

## Ellen and William Craft: A Story of Escape and Struggle

Sweat beaded on Ellen Craft's brow. "We shan't let you go," said the border patrol clerk, detaining her and her husband, William. Ellen sank "[in]to the dark and horrible pit of misery." They had come so far, prayed, and worked so hard that they could not fail now. The tension was thick enough to cut when the train's departure bell sounded. The clerk scratched his head. "It is a pity to stop him," the clerk re-decided, "let this gentleman and slave pass." (Smithsonian)

Born to her slaveholder father and mixed-race slave mother in 1826, Ellen Craft held a majority white heritage and striking resemblance to her father. A resemblance so strong that the plantation's mistress sent the eleven-year-old Ellen away to Macon, Georgia, to be a gifted slave for her half-sister (Smithsonian). William was no different, born in rural Georgia in 1824 and was separated from his family at just sixteen years of age through a slave auction done to pay his master's debts. He watched as his sobbing fourteen-year-old sister was sold and dragged away (Smithsonian). He was sold to a local bank cashier, trained as a carpenter, and eventually met Ellen through his work. By 1846, they were married (SM, AA). The realization that their desired family may go through the same separations gripped Ellen and "filled her soul with horror." (Smithsonian)

So, after much deliberation, they planned their escape. Ellen realized that masking her race, gender, and social class to pass as a white male over the period of a four-day trip from Macon to Philadelphia was their best bet (Smithsonian). William agreed (Smithsonian). With his job as a skilled carpenter, William brought in wages for his master and began to skim and save some for himself, while Ellen used her skills as a seamstress to create disguises (Morgan). Ellen Craft became "William Johnson," a man seeking treatment for his tooth decay and arthritis in the medical mecca of Philadelphia. And on December 21st of 1848, with Ellen's hair cut short, right arm slung, face bandaged, and in a man's suit, they began their "desperate leap for liberty" (Smithsonian).

By train, steamer, and train again, they traveled for four days non-stop. And, along every step, the Crafts faced the potential of being captured. With a familiar face, mistaken identities, document checks, and even being temporarily detained in Baltimore, the Crafts relied on their clever minds and blessings from "our heavenly father" to reach their freedom (Smithsonian). And on Christmas Day, the Crafts arrived in Philadelphia, and Ellen cried, "Thank God, William, we're safe!". Lodging was provided by Philadelphia abolitionists, who gave them a writing lesson that very day (Smithsonian). Three weeks later, they relocated to Boston, where William began work as a cabinetmaker and Ellen as a seamstress (Smithsonian). The two were remarried in a Christian church and became part of the free black community on Beacon Hill. Their abolitionist affairs continued as they toured with William Wells Brown to deliver anti-slavery lectures, where they quickly won the hearts of audiences throughout New England. (McCaskill)

But, just as their peaceful life began, it was rudely interrupted by two bounty hunters seeking reward under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Thankfully, Boston's black and abolitionist communities smuggled the couple from location to location throughout Boston to elude their capture. Eventually, the bounty hunters left, but the safety the Crafts once felt was gone (McCaskill). In December 1850, almost exactly two years after gaining their freedom, they set sail for Liverpool, England (McCaskill). There, they found the calm they had sought for so long and settled down to have five children ("Ellen, and William Craft, Slaves Who Escaped to Freedom")

Even while in England, the Crafts spoke against slavery, including a June 1851 demonstration in the London Great Exhibition and a published 1852 open letter by Ellen about the importance of freedom in one's development and happiness (McCaskill). "Since my escape from slavery, I have gotten much better in every respect that I could have possibly anticipated," Ellen explained, "I had much rather starve in England, a free woman, than be a slave for the best man that ever breathed upon the American continent." (Morgan). William even published his famous autobiography, "Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom," which told his harrowing tale of slavery, escape, and how a decade of freedom shapes a man (Morgan).

After twenty years of freedom and the end of the Civil War, the Crafts realized they wanted to repay the kindness the world gave them and were eager to be a part of the United States' Reconstruction. The Crafts, after twenty years abroad, returned to Boston with their three youngest children in 1868 to form and fund their ideals of educating the newly freed black citizens in the South (McCaskill). The education of freedmen was a prevalent idea, with many northern financial backers, including abolitionist publishers and anti-slavery advocates, agreeing to provide the necessary funding. Their funding created two schools on South Carolina and Georgia border, but the Night Riders of the Ku Klux Klan burned down both of them, reducing the Craft's hard work and dreams to ash in mere hours (Morgan).

After this traumatic attempt, the Crafts were apprehensive but dedicated and purchased 1800 acres of the former Woodville Plantation in Ways Station, Georgia. Thus, the Woodville Co-operative Farm School for the Education and Employment of the Newly Freed Men and Women was founded ("Ellen, and William Craft, Slaves Who Escaped to Freedom")(McCaskill). Opening its doors in 1873 to African American men, women, and children, it taught math, reading, writing, and agriculture to its students (Morgan). Ellen and her daughters led the teachers and curriculum, while William handled the school funds and fundraising (Morgan).

But in 1876, after two years of successful work, William was accused of misusing the school's funds. Historical Barbara McCaskill said that the accusations were "out of a combination of resentment, that formerly enslaved African-Americans were now able to purchase land and have a farm when all around them were white farmers whose enterprises had been destroyed by long years of war and famine." (Morgan). William fought back against the claims and sued for libel in 1878, but with little evidence and a biased court system, he lost and lost his reputation, leading to the closing of the school later that year (Morgan). The Crafts moved back to Charleston, South Carolina, with Ellen dying in 1891 and William in 1900 (Morgan).

Despite the school not surviving long, the precedent it set was remarkable. Black schools by black educators have shown to be particularly effective in educating black students, with black students having had just one black educator in their academic career being 9% more likely to graduate high school (Gershenson et al.). Additionally, the story of William and Ellen Craft's escape and education efforts live on today, with Ellen Craft being inducted into the Georgia Women of Achievement and William's autobiography still standing as an essential piece of abolitionist literature (McCaskill). Their legacy lives on through their charitable efforts and story of hope, reliance, and determination to thrive.

#### Works Cited

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