

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN MONROE COUNTY¹

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As has been the case in too many questions of historical interest, particularly those having only a local bearing, so in the case of the Underground Railroad in Monroe County, no record has been preserved from which an account could be written. This question has been neglected, until now there are very few people living who have any first hand information to give.

The source of the material for this paper, therefore, has been largely the statements of people who remember the stories told by those who were actually engaged in aiding runaway slaves to escape to Canada. An attempt has been made to check any errors that may have slipped in through a lapse of memory by comparing the statements of several different individuals concerning each particular bit of information. Particularly was this method used in connection with the story of "Tony," about whom more will be stated later in the paper. Documents, newspaper clippings, and letters bearing on the subject of the Underground Railroad I was unable to find. About a dozen people were consulted who remember something about specific instances of aid offered to runaways, but I was able to find only three people who had

¹ This article appeared in the Sept. 1917 issue of the Indiana Magazine of History; Vol. 13, No. 3; pp. 288-297.

Please note that I am still correcting the transcription (*which was scanned from a copy of a book*), and adding my own notes to connect this story to my genealogy (and my website) as well as describe the historical context of this fascinating article.

² Henry Lester Smith's mother was Sarah Ellen Cathcart, who was the daughter of John & Sarah Little Cathcart. Henry's great grandfather was Matthew Cathcart, Sr. (one of [the "Big Four" Cathcart brothers](#)).

- [Click here for 1900 census enumeration for 24 year old Henry, who was living with his parents in Bloomington.](#)
- The following is from the [University of Indiana website](#):

Henry Lester Smith was a long-time professor and administrator at the Indiana University School of Education. In addition to teaching and other administrative positions, Smith served as the dean of the School of Education from 1916 until his retirement in 1946. While at IU, he also created the Bureau of Education Research and made it the means of disseminating the best in educational thinking to Indiana educators and others through regular publications of its Bulletins. Active in the community and state, Smith was a lifelong member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church and chair of the local Red Cross chapter for most of his professional life. As secretary-general of the World Federation of Education Associations, he was involved in drafting documents to create the educational branches of what would be UNESCO. Prof. Smith died in Bloomington, Ind., in 1963. The collection consists largely of correspondence relative to his national and international educational work, materials developed in connection with his teaching, and research materials and writings in his main interest areas of international education, school administration, and character education. There is a substantial amount of material on his year of service as Superintendent of Schools in the Canal Zone in 1908-1909, his work with the National Education Association and other national organizations as well as the World Federation of Education Associations. There is a small series holding records from his tenure as Dean of the IU School of Education.

actually taken part in the escape of slaves. These persons were W. C. Smith³, who was rather intimately connected with several cases, T. N. Faris⁴, who helped escort to safety the last runaway that passed through this section, and Thomas Kilpatrick, who was one of several into whose custody was placed a negro that was escaping by way of a Monon train⁵.

Generally speaking, the people of Monroe County were rather luke-warm in regard to escaping slaves. They weren't actively engaged one way or the other. The small group of people that was actively engaged in aiding fugitives came originally from South Carolina. Some of them were influenced to move from South Carolina largely because of the slavery question. In fact, the church with which they were connected, the Reformed Presbyterian church, was undergoing a rupture, one of the factors of which was the question of holding slaves. The break in the church came in 1833.⁶ Those who remained in the church were staunch Abolitionists and many of them who had not already left South Carolina before that time left then. Many, however, had noticed the drift of things, and had moved before the break came. Monroe County, Indiana, was one of the stopping places. Several of these people entered land in Monroe County, as early as 1816.⁷ From that time on they continued to arrive until a few years before the Civil War. When the split in the church came in 1833 there were in Monroe county members of both factions. Two churches resulted from the rupture. Among the people here, though the slavery question was not a paramount issue in the break-up, practically all were agreed on the slavery question, so they continued to work together in the interests of Abolition.

The main motive actuating the majority of those who aided escaping slaves in this community then was a religious motive. That accounts for the persistency with which they carried on their work and for the risks they ran in performing what they considered their duty.

³ William Curry Smith (1828-1915), son of Thomas Smith. See Thomas' information below.

⁴ Thomas Neil Faris (1835-1916), also son of Rev. James and Nancy (Smith) Faris, Jr.

⁵ Monon Train, would have made much more sense in 1917 when this article was first published. Formed from the merger of the New Albany and Salem Railroad Companies in about 1847, the Monon Line (or "Hoosier Line") was named from the city in Indiana (which was in turn named from the convergence of two rivers of the same name) of the same name. [Click here for more information \(Wikipedia\)](#).

⁶ In 1833 the Reformed Presbyterian Church broke up into the "Old Light" (or Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America), and "New Light" (or Reformed Presbyterian, Evangelical Synod) branches. The terms "New-" and "Old Light" had been applied at various times over the years to describe variations in faith; and basically refer to a divide between "conservative/traditional" and "liberal/evangelical" interpretations of faith. Although the 1833 schism involved many esoteric ecclesiastic issues (such as "occasional hearing" and "voluntary associations"), disagreements over slavery—and the appropriate action/response to it—also contributed to the religious friction between the competing groups of Presbyterians.

⁷ More research needed to determine exactly who these earliest settlers were, and whether they included any of the families tied to my Cathcart line (York and Chester Counties of South Carolina). In addition to Cathcarts, the surnames are: Stormont, Curry, Smith, McQuiston, Hemphill, Wylie, Blair, *inter alia*. These primarily Scots-Irish families left South Carolina and headed "west," to states/territories where they could practice their faith amongst kindred spirits. They also tended to head to states where slavery was not allowed.

Among those in the vicinity of Bloomington who took the most active part in aiding escaping slaves were Thomas Smith⁸, James Clark, Rev. J. B. Faris⁹, John Blair, Samuel Gordon, Samuel Curry¹⁰, William Curry¹¹, Robert Ewing, John Russell, D. S. Irvin, W. C. Smith, T. N. Faris¹², Austin Seward, and John Kite, while they didn't take an active part, were nevertheless in sympathy with the people who were doing the work, and thus encouraged and supported the cause. The greatest activity of all of these men was between the dates of 1845 and 1860. Many of them were active only a few years before 1860. Thomas Smith and James Clark were leaders in the movement from the very beginning.

The leading "slave catchers," as they were called, who were active in this community were William and Jess Kersaw and Cornelius Mershon through the entire period, and Isaac and James Adkins during the latter part of the period.

The first station immediately south of the Bloomington station was at Walnut Ridge, a few miles this side of Salem, Indiana.¹³ There were some Reformed Presbyterians at that place who were interested in aiding slaves to escape. Rev. J. J. McClurkin¹⁴, who was pastor there for a while, was active in the cause. Isaiah Reed, a member of the congregation there, came to Bloomington several times with negroes. A great many people in that community harbored and fed the negroes while they stopped there for a rest, and for hiding. Farther south still, at Washington, Davies County, lived William Hawkins, colored, a son-in-law of Knolly Baker, a barber in Bloomington. Hawkins, being acquainted as he was with the people of Bloomington who would help the negroes, gave the negroes directions and assistance on their journey north toward Bloomington. In the early days of the Underground Railroad the first station north of Bloomington was at Mooresville, a Quaker settlement. A little later on some Reformed Presbyterians moved near Morgantown and after that Morgantown became an intermediate station between

⁸ [Thomas Smith \(1804-1886\)](#) was the father of William Curry Smith (referred to as "Will" or "W.C." Smith in this article). Another two of Thomas' sons—James Cameron & Samuel Thomas Wishart Smith—married two Cathcart sisters: Mary Jane & Sarah Ellen Cathcart. Samuel and Sarah (Cathcart) Smith were the parents of the author. In 1826 Thomas and family moved to Monroe County, Indiana from Chester County, South Carolina.

⁹ Rev. James Becket Faris (1828-1894), son of [Rev. James and Nancy \(Smith\) Faris, Jr.](#) (Pastor of the Bethesda Reformed Presbyterian Congregation of Monroe County, Indiana). Need more data!!!!

¹⁰ [Samuel Curry \(1810-1882\)](#). Samuel (along with his brother William H. Curry below) were sons of William Curry (1772-1847) and Margaret Harbison. William Curry (Samuel and William's father) and family moved from Chester County, SC to Monroe County Indiana in 1821.

¹¹ [William H. Curry \(1818-1894\)](#)

¹² Thomas Neil Faris, *op. cit*

¹³ Located about 50 miles S-SE of Bloomington, and 35 miles NW of Louisville, KY

¹⁴ Likely the Rev. John Johnston McClurken (1813-1907), who served as Pastor of the Walnut Ridge Presbyterian Church in Salem, Washington County, Indiana. Rev. McClurken was born near Rocky Creek, Chester Dist., SC. ([click here for more information](#))

Bloomington and Mooresville. At Morgantown James Kelso¹⁵ and John Cathcart¹⁶ took charge of the negroes. Mr. Cathcart usually harbored them until an opportunity could be found to take them to Mooresville. Mr. Kelso took the negroes from Morgantown to Mooresville. He sometimes even came to Bloomington to help negroes through to Morgantown. Generally, however, the Bloomington people looked after that part of the work.

The negroes usually made their escapes during the summer time or the fall, because they could get their food easily, being able to live on fruits and thus avoid stopping at houses where they might be detected and captured. Occasionally, however, they came through in the winter time. The case of Joel Bee is the most striking example of this kind, and for that reason the story is given as complete as I have been able to work it out.

Joel Bee had made his way north as far as Salem and after passing that town, which was always considered a dangerous one for negroes, he found himself at the break of day in a corn field. It was a little cold and he longed to go to a farm house, but considered such action too dangerous and decided to hide in a corn shock. Later in the morning men came out and began shucking corn. Nearer and nearer they approached him so that it was impossible for him to shift his position, to walk about and get warm. He sat quiet so long that his feet were frozen. More than that, he barely escaped being discovered. The huskers were gradually approaching the shock he was in. About noon they began on the one next to him. Before they finished it, however, Joel was delighted to hear the dinner bell ring and to see the men leave the work for dinner. During the noon hour he escaped to a nearby woods, where he stayed until night. At dark he began his painful journey north, crippling along on frozen feet. He finally made his way to Samuel Gordon's, three miles south of town, the first stopping place near Bloomington, for practically all runaways. As was customary, because of the fact that Mr. Gordon's house was rather public, being on the road, he took Joel the same night of his arrival to Thomas Smith's, two miles southeast of Bloomington. Here Joel Bee stayed for several weeks until his feet were cured. Dr. Joseph McPheeters, Thomas Smith's doctor, doctored the negro and kept quiet the fact that he was being harbored there. During the stay of the negro, J. C. Smith¹⁷, who was at that time attending Indiana University, taught him to read and write. Later on, after he reached Canada, he wrote back here telling about how he was getting along. He also wrote to some friend in the South directing how his wife and child might find their way north. Sometime

¹⁵ [James Kelso \(1797-1876\)](#)

¹⁶ [John Cathcart \(1812-1861\)](#) was grandfather of the author. John moved from the Bloomington area to Morgantown (about 30 miles NE of Bloomington) in about 1847.

See also "[Renwick: A Cultural History, with Genealogies of the Smith, Cathcart and Ramsey Families.](#)"

¹⁷ [James Cameron Smith \(1845-1923\)](#) is another son of Thomas Smith (*Op. cit.*). John married Mary Jane Cathcart, daughter of John and Sarah Little Cathcart (*see above*).

later they came through bearing the letter with them. The letter was written so that it could not be understood except by someone who had known the writer. The mother and child stayed with Thomas Smith until they could be conveniently sent on. They were brought here from Washington by Hawkins, the colored man who had friends in the South and had married a Bloomington woman through whom he became acquainted with the people here who would aid slaves to escape.

Adkins watched closely for Joel Bee when he went through here but he failed to find him. Joel Bee stayed here longer than the most of the slaves although on one occasion when it was for some reason or other difficult to find the time or means to take them on their way, two stayed at Robert Ewing's¹⁸ two or three weeks, and helped him harvest. They were frightened most of the time because on their way here one of them had, in a quarrel, hacked a man with a corn knife and they thought the man's friends might be after him. The best record for time that was ever made was made by a negro named Britton, who was just three days on the road between his Kentucky home and Canada.

The following are a few experiences that have been related to me. They throw some additional light on the situation. Rev. James Faris, who took a very active part in Underground Railroad business in Monroe County, was initiated into the work in South Carolina in a way that would have discouraged most men from continuing it. While young man teaching school in South Carolina, he witnessed an auction. One slave that was to be sold learned that Mr. Faris had some money and begged so hard that finally Mr. Faris agreed to purchase him and take him to Philadelphia, where Mr. Faris was to enter the seminary and where the negro was to work and pay him back.

The trade was made. The following is a copy of terms of the sale:

HOPEWELL, S. C., Nov. 29, 1819.

Sold to Mr. James Fans my negro man Isaac, for six hundred dollars, and I do hereby warrant and defend the property of the said negro man Isaac to the said James Faris his heirs and assigns forever.

(Signed) A. PICKENS (Seal)

I am indebted to Mr. T. N. Faris¹⁹ for the privilege of using this copy from the original, which he has in his possession. The negro proved to be a rascal and ran away shortly after reaching Philadelphia. Later on, Mr. Faris had a family the name of Crassen willed to him, by a man in South Carolina, who wanted to free them, but could not because of the Carolina law. Mr. Faris brought this family of five or six to Indiana and freed them here. For several years after they were freed, Mr. Faris held himself responsible

¹⁸ This is likely [Robert Ewing \(born c1803 in South Carolina – died 1869 in Bloomington\)](#). Robert married Anne Curry (1804-1896), who was the daughter of William and Margaret (Harbison) Curry (*Op. cit.*).

¹⁹ Thomas Neil Faris, *op. cit*

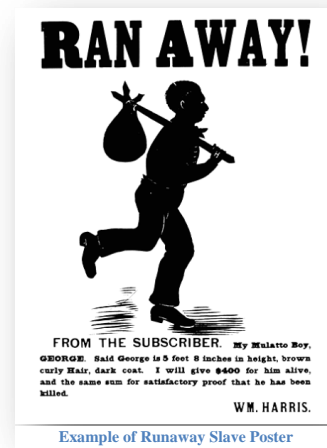
for them and looked after their welfare.

Through Mr. James Blair, I was able to gather some of the experiences his father, John Blair, had in connection with the Underground Railroad. Mr. John Blair was particularly interested in this work for a few years just previous to Civil War. On one occasion Kersaws had a colored woman and child just below the depot somewhere. The Abolitionists did not know just how to get them away, so they arranged for Mr. Blair, whose Abolition tendencies were not at the time known to Kersaws, to go to Kersaw's and ask for some money that one of them owned him. Kersaw told him that he could pay it the next day, that a man was coming up on the morning train from Louisville to claim a colored woman and child that he was holding in custody and that as soon as he got his reward, he would gladly settle. The next morning Mr. Blair was at the station and was taken in by Kersaw to help watch the woman and child. Kersaws felt safe because they thought they realized that Mr. Blair was financially interested. During the wait a fight began which was not a rare occasion at that time. Kersaws left their charge with Mr. Blair and went to see the fight. In the meantime Mr. Blair succeeded in letting the mother and child escape into the hands of some of the Abolitionists that were in waiting and when Kersaws returned Mr. Blair upbraided them for leaving the whole task to him, claiming that he had had too much to do. "You've played smash," he complained. "I had too much to watch and they got away." At another time Mr. Blair was passing Aunty Myrears' residence on the site of the present electric light plant. Aunty Myrears' was the place in town that negroes were run in for safety. She saw Mr. Blair passing, and according to previous understanding sent a negro to follow him. The negro was so anxious that he kept gaining ground and getting too close for Mr. Blair's comfort. Walk as fast as he could, however, he could not keep in the lead and was finally overtaken by the time he reached the present site of the Monon Stock Yards. By that time the negro could contain himself no longer and cried out, "Massy, Massy, how far is it to Canada?" Mr. Blair directed him to the Robinson farm where John Russell met him and later took him to Ewing's.

W. C. Smith, who, of all persons yet living, had the closest connection with the work of the Underground Railroad, related a great many experiences that he had personally. Among them was the following:

On one occasion a negro came through by himself and got to Thomas Smith's. Isaac Adkins had heard of his arrival but had been unable to locate him. He set his forces to watching in the hope that they might get a glimpse of him. In the meantime, Adkins went to Louisville presumably to find someone to claim him. He failed to come back that night, so Thomas Smith became a little uneasy and sent his son, W C Smith down there the next day to watch. He got as far as New Albany and located Adkins and his crowd there, so he stayed around until he learned that they were not coming to Bloomington until the next train. Someone of the Adkins crowd was drinking and noticing Will Smith he remarked for his benefit that they

would get that nigger or kill someone trying. Mr. Smith concluded that he would be at least as safe with a weapon as without one, so he crossed the street and bought a Colt revolver. That quieted things down in a little bit. Coming up on the train things came near breaking out again. The Adkins proposed a vote on the presidential candidates. Will Smith, to avoid trouble, voted for Filmore.²⁰ Only one voted for Fremont. They were about to put this one off the train, but because of the conductor's remark that just one would not amount to much, and also because Will Smith voted unexpectedly for Filmore to avoid their trap they quieted down. The rest of the trip to Bloomington was made without excitement. Thomas Smith met the train at the depot and later succeeded in transferring the negro to Robert Ewing's. No one ever suspected Robert Ewing of harboring slaves. The Adkins crowd stayed around several days before giving up the hunt, but they failed to find their negro. It was customary at that time to put advertisements in the papers in regard to runaway slaves. Sometimes the advertisements would be accompanied with the picture of "the nigger" running away, and the reward that would follow his capture. Frequently this advertising was done by large posters which were scattered through the country. The reward was paid as soon as the negro was delivered to Louisville. The statement was made to me



²⁰ A more thorough understanding of this passage requires a basic outline of the two names mentioned, and the politics of this period. The whole passage about the "election" refers to the heated politics associated with the Presidential election of 1856—a particularly divisive and hard-fought contest. Although James Buchanan was the eventual winner and became the 15th President of the United States, the issue of slavery was a very important component of the election—adding a great deal to the "heat" of the electoral contest.

"Filmore" in this passage, refers to Millard Fillmore—the 13th President of the United States (1850-1853), and the last President elected under the banner of the Whig Party. Fillmore was running for another term as President, after losing his bid for a second term to Democrat Franklin Pierce. In 1856, Fillmore ran as the candidate of the relatively new American or "Know Nothing" Party. Since Fillmore supported the Compromise of 1850 (which included the Fugitive Slave Act—also known as the "Bloodhound Law"), it's easy to see why Will Smith would have voted for him to avoid the trap being set by the "Bloodhound" Adkins.

"Freemont," on the other hand, refers to John C. Frémont, the Republican candidate in the 1856 election. The Republican party's rallying cry of the election: "Free Soil, Free Men, and Frémont," makes the party's position clear with respect to the expansion of slavery in the country. A vote for Frémont (for whom Will Smith would have been likely to vote in a "real" election) might have been dangerous to his short-term life expectancy in this instance!

This entire passage represents a fascinating look into the politics of the era, the degree of passion felt by both sides with respect to the issue of slavery, and the danger to life and limb the Abolitionists and Underground Railroad participants faced by taking a stand. Even allowing for a bit of hyperbole, I don't recall feeling the need to buy a pistol before engaging in political discourse... much less living in a country where I would feel the need to help a fellow human being escape the bonds of slavery!

For more information see the following links (*Wikipedia*)...

- [Millard Fillmore](#)
- [John Frémont](#)
- [1856 Presidential Election](#)
- [Franklin Pierce](#)

by two individuals that in at least a few instances when the negro proved not to be the right one, he was sold anyway to pay for the expense of his capture. Among the white families with which runaway negroes usually stayed in this community were those of Thomas Smith, Robert Ewing, and John Blair (and Mrs. Myrears, colored). They did not often stop at Sammy Gordon's or the Faris' as they lived directly on the road.

THE STORY OF TONY

Toney was a negro who escaped from his master in Kentucky and undirected made his way to Monroe county where he was caught by the Kersaws one Saturday night. James Clark, an elder in the Presbyterian Church, found out about the capture the following morning on his way to church, and sent word by Tommy Moore to Thomas Smith, who lived two miles in the country southeast of town. Mr. Smith came to town and together with Mr. Clark secured a writ authorizing them to take Tony from the Kersaws. At that time the Kersaws lived on the east side of the square where the Wiles Drug Store is at present located. Their place of business was in the marble work shop on the site where the old Presbyterian Church used to stand. The trial for the possession of Tony took place before Judge David McDonald. The negro was free; after which he went into the Kersaw house to get his bundle of clothes, and while there he was persuaded by the Kersaws that Mr. Smith and Mr. Clark were trying to get possession of him, not for the purpose of trying to get him through to Canada, but for the purpose of taking him back to the South. The Kersaws promised him that if he would stay with them they would take him through to Canada. Mr. Smith and Mr. Clark failed to get possession of Tony, as the Kersaws would allow no one to come around their house. In the meantime the judge had disappeared and could not be found. Some students, originally from the South, had by this time joined the Kersaws, and had threatened to shoot anyone who made an attempt to enter the Kersaw house. One of the students was from Alabama and his father was a slave holder in that State. Finally the feeling got so high that a group of the students decided to attack Mr. Smith and Mr. Clark, but were persuaded from their purpose by Austin Seward, who told them that these men stood too high in the community to be shot down without involving a great many people in the shooting affray. Mr. Smith and Mr. Clark finally went home leaving the negro in the possession of the Kersaws

Early Monday morning the Kersaws started with Tony towards Louisville. Tony noticed the direction in which they were going and began to feel that he had been duped. He racked his brain to remember what Sammy Gordon had told him just after the trial before he went to the Kersaws for his bundle of clothing. Mr. Gordon had felt that there was some danger that the Kersaws might fool the negro and had consequently instructed Tony that if ever he got into trouble again and wanted protection to come to the Gordon home. He described the place, a one story log cabin with a two story brick at the end of it, a

few miles south of Bloomington. The negro was told to snap the large gate latch and Mr. Gordon would understand the signal and would come out and take him in. The negro remembered this house since he had passed by it when he first came to Bloomington.

The Kersaws proceeded southward with Tony until they finally came to the residence of Mr. Fleener, the father of Nick Fleener, a few miles north of Salem. By that time the negro was tired since he was unused to riding, and with weariness as an excuse he went to bed early. During the night Tony heard Mr. Fleener urging the Kersaws to tie him. They argued, however, that they could take Tony anywhere and that he had all the confidence in the world in them and they would rather not arouse his suspicions. Tony immediately planned to escape, but he did not wish to make the attempt without his clothes, so he decided to wait until morning. The next morning he watched his chance and while his captors were not looking he slipped into a nearby cornfield and made his way into the woods where he stayed until night. At nightfall he started north again and two or three nights later made his way back to the Gordon's. The Kersaws finally tracked him to Gordon's but before they discovered that he had been there some of them reconnoitered about Thomas Smith's place east of town. That very fact warned Mr. Smith that Tony had escaped and immediately guards were stationed to be on the lookout for him to protect him. Mr. Gordon brought Tony to Mr. Smith's the same night that he reached the Gordon farm, and Mr. Gordon was back home before daylight the following morning. Tony was kept at the home of Mr. Smith for over a week. W. C. Smith, Thomas Smith's son, was not let into the secret, but he noticed the following day that his father and his uncle, Mr. Curry²¹, as they were putting up hay would frequently go back to the rear part of the loft, so he decided to see what was back there and discovered Tony.

For several days the Kersaws stayed about the place on the pretext of gathering blackberries. They had guards on all the roads and vowed that Tony would never escape. In the meantime, Mr. Kelso, from Mooresville, had been notified and arrangements were made whereby Mr. Smith was to deliver Tony to him at a point north of town as agreed upon through correspondence. The time for delivering Tony came to hand. The ways of escape were guarded. Finally two wagons were loaded, one a covered wagon with the ends closed, which was driven by Mr. Curry, the other Mr. Smith drove, which was an open wagon filled with sacks of grain. Tony was in this wagon under the sacks. Mr. Smith and Mr. Curry started towards town. Mr. Smith drove his team up to the square and began to mingle with the people, and especially with those whose curiosity had been aroused by the covered wagon Mr. Curry had intentionally looked a little guilty and driven somewhat nervously through the town and out east towards Unionville and Morgantown. After he got a short distance from Bloomington some of the pickets reported that he was whipping up his horses and before long he was followed by a crowd of Kersaw sympathizers. He was

²¹ Will's uncle "Mr. Curry" refers to either William or Samuel, *Op. cit.*

finally overtaken but nothing was found in the wagon. In the meantime Mr. Smith unhitched his horses from where they had been and started north. As it was in the dry season and there were no mills here the farmers had to take their grain away; and in view of the fact that the suspicion was directed towards the Curry wagon, no one suspected the negro's being in the wagon driven by Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith preceded unmolested, delivered Tony to Mr. Kelso at the designated point, and proceeded to the mill. No one ever discovered how the negro escaped. Some even decided that he had never returned to Bloomington, and consequently was not at the Smith residence when it was being watched.