

Two Versions of the Famous Jerry Rescue

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The Fugitive Slave
by John Adam
Plimmer Houston,
oil on canvas, 33.1
x 60 inches, 1853,
Johnson Collection,
Spartanburg, South
Carolina
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JERRY RESCUE

October 4, 1899:—

The “Jerry Rescue” started, about 1851, in Syracuse, when a group of citizens freed the fugitive slave from the custody of United States marshalls. The arrest of Jerry was a test case to see if the Fugitive Slave Law could be enforced in this state.

The federal government brought its whole power to bear in trying to catch Jerry, and every road out of Syracuse and all shipping points to Canada were patrolled and watched.

After an exciting chase out of Syracuse north, the wagon bearing Jerry lost its pursuers and finally arrived in Mexico. The story as told in the early Independent follows:

“Following the route of the ‘underground railroad’ Jerry was taken as far as Mexico the first night and left at the home of Orson Ames. He remained there a week; then Star Clark, Orson Ames and Solomon Peck took him to Mexico Point. It was some time before passage to Canada could be secured, as all the vessels were closely watched, but finally a British lumber skipper was induced to take Jerry on board one dark night, from a deserted part of the shore and carry him to Kingston. Here Jerry was sent to the home of Joseph George, a friend of the oppressed.”

The Real Story

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Mexico Independent
December 28, 1961
page 42, Mexico, NY

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Civil War times. This letter tells of some interesting facts concerning the famous "Jerry Rescue." He was a slave who escaped through the Underground Railroad and was kept hidden in a local barn for about two weeks. The letter was written in 1899.

Mr. Humphries: I have just read with much interest the article in the Independent entitled "The Jerry Rescue," and as I happened to know something of the affair I will, with your permission, give my version of it. As is stated in the article, Jerry was left at the home of Orson Ames, who then lived opposite the Academy (house now occupied by B. Olin Backus and family). Mr. Ames, being afraid that he could not safely secrete Jerry at his place took him to Deacon Asa Beebe's who then lived near where the Earl butter dish factory stands (near where Mrs. Robert Kidd lives, next to Little Salmon River). They secreted him in the barn where he was kept for about two weeks.

In the meantime, Mr. Ames, having a brother in Oswego, corresponded with him, and his brother made arrangements with the captain of a boat to take the "goods" to Canada. When the arrangements were completed, Mr. Ames notified Winsor Beebe, the son of the deacon, and he hitched up his team very early in the morning to go to Oswego for a load of wheat (they owned the mill

now called Railroad Mills) and having secreted Jerry in the high box among the bags and the blankets, he started for the city, and he must have made good time, for he arrived there before daylight and delivered Jerry to the "agent," who immediately smuggled him on board the boat that was waiting. Afterwards we heard that he was safely delivered in the "land of the free."

I neglected to state that while in the barn, good mother Beebe provided the rations for Jerry, which (to avoid suspicion) Winsor carried to him in a bushel basket when he went to care for his team.

There were other fugitives who were aided in a similar manner over the Mexico branch of the "Underground R.R." and one of them might have been secreted at Mexico Point, but I am positive that Jerry was not removed from Deacon Beebe's barn until he was taken to Oswego.

I know this, because being an abolitionist, and also a son-in-law of the deacon, I had opportunities to learn some of the secrets of the "order." It was my privilege to have an interview with Jerry, and I saw the white strips on his back which were made by the whip of the cruel slave driver.

Edmund Wheeler
Chicago, Ill., Oct. 12, 1899

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Questions from the reading:

1. What does it mean that Jerry was “a test case to see if the Fugitive Slave Law” could be enforced in this state?
2. When did Mr. Humphries write his account of the Jerry Rescue?
3. What was known as the “land of the free?”
4. What types of things did people do to keep Jerry’s presence a secret?
5. What did Edmund Wheeler claim in order to validate his account of the Jerry Rescue?

Questions for further research and discussion:

1. Who are the people mentioned in the article that hid Jerry; what was their relationship to each other?
2. Research: Who was Henry Humphries? What do we know about him?
3. Research: Who was Edward Wheeler? What do we know about him?
4. What can you find out about the deacon, and his son Winsor Beebe?
5. Create a map that contains all the locations Jerry hid in prior to reaching Canada.

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A Ride for Liberty -- The Fugitive Slaves, Eastman Johnson (1824-1906), painted between 1860 and 1864, oil on paperboard, 22x26.1 in.; This image is in the public domain.