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DELIA WEBSTER

BY B. L. WICK

In the first case cited by the Supreme Court in the territory of Iowa, the case of Ralph, Chief Justice Mason held "Where a slave goes with the consent of his master to become a permanent resident of a free state or territory, he cannot be regarded as a fugitive slave. Where the owner permits the slave to become a permanent resident, he cannot later exercise any act of ownership over the slave within the territory." Still with such a decision one of the most prominent and outspoken antislavery women, Delia Webster, lived and died in Iowa.

In *The History of Kentucky*, by R. H. Collins, a sort of diary kept by him, in December, 1844, the writer says: "Delia A. Webster in jail at Lexington charged with abducting slaves. Tried and sentenced to two years in the penitentiary. The jury signed a petition to Governor Owsley for her pardon on account of her sex.

"February 25, 1845. Delia Webster pardoned and left for her home in Vermont with her father. Rev. Calvin Fairbanks, who was with her, was convicted on his confession. The jury fixed his confinement to the penitentiary for fifteen years."

In the same history we find as of March 12, 1845, in reference to Delia Webster, as follows: "Was pardoned out of the penitentiary in Kentucky, and not long afterwards removed to Madison, Indiana, and with the Rev. Morris Day was again arrested for running away slaves."

Delia A. Webster was born December 17, 1817, in the state of Vermont, and of an abolitionist family, distantly related to the Websters of New England. She became a student at Oberlin College, Ohio, in 1842, returning to Ferrisburg, Vermont, her native state, in 1851. In 1852 she lived in Madison, Jefferson County, Indiana, near Louisville, and early became interested in the antislavery movement, and took up with the work of the antislavery organization.

Collins, in his history, speaks of Delia Webster holding meetings in Henry and Trimble counties, where she was requested

to remove from the state, but she would again return after short intervals. She became especially interested in the work of Rev. Calvin Fairbanks, who was born in New York, and who was an ardent abolitionist, and between 1837 and 1839 had aided twenty-three slaves to escape across the Ohio River. His name became still more popular by 1843, when he raised \$2,375 to secure the liberty of a slave girl, nearly white, who was sold at auction at Lexington, Kentucky. In 1844 he opened a way for the escape of the Hayden family, for which offense he suffered five years' imprisonment. Later he was again detected in violation of the fugitive slave law, and sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment at Frankfort, Kentucky, where he was cruelly treated, and received 35,000 lashes on his bare body. In 1864 he was set at liberty, after having spent seventeen years in prison.

James Lane Allen in "Aftermath" speaks of Fairbanks and Delia Webster in a most interesting manner during this period.

Delia Webster, after her Kentucky escapade, traveled much, lectured, and worked in the interest of the antislavery body, and also became interested in woman suffrage, temperance, etc. She lawed for many years over some Kentucky land, but lost all. During her later life she made her home with a sister, Martha, wife of S. B. Goodrich, who lived for a while in Wisconsin, and later came to Le Grand, Iowa, where the family was interested in business. She also lived in La Porte, Iowa. After the death of the sister, she made her home with her niece, Alice Goodrich, who, being a graduate of the University of Iowa, was a prominent doctor in Des Moines. It was in Des Moines that Delia Webster died in 1904.

At Le Grand Delia Webster was well known, and had a number of friends. She was a genuine New Englander, set in her ways, bitter and penniless, having spent a considerable fortune in unprofitable litigation. She always insisted that she was related to Daniel Webster, and that it was through his influence that she was released from the penitentiary in Kentucky. It would appear that she was rather related to Noah Webster, who was born in Connecticut, who was four generations removed from John Webster, the first settler in those parts, and from whom Delia descended.

Delia Webster kept a diary, and had many letters from prominent men in public life, who favored the antislavery movement, such as Sumner, Corwin and many others. What has become of this diary no one seems to know. In the *History of the Underground Railway*, by W. H. Siebert, there is considerable mention of names of the various episodes in the underground history, but there does not seem to be any mention of Delia, although Fairbanks and many others with whom she worked are mentioned. There is no question but that Delia Webster was closely connected with the Hayden rescue, for which Fairbanks suffered imprisonment for seventeen years.

During the last few years of her life she was, undoubtedly, considered by her relatives a burden and a misfortune. She was old, bitter and penniless. Delia Webster also seemed to have lectured in various places such as Massachusetts and Ohio. Those in Le Grand and La Porte who knew of her and of her family alleged that she was more or less of a trouble maker, who lived too ardently in the past. She would write letters to prominent people, who had been connected before the war with the antislavery movement, and frequently these letters were never mailed.

In a letter which appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1893 written by Calvin Fairbanks he speaks of a Miss D. A. Webster, a young Vermont lady who was associated with him in teaching, in the state of Kentucky, and that they left Lexington, Kentucky, with the Haydens, slaves, in a hack and crossed the Ohio in a ferry and drove to an underground railroad depot at Hopkins, Ohio, where they left the Haydens. It was when they returned to Lexington after an absence of several days that they were both arrested and later convicted for the crime of assisting runaway slaves escape. Fairbanks was one of the most prominent of the active abolitionists, and the story of his life and his writings, if found, might throw a new light upon Delia Webster.

One of the old settlers in Marshall County states the facts that in the Goodrich family in the early seventies there were four sons and four daughters, and Delia Webster generally lived in part of the house alone. She was called Aunt Tippy. She loved chickens, and was old and queer. This house is still stand-

ing in Le Grand, and was purchased from the Goodrich family by Hiram Hammond, and was later purchased by M. Tweedt.

Years have passed since the antislavery days before the Civil War, when Delia Webster, educated, young, vivacious and active took a leading part in the underground slavery movement, and personally helped many an unfortunate colored family on dark nights across the Ohio River. She was on intimate terms with the leading antislavery leaders such as Garrison, Sumner, and especially with the Boston contingent, and appeared frequently in public lectures telling of what she had seen while a school-teacher in Kentucky.

Years passed, and she came into Iowa to make her home with a sister when poverty had ground her down and after obscurity had passed its darkest mantle over her, and when she was removed from her immediate relatives and friends. The new neighbors knew her not, and her voice out on the prairies of Iowa was unheeded by those among whom she had cast her lot, and after many wanderings and after a long and eventful life she fell asleep at the advanced age of nearly ninety, recalling the days of her youth. Of all her relatives and early admirers only a faithful niece watched over her to the end.

Delia Webster sleeps in a secluded spot in one of the cemeteries in Des Moines, and the people of the state where she passed so many years have utterly failed to appreciate or comprehend the marvelous efforts she made for the slave in the spring time of her life, which at that time thrilled the hearts of the masses, but which had utterly died out in the December of her days.

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