

Abolitionists of Ontario



Fugitives and Freemen

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by Wesley W. Tate, Toronto

Good—growing out of Evil—Fillmorism.

To the Editor of the *Provincial Freeman*:—
While conversing with some friends, who have felt the effects of the working of that most atrocious and fiendish act, of the Congress of the U.S.A., known as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, or, by way of derision, Fillmore's Law of 1850, I have been induced to pen the following, to show what some people think and say of it.

I need not attempt to give an elucidation of this monstrous act, presented to the people in the garb of law, because its intentions and working are already too well known to the public. It has been argued on one hand, that the fugitive slave law of 1850 has manifestly done a great deal of harm to the Colored people of the free states, to those who were born there, as well as fugitives from slavery who had taken shelter among them, as a shield or safeguard against the baneful missiles of the malicious slaveholders. And again, it has been said, that this same law has truly done, and is yet doing, much good to both the above named classes of colored people in the free states. Being guided by reason, I draw my conclusion from the two extremes.

I shall first call the attention of the public to a few of the most prominent evils resulting directly from this act. Previous to the passage of the fugitive slave law, many slaves becoming tired of their cruel taskmasters at their homes in the

south, as Shadrick, Jerry, McQuery, Bibb, and many others have done, choosing rather to suffer the affliction of providing for themselves, as freemen, at the north, than to enjoy the privilege of having a master to provide for them, at the south, a country which is argued to be so congenial and befitting to the colored race, have left their homes, the place of their nativity, and many of them their wives, their sons, and their daughters, whom they so dearly loved as their all, and sought an asylum under the government of the so-called free states. I have said so-called free states, because they are not free states, properly speaking. In Ohio and Pennsylvania the colored people are denied the right of suffrage, as is the case also in a majority of the others, and, until as late as the year 1848, they were denied their oaths in the Court of Common Pleas in the state of Ohio. Shame on such free states as those really are!

“The land of the free, and the home of the brave,” so say American patriots, and so they would have the world to believe. But “Uncle Tom's Cabin” has been read too much in England, France, Germany, Italy, and other European countries, for them to believe such futile and false reports of vain boasted American freedom. The States of Indiana and Illinois have gone still further in infamy and disgrace to the American flag, to prove that they are not free states, for both of them have respectively passed stringent laws, even forbidding the immigration of colored people into them.

Many slaves, after escaping from southern bondage, had married wives, and purchased homes, and were making a respectable

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living, at the head of prosperous and loving little families, reposing in deep tranquillity, and useful members in society, at the north; when lo! to their utter surprise and dissatisfaction, they read Fillmore's law, giving to their masters the power of hunting, recapturing, and returning back into hopeless bondage, as many as they could trail up with their blood-hounds of the south, and with their worse than blood-hounds, the negro hunters of the north.

A multitude of such instances have occurred, some of which are too monstrous for pen to describe. A glance at the public newspapers of the day will tell you some of the horrors of the workings of this most detestable act of the Congress of the United States, and in the middle of the nineteenth century, in a land of boasted freedom and equality, under the brilliant rays of the preaching of the everlasting Gospel of Jesus Christ. I learn, with the deepest regret, too, that Mr. Fillmore was at one time considered a staunch abolitionist, and a true friend to the colored people of New York; but now, behold him, you colored people of N.Y., and confess that Millard Fillmore is not the man that you were looking for, and what is still more painful yet to record, comes from responsible colored men of N.Y., who assure me that it was principally through the aid of colored men, that Mr. Fillmore first rose into public life, and they themselves were once his supporters. One more instance stated, and I shall leave this portion of the subject.

Fillmore's law, as it is termed by the way of derision, does not only cast its baneful and deleterious influence on the fugitive, but on the free inhabitants, both black and white. Many instances have occurred in which free colored men, who never have been slaves, have been arrested on charge of being fugitives. The free white citizens of the north also feel the evil bearings of this tyrannical and oppressive law; because, regardless of what their minds, their consciences, and their religion may be, as respects the colored people, they are in common with the colored people, called upon to aid in the execution of this most unholy and worse than heathenish law, or suffer the penalty thereof: imprisonment, with heavy fine.

Having now briefly noticed some of the many evils, directly issuing from Mr. Fillmore's law of 1850, I next solicit your attention to the good that is argued to have grown, and is yet growing out of this evil-intended act. It is a well known fact that previous to the passage of the fugitive slave bill of 1850, the colored people, in general, in the States, were opposed to emigrating to Canada; this fact the colored people of Canada themselves authenticate.

I find it a common expression among the colored people of Canada, that Fillmore's law has done more good than harm, especially to fugitives, by forcing them out of the free states, where they had been remaining some of them a number of years, in menial occupations, in consequence of prejudice and oppression, into Canada, where they were obliged to engage in honorable and independent pursuits, farming, &c., through which means they have purchased homes, and are becoming wealthy and respectable tillers of the soil, and manufacturers of the products therefrom. The fact is admitted on both sides of the water, by friends and foes, that the passage of this nefarious bill has awakened the spirits and energies of the colored people throughout the entire length and breadth of the States, from Maine to Texas, and from the great northern Lakes to the Mexican Gulf, is heard the cries, the uplifted voices of the Colored people, as the voice of one man,

“We must do something for our future elevation, and our lasting welfare;” they are all crying with one accord, “We must make an issue, create an event.” It has not only aroused the fugitive up out of the nominally free states into Her Majesty's domains—the land of freedom and equal rights, where no man is known by his color, and where they are now enjoying their inalienable rights—in Canada; but it has aroused the Colored people as a mass throughout the United States; so much so, that not quite three years had elapsed after the passage of Fillmore's law, before the colored people called a National Convention, to consider the wrongs imposed upon them by the oppressive laws of the United States; this Convention met July the 6th, 1853, and the best means of ameliorating their condition, by uniting themselves together in a great

National Council, and forming a National League. This was the first time that the colored people of the United States of America ever assembled themselves together in a National Convention, to consult their common good.

These are some of the good things growing out of evil-Fillmorism; and it has not stopped there, for not many months had been suffered to pass by the sons of oppression, before another call was issued for a National Emigration Convention, held in August, 1854. The time arrived, and the convention met, and I am happy to say, as a member (from Ohio) of that memorable body, that the spirit of (forced) enterprise and emigration was thoroughly evinced; for not only were the free states represented, but glorious to tell, a number of the Slave States had become acquainted with the horrors of the fugitive slave law, and caught the fire of the spirit of emigration, to shun the ghastly missiles thrown from Millard Fillmore's act, and the slave power in general so that the State of Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and Louisiana, four slave-holding states, sent delegates as their representatives in the great National Emigration Convention.

Hence, it is seen that some good at last is growing out of the most detestable and wicked law that can be recorded in the annals of crime. Another good this law is effecting, after giving fugitives homes in Canada, is this; it is making the body of colored people stronger in Canada, in a free country under the protection of the British flag, where they enjoy the privilege denied them in the states, of uniting themselves as

citizens, under one common law of equality, which is the only true basis of elevation and permanent independence known to any race or people.

You will perceive that I have not mentioned the colored inhabitants of the U.S., with the title of "Citizens," as some incoherently might deem proper. No, and God forbid that I should be guilty of publishing to the world such a monstrous falsity as that; because they are not citizens in the States, but slaves to the whites, by law or prejudice, and aliens at home, and strangers to the common wealth of their nativity! I have said that the fugitive law had done good, in pushing colored emigration into Canada, and I believe that this fact is not unfounded, for the emigration of colored people from the U.S. into Canada, has increased with such rapidity, since the passage of the fugitive slave act of 1850, that the inhabitants of Canada, by the way of distinction, and in hatred of that law, unrivalled for wickedness in histories of heathen or papal enactments, call the emigrants of this day or since 1850, "Fillmore's Emigrants."

Much more might be said yet, with propriety, and I sometimes think that too much cannot be said and done explanatory of this shameful act, now disgracing the Statutes of the United States of America, and degrading her in the estimation of every free and enlightened nation on the globe. But of its wickedness entire, and the depth and weight of misery and woe it has caused, God only knows, and eternity will reveal.

***Fillmorism:** President Millard Fillmore signed the Fugitive Slave Law on September 18th, 1850, requiring northern "free" states to return escaped slaves to their southern owners.*

***Shadrick, Jerry, McQuery, Bibb:** famous escaped slaves who were written about in the press at the time: Shadrach Minkins, William "Jerry" Henry, George McQuerry, and Henry Bibb.*

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