

## Slavery and Civil Disobedience: Christiana Riot of 1851

Author: Patricia (Kate) de Barros, Magothy River Middle School, Anne Arundel County Public School System

Grade Level: Middle School

Duration of Lesson: One class period

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 made it legal for slaveholders to pursue escaped slaves into any state or territory in the union. This meant that runaway slaves now had to reach Canada to avoid the threat of recapture. Immediately this law sparked outrage among abolitionists who viewed the law as further protection of the immoral institution of slavery. They vowed to engage in a form of civil disobedience; knowingly breaking the law that they felt was unjust.

One of the first tests of the act came in September of 1851 in Christiana, Pennsylvania when a slave owner arrived with a group of men to retrieve six of his escaped slaves. A local vigilance group was protecting the six, who were being safeguarded in an area home. A heated exchange between the two sides resulted in a violent riot. One account says that as many as 50 blacks came from the surrounding areas to aid the vigilance group. The slave owner asked some local white men to help him capture his slaves per the Fugitive Slave Act and they refused. The slave owner was killed in the struggle. Five white men and 38 black men were arrested for treason.

The first trial lasted three weeks and returned with a verdict of “not guilty.” By the end of 1851, all charges against every defendant were dropped. This was a tremendous victory for abolitionist groups who saw it as vindication of their stance that it was morally acceptable to ignore the law. In this lesson, students will examine primary and secondary sources detailing differing accounts of the incident in Christiana. They will summarize the conflicting views and analyze the validity of their sources. At the completion of the lesson students will form a written response as to whether they think non-compliance with slave laws was acceptable or not.

### **Content Standards:**

#### **Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)**

**Standard 1:** The causes of the Civil War

### **Historical Thinking Standards:**

#### **Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation**

**C.** Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas.

**G.** Challenge arguments of historical inevitability.

- Students will conduct historical inquiry by analyzing primary sources, reading oral histories and actively researching resistance to slavery in the mid-nineteenth century.

- Students will apply that information to role-playing a part in a fugitive slave trial set in Pennsylvania in 1851.

In 1851, almost a decade before the start of the Civil War, resistance movements against slavery were well organized and supported by abolitionist groups comprised of black and white members. Pennsylvania occupied a strategic geographic location in the fight for freedom by enslaved persons. Maryland, a slave state bordered on Pennsylvania, a free state. The famous Mason-Dixon Line was drawn on their shared border as a delineation of north (freedom) and south (slavery.) In Christiana, Pennsylvania, in September of 1851, a violent confrontation between fugitive slaves and a slaveholder from Maryland resulted in the death of the slaveholder. Three whites and thirty-eight blacks were put on trial for treason against the United States. This lesson plan will allow students to research various roles in this drama and conduct their own hypothetical trial addressing the question of whether civil disobedience is acceptable if the law is considered immoral.

The background history of the laws of the time helps clarify the range of views about slavery in the time period leading up to the Civil War. The United States Constitution, ratified in 1788, said that just by escaping from a slave state into a free state does not make the slave free: “No person held to Service of Labour in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequences of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labour, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labour may be due.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Constitution - Article IV, Section 2 – <http://www.archives.gov/>

In 1793, The Federal Fugitive Slave Act was passed that required slaves to be returned to their owners.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this law, in 1780, the Pennsylvania Assembly passed the “Act for Gradual Abolition of Slavery” which stated that any negro or mulatto born to a slave mother in Pennsylvania after 1780 would be considered a servant until the age of twenty-eight and then set free.<sup>3</sup> The religious climate of Pennsylvania was also unique in that there was a strong Quaker influence which could be felt in the persuasive powers of the Abolitionist groups operating in the Philadelphia and in the Pennsylvania countryside. Even though some Quakers held slaves especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Quakers eventually decided that slavery was against God's law and violated basic human rights. This religious influence led to the development of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and vigilance committees to aid runaway slaves. The Underground Railroad system of safe houses and prescribed signals and routes for runaway slaves to freedom was supported by free blacks and many whites (especially Quakers.) Men and women, black and white, were joined in their efforts to aid runaway slaves in their flight north and practice civil disobedience to laws they felt were immoral.<sup>4</sup> The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society asked William Still to “compile and publish his personal reminiscences and the experiences of others on the Underground Rail Road.”<sup>5</sup> Still felt that these slave accounts of their determination and need of slaves to have freedom, thereby making a mockery of the southern pro-slavery view that slaves were docile and child-like and needed a master to rule them. Still also saw the need for the slave narratives to help reunite families separated by the slave sales.<sup>6</sup>

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2. Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, Article 4 – [www.law.ou.edu/hist/fugitive.html](http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/fugitive.html)

3. William Still, *The Underground Railroad*, (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), 623-641 – Thomas Garrett

4. *Ibid.*, 1 (Preface)

5. *Ibid.*, 1 (Preface)

6. *Ibid.*, 4

Into this abolitionist environment, came two escaped slaves, William and Charles Parker, from a Davidsonville plantation called Roedown, in Anne Arundel County in Maryland. They reached Pennsylvania in 1839 and settled in the Lancaster County region, eventually renting a house in Christiana, Pennsylvania from a Quaker family. Parker formed a vigilance group of ex-slaves, Quaker neighbors and free blacks determined to protect people of color in the area from slave-catchers.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 created a more encouraging and legal environment for the slave-catching of fugitive slaves. It enlarged the powers of the slaveholders in that they were permitted, by federal law, to pursue, take and remove their “fugitives from labor” (escaped slaves) from any state or territory in the nation.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in Section 7 of the Act, there were legal consequences of fines and imprisonment for persons who assisted fugitives or hindered the apprehension of the fugitive. After this law was passed, federal marshals and slaveholders could pursue fugitive slaves into any state in the United States. Escaped slaves would need to reach Canada to remove the threat of recapture.

This Slave Act prompted many persons (especially Abolitionists) to act against a law they felt was wrong. A type of civil disobedience was being talked about and acted upon, in the north, around the concept that if the law is protecting an institution (slavery) that is considered immoral, is it acceptable to break that law? In his writings on civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau in 1849 stated, “...prison may be the only house in a slave state in which a free man can abide with honor.”<sup>8</sup> This law further divided the country along sectional lines and became a serious problem in a land that is ruled by law.

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7. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2951.html>

8. Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”, paragraph 22

On September 11, 1851, Edward Gorsuch, his son Dickinson, other relatives and friends along with a professional slave-catcher, Henry Kline, who had been recently deputized as a United States Marshall in accordance with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, went into Christiana, Pennsylvania, looking for six escaped slaves they had been told were living in the house of William Parker. These slaves were owned by the Gorsuch family and had escaped from Maryland: Noah Bailey, Nelson Ford, George Hammond, Joshua Hammond, Eli Ford and Charles Ford. There are many conflicting versions of what happened next. Based on William Parker's narrative, written in 1866, William Still's second-hand narrative written in 1872, the Baltimore Sun's version in two articles written at the time, and W.U. Hensel's book, written in 1911, the important participants are the same.<sup>9</sup>

The order of events and spoken dialogue varied with the perspective of the writer. Parker stated that some of Gorsuch's escaped slaves were either staying with him or were in the area. They were all protected by the vigilance group formed to prevent slave-catchers from effectively operating in the area. During the confrontation, Parker stated there was much discussion between Edward Gorsuch and himself (even repeating actual dialogue) but all versions state that Gorsuch repeatedly said that he wouldn't leave without his property and he threatened to burn down the house.

Most versions stated that the Gorsuch party fired first – at Parker's wife when she blew the horn summoning help from the surrounding countryside. After that, depending on the version, there were as many as fifty blacks who ran into the area to help. All versions of the riot

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[http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Thoreau/Civil Disobedience.html](http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Thoreau/Civil%20Disobedience.html)

9. William Parker, "The Freedman's Story in Two Parts", *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. XVII, February 1866, 152-66 *Ibid.*, Vol. XVIII, March 1866, 276-95; Still, *Underground Railroad*, 349-357; "The Pennsylvania Outrage", *The Baltimore Sun*, 14, September 1851; "The Lancaster Riots and Murder", *The Baltimore Sun*, 12 September, 1851; W.U. Hensel, *The Christiana Riot and The Treason Trials of 1851* (Lancaster: The New Era Printing Co.,1911) 30-39

follow with a confusion of gunshots and hand-to hand fighting. William Still and W.U. Hensel's version state almost the same exact wording from Kline ordering the two white Quakers (Lewis, Scarlet) and Hanway to help him capture the fugitive slaves as per the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. The Quakers and Hanway refused to assist the slave-catchers but all versions state that they did not incite or lead the riot.

The trial began in November of 1851. The defense team was lead by Thaddeus Stevens, successful lawyer, abolitionist and member of the House of Representatives for the state of Pennsylvania. The first participant to be tried was Castner Hanway, a white neighbor who came upon the scene of the riot. Hanway was charged with treason against the United States for refusing to aid U.S. Marshall Kline in the apprehension of the runaway slaves. This incident at Christiana was seen as one of the first tests of the new Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which required citizens to help with the capture of runaway slaves. As this was a federal law, to go against it was seen as an act of treason against the United States. The jury trial lasted about three weeks and the jury deliberated for fifteen minutes to render a verdict of "Not Guilty."<sup>10</sup> By the end of the year, 1851, all charges were dropped against the 38 black men and 3 white men.

In general, the verdict of not guilty of treason for Castner Hanway and the subsequent dropping of all charges for the remaining defendants enraged the South. It sent a definite and clear signal to the South that the Fugitive Slave Law, a part of the Compromise of 1850, which came about as an effort on the part of the government to compromise with the South and preserve the Union, would not be followed by many northerners. They were concerned that this resistance might not be an isolated incident but the beginning of a move toward civil disobedience in the north. The abolitionists used this black resistance at Christiana to

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10. W.U. Hensel, *The Christiana Riot and The Treason Trials of 1851* (Lancaster: The New Era Printing Co.,1911) 90

demonstrate that slavery was not a normal and beneficial condition for any human and that since the Fugitive Slave Law denied human rights, it was morally acceptable to ignore it.

When Parker fled to Canada, he was helped by Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York. In his 1893 autobiography, Life & Times of Frederick Douglass, Douglass discusses the effects of the Christiana Resistance on the Fugitive Slave Law, “This affair, at Christiana, ... inflicted fatal wounds on the fugitive slave bill. ...not only did it fail to put them in possession of their slaves, but that the attempt to enforce it brought odium upon themselves and weakened the slave system.”<sup>11</sup>

Parker never stood trial as he escaped to Canada. He settled in a black community in Buxton, Canada, and made a life for himself and his family. His eyewitness account in the “Freedman’s Story, Parts 1 and 2”, found in the Boston magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly* depicts his struggle to defeat a system which had stripped him of his freedom and his chance at leading a dignified and free life in the United States. It was written fifteen years after the incident at Christiana, but whether all the dialogue is as accurate as he remembers it, what comes through very clearly, is his desire and need to determine the destiny of his own life. As Frederick Douglass said, “Life and Liberty are the most sacred of all man’s rights.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Bibliography:**

Parker, William, “The Freedman’s Story in Two Parts,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. XVII, February 1866 p. 152-66 and Vol. XVIII, March 1866 p. 276-95.

Still, William, The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, & C., (Narrating the Hardships Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their efforts for Freedom, as related by themselves and others, or witnessed by the Author), (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872.)

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11. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Douglass - Autobiographies* (New York: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1893) 726

12. Frederick Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1975),180

Born in Slavery: “Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project 1936-1938”, Library of Congress website <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>

Douglass, Frederick, Life and Times, in Douglass - Autobiographies (New York: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1893).

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Katz, Jonathan, Resistance at Christiana: The Fugitive Slave Rebellion, Christiana, Pennsylvania, September 11, 1851, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1974) p. 84-103

**Abolitionist:** person who seeks to ban slavery

**Immoral:** based on what your conscience suggests is wrong: varies with your set of moral beliefs

**Civil Disobedience:** the deliberate act of breaking a law you feel is immoral

**Non-compliance:** not following the rule or law

### Motivation

1. Open the lesson by reading Underground Railroad biographies to engage the students by tapping into the emotional stories of slavery, motivating the students to want to understand the need for freedom and stories behind the brave escapes (RS #1, #2).
2. Introduce students to this lesson about the Christiana Riot of 1851 by giving them a quick overview of the facts of the riot and the resulting trial. Pose the following focus question:

Is non-compliance of slave laws acceptable if slavery is considered immoral?

Lead a class discussion to students’ responses and introduce the vocabulary words that students will come across in the lesson.

### Procedures

3. Distribute a picture of the Christiana Riot of 1851 reproduced in William Still’s version of the riot (RS #3). Instruct students that they will use the Maryland Historical Society’s “How to Interpret a Picture” worksheet to analyze the picture (RS #4).



4. Assuming the role of critical historians, divide students into cooperative groups. Each group will use the APPARTS worksheet (RS #5) to analyze a document packet of five different versions of the riot from primary and secondary sources (RS #6-10). Give each student a copy of the APPARTS worksheet and document packet.
5. Using the jigsaw cooperative group approach, each group will “teach” their findings to the rest of the class.
6. Hand out to each student worksheet (RS #11). It will be used to summarize the differing views of the riot and promote class discussion concerning the historical validity of each source, varying perspectives and other reactions to the primary and secondary sources.
7. Ask students the following questions:
  - What if you were the judge of the trial that November? Would you be able to reach a clear verdict of the guilt or innocence of the participants of the riot? Why or why not?
  - Why were they on trial for treason and not murder?
  - How similar are the versions and what are the glaring differences?

### Closure

8. BCR Activity- Ask students to answer the original focus question, “Is non-compliance of slave laws acceptable if slavery is considered immoral?”

### **Biography of Leonard Black. *Beneath the Underground: The Flight to Freedom, Maryland State Archives*, Retrieved from**

<http://www.msa.md.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/008700/008776/html/008776bio.html> or

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/black/black.html>

The biography of Leonard Black, published in 1847, provides a narrative about the harsh reality and extreme conditions that existed for a young slave in Maryland. Leonard Black was a fugitive slave who co-authored his story which delves into many topics. Several topics include: how he was treated, his religious views, his family, being loaned and returned to various families, lack of food, lack of clothing, sparse living conditions, and the mental anguish that accompanies the fact that slavery existed. One sentence of Leonard’s reveals how Sunday was the best day to runaway since escape could be made from church. Teachers may want to select portions of the text or assign specific paragraphs as some of the language will offend students who are not prepared for such language, although specific words are rarely used. Students should be forewarned that this biography contains explicit descriptions of abuses Leonard faced at the hands of his owners. Upon reading about Leonard Black, students will have a first-hand account of what daily life was like for a slave in Maryland and why running away was an option that some people chose despite the possible consequences.

**Biography of James Watkins. *Beneath the Underground: The Flight to Freedom, Maryland State Archives*, Retrieved from**

<http://www.msa.md.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/008700/008792/html/008792bio.html> or

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/watkins/menu.html>

This biography of James Watkins, published in 1860, provides a narrative about the harsh reality and extreme conditions that existed for a slave in Maryland. James Watkins was a fugitive slave who writes about the how his clothes were rags, scarcity of food, the types of farm and house jobs he performed, interpretation and uses of Fugitive Slave laws, contradictions that exist between Christians and slave holders, fear of being sold, slave “prisons” on Pratt Street, 1840 cholera epidemic in Maryland, the first attempt to escape, the second and successful escape to the North (Connecticut), and he includes various media sources that describe stories or accounts of other slaves. Students interacting with James’s story will find an amazing human who is able to hold onto hope and rise above the confines of slavery despite the multitude of atrocities he encountered. Students would find James’s description of how his mother responds to his plans for escape poignant and very telling about the mental anguish one would go through in deciding to take flight from slavery.

**Engraving of the Christiana Riots (adapted from engravings found in William Still's UNDERGROUND RAILROAD (1872). From *Christiana to Harper’s Ferry, Engage the World, Dickinson College*, Retrieved from**

<http://www.dickinson.edu/departments/hist/NEHworkshops/readmore.htm>

This engraving depicts the 1851 riot that took place in Christiana, Pennsylvania. Fugitive slaves and supporters took a stand. The “Christiana Riot” as it was then called, resulted in the death of a Maryland slaveholder, severely tested the new federal Fugitive Slave Law, and set the scene for the impending Civil War. This riot exemplified the confrontations that took place between fugitive slaves, slaveholders, and federal marshals along the Mason-Dixon line. Through analysis and discussion of the engraving, students will interpret the social and racial circumstances surrounding this event.

\*Students could participate in a study of the Christiana Riots by analyzing and interpreting some of the many primary sources available from the public library holdings-

<http://www.lancasterhistory.org/highlights/christiana/christianafindaid.htm#docs>

**Transcription of the Inquisition on the death of Edward Gorsuch (1851). From *Columbia to Christiana: African Americans in Lancaster County, Lancaster County Historical Society*, Retrieved from**

[http://www.lancasterhistory.org/education/afam/resources/court\\_inquisition.html](http://www.lancasterhistory.org/education/afam/resources/court_inquisition.html)

This document outlines the findings of the inquisition related to the death of Edward Gorsuch after the Christiana Riots. This event took place one year after the second Fugitive Slave Law was passed by Congress. The findings conclude the circumstances by which Mr. Gorsuch was found dead and the fact that he initiated the confrontation that resulted in his death in the early morning hours of September 11, 1851. Upon reading this document, students will determine the time, location, persons involved, and outcomes related to the Christiana Riot. Students could entertain a discussion about how the Fugitive Slave laws allowed this slaveholder, Mr. Gorsuch, to cross state lines and determine who is accountable for the events that morning.

**Biography of Edward Gorsuch. *Beneath the Underground: The Flight to Freedom, Maryland State Archives*, Retrieved from**

<http://www.msa.md.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/007000/007018/html/007018bio.html>

This biography succinctly describes the events that took place at Christiana on September 11, 1851. Baltimore slave owner, Edward Gorsuch, the physical descriptions of his 6 runaway slaves, and why the events transpired that day are explained. He obtained the slaves upon his uncle's death in 1845. Mr. Gorsuch petitioned Congress regarding an 1850 Act entitled *An Act Respecting Fugitives from Justice* as he sought to use the law to secure the return of his slaves. A farm worker in Pennsylvania wrote to Gorsuch and told him that his slaves were hiding under the protection of a black abolitionist, William Parker. This biography provides an account of what happened when Gorsuch and his party reached the home of Parker and what happened as a result of their clash. This account is direct and to the point and may be a good alternative (for below-level readers) to the following account that describes the same event.

**Christiana Resistance Articles, September 23, 1851. From *Columbia to Christiana: African Americans in Lancaster County, Lancaster County Historical Society*, Retrieved from**

<http://www.lancasterhistory.org/highlights/afamelectronic/christianasept231851.htm>

The following is a transcript of an article written regarding the events in Christiana on September 12, 1851. This article was found in the *Lancaster Intelligencer and Journal* on September 23, 1851. It was originally published in the *Baltimore Sun*. The article provides an account of the events surrounding the Christiana Riots. This detailed account outlines those involved in the events and what was communicated between both parties. Students will use this perspective to take into account the timeline of events that fateful day. Students will determine whether the account appears to be accurate and valid as they consider the author's purpose and date of writing this article.

**Christiana Resistance Articles, September 12, 1851. From *Columbia to Christiana: African Americans in Lancaster County, Lancaster County Historical Society*, Retrieved from**

<http://www.lancasterhistory.org/highlights/afamelectronic/christianasept161851.htm>

The following is a transcript of an article written regarding the events in Christiana on September 12, 1851. This article was found in the *Lancaster Intelligencer and Journal* on September 16, 1851. This article describes the events that transpired at Christiana on April 12, 1851, as well as personal anecdotes about the slow reaction by Pennsylvania's Governor Johnston in response to this event, as well as an excerpt of one deposition. The author's tone in this account differs in the above account. Students could compare both accounts to find similar or refuting perspectives.

**William Stills, The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, & C., (Narrating the Hardships Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their efforts for Freedom, as related by themselves and others, or witnessed by the Author), (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872.) Library of Congress, Retrieved from**

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=ody\\_rbcmisc&fileName=ody/ody0211/ody0211page.db&recNum=365&itemLink=r%3Fammem%2FAMALL%3A%40field%28DOCID%2B%40lit%28ody0211%29%29&linkText=0](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=ody_rbcmisc&fileName=ody/ody0211/ody0211page.db&recNum=365&itemLink=r%3Fammem%2FAMALL%3A%40field%28DOCID%2B%40lit%28ody0211%29%29&linkText=0)

This book offers eyewitness narratives of fugitive slaves and the Christiana Riot. It is useful because it asserts to "illustrate the affect of the passage (of the Fugitive Slave Law) on the public mind." It provides a description of those impacted by the Fugitive Slave Law. The first detailed account is that of the Christiana Riots. Two accounts are provided and allow for different points-of-view. Students can interrogate these accounts and look for similar facts they received from other sources. New information presented in these accounts provides students with the ability to further interrogate the data and determine the facts. This source will take students beyond the events of September 12 and allow them additional information to consider as they reflect upon the historical importance and relevance of this event.