



Anthony Burns

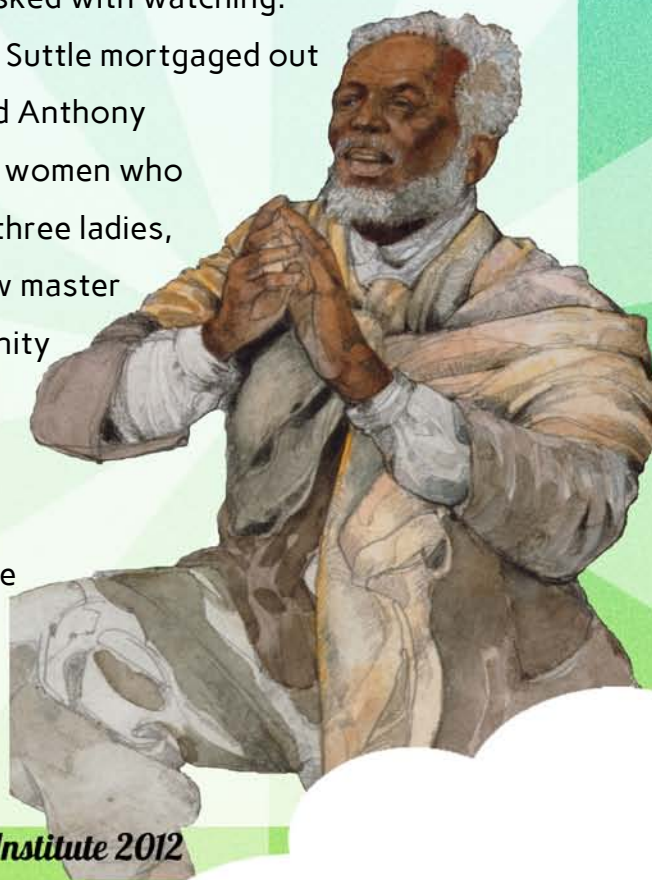
ST. CATHARINES

Anthony Burns was born into slavery in Stafford County, Virginia in 1834, the youngest of 13 children. His mother was the cook of a slaveholder named John Suttle. Suttle owned just over a dozen enslaved Africans, using the men to quarry rock, which would then be transported to the city of Washington.ⁱ When Anthony was a small child his father died from an illness he caught as a result of being exposed to the stone dust at the quarry, and not long after that, Suttle died, leaving the estate to his widow. Mrs. Suttle did not manage the estate well, and sold some of the family slaves to help pay the bills, five of whom were Anthony's siblings.ⁱⁱ

When Anthony was six, Mrs. Suttle died, leaving the estate to her eldest son, Charles. Charles was a shop-keeper who rose to become a representative for his district in the Virginia Assembly. Anthony worked for Charles in his home, nursing Charles' sister's children. It is through accompanying them to school that he first began his education.ⁱⁱⁱ In defiance of the laws of Virginia at this time, he was taught numbers and letters alongside the children he was tasked with watching.

When Anthony Burns was only seven, Charles Suttle mortgaged out some of his slaves to help pay his mother's debts, and Anthony became a house servant for three religiously-minded women who imparted to him Biblical studies. Upon leaving these three ladies, Anthony moved to a house where the wife of his new master kept a school, and again, Anthony took this opportunity to learn.^{iv} This early education would benefit Burns greatly in his later life.

At the age of 13, Anthony was employed by a cruel owner of a saw mill named Foote. Though Foote

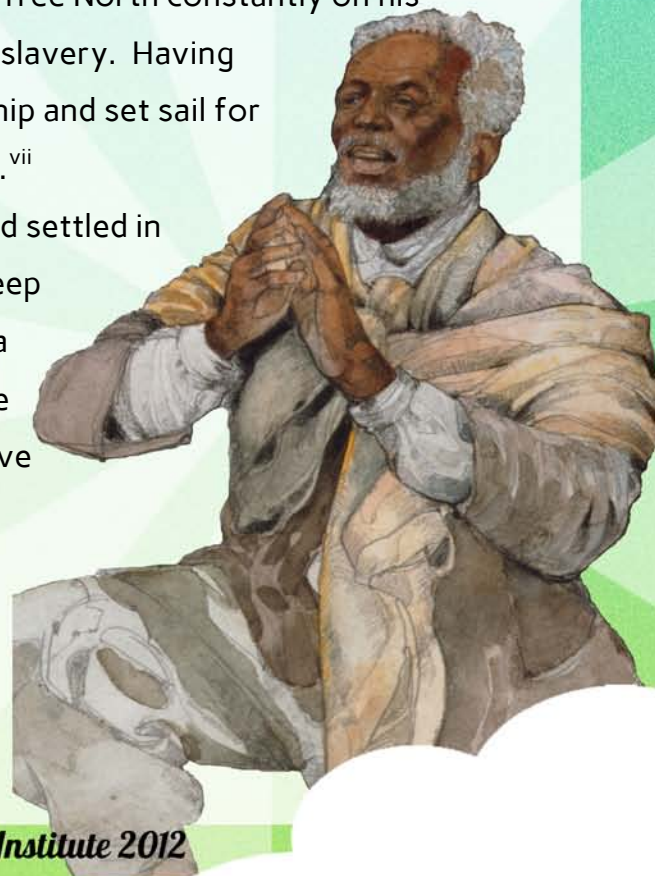




had a daughter who continued to feed Anthony's desire for learning, it was here that he mangled his hand in some machinery in the mill.^v Though this was an unfortunate accident, the time away from labour afforded Anthony the opportunity to further explore his faith, and his need for spirituality grew alongside his need for knowledge. After awhile, Anthony was baptized in the Baptist Church in Falmouth, Virginia, a congregation made up of both white people and enslaved African Americans. As his faith grew, he would begin to preach to his fellow slaves in kitchens and in small meetings, which violated the laws of Virginia that forbade gatherings of Black people without whites present. These meetings were sometimes broken up by officials in a violent manner, punishable by up to 30 lashes, an extreme punishment for Anthony for leading his fellow slaves in worship.^{vi}

When Anthony was 19, he escaped slavery. Charles Suttle had continued to mortgage him to people needing labourers. The final person to whom he was hired was an apothecary who did not have the volume of work that he thought he would, so he illegally sent Anthony out every day to do odd jobs for other whites in need of workers. Through this, Anthony met sailors and other itinerant men, some of whom spoke to Anthony of freedom. With the stories of a free North constantly on his mind, Anthony took the opportunity to escape from slavery. Having befriended a sailor, he was able to stow away on a ship and set sail for freedom in the hours before dawn, in February 1854.^{vii}

Anthony Burns fled to the Northern states and settled in Boston. There he worked for wages that he could keep for himself for the first time in his life. Coffin Pitts, a clothing dealer, was his employer.^{viii} After only three months of freedom, he was discovered to be a fugitive slave. On May 24, 1854, while walking through Boston, Anthony Burns was arrested under the Fugitive Slave Act.^{ix} This law enabled "the owners of runaway slaves to secure their property,



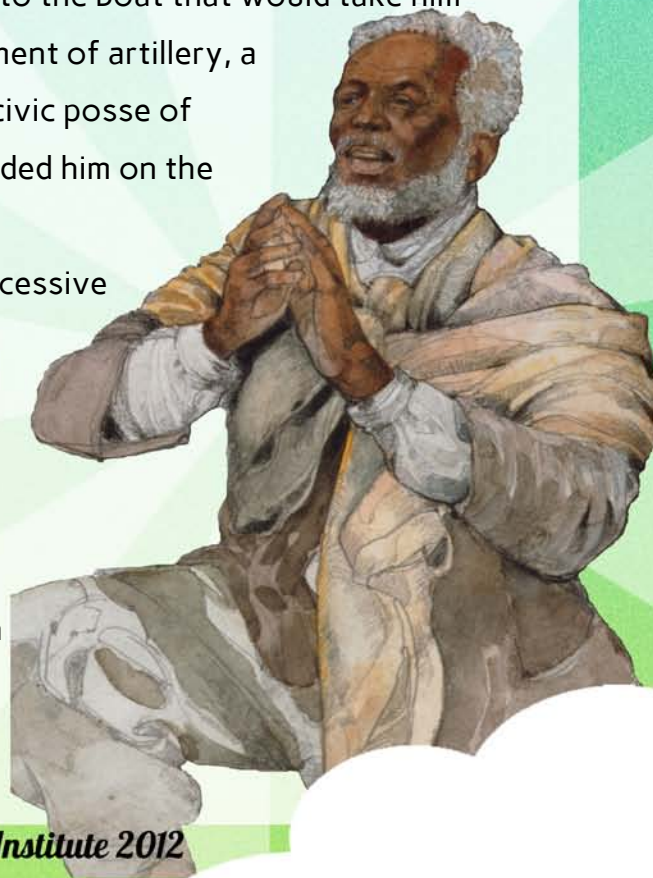


wherever it might be found within the bounds of the republic, and return it to the south".^x

It was this event which sparked the famous trial of Anthony Burns. Boston was a city well known for assisting fugitives, a city full of abolitionists and very much against the Fugitive Slave Act. The day after his arrest, Anthony was taken to the courthouse in manacles for inspection by the judge.^{xi} A group of abolitionists entered the courtroom to make a defense for him. As the days passed, the news of Anthony's arrest spread throughout Boston, and outraged men and women cried out for justice. On May 26th, a mob of 2,000 men stormed the jail where Anthony Burns was housed with the intention of rescuing him.^{xii} During the riot, the door of the jail was broken down, but Anthony remained in custody. Two companies of artillery were called out to secure him; one man died in the ensuing violence, and several others were injured, but the streets were eventually cleared.^{xiii}

On May 29th, the trial of Anthony Burns resumed, with soldiers on guard to prevent any further rioting. Though his defense was strong, the Fugitive Slave Act was the law, and he was sentenced to be sent back to slavery in Virginia.^{xiv} Fearing further attempts at a rescue, Anthony was escorted to the boat that would take him back to the South by a veritable army of men: a regiment of artillery, a platoon of the United States Marines, the marshal's civic posse of 125 men, and three further platoons of Marines guarded him on the way to the wharf.^{xv}

In protest against the judge's ruling and the excessive escort, the citizens of Boston draped their windows and storefronts in black, a sign of mourning. Across from the State House was suspended a coffin on which the words "The Funeral of Liberty" were written, and the country's flag hung upside down.^{xvi} An estimated 50,000 people watched the procession down to the docks, baring their heads, and shouting





cries of "Shame!" and "Kidnappers!"^{xvii} On the shore supporters of Anthony mourned justice, while on the river, a boat carrying Southern members of a commercial convention played "The Star Spangled Banner," in support of the victory of the slave owner who claimed Anthony Burns, and had won the court case.^{xviii}

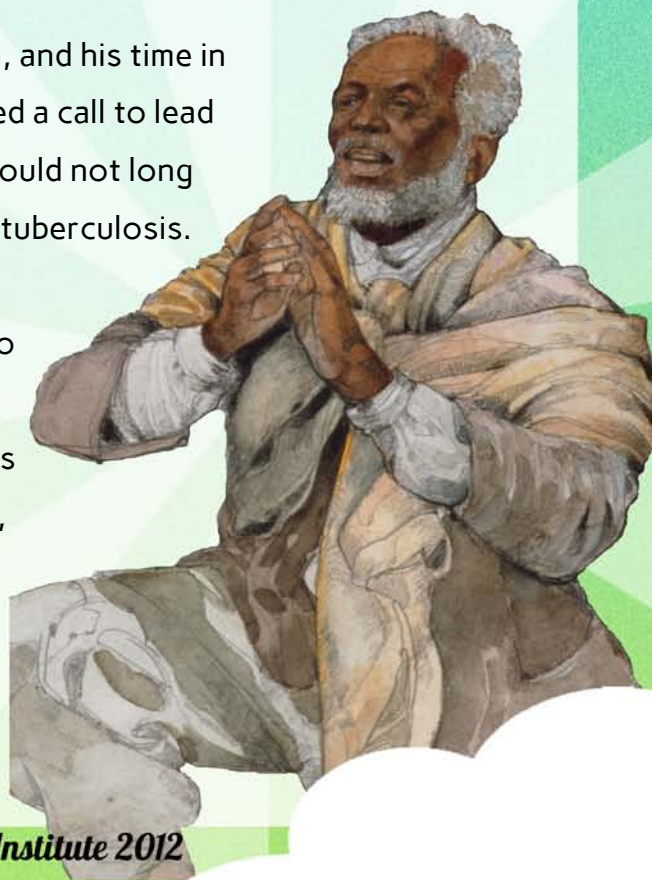
Upon his return to Virginia, Anthony Burns was sold to an owner in North Carolina. All was not lost for Anthony, however, as within a few months, the pastor of the church he had attended in Boston, the Twelfth Baptist Church, raised the \$1,200 that Charles Suttle claimed Anthony was worth, and bought his freedom.^{xix} Although Anthony's trial and subsequent freedom took nearly a year to be completed, the event was heralded by many as the beginning of the end of slavery.^{xx}

In 1855, a newly free man, Anthony Burns received a scholarship to Oberlin College from a donation received by a woman in Boston, and he studied at the integrated university for several years, eventually becoming an ordained preacher. In 1860, he became the minister for a Black Baptist Church in Indianapolis, but was forced to leave because the Black Laws of that state were such that he could have once again been sent to prison. The state constitution adopted in 1851 prohibited Free Blacks from immigrating into Indiana.^{xxi}

Not long after this, Anthony moved to Canada, and his time in St. Catharines, Canada West, began after he answered a call to lead the Zion Baptist Church there. However, Anthony would not long enjoy his freedom. In July of 1862, he succumbed to tuberculosis.

A newspaper article printed after his death stated:

"When he came he saw that there was much for him to do and he set himself to do it with all his heart and he was prospering in his work, he was getting the affairs of the church into good shape." Like so many others, he came to Canada free, fearing re-enslavement or imprisonment in Indiana simply because he was of African ancestry. Though his time in





BREAKING THE CHAINS

St. Catharines was short, he is remembered by the community to this day. His remains rest in the Park Lawn Cemetery where his headstone, once fallen over and cracked, is now protected from further damage. So much is he respected by this community that his memory is honoured with a heritage plaque outside of the cemetery.

ⁱ Charles Emery Stevens, *Anthony Burns A History* (Boston: J.P. Jewett and Co., 1856), 152.

ⁱⁱ Stevens, 152.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stevens, 154.

^{iv} Stevens, 155.

^v Stevens, 162.

^{vi} Stevens, 166.

^{vii} Stevens, 178.

^{viii} “Boston Slave Riot, and trial of Anthony Burns: containing the report of the Faneuil Hall meeting, the murder of Batchelder, Theodore Parker’s lesson for the day, speeches of counsel on both sides, corrected on both sides, verbatim report of Judge Loring’s decision, and, a detailed account of the embarkation” (Boston: Pettridge and Co., 1854), 5.

^{ix} Boston Slave Riot, 5.

^x Fred Landon, “Anthony Burns in Canada,” reprinted in Karolyn Smardz Frost et al., eds. *Ontario’s African-Canadian Heritage: Collected Writings by Fred Landon, 1918-1967* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009), 284-191, 284.

^{xi} Landon, 285.

^{xii} Landon, 285

^{xiii} David R. Maginnes, “The Case of the Court House Rioters in The Rendition of the Fugitive Slave Anthony Burns, 1854,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 56:1 (Jan. 1971), 32.

^{xiv} Landon, 285

^{xv} Landon, 286.

^{xvi} Landon, 286.

^{xvii} Maginnes, 33.

^{xviii} Landon, 286.

^{xix} Shapiro, Samuel, “The Rendition of Anthony Burns,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 44:1 (Jan., 1959), 40.

^{xx} Maginnes, 42.

^{xxi} Landon, 287. See also the state constitution of Indiana, 1851: <http://www.in.gov/history/2689.htm> <accessed March 7, 2012>

