

MOSES PIERCE,

Westchester's Friend of Freedom

by Dorothee von Huene Greenberg

A little-known hero of Pleasantville, New York, Moses Pierce (1816-1886), left no papers or letters that would document his courage in fighting slavery. Instead, he lived his life quietly, acting with conviction and inspiring members of his family and community with his strongly-held abolitionist beliefs. This article is an attempt to bring Moses' story into the light, to reveal the peaceful Quaker farmer who served a vital role in Westchester's Underground Railroad, the clandestine system that helped escaped slaves, or black self-liberators, make their way to Canada and freedom before and during the Civil War.

Moses Pierce. Courtesy
New Castle Historical Society.

In 1886, the year Moses Pierce died, historian John Todd wrote in Scharf's *History of Westchester County*, "Early in life he [Pierce] achieved for himself the reputation of a fearless upholder of just and right principles, even though those principles were unpopular and their championship fraught with danger both to life and property."¹ Todd continues:

Early convinced, with his entire family, of the injustice and wrong of slave-holding, he cheerfully met the odium and danger attendant upon such a course at the time, and, together with his son, he speeded many fugitive slaves along the mythical track of the "Underground Railroad" to the next station, at the Jay homestead, en route for Canada.²

Moses' work was shrouded in secrecy, since most "conductors" kept no records of their actions, used secret codes to communicate, and destroyed all potential evidence. Surviving sources include just a few hand-written and printed letters, marriage and death records, portraits of him and his wife with matching frames, oral histories, and reports about his activities written after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 made it less likely that those who provided aid to those who had been enslaved would be prosecuted.

A Quaker eulogy of Moses Pierce, published a year after his death, survives, emphasizing Pierce's role in anti-slavery activism:

It is also worthy of note that he largely had the power, whilst doing what he could to promote reforms esteemed unpopular, calmly to await

results without discouragement. Early interested in the abolition of slavery, he did all he was able to accomplish that end; and it was his privilege to aid many fugitive slaves, in their escape from bondage.³

Before we examine further evidence of Moses Pierce's brave anti-slavery beliefs and deeds, we'll explore the international, national and local events that fashioned the background of his life and times.

INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

Political thinkers and philosophers of the fledgling United States were eager to create a unique national identity in the early 19th century. Nevertheless, transatlantic ships of that era carried back and forth across the ocean some of the most ardent thinkers of the day, leading to a vigorous exchange of ideas among abolitionists including Anthony Benezet, John Woolman, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. All of them lived in Europe for a time and recognized the international trend supporting the abolition of slavery. Ironically, the fact that slavery was tacitly condoned by the U.S. Constitution in Article IV, Section II, undermined those progressive beliefs.

The effort to free slaves in England, of which William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was a primary and tireless leader, led to emancipation in the United Kingdom in 1772. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society was formed in 1775 and Pennsylvania's passage of "An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery" followed in

1780. By 1807 the slave trade had been abolished in the British Empire; in the U.S. it officially ended in 1808, yet the law "was so weak and the enforcement of it so lax that a repeal was unnecessary to reopen the trade."⁴ Despite increasing abolitionist activity, American slave markets remained unhampered by federal law until the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 during the Civil War.⁵

In other parts of the world, the trade in enslaved persons had ended long before the middle of the 19th century. Russia abolished slavery in 1723, for instance, although the holding of serfs continued until 1861 when that practice was abolished; Portugal in 1761; Scotland in 1778; Upper Canada in 1793 and Lower Canada in 1803. The American Anti-Slavery Society was formed in 1833, and the British and foreign anti-slavery society known as Anti-Slavery International, whose purpose was to end slavery worldwide, was founded in 1839.⁶ This must have heartened American abolitionists, for the voices of those protesting the inhumanity of slavery in the United States were becoming louder and more widespread in the early- and mid-1800s. They were also inspired by Olaudah Equiano's slave autobiography published in the United States in 1791, as well as by the 1834 emancipation of slaves in the West Indies and the influence of abolitionists such as Charles Sumner (1811-1874), John Brown (1800-1859), William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator* (1805-1879), black activist David Ruggles (1810-1849), and former slave Frederick

Douglass (1818-1895). American journalist Lydia Maria Child, defending John Brown's 1859 raid at Harper's Ferry, wrote that "the whole civilized world proclaims slavery an outlaw, [and] the best intellect of the age is active in hunting it down."⁷

NATIONAL EVENTS

The lengthy and persistent debate about the practice of slavery was intense among the Founding Fathers. Indeed, Jefferson proposed the Ordinance of 1784 which included a clause that would have prohibited slavery in the new U. S. territories established after 1800 between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. It failed to pass Congress by one vote. Although he himself was a slave owner, Jefferson was incensed by this setback. "The voice of a single individual," he pronounced, "would have prevented this abominable crime from spreading itself over the new country. Thus we see the fate of millions unborn hanging on the tongue of one man, and Heaven was silent in that awful moment!"⁸ Several other Founding Fathers had ambivalent and often evolving attitudes toward slavery, however. Benjamin Franklin (1705-1790), who had been a slave owner, became president of the largely Quaker Pennsylvania Abolition Society and made abolition his leading cause until his death in 1790.⁹ Similarly, George Washington (1732-1799) complained in 1786 that a neighbor's runaway slaves had been helped to escape by a "society of Quakers,

formed for such purposes," yet he insisted in his will that his own slaves should, after his death, be freed and provided for. He concluded, "that this clause respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the Epoch at which it is directed to take place; without evasion, neglect or delay."¹⁰ But other national leaders such as James Jackson from Georgia felt that suggesting ending slavery would sound trumpets—"trumpets of civil war."¹¹

Quakers were the first religious group in America to officially reject slavery beginning in the 1750s, and

a growing number of them began to speak out against the "evils of this frightful institution."¹² The American Anti-Slavery Society founded in Philadelphia in 1833 published four periodicals dedicated to abolishing slavery. By 1836 the society had enrolled 70 lecturers on the subject.¹³ Their cause was aided by disturbing contemporaneous events. Mobs frequently invaded halls and attacked speakers. In 1834, after working-class mobs in New York City harassed blacks and destroyed 12 black-occupied homes, a black church and a black school,¹⁴ more outraged citizens joined the

TEN DOLLARS REWARD.

RUN AWAY on Friday the 26th of August 1774, from the subscriber, living in Middle-patient, North-Castle, Westchester county, and province of New-York,

A NEGRO MAN,

Named **W I L L I**, about 27 years of age, about five feet six inches high, somewhat of a yellow complexion, a spry lively fellow, very talkative; had on when he went away, a butter-nut coloured coat, felt hat, tow cloth trowsers; he has part of his right ear cut off, and a mark on the backside of his right hand.

Whoever takes up said Negro and brings him to his master, or secures him in gaol, so that his master may have him again, shall have the above reward and all reasonable charges, paid by

JAMES BANKS.

N. B. Masters of vessels are hereby warned not to carry the above Negro.

Advertisement for a fugitive slave from North Castle. The Library Company of Philadelphia.

abolitionist cause. Public sentiment about slavery grew so intense, and discussions about it in Washington so inflamed, that Congress adopted a "gag rule" in 1836, tabling petitions to end slavery. This gag rule, which was not overturned until 1845, did not, however, prevent citizens from expressing their deeply held beliefs about the injustice of slavery. For instance, in her 1837 "Letters to Catherine Beecher," Angelina Grimke, an ardent abolitionist born to Southern slave owners, stated that enslavement was based not on race but on skin color.¹⁵ In fact, white-appearing persons born into slavery could escape to the North and "pass" for white, while freed persons of color were kidnapped and sold back into slavery.

Although highly outspoken and articulate, abolitionists remained a minority in the 1830s and 1840s. By 1840 literature prepared and distributed by abolitionists appeared in 1,000 newspapers that circulated in the states. The growing influence of abolitionists throughout the American North, exemplified by the activities of Garrison, Ruggles, Douglass and Sumner, helped to subdue violence against the abolitionists themselves and against Northern blacks.¹⁶ Their strong stance was also a major factor in persuading Lincoln to promulgate the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

EVENTS IN NEW YORK STATE

New York State had an early and evolving tradition of abolitionism, which may have helped inspire

anti-slavery feelings elsewhere in the nation. According to Quaker historians, "Horsman Mullenix [a resident of the Bronx, then part of Westchester] was the first New York Friend to raise the issue [of slavery] in 1716."¹⁷ Another powerful and very early voice against slavery, that of itinerant Quaker John Woolman (1720 – 1772), was drawing large audiences from New Jersey to North Carolina between 1741 and his death in England in 1772.¹⁸ Particularly influential was his 1754 address entitled *Some Considerations of the Keeping of Negroes Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Description*. His abolitionist ideas were based on the Quaker concept of the spiritual equality of all persons, the brotherhood of all men, and the concept "that the black people did not voluntarily come to dwell" here.¹⁹

Woolman inspired other itinerant Quaker preachers, particularly Elias Hicks (1748-1830) whose "phrase patterns in his *Journal* show that he patterned his life on John Woolman's."²⁰ Hicks, a resident of Long Island, was one of 830 "Public Friends," Quakers who traveled extensively and preached between 1732 and 1829. He traveled as far as Ontario and made "38 trips totaling an estimated 35,000 miles, often on exhausted horses."²¹ Both Moses Pierce's father-in-law, Joseph Carpenter, and David Irish, whose home was the last stop on the route to freedom, were members of meetings labeled "Hicksite." In his journal, Hicks reports visiting the Quarterly Meetings in Purchase, Chappaqua, Nine Partners and the

Oblong Meeting which Irish attended, between 1781 and 1829.²² Doubtless Joseph Carpenter, Moses Pierce and David Irish had the opportunity to hear him. Hicks and his followers, as well as Wilberforce, must have inspired prominent abolitionists in New York State, including John Jay (1745-1829), his son William Jay (1789-1858), and possibly William Seward (1801– 1872).

John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States (1789-1795) had met Wilberforce in England, maintained a 15-year correspondence with him²³ and became a prominent abolitionist while governor of New York (1795-1801). His son William Jay, Judge in Westchester County from 1818-1842, continued his father's mission to end slavery. According to his biographer Bayard Tuckerman, William Jay had achieved such notoriety because of his "anti-slavery opinions and labours" during a time when pro-slavery forces in New York State were increasingly virulent, that in 1843 he lost his seat on the bench of Westchester County, to which he had been reappointed for 25 years by several successive New York governors.²⁴

The Jays' strong abolitionist views were also echoed farther north in Auburn, New York, by William Henry Seward (1801–1872), governor of New York from 1839 to 1842, and his wife Frances Miller Seward (1805–1865). Her negative views on slavery, inspired by her Quaker education in Cayuga County, New York,²⁵ deepened when she witnessed the outrages of slavery during

an 1835 holiday trip with her husband to Virginia.²⁶ In his 1839 inaugural address as governor of New York, Seward proposed better schools for blacks. Later that year, he achieved national recognition

gained national recognition for his eloquence and moral courage.²⁸ Later, he offered financial support to Harriet Tubman, helping her to purchase a home in Auburn, New York, which, like his own, served as a stop

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when he defended three black persons accused of helping a fugitive slave seeking freedom and refused the Virginia governor's demand that they be extradited.²⁷ Even more controversial was Seward's 1846 defense on grounds of insanity of William Freeman, a 25-year-old black man and self-confessed murderer of a family of four who had been friends of Seward. At the trial, only Seward's wife stood by him while his friends, neighbors and fellow townspeople turned against him. Seward lost the legal case, but

on the Underground Railroad.²⁹

Seward's wife, Frances, never wavered in her support for his anti-slavery work. Violence incited by the 1863 New York City draft riots reached upstate New York in Auburn where she was living while her husband was away serving in Lincoln's cabinet. When someone threw a rock through her sitting room window, she wrote to her husband in July 1863, "As for personal injury, I fear more for the poor colored people, as they cannot protect themselves and few are willing to

assist them."³⁰ Although Seward's anti-slavery stance may have cost him votes in the 1840 gubernatorial election, it later made him a leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860. It also led to his appointment as Lincoln's Secretary of State and perhaps his closest friend and advisor.³¹

Many Methodists also sympathized with the abolitionist cause, and in 1832, 1833 and 1846 the Methodist Episcopal Church had engaged a particularly strong abolitionist, Daniel DeVinne (1793-1883) to preach in the Mount Pleasant Circuit.³² At that time, the Mount Pleasant circuit included "New Castle, Bedford, Sing Sing (now Ossining), Tarrytown, Greenburgh, Robins Mills (now Kensico), Pines Bridge, Pleasantville and other places."³³ In his book *The Methodist Episcopal Church and Slavery*, published in 1857, DeVinne revealed his abolitionist sentiments and asked "Where do the scriptures allow the enslaving of a human being? No where,"³⁴ and went on to declare "We can have no better abolition book than the bible, and no better plan for the emancipation of Slavery, than the enforcement of Christian discipline."³⁵

Information about abolitionist sentiments was readily available at the time, both in the *Hudson River Chronicle*, published in Ossining, and in the *New York Tribune*, founded by Horace Greeley in 1841. Greeley had purchased a farm in Chappaqua as a summer home in 1853, just north of where King Street, the road fugitives from slavery were likely to take, joined



Chappaqua Friends Meeting House. Photograph by Gray Williams.

MOSES PIERCE'S FAMILY

Moses Pierce was descended from one of the first tenant farmers who settled in what is now Mount Pleasant, New York. His great-great-grandfather, James Pearce, born Dec. 20, 1700, was one of a number of Quakers who left Long Island for the mainland.³⁷ In 1732 he settled with his wife, Elizabeth Cock, as a tenant farmer on the Mount Pleasant part of Philipsburg Manor,³⁸ on land that is now bordered by Pierce Drive, Bedford Road, Manville Road, Edgewood and Washington avenues in Pleasantville.³⁹ Although Philipsburg Manor tenant farmers had enslaved laborers, the Pearce family, like most northern Quakers, would have liberated any slaves they owned by the 1770s, when New York Yearly Meeting required members to liberate their slaves.⁴⁰

James Pearce (1737-1807), one of James Pearce and Elizabeth Cock's eight children, married Upper Philipsburg Manor native Martha Leggett (1746-1834) in 1767, becoming another of Philipsburg Manor's tenant farmers.⁴¹ James and Martha rented land in the area that is now occupied by Foxwood Condominium in Pleasantville. Their descendants "continued to lease the family farm until after the Revolutionary War, when the family purchased the property."⁴²

James and Martha had two sons, the younger of whom was Joseph Pearce (1785-1858) who remained

on their farm as an adult.⁴³ In 1812, at a public Quaker meeting in Croton Valley, New York, Joseph, who now spelled his surname as "Pierce," married Hannah Sutton (1787-1864). Four years later, their second child and first son, Moses Pierce, was born at 75 Bedford Road in Pleasantville, New York.⁴⁴ The couple had four additional children, including Joseph Pierce, Jr., who married Phebe Irish, a daughter of David Irish of Quaker Hill near Pawling, New York, the last stop on this track of the Underground Railroad.

The senior Joseph Pierce was an esteemed member of the Quaker community and deeply concerned about achieving freedom for the enslaved. Indeed, at a meeting on April 1, 1837, of the Association for the Encouragement of the Use of Articles Free from Slave Labor, he was appointed to a committee of five to "confer with merchants" to procure "goods, wares and merchandise that are the effect of free labor."⁴⁵ In other words, they were forbidden to purchase goods produced by slave labor, such as cotton and sugar cane; instead, they were to limit their wares to goods containing wool and beet or maple sugar, the result of the labor of free persons. This required a great deal of persuasive effort to gain the cooperation of merchants, since profits could be significantly reduced by the free labor proviso.

Joseph Pierce was also a friend of the renowned abolitionist Joseph Carpenter (1793-1854) of New Rochelle, New York. The Westchester County Historical

Bedford Road where Moses Pierce and his family lived. Moses would have passed Greeley's farm on the way to Meeting in Chappaqua. By 1860 the *Tribune* had a circulation of almost 300,000, and enjoyed a readership of close to 1,000,000 due to generous sharing of newspapers among neighbors and friends.³⁶ By

1864 Greeley had moved to what is today's Greeley House, home of the New Castle Historical Society, less than one mile removed from the historic Chappaqua Quaker Meeting House.

Thus Moses Pierce would have known of the international, national and state views on slavery from his

reading of the *Chronicle* and the *Tribune*, which were freely shared in the village, and from chats with his family, other Quaker Friends, and neighbors he met at the local store where he sold his produce. As he hid illegal and easily recognizable black fugitives in his wagons, basement or attic, the knowledge that a

governor, a local judge and a prominent editor supported the unpopular cause he shared with his wife would surely have given him courage. We will never know how many neighbors shared his views or may have even quietly helped him in his underground activities.

Society's *Quarterly Bulletin* includes "A Jaunt Through Westchester in 1838," a story about unnamed visitors to "Joseph Pearce" who hiked in the company of "Moses Pearce" on what is identifiably Flag Hill in Chappaqua.⁴⁶ Who were these visitors, and why did they travel through White Plains to distant Pleasantville? In all likelihood they were acquainting themselves with Joseph Pierce, a trusted stationmaster for fugitives. Joseph was a prominent abolitionist who had already worked with Joseph Carpenter to help freedom seekers,⁴⁷ and his son Moses, at 22, was of an age when he was probably participating in his father's activism.

Moses' mother, Hannah Sutton, was a woman who almost certainly shared her husband's views and may even have strengthened his abolitionist tendencies. She had attended the coeducational Quaker Nine Partners Boarding School in Millbrook, New York, which later became Oakwood School in Poughkeepsie. Since Lucretia Mott, the renowned abolitionist and woman's rights advocate, had studied and taught there,⁴⁸ the education Hannah received would have influenced her and her family and laid a foundation for her children's commitment to social equality and abolition. It would also have supplied links to a Quaker network that assisted runaways. While running her household, Hannah may well have used Lydia Maria Child's popular book, *The Frugal Housewife*, a guide for homemakers, first published in 1829 and reprinted 35 times. She was surely also familiar

with *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, a book Child published in 1833, and she must have known that Child became the editor of the American Anti-Slavery Society's *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1840. Lydia Maria Child was likely a significant presence in Hannah Sutton Pierce's life, one that would further motivate her and her family to support the abolition movement.

Moses Pierce was born on March 9, 1816, the year that James Monroe was elected President, the last of the Founding Fathers to hold the office. Although a slave owner, Monroe shared with many of his contemporaries an abhorrence of exploitation and oppression—the exploitation they felt they had experienced at the hands of the British crown. Monroe's successor, John Quincy Adams, who served as President from 1825 to 1829, also deplored slavery and promoted its gradual abolition.

As Moses was growing up, however, pro-abolition sentiment waned with the increasing power of states whose economies relied on slavery. In addition, the settling of the territories acquired through the Louisiana Purchase forced the issue over whether these areas would become slave or free and intensified the debate over what vision this nation, founded on the principle of liberty and justice for all, should follow.

By the summer of 1826 Moses was working on the family's Bedford Road farm with his father. He could have received home schooling or attended an unrecorded Quaker

school. Since New York State established public schools in 1812, it is possible that Moses attended one until age 12. In 1826 a new school had been built at the corner of what is now Church Street and Broadway in Pleasantville,⁴⁹ an easy walk for 10-year old Moses from his home. If he attended there, he would have passed David Hays' meadow each day, trudging through the snow in winter and mud in spring, passing orchards and farms with four to 30 sheep, "three to five cows...ten to thirty chickens, ten geese, five ducks, two or three turkeys and five to ten hogs," as well as two or more horses, and beehives in the fields.⁵⁰ He would have met children of different religious denominations, but particularly members of the Methodist Episcopal Society, who had built a meetinghouse in 1820 at the site of what is now the old Methodist cemetery on Broadway.⁵¹ This was the most well-attended church in Pleasantville until 1858, when St. John's Episcopal Church was built.⁵²

At school Moses would have read the New Testament and perhaps some of the popular literature of the day, including Thomas Day's *The History of Sandford and Merton*.⁵³ Day's book tells the story of Tommy Merton, the indulged and unhappy son of a slave owner, and Harry Sandford, a hard-working son of an English farmer whose lessons in civility and humanity transform Tommy. The book remained a best seller until the end of the 19th century, so it is possible that Moses' children may have read the book as well. In addition, Moses was surely

familiar with Caleb Bingham's *The Columbia Orator*, published in Boston in 1810, a book that inspired Frederick Douglass to seek freedom in 1838.

The population of Moses' village was changing during this time. In 1810 Mount Pleasant census data recorded 117 "slaves" and 25 persons labeled as "all other free persons" presumably persons of color, out of a total population of 3,376. In 1820, when Moses was four years old, the census showed a population of 3,684, of whom 142 were "Free Colored Persons" and 16 "slaves." By the 1830 census there had been a dramatic decline in the black population in Mount Pleasant. Seventeen "freed colored persons" lived there, along with four "slaves," though slavery had been abolished in New York State in 1827. This dramatic reduction in the number of persons of color in an expanding population is puzzling, because there was increasing anti-slavery sentiment in the area. Governor John Jay signed into law "An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery" in 1799, freeing children born to enslaved women after July 4, 1799. Such children would, however, remain the property of the mother's owner until the age of 25 for females and 28 for males, and considered to be "indentured servants." A later statute in 1817 freed all slaves in New York State on July 4, 1827.⁵⁴

The exodus of "colored persons" from Mount Pleasant may have been due to the high cost of living for people without inherited land or property, competition for jobs from



Esther Pierce. Courtesy New Castle Historical Society.

white immigrants, or kidnapping by bounty-seekers who sold fugitives from slavery and even freed persons of color to Southern merchants.⁵⁵ In addition, negative attitudes towards "colored persons" were common in the North, as Fanny Kemble observed in her 1833 *Diary*:

These are not slaves indeed, but they are pariahs, debarred from every fellowship save with their own despised race....All hands are extended to thrust them out, all fingers point at

their dusky skin, all tongues...have learned to turn the very name of their race into an insult and a reproach.⁵⁶

Every decade brought new developments in anti-slavery literature that must have influenced Moses' thinking. The news of Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia in October 1831, reported in William Lloyd Garrison's newly launched abolitionist monthly, *The Liberator*, would have reached Moses at the



Moses Pierce's house near the intersection of Broadway and Garrigan Avenue. Photo courtesy of the author.

Chappaqua Meeting. Two years later, Lydia Maria Child published her *Appeal on Behalf of the Class of Americans Called Africans*, urging the immediate emancipation of all slaves. Shunned by many pro-slavery friends, Child was nevertheless esteemed in the abolitionist community, befriending Joseph Carpenter and, no doubt, inspiring Esther and Moses. Indeed, Child's stay at the Carpenter home to escape abolitionist violence in New York lasted nearly six months, from September 1835 to March 1836.⁵⁷ In a letter of March 10, 1836, to her mother, Child describes Joseph Carpenter as "a kind-hearted and excellent Quaker." At that time,

Moses probably learned of the prominent abolitionist's stay at the Carpenter home and that Carpenter, despite the severe disapproval of his neighbors, shared his home with three orphaned black children.⁵⁸

MOSES AS AN ADULT

How did Moses and his future wife, Esther Carpenter of New Rochelle, meet? They might have known each other as children, socializing at Quarterly Meetings held every three months by Quaker communities. Although Moses' family belonged to the Chappaqua Meeting, and Esther's to the Purchase Meeting near New Rochelle, there were strong historic

ties between the two. In 1745 the Purchase Meeting honored the request of Quakers in the town they called "Shapiqua" to sponsor a Meeting and were given two acres for a cemetery and the construction of a Meeting House, which was completed in 1754. The building still stands at 420 Quaker Road in Chappaqua.⁵⁹

In any case, several events of the 1830s intensified and promoted the abolitionist struggle. A dramatic influx of immigrants from Europe created acute economic competition that exacerbated the struggle of freed persons of color and erupted in nationwide riots. One of the worst disturbances occurred in New York

City between July 7 and July 12, 1834, when working-class mobs destroyed black homes, as well as the home of Lewis Tappan, a prominent white abolitionist in New York City and friend of Lydia Maria Child. The next year, William Lloyd Garrison narrowly escaped lynching in Boston as he was about to speak at the first anniversary of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society on October 21, 1835. Through a ruse, the mayor was able to bring him into protective custody by "lodging him overnight in the city jail."⁶⁰ Three days after the May 14, 1838, opening of the new Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia, dedicated to temperance, peace and anti-slavery, the structure was burned. Rioters threw stones at white and colored women who were leaving the building, and civil authorities failed to intervene.⁶¹ Moses must have known of these acts of arson, assault and violence by reading newspapers and participating in discussions at home and at Quaker Meetings and been inspired by the commitment and courage shown by Tappan and Garrison. When, in 1839, the Africans on the ship *Amistad* were apprehended off eastern Long Island, former President John Quincy Adams defended the Africans, and William Jay of Bedford became a member of the Committee for the Defense of the Africans on the *Amistad*.⁶² The event must have become a flashpoint among abolitionists in Pleasantville, at least until the case was resolved in the Africans' favor in 1841.

Despite ongoing social turmoil, Moses was able to purchase a 79-

acre lot from J. Wilson Chapman in 1839 for \$8,940, when he was a 23-year-old bachelor. The lot is in what is now Mount Pleasant, less than two miles from his parents' home. Since the price was high for the time, it may have included a house, the one that still stands at 989 Broadway in Thornwood.⁶³ It was a modest dwelling, containing four square rooms on the main floor, and two rooms under the eaves of the half-story second floor. It was in this house that he sheltered freedom seekers, and it is where he brought his bride.

We have no way of knowing when Moses Pierce and Esther Carpenter, the daughter of his father's friend Joseph Carpenter, decided to marry, but it is likely the strong abolitionist sentiments they and their parents shared were among the things that brought them together. According to Aaron Macy Powell, "the mantle of her beloved father descended" on Esther,⁶⁴ implying that she, like her father, Joseph Carpenter, the prominent abolitionist, vehemently and publicly opposed slavery. In fact, at age 17 Esther was "one of three young women who attended the convention in New York City, in 1833, which organized the New York Anti-Slavery Society."⁶⁵ By May 9, 1836, Lydia Child had become well enough acquainted with Esther to correspond with her from West Boylston, Massachusetts. "Abolitionism is rapidly growing respectable here, because the abolitionists are becoming more and more numerous," she wrote. "Since truth is thus made to depend on the

voice of the majority, what a comfort it is to reflect that all majorities were minorities in the beginning."⁶⁶ Later, in 1838 Child told Esther about Angelina Grimke's abolitionist speech at the Massachusetts State Legislature, declaring, "I thought of you several times while Angelina was addressing the committee of the Legislature. I knew you would have enjoyed it so much. I think it was a spectacle of the greatest moral sublimity I ever witnessed."⁶⁷

Moses had just turned 24 on March 9, 1840, when he exchanged marital vows with Esther, also 24, at her parents' home in New Rochelle. According to Quaker custom, the wedding plans had to be approved by women of the Meeting before the couple could marry, so it was a community-sanctioned event. For the occasion, Esther probably wore the customary Quaker bonnet and Moses the wide-brimmed Quaker hat. Their garments would have been made of unbleached or dyed linen or wool to avoid slave-produced cotton. The ceremony would have been quiet, and, by Quaker tradition, there would have been no dancing or even festive food.

The year Moses and Esther married, Mount Pleasant was still a small town with a population of 7,508, of whom 483 were "free persons of color," according to the 1840 census. Still, the population was twice as large as it had been only 20 years earlier. With so many persons of color living among them, the residents of Mount Pleasant were surely involved in lively discussions and debates about slavery and other vital issues of the day, including women's

Joseph Carpenter, father-in-law of Moses Pierce. From *Personal Reminiscences of the Anti-Slavery and Other Reforms and Reformers* by Aaron M. Powell.

rights and temperance. The most widely-read weekly local paper, the *Hudson River Chronicle*, published a 16-column letter from New York Governor Seward on January 14, 1840, defending his refusal to allow the extradition to Virginia of three sailors who had helped a fugitive slave's attempt at escape. In May of that year, Seward "oversaw passage of legislation empowering state agents to return to liberty persons kidnapped into slavery."⁶⁸

It was also during this decade that Moses and Esther started their family. Their first child, a boy named John Jay Pierce, was born on May 15, 1841. The name was surely meant to honor John Jay (1745-1829), a resident of Bedford who had served as first Chief Justice of the United States and later, governor of New York. Jay was also one of the founders, in 1785, of the New York State Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves. At its original meeting, 12 of its 18 members were Quakers.⁶⁹ John was also the name of John Jay's grandson and Moses' contemporary, John Jay (1817-1894).⁷⁰ Clearly, Moses and Esther felt a close bond with the Jay family, who lived in nearby Bedford. The Jays had been dedicated abolitionists for three generations, very much like the Pierces. In a letter about his father's anti-slavery activities, Moses' son Jonathan Carpenter Pierce identified the Jay home as the third stop after their own on the Underground Railroad.

Sadly, John Jay Pierce died before his third birthday. Of their six children, five lived to adulthood: Margaret (1845-1900), Hannah J.

(1848-1937), Lydia Maria Child (1850-1877), Joanna William (1853-1936), and Jonathan Carpenter (1859-1941). Lydia was named for Esther's friend, the acclaimed author and abolitionist. She was a member of the first graduating class at co-educational Swarthmore College in 1873. Joanna married Charles Edward Purdy and gave Moses and Esther five grandchildren. Jonathan lived to be 82, and spoke at Pleasantville High School around 1938 about his parents' involvement with the Underground Railroad.⁷¹ He also wrote a letter to a friend in August 1939 that describes the route that freedom seekers took, including his father's home.

The Pierce family's commitment to ending slavery must have been reinforced by notable events of the decade. In 1841, for instance, Frederick Douglass began speaking at anti-slavery meetings in Massachusetts, and in 1843 William Lloyd Garrison began a series of 100 conventions, bringing anti-slavery speakers to New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana.⁷² Douglass articulated the pain felt by Africans in America when, in a letter written in 1846 to his supporter William Lloyd Garrison, he admired the beauty of the American landscape, but in the same breath mourned that:

All is cursed with the infernal spirit of slave holding and wrong. When I remember that with the waters of her noblest rivers the tears of my brethren are borne to the ocean, disregarded and forgotten; that her most

fertile fields drink daily of the warm blood of my outraged sisters, I am filled with unutterable loathing.⁷³

Douglass's first autobiography, published in 1845, proved that he had indeed been a slave, and it sold more than 13,000 copies that year. By 1850, 50,000 copies had been published in the U.S. and Britain.

Proof that Moses Pierce was prominent in New York's anti-slavery movement is evidenced in a letter written by William Jay to Moses, dated Bedford, October 1847. The letter was printed in Boston's weekly *Liberty Press* and reprinted in April 1848 in the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, both abolitionist newspapers. In it Jay declares:

As we fear God and hope for his favor at the last day, let us harbor, succor, secrete, and aid with food, clothing, money and advice, every fugitive who seeks our protection, regardless of the statutes which make such acts of mercy penal offences; and then let us unresistingly enter the dungeons to which sinful laws may consign us.

In addition, Moses and Esther may have attended meetings of the new Whig Party held in 1847 in the upstairs meeting room of Moses' childhood school after it had been moved to Old School Lane in Pleasantville.⁷⁴ It is likely that Moses Pierce voted Whig, since the party was sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. As the *Hudson River Chronicle* explained on October 26, 1839, the Whig party's purpose was "to preserve the republic in the purity and simplicity in which it was left by Washington and to spurn all who would array the poor against the

rich. To abjure the efforts to reduce free men to the hard money vas-salage of slave."

THE PIERCE FAMILY AIDS FUGITIVE SLAVES

When the Pleasantville station on the New York-Harlem railroad line from New York City opened in October 1846, it would have provided a new means of transportation for fugitive slaves traveling to the Pierce family home on their way to freedom. Pierce's son Jonathan wrote a letter in 1939 in which he explains how his family fit into the structure of the local Underground Railroad. Speaking of his aunt Phebe I. Wanzer, daughter of David Irish of Quaker Hill, Jonathan writes,

His [David Irish's] home was the last Station on the Underground R.R. My mother's home, Joseph Carpenter, New Rochelle, was the first Station out of New York City; my father's home [built by] Joseph Pierce, Pleasantville, was the second Station; Judge John Jay, Bedford, was the third station. This aunt's home, David Irish, Quaker Hill, was the fourth Station. At that place, 60 miles from N.Y., the fugitives were far enough on the way to Canada to find their way safely.⁷⁵

Where did these fugitives come from, and how did they travel? Those arriving from south of Chesapeake Bay most likely traveled by sea on cargo vessels to New York Harbor from Norfolk, VA, or Charleston, SC, or New Bern, NC, or Richmond, VA, according to Darlene Clark Hines and her map of Underground Railroad routes.⁷⁶

Others may have sailed up the Delaware River to "Quaker City" Philadelphia, and on to New York City by land, where the Anti-Slavery Society would have helped them make their way farther north. They could have stopped at the home of black abolitionist David Ruggles on 67 Lispenard Street in Manhattan⁷⁷ or at the Hopper Gibbons Greek Revival house at 339 West 29th Street, both havens for freedom seekers.⁷⁸ They might also have rested at 21 West 32nd Street, William Jay's New York City residence until his death in 1858.⁷⁹ Once in New York City, they could have left by several routes, depending on Joseph Carpenter's and Moses Pierce's preferences and the Quaker network that advised them. The fugitives must have traveled by boat north along the Sound or up the Hudson River, and then to Pleasantville by wagon or later directly by train.

If they had arrived in New York City by boat, they could have gone directly from the ship to Brooklyn, where private conductors would have helped them. They might have stopped off at Brooklyn's Congregationalist Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, known as "the Grand Central Depot [of the Underground Railroad]" where Henry Ward Beecher began preaching abolition in 1847.⁸⁰ Their next destination might have been Weeksville, a thriving African-American community in Brooklyn, where some could have remained. Others continued north, by wagon on the Boston Post Road or by crossing Long Island Sound on a

skiff, sailboat or canoe from Oyster Bay to Premium Point and up the Premium River in New Rochelle.⁸¹ From New Rochelle, they likely continued by wagon, hidden perhaps under produce, along the Boston Post Road to Weaver Street and on to Moses' father-in-law, Joseph Carpenter's "isolated farm."⁸² The Carpenter farm was on what is Weaver Street today, close to Stratton Road in New Rochelle.⁸³ The "Purchase Meeting House, [of which Carpenter was a member], was a key location [on the Underground Railroad] because of its large Quaker community.... Slaves brought to the New Rochelle-Scarsdale-Mamaroneck communities must have been sheltered, fed, and sent to the Friends in Purchase," according to one local historian.⁸⁴ Other historians declare that recent research disputes this contention, however.⁸⁵ Freedom seekers may also have arrived at the isolated Carpenter farm in New Rochelle, possibly on "the baggage wagon," which, according to Lydia Maria Child, passed "the farm house [at New Rochelle] three times a week."⁸⁶ From there they could have taken Boston Post Road to King Street, which would bring them to Bedford Road in Chappaqua, close to Moses' home. After December 1848, they could have traveled the 17 miles from New York City to New Rochelle by the newly constructed train line and continued northwest by wagon to Pleasantville.

Some fugitives may have traveled from Manhattan by steamboat to William Turpin's island (today's

Neptune Island and the causeway leading to Glen Island), which he purchased in 1828, and which is just five miles from Sand's Point on Long Island. At that time it was called Moses Island, a common given name. Turpin had emancipated his slaves at a cost of \$100,000. Among them was "his coachman, a very worthy colored man," whom he gave about \$50,000 for his past services.⁸⁷ It was fitting that Turpin would name his island for the man who had led his people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The road and causeway connecting Moses Island with the mainland were built under Turpin's ownership, and a steamboat landing was moved from New Rochelle's Town Dock Road to Moses Island some time before 1833, perhaps to transport fugitives as well as vacationers.⁸⁸ The bond between Turpin and Joseph Carpenter must have been a strong one because after Turpin's coachman died in 1835, the three children of the former slave joined the household of Joseph Carpenter, where Lydia Maria Child reported enjoying their company.⁸⁹

By whatever means fugitive slaves managed to reach Joseph Carpenter's home, they did not stay long, and they left no records. Fugitives might have rested there at most a night or two before being hurried 24 miles north to Moses Pierce's small Pleasantville farmhouse, now located in the hamlet of Thornwood, where Broadway intersects with Garrigan Avenue.⁹⁰ It was a small farmhouse, as modest as the home of his father. The Pierces spent a great deal of their resources

aiding fugitives—providing them with clothing to replace that which identified them as former slaves, along with better shoes, and perhaps the train tickets they would need to travel north. By 1860 Moses and Esther had moved to his deceased father's farm in the area of Pleasantville now known as Foxwood Condominium.

The earliest source for Westchester Underground Railroad routes is John Todd's biography of Moses Pierce, published the year of his death and quoted at the beginning of this paper. Twentieth-century reports confirm that route, as outlined in Jonathan Pierce's letter of August 1939. In addition, the year after Jonathan died, a local historian reported that Jonathan:

often told how the frightened negroes were transported during the night from station to station in produce wagons, concealed by vegetables, bags and boxes. During the day-time they were hidden in the house, fed and refreshed for the next jump. The route ran from the city to Quaker Ridge [in New Rochelle], to Pleasantville to Bedford and then to Pawling [Quaker Hill].⁹¹

This sequence was corroborated in a September 2010 interview with Phebe Washburn, who remembered Jonathan from Chappaqua Meetings in the 1930s where he mentioned that his father had hidden families in their home. When Phebe attended Pleasantville High School before World War II, Jonathan was a candidate on either the Socialist or Progressive ticket and spoke at the school. She recalls that he mentioned, once again, having seen run-

aways in his father's home.⁹²

Although Jonathan may have been too young to remember many specific events, the drama must have made a deep impression on him, along with family stories about abolitionist activities. The fact that William Jay's published letter to Moses was written just one year after the arrival of the railroad in Pleasantville suggests that Moses had already established a reputation for himself as a "conductor" when only horse and wagon were available.

Fugitives and those who assisted them would have traveled on isolated dirt roads where the possibility of an encounter with other travelers must have triggered terrible anxiety over discovery and capture. After all, the penalty for not reporting a runaway was prison and a fine of \$1,000. Commissioners received a reward of \$10 if they proved an individual was a runaway, but only \$5 if the individual was adjudged to be a free person.

Once in Pleasantville, fugitives would have been fed and lodged and given provisions. It was relatively safe there for Moses since five other members of his family lived within walking distance,⁹³ and the Friends' Meeting House in Chappaqua was only three miles away. In addition, Methodists living in the area were probably supportive of his work as a stationmaster. "Wherever Methodist and Zion Churches were found, active participation in the Railroad and abolitionist activities were documented evidence," a local historian writes. "In many localities, there was a close working relation-

ship between the African Methodists and the Society of Friends in their effort to help fugitive slaves."⁹⁴ At the time, several Methodist families, 10 to 12 Episcopal families, and one Jewish family lived in the area.⁹⁵ Also, the fact that Moses was a member of the local temperance organization and had served as its secretary⁹⁶ would have enhanced his standing in the community and possibly given him protection from irate neighbors who might not have agreed with his abolitionist sentiments.

After spending a night or two in Pleasantville, the fugitives would have been hidden in another wagon and brought north. According to several accounts, their next stop would have been Bedford, at the home of William Jay and his son John. Judge William Jay (1789-1858), was living on his 800-acre farm in Bedford in 1843, 14 miles north of Pleasantville, and was "probably the leading Episcopal layman in this country."⁹⁷ According to Bayard Tuckerman, his biographer, William Jay had achieved renown and notoriety because of his "anti-slavery opinions and labours,"⁹⁸ and had lost a seat on the bench of Westchester County as a result.

There is no evidence at the John Jay Homestead State Historic Site that the site served as a "depot," although contemporaneous reports demonstrate William Jay's strong commitment to helping fugitives on their path to freedom. As early as 1841, for instance, Joseph Sturge reported that William Jay discussed with him "the runaway slaves who

called at his house."⁹⁹ However, that house might have been his home on West 32nd Street in New York City.¹⁰⁰ In addition, both John Todd's brief article about Moses Pierce, published in the year of Pierce's death, and Jonathan Pierce's 1939 letter name the Jay homestead as a stop for fugitives. As a passionate abolitionist, William Jay even distributed anti-slavery tracts in Arabic while on a family trip to Egypt in 1843, "in the slave market, in the bazaars, in a public coffee house, in the hotels, and to persons in the streets."¹⁰¹ After the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850 was passed, William Jay published a letter in the *New York Evening Post*, on October 2, 1850, stating that he had directed "a fugitive as to the route to Canada." As Tuckerman points out, William Jay's position was highly remarkable and unusual since he came from a family of wealth and privilege, one much less likely to be directly involved in abolitionist activities. Tuckerman declares, "He set an example to the class most able and least willing to oppose the curse of slavery."¹⁰² Moses may also have worked closely with William Jay's son, John (1817-1894), who carried on his father's work by becoming a lawyer and defender of those who sought freedom.¹⁰³

William Jay died in 1858, before he could witness the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. His eulogy, delivered by Frederick Douglass to a colored audience at the Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York City, hints at Jay's heroic efforts on their behalf. Though Douglass does not say Jay was a

"conductor," his oration suggests the possibility:

We...look around with anxious solicitude for the man who shall rise to fill the place now made vacant. With emphasis it may be said of him, he was our wise counsellor, our firm friend, and our liberal benefactor. Against the fierce onsets of popular abuse he was our shield; against governmental intrigue and oppression he was our learned, able, and faithful defender; against the crafty counsels of wickedness in high places... he was a perpetual and burning rebuke.¹⁰⁴

Douglass was fully aware of the dangers of divulging anything about those who aided fugitives from slavery, both for the sake of Jay's family and for the safety of future travelers to freedom on the eve of the Civil War. Whether or not William Jay's home in Bedford harbored them, Douglass's encouraging words would have heartened Moses in his own resolve.

After the Jay homestead, the next stop on the underground route from Pleasantville according to Jonathan Pierce's letter was the home of David Irish (1792-1884) on Quaker Hill in Pawling. Irish's home was 22 miles north and also the site of the Oblong Meeting House. The fugitives would have reached Quaker Hill at night, hidden in wagons and traveling along dirt roads, or, after 1848, possibly by train. According to Christopher Densmore, Curator of the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore, in 1769 Oblong and Nine Partners Meetings became the first to "advocate that New York Yearly Meeting make manumission mandatory for

all members."¹⁰⁵ The New York Yearly Meeting of Quakers dodged the question of abolition for several years, and though in 1775 it was stated that all Friends should "restore them [slaves] to their natural right of liberty," according to Densmore, "a clear statement that anyone who would not heed the advice of the Yearly Meeting to release their slaves would then be disowned" was not made until 1777.¹⁰⁶

Many former slaves would have found respite and perhaps a temporary home with the Irish family. David Irish had been profoundly influenced by Elias Hicks, whose strongly abolitionist tract *Observations on African Slavery and Their Descendants* was published in 1811 when Irish was 19. David and his sister Ruth, 10 years his senior, subscribed to *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, the first anti-slavery paper, published from 1821 to 1839. In 1836 Irish had self-published a pamphlet entitled "Self-Justification Self-Condemned, a Dialogue," in which he debated the virtues of purchasing free-labor products. In sentiment and question-and-answer style, *A Dialogue* strongly resembles Elias Hicks's *Observations on African Slavery and Their Descendants*. At the end of this treatise Irish declared:

Bear in mind, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." Remember the poor and oppressed slaves; their sighs and groans for the enjoyment of liberty under tyrannical treatment;...And above all, ever have in view the important responsibility that devolves upon the consumers of

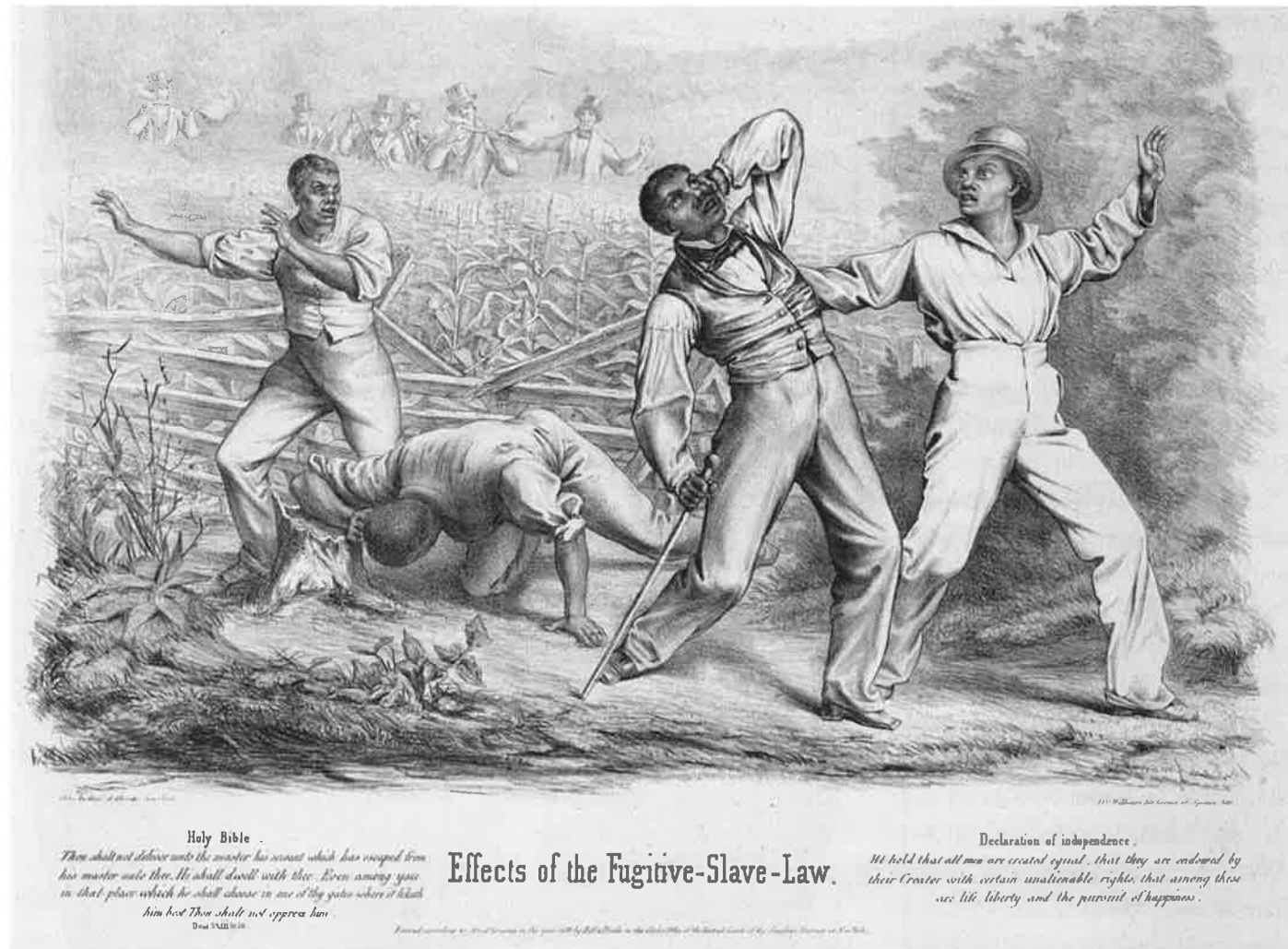


David Irish. Photograph from David Irish, A Memoir by Phoebe T. Irish Wanzer.

the produce of slaves' labour, by being delegated with every sufficient means for the entire eradication of the slave system.¹⁰⁷

David Irish's daughter Phebe (1828-1907) first married Moses' younger brother Joseph Pierce, Jr., (1827-1859) in 1852, strengthening

the bond between Moses and Irish. Because David Irish lived to be 93, he, Moses' father, and Moses would have had many years of collaboration, perhaps supported by Phebe even after she was widowed with four children in 1859. In her 1902 published memoir of her father,



This lithograph by Hoff & Bloede called attention to the dangers escaped slaves faced as a result of the Fugitive Slave Act. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

entitled *David Irish*, Phebe, who had since remarried a man named Wanzer, recalled her father's firm stance on slavery. David Irish had, she wrote, abstained "so far as possible, from the use of slave-labor products."¹⁰⁸ Also,

With tongue and pen he labored zealously...against the sin of slavery....In his home was always made welcome the trembling fugitive fleeing from his Southern prison house; he was fed and lodged, and with words of cheer sent forward with a few lines of endorsement to the next station towards the North land of freedom.

Occasionally one was kept for a time and employed, if it was deemed safe, and there must never be any distinction made in the family on account of his color; he sat at the same table, and was treated as an equal.

Indeed, there were no class distinctions in that household, and the head of it was careful never to call any one in his employ but by their whole proper name. These things may be looked upon as trifles, but they indicate character; the earnest desire to recognize a common brotherhood, independent of color, station, or circumstance.¹⁰⁹

It is likely that Irish also provided the fugitives with new clothes and enough money to reach Canada, possibly to agent Hiram Wilson in Ontario, mentioned by Trendel,¹¹⁰ where they would have found freedom from American laws.

It is difficult to estimate how many fugitives either Moses or David Irish helped to freedom. Isaac Hopper, in New York City, is reputed to have helped save over 1,000 freedom seekers. Stephen and Harriet Myers, writing from Albany on January 1, 1860, declared,

"Within the last eight years I have passed six hundred and fifty four men, women, and children through my hands that have gone safely on to Canada,"¹¹¹ so it is possible that Moses helped hundreds, too.

Over time, Moses faced increasing danger of discovery and imprisonment. Southern slave owners fought fiercely to maintain their traditional economy, and they were adamantly in favor of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which strengthened the Act of 1773, requiring citizens to assist federal marshals in returning those who escaped slavery. Law officers who neglected to arrest a presumed fugitive could now be fined \$1,000. Commissioners could also earn as much as \$10 for capturing a runaway. Indeed, since any person of color could be kidnapped and sold into slavery for profit, Moses may have been additionally apprehensive because of the free "colored man" who was under his employ according to the 1850 census.

The 1850 law intimidated fugitives who, until then, lived in relative security and anonymity in New York City. "Many families, who had lived in the city for twenty years, fled from it now," wrote Harriet Jacobs in her 1858 autobiography. "Many a washerwoman, who, by hard labor, had made for herself a comfortable home, was obliged to sell her furniture, bid a hurried farewell to friends, and seek her fortune among strangers in Canada."¹¹² Because Moses' parents, Joseph and Hannah, were still living in Pleasantville with three adult children, and five other Pierce

homes were within walking distance of each other, Moses must have depended on the collaboration of relatives, and, considering the lively presence in Mount Pleasant of Methodist preacher Daniel DeVinne, he must also have had the help of neighbors other than Quakers, particularly Methodists and possibly Episcopalians.¹¹³

The harsh Fugitive Slave Act did not seem to deter Moses from his mission. One month after its passage, on October 8, 1850, Esther gave birth to a third daughter who her parents named Lydia Maria Child, a testimony to how strongly they valued her inspiration. Assuredly, the need to help fugitives on their way north would only have increased after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. By that time, more voices were speaking out against slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's serialized novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in June 1851. The first week it sold 10,000 copies—one year later, more than 300,000 copies had been sold. Surely Moses and Esther must have heard of it, perhaps even reading it aloud to their children.

When Moses' father died in 1858, several dramatic events were catapulting the nation toward war and eventually abolition. A few weeks after John Brown's hanging in 1859, Abraham Lincoln gave an address at The Cooper Union in New York City that helped to launch him as a presidential candidate opposed to slavery. Moses would likely have read about the speech in the *Tribune*, which reported it as "one of the most happiest

and most convincing political arguments ever made in this City." Lincoln was elected President in November 1860, and there is little doubt that Moses cast his vote for the Republican, antislavery candidate. Still, Westchester County did not go for Lincoln in that or in the following election, illustrating the divisive nature of the issue of slavery even on Moses' home turf.¹¹⁴

With Lincoln's election, national tensions about slavery escalated further. Lincoln's inaugural train ride took him through upstate New York where he visited sites of the future unrest and dissension that would shortly follow. In his *Personal Reminiscences*, Aaron Macy Powell, an editor for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, writes that, "It was during the winter of 1860-61, after the election of Lincoln, and before his inauguration as President of the United States that our anti-slavery conventions in the larger cities, Buffalo, Rochester, Auburn, Syracuse, Utica and Albany, were much disturbed by mobs."¹¹⁵ Lincoln's pre-inaugural train ride had taken him through each of these cities. By the time Lincoln was inaugurated, seven states had seceded from the union. One month later, the Civil War began.

The war led to the promulgation of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, and the stream of runaways migrating north added to mounting racial tension. In New York City, the draft riots of 1863 targeted government buildings, but also black people, an orphanage for children of color, and anyone sympathetic to the aboli-

tionist cause. As local historian Vincent DeAngelis points out, the tensions reached Mount Pleasant.¹¹⁶ Moses and Esther must have felt ever increasing anxiety on behalf of their fugitives.

After the war ended and the nation mourned Lincoln, returning soldiers added to festering racial tensions. According to DeAngelis, "The end of the war created the usual readjustment problems as returning veterans found a higher cost of living and a scarcity of jobs awaiting them."¹¹⁷ There was escalating competition for jobs between former soldiers and formerly enslaved workers, and resentment of abolitionists persisted, but Moses was not to be thwarted:

Once after the war when he sheltered a colored family who had been threatened and driven from their home in Tarrytown by their race-conscious neighbors, some of Mr. Pierce's Pleasantville contemporaries discussed with fervor the advisability of burning down his house over his head. But cooler heads prevailed—or perhaps his own quiet courage and strong character awed his enemies.¹¹⁸

In his last years Pierce was an active member of his community and family. On February 8, 1872, well after slavery had been abolished, he was asked to appear at a Surrogate Court trial to testify for the estate of James Romer, which had been contested on the grounds that Romer had not been of sound mind. One year earlier Romer had told Moses that as to the right of persons to take slaves into Kansas, "the slave holder had as good a right to take slaves into Kansas, as the

northern man had to take his cattle or sheep,"¹¹⁹ though the man must have known of Pierce's strong views on abolition. Nevertheless, Pierce decided that Romer was of sound enough mind to warrant his will being honored.¹²⁰

In 1876 there were two weddings in the Pierce home in Pleasantville. First, on March 23, the younger daughter, Johanna, married Charles Purdy of North Castle. Then, in June Lydia Maria Child married a Swarthmore College professor.¹²¹ The family was thriving, but their joy was fleeting, for one year later, Lydia died in Paris of Roman fever, a deadly strain of malaria, and was brought to Pleasantville for burial.

Moses and Esther vacationed in Atlantic Highlands, NJ, in 1885. In his sole surviving letter, Moses wrote to their children that they napped every afternoon, enjoyed the breeze and watched the sailboats. He hoped the sea would help his cold feet and bad circulation, he said, and both Moses and Esther report being happy to be in the company of Methodists who had been such staunch abolitionist allies.

Moses Pierce died in April 1886 at the age of 71. At some point, members of the Quaker Chappaqua Meeting hung large, matching and specially prepared photographs of Moses and Esther in a place of honor. His obituary, published by the Yearly Meeting of New York in 1887, lauded Moses as an exceptionally honorable and compassionate neighbor and friend:

An Elder for many years, he occasionally felt called to speak a few

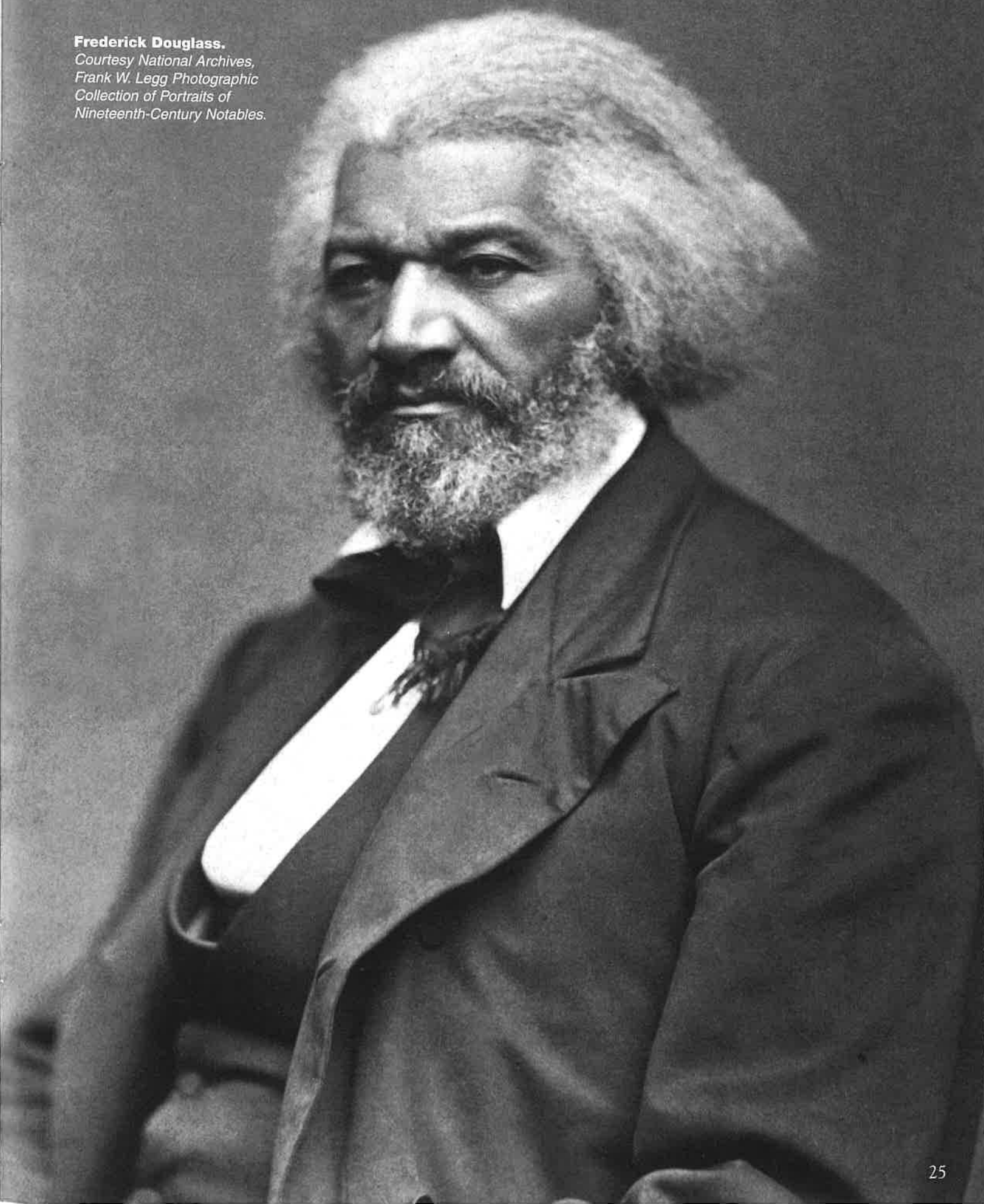
words in counsel. At such times he ever drew attention to the love of God and his indwelling spirit; entreating those who had stepped aside from the narrow path to return, and, by repentance, and amendment of life, to obtain peace for their souls.

Full of charity and brotherly kindness for all, he labored to promote these both in and out of our Society. He bore in mind and frequently visited the poor, the sick and the aged. Cheerful by nature, he often carried to those more comfort than he was aware. Nor was he sparing of his means in any good cause, but gave widely and generously of that which he possessed. He always evinced a great love for his meeting. Of which he was a diligent attender; and he was ever a faithful and willing worker in the performance of any service laid upon him therein.

Of late years he attended many neighboring meetings, both within and without the limits of his own Yearly Meetings; and always in that spirit of loving sympathy so profitable to the soul, and beneficial to those visited.

It is also worthy of note that he largely had the power, whilst doing what he could to promote reforms esteemed unpopular, calmly to await results without discouragement. Early interested in the abolition of slavery, he did all he was able to accomplish that end; and it was his privilege to aid many fugitive slaves, in their escape from bondage. His adoption of the position of total abstinence from all alcoholic beverages was equally early and quite as pronounced. He helped to organize, and was secretary of the first Temperance Society in his neighborhood, over fifty years ago. A few years since, in view of the wonderful

Frederick Douglass.
Courtesy National Archives,
Frank W. Legg Photographic
Collection of Portraits of
Nineteenth-Century Notables.



tenacity of this giant evil of intemperance, he felt it right for him to join hands with the Prohibition movement, hoping thereby to help sweep away this prolific source of misery and crime. Of late years he was concerned to unite with others in advancing the cause of peace, and to encourage the settlement of difficulties by arbitration.

When a young man, he refused, through principles, to attend to the military requirements of that day, and with others, suffered the penalty of imprisonment therefor. The cause of education found in him an earnest advocate, and he gave freely of his means and labors to aid in establishing and carrying on a "Friends School" within his own Quarterly Meeting. While still full of interest in and plans for the promotion of many good objects, disease found him. At first it was thought he could survive and he then would have been well pleased to continue his work, but it was finished, and he was heard to declare, "The arm of the Everlasting Father is beneath me;" which we doubt not was the case. It only remains for us to invite all to consider for themselves the kindly character of this Friend, and allow the memory of his life constantly to exhort us to do our duty faithfully and cheerfully, and leave the issue to that Father "who doeth all things well."¹²²

A prosperous farmer in a small village, Moses Pierce lived during terrible, troubled times, but he was a courageous and caring community leader, one who tirelessly promoted the cause of liberty. Inspired by his Quaker faith, by his Quaker and Methodist neighbors, by his family, Moses became one among a few modest heroes who helped make America what it is today. Nor was



William Jay.

he alone. There were voices in the world, in our nation, and in New York State, who encouraged and aided him. In simpler times he might have led a very different life; instead, he met the challenges of his era with courage, generosity and a deep humanity. ■

A note from the author: Many heartfelt thanks to Pace University for granting me a sabbatical leave to do this research, to Carsten Johnson, Village of Pleasantville Historian, for his tireless encouragement and invaluable expertise, to Christopher Densmore, Curator of the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore for his

prompt and reliable information, Bert Ruiz for his inspiration and continued support, and countless other persons for generously sharing their time and knowledge to make this article a reality.

ENDNOTES

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¹² Fanny Kemble. Letter to a friend in www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2922t.html Accessed June 29, 2011.

¹³ Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 196-7.

¹⁴ Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine and Stanley Harrold, *The African-American Odyssey. Volume One: to 1877* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 191.

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