Dennis' Captain Prince Crowell: anti-slavery efforts on Cape Cod
By Barbara MacPhee

Yes! ROOTS, as shown on television, made us all look backward, wondering about our own progenitors. I wondered why Capt. Prince Crowell, back in the last century, to whom my grandfather referred with such deference, was the kind of a man he was.

Captain Crowell was of the manner and breed of men that brought respect and admiration to the shipmasters and their crews all along the New England coast, prosperity to their villages, and a merchant fleet second to none in the days of the great clippers.

These shipmasters walked as "Kings of the Earth," and stepped out of little Cape Cod homes no bigger than their neighbors. That was, until they made their fortunes, and then they built lovely four-square Georgian homes, or homes with columns after the Greek Revival style. The area was their market place - tea and silk from China, furs from the Pacific Coast, cotton from the South, fruit from the Mediterranean, and hemp and flax from Russia.

Captain Prince was born at East Dennis in 1813 during the War of 1812, in the home of his grandparents. Little windmills lined the shore, pumping up sea water for the salt works, and Prince's Shiverick relatives were building vessels in their boat yard on Sesuit Creek. A British warship stood off-shore during the war, and men took turns watching from the bluffs to warn of raiding parties.

Prince's parents were Quakers, followers of George Fox, hoping to the belief that God reveals Himself, not through any priesthood, but through His Spirit. Evehemtly these Friends opposed the holding of men in bondage. They had settled throughout the colonies, often dragged up to Boston to stand trial for their beliefs.

Early anti-slavery societies were formed by these people in the border states to prevent the kidnapping of freed slaves. Here the Underground Railroad had its beginning, launched by such men as Levi Coffin and Benjamin Lundy.

Young Prince, named for a forebear, Governor Prince, learned to sail with his Shiverick cousins, Joshua Sears, and the Howes brothers, Levi, William Frederick, Anthony, and Alison, and Milton Hedge. Later they were to become captains on the lovely Shiverick vessels.

Prince's mother had been a Sears, and although they learned to book-learning, they had mighty strong feelings when they knew they were in the right. Isaac Sears, an uncle, a sea captain, was in the port of New York when word reached the colonies that Parliament had passed the Stamp Act. Sears put himself at the head of the disaffected with a shout, "Hurrah! my boys, we WILL HAVE the stamps!" He was as good as his word - the stamps were thrown into a bonfire. Hencefor he was called 'King' Sears for his defiance of His Majesty.

But Prince was early trained in the ways of peace. "Tut! Tut! Son!" Father, David would caution, "Thee must never raise thy hands in anger." Yet Prince had the blood of 'King' Sears in him, and Quaker or not, he had a mite of trouble with those great hands of his when need arose inspite of his good nature.

When the great Methodist Revival Meetings were sweeping over Cape Cod, the Crowells and their neighbors joined the Methodists, worshipping at the old Red Top Church, now a home in East Dennis. They sat quietly in Meeting, listening in vain for any word against the evils of slavery.

The pulpit was silent on the subject, fearing to offend southern members. But Father David, who had a contract for mail for the West Indies, had seen slave auctions and the conditions some of the slaves worked under. He vehemently protested the institution, and Prince, as supercargo on his father's vessels summers, agreed with him. They must have their own church, based on the premise that slavery was a sin.

Young Prince attended Paul Wing's Academy at Sandwich, a fine Quaker school. Friend Wing's influence radiated throughout New England. Vibrant and singing, his voice would admonish his boys - "COURAGE! COURAGE! Man the breech and play the MAN!" He impressed his pupils with his own will to stay in a fight until it was won, and with his hatred of slavery.

Tail Prince grew, six foot two, in command of his own small trading schooner now. Then he met and married little Polly Foster of Brewster with her aristocratic Chillingworth blood and her strong, intellectual mind. She was a great reader and admirer of Theodore Parker, the great Boston anti-slavery preacher who'd been denied a pulpit for his views.

Now the Crowells and their neighbors at last petitioned the state Assembly for an Act to establish their own Wesleyan Methodist Church. The charter was granted in 1845, based on the premise that "slavery is a sin." Proudly now they sat in Meeting, the land given by Father David.

But when an escaped slave was denied the right to tell his story from the pulpit, Prince made a decision. Into that church he sailed, and with his own hands, removed his family pew!

There were slave uprisings in the South, and because of fear of another insurrection, the Rev. Elijah Lovejoy was murdered by a pro-slavery mob in Illinois in 1837, and his printing press was destroyed for his anti-slavery articles. The mob had attacked the rights of free speech. Up in Boston at a protest meeting at Faneuil Hall it was Benjamin Hallet of Barnstable who read the resolution:

"Resolved: That in this country the mightiest influence is public opinion; that mobs cannot prevail without a criminal apathy in the public mind."

And it was the Honorable William Sturgis of Barnstable, known as a fine sea captain and for his defense of the rights of the Pacific Coast Indians, who called for order...
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when the pro-slavery mob tried to shout down the speaker, Wendell Phillips, as he condemned Lovejoy’s killers.

Captain Prince had a daughter now, and sons. He didn’t want to cargo cotton to Liverpool as a slave-labor product and tried the Mediterranean Fruit Trade. He waited so long in Palermo for the fruit to ripen, that the voyage was a financial failure. His wish was to command a China clipper, and in 1846 off he sailed for Whampoa, as blithely as any old China hand. His mother wrote to him there:

"I hope you will not delay seeking your soul’s salvation. But there must be a determination in the will that we put our good desires into practice and keep a conscience void of offense toward God and fellowman.

When he returned from China he decided he’d made enough to retire, at least from the sea, and acted as ship’s broker for the Shiverick ships in which he had an interest with his brother-in-law, Capt. Christopher Hall.

America was growing. Westward the wagons rolled - men clamoring for more land. Factories were growing, more roads, more canals, and emigrants were pouring in by the thousands.

The United States was having trouble with Mexico over her territory that year of 1846. President Polk asked Congress for money for the purchase of land there. Free Soilers and Abolitionists accused him of wanting it for another Slave State. Would Texas be free or slave?

Down on Cape Cod in the summer of 1848, Captain Prince joined forces with Zebinia Small (he stood five feet two in his sea boots) of Harwich. He had sold his beloved vessel, the “Emulous”, refusing to cargo slave-labor products any longer. They planned an anti-slavery Convention and assembled over 3000 at Harwich Center to hear the speakers, Stephen Foster, Parker Pillsbury, Lucy Stone, and William Wells Brown, an educated freed slave. Determined they were to save their neighbor’s souls from the pro-slavery forces so strong on the Cape which traded South and shipped her cotton.

When Pillsbury accused a local captain of returning a fugitive slave on his vessel back into slavery for the reward, the captain admitted it was so. “I did my duty as I saw it according to the BIBLE, returning to the owner what was his. I’m a member in good standing of the Church.”

“I’ll Defend the Church,”’ the mob screamed, attacking the speakers on the platform. And all Hell broke loose. Three thousand people lurched forward, ready to lynch the anti-slavery men. As Pillsbury wrote later in ACTS OF THE ANTI-SLAVERY APOSTLES:

"But Captain Crowell was there and we were safe. And our holy cause was safe! And his young, tall, manly, majestic form moved on that seething, surging sea of human passion, set by fires of Hell, and when and where he came, the tempest subdued.”

Bruised, bloodied, but unconquered, the Abolitionists reached Binie Small’s home nearby. There they planned their next move. They’d fill the State House with anti-slavery men and send some down to Washington. They wasted no time. They found men with Republican views and helped get them elected. They didn’t think it strange to nominate and help elect Nathaniel Doane to office although he’d been off fishing for a living when his name was first mentioned.

And then - March 7, 1850. Daniel Webster rose to his feet. His magnetism filled the Senate. Cape Codders knew Dan’ll well. He’d tried many a case in the Barnstable Court House.

"I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man . . . but as an American.”

And Webster demanded that Clay’s Compromise be passed, and the fugitive slave law enforced by every citizen. And while Daniel drank at the old inn at Sandwich, the Quakers were passing runaway slaves north to freedom right under his very nose. The Underground Railroad was running on Cape Cod. When Dan’ll got wind of it, he wrote a chiding letter to show them the error of their ways.

To a number of friends in Dennis:

Discover fanciful ideas, and all attempts to reach ends which, however desirable . . . are not placed within compass of your abilities. Hold on to the Constitution and the laws established under it.

But Captain Prince and his anti-slavery friends kept doggedly on. Agitate, agitate, petition, petition - and the abolitionists sent so many petitions to the State House, it was said they could have heated the city.

There was Knowles of Eastham, Joshua C. Howes of Dennis, R. Gould and Rufus S. Pope of Falmouth, Asa Lovell of Barnstable, and Johnson, Freeman, Lapham, Shed, and Lewis - all anti-slavery men elected to office, along with Nathaniel Doane again. This Massachusetts House of 1851 was made memorial because they helped send Charles Sumner, the great conscience Whig to Congress in the face of determined opposition.

Prince and Binie and their cohorts ignored the Fugitive Slave Law that sent thousands of freed slaves fleeing North. A letter to them from Wendell Phillips directed Mr. Mayo and Binie to take charge of

"my little colored boy when he arrives . . . It is not safe to have colored children traveling about alone.”

John Brown came to Boston to raise money to arm the freedsoilers in Kanândas. Prince met him, had his lithograph done, and gave to his cause. But by 1856, Prince decided he’d see for himself what was going on there. He traveled West, joining an emigrant party at the Mississippi. What he heard he didn’t like. When Brown returned to Boston for more funds, Captain Prince refused to give. “He’s asking for enough money to arm a battalion,” he remarked.

And then, on a dark and chill October night, John Brown and his men struck the government arsenal at Harper’s Ferry. The nation rocked with horror. Boston men, involved in the plot, fled to Canada, and others went when he was hung. He became a Martyr to the Abolitionists.

As ship’s broker for the Shiverick vessels, Captain Prince was having a mite of trouble with freight rates, now
so low profits were sinking. Cargo was scarce - the price of cotton was at rock bottom and piling up on Southern wharfs. Prince, patiently with his daughter, writing three drafts with their quill pens, wrote to one captain in the South:

"I suggest you take a cool mint julep in hand and a short rest until freights go up.

But, to one of the captains on his vessels scrounging from port to port in China for freight during the Depression of 1858, who wrote for advice, he wrote:

"... besides, we have other than pecunary reasons for not wishing any of our ships to engage in the coolie trade. I thought I would mention this now, for should the dull freight market continue, an offer of this kind might be tempting, and not wishing to subject you to too severe a temptation between moral obligation and pecuniary gain, I intimate my wishes."

But Prince found compensation in the work and sacrifice he'd made for the anti-slavery cause. For wasn't it one of the men they'd worked to elect to the State Assembly, Mr. Knowles of Eastham, who stood forth, steady and fearless, ignoring the cat-calls of pro-slavery men, and read the Resolutions for a new Personal Liberty Bill to restore the freedom of Blacks in Massachusetts at least:

"Resolved: ... that the Fugitive Slave Bill is a direct violation of the tenth amendment ... and that Congress use honorable means to secure "a repeal of the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850."

Abe Lincoln had no sooner been elected President and taken office than eleven southern states seceded. Federal forts were seized and when the President attempted to send supplies to Fort Sumter, the South declared War, and opened fire!

Two days later, on April 15, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers. "Let the erring sister states go! Let there be no Civil War," cried Garrison in the LIBERATOR.

But it was too late. Down at Dennis the town called upon none other than Captain Prince Crowell to read Abe Lincoln's call for volunteers, and standing on Hockum's Rock before the assembled crowd, he read the document.

"Now, therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States ... do call forth the militia of the several states ..."

All compromise had failed! The South had rejected all offers to compensate the planters for the freeing of their slaves had England had done in her colonies. The Dennis lads mustered under the old vineyard trees at Scargo Lake, and marched off down the Old King's Highway for the depot.

Captain Prince Crowell and Binnie Small may not be in any history book, but these steady, determined men with the courage to endure, changed public opinion here on Cape Cod. The Cape men and women who opened their homes to fugitive slaves are part of the history of her past and her free heritage.
[1977-07-21; multi-page clipping from The Register, “Dennis’ Captain Prince Crowell: anti-slavery efforts on Cape Cod,” written by Barbara MacPhee. Article has a lot of poetic license. Not transcribed.]