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Abstract

“I’m Some O’Rowl’n Rob’son’s Relations”
Racial Attitudes and Race Relations at Rokeby in Ferrisburgh, Vermont, 1830 – 1860

This thesis investigates the Robinson family’s racial attitudes and how they affected race relations between them and their African American employees. Rowland and Rachel Robinson were Quakers, abolitionists, and agents on the Underground Railroad guided by a commitment to doing right. Their convictions were so firm, they refused to even acknowledge the institution of slavery. This dedication led them to hire fugitive slaves and free blacks to work on their farm and in their home during a time when racism was prevalent in Vermont. Contrary to the popular myth, created at the state’s inception by its illusory constitutional ban on slavery in 1777, that Vermont was a state that valued liberty for every person, slavery persisted into the nineteenth-century. Even as the institution faded, black Vermonters struggled to find meaningful independence, and faced prejudice in the working sphere and in personal interactions. Despite Rowland and Rachel Robinsons’ racial attitudes, their sons, George and Rowland Evans, held racist attitudes, which manifested most obviously in their hatred towards black women who worked in their home. However, these men also developed kinship relationships with black men who worked on the farm. The younger Robinsons loved Mingo Niles, a faithful, entertaining black man who tended to the family’s garden for over thirty years. Contradictions were abound at Rokeby. Even though the heads of the household at Rokeby, Rowland and Rachel, obstinately persisted to do right by striving for racial equality on their farm and in their home, black workers, including Mingo, felt the need to adhere to social discrepancies between themselves and the Robinsons. Their observance of distinctions between themselves and the Robinsons was one approach the black workers at Rokeby took to deal with the contradictions they faced. Mingo’s provisional kinship shows he was thankful for and fond of the Robinsons, but also keenly aware of his position in respect to them. He was one of many African Americans at Rokeby who negotiated contradictory attitudes and circumstances to forge part of his life there.

Sources Include:
Robinson Family Letters, Middlebury College Special Collections and Archives.