

Transcript of "The New York Vigilance Committee"

Emily Hello everyone and welcome back to the Bowne House Historical Society's podcast. My name is Emily and I am again joined by David. We chat about historical topics connected to the Bowne House that you might be unfamiliar with. Welcome, David!

David Hi, Emily. I am glad that we are back!

Emily Me too! Today's podcast will be sharing a bit of the history of the New York Vigilance Committee. As we discussed in a previous podcast, this is the organization some Bowne House residents were assisting with during the middle of the 19th century. Now we want to understand more; David, what is the origin of this group?

David It began as the New York Committee of Vigilance in 1835 and its founders included prominent anti-slavery activists like David Ruggles. In their First Annual Report, the group lists their two main objectives: "1. To protect unoffending, defenceless, and endangered persons of color, by securing their rights as far as practicable. 2. By obtaining for them when arrested, under the pretense of being fugitive slaves, such protection as the law will afford." To be clear, this is not the only such group in America to do this type of work, but it was a significant one.

Emily So, their goals were specifically to protect and aid people of color who were accused of fleeing slavery. You might be wondering why this was still an issue in New York in 1835. The state went through a complicated process to abolish slavery; but eventually, it set the date of total emancipation on July 4, 1827. So why was there still a need for the New York Committee of Vigilance in 1835? Can you explain why?

David Even though slavery was abolished in New York State by this time, the Federal level Fugitive Slave Act required all states to return any individual accused of fleeing slavery. There were still illegal kidnappings of free blacks who resided within New York State and fugitive enslaved people who came to New York seeking freedom from non-free states, as well as others brought here as a result of an illegal but still ongoing transatlantic slave trade. Publicly, the main object of the New York Committee of Vigilance was to provide legal and financial support to those accused of being escaped enslaved people and privately the committee was leading the Underground Railroad operations in New York.

Emily Certainly, the mindset that fueled slavery could not be changed overnight. Although one's legal standing might change that rapidly, their daily interactions would have essentially remained the same. The Black population of New York had much to contend with.

David This is why the founders of the New York Committee of Vigilance saw the need for community involvement. Accusations would not have been easily disputed solely based on the accused's testimony. With the aid of a larger community, these individuals stood a chance of returning to a free life.

Emily So once they got involved, what would this committee's actions look like?

David They must begin by making a legal claim that the individual was being wrongfully held. This would get the legal ball rolling for the case. At which point, they would make sure the case was public knowledge. They would have it printed in the newspaper and send the information to all those that might potentially assist. This would help them raise the necessary funds for any legal fees and secure public sentiment.

Emily Ah yes, public sentiment would be invaluable. These court cases would have been significant events for the community.

David That is part of the connection the Bowne House residents had to the New York Vigilance Committee. Their treasurer requested in a letter that Robert Bowne Parsons collect donations from sympathetic parties in Queens. These Vigilance groups relied on public support, both financially and via public pressure.

Emily Are there any specific examples we can go into? Individual stories can help us understand the significance of this work.

David There are several examples, but one that stands out to me involved a woman named Hester Jane Carr that is outlined in the group's First Annual Report.. She was employed in New York by Nancy Haws as a "waiting-maid." Hester accompanied Nancy on a trip bound for Georgia, but when they arrived in Virginia, Nancy sold Hester into slavery. Upon hearing of this, the New York Committee of Vigilance got involved. They found several witnesses to testify on her behalf. Unfortunately, this case was happening in Virginia, so "the evidence of a free colored person cannot be received in the courts of Virginia where a white person is concerned." There were no white people in Virginia able or willing to testify in Hester's defense and thus she was enslaved for the rest of her life.

Emily This is what was at stake. The New York Committee of Vigilance was fighting for

the very freedom of these individuals and they had to fight explicitly discriminatory laws.

David That is precisely why this work was so important but also so difficult. The difficulty could only be surmounted by a group effort and then only occasionally. While at the same time, this work was crucial. The Black community rallied around their own for these cases. It was due to this community that several accused individuals escaped a life of enslavement. The secretary of the New York Committee of Vigilance, David Ruggles, reported in August of 1837, that the group had resolved 19 cases that month alone. Yet there were still 5 cases unresolved and that deeply bothered him, particularly because these cases remained unresolved due to lack of appropriate funding.

Emily That is understandable. No wonder Robert Bowne Parsons was asked to help raise funds for this essential work. Thank you again, David. To learn more, please visit our website www.bownehouse.org. There you can read more under our “BH From Home” tab; or see the house for yourself by booking an appointment on our website. Thank you again for joining us.