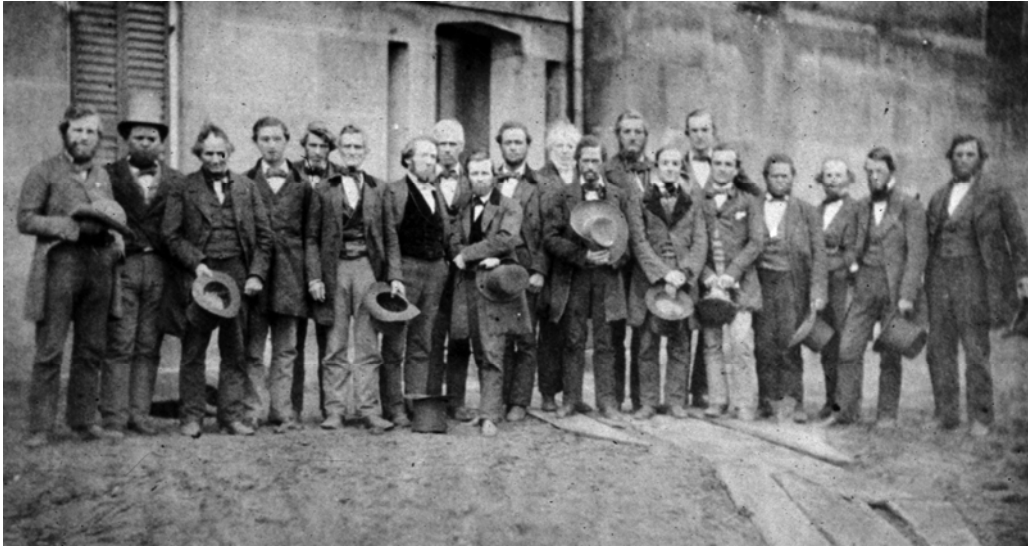# The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue 1858

These were twenty of the thirty-seven citizens from Oberlin and Wellington who were charged with breaking the law by helping John Price escape from slave catchers in the fall of 1858. The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue and subsequent trial caught the eye of the nation as escalating tensions over slavery raised the prospect of civil war. (Courtesy of Oberlin College Archives)

Oberlin and Anti-Slavery

Oberlin was a uniquely tolerant community in the early nineteenth century. Founded in 1833, Oberlin College pioneered co-education and in 1835 broke new ground by admitting students regardless of their race. Many residents were abolitionists and over two hundred people joined together to form the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society in 1835. The society was dedicated to "the immediate emancipation of the whole colored race within the United States: The emancipation of the slave from the oppression of the master, the emancipation of the free colored man from the oppression of public sentiment, and the elevation of both to an intellectual, moral, and political equality with the whites." Over the next generation, Oberlinians supported the antislavery cause by helping fugitive slaves escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

After the federal government passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Oberlin abolitionists grew increasingly concerned about the threat posed by slave catchers hired to recover slaves who had "stolen" themselves from their masters. Under the 1850 Act, federal marshals received rewards for the arrest and return of alleged fugitive slaves, and anyone caught helping a freedom seeker could be jailed and fined. Antislavery activists throughout the nation denounced the law as immoral and Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to rally public opinion against the measure. Most Oberlin residents were proud of the town's reputation as a major station on the Underground Railroad and were more ready than ever to safeguard the escaped men, women, and children seeking aid in their community.

The Kidnapping of John Price and the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue

John Price was a young man who had escaped from his Kentucky slave owner in the mid-1850s. He had been living and working in Oberlin for about two years when, in the fall of 1858, slavecatchers Anderson Jennings and Richard Mitchell conspired to kidnap Price and bring him back to his Kentucky master. With the help of a few locals (not everyone in Oberlin was an abolitionist), on September 13, 1858 the slave catchers lured Price out of Oberlin with the promise of work. Armed with weapons and a warrant, Mitchell, federal marshal Jacob Lowe, and his assistant Samuel Davis forced Price into their carriage. They then drove him eight miles south to Wellington, Ohio to catch the 5:13 p.m. southbound train.
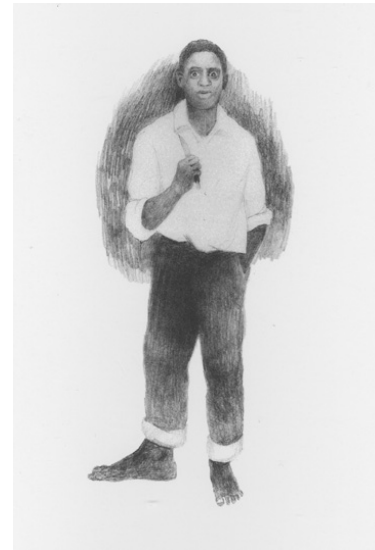
Artist's drawing of freedom seeker John Price.
(Courtesy of Oberlin College Archives)

News of John Price's kidnapping spread quickly in downtown Oberlin as townspeople, students, and professors rallied together in response. "They have carried off one of our men in broad daylight, and are an hour on their way already!" shouted one outraged citizen. White and black Oberlinians hurried the eight miles to Wellington in wagons, buggies, carriages, and some even on foot to rescue Price from slavery. When John H. Scott went to his neighbor, Mrs. Oliver P. Ryder, to borrow a horse she told him, "If necessary, spare not the life of my beast, but rescue the boy."

John Watson, a black store owner in Oberlin, arrived in Wellington first. Soon between 200 and 500 men crowded the streets around the Wadsworth Hotel where the slavecatchers held Price. The crowd began to shout back and forth with the captors, disputing the legality of the capture and demanding to hear from Price himself. Many in the crowd were determined to free Price, whatever the law or consequences. Charles Langston, a black school teacher, moved through the crowd trying to calm the armed protesters. When the southbound train arrived, the situation grew urgent and the crowd began to force their way into the hotel. In the confusion that followed, Price escaped with the help of men who had been trying to negotiate with the captors. Energized by the success of the rescue, Oberlin residents paraded back from Wellington, "shouting, singing, rejoicing in the glad results."

Price first hid in the home of James Fitch, but then moved because Fitch was a known agent of the Underground Railroad. Fitch and Professor James Monroe approached Oberlin College professor James Fairchild, who was known as a more conservative, law-abiding citizen. Fairchild disapproved of slavery and agreed to house Price until he was able to continue north. As the rescuers had hoped, no one came to search Fairchild's home. With the help of others, John Price probably made his way into Canada. Unfortunately, the story of his life after the rescue is lost to us today.

The Trial of the Rescuers

Jubilant spirits in Oberlin dimmed when thirty-seven of the Rescuers, both black and white, were charged with breaking federal law. Twenty-five of the men were from Oberlin and twelve were from Wellington. Ever defiant and trusting in the right of a "higher law," many of the accused and their wives attended a "Felon's Feast" on January 11, 1859. Sixty-four guests dined while the Oberlin String Band played. The night was filled with speeches, toasts, spirited criticism of slavery, and a few jokes as well.

The town had less to cheer about in the following months as the lengthy trials began and the Rescuers were remanded to jail for their refusal to post bond. They had little chance of escaping legal punishment with a Cleveland-based jury entirely formed of Democrats who opposed abolition. Their lawyers used the trial to speak about the horrors of slavery and to persuade people to support the Republican cause. Two of the defendants sold 5,000 copies of their newspaper "The Rescuer" from inside the jail. Rescuers Simeon Bushnell and Charles Langston were eventually convicted of violating the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Bushnell's sentiments likely matched those of his fellow prisoners when he wrote, "They may do their worst, & when I am again out, I will rescue the first slave I get a chance to rescue." On May 24, 1859 thousands of people crowded into Cleveland's Public Square to support the Rescuers. Court costs continued to mount and the legal tangle intensified when the Rescuers' supporters arranged for the arrest of the slave catchers on kidnapping charges in Lorain County. A deal was finally negotiated and the Rescuers were released on July 6, 1859, eighty-three days after being imprisoned.

Oberlin College professor Henry Peck, a well-known abolitionist, was arrested for aiding in the Rescue despite not even going to Wellington that day.
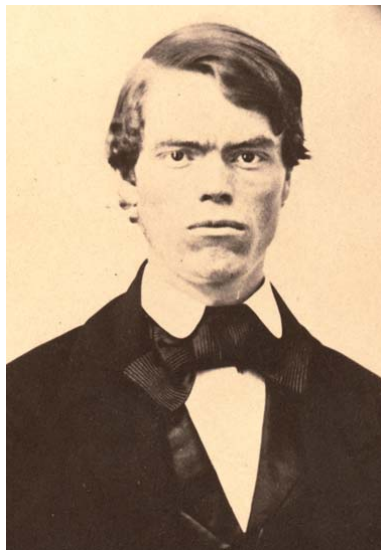

William Scrimgeour, an Oberlin College senior, participated in the Rescue of John Price and was indicted along with four other students.
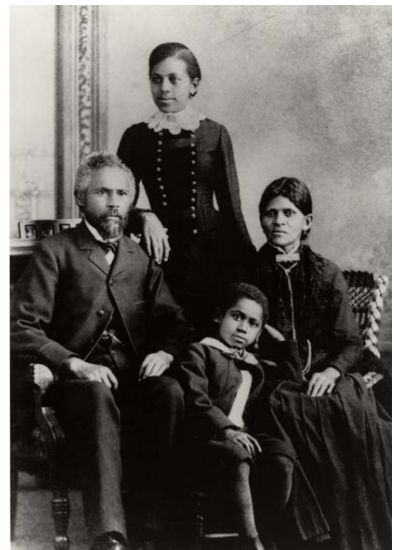
John Scott was an Oberlin harness and trunk maker and one of twelve black men who were charged with breaking the law by participating in the Rescue.

Public Sentiment

Most Oberlin residents were proud of their participation in the Rescue and the continued reputation of the community as a safe haven for all men and women, regardless of color. So strong was their belief in a "higher law" that many were surprised when Bushnell and Langston were found guilty. They saw the trial as a sham and moral outrage, and large numbers of their fellow Northerners agreed.
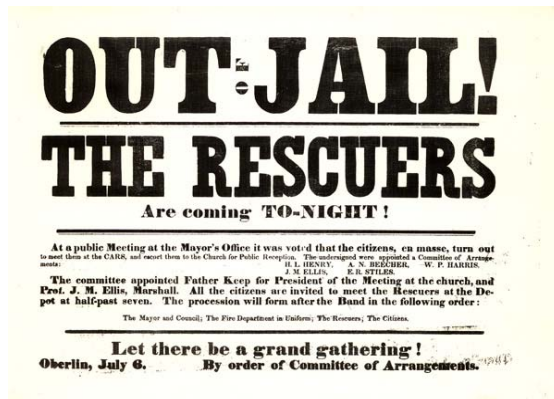
Poster alerting Oberlin residents to a meeting in honor of the released Rescuers.
(Courtesy of Oberlin College Archives)

However, others in the North as well as the South felt the arrests and trial had been justified. By harboring fugitive slaves, Oberlin residents had been breaking the law for years. What would happen if everyone began disobeying the laws of the state or nation because they followed a "higher law"? While Oberlin residents saw themselves as unwaveringly in the right, many outsiders thought they were arrogant idealists who were pushing the nation towards war.

For the black men and women living in Oberlin, free and fugitive, abstract debates over the law mattered less than the immediate necessity of ensuring their own safety and the safety of their families and friends. Yet they also recognized that fundamental principles were at stake.

After being tried and found guilty, Charles Langston gave a speech to the court that eloquently expressed his belief in universal human rights:

"I must take upon myself the responsibility of self-protection; when I come to be claimed by some perjured wretch as his slave, I shall never be taken into slavery. And as in that trying hour I would have others do to me, as I would call upon my friends to help me, as I would call upon you, your Honor, to help me, as I would call upon you [the prosecuting and defense attorneys] to help me, and upon you and upon you, so help me God! I stand here to say that I will do all I can for any man thus seized and held! . . . We have all a common humanity, and you all would do that; your manhood would require it, and no matter what the laws might be, you would honor yourself for doing it, while your friends and your children to all generations would honor you for doing it, and every good and honest man would say you had done right!"

This narrative was compiled with the help of Liz Schultz, Roland Baumann, Gary Kornblith, and Mary Moroney from the works listed below. Sources marked * are available for purchase in the Oberlin Heritage Center museum store:

Baumann, Roland M. *The 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue: A Reappraisal*. Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 2003.*

Bigglestone, William E. *They Stopped in Oberlin: Black Residents and Visitors of the Nineteenth Century*. Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 2002.*

Brandt, Nat. *The Town that Started the Civil War*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1990.*

Constitution and List of Members of the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society. Autograph File, Oberlin College Library, O.C. A, 1835.

Fletcher, Robert Samuel. *A History of Oberlin College*. Oberlin, ,OH: Oberlin College, 1943.

Rokicky, Catherine M. *James Monroe: Oberlin's Statesman & Reformer, 1821-1898*. Kent, OH: Kent State University, 2002.*

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