

The Recapture of Harrison **Williams** in relationship to Lewis **Clark(e)** and as reported by Harriet Plumb **Hunter**, Frederick **Douglass**, and Horace **Greeley**.
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2015

The story of the recapture of Harrison **Williams** in Busti (Chautauqua County) NY was repeated in many newspapers of the time. For example, the letter of 3 October, 1851 to Rev. Robert **Hunter** (1820 – 1872) of Charlestown OH from his wife Harriet Elizabeth **Plumb Hunter** (1823 – 1910), who was visiting her father Theron **Plumb** (1783 - 1864) near the place of the recapture, was reprinted at least in part, and at least twice. At some time, the **Hunter** letter evidently appeared in the *Ohio Star* of Ravenna OH, and on 6 November 1851, it evidently appeared as follows in the *Frederick Douglass Paper*:

“Interesting Letter – The Fugitive Slave Harrison.

“It will be remembered that Harrison , a fugitive slave, was seized a short time since at Busti, in the region of Buffalo, hurried before Commissioner H. K. **Smith** and by that functionary very summarily sent back to slavery.

“The accomplished wife of Rev. Mr. **Hunter**, of Charleston [Charlestown OH], was in Busti, at the time, on a visit to her parents, and wrote to her husband a thrilling detail of the outrage, committed in the name of the law. We have been kindly permitted to make extracts from her letter, which we know will be perused with painful interest, by all our readers. It will be seen, that when the letter was written, the writer had not learned the action of Commissioner **Smith**.—
Ohio Star.

“Busti, Oct. 3d, 1851

“Last February there were seven colored boys from the more northern part of Virginia, came into town on their way to Canada. The people thought they had better stop here and go to work, and so they all soon hired out within a few miles of my father’s. Among the seven there were two that left wives, and they felt sure that they could go back and get them, that they left here in August for that purpose. In the attempt, one was taken, and he was forced to reveal the residence of the rest, and immediately two slaveholders, with three men from Virginia, for witnesses, came to Mr. **Smith** of Buffalo, and got a warrant for the five remaining boys, and two others that had been in Jamestown five or six years.

“There were twelve men in three carriages and not to excite suspicion, part of them wore bonnets and shawls and veils and appeared like a company of gentlemen and lady travelers. They first went to Mr. Levi **Jones**; where some lived and searched the house and barn; but he was away, and they did not find him. This was about sunrise in the morning. They then drove very fast to Mr. **Storum**’s, where Harrison, the fugitive, and Mr. **Storum** were in the yard milking the cows. Lewis and Milton **Clark** were in the house.

“One carriage drove up to the door—a man got out and inquired if Lewis **Clark** was in. Mr. **Clark** answered that he was in the vicinity. ‘Well, sir, are you the man?’ ‘He is in the vicinity, sir,’ said Mr. **Clark**, and shut the door and buttoned it, but the slaveholder on the outside, pushed it so hard that the button burst off. Mr. **Clark** went round fastening the doors and then went to his room to load his pistols, and then thought perhaps, he had better go down and help keep the ruffians out, for by this time bonnets and shawls were off, and the men were mostly out of the carriage.

“While this was going on at the house, five men went to the milk yard. Two took hold of Mr. **Storum**, and three laid hold of Harrison, and dragged him through the mud to the road, and

there two men were standing with chains, which they put on, and thrust him in the carriage and drove off very fast. As soon as Lewis and Milton saw what was going on in the milk yard, they started to the rescue, but it was too late and Lewis jumped on to a horse in hot pursuit crying, crying [*sic*] ‘stop the kidnappers, stop the kidnappers,’ and when they got to Jamestown there were thirty men , armed , after them.

“But they drove through very fast. Mr. **Clarke** and **Bacchus** went to Esq. **Hazeltine** for a writ of Habeas Corpus. Mr. H. said he would give a writ, but it would do no good, for if the slave holders should prove property the Judge could only deliver him as property, and all the good it would do would be to detain them for a few minutes. Mr. **Bacchus** said, ‘give us the writ, and while the Judge is examining the papers, we will take care of the rest.’ Mr. **Hazeltine** said, ‘if this is what you want, to get up a mob, *get out of my office. I don’t know who you are, nor what you want, but out of here. I won’t have anything to do with it.*’

“So they got no writ. They then telegraphed to Buffalo to have the friends there rescue the boy, and Mr. **Sherman** followed on but they cannot learn that they ever took the boy before a commissioner. The probability is that he was put on board the cars at Dunkirk, for New York. The slaveholders left word, that as soon as they got Harrison in safekeeping; they were coming back after the rest. But they are now in safety.

“Last night there was a large meeting of the people of the vicinity, where they pledged themselves to be ready, at the signal of a cannon, to go well-armed in pursuit of any kidnappers that should come into town looking for slaves. There is some move being made to purchase the boy Harrison, but whether he can be had, they do not know. Lewis **Clarke** says he will give one hundred dollars. Lewis will no doubt be sent for soon, but he cannot be taken without bloodshed. He goes armed with two revolvers, a bowie knife and a lead mallet.

“He made an appeal to the people of this town last night, which was very eloquent. He said he had thought much of what he should do, whether he should go to Canada or buy himself. Sometimes he felt degraded to live under and support a government that afforded him no protection. But he looked at it in another light. He was bound here with the strongest ties that could bind a man to a community. He had married him a wife and buried her here. He had tried to be a faithful citizen. He was not willing to leave, if any other way could be devised.

“This community feels that slavery has something to do with them, and at least they are awake. Some feel that it would be a blessing to have the Union dissolved. Others think the time has fully come, when every man should demand the freedom of the slave at the point of the bayonet. But I cannot enlarge. The slave holders have left their abettors, as spies, all over town, so that if any of the fugitives should be seen, they may know it immediately and come back and *grab again*. But they are all gone except Lewis **Clarke**, and he will be on the lookout, and ever ready for them, and every person in the vicinity will do all they can to save him.

“We had a most thrilling appeal from Milton **Clarke**, who lives in Boston, but came here on a visit, and is with us. I shall have occasion to refer to this again when I see you.”

For the *Frederick Douglass Paper*, Harriet’s letter served as clarification and amplification to the following, which had evidently appeared on 9 October 1851 in the *Frederick Douglass Paper*:

“Another Fugitive Case in Buffalo.

A colored man named Harrison was arrested in Busti, Chautauque county, and brought before Commissioner H. K. **Smith** of Buffalo, on Wednesday. James M. **Smith** appeared for the claimant, and H. S. **Lone**, B. F. **Green** and S.C. **Hawley**, for the party arrested.

“The *Express* of yesterday morning says: ‘The hearing was brief enough, and the process sufficiently summary, we presume, to satisfy, if anything can satisfy the South, that the Northern people are utterly abject and submissive to the Compromise. The time allotted would not permit us to give a detailed statement of the proceedings and points of the case. It resulted in the man or boy Harrison being sent into slavery by the certificate of the Commissioner. The proof was of a character so slight that we venture to say, that when it is published nine out of every ten sane men will be utterly astonished at the result. Upon such a proof no man could recover in civil suit the value of a pig. Tomorrow we will give the proofs and points at length. - *Democrat*.’”

Furthermore, on 23 October 1851, the following evidently appeared in the *Frederick Douglass Paper*, reprinted from *The Northern Citizen*, a liberty paper of Jamestown (Chautauqua County) NY:

“The Late Kidnapping Case.

“As we were putting our paper to the press last week, we were astounded by the information that a case of kidnapping had just occurred, and we gave a hasty account of the circumstance. We have since learned that the kidnapers made haste with their victim to Buffalo, where Commissioner **Smith** was ready to furnish all the "orders," which the abominable fugitive slave law requires. The young man was ironed, imprisoned, and as soon as his captors were ready, hurried off to slavery, notwithstanding his asseverations that ‘he would rather die, than go back into slavery.’”

“Is it possible that such things can take place in our boasted land of freedom? Can it be that we live in a civilized and Christian land, when such atrocities can be perpetrated under the cover of pretended law? We see such to be the fact, and we involuntarily stop and ask ourselves, can it be possible that any law, enacted in the 19th century can sanction such enormities? Ah, yes! such is the fact - and we are surrounded by some - we will not say many - who sanction such proceedings by silence, if not by aid and assistance.

“The young man Harrison might have been legally saved from the doom worse than death, if some of our own citizens had done their duty. The gang of banditti, who seized and carried him off, arrived here in the night, and made a halt. They made known their object, and were aided, we grieve to say it, by some of our own citizens. Had those citizens done their duty, as common humanity would have dictated, they would have made it known that this gang of kidnapers were in the neighborhood, and a writ of *habeas corpus* might have been prepared, and been ready for use on their return. Judge **Marvin** was in our village at the time, and undoubtedly would have granted a writ on application.

“But no such information was given, and the kidnapers were out of reach, before it was known here what was going on. Had such a writ been served, there is hardly a doubt but that the young man would have been saved. - *Northern Citizen*.”

Also on 23 October 1851, the *Frederick Douglass Paper* evidently printed the following, which is probably from John Warren **Fletcher** (*born 1819*), an editor of the *Jamestown Journal*:

“Jamestown NY Sept. 30, 1851.

"**H. Greeley**: Dear Sir: - Our village was thrown into a great excitement this morning, by the appearance of three carriages, containing Deputy Marshal **Gates** of Buffalo, with a *posse* of eight or ten men, and a fugitive slave by the name of Harris, under arrest. They were followed by some half-dozen men with rifles, shouting 'Man-Stealers!' 'Kidnappers!' &c. **Gates** passed through town, without being molested however.

"Harris was arrested in Busti, about daylight, while milking. It is said that he made his escape from Virginia before the Fugitive Slave Law was passed. The town of Busti is the stronghold of Abolition, and is pretty thoroughly stirred up.

"Yours, in haste, J.W.F."

The **Fletcher** letter to **Greeley** appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune* on 4 October 1851 under the headline, "Slave-Catching in Chautauqua County." It served to amplify the following stories, which had all appeared in the *Tribune* on 2 October 1851:

"The Topics of the Morning.

"The kidnapping sharp practice, or man-catching under the Fugitive Slave Law, is becoming more and more general throughout every part of the country. Two cases are reported to-day in our telegraph dispatches, one at Syracuse and the other at Buffalo, in our State. Both caused great excitement, and in the Syracuse affair it rose to actual resistance. The slave was rescued, and the man who apprehended him placed under arrest and examination. He was, however, recaptured and brought back, guarded by a large military escort—in fact an army of occupation.

"The Buffalo fugitive was hand-cuffed – it would be more convenient to have him hamstringed—and was followed by an indignant crowd of colored people."

"Another Slave Kidnapper—Great Excitement among the Colored Population.

"Buffalo, Wednesday, Oct. 1, 1851.

"Deputy Marshal George B. **Gates**, of the Northern District, arrested yesterday, at a negro hut, near Jamestown, in Chautauque County, an alleged fugitive slave, named Harrison, and brought him to this city this morning, via Dunkirk, under a strong guard and handcuffed, to Constable **Harrison** and **Best**, so as to make a rescue more difficult. The colored population were a good deal excited, and followed the officers with their victim in great crowds from the boat to the jail, where he now is.

"He will be examined this afternoon, at 2 o'clock, at the Court House. The claimant's name is Dr. **Parron**, of Hardy Co., Va. Harrison left there with seven other fugitives in January last, two of the party returned about six weeks ago for their wives and were arrested, and then exposed the whereabouts of their companions. This resulted in Harrison's arrest. The officers had warrants for three other fugitives who were in Jamestown but they escaped into Canada. Messrs. **Talcott** and **Love** will appear for the fugitive, and **Haven** and **Smith** for the claimant.

"Later.

"7 ½ O'clock P.M.

"After a brief hearing in the case of Harrison, Commissioner **Smith** decided that the boy was a fugitive slave, and that he would make out an order for his return, after which he was bound and taken to jail.

“The Court House was crowded with excited citizens, who made a show of resistance, but, after some slight skirmishing, within and without the Court room, Harrison however, was safely lodged in jail. To prevent the escape or rescue of the prisoner, he was handcuffed to a Buffalo constable named **Hambert**. The claimant of Harrison is Dr. **Parsons** of Hardy County, Virginia.

The negro is a mulatto, and about 19 years of age. When about being removed from the Court-room, he said, “I would rather die than return to slavery.

“Seth C. **Hawley** defended the prisoner, the principal objection that he raised was that the affidavit on which the warrant was issued did not state that Harrison escaped from Virginia or any other place, but simply that he escaped. This point was overruled. Neither of the other four fugitives for whom warrants are issued have been arrested.”

“Negro Hunting at Buffalo.—Commissioner H.K. **Smith** issued warrants for the arrest of five fugitive slaves, on Saturday last. The men got safe across to Canada the same morning.