

Echoes of Slavery Days in Nebraska Territory Vividly Recalled

(Transcribed from Sunday World Herald – Magazine Section, page 6, May 3, 1925)

That slavery once prevailed in Nebraska, to a limited extent, seems not to be of general knowledge, yet according to the records it did, one case at least being pointed out where a man and his wife were put on the block at Nebraska City and sold, and other instances cited where slaves escaped froth their masters, through the aid of the "Underground Railroad." A writer in the Nebraska City Press, of recent date, has the following to say on the subject:

"In front of the courthouse" is a phrase that has more than once, for a period of more than sixty years, appeared. in the official and legal notices of sale of Otoe county, but only once in the history, of Nebraska, so far as is known now, did that phrase refer to the place of vendue of human flesh.

December 5, 1860, William P. Burchfield, sheriff, held a sale at the east door of the court house and the "property" consisted of two Negroes, Hercules and Martha. The value placed on them, evidently, was not high for they were 'knocked down' to William B. Hall, for 3 hundred dollars.

The sale was the result of a lawsuit which was brought in the district court by Charles F. Holly against William B. Hall. The amount claimed does not appear on the records, but a cross petition was evidently filed by Hall for a jury, consisting of eleven men, brought in a judgment against Holly and in Hall's favor, for \$338.

An execution was issued to November of that year, 1860, and Sheriff Burchfield reports that he levied on "One Negro man named Hercules and one Negro woman, named Martha, slaves and belonging to Charles F. Holly, said levy having been made on November 17, 1860."

Two Sold for Three Hundred Dollars.

A later entry on the record shows that Sheriff Burchfield caused a notice of sale to be published and on December 5, of the same year the two negroes were brought out, publicly exhibited, and sold to Hall, for \$300. The sheriff first offered Hercules for sale, but there was no bidder, He then offered the two together and Hall, evidently the only bidder bought them.

While this is the first and only record of a negro sale in Nebraska, at least in Otoe county, there were slaves owned in the territory. The Bellevue Palladium, August 16, 1854, asserted, as a sort of backhanded slap to the slave owning population of the west that "an Omaha squaw is the only negro owner in the territory."

The Nebraska City News of November 27, 1858, the day, by the way, on which the first issue of The Press is supposed to have appeared In circulation, notes that "two negro women were enticed from our worthy townsman, Stephen F. Nuckolls, by some white-livered abolitionist," and that Nuckolls had offered a reward of 2 hundred dollars for their apprehension and return to him. A little later the Dakota Herald tells of the arrest of a fugitive

slave, Phillips by name, who had been in Dakota City for about a year. A little while later after his arrest he was rescued by persons living on the Iowa side of the river.

Siebert, author of "The Underground Railroad," has this to say about the Nuckolls incident, referred to above:

Escape of the Nuckolls Slaves

"A case that well illustrates the method of search employed by searching parties is that of the escape of the Nuckolls slaves through Iowa, the incidents of which are still vivid in the memories of some that witnessed them. Mr. Nuckolls of Nebraska City lost two slave girls in December, 1858. He instituted search for them in Tabor, an abolitionist center, and did not neglect to guard the crossings of two streams in the vicinity, Silver Creek and the Nishnabotna.

"As the slaves had been promptly dispatched to Chicago the search availed him nothing. A second and more thorough hunt was decided on, and the aid of a score or more fellows was secured. These men made entrance into houses by force and violence, when, bravado failed to gain them admission. At one house where the remonstrance against intrusion was unusually strong the person remonstrating was struck over the head and injured for life. The outcome of the whole affair was that Mr. Nuckolls had some 10 thousand dollars to pay in damages and, after all, failed to recover his slaves."

A letter written by the Rev. John Todd of Tabor, published in an Iowa newspaper about thirty years ago, has the following to say about the pursuit of the Nuckolls negroes:

"Eliza, a slave of Stephen Nuckolls, who had escaped late in 1853, was arrested in Chicago on the 12th of November, 1860, and to escape a mob of excited Negroes the United States marshal was compelled to give the woman to the city police, who lodged her in the armory for safe-keeping. On the 24th, it is related, Eliza had been taken from an officer of the government and sent 'kiting into Canada.'"

Omaha Nebraskian Approved Comment.

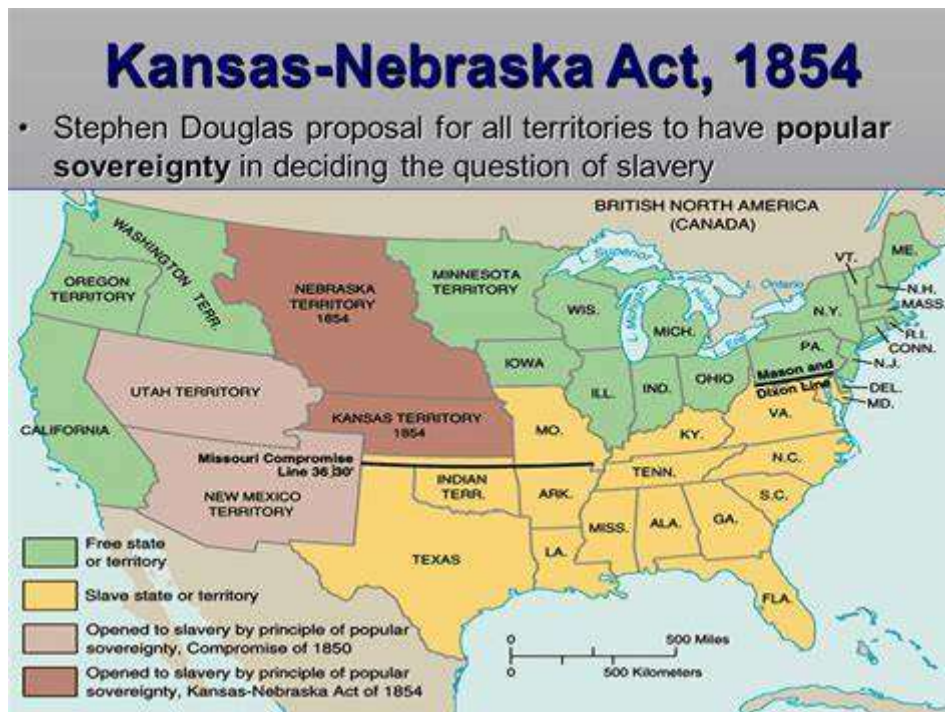
The Omaha Nebraskian quoted approvingly the comment of the Chicago Times and Herald (owned by Cyrus H. McCormick of harvester fame) on the incident:

"A runaway slave, belonging to Hon. S.F. Nuckolls of Nebraska City was recently captured in the city of Chicago, but almost immediately forcibly taken from the officers by a mob of drunken Negroes and Black Republicans. In commenting on the affair, the Times and Herald of that city says:

"In the presence of thousands assembled, the mob forcibly overrides the constituted authority of the Constitution of the United States, and rescues a fugitive from the custody of the law amid general rejoicing and midnight howls! Who can doubt henceforth the strength of the federal government? Who can question our loyalty to the Constitution? Let the South dare to talk seceding, with this glorious evidence of our fidelity to our obligations to the law? Grand government! Magnificent civilization! Down with the lawless southern barbarians! Stock rising! Illinois banks sounds

What Morton's History Says.

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Interpreting the History of Nebraska's Underground Railroad

Location: 2012 4th Corso in historic Nebraska City, Nebraska

The museum interprets the history of the Mayhew Family's involvement in the Underground Railroad. The family includes Allen and Barabara Mayhew, their many children, Barbara

Mayhew's brother, John Henri Kagi, who became an ally of the famous abolitionist, John Brown, in 1856. John Kagi would become one of John Brown's most trusted advisors.

In early 1857 and at the direction of John Brown², John Kagi aided escaping slaves left Kansas Territory, accompanying them through Nebraska (and Nebraska City) and delivered them to other Underground Railroad conductors in Iowa. In December of 1858, John Brown and a group of his loyal followers, including John Henri Kagi, rode into Missouri under the cover of darkness from a very violent and “Bleeding Kansas” and at gunpoint took eleven slaves from their masters, including one heavily pregnant woman. The goal was to take the slaves to Canada and freedom. For weeks, these “fugitives” were hidden in various locations in northeast Kansas Territory. During that time, the pregnant woman gave birth to a son, who was named after John Brown. In early 1859, the then group of twelve were led out of Kansas Territory and taken north through Nebraska. In February of 1859, the twelve freedom seekers were given food and shelter at the modest home of John Kagi’s sister, Barbara Mayhew, at the now historic Mayhew Cabin in Nebraska City. The notorious reputation of John Brown and the murder of one of the slave owners in Missouri when the slaves were taken publicized the taking and the trek northward. Despite an armed posse attempting to take John Kagi at his sister’s cabin, the group of slaves made it safely across the river into Iowa and they eventually reached freedom in Windsor, Ontario, Canada in March of 1859. It was because of this event (and possibly other times when the Mayhew Cabin was used as part of the Underground Railroad) that the Mayhew property became known locally as "John Brown's Cave.”

Allen and Barbara Mayhew migrated to the Nebraska City area from Trumbull County, Ohio, with their two sons in the spring of 1854. John Wallace Pearman noted that Allen Mayhew was one of the “chainmen” on the surveying crew for Nebraska City Town Company on July 10, 1854¹. The Mayhew family is also recorded in the first territorial census for Nebraska taken on November 20, 1854 as living on government land near Ft. Kearny, Otoe County, Nebraska Territory.

¹ The Nebraska Territory formed in 1854, and Stephen F. Nuckolls established himself as a major force in forming Nebraska City around Table Creek. Nuckolls was named postmaster in July and created the Nebraska City Town Co. He drove a survey marker on the Fourth of July at Sixth and Main (Central) streets to mark the terminal point of the city plat, which later became the site of the Nuckolls House Hotel.

Source: By JIM McKEE / For the Lincoln Journal Star JournalStar.com | Posted: Sunday, February 19, 2012.

Thomas B. (Brad) Mayhew, Secretary/Treasurer of The Mayhew Cabin Foundation, is the great-great-grandson of Allen and Barbara Mayhew. Brad heads an asbestos occupation training firm that I take classes from annually. Brad has taught many of the classes I have attended.

Gary Carson, Wood River, NE, 2021

² John Brown (abolitionist)

John H. Brown (May 9, 1800 – December 2, 1859) was an American abolitionist leader. Brown felt that violence was necessary to end American slavery, as years of speeches, sermons, petitions, and moral persuasion had failed. In October 1859, Brown led a raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (today West Virginia), intending to start a slave liberation movement that would spread south through the mountainous regions of Virginia and North Carolina. He seized the armory, but seven people were killed, and ten or more were injured. Brown was hastily tried for treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, the murder of five men, and inciting a slave insurrection. He was found guilty of all counts and was hanged on December 2, 1859, the first person executed for treason in the history of the United States.

Source: [John Brown \(abolitionist\) - Wikipedia](#)