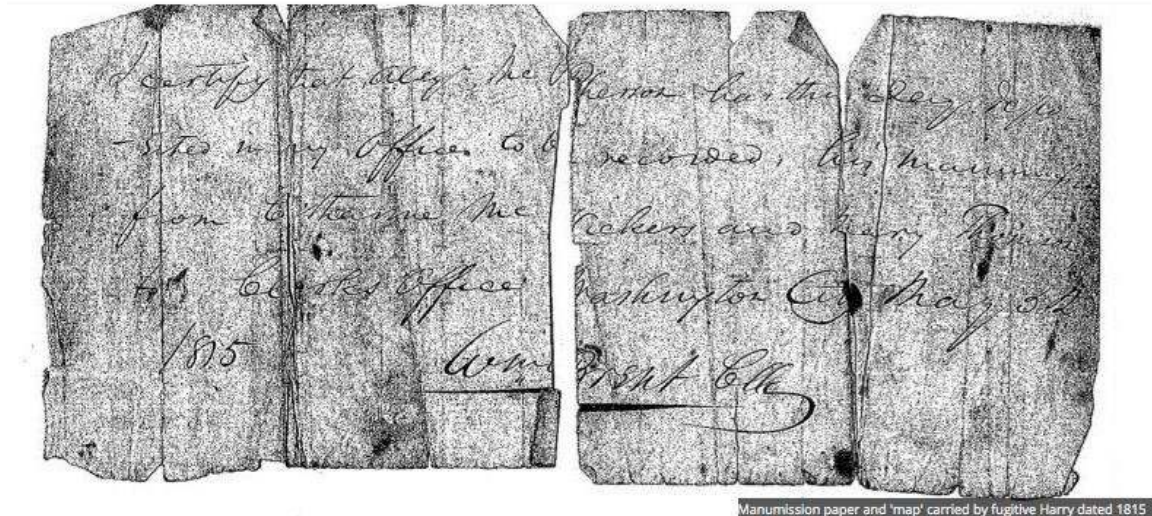


Free blacks in Loudoun County had to carry legal documents proving their freedom. Loss of such documents could put their own liberty at risk. Yet one such African American man, Alex McPherson, took this risk by loaning his “freedom document” to an enslaved man named Harry, who feared that he was about to be sold and sent down South. With the help of an anti-slavery Quaker couple in Lincoln, Yardley and Hannah Taylor, Harry initially escaped using the papers but was then caught and returned to his owners. Yardley Taylor spent some time in Leesburg’s jail for his unlawful aid to Harry, but eventually was released after paying a fine. Alex and Harry presumably did not fare as well.



Freedom Document that Harry borrowed from Alex McPherson

LOUDOUN, SLAVERY AND THREE BRAVE MEN (1828)

[Slightly amended from *Loudoun Now*, October 26, 2017]

Lee Lawrence

Harry was in a terrible situation: it was 1828 and Harry was an enslaved man in Loudoun County, rented by his owner to Samuel Cox. Because Harry was chattel (personal property), he had no recognized surname, as was common among slaves in Loudoun before 1860. On learning that his owner, a “Miss Allison” of Stafford County, was planning to sell him to slave traders who would take him further south, Harry decided to escape.

He approached a free black man named Alex McPherson and asked to borrow his “freedom paper,” a document carried by all free blacks verifying the person’s freed status. McPherson, at great risk to his own safety and liberty, agreed to lend Harry his paper, but insisted it be returned to him as soon as possible. Harry would carry the paper north. If he was stopped and questioned along the way, he would show the paper and claim to be legally free.

Before leaving Loudoun, Harry needed to learn the best route north. Once safely in a free state, he would need a job and place to live. For this help, Harry turned to some Loudoun County Quakers, many of whom were abolitionists. It was common knowledge where the Quaker communities were located, including Waterford, Hillsboro, Goose Creek (now called Lincoln) and other villages.

On January 23, 1828, Harry approached the Quaker home of Yardley and Hannah Taylor on Lincoln Road near Lincoln and asked for help. Yardley Taylor listened to Harry's plight and agreed to help him. He wrote a letter for Harry to carry north to Quaker Jonathan Jessop of York, Pennsylvania, a man active in helping slaves escape bondage. This type of activity would become known as the Underground Railroad, a name that didn't become common until the 1840s.

Yardley's letter to Jessop explained that Harry was "*a man of good character,*" who was to be sold to slave traders. Yardley wrote Harry would be "*forced to the south by a set of men who to say the least of them their mercies are cruel.*" Yardley asked Jessop to return McPherson's freedom paper quickly. He warned that the paper must not be mailed back, but sent in person by "*safe conveyance.*" Yardley Taylor possibly thought his own mail was under surveillance.

Yardley also gave Harry a small piece of paper which listed six towns through which Harry would pass on his journey to York: "*From Frederick to Woodborough 13 miles Taneytown 14 miles....*" This information would be important help, allowing Harry to follow the right roads as he walked from town to town heading to freedom.

However, the envelope Yardley addressed to Jessop, containing Yardley's letter, also bears other handwriting: "*This Taken by me from Negro slave named Harry the 28th day 1828 January, belonging or as he says to Pa [Pennsylvania] ... Jonas Dixon.*"

Dixon's notation explains a tragedy: Harry got caught. Five days after receiving Yardley's help on January 23rd, Harry was stopped and questioned by Dixon, who possibly was a slave catcher on Maryland roads. When stopped, Harry would have shown the freedom paper he was carrying, claiming to be Alex McPherson. But that ruse didn't work. Once Harry's pockets were searched and Yardley Taylor's letter was found and read, the desperate gamble was lost.

Harry was brought back to Loudoun County and put in the Leesburg jail. Punishment for an attempted slavery escape was lashing; the courthouse grounds had a public whipping post for just these occasions. Public punishment was intended to set an example and serve as warning to other slaves. Harry's owner was contacted to come to Leesburg and pick up her property. Either she or her farm overseer would have come for Harry, taking him back to Stafford County. He was likely punished again at his home farm. Then what Harry most feared, being sold to slave traders and forced south, would have happened. After all, that is what his owner had intended for him all along. Now she had all the more reason to sell Harry: he had proven himself to be troublesome. "*Their mercies are cruel.*"

Alex McPherson, by loaning out his freedom papers, would now find his own freedom in jeopardy. Slave codes at the time provided that freedmen could lose their liberty if they were involved in

helping people flee bondage. McPherson would not be able to assert that his papers had been lost or stolen because Yardley Taylor's letter laid out McPherson's involvement. Knowing Alex was vulnerable to harsh punishment would have added to the misery felt by Harry and Yardley when the escape effort failed.

Yardley was a mail carrier for Loudoun County, and ran a plant nursery in the village of Lincoln. However, he also gave public speeches against slavery and wrote abolitionist articles and letters to Leesburg newspapers. He was president of various anti-slavery societies until those societies were outlawed by the state of Virginia. (In 1853, Yardley Taylor drew a detailed map of Loudoun County used by both armies during the Civil War. He is best known for that map.)

What happened to Yardley for his role in Harry's escape? Shortly after Harry's capture, Yardley Taylor was arrested for "*enticing, persuading and advising a certain negro slave named Harry...*" Yardley was put in jail in Leesburg. Neighbor and fellow Quaker Daniel Cockrill posted his \$300 bail. Yardley pled not guilty. The case dragged on for two years. Finally, Yardley changed his plea to guilty, and paid a \$20 fine. He continued with his outspoken abolitionist opinions, but was never again arrested for helping slaves escape.

The documents mentioned here: the McPherson freedom paper, Yardley's letter, the paper listing towns/mileage, and the envelope, are in our Loudoun County Courthouse Historic Records and Deeds Research Division; anyone can request to see them. A thin file will be brought to you. When you open the file you will hold some of the most emotionally wrenching and significant pieces of history to be found in our shared American story. You will know of three brave Loudoun men: Yardley Taylor, Alex McPherson, and Harry (no last name).

This article is derived from an address Lee Lawrence delivered at Oatlands October 1, 2017. Ms. Lawrence, who lives in Lincoln, VA, serves on the Boards of the Mosby Heritage Area Association and Friends of Thomas Balch Library. For more information about the Loudoun County Courthouse Historic Records and Deeds Research Division, go to Loudoun.gov/clerk/archives. The "In Our Backyard" series is compiled by the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition.

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