Oberlin Monuments and Outdoor Sculpture:
The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument

Location: Martin Luther King Jr. Park

Dedicated: May 1990

Installed: 1990

Current day photograph of the
Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument
(Courtesy of the Oberlin Heritage Center)

Situated in Martin Luther King Jr. Park, the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument stands as an example of Oberlin's fierce abolitionist history. The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue was a pre-Civil War event that highlights the extent abolitionists in Oberlin and the surrounding area were willing to go to oppose the institution of slavery and federal laws they felt were unjust. Oberlin—town and college—was a prominent depot on the Underground Railroad and one of the final stops before a freedom seeker escaped to Canada. Oberlin's population of free African Americans, its staunch anti-slavery stance, and physical proximity to Lake Erie made it a prime location for this network to freedom.

Background

Since the beginning of slavery in America, occasionally individuals and families would risk everything to escape enslavement. By the 1840s it is estimated that hundreds of enslaved people were escaping captivity each year with no sign of slowing down. Northern States were already defying the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, and the U.S. Government, in an attempt to appease slaveholding states, passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in order to strengthen the existing law. The older law gave owners a legal pathway to recover an escapee, but the onus was largely on them to recover the freedom seeker. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 compelled members of the public to comply with slave catchers or face steep penalties. These penalties included a fine upwards of $1,000—over $30,000 in today's money (as of July 2020)—and/or up to six months in prison.

The passage of the 1850 law was extremely unpopular in the North for several reasons. First and foremost, abolition had gradually garnered favor in many northern states and this "compromise" felt more like a concession.[1] Additionally, all that was needed to prove ownership was an affidavit. Once this sworn statement was presented to a law enforcement official, the officer had to assist in the recapture of the freedom seeker or face federal punishment. Slave catchers were also known to obtain fraudulent or misleading affidavits that would be used to kidnap free African Americans.[2] Making a bad situation worse, the Dred Scott Decision in 1857 declared that African Americans would never be considered United States citizens. Since African Americans, free or otherwise, were not granted citizenship they could not defend themselves in court, including if their free status was questioned. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in conjunction with the Dred Scott Decision only served to make northern abolitionists more dedicated to their cause.

The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue

These decisions sparked outrage and a continued dedication to abolition among most Oberlinians. This tension and commitment were clearly highlighted in the events of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue. For a full narrative of this event, OHC recommends referring to the readings at the end of this feature, including *The Town That Started the Civil War* by Nat Brandt, Jacob R.

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[1] Hamilton Hill, "Public Action on the Fugitive Slave Law," *Oberlin Evangelist* (Oberlin, OH) October 9, 1850.
[2] Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*. (New York: Dell, 1990), 14-17.

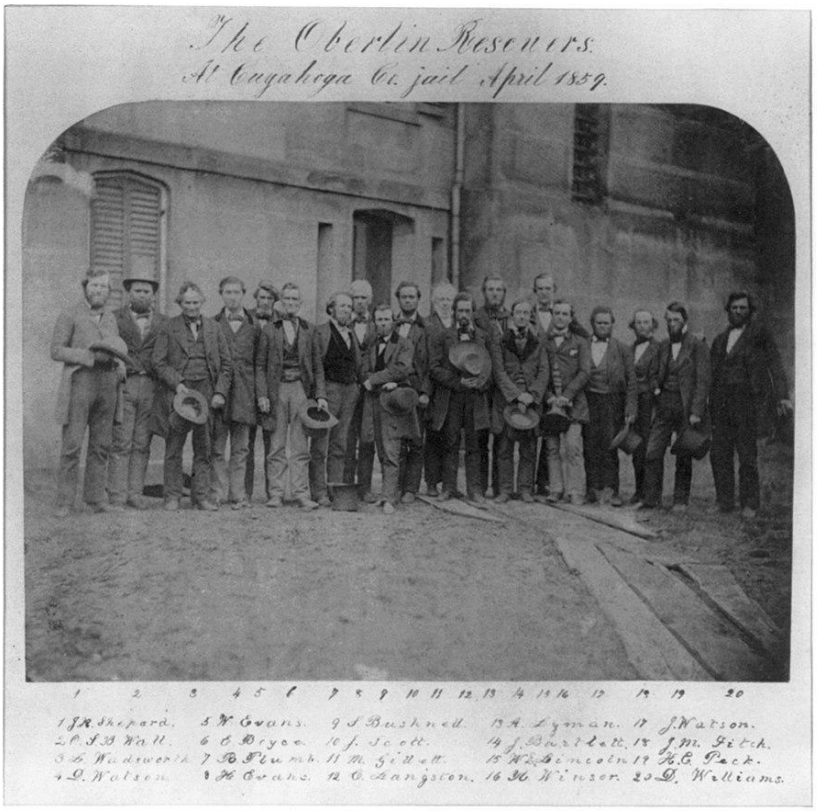
Shipherd's *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue,* which gives a contemporary view of the events, and Roland Baumann's *The 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue: A Reappraisal*, which offers a factual breakdown of the events.

To summarize, John Price, a freedom seeker who had been living in Oberlin for two years, was discovered by visiting slave catchers. With local assistance, they lured Price out of town so he could be captured and transported to the nearby town of Wellington and the south-bound rail line on September 13, 1858.[3] The slave catchers' plan was successful, but news quickly spread of Price's capture and numerous residents and students of Oberlin rallied and traveled to Wellington in pursuit. Once people in the town of Wellington became aware of the situation, many joined to aid in Price's rescue. The group initially tried to negotiate with the slave catchers peacefully, but once that proved fruitless, the group stormed the hotel where Price was being held. Citizens from Oberlin and Wellington overpowered Price's captors, allowing the captured man to get away.[4] With the help of the rescuers, Price escaped from the slave catchers and government agents, returned to Oberlin, and was hidden in the home of James and Mary Fairchild. This was the perfect place to hide because though the Fairchilds were sympathetic to the abolitionist cause, they were not nearly as vocal as other Oberlinians, and would not be considered suspects.[5] Price stayed with the Fairchild family until preparations were made to escort him to Canada where he would be free from prosecution under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Unfortunately, at this time, this is where records of John Price's story ends.

Several months later, thirty-seven men—black and white—from Oberlin and Wellington were named in an indictment and faced federal charges for their participation in the Rescue. Of those men, twenty were from Oberlin.[6] Some of the men charged were not even a part of the Rescue; some were merely outspoken abolitionists.[7] The federal government intended to send a message that any kind of attempt to subvert federal law would be met with harsh punishment. Rather than post their bail and await trial as free men in the comfort of their own homes, the

[3] Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 61-67.
[4] Ibid, 103-112.
[5] Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 108-110.
[6] Ibid, 117-125.
[7] Ibid, 125, 133.

Rescuers instead chose to remain at the Cuyahoga County Jail to protest the Fugitive Slave Act.[8] Remaining in prison was also a good way for the Rescuers to garner sympathy for their cause.



Photograph of the Rescuers taken inside the Cuyahoga County Jail (*Courtesy of Oberlin College Archives*)

Simeon M. Bushnell and Charles Mercer Langston were the first two men tried and sentenced for their memorable roles and the amount of evidence against them. Bushnell was sentenced to 60 days in prison and had to pay a $600 fine whereas Langston was sentenced to 20 days with a $100 fine.[9] Both men were ordered to pay court fees in addition to their fines. Neither Bushnell nor Langston was granted time served, even though they had both spent nearly a month behind bars at that point. Langston, in his allocution statement prior to his sentencing, gave an impassioned speech arguing for the mitigation of his sentence.[10] Langston, a black man, felt the entire process was unjust and claimed,

> *"I was tried by a jury who were prejudiced; before a Court that was prejudiced; prosecuted by an officer who was prejudiced, and defended, though ably, by counsel that were prejudiced. And therefore it is, your Honor, that I urge by all that is good and great in manhood, that I should not be subjected to the pains and penalties of this oppressive law, when I have not been tried, either by a jury of my peers, or be a jury that were impartial."*[11]

Langston's speech impressed the judge, which resulted in a lighter sentence.

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[8] Ibid 138-139.
[9] Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 183,189.
[10] Ibid, 186-190.
[11] Charles Langston, "Charles Langston's Speech," Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Trial, Cleveland OH, 1859.

The remaining Oberlin-Wellington Rescuers had their charges dropped following a deal between the state courts in Ohio and the federal courts. The defense team for the Rescuers managed to bring state kidnapping charges against the men who captured John Price. In exchange for dropping the federal charges against the Rescuers, the State's charges against the kidnappers were dropped and the matter was considered settled.[12] In July of 1859, the remaining Rescuers in the Cuyahoga County Jail were released.

The Monument

The monument itself is a rectangular brick pillar with a black stone bisecting two sections of brick. The stone is etched with a photograph taken of some of the Oberlin-Wellington rescuers who helped John Price. The inscription on the monument reads:

"In the spring of 1859, twenty Oberlinians went to jail for the crime of rescuing John Price from slavery.
With all their comrades in the Abolition Cause, they kindled hopes of freedom for us all."

Harpers Ferry Memorial (left) and the Oberlin Wellington Rescue Monument (right)
(Courtesy of Oberlin Heritage Center)

The monument was dedicated and placed in Martin Luther King Jr. Park in May 1990. The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument was designed by former Oberlin College professor of art Paul Arnold and built by Burrell Scott. Arnold and Scott also collaborated together on the Martin Luther King Jr. Monument in MLK Park, which was constructed three years earlier.

View the MLK Monument feature here:
http://www.oberlinheritagecenter.org/platform/cms/MLK%20Memorial%20Final.pdf

[12] Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 233.

The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument was created as a compliment to the Harpers Ferry Memorial[13], also located in Martin Luther King Jr. Park. Lewis Sheridan Leary and John A. Copeland Jr., two African American men who are honored by the Harpers Ferry Memorial, also participated in the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue the year prior to the Raid with John Brown. Both monuments pay tribute to Oberlin citizens who were willing to risk their own lives and freedoms to fight against the injustices of slavery. These monuments continue to be shining examples of Oberlin's active abolitionist history and serve as reminders that ordinary people are capable of the extraordinary.

Key to Jail Photograph on page 4 (Left to right)

Jacob R. Shipherd, Orindatus S. B. Wall, Loring [Loren] Wadsworth, David Watson, Wilson B. Evans, Eli Boies [Boyce], Ralph Plumb, Henry Evans, Simeon Bushnell, John Scott, Matthew Gillet, Charles Langston, Ansel W. Lyman, James H. Bartlett, William E. Lincoln, Richard Winsor, John Watson, James M. Fitch, Henry E. Peck, and Daniel Williams.

[13] Jeff Mohrman, "Slave Rescue Remembered" *Elyria Chronicle Telegram*

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