

The Clingman Family Part 1– The Escape to Freedom

-Samuel Gabriel Clingman learns to read and write before escaping enslavement and finding success as a teacher and minister in Canada. Read more below.

Have you ever heard of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850? This law was passed by the United States Congress and stated that those who escaped enslavement and took refuge in the North could be captured and returned to the South. This law also fined and/or imprisoned those who assisted in the escape of freedom seekers and took away the right for African Americans to testify on their own behalf in court. This law is often an explanation for why 30,000-40,000 freedom seekers came to Canada, but did you know that there were numerous freedom seekers who escaped to Canada years, even decades, before the passage of this law? Members of the Clingman family are examples of those who came to Canada before the 1850 law. Samuel Gabriel Clingman, for example, escaped enslavement in the early 1820s and came to Upper Canada (Ontario), demonstrating that there was Black settlement in Upper Canada before the 1850's mass migration.

It was while enslaved that Samuel Gabriel Clingman learned how to read and write with the assistance of Moses MacKoy, the son of the neighbour of Gabriel's "master," Thomas King. Did you know that it was illegal to teach enslaved people how to read and write? Before the Civil War, southern states banned the education of enslaved people because slaveholders, who were also lawmakers, saw literacy as dangerous. Slaveholders feared that literacy allowed the Black community to read abolitionist pamphlets which would, in turn, inspire slave revolt. Additionally, if enslaved people displayed their literacy, it contradicted claims of their intellectual inferiority which was a key justification for the enslavement of Black people.

Despite this, 17-year-old Moses secretly taught Samuel Gabriel how to read and write in his father's horse-mill each Sunday morning. It was referred to as the "mill-house school." Unfortunately, Samuel Gabriel's "owner" caught him practising his writing on the inside of a barn wall and demanded that Samuel Gabriel reveal who his teacher was. He had no choice but to reveal that it was Moses, which resulted in the immediate closure of the mill-house school. This was further motivation for him to escape.

It was in the early part of 1820 that Samuel Gabriel Clingman escaped Thomas King's plantation, but King was not willing to give up Gabriel so easily. Thomas King placed an advertisement that said: "100 Reward! Left my house in Greenup, Kentucky, four miles above Portsmouth, on the 18th of March, 1820, a negro named GABRIEL." About 5 feet 10 inches high, and of a very dark brown or black complexion between 21 and 22 years of age. He has a small scar on his breast occasioned by a burn when young, and is very apt to stammer when speaking. His clothing was a London brown broad cloth and Lindsey pantaloons, swansdown waist-coat. Said negro man is supposed by some to be drowned."

The advertisement continues by saying "Any person finding him alive and delivering him to me shall have the above award; or fifty dollars for securing him in any jail so that I cannot get him again together with all reasonable expenses. If he is drowned any one finding him will confer a particular favor by writing a few lines to the subscriber directed to Portsmouth post-office. Thomas B. King April 1."

Fortunately, King was unsuccessful in his search and Samuel Gabriel Clingman reached Canada. It was there that he found success and became a teacher and an ordained New Connexion Methodist minister who returned to the United States after gaining his "Freedom

Papers.” Samuel was very active in the US but was reassigned to Colchester as an itinerant circuit minister and it was at the Colchester AME Zion Church that he found his home.

Even after his escape, Samuel Gabriel stayed in contact with Moses MacKoy (who taught him to read and write) and told him to find out from Thomas King (Samuel Gabriel’s former “master”) what it would cost to acquire his freedom papers. King replied, saying that it would cost \$200 cash. In response, he immediately sent \$200 and on September 7, 1835 his Certificate of Freedom was signed by A.W.G. Nichols, making Clingman a free man.

According to Milo Johnson’s book, *New Canaan*, Samuel Gabriel Clingman likely had a son named Gabriel while enslaved. Samuel and Gabriel Jr. were born on the same plantation and it is believed that when Samuel Gabriel left in 1820, he left behind a child. That child is believed to be Gabriel Jr. and he, along with his descendants, are who we are going to discuss next.

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 2.