



Video Story Transcript

The Oberlin Rescue

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37hINF7xkSc>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Slavery was invented. We often don't think of it that way but it was created step by step and law by law. At first, you know, somebody could be enslaved only a certain period of time but they changed that. And it used to be that the children of people who were enslaved, they wouldn't be enslaved, they were free. Well, they changed that. And it used to be they would give rewards to people if they caught somebody who escaped but that wasn't working because so many people were escaping slavery. So they tried punishment. In 1850, they patched... passed the Fugitive Slave Law. Now, it said if you knew somebody was escaping and you didn't assist in their arrest, you would get fined. If you helped, you'd get fined and you would be sent to jail.

But one town, Oberlin, Ohio, said, "Uh, uh, we're not doing it." Now it had been known as a pretty progressive town, they refused to celebrate the 4th of July. And they said, "How can we celebrate Independence Day when we have people on our land who are enslaved?" And they're the first folks to send men, women, and blacks to college. And they were the first folks you had, um, had more... um, everybody could vote there before that was true of the rest of the nation.

So, some people said that the Civil War almost started earlier in Oberlin because of something that happened in 1857. Here's what happened. There were two people who are enslaved down in Kentucky. They're just a quarter mile, two blocks away from the Ohio River that separated the South and the North. But they had been enslaved by a man named John Bacon, and their names were John and Dinah. And they wanted to be free. Now this was very risky business because, of course, you'll be shot, killed, maimed, whatever, trying to

escape. And that was kind of the lucky ones because if they caught you and brought you back, ah, your life could really be hard.

But John and Dinah didn't care. They were two cousins who wanted to be free. And they saw their chance. One night, when John Bacon went off to visit family, and the man who was put in charge to watch the enslaved people on that plantation, kind of had a reputation of being somebody who fell asleep on the job. Well, word spread that he was asleep. And then, John and Dinah, they crept into the barn. Now can you imagine how hard it was to keep two horses quiet? They managed to get the horses out of that barn and then they rode in the opposite direction. Now it wasn't that they didn't know where they were. Now, this happened to a lot of people. You get captured in Africa, you get brought here. It's not like somebody showed you a map of where you were. But it wasn't because they didn't know where they were. They were doing something very brave. They were going the opposite direction to go get their friend, Frank, who also wanted to escape. They picked him up, two on one horse, one on the other. They raced back to the Ohio River. Got across with no problem because it was winter and the river was frozen. When they got to the other side, they couldn't find the path up that bank.

Now remember, this was back in the 1800's. There were no electric street lights or whatever. Pitch darkness; scrambling all night in the freezing cold. They didn't have coats or anything. (That was one of the ways they kept people who are enslaved from running is that they take their shoes or heavy coats at night.) Scrambling, trying to find the path up and couldn't find it. And they knew that if the sun came up that morning, oh, my goodness, they'd be so easy to spot. Three people, two horses on the bank. So they kept on all night. And finally, they find their way up.

And then John did something, to me it's kind of amazing.

He said, "Nobody can own me, but John Bacon owned these horses."

Now, I don't know about you, but if I've been working free all my life, and my mom had been and my grandma had been, I'd be thinking these horses belong to me. But he hit them on the rump and sent them home. And then they went on their way. They split up. Dinah went with somebody from the underground railroad and Frank and John headed up to Oberlin. Now, the plan was they'd be in Oberlin and wait for Lake Erie to thaw and move up to Canada. When they got to Oberlin, it must've felt like a fantasyland. There were black storekeepers. There were black people going to college! They got a job with a farmer paying a dollar a day. Well, after working for free, that seemed like a lot. So they decided to stay. And John took the name John Price.

What he didn't know was that slavecatchers had been sent after them. A man named Anderson Jennings was a professional slavecatcher. He could get as much as a thousand dollars, a lot of money back then, if he caught somebody. So, not everybody was progressive in Oberlin. He found a family he knew that he could count on, the Boyntons, and this is a great name. He got their son, 10-year-old boy, Shakespeare Boynton, gave him twenty dollars and told him to go pick up John and Frank. So, Shakespeare took his buggy and went to the farm where John was working. "Hey, my dad's paying two dollars a day, twice as much, come and help."

Now, John, he was a loyal friend. He said, "No, my friend, Frank, is kind of sick. I can't go." Good! But then he said, "But I know somebody who really needs the money. I'll show you where he's staying." And he got in

the buggy with Shakespeare. And Shakespeare started driving the wrong way and John's like, "No, my friend's over here." Drive them into the woods. And, all of a sudden, another buggy comes tromping up behind. Men jump out with rifles, grab John, tie him up, throw him in their buggy and off they go!

Now, Anderson Jennings and his men knew they weren't going to try to get on the train at Oberlin. That town was not a friendly place for them. So went nine miles south to Wellington and they rented the third floor, like, attic, because it wasn't coming... a night train was coming, and they had to wait. They could see from that vantage point if anybody was coming, if there was any trouble. Well, luckily, an Oberlin student saw all this going on, saw John get captured, and went running into town.

"They've got John! They've got John Price! Hurry!"

People went out on horses, on their buggies, they went to the livery station and rented some, they went out on foot to go the nine miles to Wellington. And imagine Anderson Jennings surprise when he saw a hundred people show up in front of that Wadsworth Hotel where they were waiting. And then two hundred people in the square. Three hundred, four hundred, five hundred, six hundred, seven hundred people came down. Remember all these people were breaking the federal law, the Fugitive Slave Law. All of them could be in prison but they were shouting, "Give us John Price! Give us John Price!"

Well, Anderson Jennings got kind of nervous. He sent one of his men to the telegraph office to send a wire, sending for soldiers because it was federal law. Sent for the federal soldiers to come help them. And the rumors spread in the crowd.

"The soldiers are coming. We better make our move." So one group went up the front of the hotel, the other went up the back.

But now it was kind of light, and they couldn't see where they were going. All of sudden, the group that went up the back, saw Anderson Jennings' men there with rifles. And one of the Oberlin (*Anderson Jennings'*) men took his rifle, ready to shoot. And just at that moment, then the Oberlin man hit that rifle, and it hit - the bullet went right up into the ceiling. He said, "No! No violence!" Now this was an African-American man who had the lashes down his back to prove that he could have been out for revenge but instead, he said no violence. But that was enough to scare Jennings' men. They went running off. That group went up the back steps, they met the group that had gone up the top steps. Remember, there's no lights, electricity, back then. It was getting dark. So it's kind of like, I don't know if you saw the old comedy of the Keystone Cops; doodalum, doodalum; kind of running into each other, trying to figure out where is the room John might be in. And just at that moment, Anderson Jennings pulled his head back and looked through a hole where an old stove pipe he had been, trying to see down the dark of the hall; who's making that noise.

Just then one of the Oberlin men took his rifle and put it down that hall and bonked, bonked Jennings on the head. He fell to the ground and let go of the rope he was holding. That's all they were using to close the door, wasn't even locked. The door swung open. The Oberlin people came in. There was all this confusion. But they knew they had John when they heard the cheers outside of, "Yeah, John!" of the whole crowd cheering. And they whisked him off. We don't know where exactly. Some say Canada. I like to think he and his cousin Dinah found each other.

Well, the federal marshals came marching into town. They arrest 37 people – legislators, farmers, a 74-year-old man - none of them had previous records except one who had been fined \$1 for smoking a cigar on the Oberlin street. When they came into the classroom to arrest one of the teachers, this little first grader stood up and he said, “Why our teacher had more goodness in his little finger than your entire carcass!” And they jailed these people, 37 Oberlin people, at maximum security in Cleveland.

They said, “We’ve got to make an example! These Oberlin people have always been pushing against the laws. We got to make an example.”

But it backfired. Four thousand people came to visit them. School children wrote letters. People wrote articles calling them the new patriots. And Jennings came up to that trial; which was completely rigged by the way, you can’t believe what they did in that trial; when Jennings, Anderson Jennings the slavecatcher, came up to that trial, the Oberlin people kidnapped him. And they made him sign something that said he would never come trying to catch enslaved people who had previously been a slave before. And after that, the government’s case just completely fell apart and they had to release them. And when they did, bands met them, people played Yankee Doodle Dandy, cannons were shot up, they got on the train in Cleveland, and they went to Oberlin. And when they got there, this little town of under 2,000 people, there were 5,000 people there to greet them. And they had a huge rally, and at that rally, everybody stood up and took a pledge that nobody would ever be caught in their town again. And nobody ever was.

That’s the kind of people we come from. That’s our legacy. We come from a group of people who have always stood up for each other. People who said they would risk anything for freedom. People who have refused to be divided and said, “No! We are one American family!”