

## 2 – Who Claims Me?

By Gary Collison

**1851:** Boston becomes the center of the abolitionist movement

*From the beginning of the slave trade in the colonies, Black women and men rebelled against the brutal institution. In the fields, slaves engaged in passive resistance by refusing to work. Some organized armed uprisings. Many followed the abolitionist advice to "vote for freedom with their feet" by fleeing their masters.*

*By the mid-19th century, thousands of slaves were escaping each year on the legendary Underground Railroad. To appease Southern slaveholders, Congress passed a harsh new Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. The measure obligated all citizens to aid federal agents in recapturing runaways and imposed severe penalties on anyone assisting escaped slaves. Black abolitionists - many of whom were former slaves themselves - joined with their White allies to vehemently denounce the measure.*

*In Boston, widely regarded as the center of the abolition movement, Black leaders called on citizens "to trample this law underfoot" and "to make Massachusetts a battlefield in defense of liberty." It wouldn't take long before they had a chance to act on their pledge of resistance.*

In Boston, the 15th of February, 1851, was a dreary, rain-drenched day in the middle of a winter thaw. At the Cornhill Coffee House in the heart of downtown, young Shadrach Minkins bent over his early morning customers as they sipped their coffee. A fugitive slave from Norfolk, Va., Minkins had escaped to Boston only nine months before. He had been lucky to find this job as a waiter at one of the city's most popular restaurants soon after arriving.

Almost unnoticed, a group of men slipped into the room. As they strode straight toward him, Minkins had an uneasy feeling. Suddenly, their hands reached out, encircling his arms and wrists, pinning them at his sides. Minkins struggled, but he was alone and they were many. They dragged him to the doorway, then out into the muddy street, walking rapidly with him in their midst.

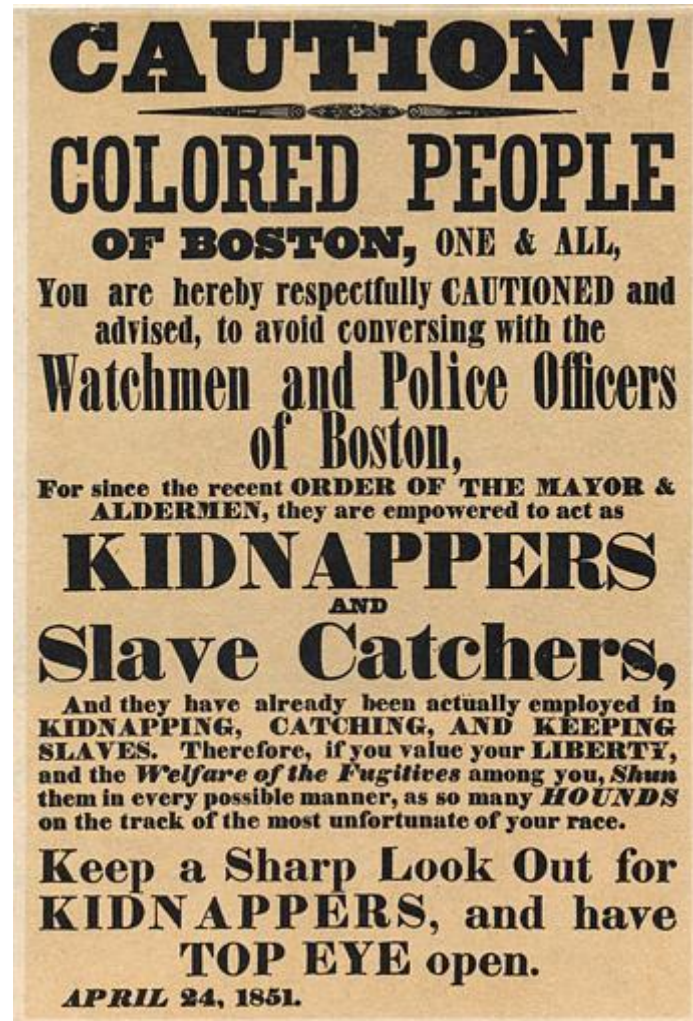
This was the nightmare moment that every fugitive slave feared, the moment when the world came crashing down, when the trap closed, and terror and confusion reigned.

For Shadrach Minkins and Boston's other estimated 400 to 600 fugitive slaves, a dire moment such as this had been looming over them ever since the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law the previous September. Before the new law, no Northern city had seemed safer than Boston, which was known since the days of the American Revolution for its commitment to human liberty.

It is true that the system of slavery had so poisoned race relations, both North and South, that many White Bostonians refused to accept African Americans as equals - or even to accommodate them at all - in restaurants, theaters and even, in a few notorious instances, in churches. Some White Bostonians thought that fugitive slaves had no right to live in their city and should be sent back to the South.

Still, many White Bostonians sympathized with the plight of fugitive slaves. The last fugitive slave arrested in Boston had been George Latimer in 1843, and he had been released after antislavery activists forced the man who claimed him as his property to accept a purchase price well below market value. Since then, Boston's fugitive slaves had been sleeping pretty soundly at night.

But the new law had changed everything. It was part of the package of legislation known as the Compromise of 1850, designed to heal the growing rift between the North and the South. The South agreed to allow Western territories to come into the Union as free states if the citizens of those states chose to do so. In exchange, the South got a Fugitive Slave Law that had real teeth in it.



Around Boston, abolitionists posted notices like this warning Blacks to beware of slave catchers.

The law created special commissioners to hear fugitive slave cases and authorized the U.S. marshal to employ an army of deputies to aid in the slave's return. Anyone caught helping a fugitive slave to escape faced thousands of dollars in fines and as many as six months in jail.

In effect, the U.S. Congress had traded away the hard-won freedom of fugitive slaves for peace between the North and the South. The law posed a threat to free Blacks as well as fugitives, since anyone could claim that a man or woman was a runaway. Blacks taken into custody could not testify on their own behalf in court and were denied a trial by jury.

The law left Blacks in Boston - and around the nation - exceedingly vulnerable. Would the next knock on the door be the U.S. marshal bearing a warrant for their arrest? Would they

soon find themselves in Richmond, Charleston or Savannah being sold to the highest bidder on an auction block or bound to a whipping post? It was a terrifying prospect.



**Boston authorities broke up this abolitionist meeting on December 3, 1860**

African Americans loudly condemned the measure. "I received my freedom from Heaven, and with it came the command to defend my title to it," declared Jermain W. Loguen, a Black abolitionist minister in Syracuse, N.Y., who had fled his master in Tennessee several years earlier. "I don't respect this law - I don't fear it - I won't obey it! It outlaws me, and I outlaw it."

In the first month under the new law, newspapers carried reports of a great exodus of fugitives fleeing to Canada from Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Cincinnati and elsewhere. In late September, the capture and re-enslavement of James Hamlet in New York City, another antislavery center, gave Boston's fugitive slaves even more reason to be frightened. Some packed a few belongings, made hasty farewells to friends and family, and disappeared into the night. Hundreds teetered on the verge of flight.

The alarm had been sounded. Meanwhile, Boston's Black leaders strategized about how best to protect runaways and attack the new law.

No one knew better than Lewis Hayden, an antislavery leader and fugitive slave himself, what this time of crisis required. Six years before, hidden in a carriage driven by two abolitionist friends, Hayden had escaped from Kentucky with his wife and son. They made it safely to Canada, but Hayden felt too isolated from the struggles of his fellow fugitive slaves, and the family soon moved back to the United States. In 1848, they settled in Boston with the aim of helping the city's fugitives and the abolitionist cause.

Hayden set up shop as a clothing dealer and took up residence in the largely Black West End neighborhood on Beacon Hill. The Hayden house quickly became a refuge for many a newly arrived fugitive slave and a headquarters for Boston's Black activists and their allies.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the famous Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), once found 13 fugitive slaves living under the Haydens' roof.

Hayden remembered well the horrors of slavery. As a youth, he had witnessed the auctioning off of his brothers and sisters. He himself had been traded from one master to another for a pair of carriage horses. Twice his mother had tried to kill herself to escape the barbaric institution. No fugitive was going to be returned to slavery if Lewis Hayden could possibly help it.

## RAN AWAY!



FROM THE SUBSCRIBER. My Melatto Boy,  
GEORGE said George is 5 feet 8 inches in height, brown  
curly Hair, dark coat. I will give \$400 for him alive,  
and the same sum for satisfactory proof that he has been  
killed.  
Vide ANTHONY & ELLIS' MAMMOTH WM. HARRIS.  
"UNCLE TOM'S CABIN"

**Under the Fugitive Slave Law, anyone caught helping a fugitive slave faced severe penalties.**

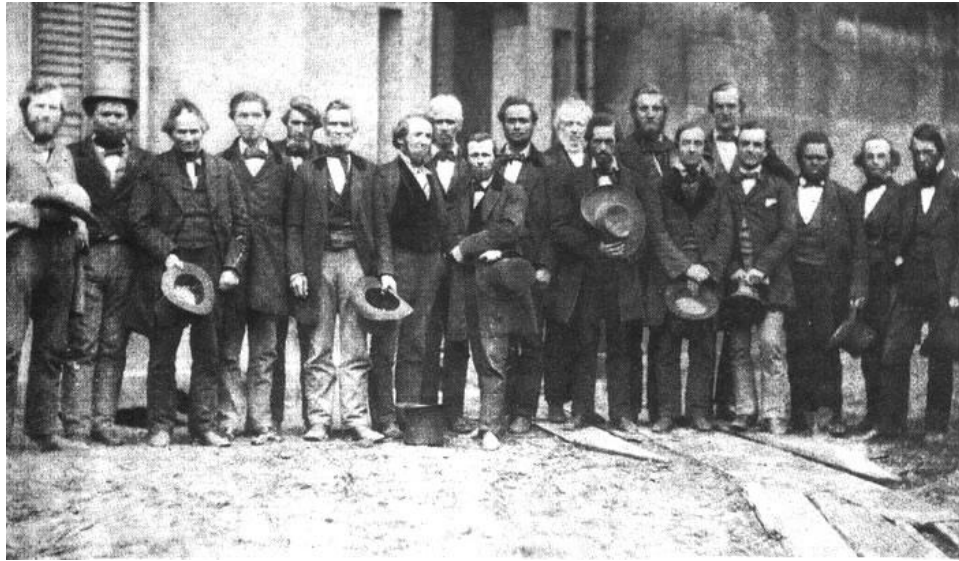
Presiding at a preliminary meeting of the Black community, Hayden called for "an united and persevering resistance." At a second, even larger assemblage, the group adopted bold resolutions promising to defend the freedom of every fugitive slave among them, to the death if necessary. "They who would be free, themselves must strike the blow" one resolution stated. Another authorized a "League of Freedom" composed of men who, in the words of one speaker, "could do the heavy work in the hour of difficulty." Their defiant words echoed those being pronounced at similar meetings around the nation.

Other resolutions passed by Boston's Black citizens warned fugitives to be cautious and to initiate no violence but, if attacked, to fight for their freedom with all their strength, with any weapon at hand. Still another resolution appealed to their many White allies in the city to rally around them in resistance to the obnoxious law.

The call for help was soon answered. On October 14, friends of Boston's fugitive slaves gathered for a meeting at Faneuil Hall, known as the "Cradle of Liberty" for all the patriot meetings held there during the Revolution. Famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass came down from Rochester, NY., to encourage the gathering with fiery words.

"We must be prepared should this law be put into operation to see the streets of Boston running with blood," Douglass warned. The meeting resulted in

the formation of a new biracial organization, the Boston Vigilance Committee, to protect fugitive slaves and provide relief to destitute fugitives. As a member of the executive committee, Lewis Hayden was to play a key role in these efforts.



**These residents of Oberlin, Ohio, were punished for helping fugitive slaves in 1859.**

Their preparations hadn't been made any too soon. At the end of October, two "man-stealing" agents for a Macon, Ga., slaveholder arrived in Boston. They immediately set about obtaining warrants for the arrest of a fugitive slave couple, William and Ellen Craft, who lodged at Hayden's West End home.

Fortunately, federal officials were slow to act. By the time they got around to issuing warrants for the Crafts, the entire African American 6th Ward neighborhood was armed and ready. Reports said Hayden's house had been turned into a fortress with powder kegs rigged up in the basement to explode should the U.S. marshal's men break in. Unwilling to risk the lives of his officers, the marshal wisely decided to ponder his options before taking any action.

Meanwhile, the Boston Vigilance Committee harassed the slave catchers while they remained in the city. They filed lawsuits against them for petty infractions such as smoking in the street. Committee members dogged their every footstep, calling out, "Slave catchers! Slave catchers! There go the slave catchers!" Finally, after enduring a week of legal delays and relentless torment, the Georgians left town in disgust, convinced that Boston was no place for recovering runaway slaves.

Boston's Black and White abolitionists were jubilant. Lewis Hayden, however, knew that their victory would not be without consequences. No longer safe in Boston, the Crafts had to be sent to England for protection. Their escape enraged Southerners and their Northern friends, including Boston businessmen who traded with the South, making other attempts on fugitives virtually inevitable. Widely denounced for incompetence, Boston's U.S. marshal and federal officials would not take such a cautious, unhurried approach the next time a slaveholder tried to recover his property.

The "next time" came all too soon, at Boston's Cornhill Coffee House. Now it was Shadrach Minkins who found his world suddenly shattered, his freedom wrenched away in an

instant. With Minkins firmly in their grasp, the federal officials rapidly reached the Boston Court House and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Minkins, still wearing his waiter's apron, struggled to understand what was happening.

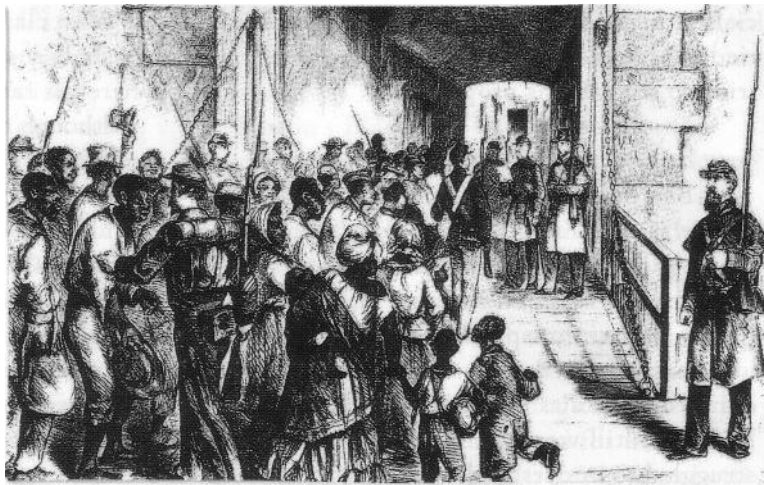
"Who claims me?" he demanded, as the marshals rushed him into the U.S. courtroom where his fate would be decided.

Although the officers had made the arrest quietly, the news passed rapidly along the city's network of White and Black abolitionists. Within a short time, lawyers from the Boston Vigilance Committee began arriving to take up Minkins' defense. Robert Morris, Boston's only Black lawyer, soon joined the group.

It was late morning before the legal proceedings finally began. The lawyer for the Norfolk slaveholder presented a stack of legal documents proving that he had purchased Minkins sometime in 1849. After these documents were read, the hearing adjourned. Minkins was allowed to remain in the courtroom to consult with his lawyers.

The Rev. Leonard Grimes, the Black minister of Boston's 12th Baptist Church, sometimes called "The Church of the Fugitive Slaves," came and sat beside Minkins to advise him. Grimes remembered later that the runaway's hand was shaking badly from all the excitement. The minister had to help him make his 'X' on the legal papers his lawyers placed before him.

Meanwhile, a great crowd composed mostly of African Americans had gathered in the hallway and outside in Court Square. Increasingly restless, the crowd peppered anyone who emerged from the courtroom with urgent questions. Rumors flew. According to one, Minkins was to be taken to the Federal Naval Yard. Another claimed that the U.S. Army had been summoned, still another that Minkins was to be put aboard a ship bound for the South. If ever there was a time for Lewis Hayden and the "League of Freedom" to act, that time was now.



**At Fortress Monroe, Va., runaway slaves appealed to federal guards for freedom and protection.**

As 2 o'clock neared, the sound of many footsteps suddenly echoed on the stairs below. In seconds, a squad of 20 Black men emerged at the top of the stairs just outside the courtroom where Minkins was being held. Dressed in the rain gear of sailors, with sou'wester hats pulled down low to conceal their faces, they rushed to the courtroom door and wrenched it from the grip of the guards. "Hurt no one," one of the men cautioned as they surged in.

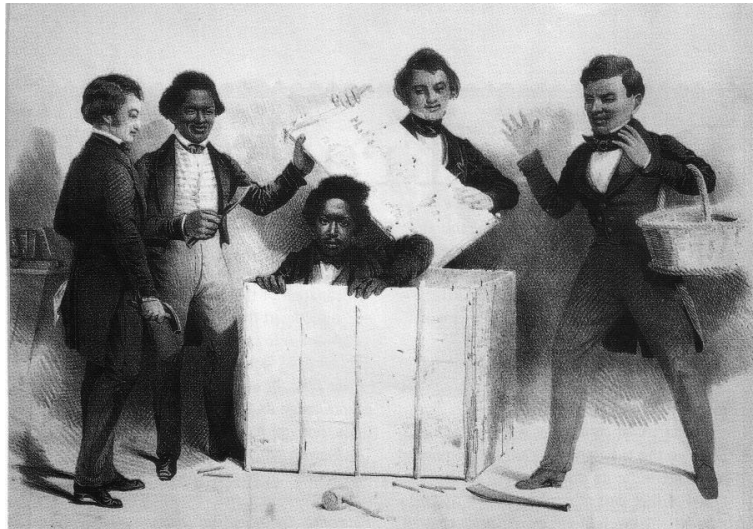


At the defense table, Minkins was startled - by the commotion. He had not been-forewarned of a rescue attempt. Who were these men rushing toward him? Would the officers open fire? Would they all be killed?

In an instant, the party of men raced to where Minkins stood, seized him and then retreated out the way they had come in, half-carrying the stunned fugitive. The feet of the men thundered on the stairs more loudly than before. When the rescuers emerged from the Court House doors with Minkins, loud cheering broke out. The rescue party hastily crossed Court Square, the curious following them like the tail of a comet. A woman in the crowd reached out to touch Minkins' hair and shouted, "God bless you!" as the fugitive was whisked away through the city streets.

Minutes later the Black "League of Freedom" escort - with Lewis Hayden at its head - entered the narrow streets of the African American neighborhood on the back side of Beacon Hill. They soon vanished into the neighborhood's narrow alleyways, the clamorous rescue party evaporating as silently as raindrops after a summer shower.

Much later, Hayden revealed that he had secreted Minkins in the attic of Elizabeth Riley, widow of one of Boston's most successful African American businessmen. Then a few hours later, he had led Minkins to a safer location just outside Boston. That night, under the cover of darkness, Hayden and another "League of Freedom" member drove the rescued fugitive in a wagon 15 miles to the village of Concord, Mass.



**Henry "Box" Brown acquired his nickname in 1850 by shipping himself to freedom in a wooden crate.**

After Shadrach had eaten and rested for a few hours at the home of Ann and Francis Bigelow, two of Concord's many antislavery friends, he was sent on the Underground Railroad toward sanctuary in Canada. A week later, cold and weary but finally safe, Minkins arrived in Montreal, where he would live out his days as a free man.

For Boston's African Americans and their White allies, the rescue of Shadrach Minkins was cause for great rejoicing. They had succeeded in making a bold statement against an unjust law that supported an inhuman institution. But Lewis Hayden knew their victory was incomplete. More difficult challenges still lay ahead.

Supporters of the Fugitive Slave Law grew more determined than ever to force Boston to hand over a fugitive slave. Eventually, with a virtual army of guards and at great expense, Boston's federal officials succeeded in extracting two fugitive slaves from the city: Thomas Sims in 1851 and Anthony Burns in 1854. In both cases, rescue attempts had failed. After Sims was returned to slavery, Hayden felt compelled to send his wife, a fugitive herself, briefly into hiding in the countryside.

Yet the spectacle of watching Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns being marched back into slavery through the public streets of freedom-touting Boston shamed even those citizens who sympathized with the South. Slaveholders made only a few more token efforts to reclaim their human property in Boston, none of them successful. The Black community safely hid dozens of threatened fugitive slaves or helped to spirit them out of the city. In other towns and cities, too - Cincinnati, Syracuse, Detroit, Milwaukee and many more - antislavery activists were able to thwart the detested law, at times pulling off dramatic rescues of recaptured slaves.

The fight in Boston and other locations to secure the freedom of their fugitive slaves helped focus the nation's attention on the gaping chasm between American ideals of freedom and the actualities of U.S. law that turned men, women and children into chattel. It announced that the time had come for the nation to face the appalling contradiction written into the Constitution.

It would take a bloody war to settle the issue of freedom once and for all. In 1865, the 13th Amendment finally accomplished what Black and White abolitionists had been working toward for zoo years: the end of slavery. Never again would African Americans have to ask the question fugitive slave Shadrach Minkins demanded of his captors: "Who claims me?"

They claimed themselves.

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*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit  
A Place at the Table.*