

HORACE BELL

The Scribners founded New Albany on the Indiana side of the Ohio River because they did not want to settle in a slave state. Slavery had been a minor issue when New Albany was young, but as cotton became an important Southern crop, the use of slaves spread rapidly. Most Northerners regarded slavery as morally wrong, and a controversy developed between North and South. The story of Horace Bell shows how that controversy affected New Albany . . .

New Albany's streets were almost deserted on a quiet October afternoon in 1858. Most people were attending the Floyd County Fair out at what would later be the junction of Silver Street and Charlestown Road.

Horace Bell, whose father operated the ferry between Mauckport, Ind. and Brandenburg, Ky., prepared to catch the stage coach to Corydon. As he passed the intersection of Main and Bank, he was suddenly surrounded by five armed men who hustled him onto the Portland ferry and to Kentucky.

When New Albany discovered what had happened, the city was outraged. During the summer Bell had made himself the man of the hour by his daring rescue of his father and younger brother from the jail at Brandenburg. Now he had been kidnapped on a New Albany street and taken a prisoner to the very same jail.

Bell had gone off to California in gold-rush days, but when he learned that his father and brother had been lured to Kentucky and thrown into jail at Brandenburg, he hurried back to Indiana.

His father and brother had been charged with aiding in the escape of a slave owned by a Brandenburg doctor. The Bells lived in Indiana near the Mauckport ferry landing. When Horace returned home he found Hoosiers up and down the river angry at the treatment the Bells had received. They had been in jail eight months without trial and the Kentucky militia had been called out to protect the jail after Hoosiers had threatened to rescue the Bells by force. After Horace Bell returned home, the trial was postponed another six months and tempers on the Indiana side of the Ohio River were at the breaking point.

Horace decided the time had come for drastic action. Accompanied by another brother, he rowed to Brandenburg in the middle of the day, broke into the jail and rescued the prisoners. Dodging a hail of bullets, the whole family escaped unharmed to Indiana. The New Albany Ledger praised his daring act and called him "as brave as Julius Caesar."

Now Bell himself, the hero of the Indiana side of the river, was a prisoner in a Kentucky jail. Hoosier anger flared into action. A New Albany ferryboat with a cannon mounted on its prow and 125 armed men crowded on its decks steamed down the river to rescue Bell. The cannon was pointed at Brandenburg, but Bell's rescuers found that he had been moved to Elizabethtown.

Brandenburg residents didn't like the looks of the artillery piece, though, and they agreed that Bell should be given a speedy hearing and released under bail. They were as good as their word, and as soon as Bell was released he boarded a steamboat for New Albany.

When he arrived, he found that most of the city was at the old Woodward Hall at West First and Main to see an exciting drama called "Horace Bell, Champion of Freedom". The audience went wild when Bell appeared in person after the first act.

Soon after his release, Bell went back to California and the excitement of his rescue was soon forgotten. The runaway slave was never found. But the incident pointed up the growing disagreement between North and South over slavery. Three years later many of the New Albany men who rushed to Bell's rescue were marching off to a war to save the Union – a long bloody war that was to make a deep impression on New Albany.

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