

PEDRO TOOOKAN PARRIS
Ambrotype from the S.P.N.E.A. Collection.

OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND

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Pedro Tovookan Parris

By PERCIVAL J. PARRIS

Edited by EARLE G. SHETTLEWORTH, JR.

THE following chronicle traces the life of Pedro Tovookan Parris, an African native who came to the United States in 1845 under unusual circumstances and became part of a prominent Maine family. The author, Percival J. Parris,¹ was a member of that family and was eleven years old when Pedro died in 1860. Percival J. Parris apparently never forgot his childhood friend, for at some point before his death in 1945, he wrote this brief but engaging account of Pedro's life, thus preserving a fascinating chapter in the history of the black experience in New England. Both men now rest in the Parris family plot of the Knoll Cemetery on Paris Hill, one of the least spoiled communities in Maine.

* * *

Tovookan was born of full blooded-native African parents somewhere on the eastern coast of Africa about 1833. He was called Tovookan by his own people. This name signified "To run away," and he thought it was a nickname given

him because of his noncombative disposition. He confessed to being maltreated by other boys, and his father scolded him and vainly urged him to fight. Tovookan had three brothers and one sister, the latter younger than himself. . . .

Tovookan was about ten years old when captured. He remembered that he lived near the sea and that he had seen hippopotami in the water. This was probably somewhere on the coast of Zanguebar.² He said his people lived in huts made with poles and used mats for doors and to sleep on. The first fruits gathered were hung on a particular tree to propitiate a spirit or departed spirits, he did not clearly understand which. There were also ceremonies observed in planting, which he supposed to be designed to protect the crop from evil spirits. The tribe was to some extent agricultural. Each took to himself such lands as he chose to cultivate by simply marking out as much as he needed. Fowls were kept for their eggs. The custom of the tribe permitted of a man's having two or more wives,

each of which had a hut of her own; but Tovookan did not remember that his father had any other wife than his mother.

He was captured in a night attack on his people by a neighboring tribe. A terrible uproar arose in the night and as his father stepped out of the hut to learn the cause he was struck down. The terrified family scattered, attempting to escape as best they could in the confusion and darkness. But Tovookan was taken. The last he saw of his family that night was his grandmother screaming on a large rock on which she had sought refuge as he was being hurried away. The captives were kept on a forced march all of that night, and in the morning he found that his three brothers were also captives. He never saw or heard of the rest of his family again.

The slaves were on the march for several weeks and were taken at last to a dealer on the small island of Zanzibar in Mozambique Channel.³ Here Tovookan first saw a white man. He was smoking. He had on a hat and shoes. The captives thought these were a part of the man and grew upon him. Tovookan's people were not cannibals, but the captives feared when taken that they were to be eaten and when delivered over to the white people they felt sure of it. This would seem to indicate that there were man-eating tribes in their vicinity.

The slave dealer who bought this band was a Portuguese named Sebastian. His slaves would bring a higher price if they could speak Portuguese and here Tovookan learned a smattering of that language. Sebastian was a harsh man and gave him many a beating to hasten the acquisition [sic] of a strange tongue. Sebastian sold him to Captain Paulo, who bought a full cargo of slaves and shipped

them to Rio Janeiro.⁴ At Zanzibar Tovookan had been named Pedro.

Pedro and a small negro from Quimbaine, south of Mozambique,⁵ were taken as body servants by Captain Paulo and carried to Rio Janeiro on the vessel of Captain Libby of Portland, Maine.⁶ Captain Paulo was kind to the boys and they were much attached to him. Years afterwards in Maine Pedro had a fine curly horned weather sheep that he named Paulo in honor of the Captain.

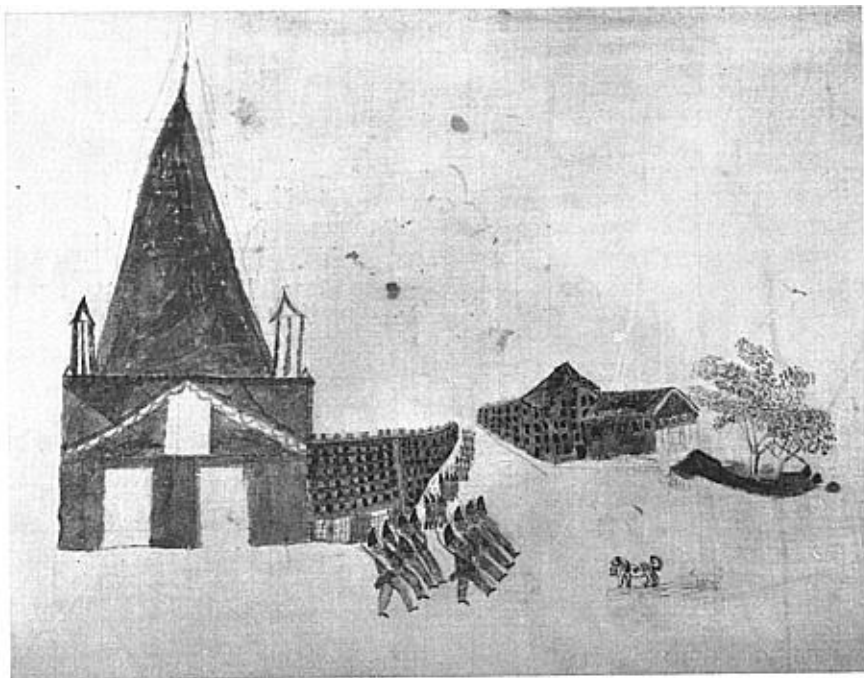
On arriving at Rio, Pedro had expected to see his brothers again, but he never landed there. The sailors on Libby's vessel had not shipped as slavers, and were much enraged when they discovered what trafic [sic] they had been drawn into. At Rio they were boarded by Geo. W. Gordon,⁷ who was then American Consul at Rio, and while his boat was alongside one of the crew threw a note into it giving the character of the vessel. Captain Libby and his vessel were taken into Portland by an American warship then at Rio under charge of slaving.⁸

Captain Libby was a native of Scarborough, Maine. The custom in those days with many captains sailing from Portland and Boston, and as was alleged under orders from some of the most devout and respected citizens of those places, to sail from the New England port with a cargo of shook for making molasses hogsheads: to sail for Havana; there unship their shook, take in a supply of gratings and shackles, sail for Africa, and having secured a cargo of "black ivory," return to Cuba, sell their cargo of slaves, ship a cargo of molasses and return to the port from which they started.

On his arrival in Portland Captain Libby was indicted for slaving. There were three of the negro boys, Pedro, Billie and George. They were kept in jail

or within jail limits for six months while Libby could get testimony from Brazil showing that the boys were free when he took them with Paulo from Zanzibar. This he succeeded in doing and escaped, though his ship had been condemned and sold.⁹

sent to school. He was able to read and write and mastered the first four principles of arithmetic. One of his ambitions was public speaking and he sometimes took part in the discussions of the school debating societies of that day. His forensic ability was somewhat limited, and his use



TROOPS MARCHING IN RIO DE JANEIRO. THE FIRST SECTION OF A WATERCOLOR PAINTING ON GLAZED CHINTZ BY PEDRO TOVOOKAN PARRIS DEPICTING HIS JOURNEY FROM BRAZIL TO MAINE IN 1845

From the S.P.N.E.A. Collection.

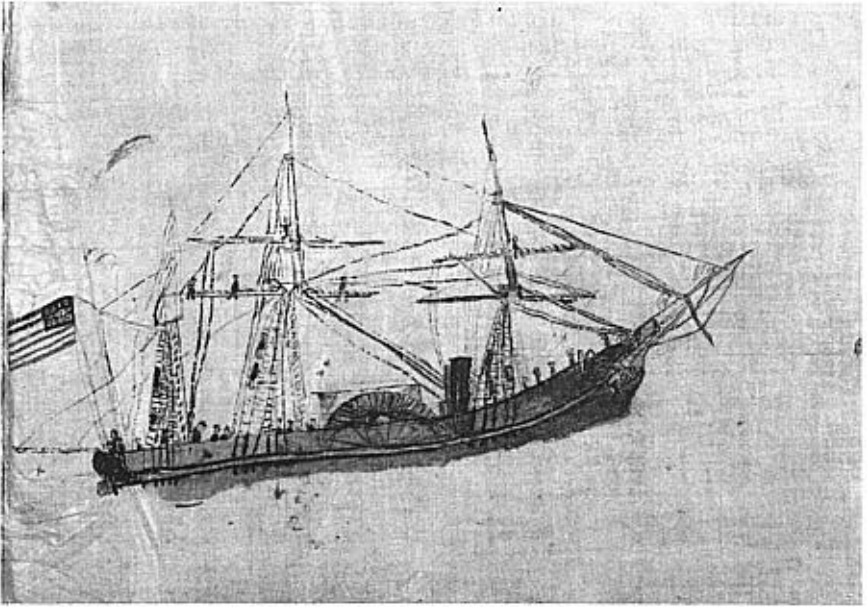
The United States Marshal for the state of Massachusetts at this time was a gentleman named Barnes,¹⁰ while the United States Marshal for Maine was Virgil D. Parris.¹¹ The boy Billie was taken into the employ of Mr. Barnes and called himself Billie Barnes,¹² and Pedro was taken by Mr. Parris and called himself Pedro Tovookan Parris.

In the family of Mr. Parris, Pedro was

of the English language odd enough to be a source of delight to the small boys. It was enough however to serve in the presidential campaign of 1856. In this, besides the Democratic party and the newly organized Republican party, there was a remnant of the vanishing Whig party and American or Know-Nothing party. They united to nominate Fillmore and Donaldson, and their candidate for Gov-

ernor in Massachusetts was the George Gordon who had been so active as consul to Rio Janeiro in opposing the slave trade. The party needed something to check the trend of abolitionists towards

They sang them together in private theatrical entertainments in houses of the relatives of the family. The following is one of the songs as nearly as it can be produced by the use of English letters,



UNITED STATES FRIGATE RARITAN SAILING FROM RIO DE JANEIRO TO BOSTON. THE SECOND SECTION OF THE WATERCOLOR

the Republican party. They sought out Pedro and employed him for six weeks making campaign speeches for Gordon, who had rescued him from slavery.

After his return to Paris he settled down to his work again, but this taste of public life had left him somewhat restless. He longed to be a showman, and when by himself was often making strange noises in his efforts to become a ventriloquist.

Pedro remembered several of his native songs, two of which he taught to Percival, then a boy of eight or nine years and the youngest of the Parris children.

Gah mah tlang gah, hing gah, we ah,
 Hing yang gah,
 Hing yang gah mel ba may fah we cahh
 Tim vah nah,
 Hing yang gah, hing we ah him fula
 Hing yang gah, hing we ah him fula,
 Alah he mang gwah, alah he mang gwah.
 Mah quay quay, alah he mang gwah.
 Gah mahtlang gah, tc tc.

... Pedro sang other songs. One, more intricate, but more interesting than the others had a tripping refrain [sic] of "Chee-sah, tindel, tah voh."

Pedro lived with the Parris family till his death from pneumonia on April 10, 1860. He was much attached to the

members of the family as they were to him, and he was a general favorite in town. This fact, combined with that of his having been captured as a slave and the strong antislavery sentiment in Maine

him a good education, and have treated him in every respect as one of their number. He has always maintained an affectionate regard for them, devoting himself faithfully to their interests, and refusing to leave them. He had also adopted the name of the family who had be-



BOSTON AND THE PARRIS HOME IN MAINE.
THE THIRD SECTION OF THE WATERCOLOR

at that time, probably account for his funeral being one of the most fully attended that had been held in the village. He lies buried in the family lot and a decent stone marks his grave.

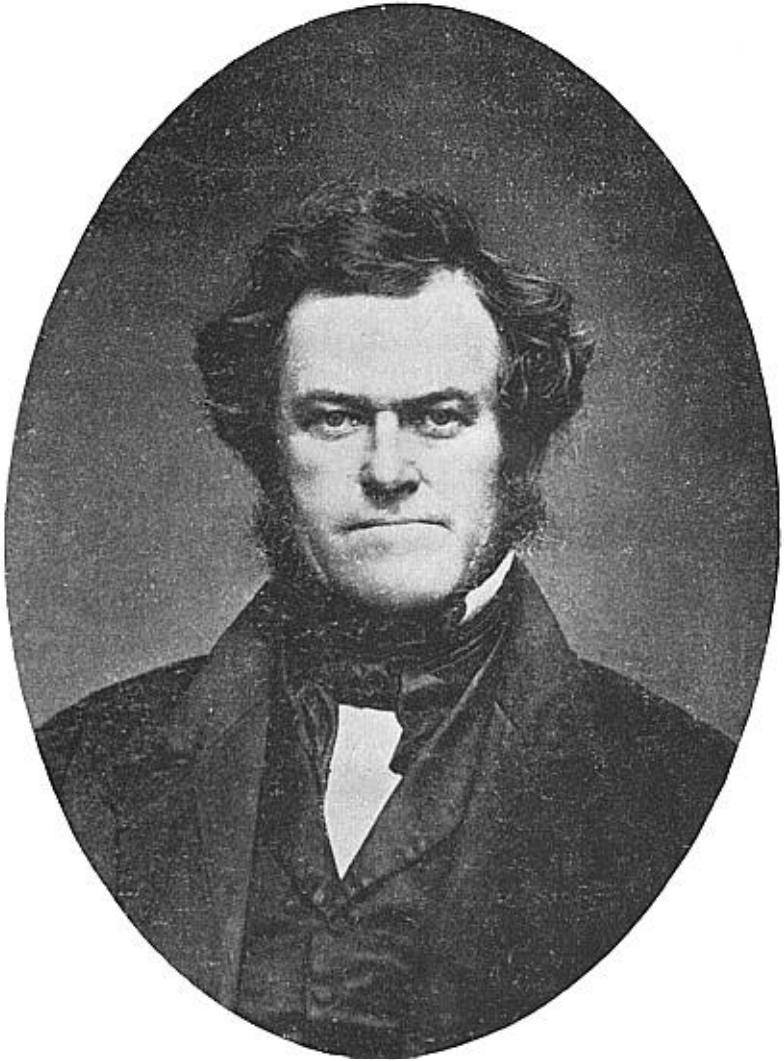
Obituary of Pedro Tovookan Parris
from the *Oxford Democrat*, Paris, Maine,
of Friday, April 13, 1860:

Died in this village, Tuesday, PEDRO TAOCAN[sic], a native of Africa. While Honorable V. D. Parris was Marshal of Maine, a slaver was captured, having left on board but two of the Africans that had composed her cargo. These lads, after acting as witnesses, were taken in charge, one by Mr. Parris, and the other by the Marshal of Massachusetts. The family taught Pedro our language, gave

frinded him. His funeral was attended Wednesday afternoon, by a large number of our citizens. Few have gone from our midst, whose loss is more generally or sincerely mourned.

* * *

Readers of OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND will be interested to know that the Society has recently acquired Percival J. Parris's manuscript account of Pedro Tovookan Parris as well as the ambrotype and watercolor illustrated in this article. Accompanying these items in the Society's collection is another painting by Pedro Parris as well as original documents relating to the trial of Captain



Virgil D. Parris

VIRGIL DELPHINI PARRIS. UNITED STATES MARSHAL
FOR MAINE, 1844-1849

Illustration from *History of Paris, Maine* by William B. Lapham
and Silas P. Maxim, Paris, 1884.

Cyrus Libby and printed material concerning George W. Gordon's 1856 campaign for the governorship of Massachusetts. In addition, the Society has secured copies from the National Archives of the

extensive legal papers pertaining to Captain Libby's trial. Together these written and pictorial sources provide a unique record of Pedro Parris, a heretofore forgotten figure in New England history.

NOTES

¹ The following account of Percival J. Parris's life appears in the *Advertiser-Democrat* of Norway and South Paris, Maine, for Friday, October 12, 1945:

Percival J. Parris, 96, oldest resident of Paris, died Thursday (October 4, 1945) at his home.

He was born at Portland, January 5, 1849, the son of Virgil D. and Columbia Rawson Parris. His parents moved to Paris when he was two-and-a-half-years old.

He attended Paris Hill Academy, Bowdoin College for three years, then transferred to Union College, Schenectady, from which he was graduated in 1871. For some time he taught school in Maine and Massachusetts. Later he studied law and was admitted to the Oxford County Bar in 1879. He graduated from Hamilton College Law School, New York City, in 1880 and practiced law in New York City until 1890, when he went to Washington State for two years. He then returned to New York, where he accepted a position with the New York Life Insurance Co. He remained with this company thirty years, retiring in 1922, when he returned to Paris, where he has since resided.

² Lippincott's *Gazetteer of the World*, Philadelphia, 1885, states that "Zanguebar is a name frequently given by geographers to a long tract on the east coast of Africa . . . from the south side of the River Juba near the equator to Cape Delgado."

³ Lippincott's *Gazetteer of the World*, Philadelphia, 1885, defines Zanzibar as "an island . . . on the east coast of Africa" and Mozambique Channel as "a strait in the Indian Ocean on the east coast of Africa."

⁴ Rio Janeiro refers to the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

⁵ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, New York, 1969, states that Mozambique is "an overseas province of Portugal . . . situated on the southeastern coast of Africa."

⁶ The following account of Captain Cyrus Libby is found on pages 218-219 of *The Libby Family in America, 1602-1881*. Prepared and

published by Charles T. Libby, Portland, 1882:

Cyrus Libby, born Scarborough, Maine, September 13, 1804, the son of Captain Cyrus and Lois Libby. Unmarried. He followed the sea from boyhood. He rose to be captain, and sailed to most all the principal ports of the commercial world. He is now a school-teacher in Victoria, Australia.

⁷ George William Gordon was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, the son of John Gordon, a prosperous farmer. George W. Gordon attended Phillips Exeter Academy and graduated as the valedictorian of his class. He then went to Boston and entered the importing business. In 1830 he helped to found the firm of Gordon and Stoddard, importers. For five successive years, from 1831 to 1836, Gordon served on the Boston City Council. His firm lost heavily in the Panic of 1837 and was dissolved in 1839. However, he quickly established a new firm to regain his losses. At the same time, he turned his attention to Whig politics, campaigning actively for William Henry Harrison in 1840 and receiving the post-mastership of Boston as a result. Gordon held this position until 1843 when he accepted President John Tyler's appointment as American consul at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Between 1843 and 1846, Gordon waged an active campaign of discovering and bringing to justice American captains and crews involved in the African slave trade. In 1846 he returned to his mercantile pursuits in Boston. From October, 1849 through September, 1850, he worked in Washington to compile the annual report of the Secretary of the Treasury on manufacturing, commerce, and tariffs. During this period, he was in close contact with Daniel Webster and President Millard Fillmore. Upon the admission of California to the Union, Gordon was offered the post of Naval Officer at San Francisco but refused it. In September, 1850, he was reappointed Postmaster of Boston, a position he held until the fall of 1853 when President Pierce replaced him with a Democrat. George W. Gordon ran for the governorship of Massachusetts on the Whig and American Party tickets in 1856. He stressed his antislavery ac-

tivities as the American consul at Rio de Janeiro, but his campaign was unsuccessful. Gordon returned to his business life in Boston, dying there in 1877. For further information concerning Gordon, see *The Record of George Wm. Gordon*, Boston, 1856.

⁸ According to *The Record of George Wm. Gordon*, Boston, 1856, Captain Cyrus Libby's vessel was the American brig Porpoise under the ownership of George F. Richardson of Brunswick, Maine. The Porpoise arrived in Rio de Janeiro in January, 1845. The vessel which took Captain Libby and his ship to the United States was the U.S. Frigate Raritan. Contrary to Percival J. Parris's statement, the Porpoise was brought to Boston instead of Portland. Pedro and two other boys arrived in Boston before coming to Portland as witnesses in Captain Libby's trial.

⁹ Captain Libby was charged with having been engaged in the slave trade. He was examined in Portland before the United States Circuit Court between July 31 and August 5, 1845. His trial was then continued for almost another year while he sought evidence from Brazil to defend himself. Proceedings were continued in the U. S. Circuit Court in Portland on July 9, 1846. Captain Libby was acquitted on July 22, 1846, on the grounds that the government had produced insufficient evidence to convict him. However, the brig Porpoise had become libeled upon arrival in Boston and was sold by the U. S. Marshal. This resulted in a legal controversy which continued over a ten-year period until July of 1855 when Justice Curtis of the U. S. Court in Boston ruled that the vessel had been rightfully seized.

¹⁰ Barnes refers to Isaac O. Barnes, United States Marshal for Massachusetts from 1848 to 1850.

¹¹ The following account of Virgil D. Parris's life is published on pages 434-435 of *History of Paris, Maine* by William B. Lapham and Silas P. Maxim, Paris, 1884:

Hon. Virgil Delphini Parris was the son of Capt. Josiah and Experience (Lowden) Parris. He was born in Buckfield, Feb. 8, 1807, and graduated at Union College, N. Y., in 1827. Adopting the law as his profession, he was admitted to the bar in 1830. Entering upon active life at a period of high political excitement and inheriting an ardent temperament from his patriotic ancestors, he zealously espoused the cause of Gen. Jackson, and in 1827, before he became a voter, organized in his native town

the first Jackson Club in Maine. In 1831 he was chosen Assistant Secretary of the Maine Senate. From 1833 to 1838 he represented Buckfield in the Legislature, and in 1838 he was elected to fill the vacancy in the XXV Congress occasioned by the death of Hon. Timothy J. Carter of Paris, and in 1839 was re-elected. In 1842 and 1843 he served as State Senator from Oxford county, and in the latter year, when Edward Kavanagh became, by the death of Governor Fairfield, Acting Governor of the State, Mr. Parris was chosen his successor as President of the Senate. In 1844 he was appointed by President Tyler, United States Marshal for the District of Maine, which position he held during the administration of President Polk till 1849. In 1853 President Pierce appointed him Special Mail Agent for New England, and in 1856 he was appointed Naval Store-keeper at the Kittery navy yard. With the inauguration of President Lincoln, Mr. Parris retired from office, although he continued to take an active part in politics until precluded by disease. Mr. Parris had a decided taste for scientific pursuits. He was interested in all branches of natural history and was a collector of antiquities; but he took especial pleasure in astronomy and numismatics. To the latter subject he was a devotee and possessed one of the finest collections of coins in the country, which he took much pride in exhibiting.

Mr. Parris was a man of iron will, with great energy of character; his integrity was unquestioned, his impulses were generous, most genial in his companionship. As a man, a citizen and a friend, he was esteemed the most by those who knew him best. Before stricken with disease he possessed great physical vigor, strength and activity. He married in 1833 Miss Columbia, daughter of Capt. Samuel and Polla (Freeland) Rawson, who survives at this time (1884). He died in Paris, where he had resided quite a number of years, Saturday morning, June 13, 1874. Mr. Parris did not resume the practice of law after retiring from politics. He was one of the originators and prime movers in building the Buckfield railroad, and was interested in all the projects for the advancement of his native town and county.

¹² According to information on page eight of *The Record of George Wm. Gordon*, Boston, 1856, Billie Barnes was a successful barber in Milton, Massachusetts. The third boy, George, had been Captain Libby's servant. When freed, he became a seaman and, as of 1856, was still going to sea.