

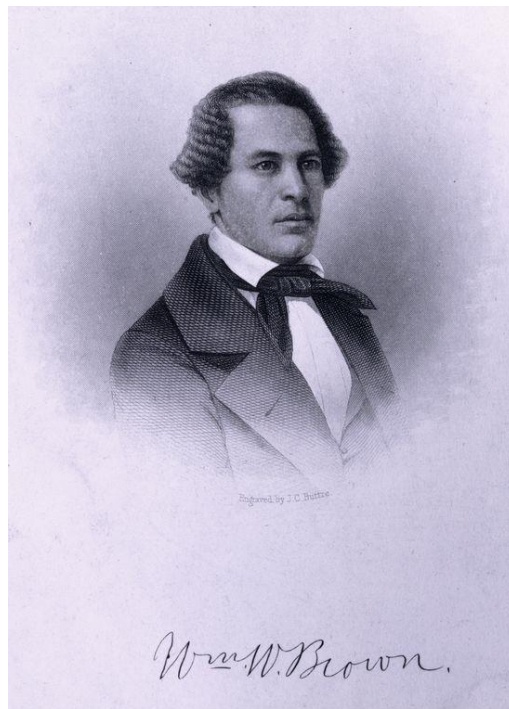
Fillmore and the Fugitive Milton Clarke

Did Fillmore Aid or Assist any Freedom Seekers?

Millard Fillmore was the 13th President of the United States (July 1850 – March 1853). In September of 1850, he signed into law the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850. This act doomed his political career in the North as he was looked upon as a pro-slavery dupe for the southern slaveholders. His historical reputation never did recover from this tragic event. However, as a vice-presidential candidate for the Whig Party (1848) and as an American (Know-Nothing) Party presidential candidate (1856) he was critiqued and charged with being an anti-slavery man by southern political leaders. Rumors abounded that Fillmore had, in fact, helped freedom seekers in their journey. Was there any truth to this? Below are two incidents concerning Millard Fillmore and of his assisting fugitive slaves.

William Wells Brown (1815 – 1884)

William Wells Brown was an American abolitionist, novelist, playwright, and historian. He was born into slavery near Lexington, Kentucky in 1815. At the age of 19 in 1834, he escaped into Ohio.



The young fugitive made his way to Cleveland where he lived for nearly three years working as a waiter on Lake Erie steamers. Brown immediately jumped into the role of helping other freedom seekers on their way to Canada. In 1835, while working on the steamer *Charles Townsend*, Brown later wrote that he helped dozens of runaways receive passage to the Lake Erie port cities of Detroit and Buffalo.

In the fall of 1836 Brown, now married with a family, moved to Buffalo, a city that had an African-American population much larger than Cleveland. He became involved in the temperance movement while also staying active in the underground railroad. Brown claimed that in 1842, he was responsible in guiding 69 individuals through Buffalo and into Canada. And it was in this realm of activity that his name became linked to that of Millard Fillmore.

After leaving Buffalo in the mid 1840's, William Wells Brown became known as an anti-slavery activist and lecturer. On October 4th of 1854, Brown, while lecturing at the Corinthian Hall in Rochester, described an event that happened during his time in Buffalo.

The Rochester *Democrat* published the following sketch.

Mr. Brown spoke for about an hour, dwelling particularly upon the effects of the institution of slavery upon free people of color in the Northern States, and contrasting the liberal sentiment which the colored man meets in Europe, with the prejudices which degrade him in this country. He spoke very well, and elicited the favor of the audience, while he amused them with several well-told anecdotes of his own experience. One relating to Mr. Fillmore would create for that gentleman respect in the free States, while it might tend to injure him in the estimation of the Southern people, whose good-will he has so sedulously cultivated. Mr. Brown said that while he was a resident of Buffalo, several years since, he and others applied to Mr. F. to act as counsel for an alleged fugitive. The service was performed, and the counsel fee refused – Mr. Fillmore alleging it to be his duty to help the poor fugitive. Still, he afterward signed the Fugitive Slave law!

When exactly did this take place? Who was the fugitive? What were the results of the service performed? This incident was also mentioned in Brown's biography written by his daughter, Josephine. However, no additional details were supplied. The early 1840's may be a reasonable estimation for the timeline as this was the period (1842) in which another Fillmore/fugitive slave episode did take place.

Milton Clarke (1820? – 1901-02)

Buffalo Morning Express, June 21, 1851:

Fillmore and Milton Clark. – At the mass meeting at Burlington, Vt., recently, Milton Clark (sic) stated that when he escaped from slavery into the Free States, he was soon supplied by friends with letters to different persons to help him on his way northward, and among them was one Millard Fillmore, who seemed rejoiced at his escape, harbored him, gave him money, and helped him on his way – performing, in fact, the very acts which he says now shall be visited with condign punishment.

Fillmore was President of the United States at the time of this article (1851) and had signed the Fugitive Slave Law into effect one year earlier (1850).

Who was Milton Clarke?

Can his story be verified through any other source?

Milton Clarke was the 8th child of an enslaved Kentucky woman. As he reached manhood, he was able to hire out his services by joining a company of musicians who played at various balls and parties. Around 1840, he and the group played at a ball in Cincinnati. Instead of heading back to Kentucky, they escaped north. Clarke went to Oberlin, Ohio while the rest of the men departed for Canada through Detroit. His older brother, Lewis, escaped a year later in 1841 and reunited with Milton in Oberlin.

Oberlin at this time was known as an abolitionist center. Clarke became involved in the movement of freedom seekers northward to Canada. In 1842, nine individuals, all from the same plantation, arrived in town. They were being closely followed by slave catchers. Milton concocted a plan to divert the attention of the kidnappers while the fugitives took the road to Lake Erie and Canada. The ruse worked but it brought unwanted attention to Clarke. He was arrested, taken to court and tried as a runaway. Among his lawyers was one Salmon Chase, of Ohio, who was a prominent lawyer and abolitionist; later, senator, Secretary of the Treasury in Lincoln's cabinet and finally, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Despite all the legal representation, Clarke was sentenced to return to slavery. Public anger at the decision gave him the opportunity to escape and head eastward toward Western New York.

And now his story is picked up from another source, George Washington Jonson's diary. Jonson was a Buffalo lawyer, land agent, abolitionist, very active in the Liberty Party politics, an associate of Millard Fillmore and an energetic diarist throughout his adult life.

According to Nelson Terry Heintzman's thesis, the first mention of Milton Clarke from Jonson's diary came on Wednesday October 19, 1842

Rev. Mr. Shipperd called on me at the office, and presented a white-black man, named Milton Clark (sic). A fugitive slave, from Kentucky. Mr. S. asked if he could not be made useful. And we decided to set him lecturing... Clark, last from Ohio – nearly white.

Milton Clarke, and his brother Lewis, were white slaves. Their father was white and their mother was an enslaved nearly white woman, making them, by the rules of southern slavery, enslaved. Lewis had mentioned in his own written story that white enslavement was not uncommon in the slave states. In fact, in another case, Sally Hemmings of Monticello was $\frac{3}{4}$ white. Her children by a white man, possibly Thomas Jefferson, were $\frac{7}{8}$ -part white and were enslaved until Jefferson's death. When freed, they were able to blend into white society with no issues.

According to the diary, Clarke was put to work as an antislavery lecturer. On Friday October 21, 1842, Jonson wrote that the Park Church was opened for Mr. Clarke to lecture in. He then doubled up with a Rev. Brown and continued their lecturing across Erie County.

Thursday, October 27, 1842

.... Mr. Brown and Mr. Clark returned, having held they report, 4 good meetings in Williamsville, Clarence, Newstead and Lancaster. Got them off to Hamburg.

On Friday, Milton Clarke finally met Millard Fillmore.

Friday, October 28, 1843

... Rev. Mr. Bridgman called upon me. Mr. B. is an Abolitionist and conversed upon slavery. Accepted E. H. Estabrook's order for \$4.50 for Liberty votes. Clark, colored fugitive here, and left his pistols and overcoat in my office. Introduced to Mr. Fillmore who [could] hardly believe he had Negro blood; he was so fair. He gave Mr. F. his history.



In mid-November, George W. Jonson recorded the following

Wednesday, November 16, 1842

Sent Milton Clark, colored fugitive here, off to Lockport with a letter introducing him to M. M. Southworth, Esq. of that village.

Clarke continued on with his career as an anti-slavery lecturer up to the Civil War.

Sources

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