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HALL, WILLIAM ANDERSON (born c. 1820), carpenter, fugitive from slavery, author

Name: William Anderson Hall
Date of birth: born c. 1820
Child: Rosetta
Parent: Hall
Gender: Male
Occupation: carpenter, fugitive from slavery, author
Area of activity: Activism; Literature and Writing
Author: Phil Okwedy

William Anderson Hall was an enslaved labourer in the USA who eventually gained his freedom and wrote an account of his life and escape which was published in Cardiff in 1862. Everything we know about him comes from that account.

Born in Bedford County, Tennessee, around 1820, William was the son of an enslaved African mother (not named in the text) and a father he described as an 'Englishman', a Dr Hall who was the son of his master. There were several families named Hall in Bedford County at this time, and Anderson was also a common surname in the area. However, William Anderson Hall may have been a name adopted after he gained his freedom (a common practice of fugitives), perhaps referencing John Anderson, another well-known fugitive from slavery, and William Hall from Nova Scotia, the first Black soldier to be awarded the Victoria Cross.

At the age of nine William's father took him away from his mother, 'without being allowed to bid her goodbye,' and within a year or two he was sold into chattel slavery and became a skilled carpenter. As an enslaved labourer, William was keenly aware of the injustice of his situation and grew increasingly defiant. As a result, he was sold, hired or loaned out to various owners of enslaved African people. Between 1836 and 1841 he was owned by B. G. White. During this time William married an enslaved girl (also not named in the text) and they had a least two children. Refused permission to visit his family who were hired out to a different owner, William went anyway, 'determined to stand the consequences.'

In 1842 William became a Christian, 'to the great joy and relief of my soul,' he later wrote. He was persuaded by a master named Jackson Flemming to join the Campbellite movement. For a brief period he lived in the hope that religion would bring salvation from chattel slavery. At a religious meeting where he was encouraged to speak freely, William, quoting scripture, asked if the poor man did not deserve to be treated the same as the rich. His question was not well received by the white men present and would eventually result in his owner selling William's wife away from him. This in turn led directly to his first serious attempt at self-liberation.

The attempt failed but returned to his owner, William was offered the prospect of his freedom rather than punishment. However, within a year, he would see his children hired away. This last injustice hardened his resolve to free himself.

From this point on, William's narrative alludes to the Underground Railroad - the network of routes and safe houses that aided enslaved people to escape the southern states. In hiding for three months, William received news of the death of his second daughter, Rosetta (the only member of his family named in the text). Shortly after this, his journey to self-liberation began in earnest.

Fleeing from enslavement, William was often helped by 'friends', a euphemism for the network of free African Americans and others who were sympathetic to those seeking to escape slavery and who made up the Underground Railroad. However, William's journey was far from straightforward. He was caught and imprisoned on at least two occasions, suffered beatings and betrayal and found that life in the free states of the North could be as precarious as in the South. It was only when William reached Canada that his 'old feelings of dread' left him.

In Canada he went into business, transporting wood back to the United States, until a storm wrecked the boat and he was cheated out of the salvage money. Destitute, he was persuaded to make for England. Working his passage on a ship to Liverpool, he could find no other employment so continued to earn his living as a sailor. After several voyages, he made landfall in London. Again finding no work, he travelled first to Bristol then finally to Cardiff, in the late 1850s or early 1860s. He described himself as 'thankful for a residence in this glorious land of liberty, freedom and religious privilege'.

Slavery in the United States of America: Personal Narrative of the Sufferings and Escape of William A. Hall fugitive slave, now a resident in the town of Cardiff was published by James Wood of Bute Street, Cardiff, in 1862 with financial support from local Wesleyan Methodists. Cardiff University's Salisbury Library holds what seems to be the only surviving copy. Hall's *Narrative* contributed to the Wesleyan anti-slavery campaign at a crucial time early in the American Civil War, and also represents a significant moment in Welsh history as it was the first autobiographical account of a self-emancipated Black man to be published in Wales.

Nothing is known about William Hall's life after the publication of his Narrative.

Author

Phil Okwedy

Sources

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