

### Assisting Fugitive Slaves: The Philadelphia Vigilant Committee

#### "Record of Cases attended to for the Vigilant Committee of Phila by the Agent"

##### Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia Records, 1839-1844, HSP

*Although Pennsylvania had expanded the rights of fugitives through the passing of Personal Liberty Laws and had passed laws to punish slave-catchers, abolitionists and fugitives could not depend upon the court system to deliver freedom to runaway slaves. In addition, not all northern citizens shared in anti-slavery ideology. They attempted to hinder escapes, reported acts of sheltering runaways, kidnapped runaways for rewards, and, at times, lashed out against those known to assist fugitives. In addition, there were laws that could be used against those assisting the runaways. To publicly promote antislavery ideology and "to create a fund to aid colored persons in distress," the Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia was formed in 1837 by Robert Purvis, an ardent abolitionist.*

*The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia operated between 1837 and 1852; it was the secret auxiliary of the Vigilant Association. The Vigilant Committee's purpose was to appoint offices, raise revenue, and have resources readily available to assist runaway slaves while they stayed in or passed through Philadelphia. Such assistance could include food, clothes, shelter, transportation, medical attention, and legal fees. Considerable expenses could be incurred when assisting the runaways. Food and transportation were essential costs, coupled with additional expenses such as clothing, shelter, and medicine. Some of the expenses were met through membership dues; additional funds were sought from outside of the organization.*

**No. 1. June 4, 1839** Man arrested by Constable Hog[g] and committed to prison at Woodbury, N.J. without trial, or without any hearing whatever, removed from prison at Woodbury, and imprisoned at Camden, N.J. M<sup>r</sup> Browning procured as council obtained a writ of habeas corpus from Judge Ford.

**June 25th** This writ was served upon the keeper of the prison as is usual or in compliance with the law in such cases; the keeper refused or could not comply with the writ, not having the man in his custody. A writ has been served upon the constable who refuses to comply with it and bring the man to a hearing. This is certainly one of the most aggravating cases on record in the U.S., perhaps the first instance of a keeper of a prison or constable has refused to obey the writ of habeas corpus; the constable above named has the keys of the prison and the man arrested by him still held a prisoner under pretence of being a fugitive from slavery. Thus are the supreme

laws of the state of N.J. held at defiance by a petty constable; w[h]ether or not N.J. will suffer her laws to be trampled upon with impunity by one sworn to support them time will show. We have made arrangements for prosecuting the case.

**No. 14. August 5<sup>th</sup>** A gentleman from My<sup>d</sup> recommended by E Needles & E Coates, his object being to assist some person or persons in distress, advanced \$2.00.

**No. 17. August 15<sup>th</sup>** Boy. A letter intercepted, directed to the number of a house on Shippen St., in which resided a man by the name of Day. From the contents of the letter there is no doubt he intended selling the boy. We had this man taken before Alderman Hutton, who, at once, decided that this man had no right to send the boy out of this state, Day having stated before the alderman that he only intended binding him out. He was taken away and sent to the poor house.

**No. 49. 4<sup>th</sup>** W<sup>m</sup> Smith from Vir sent to Trinidad. Samuel Williams from Co[lumbi]a, imposter. This man was brought to E.H. Coates and feigned himself deaf & dumb, but not succeeding to his satisfaction, he made a second call representing himself a slave. He was however detected and finally acknowledged the fraud, but from the statement made by him, believing him in want, we gave 20 cts to help him on his way and furnished him with some food. 20cts.

**7<sup>th</sup>** Imposter. This was a man of dark complex. Representing himself a slave from Vir. He was rather tall and stout built, large whiskers. Exp. For carriage \$3.00.