1860. The Africans of the Slave Bark, Wildfire, June 2, 1860, pages 344 - 346

Harper's Weekly began publication in New York City on January 3, 1857. In an era before news photography, its stories were illustrated by detailed drawings. According to the magazine's website, "before the Civil War, the editorial practice of Harper's Weekly was to avoid discussion of the divisive issue of slavery whenever possible, and to calm anxiety and tempers when compelled to confront it. That editorial inclination was grounded in both the conservative political principles of the Harper family and their financial self-interest not to alienate readers in any area of the country. When the editors did speak directly on the subject of slavery, they consistently blamed sectional tensions on small but vocal groups of extremists on both sides—Northern abolitionists and Southern secessionists." Despite its general practices, the magazine reported on the Dred Scott case, the slave trade, abolitionism, and John Brown's raid.

The document is an edited version of the article, "The Africans of the Slave Bark Wildfire." It appeared on June 2, 1860. A picture and the full text are available at "blackhistory.harpweek.com/SlaveryHome.htm".

On the morning of the 30th of April last, the United States steamer Mohawk, Lieutenant Craven commanding, came to anchor in the harbor of this place, having in tow a bark of the burden of about three hundred and thirty tons, supposed to be the bark Wildfire, lately owned in the-city of New York. The bark had on board five hundred and ten native Africans, taken on board in the River Congo, on the west side of the continent of Africa. She had been captured a few days previously by Lieutenant Craven within sight of the northern coast of Cuba, as an American vessel employed in violating our laws against the slave-trade. She had left the Congo River thirty-six days before her capture.

Soon after the bark was anchored we repaired on board, and on passing over the side saw, on the deck of the vessel, about four hundred and fifty native Africans, in a state of entire nudity, in a sitting or squatting posture, the most of them having their knees elevated so as to form a resting place for their heads and arms. They sat very close together, mostly on either side of the vessel, forward and aft, leaving a narrow open space along the line of the centre for the crew of the vessel to pass to and fro. About fifty of them were full-grown young men, and about four hundred were boys aged from ten to sixteen years. It is said by persons acquainted with the slave-trade and who saw them, that they were generally in a very good condition of health and flesh, as compared with other similar cargoes, owing to the fact that they had not been so much crowded together on board as is common in slave voyages, and had been better fed than usual. It is said that the bark is capable of carrying, and was prepared to carry, one thousand, but not being able without inconvenient delay to procure so many, she sailed with six hundred. Ninety and upward had died on the voyage. But this is considered as comparatively a small loss, showing that they had been better cared for than usual. Ten more have died since their arrival, and there are about forty more sick in the hospital. We saw on board about six or seven boys and men greatly emaciated, and diseased past recovery, and about a hundred that showed decided evidences of suffering from inanition, exhaustion, and disease. Dysentery was the principal disease. But notwithstanding their sufferings, we could not be otherwise than interested and amused at their strange looks, motions, and actions. The well ones looked happy and contented, and were ready at any moment to join in a song or a dance whenever they were directed to do so by "Jack" -- a little fellow as black as ebony, about twelve years old, having a handsome and expressive face, an intelligent look, and a sparkling eye. The sailors on the voyage had dressed "Jack" in sailor costume, and had made him a great pet. When we were on board "Jack" carried about in his hand a short cord, not only as the emblem but also as the instrument of his brief delegated authority. He would make the men and boys stand up, sit down, sing, or dance just as he directed. When they sang "Jack" moved around among them as light as a cat, and beat the time by slapping his hands together, and if any refused to sing, or sang out of time, Jack's cord descended on their backs. Their singing was monotonous. The words we did not understand. We have rarely seen a more happy and merry-looking fellow than "Jack."

From the deck we descended into the cabin, where we saw sixty or seventy women and young girls, in Nature's dress, some sitting on the floor and others on the lockers, and some sick ones lying

in the berths. Four or five of them were a good deal tattooed on the back and arms, and we noticed that three had an arm branded with the figure "7," which, we suppose, is the merchant's mark.

On the day of their arrival the sickest, about forty in all, were landed and carried to a building on the public grounds belonging to Fort Taylor, and Doctors Whitehurst and Skrine employed as medical attendants. We visited them in the afternoon. The United States Marshal had procured for all of them shirts, and pants for the men, and some benevolent ladies of the city had sent the girls and women gowns. Six or eight were very sick; the others did not appear to be in any immediate danger of dying. We were very much amused by a young lad about fifteen years old, not much sick, who had got on, probably for the first time in his life, a whole shirt, and who seemed to be delighted with every body and every thing he saw. He evidently thought the speech of the white man was very funny. When a few words were spoken to him he immediately repeated them with great glee. Pointing to Dr. Skrine, we said "Doctor." He said "Doctor." And then pointing to Dr. Whitehurst, we said "Doctor too." He said "Doctor too." The doctors had selected from the bark a woman about twenty-four years of age to assist the nurse in taking care of the sick. She had been dressed in a clean calico frock, and looked very respectably.

About sundown they all lay down for the night upon a camp bed, and were covered over with blankets. And now a scene took place which interested us very much, but which we did not understand and can not explain. The woman standing up slapped her hands together once or twice, and as soon as all were silent she commenced a sort of recitation, song, or prayer, in tone and manner much like a chanting of the Litany in Catholic churches, and every few moments the voices of ten or fifteen others were heard in the same tone, as if responding. This exercise continued about a minute. Now what could this be? It looked and sounded to us very much like Christians chanting together an evening prayer on retiring to rest. And yet we feel quite assured that none of these persons had ever heard of Christ, or had learned Christian practices, or possessed much, if any, knowledge of God as a Creator or Preserver of the world. We suspect that it was not understood by them as a religious exercise at all, but as something which they had been trained to go through at the barracoons in Africa or on board the ship.

In two days after the arrival of the bark the Marshal had completed a large, airy building at Whitehead's Point, a little out of the town, for the reception and accommodation of these people; and after getting them clad as well as he could in so short a time, they were all landed on the fort wharf, and carried in carts to their quarters. On arriving there they all arranged themselves along the sides of the building, as they had been accustomed to do on the decks of the vessel, and squatted down in the same manner. It took the Marshal and his assistants some little time, and no small efforts, to give the Africans to understand that they were free to move about, to go out and come in at will.

They learned this in the course of a few hours, however, and general merriment and hilarity prevailed. We visited them in the afternoon, and have done so several times since; and we confess that we have been struck, as many others have been, with the expression of intelligence displayed in their faces, the beauty of their physical conformation, and the beauty of their teeth. We have been accustomed to think that the civilized negroes of our own country were superior, in point of intelligence and physical development, to the native Africans; but judging only by the eye, we think it would be difficult to find, any where in our own country, four hundred finer and handsomer-looking boys and girls than these are. To be sure you often saw the elongated occiput, the protruded jaws, and the receding forehead; but you also often saw a head as round, with features as regular as any European's, except the universal flat noses. Little "Jack" has a head as round as an apple.

A number of these negroes -- perhaps twelve or fifteen in all -- have been more or less at and about Loando, a Portuguese town on the coast, and have learned to speak a little Portuguese. Through an interpreter we learned from them that some four or five -- perhaps more, but probably not many -- had been baptized at the Roman Catholic missionary station at Loando. Francisco, a young man, says he was baptized by a Franciscan friar in Loando; that he was a slave in Africa, and does not wish to return there. He says he had rather be a slave to the white man in this country. Salvador, a bright-looking, smart lad, has been baptized. Constantia says she was baptized in Loando. She does not remember her father; she was stolen away when she was young, and was sold by her brother. Antonia and Amelia are both fine-looking young women, aged about twenty, and were both baptized at Loando. Madia, a pagan, unbaptized, aged about twenty, has obtained among the white

people here who have visited the quarters the name of "The Princess," on account of her fine personal appearance and the deference that seemed to be paid to her by some of her companions. The persons we have here mentioned, including some eight or ten others, evidently do not belong to the same tribe that the rest do. Indeed the whole number is evidently taken from different tribes living in the interior of Africa, but the greater number are "Congos." The women we have named have cut or shaved the hair off the back part of their head, from a point on the crown to the back part of either ear. It is the fashion of their tribe. None of the other women are thus shorn. Many of the men, women, boys, and girls have filed their front teeth -- some by sharpening them to a point, and others by cutting down the two upper front teeth. The persons above named have their teeth in a natural state. Perhaps fifty in all are tattooed more or less.

Travelers describe the natives of Congo as being small of stature, cheerful, good-humored, unreflecting, and possessed of little energy either of mind or body. Negro indolence is carried with them to the utmost excess. The little cultivation that exists, entirely carried on by the females, is nearly limited to the manioc root, which they are not very skillful in preparing. Their houses are put together of mats made from the fibre of the palm-tree, and their clothes and bedding consist merely of matted grass.

The President, on receiving news of the capture of the Wildfire, sent a special message to Congress on the subject, from which we give an extract below. The subsequent capture of another slave ship with more Africans will probably lead to some enactment on the subject. The President says: "The expenditure for the Africans captured on board the Wildfire will not be less than one hundred thousand dollars, and may considerably exceed that sum. But it will not be sufficient for Congress to limit the amount appropriated to the case of the Wildfire. It is probable, judging from the increased activity of the slave-trade and the vigilance of our cruisers, that several similar captures may be made before the end of the year. An appropriation ought, therefore, to be granted large enough to cover such contingencies. The period has arrived when it is indispensable to provide some specific legislation for the guidance of the Executive on this subject. With this view, I would suggest that Congress might authorize the President to enter into a general agreement with the Colonization Society, binding them to receive, on the coast of Africa from our agent there, all the captured Africans which may be delivered to him, and to maintain them for a limited period, upon such terms and conditions as may combine humanity toward these unfortunates with a just economy. This would obviate the necessity of making a new bargain with every new capture, and would prevent delay and avoid expense in the disposition of the captured. The law might then provide that, in all cases where this may be practicable, the captor should carry the negroes directly to Africa, and deliver them to the American agent there, afterward bringing the captured vessel to the United States for adjudication.