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Course Number

9 March 2019

Analysis: Eric Foner Interview

In the NPR radio program, Eric Foner was interviewed regarding his book ‘Gateway to Freedom’ that provided a detailed account on how fugitive slaves escaped and how they were helped to relocate in New England, New York and Canada (NPR Fresh Air).

The experiences shared by Douglass in his autobiography described the conditions he felt as a black person, fearing that any turning point, road or bridge some white person may be following him. He describes the feelings of being petrified out of fear of being discovered. A similar account was related by Eric Foner who explained that each white person according to law was asked to keep an eye open for fugitive slaves. Therefore, any black person could be stopped and asked to show their documents to prove that they are a free person, or have been given permission to venture outside (Foner). The feelings of fear described by Douglass were a result of suspecting every white person to be searching for him.

The slaves wanted to escape because of two main reasons. One main factor was the physical abuse which involved being whipped, mistreated and abused in a harsh and violent manner. Another key reason for wanting to escape was the fear of being sold. Most fugitive slaves hailed from the upper south, where they were comparatively treated better than the lower South. Moreover, they feared being separated from their families and people they knew. Moreover, they also feared having other members of their families sold and the possible brutal conditions that they might face in the place where they are relocated to.

In New York City, slaves were estimated to be sold for more than $100 in the market, where the average earnings for a working-class individual was close to $250. Foner estimates that about one dozen people would have been involved in aiding fugitive slaves in New York City, but who continued to do so very effectively for a few months. There were documented records for 200 slaves who passed New York City. Although the people in the Underground Railroad who were involved were not too many, but they were actively working. Between 1835 to 1860, Foner estimates that more than 5000 fugitives were aided nation-wide (Foner).

According to Foner, the Fugitive Slave Act was very important in the way that it affected the black population living in the North. The population became vulnerable and as a result saw a mass exodus of fugitive slaves, wanting to escape Northern cities, such as New York. Moreover, the Fugitive Slave Law also applied to those who had already escaped a dozen years ago and were living peaceful lives in the North with their families and earning a wage. Those people also became vulnerable as a result of the law and feared being relocated to the South after being captured. Also, the person who was accused was not provided the right to testify, therefore it became very easy to be picked up, captured and relocated by means of the law. Furthermore, the 186 Civil Rights Act was a very important law that, for the first time, provided equal rights to African Americans without distinction of their race. The fugitive Slave Act also helped provide a model for the Civil Rights Act, since it was a federal law that overrode state law. The Fugitive Slave Law constitutionally established the South’s right despite the opposition from the North, and now the Civil Rights Act was modeled after the same law to penalize any state officials who were looking to put Blacks back into slavery again.

The information used by Eric Foner was obtained from personal memoirs, and from Howard Gray’s manuscript ‘Record of Fugitives’ that were published in Northern newspapers. The entire record was maintained by the journalist, Howard Gay, that was based on his personal meetings with fugitive slaves, and which documented their histories and accounts of escape.

# Works Cited

Foner, Eric. *Gateway to freedom : the hidden history of America's fugitive slaves*. 1st. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

NPR Fresh Air. *Gateway To Freedom': Heroes, Danger And Loss On The Underground Railroad*. 19 January 2015. 9 arch 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2015/01/19/377606644/gateway-to-freedom-heroes-danger-and-loss-on-the-underground-railroad>.