

The *Keziah* Affair, 1858

This article is one of a series of articles developed under the editorship of LTC (Ret.) John R. Kennedy, III as part of Preservation Petersburg's Peter Jones Trading Station Initiative, 2012-14. Many of the articles served as source materials for the "Petersburg Moments in Time" broadcast series produced by Professor Dan Roberts.

The successful and even abortive escape attempts of Virginia slaves to the North often engendered a visceral response from the white population. In 1855, the *Norfolk Southern Argus* wrote that the "frequent escapes of fugitives from our port" were "an intolerable evil." To counter this "evil," in March 1856 the Virginia General Assembly decreed that all ships leaving Virginia for the North must be inspected. This law made the transport of slaves from Virginia much more dangerous for ship's captains.

Early on May 28, 1858, an Isle of Wight County slave named Anthony was found aboard the New Jersey schooner *Francis French* in the James River. Approximately 2,000 incensed Norfolk citizens were on the riverfront of that city when the schooner's crew arrived for their court appearance. The crew and William Thompson, Anthony's friend, were sentenced to jail. Thompson was a free black and a cook on the ship, and he had hid Anthony on board. That night, many citizens of Norfolk and Portsmouth gathered to express their anger over the abortive slave escape in perhaps the largest public meeting in Norfolk history.

On the following day, a two-masted schooner named the *Keziah* weighed anchor from the port of Petersburg with a cargo of wheat. The Captain of the *Keziah* was William Baylis, and Joseph Simpkins was his mate. However, the ship ran aground a mere five miles downriver. This was very unfortunate for the captain and his cargo of wheat, but even more ill-timed for the rest of his cargo: Gilbert, Sarah, William, John Bull, and Joe Mayo. They were slaves from Petersburg seeking to escape to the North. Each had specific reasons to attempt such a risky endeavor. Joe Mayo, for instance, sought to escape to join his wife in New York City; she had escaped from Petersburg a few years before. They placed their trust and hopes in a veteran conductor, for Captain Baylis and his two brothers had transported slaves out of Virginia for a number of years. In fact, Captain Baylis was among the most active and successful waterway conductors on the Underground Railroad.

On May 30th, Thomas W. Epes discovered the disappearance of his slaves Gilbert and Sarah. Mr. Epes operated Powell's Hotel on the west side of Sycamore Street just south of Tabb Street. He placed an advertisement in the *Petersburg Daily Express*, to run on the next day, offering \$50 apiece for the return of each slave. He also spoke with Andrew Kevan, who had just realized that his slave John Bull was missing. Together, they sought the Petersburg wharfmaster, Henry Pannill. Mr. Pannill told them that he had seen John Bull on the wharf on the evening of May 29th. He also expressed his surprise that the ship had left the harbor when the wind was coming from the east. Based on this evidence, Petersburg Mayor William Waverly Townes authorized a search party. On May 31st, the party spied the *Keziah* 26 miles below City Point and found the five missing slaves from Petersburg on board. The captain and his mate were arrested, and they and their ship with the five slaves were brought back to Petersburg.

It did not take long for this story to spread far and wide. The *Petersburg Daily Express* reported that Petersburg became "the theatre of the most intensely exciting event that has ever transpired within its limits." Not only did the local newspaper report this story, but it received coverage throughout Virginia and beyond, including Baltimore, New York, and Providence. When Captain Baylis's wife Martha heard of his arrest, she petitioned a Petersburg official to help her husband, but to no avail. Mayor Townes postponed Captain Baylis's scheduled June 1st hearing to allow the heightened tensions to cool. The city leaders intended to sell the *Keziah* for \$800 upon the conviction of Captain Baylis. He was indeed found guilty of five counts of abduction and sentenced to 40 years in prison.

The imprisonment of Captain Baylis did not end the saga of the *Keziah* affair. Joseph Simpkins, the mate aboard the *Keziah*, spent five months in prison. He was set free in November 1858. After this affair, the only known conductor on the Underground Railroad in Petersburg, "Ham and Eggs," was active as late as 1860. The fate of only one of the five slaves captured aboard the *Keziah* is known. A man bought John Bull for \$1,150 and took him to Tennessee. It is interesting that this slave was worth almost 50% more than the asking price for the schooner *Keziah*. Captain Baylis spent only six years of his 40-year sentence behind bars. He returned home to Wilmington, Delaware, in March 1865. His wife Martha was indefatigable in her

efforts to obtain his release. She even moved to Richmond and lived there for 2 ½ years to plead his cause. Ironically, two months before he was set free, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, freeing the slaves, was approved by the U.S. Congress and sent to the states for ratification. Within a month of his release, Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

Generally, slaves who wanted to escape to the North were willing to pay handsomely to obtain their freedom. However, the conductors were motivated by more than monetary profit, for the risks were great. Plantation owners had more control over their slaves than did slave owners in cities like Petersburg. Many slaves in Southern cities worked in trades and were hired out to others. Those who did escape from Virginia by a water route generally hid aboard a large, passenger steamship that routinely sailed between Richmond and cities in the North.

Twenty-three years after his arrest and incarceration, William Baylis died in Wilmington, Delaware, on February 7, 1881. The *Petersburg Index-Appeal* characterized Captain Baylis's life as "eventful." The memory of the *Keziah* affair lived long for some Petersburg citizens. The well-known physician in Petersburg during the Civil War, John Herbert Claiborne, remembered the event vividly 46 years later when he wrote, "This incident... served to awaken our citizens to a sense of the insecurity of their property."