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Downtown Oberlin Walking Tour of Civil War Monuments

Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument

Main Tour

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Extended Tour



Courtesy of Oberlin College Archives

Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument, East Vine Street

On the morning of September 13, 1858, John Price, a young black man, was approached by Shakespeare Boynton, the son of a wealthy Oberlin landholder. Price was unable to provide for himself and had been staying at the house of James Armstrong, a black laborer who often boarded fugitives. Unbeknownst to Price, Boynton had been sent by a group of Kentucky slavecatchers who had been frustrated in their previous attempts to find fugitive slaves, as well as two Columbus deputies. Boynton persuaded Price to go with him by saying that the Boyntons needed help harvesting crops, and they went off in a buggy. Suddenly, the conspirators intercepted the buggy holding guns and knives, forced Price into their carriage, and proceeded to Wellington.

When news of this incident reached Oberlin about noon that day, a large crowd of Oberlinians, including blacks and whites, townspeople and students, rode off towards Wellington. Included in the crowd were such prominent Oberlinians as Charles Langston, the brother of John Mercer Langston, and James M. Fitch, bookseller and superintendent of the Oberlin Sunday School. John Watson, a grocer, reached Wellington about two o'clock and ran into town yelling, "Kidnappers!" The Kentuckians, alarmed at his appearance, took Price up to the attic of the hotel where they were staying, and hid there, while the Columbus deputies gathered a posse to guard the doors. Soon a mob of Oberlinians had gathered by the hotel demanding Price's release.

Meanwhile, Charles Langston, Watson, and O. B. Wall, another Oberlinian, attempted to seek legal action, first trying to persuade the village constable to arrest the slavecatchers for kidnapping, and then trying to secure a habeus corpus (a court petition which orders that a person being detained be produced before a judge for a hearing to decide whether the detention is lawful). Despite the failure of these attempts, Langston still endeavored to find a non-violent solution to the crisis, first seeking to calm the crowd, which had become increasingly agitated, then going

to talk to Jacob Lowe, one of Price's captors. However, Langston soon realized that the kidnappers would not give Price up, but informed Lowe that, "we will have him anyhow."

When the crowd learned that Langston's negotiations had failed they quickly sprang into action. Wilson Evans, John Copeland, Jr., and Jerry Fox rushed the door guards, and allowed some of the rescuers to enter the inn. A struggle soon broke out in the hotel, during which Richard Winsor, a theological student, led Price outside, where he was led to a buggy and rushed back to Oberlin. Once in Oberlin, the rescuers celebrated their triumph over the hated Fugitive Slave Act. Price was hidden in the home of Oberlin College President James Fairchild, and later taken across the border to Canada.

Thirty-seven of the rescuers were later arrested for their participation in the event. Over the course of the trial, they chose to remain in jail rather than post bail, in solidarity with Charles Langston and Simeon Bushnell who had been convicted and sentenced for their actions. Bushnell was sentenced to sixty days, and Langston had his sentence reduced to twenty days as the result of an impassioned speech, which is presented below. While in prison, the "jail-birds," as they came to be known, attempted to carry on with their lives, even printing a newspaper entitled "The Rescuer."

Eventually the men from Kentucky and Columbus who had captured John Price were arrested and charged with kidnapping. In return for the charges against them being dropped, they chose to drop the charges against the rest of the rescuers. Thus, on July 7, 1859, all the rescuers except for Bushnell, who was still serving out his sentence, returned to Oberlin amid great celebration. Bushnell returned to Oberlin on July 11th, and was also greeted with a crowd to welcome him home.

Text on monument:

"In the spring of 1859, twenty Oberlinians went to jail for the crime of rescuing John Price from slavery."

"With all their comrades in the Abolition Cause, they kindled hopes of freedom for us all."

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