



excerpt

The Abolition of War

Introduction to *No Strangers Here Today*
by Susan Banyas

War cannot be humanized. It can only be abolished. – Albert Einstein



Ohio River, Ripley, Ohio

It is your civilization, it is you. Good or evil, you belong to it, and this side of the grave you will never get away from the marks that it has given you. – George Orwell

No Strangers Here

At the heart of this story is my great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth Conard Edwards, who wrote down a few of her memories of life on a farm in southern Ohio in 1864, three years into the American Civil War. When her diary fell into my hands, her private thoughts became public and history became personal. Coded entries in her daily notations - *No Strangers here today* - verify that Elizabeth Edwards and her family, who were Quakers, were a link in the Underground Railroad, the clandestine network between blacks and whites that defied federal authority to move fugitives of slavery north to Canada and freedom.

Quakers called the fugitives *travelers* and *strangers*.

January 1, 1864

I arose this morning twelve minutes after five, found it middling cold, thermometer ten degrees below zero, blowing strong. No Strangers here, but Adeline sewing at Maria's dress. Men sitting around. Too cold to work.

In the shadow of the story is freedom's opposite. The thinking that justified the ownership of humans did not die in the Civil War or end with the passage of the 13th Amendment. Economic systems that depend on "cheap" labor and military dominance are still considered normal. War is considered normal. Slavery was considered normal.

America had the largest slave population in the world prior to the Civil War—four million people were enslaved in the brutal "overseer system of plantation management." The enslaved were worth "at least \$3 billion in 1860... more than all the capital invested in railroads and factories in the United States combined."ⁱ

Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850 protected slave owners and their "property rights." Harboring or assisting a fugitive, even in the "free" states north of the Mason-Dixon Line, carried heavy penalties – fines, incarceration, confiscation of property, and torture. Local law enforcement, backed by federal law, enlisted bounty hunters – "slave catchers" – to hunt down fugitives, kidnap free blacks, and transport the human "property" back to their masters in the South.

Slave uprisings and anti-slavery protests began to test the system. The victorious Haitian revolution (1791-1804), led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, pushed it to the edge. Haiti became the first independent Black Republic, and plantation owners fled to the American South, taking their slaves with them. But their slaves secretly introduced the word "freedom" into the lexicon.

The word spread.

“America is more our country than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our blood and tears.” David Walker’s *Appeal in Four Articles, To the Coloured Citizens of the World*, circa 1829, was one of the first abolitionist texts. Before he died in Boston – possibly assassinated by the slaveocracy – he circulated his *Appeal* North and South. *“The greatest riches in America have arisen from our blood and tears. Oh! My coloured brethren all over the world, when shall we arise from this death-like apathy? – and be men?”*

In the Midwest, the Reverend John Rankin, a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad in Ripley, Ohio on the Ohio River, worked for forty years prior to the Civil War to end American slavery and the thinking that allowed it. In 1824 Rankin published *Letters on American Slavery Addressed to Mr. Thomas Rankin*, his brother, a slaveholder. *“God did not create Africans for slavery. Their ancestors were born free, and the nation that enslaves them cultivates cruelty and tyranny.”*

Good News

My ancestors arrived in the New World in 1683 to escape religious persecution in Europe. Quakers were considered criminals because they would not remove their big black hats and bow to the nobility in passing. George Fox founded this renegade Christian sect in the 1600s, walked all over England, when he wasn’t in prison, spreading his *Good News* about the *Inner Light*. Every person has *within* the test of truth upon which she may rely. The Religious Society of Friends opposed the “binding character of authority,” refused to take vows, claimed that war was “incompatible with the Christian spirit.”ⁱⁱⁱ So the authorities tortured, killed, and imprisoned Quakers by the hundreds.

But the *Good News* spread.

Elizabeth Conard Edwards’ Dutch-German clan, *Conard*, translated from the original *Kunrad*, were followers of George Fox.

From the *Genealogy of the Conard Family*:

“In the latter part of June, 1683, twelve families, numbering all thirty three persons, forced by persecution to act in self-defense, but guided by their religious principal of non- resistance by force, and their policy of flight from oppression, bade farewell to the Rhine, and began their journey to the free and quiet home in the wilds of Pennsylvania.”

My ancestors lived in caves until they built the first dwellings in what became the Germantown settlement, “with hipped roofs... surrounded by their fruitful orchards, and fronted by their avenue of peach trees.”

They lived in “*peace with the red man, a vivid contrast to the troubled and bloody persecutors of Indians and Friends,*” referring to the witch-burning Puritans, who hated the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers valued the education and leadership of women and spoke out against oppression. “*In 1688*”, the genealogy notes, “*the first protest against slavery in the new colonies originated with the German Friends.*”

Holy Experiment

Penn-Sylvania was a colony granted to William Penn by the British Crown to clear up a family debt, making Penn the largest private, non-royal landowner in the New World. He was also a follower of George Fox and the teachings on the *Inner Light* and drew from Quaker philosophy to frame his *Holy Experiment* – a vision of society mutual trust and respect. He encouraged Quakers and other religious refugees to purchase property in his colony, sail from London, and settle in the New World, free of oppression.

Penn built schools, paid Indians for land they agreed to sell, gave servants fifty acres of land. And Penn owned and traded slaves. He drew up plans for Philadelphia, constructed a *Frame of Government* and drafted a *Charter of Liberties* to guarantee absolute freedom of worship, insure fair trial by jury and free elections, with a governing body of commoners (the Assembly) and landowners (the Council). Penn’s innovative document included a new and radical idea. Amendments. “*Governments, like clocks, go with the motion men give them,*”ⁱⁱⁱ he wrote. The people had the power to re-frame the social contract.

Penn, however, was an absentee landlord, spending long stretches of time back in Europe, dealing with the Crown. Anti-slavery sentiment was growing in the colony. Quaker elite wanted more power. The colonists were taking their *Charter of Liberties* to heart. While Penn was away, they re-wrote the Charter, eliminated the Upper House (wealthy elite), strengthened the Assembly (commoners), ignored British authority, paid few taxes, had no public debt, fought no war, and prospered.

For several decades prior to the American Revolution, the colonists of Pennsylvania, including my ancestors who settled in Bucks County, lived cooperatively together as varying religious groups, races and classes of people in an unruly society that also became a center for politics, science, and commerce.

“*Then let us try what love can do to mend a broken world,*” William Penn wrote in 1693.

His *Holy Experiment* was not perfect, but he stood by his dream, and Humanism took root.

Shadow

By the time the Founding Fathers trotted into the City of Brotherly Love to write the American Constitution (1787), Philadelphia was a multi-cultural party town; and a group of twenty-four men, mostly Quakers, had founded the first anti-slavery society in America, the *Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery*.

Earthy commoners tumbling out of taverns, pleasurable mingling among the races, anti-slavery advocates threatening the economic order deeply disturbed the Fathers' refined sensibilities. They designed an eloquent document to rein it in. They framed their democratic model on the philosophy of *Enlightenment*, on ideas of freedom; but half of the delegates were slave owners and all were wealthy landowners who did not want to disrupt their manifest destiny, who supported the ongoing genocide of the North American indigenous tribes to amass property, who raised armies (sacrificed young men) to beat back the British and French to keep *their* land, and who would not relinquish power. Only white male landowners were allowed to vote and govern. The Fathers did borrow from William Penn and wrote in the loophole, the Amendment process, starting with the *Bill of Rights*, to keep up enlightened appearances.

The set-up, was a signal to the shadow.

During the next fifty years of America's democratic experiment, the South grew to become the 5th largest economy in the world. The slaveocracy—a powerful coalition of financial institutions, political elite, and wealthy landowners—held the federal government in check through economic power, assassinated enemies, advocated white supremacy as god-given, agitated for “states rights,” a euphemism for domination by the local ruling elite, and intensified wars of aggression against Indians and Mexicans to make way for King Cotton. They built a booming domestic slave trade, after the Atlantic slave trade was “abolished” in 1808, to service the British textile industry. Money was flowing from the Cotton Kingdom to Wall Street to Europe. The slave trade “energized” the market.

A slave owner in Kentucky, fifty miles south of Elizabeth Edwards' farm, could make more money tearing a family apart and force-marching each one down to Natchez, Mississippi to slave markets near the cotton fields than he could growing tobacco on his own plantation.

Safe House

A counterforce also grew during those fifty years. By 1836, the number of antislavery societies in the nation numbered more than five hundred and doubled again in 1837,^{iv} the same year Elizabeth and Robert Edwards packed their children and all their possessions in a “two horse jersey wagon, covered with a canvas top,” and traveled for three weeks across Pennsylvania into Ohio to settle in New

Lexington, a Quaker stronghold fifty miles north of the Ohio River and the Ripley branch of the Underground Railroad.

By then the Underground Railroad had grown from a scattered grassroots resistance movement into a vast network of Friends, free blacks, preaching women, pastors, intellectuals, newspapers, lobbying organizations, wealthy patrons, progressive politicians, “station masters,” “conductors,” “safe houses,” and former slaves on the abolitionist lecture circuits.

Frederick Douglass passed through Greenfield, Ohio in 1844, a few miles from the Edwards’ farm, to address several churches on the issue of slavery. The town folk were so enamored with Douglass they gave him a riding horse and saddle as a farewell gift.

Had Elizabeth and Robert hitched up the buggy and trotted over to hear the roar of the great orator?

This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.^v

Joining a clandestine movement was not common practice among Quakers, even those who were abolitionists. Direct action protest was thought to be aggressive by orthodox Quakers, who sought to avoid conflict. But Elizabeth and Robert Edwards were Hicksites, the “un-programmed,” progressive branch of Quakers. They decided to actively resist state-sanctioned violence and quietly joined the great movement that snaked its way from the deep South to the Canadian border, outsmarting southern sympathizers, slave catchers, and U.S. marshals, to become what Henry David Thoreau, in *Civil Disobedience*, called “a counter-friction to the machine.”

The red brick farmhouse, built by Robert Edwards in 1852, was a “safe house.”

January 7

A light skill of snow fell last night. Went to help Suzanne McCoy quilt a skirt. Abbie got a letter from Willie. He is at Camp Chase. No Strangers here today.

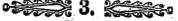

 JANUARY.
 
 1864


 1.
 

I arose this morning 10 minutes
 later of 5 found it very cold
 other weather, 10 degrees below
 zero blowing strong, no strangers
 there but Adaline, the girls
 sitting at Maria's desk, some
 sitting around, too cold to work


 2.
 

Still cold temperature
 about the same, done some
 baking, not very well.
 & Pradson come home, too
 cold to work. Barber and posse
 went to Leesburg, and Cox


 3.
 

arose at 6 a little warmer
 Adaline & Edwards and the
 girls, went to meeting. ~~of~~
 no strangers here today
 I wrote to Willie.

Susan Banyas, *The Abolition of War* ©2013

ⁱ Walter Johnson, "King Cotton's Long Shadow," *NY Times*, March 30, 2013

ⁱⁱ John Fitzgerald, *A Peaceable Pilgrimage*

ⁱⁱⁱ Dobrée Bonamy, *William Penn: Quaker and Pioneer*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1932, NY

^{iv} Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound For Canaan/The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*, New York: Amistad/HarperCollins, 2005.

^v Frederick Douglass, *On Slavery and the Civil War*, selections, Dover, New York, 2003