

AARON ABBOTT'S

Amazing Achievements

For a family held in slavery in Clark County, Kentucky in 1830, such as Aaron and Charity Abbott and their children, a pathway potentially leading to freedom was nearly invisible. The slavery system into which they were born ensured that they were closely controlled, would find it very difficult to escape, and would probably be recaptured if they did try to escape. Even if they could reach a free state, they would be pursued by bounty hunters. Runaways who were recaptured could face barbaric punishments.¹ For the brave few individuals who succeeded in escape, they would have to assume that they might never see any of their family again.

For an entire family, including children, to escape would be so far-fetched that no hint can be seen of any family from Clark County who ever even attempted to do so (prior to the depths of the Civil War).²

For obvious reasons, those individuals who did successfully escape were not anxious to make known where they were from or who had previously owned them. Thus, it's been difficult to identify the people from Clark County, undoubtedly relatively few in number, who successfully "rode the Underground Railway" to freedom.

Other than escape, the only other route to freedom for a slave was to be legally emancipated by their owner (known as manumission). Although, unlike in some other slave states, emancipation of a slave was legally possible in Kentucky, it was uncommon. Few people had the good fortune of an owner who granted freedom, and even then that freedom usually came only after decades of obedient servitude.³

An even smaller number of people in Clark County, only a handful, had the good fortune of being purchased for the specific purpose of granting their freedom, almost always by family members who had been previously emancipated by their owner.

Rarest of all, extremely rare compared to the vast number of people held in slavery, was a person who was able to emancipate himself or herself by purchasing their own freedom from their owner.

¹ Estimates of the number of slaves in the U.S. who escaped to free states, prior to the Civil War, typically range from 1,000 to 2,000 people per year, out of the approximately four million people held in slavery. Even once in a free state, unless they made it to Canada, escaped slaves were subject to recapture by bounty hunters. Numerous reports describe the whippings, brandings, mutilations or other tortures that might be meted out to recaptured runaway slaves. The total numbers of fugitive slaves reported by Kentucky slaveowners in 1850 and 1860 was miniscule, only about 100 in the entire state (*A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, page 62). Even if this number was understated, it's clear that escape, prior to the Civil War, was extremely difficult.

² In the final years of the Civil War, sheltering under the protection of the Union Army became plausible.

³ In a curious form of restrictive emancipation practiced by a few owners, a small number of people were freed on condition that they emigrate to Liberia.

Even though it was theoretically legal in Kentucky for a slave to purchase his or her own freedom, it was so very far out of reach. How was a slave—who ordinarily wasn't paid for any of the work they performed for their owner—ever to obtain that much money? (Note: stealing the money was not an option.⁴) Even though it wasn't unusual for those held as slaves to occasionally earn small amounts of money on the side, amassing the large dollar amount needed for self-purchase was vastly beyond reach for the great majority of slaves.

An adult slave could cost as much as one thousand dollars, sometimes even more (the equivalent of \$25,000 to more than \$100,000 in current dollars, depending on conversion method).

For a person held as a slave to legally manumit themselves, by first buying herself or himself, was, at root, a contradiction of slavery's essence. Slavery operated by denying any fundamental control over their own lives to those were held as slaves. Under the American system of chattel slavery, slaves and their descendants, even their grandchildren's grandchildren, were to continue in bondage forever, never to be liberated (unless an owner chose to be magnanimous).

Out of the thousands of people held as slaves in Clark County over many decades, the author has only been able to identify one person who managed to buy his own freedom and thus legally emancipate himself (self-manumit): Aaron Abbott.⁵

In the history of Clark County, there can have been few accomplishments as prodigious as Aaron Abbott's self-manumission, followed by emancipating many of his family.⁶ To do so required the most extraordinary combination of perseverance and skill, combined at the outset with some unusually good fortune, if that term can be used for someone consigned to the hell realm of slavery.

⁴ It would be foolish to think that illegally obtained money could be used for the purpose of emancipation...and not just because slaves were hemmed in by a system of close control. Emancipation required a court document approving it. One would have to demonstrate to the court that the money was legitimately obtained, backed up by the testimony of a white person respected by the court. An attempt to legally purchase oneself or one's family members, confirmed by an emancipation document issued by a court, using illegally obtained funds would be pointless, and would likely also lead to the money being confiscated and other punishments.

⁵ For several free African-Americans in Clark County, including Bristow and Judy Pigg in the 1850s; it's unknown how they were emancipated; although it's possible that one or more self-manumitted by purchasing their own freedom, it's clear that true self-manumission was exceedingly rare.

⁶ A few examples of other people from across the country who were able to buy their own freedom include the famous Denmark Vesey of South Carolina, who purchased himself with money won in a lottery. George Horton of North Carolina raised money through, amazingly, the sale of his poetry. Godfrey Brown and Noah Davis were shoemakers. (Those examples come from an article, Manumission by Purchase, in the April 1948 *Journal of Negro History*.) Another well known example is Elizabeth Keckly, a dressmaker who later became a confidante of Mary Todd Lincoln. (It might be noted that a weakness of many of the published discussions of manumission by purchase is that they tend to conflate purchases for manumission by others, usually family members, and self-purchases, which were far less common. The examples just given appear to be actual self-purchases.)

Aaron Abbott and his family.⁷ This much is known about Aaron Abbott's early life. He was born into slavery in Middlesex County, Virginia in April 1806.⁸ His parents Manuel ("Maniel") and Daphne ("Dafny") Abbott were almost certainly owned as slaves by Bivin Abbott in Virginia.⁹ Bivin (or Bivvin) Abbott, who married Nancy Dejarnette in 1801 in Middlesex County, Virginia, moved to Clark County, Kentucky about 1809.¹⁰ Young Aaron and his parents were surely part of the contingent of sixteen people held as slaves that Bivin brought with him to Kentucky. Bivin's son Barzilla Abbott, who married Eveline Rankin in 1825, set up his own household in Clark County after marriage. Aaron passed from Bivin into Barzilla's hands prior to 1830.

Eveline nee Rankin also brought at least one slave into her household with Barzilla. Charity was a young woman, born circa 1810-1814, who was owned by Eveline's father John Rankin. Sometime before 1830, he gave Charity to Eveline. When ownership of Charity passed from John to Eveline, so did that of Charity's daughter Ann, who was born before 1830.¹¹

Aaron and Charity Abbott were presumably the two adults held as slaves in the Barzilla Abbott household in the 1830 Clark County census.

In the 1830s, Barzilla rented Aaron out to an ironworks for seven years. It sounds like a 19th century version of a felony prison sentence: condemned to toil as a slave laborer in the hot, loud, fearsome interior of an early iron foundry. None of the money from his rental went to Aaron, going instead to his owner Barzilla. Aaron received no benefit from providing ten hours or more per day of difficult, dirty, and dangerous toil required from him as a slave, unless one counts whatever the owners fed him to keep him alive. He also would have been separated from his wife and children while at the ironworks.

Extraordinarily hardworking and disciplined man that he was, Aaron was able to turn this horrifying circumstance into a pathway to freedom. He proved capable, throughout his life, of saving large amounts of money under circumstances that would have overwhelmed the average person.

⁷ A key source for this chapter is a biographical note about Aaron Abbott included in the 1882 atlas of Paulding County, Ohio published by Hardesty & Co. of Chicago and Toledo, given to me by Aaron's descendant Charles Abbott. Other sources of information about the family included early censuses, as noted, and the Barzilla Abbott and John Rankins probate records.

⁸ The Abbott family is also unusual, for a family held in slavery in Kentucky, in the following respect. The ancestry of the current Abbott family in Ohio can be traced back through their entire Ohio and Kentucky histories to specifically named people in a specific county in the Virginia Tidewater.

⁹ Bivin Abbott's will, dated March 31, 1834 (Woodford County will book L, p. 186) and proved in September 1839 stated that he wanted "Dafny" and also a woman Isabella to be freed by his executor. Neither Daphne nor Manuel (nor Isabella) were included in Bivin Abbott's 1839 estate inventory (Woodford County will book L, p. 272). Manuel was probably either long since deceased or sold. Daphne is presumably the free woman named Daphney Davis, over 55, living by herself in the 1840 Woodford County census, perhaps she had had a second husband with the surname Davis. The spellings "Maniel" and "Dafny" given in the 1882 atlas are presumably phonetic. Maniel is surely Manuel, short for Emmanuel. An orthodox spelling of Dafny is Daphne. Their surnames were spelled Abbott in the atlas.

¹⁰ Bivvin Abbott signed a bond for Thomas Healey in Middlesex County, Virginia in 1808; he was included in the Clark County, Kentucky census in 1810.

¹¹ Reference to Charity and Ann is included in the John Rankin probate records. Ann was presumably the girl under 10, held as a slave, in the Barzilla Abbott household in the 1830 census. Aaron was likely the father of Ann, but this is unconfirmed. Ann's exact birth year or her eventual whereabouts are unknown. She may have died young since she was not included in either the 1847 Barzilla Abbott probate records or the 1882 list of Aaron and Charity's children.

Aaron performed prodigious amounts of extra work, above and beyond the long hours already required of him as a slave, but for cash. On average, for every week over the course of seven years, he earned more than \$2.50 in cash.

A Kentucky slave owner typically charged about \$100 per year for the rental of an adult male slave. The ironworks no doubt expected at least three thousand hours, perhaps more, of annual labor from the rented slave, costing them roughly \$.03 per hour. Even if the ironworks paid the owner a bit more for grueling work that could break the health of their slave, it might still only amount to \$.04 per hour.

The owners of the ironworks where Aaron was sent apparently felt that it was more productive to get additional work from Aaron by paying him a bit of cash for that extra work, as compared to trying to beat the work out of him.¹² If they were willing to pay Aaron a similar amount, \$.04/hour in cash for overtime, earning \$2.50 per week would have amounted to another sixty hours a week of work. That would be on top of what was already a backbreaking job—there were no eight hour days for slaves. Even if, as is probable, the pay was entirely in the form of piecework bonuses rather than an hourly rate, and even taking into account that he must have been a virtuoso at hammering metal, the sheer sustained effort required is unthinkable.

Aaron Abbott's labor at the iron foundry may have required raw strength at something approaching a "John Henry" level. In endurance, Aaron surpassed even a John Henry. For seven years running, Aaron did the heaviest kind of labor all day and into the night, and yet, unlike the fabled John Henry, he managed to survive the ordeal.¹³

Keeping pace with his nonpareil capacity for heavy work, Aaron exhibited stringent discipline in continually saving the money he earned.

In Aaron Abbot's case, it's no mere metaphor to say that he combined a passion for freedom with determination of the strength of forged iron. Indeed, he seems to have absorbed some of the implacable character of the metal that he worked.

On the basis of the large sum of \$920 that he saved from his seven years of overtime at the ironworks, Aaron was able to make a contract with Barzilla to buy his own freedom for \$1050. Although the remaining balance was still owed to Barzilla and wasn't ultimately paid off in full until 1848, Barzilla did grant Aaron his freedom in October 1838 (Clark County Order Book 10, p. 33),¹⁴ based on the nearly 90% payment, rather than postponing emancipation until the final payment. (That gesture,

¹² The aforementioned article in the 1848 Journal of Negro History gives an example of another foundry, the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, Virginia, which paid money to its slaves for extra work. In the context of slavery, it was a stroke of good fortune for an enslaved person to have a circumstance where any cash income could be earned. As detailed in the book *The Half Has Never Been Told*, cotton plantation owners instead normally used torture—the bullwhip—to extract the maximum work from enslaved workers. Even so, the existence of a few employers of slave labor who found it profitable to pay slaves something for extra work is far less remarkable than Aaron's use of that circumstance to gain enough money to buy his freedom.

¹³ Honoring Aaron Abbott's extraordinary accomplishments is no criticism of the countless thousands who were unable to match his rare success. The entire slavery system was geared toward keeping slaves in bondage, not toward freeing them. Millions of people wanted freedom, relatively few were able to achieve it before universal emancipation, and only the tiniest percentage managed to self-emancipate by buying their own freedom. To do so required skill and tenacity on the level of John Henry's ability to drive steel, plus the circumstances where those talents could be brought to bear.

¹⁴ Harry Enoch kindly provided a copy of the 1838 court order concerning Aaron Abbott.

minimal as it was, combined with Barzilla's willingness to even countenance Aaron's self-purchase, was surely the reason that Aaron later named two of children Barzel and Nancy Eveline.)

In the 1840 Clark County census, ten people held as slaves were included in the Barzilla Abbott household, plus one free man of color, born 1805-1816. The free man was Aaron, who was either working for Barzilla or working at one of his trades, or more likely, considering Aaron's personality, both. Those still held as slaves included his wife Charity and their children.

In 1842, Aaron was able to contract with Barzilla to buy a modest portion of the latter's land and thus also set himself up as an independent farmer, earning money directly by raising crops and livestock. Importantly, it was adjacent to Barzilla's land so that Aaron could live with Charity and their children while working the farm.

His farm would itself have required working capital. Nonetheless, in combination with whatever work he did on the side, it generated sufficient net income for Aaron to be able to purchase his wife Charity's freedom for \$500 in 1846. However, in 1847, at the time of Barzilla's death, all of Aaron and Charity's living children were still owned as slaves, as seen in Barzilla's estate inventory.

Making maximum use of their control over their time, their ownership of their own small farm, and what must have been a ferocious amount of labor, Aaron and Charity then earned enough money to purchase their two eldest sons. Lewis, born in 1829, had been appraised in 1847 for \$700. Aaron paid \$700 for him in 1848. Henry, born in 1831, was appraised in 1847 for \$575. His father paid out \$850 to purchase him in 1850.

When Eveline Abbott, by then a widow, was included in the 1850 slave schedule, she held seven people as slaves. These did not include Aaron or Charity, who were already free, but did include several of their children that they had not yet been able to purchase.

The two children borne by Charity after her emancipation, Martha and Margaret, were born free. Those who were born before her emancipation, such as Charles, were not born free even after Aaron was already free, since the child's status at birth matched the mother.

Thus, by 1850, Aaron and Charity were free, as were some of their children: Lewis, Henry, Martha, and Margaret.¹⁵ For an enslaved family to have accomplished this entirely by their own efforts was a towering achievement. However, their efforts did not end there.

To summarize as to Aaron and Charity's known children: *Ann* was born before 1830 and probably died young; *Lewis*, born March 5, 1829, was freed due to Aaron's purchase of him in 1848;¹⁶ *Henry M.*, born May 8, 1831, was freed due to Aaron's purchase of him in 1850; *Caroline*, born in August 1833, was probably still owned by Barzilla Abbott's estate in 1850; *Anthony* was born about 1835, his freedom was eventually purchased by Aaron as described below, *Charles*, born January 8, 1842, was still owned

¹⁵ In the 1850 Clark County census, Aaron Abbott was listed as the head of a free family included on the same page of the census as the Eveline Abbott household. Aaron's birth year was indicated in that census as 1804 and Charity's as 1814. (Her actual birth year was almost certainly several years earlier than that.) Their free children—Lewis, Henry, Martha, and Margaret—were included in their household in the census.

¹⁶ Lewis Abbott was living in Powell County with his brother Henry M. Abbott in 1860; Lewis moved to Ohio with his wife and children before 1870 and to Kansas with them before 1880.

by the Barzilla Abbott estate in 1850 and was part of Eveline Abbott's household at that time; *Mary*, born in 1844, was surely still owned by the Barzilla Abbott estate in 1850 and was presumably one of the girls listed in Eveline Abbott's household at that time; *Martha*, born in June 1848, was free from birth and living with her parents; and *Margaret*, born on May 18, 1850, was also free from birth and living with her parents.

Aaron purchased a farm in Powell County, Kentucky, to the southeast of Clark County, in the early 1850s. Reportedly, he lived there with his family for nine years. Charity, sadly, died in the early 1850s, possibly even before the relocation. During his time in Powell County, and consistent with his astonishingly industrious nature, Aaron not only operated his farm but worked at two trades, as a molder and as a stone mason, and also owned a distillery. Aaron and Charity's motivation for moving to Powell County may well have been to stay close to their children who were still enslaved. Zadock Kidd, a slave owner who moved from Clark County to Powell County in the 1850s, purchased their son Charles in the early 1850s and relocated him to Powell County.¹⁷ Their daughters Caroline and Mary also ended up in Powell County, and had known associations with the Powell family; it's likely that they were purchased by Zadock Kidd from Barzilla Abbott's estate in 1852.¹⁸

By 1854, Aaron, a widower, had remarried to a woman held as a slave, Harriett Jones. Harriett was born June 10, 1813 in Clark County, the daughter of Robert Canon and Jane Jones. She already had a daughter, Betty, when she married Aaron.¹⁹ Harriett was owned at this time by Andrew Taul of Clark County. Aaron apparently made a contract of purchase or similar arrangement with Andrew Taul for Harriett, because it appears she was allowed to live with Aaron in Powell County.

In an unusual gesture to his former owners, Aaron and Harriett's first two children together were given the names, Barzel and Nancy Eveline; they were born September 8, 1854 and December 15, 1857, respectively.²⁰ Since their mother Harriett was still enslaved at the time, these children were born as slaves. The couple's next child, Mary E., was born in 1859.²¹

¹⁷ Aaron was never able to purchase his son Charles' freedom; Charles wasn't emancipated until joining the Union Army in 1864. In December 1866, Zadock Kidd stated that he had purchased Charles Abbott from the Barzilla Abbott estate in 1855. It's likely that he misremembered the date of purchase and that it was earlier in the 1850s.

¹⁸ No record has been found indicating that Aaron was able to emancipate his daughters Caroline and Mary before they were freed by the 13th amendment in 1865. An estate settlement document for Barzilla Abbott's estate, dated September 15, 1857 (vol. 15, p. 535), stated that Barzilla's administrator sold from his estate in 1852 a woman for \$600 and two young girls for \$1050, but doesn't give their names or indicate the buyers. Although it's not impossible that their father bought Caroline and Mary and that they were included as free people in the family's move to Powell County, it's more likely that Aaron didn't have enough money and that Zadock Kidd was the slave owner who bought them. Zadock Kidd moved from Clark County to Powell County in the 1850s. Both Caroline and Mary relocated to Powell County and both had connections to the Kidd family; the likelihood is that they accompanied Zadock Kidd to Powell County as his slaves. Zadock Kidd was definitely the owner of their brother Charles no later than 1855 and brought Charles to Powell County. Caroline Abbott was living in Powell County with her four children in 1870 as part of the household of Zadock's son Oswald Kidd. Mary Abbott subsequently married a black man, Willis Kidd, in Powell County, Kentucky and had a son, William Kidd, with him in 1864. It's likely Willis had previously been owned by Zadock Kidd; Mary and Willis appear to be two of the people owned by Zadock Kidd in the 1860 Powell County slave schedule. Mary apparently died before 1870 and definitely before 1882.

¹⁹ Harriett's daughter Betty was taken or sold into Mississippi and later, after abolition, moved to Texas.

²⁰ Aaron and Harriett's son Barzel died before 1882; their daughter Nancy Eveline died in 1872.

²¹ Apparently slave owner Andrew Taul either regarded Mary E. as having been born free, since her mother's sale was pending, or otherwise ignored her, since Mary wasn't included in Harriett's sale and yet was free in 1860.

In early 1860, Aaron was able to conclude the purchase of Harriett's freedom, and that of Barzel and Nancy Eveline, for \$650 from Andrew Taul. He also purchased his son Anthony's freedom at that time, for \$700.²²

Aaron's purchases of himself, his wives, and a number of his children in order to free them were not sufficient to effect their emancipations. For each person, an additional step was needed: manumission documents issued under court order. In February 1860, Aaron appeared in the Clark County court, aided by a white witness, Dr. Thomas H. Robinson. At that time he requested and received the necessary certificates for Anthony, Harriett, Barzel, and Nancy Eveline. Harriett and her children were described in the court records as light-skinned; both mother and daughter were also described as good looking.²³

Once Aaron, his second wife Harriett, and most of his children were free, the couple promptly made the decision to move north of the Ohio River to a free state. By the middle of 1860, Aaron and Harriett were living in Wayne Township, Fayette County, Ohio, where he was listed as a laborer. With them in their household were Aaron's children Anthony, Martha, Margaret, Barzel, Nancy Eveline, and Mary E.²⁴ Born free soon thereafter, on September 3, 1860, was Aaron and Harriett's final child, Samuel J.

For a man as staunch of character as Aaron, and who worked so strenuously to obtain freedom for himself and his family members, one suspects that he may well have aided people passing through Ohio on the Underground Railroad. However, very few records were kept of this clandestine network and it's unlikely we'll ever know if he participated.

In 1864, Aaron's son Charles, who was born in 1842 and was still held as a slave by Zadock Kidd in Powell County, joined the war against slavery. He escaped to enlist in the 117th U.S. Colored Infantry in Covington, Kentucky. His unit was sent to the Virginia front, where he served in the siege of Richmond. In a highly dramatic moment, especially for someone who had been a slave for his entire life prior to joining the Union Army, Charles was present at Appomattox when the Confederacy met its end. Afterwards, he was assigned to garrison duty in Texas until August 1867.²⁵ Charles moved to Ohio after his military service, where he married and raised a family. Charles and his wife Mary Ann nee Gaines and their children lived near Aaron and Harriett in Blue Creek, Paulding County, Ohio.

Charles "Charley" Abbott is included in the African-American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C. (plaque D-117).

²² Anthony Abbott, encumbered by a serious physical disability, died in 1876 in Fayette County, Ohio.

²³ This information was found in *Clark County, Kentucky, a history*, p. 225; the author of that book, who mistakenly called Aaron "Adam," obtained it from the 1860 order books.

²⁴ Margaret Abbott, who moved with her family to Ohio in 1860; died before 1882.

²⁵ Gallingly, Zadock Kidd filed a claim for federal compensation on December 26, 1866 for the loss of his slave Charles Abbott due to enlistment in the Union Army. Charles' military personnel records are included with the 117th U.S. Colored Infantry records. An 1866 Freedman's Bank record for Charles, by then living in Washington, Fayette County, Ohio, also listed Zadock Kidd as Charles' former owner. Charles filed for a veteran's disability pension in 1876. He and his wife and children were included in the 1880 and 1900 Paulding County, Ohio censuses. At the end of his life, he moved to Kansas, where he died in 1907. His wife Mary Ann filed for a widow's pension after his death. After her death, she was buried in the Abbott family cemetery in Paulding County.

In 1870, Aaron and Harriett lived in Blue Creek, Paulding County, Ohio, where he was a farmer. Living with them were Barzel, Nancy Eveline, Mary E., and their youngest child, Samuel. Anthony, who had registered for the draft in 1863, remained in Wayne County, Ohio in 1870, where he worked at a retail grocery.

In 1880, Aaron and Harriett were still living in Blue Creek but their only child still living with them was Samuel. They did have two grandchildren with them, Henry Weston (born about 1861), and Mary E. Weston (born about 1868), both of whom were born in Mississippi to Harriett's daughter Betty.

After Aaron's death (probably circa 1885), Harriett moved in 1887 to Waco, Texas to be near her daughter Betty. Harriett died there in 1892.²⁶

The Abbott family cemetery in Paulding County, Ohio is still maintained today. Some of the family members mentioned in this account are buried there, including Nancy Eveline, who died on June 16, 1872 at age 15, and Henry M., who died in August 1894.

Still revered by his descendants, Aaron Abbott deserves to be more widely remembered for his indomitable commitment to freedom from slavery.

Thank you to Charles Abbott of Powell, Ohio, a descendant of this family, who contributed some of the information included in this chapter.

²⁶ The March 23, 1892 edition of the *Waco Daily News* reported that Harriett Abbott, who lived near the First Street Cemetery, was found dead of heart disease in her home on March 22 when her daughter returned home from work. Thank you to Bradford Willis of Waco for this information.