



**BARRETT** was Overseer on the plantation where young Minty—who would one day be known as the “Moses” of her people—lived and worked. A white employee of the Master, he enforced discipline in the fields.

Barrett believed slavery was natural and necessary. For generations, white Southerners had owned black slaves. Overseers, like slaveholders, did not consider themselves bad people; instead, they believed free labor was essential for the livelihood of the South. Barrett thought of “negroes” not as human beings, but simply as the property of their Master.

Whether growing tobacco, cotton or indigo, plantation owners wanted to get the most work possible out of their slaves. Many slaveholders relied on an Overseer, like Barrett, who swiftly punished “misbehavior” with his whip, rifle or cane to keep field hands on task. Barrett, like all Overseers, knew that his boss’s business depended on him, and was under great pressure from the plantation owner to show little mercy when slaves worked too “slowly” or paused to rest. Following the Master’s orders, Barrett enjoyed the chance to wield power over his charges, ensuring that field hands toiled from sunrise to sunset, six days a week. When slaves dared try to escape, the Master sent Barrett after them, with instructions to track down the fugitives—and teach them a lesson they would not soon forget.

Barrett supported the Fugitive Slave Act. He felt the law would make his job easier by protecting his Master’s property. Barrett knew his boss’s plantation could not survive with slaves constantly escaping, and welcomed the government’s help to preserve the Southern way of life.





**F.H. PETTIS** was a slave catcher.

In the 1830's, a person could make a lot of money catching runaway slaves. If you were a believer in slavery, slave catching was an adventurous job that offered the chance for travel, excitement and big payoffs.

In 1838, F.H. Pettis was hired by a Maryland slaveowner to catch one of his slaves who had escaped north to freedom in nearby Pennsylvania. Although Pettis caught the slave, it was against the law in Pennsylvania to take anyone out of the state without proper evidence. So, Pettis

was arrested and charged with breaking a Pennsylvania state law against kidnapping.

At his trial, Pettis challenged the Pennsylvania law, claiming it was unconstitutional. Since the laws of the United States allowed Pettis to legally take back a runaway slave, the Supreme Court sided with Pettis. This decision was important because it set an example that U.S. law—made in Washington D.C.—was more powerful than the laws of the states (in this case, Pennsylvania).

F.H. Pettis must have supported the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. After all, the Fugitive Act made it easier for slave catchers to catch slaves in Free States. Not only did the new law make it illegal to help a runaway slave, it also put special agents of the U.S. government on duty in Free States to help the slave catchers do their job.



**\$150 REWARD.**  
**R**ANAWAY from the subscriber, on the night of Monday the 11th July, a negro man named  
**TOM,**  
 about 30 years of age, 5 feet 6 or 7 inches high; of dark color; heavy in the chest; several of his jaw teeth out; and upon his body are several old marks of the whip, one of them straight down the back. He took with him a quantity of clothing, and several hats.  
 A reward of \$150 will be paid for his apprehension and security, if taken out of the State of Kentucky; \$100 if taken in any county bordering on the Ohio river; \$50 if taken in any of the interior counties except Fayette; or \$20 if taken in the latter county.  
 July 12-84-tf B. L. BOSTON.

**EDWARD PRIGG** was a slave catcher who became well known as the subject of a famous Supreme Court case in 1839.

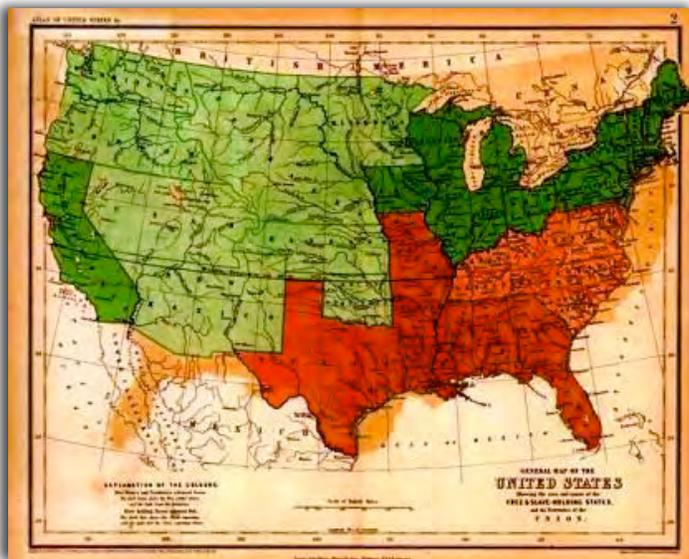
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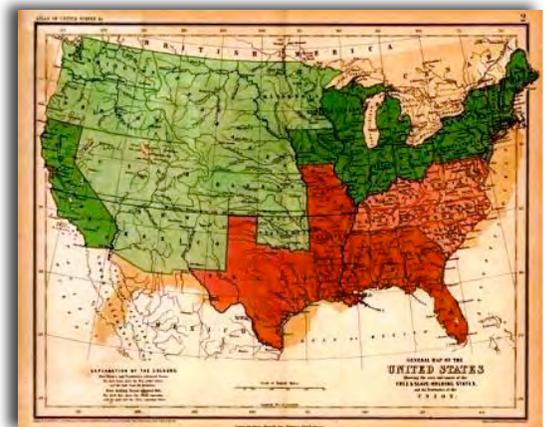




**PATTY CANNON** led a gang of illegal slave catchers, stealing both free blacks and those still “owned” by slaveholders in order to re-sell them for a handsome profit in the Deep South.

Cannon was the mastermind behind her thieving gang. Her husband, a white Maryland farmer, and her son-in-law, a blacksmith, were among the men who followed her lead—impressed by her strength, size and taste for violence. The gang preferred to capture free black people instead of slaves from nearby plantations, because white owners always grew angry when their “property” was stolen and would send the police on their trail. Since no one owned free blacks, there was no one to complain when Cannon captured them to sell at slave auctions down South. The police rarely made an effort to stop slave-catchers from doing just that, because few Southern officers considered “negroes” to be worth the trouble and danger of angering slave-catching gangs. So Cannon continued to hunt “negroes,” making large sums of money when she sold them to slave-traders and auctioneers.

Fate finally caught up with Patty Cannon when a hired farmer discovered four dead bodies in a field on her property. She went to prison, where she eventually died in her cell. Although the Fugitive Slave Act would not pass for another 21 years, Cannon would have undoubtedly supported it had she survived. The law required normal citizens to return runaways to their “rightful” owners in the South, which made slave-catching not only lawful, but patriotic. Although Cannon’s actions would have remained illegal under the Fugitive Act—since she was stealing free blacks instead of returning runaways—authorities would have likely overlooked that “detail,” allowing Cannon to continue her thievery with the law on her side.





**THOMAS OTWELL** was a slave catcher, capturing runaways and free blacks alike. He returned fugitives to their Masters and collected a reward, or sold free blacks to slave-traders in the Deep South for a profit.

Since many lawmakers, judges and police officers did not consider "negroes"

to be human beings, Otwell faced no legal difficulties—even when he targeted black people whose families had lived in freedom for generations. After the Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850, Otwell's job became even easier. Now police and government officials no longer had to look the other way to let Otwell go about his business. Capturing slaves was perfectly legal in every state of the Union, and citizens who refused to assist slave catchers would be subject to punishment by law. When Otwell captured a victim, courts required the slave-catcher to state that the "negro" was in fact a runaway. Beyond that, no proof was necessary. Black people could not speak in their own defense nor expect a trial by jury.

Otwell did not consider himself a bad person. He believed slave-catchers performed a much-needed service for Southern slaveholders, whose plantations could not function if slaves continued to escape North. He chose the profession because it promised to yield large sums of money, and he found the chase exciting. Otwell could not understand that the "property" he captured felt pain and injustice. In spite of Otwell and slave-catchers like him, fugitives would continue to seek freedom in the North, with the Underground Railroad as their guide.

**CAUTION!!**  
**COLORED PEOPLE**  
**OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,**  
You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the  
**Watchmen and Police Officers**  
of Boston,  
For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as  
**KIDNAPPERS**  
AND  
**Slave Catchers,**  
And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the Welfare of the Fugitives among you, Shun them in every possible manner, as so many HOUNDS on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.  
Keep a Sharp Look Out for  
**KIDNAPPERS,** and have  
**TOP EYE** open.  
APRIL 24, 1851.



**HADLEY, THE STOREKEEPER,** would have been like so many other small shop owners in rural Maryland at the time of our story. There were no supermarkets in the mid 1800's. Instead, every village and town had its general store, a place where locals, both white and black, would come to get the things they could not make or grow at home: flour for baking, kerosene for lamps, tools and nails to build with, special seeds for spice or vegetable gardens, and candy, lemonade or jars of fruit jelly to satisfy

a sweet tooth.

Although slaves were sometimes served in such stores, they were often looked upon with great suspicion by storekeepers, always on the lookout to prevent their goods from being stolen. There is no evidence that slaves stole from these stores any more often than the white customers did, but slaves were often the easiest to blame for crimes of this kind. So, a local slave would better be on his or her best behavior when entering a white storekeeper's shop.

Hadley, and storekeepers like him, would always have young boys hanging around the place, ready at a moment's notice to run errands for the storeowner, if there was a penny or two to be made for their efforts. So it was that Hadley could send for the sheriff if trouble was brewing. And once the sheriff arrived, no further questions were asked. In cases like this, the storekeeper was always right, no matter the facts. Slaves would be punished, sometimes severely, for their "crimes" whether or not they had actually committed them.

Hadley would surely have supported the Fugitive Slave Act. After all, the Act made it easier for slave owners to hold on to their slaves. And that was good for business, especially if your store happened to supply the slave plantations with all their many needs.

