

Carroll Yesteryears
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William Boyd, A Hero of the Underground Railroad
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

The Historical Society of Carroll County is occasionally asked whether stops on the Underground Railroad existed locally before the Civil War. Unfortunately, we do not have solid evidence of any, although many escaping slaves must have passed through as they tried to reach Pennsylvania. The presence of abolitionist Quakers in Union Bridge does suggest that some residents there might have aided freedom seekers.

An article in an 1859 Carroll newspaper mentioned an incident involving escaping slaves caught near New Windsor. On November 2 William Boyd was arrested, thrown into the Carroll County jail, and held for several weeks on \$6,000 bail before being taken to Washington, D.C. to stand trial. He was charged with “abduction of slaves,” a crime during that period. Although apprehended here, Boyd lived in Washington, and the two enslaved people he was transporting belonged to D.C. residents. Exactly who tipped off authorities that Boyd was in New Windsor is unknown. His destination was obviously somewhere north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

William Boyd (1820-1884), born in Ireland, arrived in Washington around 1856 and joined a group of citizens actively opposed to slavery. One of the more radical members of the group, Boyd began hiding and transporting runaway slaves as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. The *Evening Star*, a Washington newspaper, referred to him as “Another Osawatimie Brown on a Small Scale.” Osawatimie was a nickname given to the well-known abolitionist John Brown of Harper’s Ferry fame.

Details of Boyd’s method of operation came to light during his D.C. trial. He made his living peddling produce, so traveled frequently into the countryside with a wagon and team of horses to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. A black curtain hanging at the back of his wagon covered a narrow compartment where he hid slaves. Anyone peering in assumed the wagon ended at the curtain. One Carroll County witness at the trial testified he had seen Boyd passing through the area twice before, and that he drove over rough terrain rather than using a good road. Evidence also linked Boyd to another slave caught locally several months earlier.

The people discovered in Boyd’s wagon were husband and wife but enslaved in different Washington households. The owner of the husband allowed him a great deal of freedom to move around the District, but the owner of the wife kept closer tabs on her so was immediately aware when she didn’t return home. Notified that her slave was held in Westminster, the owner arrived here to identify her.

Boyd was convicted on two counts of stealing slaves and sentenced to fourteen years in jail, but on October 3, 1861, he was pardoned by President Lincoln at the urging of 54 members of Congress, penitentiary officials, and highly respected citizens of Washington. Just six months later, Congress passed a law emancipating all those enslaved within the District.

In June 1865, William Boyd went to the defense of some of Washington's now-free Black citizens. He threatened rowdy soldiers looting and beating Blacks near Virginia Ave. and 1st Street S.W., but was assaulted himself, lost an eye, and nearly his life. He recovered sufficiently, however, to resume peddling.

Today, Boyd and other conductors on the Underground Railroad, many of them still unidentified, are recognized as heroes—people of great courage and moral conviction.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.

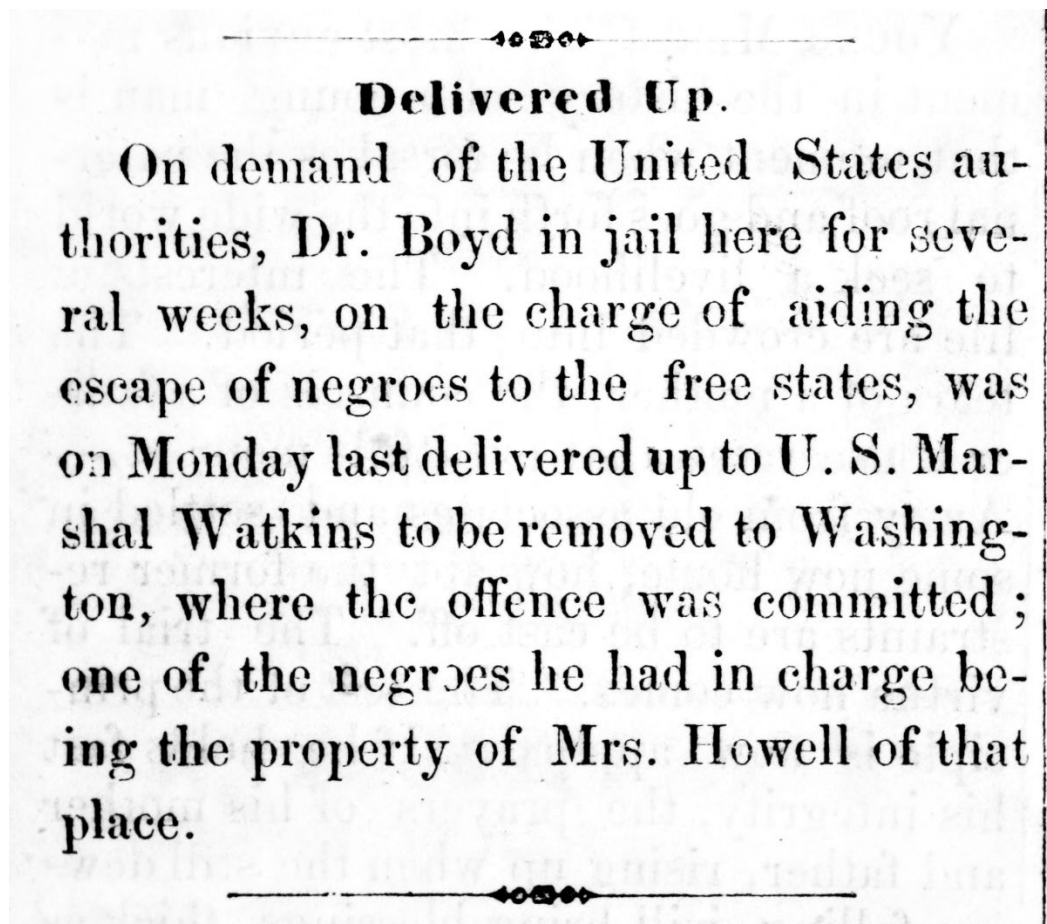


Image credit: Carroll County Democrat newspaper

Image caption: This short article appeared in Westminster's Carroll County Democrat on November 17, 1859, fifteen days after William Boyd, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, was caught trying to smuggle escaping slaves from Washington, D.C. to freedom in Pennsylvania.