

1843

Crossing the Threshold

THE YOUNG MAN had come to the right place, led by God's hand, sheer luck, or perhaps an inside tip. He was in dire straits: a runaway slave from Maryland adrift in northeastern Pennsylvania, still hundreds of miles from the promised land of Canada. Slave-catchers had caught wind of his whereabouts and were closing in. In all probability it was dusk, the best time to start moving, but he hadn't been able to shake his armed pursuers. The lone farmhouse, prominent on a bare hilltop, must have beckoned like a lighthouse.

As the story goes, the white farmer was at home and answered the knock on his door. Rodman Sisson was one of the area's many Rhode Island transplants, an upright Baptist and devoted abolitionist. He belonged to a movement that fought human slavery by both word and deed, even if it meant breaking the law by harboring a fugitive from bondage. Perhaps Sisson took his time scrutinizing the stranger standing there in the gloom, a light-skinned black man in his early twenties, dressed in sweaty garb, panting his plea with a Southern drawl. More likely, he immediately yanked the fellow inside, keenly aware of the danger facing them both.

Many years later, Sisson would chuckle when he told a friend what happened next. It went like this: he hurried the fugitive to an upstairs bedroom and directed him to its open, unlit fireplace. With seconds to spare,

the stranger clambered up into the chimney. There he hid like a spider, precarious and grimy, but out of sight.

More sounds were heard at the front door—loud pounding this time. Sisson opened it to a blast of hostility and threats. Yes, he knew harboring a runaway was against the law, yet he insisted no runaway had come his way. He let the slave-catchers check the first floor while, with a flourish of bluff and bluster, he managed to keep them from the bedroom. The posse eventually stalked off, empty-handed.

Hours later, once the coast was clear, the runaway was whisked to an outbuilding for safekeeping. From there he was moved overland to a nearby village, where Sisson's newlywed daughter would see to his well-being.

That fateful showdown occurred in the early 1840s (most likely summer of 1843) at La Plume Corners, in what was then North Abington Township. The nearby village was Waverly, known at the time as Abington Centre. A handful of villagers had already helped other runaway slaves journeying through toward Canada, but the young farmhouse fugitive was different. He lingered around Waverly, took its measure, and decided to stay—thus launching an extraordinary chapter in the annals of Northeastern Pennsylvania. By putting down roots there, he became the founding father of Colored Hill, the long-lived fugitive colony that soon sprang up from nothing on the edge of otherwise all-white Waverly. In time, it would become the largest black enclave for thirty miles around.

The young man would be known to the locals as George Keys. That may not have been his birth name. As with most runaways from bondage, facts about his origins are sketchy and inconsistent. On occasion, Keys claimed that he came from the uplands of western Maryland, birthplace of many of Waverly's ex-slaves. His son said Keys actually had fled a tobacco plantation

in tidewater southern Maryland—from an area that was to erupt in slave resistance in 1845.

Before his auspicious arrival in Waverly, Keys seemed to have tarried thirty miles to the south, in the county seat of Wilkes-Barre, where free-born blacks and a few white allies were known to safeguard fugitive slaves. Unfortunately, Wilkes-Barre also was home to a number of white roughnecks and bounty-hunters, and a group of them might have set their sights on Keys. While one version has Keys being chased to Sisson's door by his slave master's son, it's more likely he was dogged by local hired guns. Chances are, some sympathizers had given Keys directions to Sisson's safe house. They might have seen it as distant enough to elude the would-be captors while still close enough to Wilkes-Barre—home of a free-born black woman whom Keys had begun courting and would, in time, bring to Waverly as his bride.

THE TALE OF RODMAN SISSON'S farmhouse standoff was recounted by one of his friends many years afterward. The friend told the dramatic story to a Scranton newspaper;¹ unfortunately, he gave no insight into Sisson's motivation to defy the law. Sisson ran for county office on the abolitionist Liberty Party ticket in 1847² and kept up his secret Underground Railroad work for many years, even after moving from La Plume to Waverly in 1857. But what drove him to civil disobedience is unknown. Like other pious Christians, Sisson may have felt commanded by scripture to welcome all strangers. Perhaps he was inspired by Congressman Galusha Grow, a lifelong family friend who declaimed against slavery on the national stage.³ Whatever his reasons, they are lost to history. Sisson could read and write, unlike George Keys, yet he left behind no journal or other records about his covert activities.

One thing is clear. Through those activities, Sisson and his compatriots carved out a durable zone of safety that was rare for its time and place. Keys must have spread the word to other freedom-seekers down the line that if they delivered themselves unto Waverly, they, too, might find lasting sanctuary.

As it happened, George Keys was not the first person of color to live in greater Abington. William Fogg of Connecticut had quietly settled five miles away, on the eastern edge of the township with his blended family back in 1811.⁴ Whereas Keys began thriving in Waverly's climate, Fogg ran headlong into the state's bigoted white power structure. Fogg fought back—but, as shall be seen, his legal fight produced a pair of landmark setbacks that would stymie all black Pennsylvanians for decades to come.

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1. Twining, Alfred "Waverly an Important Station on the 'Underground Railroad,'" *The Scranton Times*, (Scranton, Pa.), Oct. 3, 1916, p. 37
 2. *The Wilkes-Barre Advocate* (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.), Sept. 29, 1847, p. 2
 3. *Historical Record: The Early History of Wyoming Valley and Contiguous Territory* (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.: Press of the Wilkes-Barre Record, 1893) p. 99
 4. *Weekly Notes of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, the County Courts of Philadelphia, and the United States District and Circuit Courts for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, Vol. 2.* (Kay & Brother, 1876, online as Google eBook) p. 709