

PROLOGUE



LOOKING OUT FROM THE BARRED WINDOW of his jail cell, John Anthony Copeland could easily see the rolling hills and agricultural lands that surrounded Charlestown, Virginia. There had been no opportunity for him to appreciate the beauty of the countryside since his arrival in the state only a little more than one week earlier. Now, in late October 1859, most of the abundant crops had been harvested, leaving the fields brown with rolls of hay and a few standing stalks of corn. The leaves on the native beech, oak, and ash trees, however, had already begun to turn red and gold, and the vivid colors might have cheered Copeland’s spirit if he had not been facing death by hanging.

Copeland’s home was in Oberlin, Ohio, over 400 miles to the northwest, where leaves had already fallen and his mother and father longed for news of their imprisoned son. In time, he would write to his parents, assuring them of his belief that “God wills everything for the best good.”¹ But for now, he had no words to calm himself or to bring them comfort. There was little hope for a black man charged with murder in Virginia, and even less for one accused of inciting slaves to rebellion.

A mob had gathered outside the jailhouse, calling loudly for the blood of John Brown, whose abortive invasion of Harper’s Ferry had lasted only three days – October 16–18 – while taking the lives of four Virginians and a U.S. marine. Brown was already notorious from his days on the battlefields of “Bleeding Kansas,” but the four men captured with him – Copeland and three others – were unknown. That made no difference to the lynch mob, which wanted all of them dead. Nor did it matter to the Southern press, which dismissed all of Brown’s raiders as “reckless fanatics” and “wanton, malicious, unprovoked felons.”² In fact, Copeland’s decision to join John Brown had been neither reckless nor unprovoked. Although only twenty-five, he had for many years been

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dedicated to abolitionism, having grown up among fugitives and freed slaves. As a child, he had evaded slave patrols in North Carolina and Kentucky; as a student, he had attended school with one of the former captives from *La Amistad*, who had been freed by order of the U.S. Supreme Court; and as a young man, he had confronted slave hunters and had spirited a runaway to freedom in Canada. In many ways, Copeland’s enlistment under John Brown’s command – far from an act of rash fanaticism – had been the culmination of his life’s progress from idealism to militancy.

Copeland’s motivation was also deeply religious. His parents had been known for piety in their native North Carolina, although the black churches they attended could never risk any open opposition to slavery. In Ohio, however, Copeland had been exposed to the evangelism of Reverend Charles Grandison Finney, the acknowledged leader of the Second Great Awakening and an avowed enemy of slavery. Finney preached in Oberlin’s First Church, which was one of the few fully integrated congregations in the United States and by far the largest one. Sitting side by side with white children, Copeland came to understand that his “duty to both God and man” required him to fight slavery, even if that might take him to “the dark and gloomy gallows.”³ For any man “to suffer by the existence of slavery,” he believed, was far worse than “the mere fact of having to die.”⁴ Copeland’s determination was bolstered by his powerful faith in the afterlife. He warmly accepted Finney’s promise that friends and loved ones would meet again in heaven.⁵ As Copeland himself put it, “when I have finished my stay on this earth . . . I shall be received in Heaven by the Holy God [to meet those] who have gone before me.”⁶

Like many Southern “mulattos,” Copeland’s mother traced her ancestry to a Revolutionary War veteran, in this case General Nathanael Greene.⁷ And like many African-Americans in the North, Copeland himself idealized the revolutionary generation, believing that “those who established the principles upon which this government was to stand” intended the “right to life, liberty, and happiness” to belong “to all men of whatever color.”⁸ In Oberlin’s integrated school, he had learned to revere George Washington as having “entered the field to fight for the freedom of the American people – not for the white man alone, but for both black and white.”⁹ That was a familiar story in abolitionist circles, made no less inspiring by the fact that it was not really true. Although Washington had sometimes expressed support for gradual emancipation, he had freed no slaves in his lifetime and, as president, he had signed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.¹⁰ Still, Washington provided a convenient hero for a young African-American who was prepared to embark on a revolutionary course of his own. He held fast to the belief that “black

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men did an equal share of the fighting for American Independence,” and the time had come for them to share the “equal benefits” they had been promised by the founders.¹¹

If Copeland’s veneration of George Washington was for the most part misplaced, his regard for another revolutionary era figure was fitting indeed. He identified closely with Crispus Attucks, who had been the first victim of the Boston Massacre in 1770. Copeland was proud that “the *very first* blood that was spilt” in the battle for American independence “was that of a negro,” calling Attucks “that heroic man (though black he was).”¹² Attucks had been all but beatified by the black abolitionist movement, and Copeland shared the widespread admiration of his martyrdom.¹³ In Copeland’s words, Attucks had given his life for “the freedom of the American people,” which also marked “the commencement of the struggle for the freedom of the negro slave.”¹⁴ As he contemplated his own death, Copeland turned time and again to Attucks’s example of a black man whose memory endured long after his life’s end. He prayed that his own sacrifice would be recalled as proudly by his family and friends.

But while he reflected on ideals of heroism, martyrdom, and immortality, Copeland’s view of the outside world was bounded by the jailhouse walls. He could not even look in the direction of the Free states, as the only window in his cell faced cruelly to the south. With the shouts of the lynch mob in his ears, his thoughts turned to his years in Oberlin. It was the most thoroughly abolitionist community in America, where he had been nurtured, educated, and set on a path that led him to Harper’s Ferry as a soldier in John Brown’s insurrectionary army.



PROFESSOR JAMES FAIRCHILD HAD GOOD REASON to be proud of Oberlin College when he walked to the lectern on May 18, 1856, ready to present the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society with a “Sketch of the Anti-Slavery History of Oberlin.” Like nearly all members of the faculty, Fairchild was an abolitionist and a pacifist, committed to ending slavery through peaceful means.¹⁵ He could not have imagined, as he began his lecture, the bloody events that would occur only one week later in faraway Kansas, and how they would affect life in his own quiet community. On the night of May 24–25, John Brown would lead a sortie that has come to be known as the Potawatomie Massacre, slaughtering and dismembering five pro-slavery settlers and changing – at a literal stroke – the terms of the abolitionist struggle. Nor could Fairchild have envisioned how

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deeply Oberlin would become entangled in Brown’s war, much less that one of its own recent students – a young African-American named John Anthony Copeland, Jr. – would become, as a soldier in Brown’s army, one of the “colored heroes of Harper’s Ferry.” On that spring day, however, the violence still lay in the future, and Fairchild’s only intention was to expound on Oberlin’s pacific and honorable past.

For over two decades, Oberlin had been a beacon of abolitionism, sending ministers to preach against slavery in the pulpits of countless churches, providing teachers to the impoverished “negro schools” of Ohio, and, most notoriously, offering a haven to fugitive slaves. Fairchild had been at Oberlin virtually since its founding, first as a student (in the inaugural freshman class) and then as a teacher of theology, philosophy, classical languages, and mathematics.¹⁶ In his late thirties at the time of the lecture, Fairchild had sunken eyes, a bulbous nose, and a weak chin, and he was already beginning to develop the heavy jowls that would become more pronounced as he aged. Despite his unimpressive appearance, Fairchild’s erudition and animation ensured that he would have no trouble holding the attention of his audience. He was broadly versed in academics, but his great passion was to oppose “the intrinsic wrongfulness of Slavery, and the obligation to undo at once the bands of wickedness and let the oppressed go free.”¹⁷

As Fairchild reminded the assembled ladies, the trustees of Oberlin had resolved in 1835 to admit students “irrespective of color” and, although the motion had passed by only a single vote, the college had since become the most integrated educational institution in the United States.¹⁸ By 1856, there were forty “colored students” at Oberlin, both men and women, in a student body of 800. The town of Oberlin itself had an even larger African-American population, comprising both free blacks and runaway slaves. So common were the latter that the signposts on the road to Oberlin were said to show “a full length picture of a colored man, running with all his might” to reach sanctuary. Nor were the fugitives unwelcome. Oberlin prided itself as “a sort of general depot for various branches of the under-ground railroad,” and residents readily either sheltered fugitives or helped them escape onward to Canada.¹⁹

Needless to say, Kentucky slave catchers were often attracted by the highly visible presence of so many runaways, and attempts at recapture were not uncommon. Fairchild was certain that no self-respecting Oberliner would ever “interrupt or expose a fugitive,” but he realized that “there were those in every neighborhood who would undertake

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the odious work for the reward which was offered.” Many Oberliners consequently became adept at thwarting slave hunters, using various ruses and deceptions. In one well-known instance, a wagonload of citizens disguised themselves as fugitives and lured a band of slave hunters to follow them out of town. Meanwhile, the real runaways were dispatched in the opposite direction, where they rendezvoused with a Lake Erie steamboat captain who had agreed to carry them to Canada.²⁰

Thus, Professor Fairchild was able to boast, without exaggeration, that “no fugitive was ever taken here and returned to slavery,” and yet there had been “no instance of bloodshed or personal harm” to a slave catcher.²¹

Fairchild’s lecture – transcribed and published by the *Oberlin Evangelist* – was greeted with much satisfaction by the local citizens, one of whom was John Anthony Copeland, Jr. Then only a month shy of his twenty-second birthday, Copeland had been born free in North Carolina to parents of mixed background. The Copeland family – headed by John, Sr., and Delilah – had moved to Oberlin in 1843, seeking relief from the racism that plagued free blacks in the South. John, Sr., found work as a carpenter and cabinetmaker, and he arranged for his oldest son to attend Oberlin College’s preparatory department (equivalent to a high school) in 1854–55.²² The young Copeland – known to his family as John Anthony – was a respectable student, especially in theology and history.²³ Nonetheless, he left without matriculating – perhaps because his family could not afford the \$18 annual tuition or perhaps because he needed to help support his six younger siblings – and joined his father in the carpentry trade.²⁴

John Anthony had grown up surrounded by abolitionism. He attended his first anti-slavery meeting at age nine, when his parents stopped in New Richmond, Indiana, en route to Oberlin, and he continued his involvement for the rest of his life.²⁵ In Oberlin, John Anthony became active in the Anti-Slavery Society, and he was especially attuned to the plight of fugitives. At one meeting, he listened intently to the story of a runaway, “signifying often by the deep scowl of his countenance, the moist condition of his eyes, and the quivering of his lips, how deeply he was moved by the recital of wrong and outrage.”²⁶

Copeland’s intensity was not reserved for abolitionist meetings. His arched eyebrows, high cheekbones, and piercing eyes gave him an appearance of settled purpose, as though his thoughts were keenly fixed on a distant objective. A bushy and well-trimmed mustache made him look slightly older than his years. His light complexion and wavy hair

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would later prompt the Southern press to describe him as a “bright mulatto,” meaning that he could almost pass for white. Nearly fifty years later, however, Copeland’s sister would deny that he was “bright,” perhaps to emphasize that he had always identified as a black man.²⁷

As he reached adulthood, Copeland began to abandon the tenets of nonviolence as preached by Fairchild and accepted in most of the Oberlin community. He eventually took up arms, beginning with a stout wooden staff that he employed to knock a hapless slave catcher to the ground. Copeland soon switched to a rifle, however, when the kidnapers themselves became more daring and combative.

In his 1856 lecture, James Fairchild had been able to brag that no fugitive had ever been seized in Oberlin, but most of the slave hunters until then had been amateurs who were not very hard to intimidate. They had been a nuisance, to be sure, but they were fairly easily repelled or diverted and were regarded almost humorously by the Oberlin gentry, who sometimes referred to foiling slave hunters as a “confidence game” and even “a lark.”²⁸ The fugitives themselves were in no position to make light of their situation, however, and they felt quite differently about their pursuers. The Oberlin memoirist Milton Clarke wrote that the anxiety of being hunted “was beyond anything I ever felt in my life.”²⁹

Oberlin had been a thorn in the side of slave owners for many years, but it was also isolated and remote, and therefore relatively tolerable. By 1848, efforts to seize runaways in Oberlin had all but ended, thanks to the ever-alert work of the local “vigilance committee,” which patrolled the town for signs of slave catchers.³⁰ The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 shifted the responsibility for slave catching to the national government, on the theory that it would lead to more effective recaptures. But federal authority was virtually nonexistent in Oberlin – other than the local postmaster – and therefore useless to slave hunters. Besides, there were plenty of fugitives elsewhere in Ohio – or vulnerable free blacks, for that matter – who could be captured without opposition from vigilant fanatics.

In 1858, however, political intrigues in far-off Kansas and Washington, D.C., would combine to focus the attention of the federal government on Oberlin. The existence of such a brazen sanctuary became unacceptable to the administration of President James Buchanan for political reasons that stretched far beyond Ohio. Thus, the slave hunters of Kentucky were suddenly able to call on the power of the federal government, which emboldened them to strike deeply into the heart of Oberlin. What had once been a near idyll was quickly becoming a true battleground.

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Force would be met with force, with John Anthony at the center of the fighting. His struggle against slavery would not stop in Oberlin but would reach all the way to Virginia at the side of John Brown.



IN 1857, THE U.S. SUPREME COURT decided the *Dred Scott* case, now most often remembered for Chief Justice Roger Taney’s infamous pronouncement that a black person had “no rights which the white man is bound to respect.”³¹ Taney’s disdain for African-Americans ran deeply. As historian Margot Minardi has observed, the chief justice was making not only a legal point but also a historical claim about the black experience in the United States.³² The predicate for Taney’s opinion was his insistence that blacks in the revolutionary era “had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations.”³³ Thus, in Taney’s view, African-Americans were a people who lived in a state of absolute subjugation, without historical agency, who were “never thought of or spoken of except as property.”³⁴ He was wrong in terms of legal precedent, of course, as was pointed out in the dissents of Justices Benjamin Curtis and John McLean, but he was also intellectually and factually wrong. African-Americans – whether free, slave, or fugitive – had always been historical actors in America, from the time of Crispus Attucks to the time of John Brown. They had never acceded to their presumed status as property.

African-Americans in the antebellum era engaged in three main forms of active resistance to what was then known as the Slave Power (meaning the governmental and economic forces beholden to slavery that dominated political life in both the North and South). Many thousands escaped the Southern land of bondage, either as fugitive slaves or free black emigrants. In the Northern states, black communities came to the assistance of runaways, sometimes surreptitiously spiriting them to Canada and sometimes wresting them quite openly from the grasp of slave hunters. And some brave souls, both free and enslaved, joined armed insurgencies.

John Anthony Copeland was one of the few people who took part in all three. At age nine, he fled North Carolina in a wagon train of fourteen adults and children who, although legally free, were still at the mercy of roving “pattyrollers” who might disregard their papers and reenslave them at any moment. As a young man in Oberlin, he was active

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in the defense of fugitives – once clubbing a deputy U.S. marshal to the ground – and he played a crucial part in the momentous Oberlin Rescue of 1858. Ultimately, he joined John Brown at Harper’s Ferry, where he gave his life in the cause of freedom.

As with most of Brown’s men, Copeland’s story has seldom been told, and never at book length. Brown’s towering persona has understandably tended to overshadow all of his followers, but there is still much to be said about Copeland and the other black men who participated in the historic insurrection. Although all of Brown’s many biographers have mentioned Copeland, none have paid more than passing attention to his background in the abolitionist movement, and most have gotten at least some of the details wrong.³⁵

In this book, we will see how and why John Copeland’s actions intersected with John Brown’s at a critical moment in history. Far from incidental to his involvement at Harper’s Ferry, Copeland’s experience in Oberlin – including his earlier confrontation with slave hunters – turns out to have played a key role in Brown’s own planning for, and execution of, the historic raid. Along the way, we will address three long-standing, and interrelated, questions about the Harper’s Ferry raid. Why did Brown suddenly decide to launch his attack on October 16, 1859, while many of his close associates were expecting it to come at least a week later? How is it that Brown’s greatest success in attracting black troops had come in Oberlin? When did John Anthony Copeland first learn of Brown’s plans, and why did he enlist in the insurrectionary army when so many others demurred?

Perhaps needless to say, there is no simple way to recapture the life of a man who was obscure until eight weeks before his death at the age of twenty-five. Fortunately, there are many newspaper articles, letters, reminiscences, memoirs, and court documents that address various aspects of Copeland’s life, although nearly all of them were created following the events at Harper’s Ferry. Beyond that, we must pursue a complex process of reconstruction, using a combination of primary sources, the documented experiences of Copeland’s friends, family, comrades, and contemporaries, and, of course, the context of the times in which he lived. I have done my best to flag those instances in which I found it necessary to make deductions or suppositions about relationships or events, relying in such cases on reasoned conclusions from the known facts. When assessing a balance of probabilities, I have taken care to explain the various alternatives. Gap filling is sometimes unavoidable, even if seldom ideal, although to do otherwise would allow stories such as Copeland’s to remain untold.

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It was John Brown’s destiny to have grandiose plans but few men. Throughout his long war on slavery – from the battlefields of Kansas, to his brief incursion into Missouri, to his historic invasion of Virginia – he never attracted more than three dozen soldiers to his side, and a good many of those were his own sons and sons-in-law. Although he intended to lead a servile rebellion that would shake the foundations of Southern slavery, Brown was especially unsuccessful at attracting black troops. His important Chatham conference, for example, was attended by thirty-four black men who endorsed Brown’s plan to assemble a “provisional army” of liberation, but only one of them eventually came to Harper’s Ferry. Notable African-American leaders – including Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman – refused to join Brown’s ranks. When Brown finally launched his armed attack on the U.S. armory at Harper’s Ferry, he had only five black men in his small army. One of them was John Anthony Copeland.

Historians have treated most of John Brown’s foot soldiers as loyal spear carriers in the operatic sweep of the events at Harper’s Ferry – quite literally with regard to the black men who were assigned the task of distributing pikes to liberated slaves. This book will bring one of the “colored heroes” directly to center stage.

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ONE

THE FROZEN RIVER



JOHN PRICE WAS ONE OF THE FEW KENTUCKIANS who welcomed the exceptionally cold winter of 1855–56. As a slave, he was pleased that the frigid weather would slow local work to a standstill, requiring masters and servants alike to remain indoors as much as possible. But even more than that, John realized that the enforced idleness and isolation in the area – with the country roads deserted and even village shops empty of customers – would afford him the long-awaited chance to bolt for freedom. And so he did, eventually reaching the abolitionist stronghold of Oberlin, Ohio. In Oberlin, Price fatefully crossed paths with John Anthony Copeland. Together, they set in motion a series of events that would culminate at John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. It is likely that John Price never learned of his unintended impact on Brown’s plans. He only knew that he wanted to be free. As it turned out, that would be enough to shake the nation.

The winters in northern Kentucky tend to be mild, but temperatures fell below freezing in mid-December 1855 and remained locked in place – even on sunny days – for weeks without letup. The landscape soon came to resemble New England more than the border South, as snow covered the fields and streams and ponds iced over. Even the Ohio River froze solid, blocking the riparian commerce that was usually the region’s main activity in the winter months. With farming at an end until spring, and trade at a near standstill, humble families simply huddled for warmth around their fireplaces and stoves as they waited out the unaccustomed cold. More prosperous families traveled by sleigh to visit relatives, where they, too, huddled for warmth around their more substantial hearths.

There was one group of Kentuckians, however, for whom the uncommon weather promised much more than days of dull seclusion. Kentucky was slave country, as it always had been since Daniel Boone led the first colonial settlers from Virginia through the Cumberland Gap. The