

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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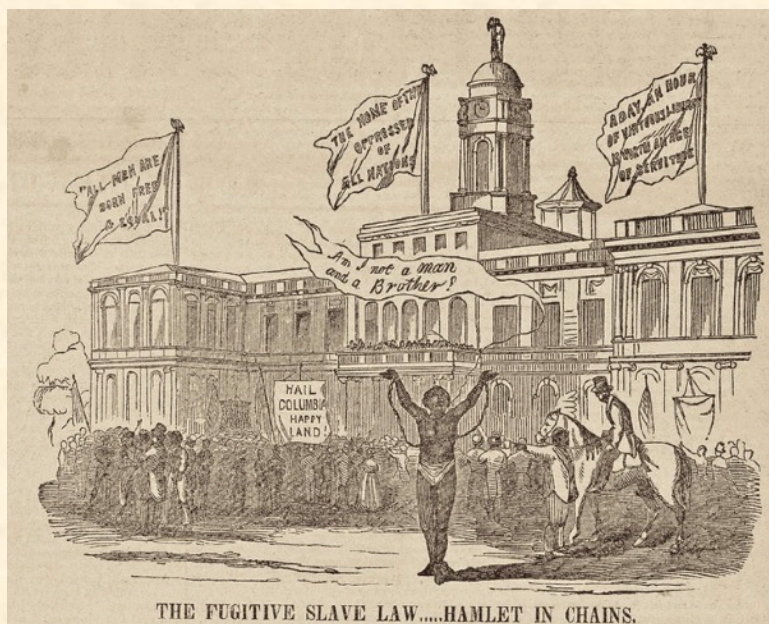
Otterbein and the Fugitive Slave Law

by David Safier

On September 26, 1850, James Hamlet, a 26 year old man who had escaped slavery two years earlier, was living in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and two children. Policemen came to Hamlet's place of work, arrested and handcuffed him, then took him to the courthouse where he was tried and convicted as a fugitive, all in the space of three hours. The New York anti-slavery community, Black and White, was enraged by the incident, but it all happened so quickly, they were unable to help.

James Hamlet was sent back to his "owner for life," Mary Brown, who said she would free him if she was paid \$800. New Yorkers raised the money in days. Ten days after his arrest, James Hamlet returned to New York to a hero's welcome. Thousands of people crowded the park across the street from City Hall. Numerous speakers welcomed Hamlet and condemned slavery. Through it all, Hamlet stood next to his wife and children speechless, tears pouring down his face. Two hundred supporters escorted Hamlet and his family home.

The political cartoon at right gives some idea of the importance the anti-slavery community gave to this case, which was reported in papers up and down the east coast and into the south. It even made the news in England, Scotland and Australia. The reason this specific case received so much attention at a time when escapees from slavery were common, as was their capture, was because James Hamlet was the first person captured under the newly revised Fugitive Slave Law which was signed into law eight days earlier.



This story belongs as a part of Otterbein community history because James Hamlet had lived at 524 South Hanover Street, a few houses north of Lee Street, for 17 years before his escape. His life and the lives of a few neighboring families reveal a great deal about what this community was like in the first half of the 19th century.

Slavery in Baltimore

Let's begin with the troubling issue of slavery in Baltimore. In the 1830s when this story began, just over 4,000 enslaved people were living in Baltimore out of a total population of 80,000. That number declined significantly over the next decades. By 1860, the enslaved population had shrunk to 2,200. This was because slavery was not a good fit for the Baltimore

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economy, not because of strong opposition to the institution in the city. Over the same thirty year period, the Free Black population, which had been the largest of any city in the country since the early 1800s, had increased from 14,000 to 25,700.

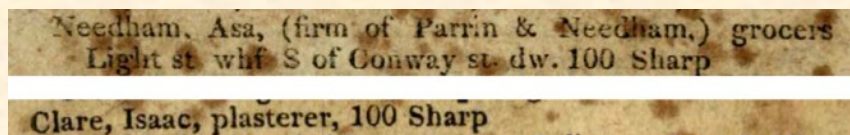
Few citizens of Baltimore held a large number of enslaved people. In many cases, they had one or two enslaved people living with them as household servants. Looking through the census records from 1830 and 1840 in this area, I was able to locate between two and three families per block with one or two enslaved people living in their homes; the actual number of households holding enslaved people was probably higher. These families easily could have hired live-in servants instead, but owning another human being was something of a status symbol at the time.

The Brown, Needham and Clare families

I'm going to focus on three interconnected families living on Hanover Street on either side of Lee, all of whom had enslaved people in their households. One is the Brown family, where James Hamlet lived. Another is the Needham family which lived next door to the Browns. The last is the Clare family which lived in the corner house just south of Lee Street. Their lives provide a window into the slave-owning world in this part of South Baltimore.

The story of the relationship between these three families began in the early 1820s, ten years before James Hamlet showed up in any records I found. At the time Asa Needham and Isaac Clare, two men in their 20s or early 30s, lived in the same house on the west side of Sharp Street between Conway and Barre, where the Federal Reserve Bank is today. Needham co-owned a grocery store on Light Street Wharf across the street from the Inner Harbor. Clare was a plasterer, probably working on the interior walls of new houses in the area. Clare would have found plenty of work nearby, since much of what is now the Otterbein neighborhood was undeveloped land at the time. (If you look at the two entries in the 1822-23 directory at right, you'll see the address is listed as 100 Sharp. That was from the city's original address numbering system which changed in

1887. If that house was standing today, its address would be 404 South Sharp.)



From the 1822-23 Baltimore Directory

In 1829 Asa Needham acquired an undeveloped 70 foot by 90 foot plot of land on the southwest corner of Hanover and Lee. Today it holds four houses on Hanover — 600, 602, 604 and 606 — and two houses on Lee — 105 and 107. A month later Needham turned a portion of the land over to his friend and housemate Isaac Clare. The speed of the transaction indicates that Needham and Clare had made an arrangement to split the land between them. In the decade

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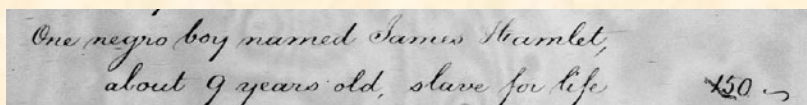
following, Clare acquired more of the land, until in 1840 all of the original plot of land was in Clare's hands.

I use the words “acquired” and “turned over” to refer to the land transactions rather than “bought” and “sold” because the property in this area was owned by the Howard family, and they followed a practice common in Baltimore at the time of leasing the land rather than selling it. The leases were for 99 years. So long as the lessees paid their yearly “ground rents,” they were guaranteed possession of the property and could build on it, then sell it to others for the value of the buildings. (John Eager Howard, who owned the land and began leasing it at the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, was one of the wealthiest and most important men in Baltimore. He was a Revolutionary War hero and later became governor of Maryland as well as its U.S. Senator. He died in 1827; Needham leased the land from Howard's sons.)

Also in 1829, John Brown acquired a house-sized plot of land from the Howard family across Lee Street and a few houses north, at what is now 524 South Hanover Street. He built a house for himself, his wife Mary and their four young children.

A year later, Asa Needham bought an unfinished house next door to Brown's — today's 522 South Hanover — finished it and moved in.

John Brown died unexpectedly in 1831, leaving his wife Mary a widow with four young children to raise on her own. A formal inventory of Brown's estate estimated its worth at \$1,980, about \$70,000 in today's dollars. Most of that was the value of his house, estimated to be \$1,500. Brown's only other “property” with more than minimal value was described in the inventory as follows: “One negro boy named James Hamlet, about 9 years old, slave for life.” His value was placed at \$150.



*One negro boy named James Hamlet,
about 9 years old, slave for life \$150*

Brown's unexpected death raises a question. How did Mary support her family after her husband died? She continued to live in the same house, according to Baltimore's yearly city directories, but the directories, which list people's occupations as well as their addresses, had no occupation listed for Mary. How, then, did she manage to put food on her table and clothes on the backs of her family? We'll leave that question for later.

Meanwhile, Asa Needham's business was thriving. He bought out the partner in his grocery store on Light Street and added “commission merchant” to his portfolio. He would either ship other people's goods out of the Inner Harbor for a commission or buy the goods outright and resell them. Soon he was successful enough to buy a four story warehouse on Light Street

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Wharf across from the harbor and gain access to 108 feet of space on the wharf. Over the years Needham's wealth increased, and he became an active member of the city's influential business community.

The Needham family had an enslaved woman living in their home, most likely a servant working in the house.

Isaac Clare opened a grocery store on the southwest corner on Hanover and Lee in what is now 600 South Hanover. Though I found no record to substantiate this, it isn't hard to imagine that his friend Asa Needham helped Clare transition from plasterer to grocer, offering business advice and possibly using his own connections as a grocer to help Clare stock his store.

The Clare family had two enslaved people living in their home. I could find no mention of the work they did, but it is likely one or both of them performed work connected to Clare's grocery store.

We don't know how Mary Brown survived her first years of widowhood financially, but her fortunes took a turn for the better in 1833 when her daughter married Isaac Clare's nephew Thomas — she was 17, he was 22 — who moved into his new mother-in-law's house. Before the marriage Thomas had been living a block away on Welcome Alley. Like the other alleys in the neighborhood, Welcome Alley was filled with small houses occupied by low wage workers, so Thomas must have been just scraping by financially. By the time Thomas married into the Brown family, city directories list him working in his uncle Isaac's grocery store and even as a partner in the business. The Brown household now had a steady source of income.

Which brings us to James Hamlet. He was nine when John Brown died. As he grew older he became a source of income for Mary Brown. It was a common practice in Baltimore for enslaved people to be "hired out" as an added source of income for a family. It was not unusual for them to work side by side with Whites and Free Blacks, and they often earned comparable wages. The most well known example of this practice in Baltimore history is Frederick Douglass, who lived in Fells Point and was hired out to work as a caulker in the boat building industry.

When Thomas Clare testified at James Hamlet's trial in 1850, he verified that Mary Brown hired out James Hamlet. According to a summary of his testimony in *The Baltimore Sun*, "Mr. Clare said that when the slave was not engaged around the house, he got him employment, and Mrs. Brown received the wages for his labor." In Baltimore widows whose financial situation was precarious often hired out their enslaved people to supplement their incomes.

The economic lives of the three families intersected most clearly in 1844. That was the year Asa Needham joined together with a number of wealthy and powerful men in Baltimore

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(Johns Hopkins among them) to buy Gist's Shot Tower on Eutaw Street near Camden, which they renamed the Merchants' Shot Tower. Today, the right field stands of Camden Yards Stadium occupy the space. Within a year of the purchase Thomas Clare was made secretary of the shot tower. You can see his name listed at the bottom of newspaper advertisements for the business. This must have been a significant professional and financial advancement for Thomas, from assistant grocer to the man in charge of the day-to-day operations of a shot tower. His position was enhanced further when Needham and his partners bought the Phoenix Shot Tower, which is still standing on East Fayette Street just off of President Street.



Baltimore must have been filled with young men who were as qualified to run the shot towers as Thomas Clare. I have to believe it was more than a coincidence that, out of all the possible candidates for the position, the owners chose someone who was Asa Needham's next door neighbor and the nephew of his friend Isaac Clare. If my supposition is correct, it speaks to Needham's continued personal involvement in the well being of his friends and neighbors.

When Thomas testified at James Hamlet's trial, he said he took Hamlet to work with him at the shot tower, giving the enslaved man, now in his 20s, a steady source of income, most or all of which went to Mary Brown.

James Hamlet's escape and arrest

In 1848 James Hamlet escaped from his enslavement in Baltimore. He settled in Williamsburg, now Brooklyn, New York. Over the next two years he married, had two children and worked at two jobs, a porter in a fashionable store and a servant to a celebrated New York City developer, indicating that he was an able, personable young man. He was also an active member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

One of Mary Brown's sons, Gustavus, was living in New York at the time and stated during his testimony at Hamlet's trial that he spotted Hamlet at least six months before he was arrested. If so, why did the family wait so long to have Hamlet arrested and returned to Baltimore?

The most likely answer is, the country had fugitive slave laws before 1850 which stated that enslaved people who escaped had to be returned to their owners, but the authority to carry out the law was given to the states, and free states like New York were reluctant to enforce it. The revised Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 gave the jurisdiction to the federal government, which made enforcement more likely. So it makes sense that when the revised act was signed into law by President Millard Fillmore, Thomas Clare began gathering together the necessary documents to

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have Hamlet put on trial and presented them to the New York court eight days later. Gustavus Brown was able to tell the authorities where to find Hamlet, who was arrested at work, put in handcuffs and brought to trial. Thomas and Gustavus were waiting, ready to present their documents and testimony identifying Thomas Hamlet as “slave for life” to Mary Brown. Three hours after he was arrested, Hamlet was on his way back to Baltimore, the first person in the country arrested, tried and convicted under the new Fugitive Slave Law. The anti-slavery community in New York was strongly opposed to the new law, and they expressed their outrage at the arrest and trial.

Apparently Mary Brown had no intention of having Hamlet resume his position as an enslaved servant and wage earner in her home. When Hamlet arrived in Baltimore, he was locked up in a slave pen on Pratt Street near Howard, one of a number of slave pens near the Inner Harbor where enslaved Blacks (and sometimes Free Blacks who were kidnapped) were held awaiting transport to their next destination. Thomas Clare announced that Hamlet’s freedom could be purchased for \$800 — about \$30,000 in today’s dollars — which was a reasonable price at the time for a healthy, young adult male. Hamlet’s monetary value gives some indication of how important the institution of slavery was to the U.S. economy and to enslavers’ personal wealth.

Collections began in New York immediately. Five days after James Hamlet was arrested, a meeting was held in what I believe was the church where Hamlet was a congregant. A thousand Black people filled the room. This is an excerpt from a speech given that night by the president of the church.

A more important subject than this never, in the history of this country, came before the American people, and it is nothing more nor less than this—Shall we submit to the iniquitous Fugitive Slave Bill, which subjects every free colored man, woman and child, to be seized upon, hand-cuffed, and plunged into perpetual slavery? Shall the blood-thirsty slaveholder be permitted, by this unrighteous law, to come into our domiciles, or workshops, or the places where we labor, and carry off our wives and children, our fathers and mothers, and ourselves, without a struggle—(loud cries of “No, no”)—without resisting, even if need be, unto death? (Cheers.) Or shall we sit down and tamely submit our necks to the halter, and our limbs to the shackles, and clank our chains to the sweet music of passive obedience? (No, no.) Every step which we may take, whether it be backwards or forwards, will be followed by consequences vast and momentous. Let us be united as one man, regarding our first rights as inherent and inalienable. There are a thousand and one ways by which the unsuspecting colored man, woman and child may be entrapped into the hands of the black-hearted, villainous kidnapper, and spirited away into slavery almost instantly. The case of James Hamlet, the fugitive, is in point. There is one victim. Will you submit that there may be more? (Loud noes.)

Following the speech, a list of 14 resolutions against slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law were read, after which a speaker announced that \$800 had been raised to buy Hamlet’s freedom, emphasizing that the first \$100 was given by a Black man, Isaac Hollenbeck.

Five days after the meeting in the church, more than a thousand Black and White people gathered in the park across the street from City Hall where James Hamlet had been tried and convicted ten days earlier. After a number of speeches condemning the Fugitive Slave Act and welcoming James Hamlet as a free man, Hamlet and his family were introduced to the crowd and greeted with cheers. Hamlet was called on to make a speech. According to coverage in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*:

MR. HAMILTON said the heart of Hamlet was too full to speak.

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THE CHAIRMAN: Here he is a free man — that is a speech in itself. The meeting then adjourned, the Chairman exclaiming, “Rejoice my people.” Men, women and children then gathered around Hamlet, and gave him an awful hugging, and finally he was borne on their shoulders through the Park, and down Spruce street to the Williamsburg ferry, amidst cheering and shouting and rejoicing.

Afterword

Asa Needham’s wealth and stature continued to increase. In the 1860s he brought his sons into the business, renaming it A. Needham & Sons. He had long been an active member of the Whig Party, which took a reasonably neutral stand on slavery, unlike the pro-slavery Democratic Party. During the Civil War, he and his sons were active supporters of the North in a city so divided in its loyalties that the Union felt it necessary to place a fort atop Federal Hill to keep pro-Confederacy citizens in line.

I mention Needham’s support of the more progressive political party and of the North’s fight against the South as a counterpoint to the fact that he had an enslaved woman in his home, which indicates he accepted and condoned the institution of slavery in his personal life. Recent scholarship has revealed that the history of what is often referred to as this country’s original sin is far more complex than the way it has been presented in the past. This, I think, is one example.

Asa Needham left the city and retired to a 38 acre estate near Catonsville where he died in 1874 at age 83.

Mary Brown and Thomas Clare received an \$800 windfall from their sale of James Hamlet, which must have made their lives considerably more comfortable. I found no record of Mary’s life after that. Thomas Clare moved out of the Hanover Street house, and most likely Mary moved along with him.

Isaac Clare continued to live on the corner of Hanover and Lee for a number of years, after which I could find no records for him until his death in 1867 at age 80. Isaac must have remained close to his nephew Thomas, because the bulk of Isaac’s estate was left to Thomas’s daughters.

As for James Hamlet, the 1892 New York census mentions a James Hamlet, age 68, living in Brooklyn. That is where Hamlet was living when he was arrested in 1850 and approximately the age he would have been in 1892. It may be the same man.