"Champion of the Weak"

I took the title for this painting from the autobiography of John P. Parker of Ripley, Ohio, who, in recollecting his days as a slave, described himself as such when he, only eight years old, defended a child-slave even younger. When Parker and 400 other slaves, bound together with shackles and chains, marched from Richmond, Virginia, to Mobile, Alabama, he took pity on this little boy and looked after him. When a bigger boy stole the youngster's dinner, Parker beat him until he returned the meal. As he stated, "From that time forward, I was the champion of the weak."

Serendipitously I discovered the John P. Parker house, now a registered National Landmark, through an article in the *Sunday New York Times* in January of 2017 when my wife and I were on an art sabbatical in Florida. Though I rarely read this newspaper, for some reason I decided to buy a copy for my journalist-wife, who enjoys *The Times*. The article caught my attention.

Upon return to Ohio I contacted the folks at the John P. Parker Historical Society and eventually met Carol Stiver, toured Parker's restored home in Ripley, and decided to put my paintings of the county farms into a fundraiser for this small organization. And, although I normally paint only old barns, I felt this house and Parker's heroics deserved my efforts.

While at the house I purchased *His Promised Land,* a book that reconstructs Parker's life via an interview done by Frank M. Gregg in 1889, which became buried in the archives of Duke University for over a century. Stuart Sprague, a professor emeritus of history at Morehead State University, put together the book, whose royalties support the foundation. The house, on the banks of the Ohio in Ripley, is open to the public.

Even though I'll make this essay relatively short, I'll admit that I couldn't stop reading the book, which convinced me that not only this foundation was worthy of my artistic efforts but that Parker, besides having led an incredibly lucky life, is probably the most courageous American hero I've never heard of. Thousands of descendants of the fugitive slaves he helped escape will probably agree.

He was born in 1827 in Norfolk, Virginia, to a wealthy white plantation owner and a black slave woman. When he was eight, he was sold to a slave trader and marched to Richmond where he, along with 400 others in chains, walked to Mobile, Alabama, in the hot summer. There a doctor bought him and gave him a comfortable life. Illegally, his sons taught Parker to read. But they couldn't extinguish his hatred of slavery.

At 16, in 1843, at the urging of his doctor-owner, he began to learn a trade, but was beaten by a drunkard boss and taken to a hospital for slaves, which was run by a cruel woman. Once, when Parker protested her whipping a defenseless slave, she hit him in the face. Rather than turning the other cheek, he returned the whipping and, fearing retaliation, fled Mobile.

His adventures along the Mississippi in his quest for freedom – its flatboatmen, thugs, ruffians, falling in and out of captors' hands, sneaking through cornfields and Southern woods – would easily fill a book. Serendipity – again – returned him to his Mobile doctor, who, his patience now exhausted, decided to put him back on the auction block. But, clever and imaginative, Parker convinced one of the doctor's patients, a rich widow, to buy him so that he could pay her back and earn his freedom, which he did in 1845. He moved north to Indiana, then to Cincinnati, and finally to Ripley.

There he worked in a foundry, having learned the skills of iron molding in Mobile, eventually owned the foundry, married, and had seven children, all of whom became college educated. Ripley, the seat of the abolitionist movement in Ohio, located on the banks of the Ohio, a short distance from the slave-owning state of Kentucky, was a thriving port in Ohio in those days, second only to Cincinnati. But most of its residents were not abolitionists and they allowed slave hunters to chase down runaways, sometimes collecting rewards for their assistance. Despite this, Parker's business flourished and so did his reputation as a fearless helper of fugitive slaves, whom he helped escape across the river – to safe houses in Ripley and then onto points north via the Underground Railroad. Hundreds of them.

The accounts of his daring raids into Kentucky, the only Union state not to abolish slavery during the Civil War, show not only his bravery – he was always heavily armed – but his cunning. And his luck.

Once, in a raid in darkness – the night was the only safe time for his heroics – he helped a man and woman whose baby was held in the farm owner's home as “insurance” – in case the slaves decided to try to escape. In their log home a candle glowed on a stool, on which sat two large pistols that the owner claimed he would use if anyone tried to take the baby. Quietly – like a mouse – Parker crept into the room while the couple slept soundly, picked up a bundle with the baby inside, but stumbled. The stool fell over, the candle went out, and the pistols dropped to the floor. The owner, awake and angry, fumbled in the dark to find his pistols, giving Parker a few minutes to run out, connect with the two frightened slave parents, and head to his skiff on the river bank, closely pursued by the owner, his guns firing over their heads. The owner had to be careful – his slaves were valuable commodities for the auction block. Despite the danger, Parker’s courage prevailed: the slaves escaped.

Now not only a respected businessman but a feared hero for runaways, he had to be careful. In 1850 the federal Fugitive Slave Act allowed slave hunters the right to pursue slaves in free states and it prescribed penalties for those who harbored runaways. Kentucky's laws were even harsher: slave owners placed a $1000 bounty on Parker, dead or alive. So, in Ripley, where enterprising thugs could hide in alleys, Parker, always heavily armed with pistols and a knife, would walk down the middle of the street. He was never captured, though he had plenty of harrowing close calls, which he recounts in the book.

Rather than succumb to racism, still heavily prevalent, he prospered after the Civil War and the end of slavery, survived bank collapses, received three patents for his inventions – one of only a handful of African-Americans to earn patents in the 1880s – won medals for his tobacco presses in national expositions, and raised his seven children. He died in 1900, a forgotten part of Ohio’s history – since Gregg's interview could not be published in those days of racism. Thanks to Duke University, Stuart Sprague, and the John P. Parker Historical Society, his legacy has survived.

A few days after I wrote, this I ran in the Missoula (Montana) marathon. While listening to our national anthem, played just before the start of the race, I couldn’t help but thinking about John P. Parker when the last two verses were sung – “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

I've already got ideas for a movie about this American hero. I'd cast Morgan Freeman as the older Parker recounting his life – just like he did in *The Shawshank Redemption* – and Denzel Washington as the young John Parker. Now, all I need to do is to contact Steven Spielberg. I'm sure he'll bite.