

## Resource Sheet # 8

The following is a transcript of an article written regarding the events in Christiana on September 12, 1851. This article was found in the *Lancaster Intelligencer and Journal* on September 23, 1851.

### The Christiana Tragedy

The following circumstantial account of the terrible riot, which resulted in the death of his father and dangerous wounding of his brother, is from the pen of Mr. J. S. Gorsuch. It is copied from the Baltimore Sun, and will be read with great interest:

Having seen various and contradictory reports concerning the tragic fate of my father and the attendant circumstances, I have thought it best to perform the painful task of giving you some facts, in reference thereto, which may be relied upon:

Near three years ago, four Negroes, between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, fled from my father's Baltimore county nineteen miles from the city into Pennsylvania. These Negroes were to be free at the age of twenty-eight, and this fact they knew. It had come to the knowledge of my father that they had sold wheat, stolen from him, to free a Negro. A warrant was got out for the arrest of the free Negro, which, coming to the ears of his accomplices, they resolved (the same evening) to make good their escape. This was in November. During the winter it was reported that three men were suffering for food. A colored man was sent to find them, and assure them that if they would come home and behave themselves, nothing would be said to them about their theft. They were found, but did not return.

After having carefully provided the necessary vouchers and papers, attended by a deputy marshal and two constables from Philadelphia, my father, his son (Dickerson), his nephew (Dr. Thos. T.G. Pierce), Joshua Gorsuch, Nathan Nelson and Nicholas Hutchins, set out on the first of last week for the scene of intended arrest. The plan was to arrest the fugitives on Wednesday morning, but this plan was frustrated by the non-appearance of the deputy marshal, who had the authority and the papers. Both the city constables returned to the city, with the understanding that they were to come back at night with the new warrants – one of them having been deputed to act as marshal. The delinquent marshal made his appearance on Wednesday morning about nine o'clock, urging as an excuse for his failure that he had been followed by a Negro, whom he knew to be a spy. In endeavoring to elude his pursuit and prevent the discovery of his posse, by rapid driving, he broke his wagon. It was then agreed that they would attempt the arrest on Thursday morning, strengthened by the constables, whom they expected to return on Wednesday night – but three did not return.

Deputy Marshal Henry H. Kline, and the five gentlemen in company with my father, reached the house where two of the runaways were supposed to live, just about morning dawn. This house stands near the head of the Great Valley in Lancaster County, about two miles from the village of Christiana. The valley here is about three quarters of a mile road, quite trough-like in shape, and

bordered with wood. Across the valley runs a narrow rough lane. About 150 yards from the southern border of the valley, and one hundred yards from the lane that crosses it, stands the house of the fugitive, connected with the large lane by a short lane twelve feet wide. As this party, at this early hour, were proceeding along the lane that crosses the valley, and near the house, one of the Negroes, who was recognized as Nelson, came to the mouth of the short lane and upon seeing these men, ran towards the house, all the party in full chase. The Negro barely made his escape. One man was stationed at each corner of the house to guard the windows. The house is two stories in height, and the Negroes were all upstairs.

The Marshal and my father entered the house. Mr. Kline asked for the owner of the house; told them he was an United States Marshal, and that he came for the purpose of arresting Mr. Gorsuch's slaves, Nelson and Josh. He then read to them the warrants, and while doing this he heard them loading their guns upstairs. The Marshal and my father started both together to go upstairs, the latter having first called to Nelson, that he saw him, and told him that if he would come down peaceably and go home with him, he would treat him as kindly as before he ran away. Resistance, he said, would do no good, for he came with the proper officer and authority, and he would not leave the premises without his property. While they were on the steps and intending to proceed, one of the Negroes struck at them with a staff shod with sharp iron. My father then turned and went out of the door. Just as he got out a gun was fired at his head from one of the windows, but the aim was too high. The Marshal coming out just behind him fired his pistol in the window. Again they went in, and starting to go to the upsteps, an axe was thrown down at them, which, however, passed harmlessly by them. In this way a little skirmishing was kept up between the Negroes at the windows and the young men outside, and between those at the head of the steps and the tow men in the house.

During this period the warrants were read three times, the law was explained, they were advised and entreated to give up the two slaves, and assured that the arrests would be made even if blood must be shed. A missile had been thrown out of the window and had wounded Pearce in the head; he had attempted to shoot, but the cap only exploded. At last they gave the Negroes a definite time to decide; the watch was held, but before the time expired a white man rode up to the bars in the lane. His presence inspired the blacks; they immediately raised a shout and became confirmed in their opposition. When the marshal saw the man at the bars, he went to him, and called on him in the name of the United states, to assist in arresting the fugitives, showing his warrant, reading his authority, and telling him the inevitable consequence of refusal. Another white man was also present during this conversation. The reply was, that he would not assist; and that they had better go home, for they could make no arrests there, or blood would be spilt.

Before, during, and after the conversation with this man at the bars, Negroes were arriving from every quarter, some on horseback and others on foot, armed with guns, pistols, clubs, corn-cutters, &c. They seemed to be scattered all around upon the first of their arrival, but most of them were gathered in knots near the place where the white man on horseback and the marshal ere talking, engaged in loading their guns. At the close of the conference, the marshal called to his party to retire, saying that he would not press the arrest farther, and that he would hold this man responsible for the property. Then the marshal and two of the young men left. My father was then near the house, his son, Pearce, and Joshua Gorsuch, not far from him, still guarding the

house to keep the slaves from escaping. Just as the marshal and the two young men left, the Quaker on the horse said something to the Negroes that had assembled near him, when they set up a most hideous yell and rushed towards the house, the Negroes in the house at the same time rushing out, and whooping like savages, met the advancing gang around my father. They were four men, all armed with pistols, it is true, apposed to about one hundred infuriated, blood-thirsty, howling demons. As soon as these two gangs met in the narrow lane, the attack was made upon the diminished band by a Negro from behind striking my father on the head, which caused him to fall forward on his knees, when he was shot several times and cut over the head with corn-cutters.

When the young men near him saw him fall, Dickinson and Joshua ran to him and discharged their pistols into the crowd that was murdering him, Pearce having been cut off from them by the Negroes who advanced from the bars. As Dickinson was shooting immediately over his father, his revolver was knocked out of his hand by a club striking him upon the arm, near the wrist. Then a Negro shot him in the right side and arm, lodging more than seventy large shot in him. The Negroes were whooping and yelling with savage glee over their victim, and the son, nephew and cousin started, to save their lives. They all escaped from this narrow lane, the scene of the awful conflict, into the longer lane that extends across the valley and the woods on either side. Dickinson, staggering under the stunning effects of his wounds, blood gushing from his mouth and streaming from his arm on one side, took the southern end of the lane, and, in a distance of a hundred yards, reached the edge of the wood, falling down by a large stump, exhausted. Some of the fiends followed and would have most cruelly murdered him, but an old Negro, who had been in the affray, threw himself over his body and called upon them for God's sake to assist him, for he would soon die anyhow.

Dr. Pearce and Joshua Gorsuch took the other end of the lane leading to the woods on the other side of the valley, which were more than half a mile distant. Pearce kept the lane, and after him rushed the whole band of Negroes, shouting and shooting every jump, a distance of three hundred yards. In his flight he overtook the Quaker on the horse, and strove to keep him between himself and his pursuers, to which course he ascribes the salvation of his life. At the distance of half a mile from the Negroes' house, he reached a dwelling, and bolting in asked two ladies, who were then the only persons whom he saw in the house, to protect him. They expressed fear lest the Negroes might come and find him there, and kill them for concealing him. He told them he would not expose them to danger then, and turned to go out, when they consented to conceal him. Soon his infuriated pursuers came to the house and asked if he was not there. They were told that some one had gone past, and they kept on to the woods, which they searched and guarded until late at night, to find and to butcher their desired victim.

Joshua Gorsuch, who had received a violent blow on the head when by my father was rather later in starting, and ran obliquely from the house to the lane, reaching it in advance of Pearce. Him they overtook and beat over the head with clubs, until it was supposed they had killed him; but he got up and went up the lane as far as he could. One Negro, who had chased Pearce farther than the rest, as he was returning, struck him (Gorsuch) over the head with a club. At last he reached the woods, completely crazed by the blows he had received. There he was found by the Marshal and taken to a place of safety.

Dickinson did not lie long before some gentlemen came and carefully removed him to Mr. Levi Pownall's where he now lies, and where I now write. Every attention that kindness can suggest and charity execute is bestowed upon him. At first it was thought he could not live until night; but through the care of his physician, and the blessing of God, he has been gradually mending ever since, and now we have strong hopes of his recovery. Dr. Pearce was conducted to the house where Dickinson is about four of five o'clock the same afternoon. Joshua escaped that evening to York, where his friends took good care of him. He is now out of danger, and doing well.

It may be gratifying to some to know that the proceedings now in progress will bring to light the secret of this bloody affair. A Negro from Philadelphia – the same that followed the Marshal on the first night – found out by some means, *fair or foul*, the names of the Negroes to be taken and other circumstances, connected with my father's plan, and gave intelligence to the neighborhood. The abolitionists and Negroes together spread the news, and thus was brought together the most of who incited the Negroes to shoot and defy the Marshal. We have also quite a number of the actors in that awful scene, but not all of them. The law will now be fairly tested, I suppose.

I have written this by the advice of friends, and am glad the painful task is performed.

J.S. Gorsuch

Christiana, September 17, 1851

<http://www.lancasterhistory.org/highlights/afamelectronic/christianasept231851.htm>