

The Arrest of the Abolitionist,

Dr. Richard Eells: A Primary Source Activity

Some Background

Before the Civil War, the United States was divided between states where some Blacks were enslaved and other states where slavery was outlawed. The disagreement between states over this issue eventually caused the civil war. Missouri was the furthest north of those slave states. Slavery was widespread and important to both agriculture and commerce on the Mississippi River. It was common for Missouri farmers to enslave a few men, women or children or a family to help them with planting or caring for livestock. There were no plantations with large slave populations in Missouri. Nevertheless, in the 1840's in Marion County, Missouri on the opposite bank from Adams County Illinois, one in four of the population were enslaved.

The story of a runaway from slavery which today we call a freedom seeker began when he or she took the terrifying decision to escape. This was often because their enslaver mistreated them or chose to sell them to another enslaver. If unmarried, the freedom seeker would run away on his or her own. However, many slave families wanted to stay together so the threat of the sale of one of them caused the family to seek freedom in the north. Running away was dangerous. If caught the freedom seekers were cruelly punished. They would certainly be separated from their families and sold to enslavers further south onto cotton or tobacco plantations where conditions were harsh. Missourians could legally chase freedom seekers across the river into Illinois.

In free states like Illinois, slavery was outlawed. However, it was also against the law in Illinois to help freedom seekers escape from Missouri slave owners. Illinois law held a severe Black Code designed not only to help Missouri slave owners hunt down freedom seekers but discourage all Blacks, even free ones from entering the state. At the time, the Black population in America was divided between enslaved people living in slave states, free Blacks and formerly enslaved people who had bought their freedom, been freed by their enslavers or escaped to northern free states. The Black Code within Illinois law enjoyed the support of most Illinoisans and remained in place until after the civil war.

Nevertheless, a small percentage of the population of Illinois were strongly against slavery and even willing to defy the Black Code. They were called abolitionists. Over time the number of abolitionists expanded. In the 1830's and 1840's a few people in Illinois were so opposed to slavery that they formed anti-slavery societies and began helping freedom seekers escape to Chicago and Canada where slavery was outlawed. This was against the law so if caught these people could be severely fined. The network of abolitionists willing to feed, cloth, hide and transport freedom seekers was called the Underground Railroad. Despite its name, there were no tunnels or tracks. It was just groups of people helping freedom seekers to travel away from Missouri. Often these networks were based on churches. One of the most important Underground Railroad locations in Illinois was in Quincy.

The activities of the Underground Railroad were top secret, so it is difficult for historians to find reliable sources describing what went on. However, we know more than usual about what happened in Quincy because Dr. Richard Eells got caught and charged with breaking the Black Code. Court cases leave records and find their way into newspapers. These become good primary sources for later historians to use.

In August of 1842, a freedom seeker named Charles escaped from his enslaver Chauncey Durkee near Monticello, Missouri and swam across the Mississippi river near Quincy. He found his way to the door of Dr. Eells, a well-known abolitionist. Dr. Eells gave Charles dry clothes and food, hitched his fast horse named White Lightning to his buggy and drove him across town to friends who would help Charles go further north to Canada and freedom. This is how the Underground Railroad worked. Unfortunately, enslavers in Missouri were aware of Dr. Eells anti-slavery activities and intercepted the buggy. Charles leaped out into a nearby cornfield but was caught and sent back to his enslaver, Chauncey Durkee. We know nothing about what happened to him after that. Dr. Eells was arrested by the Quincy sheriff and charged with the crime of helping an escaped slave. His version of what happened after his arrest is written below. Dr. Eells felt it was important to publish his side of the story in the newspaper because in the nineteenth century most people relied upon newspapers for most of their news, information, and opinions. In fact, newspapers were one of the most important ways anti-slavery ideas spread across the nation.

You will find that Dr. Eells uses religious language in his article. As mentioned above, church members organized underground railroads. At the time, most people saw abolitionists as radical because they embraced the full humanity of enslaved people. Thus, they were motivated by their belief that slavery was a terrible sin committed against fellow human beings. This endangered not only the souls of enslavers, but everyone who lived in the United States where slavery was legal.

You may find some of the nineteenth century language difficult. This is a common challenge for historians who can only understand the past by reading documents or newspapers that were written in a style different from today. Here are the meanings of some of the words to help you

understand what Dr. Eells was trying to say when he sent this article to the *Western Citizen*, the main abolitionists newspaper of Illinois. The article was edited and abridged but can be found in its original form at the Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections, <https://indc.library.edu>, January 13, 1843, *Western Citizen*

Indictment: a legal accusation or charge of a crime.

Sustained: Keep in place.

Procure: persuade or cause someone to do something.

Pantaloons: pants.

Thwarted: stopped.

Perjured: lied.

Grand Jury: a group of citizens given the job of investigating a crime to see if enough evidence exists for an indictment.

Requisition: a demand to take over something.

Precludes: happens before.

Last Resort: because everything else has failed this is the last attempt to succeed.

Meddling: trying to influence.

Deputed: given the power to act.

Providence: A broad understanding of God.

Infernal: Hell.

Dr. Richard Eells:

...In the month of August last I was prosecuted before justice Asbury of Quincy, Illinois by Chauncey Durkee of Lewis Co., Mo., for aiding and assisting a man, (whom he claimed as his slave) in running away from a cruel and inhuman master. The Court sustained the charge, and bail was given for my appearance at the Circuit Court to be held in September. At the September Court the grand jury found a bill of indictment against me under section 19, Division 14 of the Criminal Code of Illinois Laws (The Black Code). Much effort was made to get the grand jury to indict me for grand larceny, but without effect. They then made an effort to procure an indictment for stealing a pair of old pantaloons, which they said they took from my wagon, but that also failed...

Durkee and his lawyer, J.H. Alston, being thus thwarted in not accomplishing their base designs, another plan was devised, with which to gratify their hellish revenge... (Durkee) offered... to give up the slave, if anyone would place me in his hands on the Missouri side of the river. Rewards have repeatedly been offered for any one to kidnap and place me in Missouri, but that did not succeed.-- And the last resort must then be adopted, which was either by perjured witnesses before the grand jury in Lewis Co, Missouri, or by a perjured grand jury themselves, or both. A bill of indictment has been found against me....

... (Durkee) made a requisition on Governor Ford of Illinois for my arrest, and to be delivered into the hands of the Missourians. - The requisition was granted by Gov. Ford, (as I have learned) contrary to opinions expressed and advice given by some of our ablest judges of law in Quincy. And with the belief existing in his own mind that it was got up by foul play. I have not been in Missouri for any purpose whatever for more than four years last past, and Ralston, Durkee's lawyer, has knowledge of the fact. That I was in Quincy during the week (of the escape) ... he knows very well that we both had business together respecting the Quincy Insurance Company, and the business which I transacted ... with himself precludes the possibility of my going into Missouri for the purpose of meddling with Durkee's slaves. The manner of my escape from the officers deputed to arrest me I will not relate here

I have since learned that a large number of Missourians were in Quincy, at that time, handcuffs were prepared, a trap laid to decoy me into their hands at the City Hotel, a point near the river, and undoubtedly the steam ferry was in waiting for the victim. But Providence designed otherwise, and they could not succeed...

... The lines are fallen unto him in deliverance of the oppressed out of the hand of the spoiler; and the breaking down of that infernal system of robbery and oppression which prevails through this land of Free Tyrants, - whose acts are rebellion against the laws of the Great Jehovah, destroying the rights of millions of our fellow creatures, robbing them of all their hard earned wages, and finally consigning (so far as they are capable of doing it) their precious and never-dying souls to the regions of eternal despair.

Western Citizen, 13 January 1843

Postscript

Dr. Eells was found guilty of helping an escaped slave by the state of Missouri. He was severely fined. He appealed his case to the Illinois Supreme Court where he lost again. However, Dr. Eells well known activities as an abolitionist and member of the Underground Railroad made him a celebrity in the state. He was elected president of the Illinois State Anti-Slavery Society and played a key role in organizing Illinois's Underground Railroad. He also traveled to Jamaica where the British had just abolished slavery to study how the Jamaicans adapted to a free society. However, Dr. Eells health was not good. He died in 1846. Even after his death, his family and supporters appealed his case to the United States Supreme Court where he lost again. Dr. Eells was not given a pardon by the Governor of Illinois until 2014.

Questions to consider:

1. What motivated Dr. Eells? Explain.
2. Why did slave holders hate Dr. Eells?
3. Were slave holders willing to lie and cheat to capture Dr. Eells? Explain.
4. What factors would cause an enslaved person to consider seeking freedom?

5. What were the risks to freedom seekers if they got caught?
6. Is this document a good primary source for doing history? Explain.
7. Do you think slavery could have been abolished without the leadership of religious figures? Explain