

# Shadrach Minkins, Fugitive Slave to Citizen

## Gary Collison

Harvard University Press, 1997

Both the first and last African-American held in Boston under the Fugitive Slave Act settled in Canada. The last is well-known in Ontario. He was Anthony Burns and was a minister in St. Catharines. He is commemorated with a provincial historical plaque in Victoria Lawn Cemetery in that city. The other man's story is virtually unknown.

The first man to be arrested in Boston under the Act of 1850 was Shadrach Minkins. His capture and escape made headlines in newspapers across the United States, but over the years, faded into the background of history. Fortunately Shadrach's story has been resurrected with the publication of *Shadrach Minkins, From Fugitive Slave to Citizen*. Gary Collison, a professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, spent years searching through archives and old newspapers to reconstruct the life of Minkins.

Shadrach Minkins was a slave in Norfolk, Virginia, when he escaped to Boston in May of 1850. There he found work as a waiter in a restaurant in the heart of Boston. The author points out that it was not really a safe area to work for an escaped slave because of the number of Southerners who came to do business in that city. It became even more perilous with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in September, 1850. This Act sacrificed the freedom of Blacks in order to salvage the union between the North and the South. Collison shows that the South especially wanted the Act to be enforced in Boston because of the city's abolitionist history. On February 15, 1851, Shadrach Minkins became the focal point of the battle between the slaveholders and the abolitionists in the United States.

Shadrach had been seen by several businessmen from Norfolk, who informed his owner of his whereabouts. As a result, two slave catchers captured him at his place of work in Boston and took him immediately to the courthouse, where a hearing was to be held. The most exciting part of the book reconstructs the rescue and escape of Shadrach from the second floor of the courthouse. With the efforts of about twenty African-American men, Shadrach was freed from his captors, spirited through the streets of Boston and then taken to a safe house outside of the city. A short time later, he settled in Montreal, where he remained for the rest of his life.

There are gaps in the story of Shadrach's life because of the lack of first-hand documentation so much of the book details the typical life of Blacks in Norfolk, Boston and Montreal. The new facts unearthed during the author's research and credit given to the African-Americans who were instrumental in helping slaves reach safety make this book an important piece in the documentation of Canadian and American history.



**Peter Meyler**