

A Shadow on the Household: One Enslaved Family's Incredible Struggle for Freedom

Bryan Prince

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The story of Ann Maria Weems's escape from slavery in 1855 is fairly well known. A Google search of "Ann Maria Weems" provided over 2,500 hits. The tale goes that Ann Maria, dressed as a man, met the abolitionist Dr. Ellwood Harvey in front of the White House in Washington, D.C. Acting as the doctor's slave, "Joe," Ann Maria drove his carriage through the streets of Washington, through the countryside of Maryland and into the free state of Pennsylvania. Eventually she made her way from New York City to Dresden, Ontario, where an uncle and his family lived.

But why is Ann Maria's story known, while those of so many other escaped slaves' were lost? Bryan Prince sheds light on this in *A Shadow on the Household*. History can only be told if we have records. Through information gleaned from numerous sources around the world, the Weems family saga can be pieced together.

The book is the result of many hours of research. The author located several records, including first-hand accounts from some of the most important members of the abolitionist movement and those of Weems family members themselves. The reactions of Ann Maria's uncle, known in Canada as William Henry Bradley, are documented. He was said not to have been fooled by her disguise as a man when he saw her after years of separation. Crying out, "My Lord, Maria is that you? Is that you? My child, is it you? We never expected to see you again! We had given you up. O, what will your aunt say? It will kill her! She will die! It will kill her!"

Advertisements from newspapers of the time provide details of daily life, such as the one announcing the opening of the tavern of Arabella's owner, Adam Robb. Others provide descriptions about the lives of escaped slaves.

John and Arabella Weems lived in Maryland. John had bought his freedom prior to marrying Arabella. She was a slave and therefore, according to the law, the couple's six children were also slaves. The story told by Bryan Prince is that of the parents desperately trying to purchase their children's freedom.

The book creates an understanding of the social fabric of the various communities in Maryland, the District of Columbia and that of the Deep South. The Weems' story shows that many freed or escaped Blacks lived close to the edge of slavery. They wanted to stay close to family and work, but were always threatened by rogue slave catchers and slave merchants, a very precarious situation. The Weems family members' escapes, which are exquisitely described, illustrate this situation. The

real cloak and dagger lives of abolitionists, Underground Railroad operatives, and escaping slaves provide continual drama and suspense in *A Shadow on the Household*.

The Weems' struggle reflects the story of all people who try to escape from desperate situations in order to create better lives for their children. The book provides an exciting journey for the reader. A myriad of characters and situations contribute to the suspense, intrigue, betrayal and jubilation in Prince's work. *A Shadow on the Household* offers a vital window into the world of early African Americans and their struggle for freedom and justice.



Peter Meyler
