



Fugitive Slave Law of 1850

The Fugitive Slave Law or Fugitive Slave Act was passed by the United States Congress on September 18, 1850, as part of the Compromise of 1850 between Southern slaveholding interests and Northern Free-Soilers. In the response to the weakening of the original fugitive slave act, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 made any Federal marshal or other official who did not arrest an alleged runaway slave liable to a fine of \$1,000. Law-enforcement officials everywhere now had a duty to arrest anyone suspected of being a runaway slave on no more evidence than a claimant's sworn testimony of ownership. The suspected slave could not ask for a jury trial or testify on his or her own behalf. It also required all citizens to turn in runaway slaves. In addition, any person aiding a runaway slave by providing food or shelter (as Huck did for Jim) was subject to six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine (approximately \$20,000 in today's money).

Below is Section 5 of the Fugitive Slave Law

§ 5. And be it further enacted, That it shall be the duty of all marshals and deputy marshals to obey and execute all warrants and precepts issued under the provisions of this act, when to them directed; and should any marshal or deputy marshal refuse to receive such warrant, or other process, when tendered, or to use all proper means diligently to execute the same, he shall, on conviction thereof, be fined in the sum of one thousand dollars, to the use of such claimant, on the motion of such claimant, by the Circuit or District Court for the district of such marshal; and after arrest of such fugitive, by such marshal or his deputy, or whilst at any time in his custody under the provisions of this act, should such fugitive escape, whether with or without the assent of such marshal or his deputy, such marshal shall be liable, on his official bond, to be prosecuted for the benefit of such claimant, for the full value of the service or labor of said fugitive in the State, Territory, or District whence he escaped: and the better to enable the said commissioners, when thus appointed, to execute their duties faithfully and efficiently, in conformity with the requirements of the Constitution of the United States and of this act, they are hereby authorized and empowered, within their counties respectively, to appoint, in writing under their hands, any one or more suitable persons, from time to time, to execute all such warrants and other process as may be issued by them in the lawful performance of their respective duties; with authority to such commissioners, or the persons to be appointed by them, to execute process as aforesaid, to summon and call to their aid the bystanders, or posse comitatus of the proper county, when necessary to ensure a faithful observance of the clause of the Constitution referred to, in conformity with the provisions of this act; and all good citizens are hereby commanded to aid and assist in the prompt and efficient execution of this law, whenever their services may be required, as aforesaid, for that purpose; and said warrants shall run, and be executed by said officers, any where in the State within which they are issued.

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