

Harrold, Stanley. *Subversives. Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003.*

p. 108-111:

Proslavery congressmen regarded the degree of respect and friendship that Giddings accorded to African Americans to be unbecoming in a gentleman and subversive of the existing order. In particular they knew that Giddings esteemed Henry and Sylvia Wilson, a married black couple who worked as a waiter and a maid at Ann Sprigg's boarding house. It seems more than coincidental, therefore, that on the evening of Friday, January 14, 1848 – a week after Giddings presented the slave trade petition – “three ruffians' entered the lower room of the boardinghouse and violently seized Henry Wilson, while Sylvia looked on. The intruders gagged Henry and 'placed him in irons and with loaded pistols' dragged him away to William's Slave Pen.

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As might be expected, Sylvia Wilson, who had always been free and who had been a servant of William Henry Harrison during his brief presidency, reacted emotionally to what had happened to her husband. So did Giddings (who had been out on an evening walk” when the slavetraders accosted Wilson), Sprigg and Giddings' Whig messmates, Pennsylvania congressmen Abraham R. McIlvanie and John Strohm. (Giddings to Edward L. Hamlin, 15 January 1848, in clipping from *Democrat and Republican*, n.d., in Giddings Scrapbook).

The cross-racial bonds were strong enough that Sylvia “at once” turned to Giddings and his colleagues “for relief.” At first they felt powerless to respond to the outrage. “We were in a barbarous land,” Giddings recalled, “controlled by barbarous laws.” Yet he “could not sit down quietly in the midst of so much distress.” Instead he and McIlvanie walked to William's Pen at the corner of Maryland Avenue and Seventh Street. Approaching the forbidding building on a dimly moonlit night, Giddings reflected “that within its gloomy walls were yet retained all the horrid barbarity of the darker ages.” Inside, two of William's agents, who sat by a fire “smoking segars,” told Giddings, “The negur has gone. We took him immediately on board ship at Alexandria, and he has sailed for New Orleans.”

Giddings met with a similar reaction on a return visit to William's Pen. As a last resort, he “laid the case in all its hideous enormity before Duff Green,” who owned Sprigg's boardinghouse.” .. By browbeating “the old Jezebel” and the slavetraders, Green elicited an agreement to have Wilson returned to Washington and be manumitted in exchange for \$195. Sixty dollars of this amount paid what Wilson owed the woman for his freedom and \$135 covered the amount she had spent out of what Williams had paid her. Giddings raised the money by soliciting five dollar donations from Whigs in Congress, and in early February Wilson received his free papers.

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he (Ezra L. Stevens) emotionally described the scene at Sprigg's following Wilson's manumission, “Was he [Wilson],” Stevens asked his readers, “insensible to benevolent and kindness so disinterested? Oh, no!--Could you have seen him after the manacles were taken off – after the chattel had become a man! standing at the door with hat in hand awaiting the egress of Mr. G., and witnessed how enthusiastically and affectionately he grasped the extended hand of the good man, you would not doubt.”