the overt racism that continued to circumscribe Frances Overton's life once she had achieved quasi freedom. Equally important, Bixby's account of events that happened 30 years earlier reveals the urge among those who had been active in the abolitionist movement to create a legacy by documenting their participation in the great, noble cause of the antebellum period.

Here is Amos Bixby's letter.

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Boulder, Colorado, May 16, 1887.
Prof. Leonard F. Parker.

My dear friend:

Your letter, full of remembrances, and inclosing historical sketch, is rec'd, and the manuscript herewith returned. In the main I remember the incidents as related, but, with the aid of Mrs. Bixby's recollections, could be a little more specific respecting the history of the runaway slave girl called Eliza in Miss Kellogg's account. She came to us, by the underground line, as Fannie Overton, taking her master's name of Overton. But as we had a Fannie in our family, by consent of all her name was changed to Frances Overton—and she was always after known as Frances. She was then 16 years old, and Mrs. Bixby says that she had, previously, no conception of how blank and benighted a human mind could be. Seeing a picture of the crucifixion, she exclaimed, "What dey doing to dat man up dare?" Any idea of Christ was as new to her as to any heathen. Being told that the world is round, she regarded herself as an eye-witness to the contrary — having traveled from Missouri to Kansas, and from Kansas to Grinnell, and found it all a plain. "But," said she, "if you tell me, Mrs. Bixby, that a man can stand with his feet on the ceiling, and his head down, I will believe you, and that the earth is round, — and that men can walk on the other side, with their heads down.[""] She would take on faith anything that her new mistress told her.

She was so eager to learn that she did

not have to be taught — she'd follow on as fast as Mrs. Bixby could talk to her. Not knowing the alphabet when she came, three months afterwards she took the Sunday School prize offered for the scholar who could repeat the greatest number of Scripture verses. This caused offence to some white competitors.

During her stay with us, two slave girls ran away from their master in Western Nebraska, and were pursued by a professional slave hunter through Iowa. Capt. Clark was reported to have met him at Sugar Grove, the stage station a little way south of Grinnell, to inform that a nice piece of property known as Frances, was unlawfully harbored in Grinnell. He also wrote, or was supposed to have written, to her old master, Mr. Overton. These things gave us all many a touch of trepidation — not knowing what day she might be demanded for return to slavery, under the fugitive slave law. The penalties for aiding, or for harboring fugitive slaves were so severe that one might well dread them.

She made a fortress of our garret, reached by a small aperture through the ceiling, where she could pull the ladder up after her, and where she kept a store of weapons of defence. It was thought if the slave hunters came, and discovered her hiding place, she could keep them at bay until the Abolition town was aroused. We depended on such men as Harvey Bliss to rescue her. At length the danger was so imminent that it was thought best to find for her a more secure retreat, and you

were the man to direct her to a Quaker neighborhood, about 50 miles distant.

A few years years [*sic*] after our arrival in this country, word came that Frances had not turned out very well, and that some of those who thought it wrong for us to harbor her as we did, said, "See how the wench who took the Sunday School prize has turned out, after all." But — I say this to you in confidence — there is a bit of history connected with her child-slave life that may account for her fall. She said that her master's sons, the Overton boys, used to misread the Bible to her — that is make it read that the sin to which their young lusts inclined them, was not only not a sin, but was actually commanded by the Word. It is, therefore, presumable that Heaven did not stoop to save the virtue of the poor, deluded, defenceless slave girl — Her's was but the unhappy lot of slave girls since the world began.

I think it was in the spring preceding the Harpers Ferry raid that John Brown visited Grinnell. I remember that the roads were very muddy when it was announced that he, and his boys, and train of fugitives, were approaching the town on foot. Mr. Phelps, and a few others, as I remember, went out to meet them. There was quite a gathering to greet them at the hotel, on south side of the town. It was late in the cool morning, and John Brown being asked if he was not tired and hungry, having had no breakfast, he replied that he was not — that by extreme temperance, and by train-

ing in enduring hardships, he could go 24 hours without food, and not suffer hunger.

It being suggested to him that as he was getting old, it was hoped by his friends, who recognized his great and fearless service in the cause of Kansas, and for the abolition party, — that he would take a rest at his home in New York, and let younger men fight it out, he made a very brief, evasive answer, but I remember that the look on his face was as much as to say, "I am ready to be offered. Without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of the sin of American Slavery." At the evening meeting in the church, he spoke with others, briefly, but feelingly. He repeated the passage from Job in which occur the words, The cause which I knew not I searched out. It has been said that voice is soul, and certainly is put into his voice the expression of the soul that still goes marching on, as he slowly repeated the words.

... So much of reminiscence — and now let me say that we hope you will make us another visit, when you want recreation — you and your family. Mrs. Parker is one of the best remembered of all the early inhabitants of Grinnell. It is doubtful if ever we visit eastward again — but, if I live, may go to California, where all my brothers and sisters are. We have had one life in Maine, another in Iowa, a third in Colorado, now whether we have a fourth in California — we are quite submissive to the Providence that has guided us in all our journeying. Good bye — for the present — dear friend.

Yours most Truly,
Amos Bixby.

The Amos Bixby letter is published here with the permission of the Grinnell College Archives, which holds the original. A copy of the letter is in the Leonard F. Parker Papers, MS 44, box 1, folder "Schroeder's research files," Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City. Biographical material used for the introduction was found in the Leonard F. Parker Papers and Benjamin F. Gue's History of Iowa from the Earliest Times . . . vol. 4 (New York: Century History Co., 1903), and provided by Grinnell College archivist Kathryn Rod.

Further Reading on the Underground Railroad

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