ANTHONY BURNS TELLS HIS STORY, 1855

Aptheker, 368-372

Perhaps the most renowned of all fugitive slave cases was that of Anthony Burns which rocked Boston in May and June, 1854. Burns' own account of his return to and rendition from slavery comes from two documents; the first a report of a speech he delivered at a Negro church in New York in February, 1855, the second a letter Burns wrote, in November, 1855, to the Baptist Church in Union, Virginia after learning it had excommunicated him:

[a]

Anthony Burns in New York

"My friends, I am very glad to have it to say, have it to feel, that I am once more in the land of liberty; that I am with those who are my friends. Until my tenth year I did not care what became of me; but soon after I began to learn that there is a Christ who came to make us free; I began to hear about a North, and to feel the necessity for freedom of soul and body. I heard of a North where men of my color could live without any man daring to say to them, You are my property; and I determined by the blessing of God, one day to find my way there. My inclination grew on me, and I found my way to Boston."

"You see, I didn't want to make myself known, so I didn't tell who I was; -- but as I came to work, I got employment, and I worked hard; but I kept -- my own counsel, and didn't tell anybody that I was a slave, but I strove for myself as I never had an opportunity to do before. When I was going home one night I heard some one running behind me; presently a hand was put on my shoulder, and somebody said: ‘Stop, stop; you are the fellow who broke into a silversmith's shop the other night.’ I assured the man that it was a mistake, but almost before I could speak, I was lifted from off my feet by six or seven others, and it was no use to resist. In the Court House I waited some time, and as the silversmith did not come, I told them I wanted to go home to supper. A man then came to the door; he didn't open it like an honest man would, (laughter) but kind of slowly opened it, and looked in. He said, ‘How do you do, Mr. Burns?’ and I called him, as we do in Virginia, 'master!'"

"He asked me if there would be any trouble in taking me back to Virginia, and I was brought right to a stand, and didn't know what to say. He wanted to know if I remembered the money that he used to give me, and I said ‘Yes, I do recollect that you used to give me twelve and a half cents at the end of every year I worked for you.’ He went out and came back next morning. I got no supper nor sleep that night. The next morning they told me that my master said that he had the right to me, and as I had called him 'master,' having the fear of God before my eyes, I could not go from it. Next morning I was taken down, with the bracelets on my wrists—not such as you wear, ladies, of gold and silver—but iron and steel, that wore into the bone. [He showed the marks which his irons had made.] *

"The lawyers insisted that I should have counsel, but I told them I didn't think it would do any good, for what I had first said had crushed me, and I could not deny the truth, and my only hope was in the assistance of Heaven." t He proceeded to relate how the officers were armed in the court room; how the United States officials told him that Dana, Ellis, Phillips and the rest were d—d sons of b—s of Abolitionists; that he would be freed when he got back to Virginia, and advised him to have nothing to do with those who pretended to befriend him while they made his case worse. He replied that they worked for him manfully, and if they did not succeed it was not their fault. He said he saw in a newspaper that he had said he wished to go back to Virginia. Had the Devil himself said it, he could have told no greater lie.
He then described the scene of his rendition; how he, a poor fugitive was made a great lion, and escorted out of the free city of Boston, and on board of the revenue cutter, amid troops of men armed to the teeth. How they (the law and order men) promised to purchase him when he got to Virginia, and when he got to Norfolk they clapped him into jail, and put irons on his wrists, and kept him in a room without bed or seat, and with but scanty food, for two days. He was taken to Richmond, where he was kept in a little pen in the Traders' Jail for four months, with irons on his wrists and ankles, so tight that they wore the flesh through to the bone, and during the month of August they gave him a half-pailful of water every two days.

From this cell he was not allowed to come out once during four months; at the end of that time he was sold for $905 to one David McDaniel, who took him to North Carolina. The remainder of his story is short: hearing of his situation the money was raised, and his purchase effected by Mr. Grimes.*