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SEEKING A WAY THROUGH: GEORGE DEBAPTISTE'S CONTRIBUTION TO ESTABLISHING A NEW FRONTIER FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

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Abstract

The essay will examine the works of George DeBaptiste, one of the most important Underground Railroad figures of the 19th century. Though born to free parents, DeBaptiste organized campaigns against slavery and racism. It was in 1850, after the Fugitive Slave Act, when he established the most critical organizations, such as the Colored Vigilant Committee of Detroit. He assisted numerous enslaved African Americans by helping them find their way to freedom. The unwavering dedication of DeBaptiste subsequently opened a path towards equality and liberty for generations ahead.

Keywords: 19th century, Underground Railroad, African American rights, slavery

Introduction

In the 19th century, many African Americans, suffering from both discrimination and enslavement, sought a way to freedom through the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a vast web of people who sent multitudes of passengers over a well-organized transportation system to lands without slavery (Gara 1). The arrival of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 challenged the colored population's limited allies. The Fugitive Slave Act regulated any runaway slaves and thus made the road to liberty more arduous for enslaved people. Upon the arrival of the Fugitive Slave Act, George DeBaptiste, one of the many Underground Railroad conductors, was not intimidated. He risked his safety for his fellows. He made advancements for African Americans by founding the Colored Vigilant Committee of Detroit

and The Order of the Man of Oppression. George DeBaptiste contributed to freeing people's lives, passed down the courage to change the status quo, and established a new frontier for African Americans through his work in the Underground Railroad.

Pioneer for African Americans' Rights

Son of free black parents, George and Jane DeBaptiste, George de Baptiste, was a hero for enslaved people in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries. From 1776 to 1865, thousands of African Americans were enslaved in the United States, primarily in the southern states. In 1838, DeBaptiste settled in Madison, Indiana. (Brandon, Eamonn P., et al., 2018). There, he immediately asserted his role as a leader as he challenged an Indiana law, which required bond payment for a free

black to settle in the state (The Story of Georgetown District in Madison, Indiana). Since he refused to make a payment, he was found guilty and ordered to leave. With help from abolitionist legal judge Stephen Stevens, he was only sentenced to a “defective expulsion”. In Madison, he worked on shipping vessels between Indiana and Ohio. There, he met General William Henry Harrison and became his barber and servant in the White House. After Harrison’s death, George returned to Madison and ran a barber shop. His barbershop was the center for Underground Railroad activities in Madison. Madison was a key location for the underground railroad, as the Ohio River was the only barrier that separated the slave state of Kentucky from free Indiana. To help his fellow African Americans to escape, he placed his safety in danger. In 1849, a bounty was placed on his head for “stealing” enslaved people (Lause, Mark A). DeBaptiste had resettled in Detroit, Michigan, in 1846. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which required law enforcement and citizens of free states to cooperate in the capture and return of enslaved people. The Fugitive Slave Act did not extinguish DeBaptiste’s passion for the Underground Railroad. That very same year, DeBaptiste purchased a steamboat named the T. Whitney in

1850 (Karolyn Smardz Frost, 2016 and Katharine DuPre Lumpkin, 1977). Black men were not allowed to captain ships, so he hired a white man to pilot the boat and ferried cargo- including “black wool” (freedom seekers)- across the Detroit River to Canada. DeBaptiste and close collaborator William Lambert “secured passage of 30,000 slaves in Canada” (US Department of Interior et al., 1995).

Legacies

Besides being an Underground Railroad operator, DeBaptiste was instrumental in founding a secret society that helped run the Underground Railroad in Detroit, named Vigilant Committee of Detroit. Founded by DeBaptiste and William Lambert on December 20, 1842, this organization helped more than 1,500 fugitives escape to freedom. He also joined national anti-slavery groups, like the Executive Committee of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America. He continued helping fellow African Americans, assisting the Freedmen’s Aid Commission in obtaining supplies for Louisiana’s Freedmen Schools. By being such an inspiring figure and fighting for the rights of his people, DeBaptiste left a spiritual legacy for his people- to have the courage to step up and not be afraid to change the status quo.

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