Jermain Loguen and The Jerry Rescue

As tensions over slavery escalated in the mid 1800's, U.S. politicians were desperate to pass legislation they thought would pacify Southern politicians, who felt that the personal liberty laws being enacted in the North were interfering with Southern property rights.

The Fugitive Slave Act was part of the Compromise of 1850. It required that slaves be returned to their owners, even if they were in a free state. The act also made the federal government responsible for finding, returning, and trying escaped slaves.

This law provoked the ire of Abolitionists and caused terror among Blacks, both free and enslaved. Free Blacks in free states were sometimes abducted and framed as fugitives by slavecatchers to claim rewards. Escaped slaves who had established themselves in safe-harbor communities in the North lived in constant fear that they would be thrown back in chains. Penalties for harboring fugitives or hindering their recapture included a potential jail term as well as fines of more than $30,000 in today's dollars.

One city that refused to give up its own under this law was Syracuse, New York, which declared itself a safe haven for freedom-seekers shortly after the law was passed.

Syracuse was a well-known stop on the Underground Railroad. One of the conductors there was Reverend Jermain Wesley Loguen *(pronounced "Logan"),* who himself was a fugitive. Loguen fled slavery in Tennessee at the age of 21. He lived and worked in Canada and eventually moved to Central New York, where he received an education and became one of the leading anti-slavery speakers in the country.

On October 1, 1851 -- during one of Syracuse's biggest anti-slavery conventions of the year -- the federal government tried to make a statement by arresting William "Jerry" Henry, who had been working in the city for several years after escaping slavery in Missouri.

But Syracuse was ready, and its people had a plan to protect one of their own. A signal went out – church bells rang all over the city, cueing thousands of citizens to descend on the police building where the fugitive was being held. After hours of protest and a failed escape attempt by the prisoner, Loguen and a band of Vigilance Committee members broke into the police barracks, smuggled Jerry Henry out of captivity, and in the days following ensured that he made safe passage to Canada, where he lived out his remaining years a free man.

As the Stationmaster of the Syracuse depot, Jermain Loguen, a fugitive slave himself, refused to cower under the threat of recapture, and in fact published his home address

for the benefit of freedom-seekers. Along with his wife Caroline, Loguen enabled safe passage for more than 1500 runaways, earning him the nickname “The Underground Railroad King”.