

CHAPTER 1



Of Southern Birth

Robert Purvis, destined to become a major figure in the abolition of slavery, was born in Charleston, South Carolina—a state second only to Virginia in its slave population—on August 4, 1810. The Neck, an unincorporated section of Charleston, north of what was known as Boundary Street, was then a place of lawlessness; it was home to many free blacks, and the black mistresses of white slave owners. William Purvis, a white cotton merchant and his mixed-race wife, Harriet Judah, lived here on Elizabeth Street from time to time. The couple had three children; Robert was the second.¹

Among the devastating effects of chattel slavery was its destruction not only of family ties, but also of a family's past. Instead of the family Bibles, the gravestones, the family letters and journals, and other memorabilia with which many American families trace their ancestry, the descendants of slaves were left with legends, some of them colorful, most of them difficult, if not impossible, to trace.

Such was the case with Harriet Judah, Purvis's mother. When he was eighty years old, and had become famous, Robert Purvis told reporters that Harriet was the daughter of a slave, Dido Badaracka, "a full-blooded Moor." Purvis described her as a woman of "magnificent features and great beauty. She had crisp hair and a stately manner." By Moor, Purvis apparently meant what was known as a Blackamoor. Dido was not an Arab; she was dark-skinned and had tightly curled, "crisp" hair, which Harriet inherited. Many years later, when a critic falsely accused Robert Purvis of trying to pass for white, she described Harriet as a "tight headed negro lady and a dear good woman."²

According to the legend which Robert Purvis repeated several times, Dido Badaraka was born in Morocco. At the age of twelve, she was captured by a slave trader, along with an Arab girl. Both girls had been lured to go a mile or two out of the city where they lived to see a deer that had been caught. They were seized, bound, placed on the backs of camels, and carried to a slave market on the coast. Here they were loaded onto a slave ship and transported to Charleston, South Carolina in 1766. At the slave market, the Arab girl was freed. (In order to keep peace with the Barbary pirates, in none of the British colonies were Arabs or Moors enslaved.³) However, Dido was sold to a white woman, a Miss Harriet Deas, who educated her, treated her as a companion, and left instructions that Dido was to be freed and given an annuity of \$60 when Miss Deas died, which she did nine years later.⁴

Subsequent biographers have accepted this story, but it has proved impossible to verify. The date of 1766 appears to be wrong, for Dido had a child, Mary, Harriet's half sister, in 1804, when she would have been fifty years of age. It seems far more likely that the date of Dido's capture was 1776. Among slaves whose sales were recorded in Charleston between 1773 and 1810 there were twelve Didos, but none owned by a person named Deas. A search of manumission records reveals only that a Mrs. Elizabeth Deas left a will asking her descendants to free "old Dido" in 1802. Even if Dido Badaraka had been born in 1754, rather than 1764 as we now think, she would scarcely be described as "old Dido" at the age of forty-eight.⁵

When Dido was still a young woman, Purvis said, she had attracted the attention of Baron Judah, a member of a prominent Jewish family. There was such a person living in Charleston at the time, who may have been Purvis's grandfather. Baron or Baruch or Barry Judah (1763-1830) was the third of ten children of Hillel Judah, a German Jew, and his wife Abigail Seixas Judah, a Sephardic Jew, originally from Spain or Portugal. This family moved to Charleston sometime between 1766 and 1783, becoming part of a tiny Jewish community, numbering 188 according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census of 1790. Recently scholars have estimated that the numbers might be higher, possibly as many as 225.⁶

Jews began arriving in Charleston as early as 1695, although their numbers remained small until 1750. The first Jewish settlers in Charleston, as well as elsewhere in South Carolina and Georgia, were mainly Sephardic from Spain or Portugal. Many were merchants, and brought some wealth into the communities in which they settled. Although they experienced some discrimination, anti-Semitism was considerably less vir-

ulent than in the European nations they had left. They were accepted as citizens, and could vote, but not hold office. A number participated in the Revolutionary War as American patriots, several were captured, and at least one died.⁷

The Jews who settled in Charleston and elsewhere in the Deep South found the Southern way of life agreeable. They readily adapted to the institution of slavery. By 1790 at least 83 percent of Jewish households in Charleston owned slaves. They liked the leisurely way of life which slavery provided, and the mild climate. They participated in the cultural life of the city, though they did not mingle socially, that is, with a few exceptions. Several southern Jews spoke of the South as “this happy land,” or “this promised land.”⁸

At the time that the Judah family arrived in Charleston, the largest Jewish population, comprising 242 Jews, primarily Sephardic, lived in New York City. The second largest population chose Charleston as their home. The two groups were interrelated and kept in close touch. A friend of the Judah family, visiting Charleston from New York, writing to his sister in 1783, described Baron Judah, who would have been about twenty, as “A fine manly young fellow.” It must have been about this time that Baron became involved with Dido. Purvis stated that they were married in a Methodist church, but this would have been unlikely. Many white men had black mistresses, but interracial marriage was extremely rare and frowned upon. The Judahs were a prominent and proud Jewish family and owned slaves at the time. It is probable that Dido was either a slave in this family, or an indentured servant. Whatever their relationship, Baron and Dido had two children, Harriet and a son who was possibly named Daniel. Harriet, born in 1785, became Robert Purvis’s mother. A third child of Harriet’s, Mary, had a different father.⁹

The relationship between Baron and Dido ended in 1790, when Baron moved with the rest of his family to Savannah, Georgia, and then on to Richmond, Virginia in 1791. In Richmond, Baron Judah became a prominent merchant and citizen, a devoted husband and father of at least four children. According to 1820 records, he kept one slave, Mary. He may have owned others but such records were destroyed in the Richmond fire during the Civil War.¹⁰

More information is available on Baron’s younger brother, Isaac, who upon his death in 1827, gave conditional freedom to two of his slaves, Betsy and Maria; he provided for two “free mulatto boys and brothers whom I brought up, and in consequence of their attention and fidelity and my natural regard for them” (probably a euphemism for the fact that

he was their father). He left each boy a building lot in Richmond and \$500. These boys took the name of Judah, became barbers, and moved to Philadelphia where one of them, Phillip Judah, became active in the colored convention movement of the 1830s, a movement in which Robert Purvis, possibly Phillip's first cousin once removed, became a leader.¹¹

If he shared the sentiments of his brother Phillip Judah, and if he were Dido's lover, Baron Judah might have freed Dido and her children upon leaving Charleston. On the other hand, when Harriet and her sons sued for a debt owed William Purvis' estate, they lost the suit because the South Carolina courts considered all four to be slaves. At the time of her death, one Philadelphia newspaper said that Harriet had been William Purvis's slave, but when she foiled an attempt on his life he freed her and married her. Another newspaper stated that she had been born a slave, but had been freed at age nineteen. According to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's census of 1856, she was living on South Seventh Street with a niece. One of the two was described as born into slavery, another as having been born free in a slave state. The weight of all this evidence seems to suggest that Dido was never freed, and Harriet was born into slavery. It may be that William never legally freed her, since the laws for manumission were becoming increasingly rigorous. It was impossible, for instance, after 1810 to free a slave unless one could demonstrate his/her ability to be self-supporting. This eliminated the possibility of freeing one's children.¹²

Unlike Harriet, William Purvis's pedigree is well-established. He was one of seven brothers born to John and Elizabeth Thompson Purvis, who lived in Ross, Northumberland, England. After John's early death, his widow moved to Dunfermline, Fife, in Scotland, where their sons were educated. The family's patrimony had been reduced by an outbreak of sheep rot, and all but the oldest brother moved to the American colonies to seek their fortunes. John, Alexander, and Robert established themselves in South Carolina as cotton brokers. William and his brother Burrige joined them in 1780. The pioneer Purvis brothers did not take the newly arrived ones into partnership, and William and Burrige went into business for themselves in Columbia, South Carolina. In 1806, they formed a business called William Purvis & Company with a partner, Ainsley Hall, also originally from Scotland. Under this arrangement, Hall managed the business affairs in Columbia, William handled shipping and brokerage from Charleston, and Burrige represented the business in Europe.¹³

Having made his fortune, Alexander Purvis returned to Scotland in 1809, where he eventually purchased an estate and married. He revisited

South Carolina only once, in 1828. John Purvis eventually retired to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he died in 1811. Burrigge married a Charlestonian, Polly Brown, in 1798, and had a number of children.¹⁴

To represent the business he had formed with Burrigge, William Purvis established his principal residence in Charleston; by 1799, he had become a naturalized citizen. Sometime around 1805, he met and fell in love with Harriet Judah, and moved to Charleston Neck to be near her, possibly to live with her. The couple had three sons: William, born in 1806, Robert in 1810, and Joseph in 1812.¹⁵

In 1810 there were 1,472 free blacks living in Charleston, the majority of them of mixed race. There were also 11,671 slaves and 11,568 whites, making the majority persons of color.¹⁶ Some of the slaves lived independently, either as mistresses of white slave owners (such liaisons were more open and accepted in Charleston than in other parts of the south¹⁷), or as craftpersons allowed to hire out their own time on condition of paying their masters a share of their earnings. Formal manumission demanded a complicated legal procedure, and was regarded as unnecessary in these cases. The free blacks formed an elite in the black population. Many were of mixed race, and looked down on their dark-skinned neighbors. White slave owners supported the free blacks, seeing them as a buffer between themselves and the slave population. Some of the free blacks owned properties and as many as one-third bought, sold, and owned slaves, whom they hired out to bring in additional income. John Judah, who may have been Harriet's nephew, was the slave of Francis M. Weston. John was trained as a butcher and allowed to live in Charleston as a free man, and to own slaves, although retained the legal status of a slave.¹⁸

Although Robert Purvis probably never knew this, his mother, Harriet Judah, was a slaveholder. In February and March 1812, when Robert was a baby, she sold a black girl named Betty, aged ten, and bought an African girl named Bella and a black girl named Jenny. Though some free blacks bought relatives as slaves in order to save them from white owners, this was not the case with these two girls. It is possible that she dealt in slaves as a way of helping her lover William Purvis.¹⁹

Robert Purvis always asserted that his father despised slavery and refused to hold slaves. South Carolina records, however, show that William did, in fact, possess slaves at various times in his life. In 1809, William and Burrigge bought out their older brothers and acquired their business with headquarters in Charleston, Columbia, and Sumter. This purchase brought William and Burrigge into possession of land, mules, and slaves. In 1819,

William purchased a family of slaves from a South Carolinian slaveholder.²⁰ It may be that Robert never knew of these transactions. It may also be that William acquired slaves reluctantly and divested himself of them quickly.

Instead of keeping slaves, according to Robert's version, William Purvis hired gangs from a local slave owner to transport cotton from Columbia to Charleston on board two vessels he owned, the *Ant* and the *Bee*. Once, Robert claimed, when his father was overseeing the loading of a barge, the elder Purvis removed his watch and placed it on a bale of cotton. A slave, seeing his opportunity, seized it. When young Robert asked his father if he had protested this loss to the slave owner, William Purvis said "no." He did not want to expose the slave to a whipping. This act of kindness made a lifelong impression on the young boy. William Purvis also sought to educate his sons against slavery, giving them such antislavery books to read as Thomas Day's *The History of Sanford and Merton* and Jesse Torrey's *Portraiture of Slavery*.²¹

Other than these memories of his father, Robert Purvis did not speak or write about his childhood in Charleston. With two brothers to play with, and the sights and sounds of the city to explore, it must have been an exciting time for a small boy. Near their house on Elizabeth Street was the Cooper River with its shipping docks and warehouses; the boys swam, however, in the brackish water. If one ventured farther from home, there was downtown Charleston, between Meeting and King Street. Shops and churches crowded the area. Still farther south were the homes of the gentry, which were turned sideways to the street for privacy; their flowering gardens behind wrought iron gates. Farther still was the Battery, as it came to be called, surrounded by a beach of oyster shells.²²

In the summer, the rich plantation owners from the interior came up to Charleston to escape the fevers of the lowlands. There was also a time in February, known as Race Week, when the South Carolinian aristocracy flocked to the city. At these times, Charleston below Broad Street was abustle with carriages, for the wealthy families paid calls upon one another, or attended social events. Black slaves, dressed in livery, attended the carriages, and black house servants answered the front door. Behind each house were the quarters for the house slaves the families brought with them.²³

John Facheraud Grimké, a lawyer and judge, was one of those wealthy plantation owners; he owned the Grimké estate in Beaufort, South Carolina, where they grew Sea Island cotton. John Grimké, his wife Mary and their many children in the summer made their home in Charleston in the fashionable Battery district. Did Sarah or Angelina

Grimké, as fashionable young ladies, see the light-skinned Robert Purvis as a little boy, and wonder about him? Later they were to become colleagues in the antislavery struggle.²⁴

Near the Cooper River waterfront, just a few blocks above Broad on Chalmers Street, stood the Slave Market, a warehouse where slaves, freshly brought from Africa, or bred on the plantations, were sold singly or in groups from an auction block. Stripped and sometimes greased to make their bodies shine, the individual men and women were humiliated before the unsympathetic white buyers. It was a fearful and dangerous place for children of color to go, because the possibility of being seized and sold into slavery was always present. If Robert and his brothers did venture this far, they must have shuddered at the scene, for they remembered how their own beloved grandmother had once stood upon that very block.

Wandering around downtown Charleston, Robert would have seen the beautiful St. Michael's Episcopal Church established in 1752 on Meeting Street. Still on Meeting Street, he would have passed the First Scotch Presbyterian Church. It cannot be verified but perhaps his father was a parishioner. Off Meeting Street on Hazell Street was the Jewish Synagogue, built in 1790 by the congregation to which his grandfather may have belonged. And he would also have passed the red brick Quaker meetinghouse on King Street between Queen and Broad. This meeting, strong at the time Governor John Archdale was a member, was in decline; most Quakers had left South Carolina to get away from slavery. Later in his life, Robert would find himself closely connected to the Quakers, although he never became a member.²⁵

Where the Purvis boys were schooled during their years in Charleston remains an open question. It seems likely that William Purvis might have arranged to have his boys privately tutored. To educate a slave was against a South Carolina law, enacted after the Stono slave insurrection of 1739. What schools were available to free blacks were organized by the free black community. In 1803, well-to-do free blacks formed the Minor's Moralists Society "to educate orphan or indigent colored children, and also provide for their necessary wants." Daniel Alexander Payne, a prominent black churchman, later a colleague of Robert Purvis, was educated for two years by this group. In 1807, a school for free children of color was established by the Brown Fellowship Society.²⁶

This society, founded in 1790 by fifty "bona fida free brown men of good character," was an outgrowth of the social stratification of Charleston's black community. This elite group, which excluded full-fledged blacks, not only built a social hall for lectures and other meetings but they also

provided burials for their members. Though many of these “brown men” belonged to St. Phillip’s Episcopal Church, they were excluded from burial in its burial ground.²⁷

Darker-skinned blacks joined the predominately black Methodist church. In 1815, when white members reasserted their control of church affairs, black leaders sought affiliation with the the newly founded African Methodist Episcopal Church of the North, and built their own church. Slave owners feared the AME as a potential source of insurrection. In 1822, following the discovery of the Vessey conspiracy, whites dismantled this new edifice, taking it down in pieces, board by board.²⁸

Like slaves everywhere, many of the Charleston slaves dreamed of freedom, and some were prepared to fight for it. Denmark Vesey (1767-1822) was sold as a boy to a Bermuda slave captain named Joseph Vesey, who took Denmark on many voyages and brought him to Charleston in 1783 to settle down. Denmark was a skilled carpenter, and was able to buy his freedom by 1800. He learned to read and began to absorb smuggled antislavery literature. Slowly, the idea of a slave revolt took hold of his imagination. One by one he brought freed slaves like himself into a network of intrigue, planning such a revolt. Although the resulting uprising did not take place until 1822, the spirit of revolt was in the Charleston air in the years directly after the War of 1812. Like all slave revolts, this one was soon put down and the participants severely punished.²⁹

We do not know if Harriet Judah or William Purvis knew Denmark Vesey, although it seems likely, nor even how they and their sons reacted when news of the uprising reached them in Philadelphia in 1822, but Robert Purvis was to defend slave revolts resulting from the system of tyranny, oppression and slavery itself. Writing of another uprising, that of Nat Turner in Southampton, Virginia, he said:

We are sorry to hear of such scenes as that of the Southampton Tragedy; it proceeded from a natural cause; oppression, tyranny, and slavery always give birth to such events, and we can only say to Virginia, and the other slaveholding states, that so long as they continue to raise up Gabriels and Nats,³⁰ just so long may they expect to see those scenes acted over and over again. So long as slaveholders and their apologists continue to apply the same remedy to abstract and foreign causes, so long the real cause will sleep in safety.³¹

The fortunes of the William Purvis family were tied up with cotton. The War of 1812 between Great Britain and the United States was hard

on merchants, such as William Purvis and his brother Burrige. However, at war's end, they recovered quickly. In 1814, they purchased, in the fork of the Black River and Broad Back Run, an additional 532 acres north of Mayesville, South Carolina, presumably to grow cotton. They prospered in this enterprise and in 1816 formed a new business with a man called Henry Bryce. Burrige was to represent the new company in Europe, and returned to Scotland to buy an estate, Glassmont, in Kinghorn, Fife, for his wife and family. He came back to South Carolina briefly to settle his affairs, and, on the return trip to Scotland in 1816, died at sea.³²

The death of his brother, combined with his growing uneasiness about dealing in slaves, plus the growing harshness of the slave owners, caused William Purvis to decide to leave also and move to England or Scotland, where he felt his three sons could be properly educated. In 1817, he sold his business. In 1819, he took his little family to Philadelphia, intending it to be a temporary stop while he settled his complicated financial affairs. He planned to buy a home for them in Scotland or northern England.