

African Americans in the Gold Rush

Excerpts From PBS: American Experience



Stephen Hill, Courtesy: Greg French

The Story of an “Escaped” Slave in Gold Rush California:

In September 1854, Owen R. Rozier complained to the *San Joaquin Republican* (a California newspaper) that his slave, Stephen Spencer Hill, had escaped from the steamer (ship) *Urilda* the night before Rozier and Hill were to set sail for Arkansas. Further, Rozier

alleged (claimed) that Hill had stolen his gold watch and thirteen dollars in cash. "Mr. Rozier is still in this city, at the St. Charles hotel, where he would be glad to receive any information of the fugitive," the newspaper read.

Liberated

It's

doubtful Rozier got much help. Stephen Spencer Hill's escape was no fluke, but a plan concocted by his white neighbors to free him. Known as the Gold Spring Boys, Hill's neighbors didn't believe he was Rozier's property. They had spent months trying to extricate (remove) Hill from the white man's clutches.

Court Ruled against Hill

California was a free state, but under state and federal laws a fugitive (runaway) slave could be captured and returned to his owner. Rozier claimed he was the agent for Wood Tucker, of Arkansas, who had brought Hill to California. Hill didn't have the paperwork to prove he was a free man, and a judge ruled in Rozier's favor.

Slavery in the Gold Rush

White southerners brought black slaves into the California mines as early as the summer of 1849. Slave owners and slaves came primarily from western U.S. states -- Texas, Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas. Among them were Stephen Spencer Hill and Wood Tucker, who mined near Columbia. Slavery wasn't popular in the mines, but there were no laws barring it in the early days of the gold rush.

Delegates Declared California a Free State

By

September of 1849 Californians were tired of waiting for the federal government to act on the matter of their statehood. Forty-eight state delegates gathered in Monterey and voted to join the Union. Many of California's delegates were from slave states, but they were also miners. They had experienced the hard physical toil (work) of digging for gold and the majority thought slavery an unfair advantage in the mines. They declared California a free state, writing into the constitution, "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, unless for punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated in this State."

Anti-slavery, Not Anti-racist

The

Monterey delegates who made California a free state did so largely

on the basis of the mining economy. They did not extend civil rights to California's African Americans or Native Americans. Both groups were denied the right to vote and the right to testify (speak) in court. One delegate had even rallied substantial support for banning blacks from California altogether, but the provision was dropped from the constitution. In 1852 California passed its own version of the Fugitive Slave Law, allowing white slave owners to reclaim escaped black slaves.

From Miner to Farmer

When

Hill's owner Wood Tucker returned to Arkansas in April 1853, Hill purchased (bought) his freedom and remained in California. He bought 160 acres and cleared 40 to plant wheat and barley. To buy farm equipment, he mined, once pulling out a nine-ounce nugget. Hill was well-liked by his neighbors. When Rozier showed up to take Hill back to Arkansas, he faced local opposition (disagreement), but Rozier had the law on his side.

Hill Flees

Acting on Rozier's claim that Tucker still owned Hill, the sheriff threw Hill in jail. Legally, Hill was unable to speak on his own behalf, but the Gold Spring Boys got him an attorney. They also harvested Hill's crops so Rozier couldn't profit from them.

Ultimately, Hill lost his battle in court, but the Gold Spring Boys won the fight for their friend's freedom. The night before Rozier and Hill were to sail from California, Hill's friends got Rozier drunk and Hill disappeared.