

Document Adaptations: *Anthony Burns and the Fugitive Slave Act*

The three letters copied below are adapted from the originals. The language has been simplified and spelling has been standardized. Punctuation, grammar, and paragraph formatting have been modified for easier reading. We have strived to retain the full meaning of the text and voice of the authors.

Mary Blanchard to Benjamin Seaver, 4 June 1854

In this letter, Mary Elizabeth Blanchard of Boston writes to her father Benjamin Seaver, who was traveling in Europe. Seaver had been Mayor of Boston from 1852-1853, and Blanchard wrote him letters to tell him about the news happening in her family, the city, and the country.

*In this **excerpt**, Blanchard describes the crowded and angry scene in Boston following Anthony Burns' trial. People in the city had been paying a lot of attention to the case; more than 50,000 people—out of a city of about 137,000—gathered to witness and protest as police officers and federal troops forcibly returned Burns to slavery.*

Roxbury, MA
June 4, 1854

My very dear Father,

...The last week will long be remembered as a sad one by the citizens of Boston...Burns' trial was continued on Monday and Tuesday & Wednesday, and each day the nervous anticipation grew, crowds surrounded the Court House, and soldiers & Marines were inside the building to protect it. . . On Friday at 10:00am the judge gave his decision in favor of Suttle [the enslaver], and preparations to take Burns away began immediately.

A steamship was ready at L **wharf**, and the Mayor ordered out all the State military and police force...to keep the peace of the city. From 10:00am until 3:00pm, the streets from the wharf to the Court House were lined with military. During all that time State Street was blocked, so all businesses there had to shut down. About 200 volunteers surrounded the slave, a good looking fellow, and walked him down the street. Each one of these men had a drawn sword, or knife. Several companies of soldiers marched ahead of and behind Burns, and one group had a six pound cannon all loaded.

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This march was witnessed by thousands of people, who all hissed and shouted. Many of the buildings were draped with black, and the Commonwealth building put out a black coffin with the word **Liberty** upon it. An effort was made during the week to buy the slave, and his supporters raised \$1,200. But when the money was offered to Captain Suttle he refused it. One of the police officers, Mr. J K Hayes, **resigned** his office after he was ordered to be part of the police force that marched Burns to the steamship. Many are angry the Mayor used the military to shut down the city and return Burns to slavery. . .without the military, people think the public would have rescued the slave ... I suppose the South will consider his return to slavery a great victory...

I am ever your affectionate daughter,
Mary E. Blanchard

Glossary

Excerpt: a piece taken from a text

Wharf: a place built on the water where ships can dock to load and unload people and cargo

Liberty: Freedom

Resigned: gave up

Cite this letter: Letter from Mary E. Blanchard to Benjamin Seaver, 4 June 1854, From Letters to Benjamin Seaver, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/database/1999>

Anthony Burns to Richard Henry Dana, Jr., 23 August 1854

Charles Suttle, Anthony Burns' enslaver, had Burns held in jail after he was forced back to Virginia from Boston. Suttle may have thought Burns would run away again. Burns valued his freedom and himself as a person. Suttle only valued him for the free labor (work) that he gave him. In the past, Suttle had also profited (earned money) from Burns when other men paid Suttle for Burns to work for them.

In this letter, Burns writes to his former lawyer, the white abolitionist Richard Henry Dana, Jr., from jail. Burns urges his Massachusetts supporters to buy his freedom. In Boston, abolitionists had offered to pay Suttle \$1,200 for Burns' freedom, but Suttle refused. Now, Burns believes Suttle will take less money for him, as long as he doesn't know the buyers are Burns' friends.

Richmond, Virginia
August 23rd, 1854

My dear Mr. Dana,

I take this opportunity to write you a short note and I hope my letter finds you in good health. I am glad to say that I am still alive through the mercy of God and the Lord Jesus Christ who have protected me through much suffering. I am glad you and all my friends in Boston tried to protect me even though you could not keep me from returning to slavery. My suffering would have been one thousand times worse than it is now if no one had tried to help me.

But I am yet bound in jail and am wearing my chains night and day. I am waiting for some kind person to come rescue me. The man or men that brought me to this jail said that they were going to buy me, but they haven't, and I don't think they will. They told Mr. Suttle, my owner, not to let my friends in Boston have me, but I am for sale. If you all will please buy my freedom I will be a friend to you for the rest of my life. Please arrange for some of your friends to come to Alexandria, Virginia. Don't say that you come from Boston. Find Mr. Suttle and ask him if has sold me. If he has not, ask how much it will cost to buy me. You can get me for a low price--he would take \$800 for me now. I pray in the name of the Lord that you will help me out of my suffering this one time, please.

Anthony Burns
P.S. Don't write to me until I tell you to.

Cite this letter: Letter from Anthony Burns to Richard Henry Dana, Jr., 23 August 1854, From Dana Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

History SOURCE

Anthony Burns to Richard Henry Dana, Jr., 9 July 1859

As a free man, Burns moves to Ohio to study for the ministry at Oberlin College. Oberlin began admitting Black students and women in the 1830s. Known for its abolitionist sentiment, Oberlin was also a stop on the Underground Railroad and aided freedom seekers. On July 9, 1859, the twenty-five-year old Burns writes again to Richard Henry Dana, Jr. In the letter, Burns describes a visit from his brother who had recently bought his own freedom; discusses his reasons for not celebrating the fourth of July; and asks Dana for help withdrawing money from his bank account.

A note on the style of the letter: In the first paragraph, Burns apologizes for not writing more often and tells Dana how much he respects him. Burns' compliments and polite tone may have been sincere. It's also possible he wanted to flatter Dana because, at the end of the letter, he asks Dana to do him an important favor (send him money from his bank account) and needs him to say 'yes.'

Cincinnati, Ohio

9 July 1859

Mr. Dana,

I gladly take the opportunity to write you a few lines, and hope they find you, your family, and friends all well. I had thought of writing before now, but I didn't because I thought I would come to Boston this summer. But I now realize that I will not be able to come because I do not have the time and it is too expensive. I hope you will not think that my infrequent letters to you show a lack of respect for you. There is no one I respect more than you as a gentleman, friend, and scholar. I will say that although I now write, there will be nothing found in my letter that is interesting to you.

There is one thing, however, that is quite interesting to me. It is the **emancipation** of one of my brothers in Louisiana, Wachita Monroe. He bought himself. He recently visited me. I had not seen him for twenty years, and on the day we met, we rejoiced and celebrated more than on the 4th of July.

I am not able to speak very positively of the 4th of July or the cause of celebrating it in the U.S., because it was not the day on which my **liberty**, or the freedom of all Black people was achieved.

The people here (at Oberlin College) did celebrate a lot on the 4th of July, but I suggested to my people that we should spend the day praying to God for an emancipation day for the whole human race to arrive soon. I continue my studies and hope I will be able to do so for a while.

Mr. Dana, I have a favor to ask you and I hope I will not be asking too much. I am out of money in Ohio, but I have a little saved in the Savings Bank in Boston. I cannot get my money unless I send my bank book

History SOURCE

to someone I trust in Boston so that they can withdraw some of the money and send it to me. I don't know anyone more trustworthy than you. If I send you my bank book, will you please take out some money and send it to me? If so, please write back to me quickly because I am in great need.

With regards,
Anthony Burns

Glossary

Emancipation: freedom

Liberty: freedom

Cite this letter: Letter from Anthony Burns to Richard Henry Dana, Jr., 9 July 1859, From the Dana Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/database/2499>