

Puttin' on Ole Massa

The Slave Narratives of
Henry Bibb,
William Wells Brown,
and Solomon Northup

Gilbert Osofsky
editor

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Advanced Reasoning Forum

*Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he
That breathed that comforting melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?*

—From "O Black and Unknown Bards,"
by James Weldon Johnson

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Introduction

Puttin' On Ole Massa: The Significance of Slave Narratives

"The only weapon of self defence I could use successfully, was that of deception."

Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave (New York, 1849), p. 17.

"Ever after I entertained the first idea of being free, I had endeavored so to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people. The two points necessary in such a case I had kept constantly in mind. First, I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of slavery. Second, I had never appeared to be even so intelligent as I really was. This all colored people at the south, free and slaves, find it peculiarly necessary for their own comfort and safety to observe."

The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, North Carolina (Boston, 1848), p. 31.

The slave narratives are tales of bondage and freedom written or told by former slaves. There are many thousands of such narratives if one includes the stories of fugitives collected by antislavery advocates and published in the abolitionist press, or those gathered for publication in nineteenth- and twentieth-century documentary accounts. Brief descriptions of slavery from the mouths of those who lived it appear in many nineteenth-century books, such as William Still's *The Underground Rail Road* (1883), Levi Coffin's *Reminiscences* (1876), Benjamin Drew's *North-Side View of Slavery* (1856), Lydia Maria Child's *Isaac T. Hopper: A True Life* (1854), Wilson Armistead's *A Tribute for the Negro*

(1848). The WPA slave-narrative collection in the Library of Congress runs to seventeen volumes.¹ Perhaps most remarkable of this extensive literature are the four-score full-length autobiographies of slaves published before the Civil War. These books are the main focus of this essay.²

A literature so diffuse obviously varies widely in style, purpose, and competence. Some books are works of enduring value from a literary as well as "protest" perspective. The autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, and Solomon Northup fuse imaginative style with keenness of insight. They are penetrating and self-critical, superior autobiography by any standards. The quality of mind and spirit of their authors is apparent.

Because the best narratives reflect the imaginative minds of the most gifted and rebellious slaves, their value as reliable sources for the study of slavery has been questioned.³ To doubt the relevancy of autobiographies written by exceptional slaves, however, is a specious argument in its inception. The great slave narrative, like all great autobiography, is the work of the especially perceptive viewer and writer. In describing his personal life, the sensitive and creative writer touches a deeper reality that transcends his individuality. Frederick Douglass, for example, was certainly an exceptional man, but his autobiography has much to teach us about the slaves around him, his friends and enemies on the plantation and in the city, and many other typical aspects of American slavery. Douglass is glibly critical of the weaknesses of many of his fellow slaves. He derides those who adopted the master's code of behavior, those who fought for the baubles and goodies used as rewards and bribes, and those who dissipated their energy in wild

¹ Federal Writers' Project, "Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves" (Typescripts, Washington, D.C., 1941), 17 vols.; Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly*, XIX (Fall, 1967), 534-553; Benjamin A. Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago, 1945).

² Two invaluable doctoral dissertations in the field of American literature provide an overview of the subject: Charles H. Nichols, Jr., "A Study of the Slave Narrative" (doctoral dissertation, Brown University, 1948); and Margaret Young Jackson, "An Investigation of Biographies and Autobiographies of American Slaves Published Between 1840 and 1860: Based upon the Cornell Special Slavery Collection" (doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1954). Each contains a solid bibliography.

³ This question has arisen with deadening regularity each time I've lectured on the subject. The argument generally made is that men like Douglass were so unusual that their experiences emphasize only the atypical aspects of slavery.

sports and drinking bouts during holidays.⁴ Douglass presents a many-sided depiction of the slave experience—his is no papier-mâché book or antislavery tract. The historians who fail to use such a book or the narratives of a Bibb, a Brown, a Northup, or a Samuel Ringgold Ward because they are “exceptional” men might as well argue that Claude Brown and Eldridge Cleaver are unsuitable commentators on today’s ghetto. To exclude the “exceptional” is to eliminate all strong autobiography as a distortion of the events of its time. Yet it is these writers whose books are most likely to interpret reality with insight and clarity.

The majority of slave narratives, like most autobiographies, are more parochial and weaker in literary quality. Many are confused. A blatant illustration is the rambling memoir of that delightful character William Grimes (“Old Grimes”), who escaped from Georgia, settled in New Haven, and became a handyman and general factotum to students at Yale. In his poorly organized tales, ends of stories precede beginnings, detailed descriptions of many jobs (horse trader, barber, gambler, waiter, laborer, pimp, grocer) and of his legal difficulties are presented in confusing bits and pieces, and at one juncture an unexplained wife arrives on the scene.⁵

Volumes compiled to raise money in the North for the purchase of relatives in slavery, such as the autobiographies of Lunsford Lane and Noah Davis, were written hurriedly and hawked from door to door.⁶ As their books demonstrate, these authors were men of unusual ability and integrity, but they had little time for leisurely reminiscing or training in literary style. Lane, for example, worked around the clock to raise money for the food and freedom of his family. He simultaneously sold tobacco, pipes, and lumber, ran a hauling service, and labored as a domestic. Another author of a narrative, Davis, was a slave shoemaker and preacher who learned letters by copying customers’ names from the shoes he repaired and passages from the New Testament. Their life stories abound with accounts of their own response to slavery and the

⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1962), pp. 145–148.

⁵ William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave* (New Haven, 1855).

⁶ *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, North Carolina* (Boston, 1848); Rev. Noah Davis, *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, A Colored Man: Written by Himself, At the Age of Fifty-four* (Baltimore, 1859).

experiences of others. The very shortcomings of their books as literature in part testify to their authenticity as historical sources. The style of their books is a product of their schooling.

A number of slave narratives are of such doubtful validity that they may be shelved at the start. When the authenticity of a "memoir," *The Narrative of James Williams* (1838), dictated by one black man to the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier, was questioned, Williams was nowhere to be found. The book was withdrawn from publication. Williams seems to have been a free Negro who culled stories from neighbors and invented others for a little ready cash. The antislavery press is full of warnings against such bogus fugitives. Two other books, *The Slave: Or the Memoirs of Archie Moore* (1836) and *The Autobiography of a Female Slave* (1856), were works of antislavery fiction.⁷ The first was written by the American historian Richard Hildreth; the second was composed by Mattie Griffith, the white daughter of a Kentucky slaveholder. Such potential hoaxes led to careful investigation of the stories fugitives wrote for publication. Narrators were subjected to detailed questioning by committees of knowledgeable people; letters were written to former masters and neighbors for corroboration. A tale so seemingly improbable as the life of Henry Bibb led to an extensive correspondence with white Southerners, all of whom verified Bibb's account—the improbable was the real.⁸ Solomon Northup's fantastic experiences were verified by a basketful of legal documents.

Because few slaves were literate enough to write their names, much less their autobiographies, and were thus forced to rely on amanuenses, usually abolitionists, scholars have rightly wondered where the slave's experience began and that of the antislavery recorder left off. Some have maintained that the typical slave narrative is so doctored that all are suspect as sources. Ulrich B. Phillips, for example, believed that most narratives "were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful."⁹

We should be wary of such sweeping generalizations that assign the majority of surviving books to the trash heap. Phillips cited the reminiscences of Josiah Henson as a prime instance of an unreliable

⁷ C. H. Nichols, Jr., pp. 1-10.

⁸ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York, 1849), pp. i-x.

⁹ Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929), p. 219.

slave narrative. My own analysis indicates that in the early editions it is an honest autobiography. Henson became a leader among the fugitives in Canada and received widespread coverage in the anti-slavery press. Many abrasive news stories resulted from his serious break with the Garrisonian abolitionists on the question of emigration to Canada but none questioned the authenticity of his autobiography. Also, the portions of his book that provide descriptions of incidents of his public career have proved authentic when checked against other sources.¹⁰ In one of the most jolting passages in the slave-narrative literature, Henson describes how he, as a black driver, transported an entire group of fellow slaves through free territory in Ohio to a Kentucky plantation. He was repeatedly told all were legally free as soon as they touched Ohio soil, and crowds of free blacks in Cincinnati tried to convince him to remain—some showered him with curses—yet Henson pushed on, convinced that his integrity and self-esteem required him to do his master's bidding. "My pride was aroused in view of the importance of my responsibility, and heart and soul I became identified with my master's project of running off his negroes," he wrote. When Henson became a free man he admitted a deep sense of guilt in having obeyed these orders. Few men have had better cause to assign such disagreeable memories to the furthest reaches of their minds; yet this story, in all its hideous candor, is recorded in Josiah Henson's memoir. No scholarly or social purpose is served by assuming such narratives, *a priori*, to be unreliable sources.¹¹

The most obviously false accounts readily give themselves away. The Preface to the life of the militant black abolitionist and fugitive slave J. W. Loguen, for example, relates how the author who recorded Loguen's experiences invented transitional incidents to tie together what seemed to him a disjointed account.¹² He gave an appearance of coherence to his story and destroyed its credibility in the process. Eleanor Eldridge's amanuensis, after the manner of third-rate contemporary fiction, spiced her book with imaginary and gushy romances. Innumerable paragraphs exhort the reader to sympathize with the trials of the lowly as they would with the meander-

¹⁰ See the following issues of *The Liberator*, which deal with many aspects of his career and also include descriptions of his journeys to England, which coincide with materials in the autobiography: April 11, November 7, 1851; July 2, 1852; June 11, 1858.

¹¹ Josiah Henson, *Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (Boston, 1858), pp. 48-54.

¹² *The Rev. J. W. Loguen as a Slave and as a Freeman: A Narrative of Real Life* (Syracuse, New York, 1859), p. iv.

ings of kings and queens.¹³ In other lurid tales of suffering and woe and torture, cruelty after shocking cruelty appears with such deadening regularity that one easily recognizes the presence of a morality play, not the record of a human life. What the nineteenth century called "shame-shame" is pervasive in many narratives. Such clearly false or doctored accounts are excluded from this essay.

Nevertheless, the simple stories of slave life in most narratives, with their unembroidered descriptions of plantation activities, camp meetings in the woods, and many other aspects of daily routine, are striking in the consistency of themes that appear among individuals who lived on widely separated plantations, in different states, and in different decades. A coherent pattern of slave life emerges in these diverse testimonies, yet most of our present historical accounts of slavery exclude or underestimate the significance of these themes. Our histories have been written primarily from the surviving manuscript records of slaveholders and therefore tend to reflect the concerns and biases of the master caste. The witnesses who wrote or dictated narratives must be heeded if a balanced account of the history of slavery in the United States is to be written.

II

To understand the narrative literature it is important to keep in mind the relative ease of *occasional* escape from the plantation. The narratives are replete with stories of slaves who ran off to hide in woods and swamps, thereby escaping slavery for at least some portion of their lives. The frequency of such stories in slave autobiographies makes clear that running away was a common means of black protest and rebellion against slavery.

Repeatedly slaves speak of leaving in fear of sale or transportation to the Deep South, or as a means of protest against unusually brutal and unjustified physical punishment, or in an attempt to find friends, husbands, wives, children, and parents who were sold to a new master or sent to a different section of the country. It was not only possible for slaves to escape and hide out for long periods of

¹³ *Memoirs of Eleanore Eldridge* (Providence, 1847).

time, but the more skillful could also remain away almost as long as they chose. All the narrators are wise in the ways of nature, knowledgeable in animal lore and in techniques for foraging and living off the land. They often arranged to contact friends and family on the plantation to supply them with food on secret visits.

Many stories illustrate these themes. One was recorded by Lewis W. Paine, a white man, who was sent to prison for trying to help Samson, a giant slave, escape from Georgia:

When [Samson] stayed out as long as he wished, he would send word to master that he would "come in," provided he would not punish him. . . . No one knew where he was, except a few of his faithful companions. He kept hid during the day, only venturing out at night, in order to procure necessary supplies. He was out about three months before he came to me. Those who are not acquainted with southern life will think this strange. But it not infrequently happens that they stay out for years in that way. There are large tracts of land, covered with heavy timber, containing not only deep and unpenetrable swamps, but caves, holes, shelving rocks and banks. In these they secrete themselves during the daytime, venturing abroad only by night, in pursuit of food, and such articles as they may need, or to see their brother slaves who they can trust. If they intend to "stay out" long, they prepare some way to cook, and by taking fowls, and once in a while a pig, they make out very well. . . . But if they are going to tarry long, they depend on such things as they can get, or others may give them.¹⁴

A Louisiana slave told of a fugitive who hid in a large hole in a dense forest. He gathered trees, leaves, and branches to protect himself not only from discovery but from storms and wild beasts. (A number of narrators allude to coming upon packs of wolves.) The fugitive clubbed birds and animals to obtain food and occasionally slipped back to the plantation where his mother gathered provisions for him. He continued to live in this manner "until freedom came" and finally emerged from the forest so covered with hair that he looked to others like the animals among whom he had lived so long.¹⁵

John Little, who later became a successful farmer in Canada,

¹⁴ Lewis W. Paine, *Six Years in a Georgia Prison* (New York, 1851), pp. 28-29. See also Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), pp. 109-124.

¹⁵ James B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (April, 1935), 322.

stayed in the woods for two years. A powerful slave, Aaron, avoided being captured for a year. Another slave named Aaron Siddles hid out for five months. William Street hid for eight months. Another lived in the woods for five years before capture by a patrol—and then escaped again.¹⁶ Moses Roper, the slave son of a plantation owner who once ran away to find his mother after being flogged, said, "It must be recollected that when a person is two miles from a house, in that part of the country, that he can hide himself in the woods for weeks, and I knew a slave who hid for six months without discovery, the trees being so thick." Roper later slipped out of bondage on a merchant ship.¹⁷ Fugitive John Thompson wrote that few slaves of his acquaintance knew of "the friendly guidance of the north star" but all were aware of the potential tactical value of swamps and bushes.¹⁸ Henry Bibb, an escape artist equal to Houdini who seemed able to come and go almost at his own discretion, put the case neatly when he said, "Among other good trades I learned the art of running away to perfection. I made a regular business of it, and never gave it up. . . ."¹⁹

One of the most illustrious slaves in American history, Nat Turner, took to the woods after his revolt collapsed and devised ingenious ways of avoiding capture. He burrowed into the earth, skillfully camouflaged his hideout with materials gathered in the forest, found ways to round up food, and emerged only at night. Though the entire slave South was on the lookout for him, Turner lived in this way—comfortably, he said—for about eight weeks. He was finally discovered by accident when a hunting dog strayed into his hideaway for a piece of meat. If Nat Turner could remain hidden for so long with an army of searchers on his trail, less valuable prey had an even better chance to go undetected.²⁰

¹⁶ Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee, or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada: A Northside View of Slavery* (Boston, 1856), *passim*. The story of the slave out for five years is in *The Liberator*, October 1, 1852.

¹⁷ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures of Moses Roper . . .* (London, 1840), p. 59.

¹⁸ John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave: Containing His History of Twenty-five Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape* (Worcester, Mass., 1856), pp. 27-28.

¹⁹ Henry Bibb, p. 15.

²⁰ *The Confession, Trial and Execution of Nat Turner, The Negro Insurgent* (Washington, D.C., 1910), pp. 13-14.

The relative ease of occasional escape *within* the plantation South must be contrasted with the difficulty of escape to freedom in the North. Narrators tell us that most slaves on plantations lacked a sense of geography and a knowledge of the outside world. Even a man as inquisitive as Frederick Douglass admitted that there was a time in his life when he hadn't heard of the North; he learned about the abolitionists only by accident.²¹ One of John Brown's admirers and followers, James Redpath, who interviewed numbers of slaves, expressed amazement at their lack of geographical knowledge. Redpath met slaves who had never heard of Europe, did not know their own states, and could not tell him the terminus of the railroad that ran by their own locality.²²

When a Boston visitor asked Henry Watson why he didn't try to leave the plantation, Watson "told him, with a laugh, I knew not where to go. . . . He informed me of . . . the great anti-slavery movement . . . a subject which I was entirely ignorant of before. . . ."²³ When Leonard Black landed in New York City he asked a man if there was such a place as Boston. "I was so ignorant I knew not whether Boston was a State or city," Black recorded. "In fact, I scarcely knew there was such a place. Slavery is as ill adapted for obtaining this kind of knowledge as all other kinds."²⁴ Henry Banks recalled he heard of a free country "somewhere" but wasn't sure where it was.²⁵ When the kidnaped Peter Still returned to Philadelphia after a lifetime of slavery, he was told by his brother, black abolitionist William Still, that their mother lived in New Jersey and they would go together to visit her. Peter hesitated to believe him because he had never heard of New Jersey.²⁶ On Henry Bibb's first escape he was befriended by a black man in Cincinnati who said the abolitionists would help transport him to Canada. Bibb was unbelieving: "This was the first time in my life that ever I had heard of such people," he wrote. "I supposed that

²¹ Frederick Douglass, pp. 81-87.

²² James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: Or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* (New York, 1859), pp. 65-66, and *passim*.

²³ Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson: A Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1848), p. 34.

²⁴ Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black: A Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, Mass., 1847), pp. 33-34.

²⁵ *The Refugee*, pp. 75-76.

²⁶ Kate E. R. Pickard, ed., *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife 'Vina,' After Forty Years of Slavery* (Syracuse, New York, 1856), pp. 247-251.

they were a different race. . . ." Bibb aptly called slavery "the graveyard of the mind."²⁷

Many narrators blame such ignorance on practiced deceit by their masters; they argued that the master caste consciously exploited slave ignorance and gullibility for its own advantage. There is abundant evidence in the narratives to demonstrate at least the partial truth of that charge. One slave asked his master who abolitionists were, and was told that they rounded up slaves for sale in Deep South markets.²⁸ One of Harriet Tubman's major tasks during the Civil War was to counsel plantation blacks that it was safe to board Northern gunboats.²⁹ Numbers of slaves had been encouraged to believe that Yankees were cannibals who looked upon them as tasty morsels. The memoirs of the sharp-witted Lewis Clarke record a convincing illustration of this fear.

I will not forget all the horrid stories slaveholders tell about Canada [Clarke wrote]. They assured the slave that, when they get hold of slaves in Canada, they make various uses of them. Sometimes they *skin* the head, and wear the wool on their coat collars—put them into the lead-mines, with both eyes out—the young slaves they eat; as for the red coats, they are sure death to the slave. However ridiculous to a well-informed person such stories may appear, they work powerfully upon the excited imagination of an ignorant slave.³⁰

Leonard Black said derisively that "Slaves are taught ignorance as we teach our children knowledge."³¹

In the deepest sense the entire South was a prison house, and all white men, solely because of their skin color, were prison keepers.³² By law and custom every white was permitted to stop any black along the road and ask him to present his pass or freedom papers or explain why he was away from the plantation. To collect the reward on a fugitive or perhaps claim the person of a slave whose master could not be located must have been enticing bait for the poor whites who patrolled the Southern countryside. A good

²⁷ Henry Bibb, pp. 50-51.

²⁸ *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, p. 247.

²⁹ Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, New York, 1869), pp. 38-41.

³⁰ *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution*. . . (Boston, 1846), pp. 40-41.

³¹ Leonard Black, pp. 50-51.

³² The prison analogy is also used in George M. Frederickson and Christopher Lasch, "Resistance to Slavery," *Civil War History*, XIII (December, 1967), 315-329.

catch not only seemed a fulfillment of one's communal responsibility but also might mean instant wealth. The most thrilling passages of slave autobiographies deal with strategies fugitives used for handling or avoiding such confrontations with whites. Andrew Jackson wrote that he "learned to look on every white man as my foe, and dared not pass near to any one."³³ Lewis Clarke described slave anxiety in even contemplating escape to the North: "All the white part of mankind, that he [the slave] has ever seen, are enemies to him and all his kindred. How can he venture where none but white faces shall greet him?"³⁴

Further, slaves had to avoid "guards," both black and white. Most slaves and free blacks in the narratives were willing to assist fugitives, but certain black Judases sabotaged the escape plans of many. Henry Bibb's schemes were exposed at least four times by black traitors; the escape plans of Leonard Black, Frederick Douglass, and John Little were revealed by fellow Negroes, Black's by his closest friend. Little was betrayed by a free black who received a ten-dollar reward for his service. James Adams of Virginia said he feared to tell even his father and mother of his plans to leave.³⁵

The escape of three slaves as described by black Garrisonian William Wells Brown to the New England Anti-Slavery Society was a dramatic example of such treachery. One of the three, who was nearly white, had impersonated the master of the other two, but when they had traveled far away from home territory, the white slave claimed the other two as his property and sold them. "He had not black blood enough in him to make him honest!" Brown said.³⁶ When free blacks captured such men they took care of business. One black worker in the employ of Southern slaveholders was tarred and feathered in Washington, Pennsylvania.³⁷ Another from Kentucky was bombarded with boulders and brickbats in Detroit and finally locked in prison for his own safety. "Kill him," "murder the villain," the crowds shouted. One powerful black woman said she was determined to have "his heart's blood."³⁸

The dominant mechanisms of control in the slave society made

³³ *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky* (Syracuse, 1847), p. 15.

³⁴ *Narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke*, p. 31.

³⁵ Leonard Black, pp. 22, 25, 29; *The Refugee*, pp. 19, 205.

³⁶ *The Liberator*, June 4, 1858.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, August 29, 1856.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, September 17, 1858.

possible a social system which permitted a measure of occasional freedom. If the experiences of slave narrators are in the least way typical, large numbers of slaves were on the move from Saturday night through Sunday and during such holidays as Easter, Christmas, and July Fourth. These were times to visit wives, husbands, lovers, children, and friends on neighboring plantations. This leniency of control acted as a necessary emotional outlet for the entire regime. The master caste would not have permitted such wanderings unless it could be certain that the man or woman who departed Saturday night would be back in the quarters the next day. "It becomes a matter of mutual interest for each [master] to protect his neighbor's 'rights' in order to render his own more secure," the black Andrew Jackson commented. Whenever he passed whites along a road, Jackson was asked: "Where do you belong, nigger?" "Whose boy are you?" "Where are you going, nigger?"³⁹ Another slave said that under these conditions "it is almost a matter of impossibility for a slave to escape."⁴⁰

This barrier to escape poses a limitation of the use of slave narratives as sources. Most though not all of the books were written by men and women who were closest to free territory and who escaped from the Border States, not the Deep South: few escaped permanently from plantations in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Solomon Northup, Henry Watson, Peter Still, and Henry Bibb all describe parts of their lives spent in the heartland of the cotton-producing South, but these accounts are not typical. It is unfortunate for comparative purposes that we have so few descriptions of slavery as slaves saw it in the Deep South. The efficient slave control that choked off routes of escape also blocked history's access to full understanding of black bondage in America.

Successful fugitives passed through chinks in the wall of the closed society. It was an article of lore, repeated in most slave autobiographies, that the best time to plan a permanent escape was on a Saturday night or during some holiday when slaves were on the move on visits and fugitives were, therefore, least likely to be detected. Even to conceive the possibility of escape under these conditions required a special quality of mind: imagination, independ-

³⁹ *Narrative of Andrew Jackson*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ *Narrative of Henry Watson*, p. 32. Note the similar comment of Philip Younger in *The Refugee*, p. 249: "Escape from Alabama is almost impossible,—if a man escapes, it is by the skin of his teeth."

ence, cunning, daring, and a sense of self-pride. It required a strategic appearance of obedience to their masters, like seeming most satisfied at the moment they were most discontented. ("At that time, of all times, he must appear best satisfied with slavery, least anxious for freedom. . . .")⁴¹ It called for the use of subtle psychological weapons. It demanded all the shrewdness and practiced deceit one finds in such abundance in the rich folklore of Old John, the symbolic slave hero who mastered the art of tricking "Ole Massa," of fooling him, of "puttin' him on."

III

The narratives permit a measure of access to the privacy of the mind of a slave and the conversations that took place in the slave cabin. No adequate analysis can be made of the much debated question of the impact of slavery on the personalities of bondsmen without hearing the stories slaves told one another when their owners were not around. As such they are crucial evidence of the ideas that passed through a slave's consciousness, his mind, if not his mouth. Such stories, crammed with aggressive humor—and wit is one of mankind's most useful aggressive tools⁴²—reveal the difficulty of enslaving a man's mind as one has enslaved his body. Lewis Clarke, a slave who recorded much of this inside humor, said he would not vouch for the truth of many anecdotes, but they were tales "slaves delight to tell each other."⁴³ Many of the tales are surely apocryphal in a technical sense—they probably refer to things slaves wished to say as well as to the things they said.

Some slaves undoubtedly felt loyalty and affection for their owners, but the stories of fugitives describe even this relationship as one of ambivalence. Slaves often held two overlapping attitudes: a willingness to accept life with an owner who treated them fairly,

⁴¹ Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of A Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada and England* (London, 1855), p. 162.

⁴² Sigmund Freud, "Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious," in Dr. A. A. Brill, ed., *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York, 1938), pp. 697-702; Donald C. Simmons, "Protest Humor: Folkloristic Reaction to Prejudice," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, CXX (December 1963), 567-570.

⁴³ *Narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke*, p. 114.

an *entente cordiale* rather than a feeling of serious devotion; and a private sense of irreverence for many of their master's ideas. This irreverence was the subject of much slave humor.

Peter Randolph, one of sixty-six slaves emancipated on the death of their owner, told a story he had overheard on his plantation in Virginia. The following conversation is said to have occurred between the slave Pompey and his master, as the slaveowner prepared to fight a duel:⁴⁴

Pompey, how do I look?

O, massa, mighty.

What do you mean "mighty," Pompey?

Why, massa, you look noble.

What do you mean by "noble"?

Why, sar, you just look like one *lion*.

Why, Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?

I see one down in yonder field the other day, massa.

Pompey, you foolish fellow, that was a *jackass*.

Was it, massa? Well you look just like him.

It is quite unlikely that this confrontation took place as Pompey remembered it, but it is not unreasonable to assume that he wished it had, or thought of saying such things, or told other slaves like Randolph that he had replied in this manner. That the slaves told such stories to one another is a clue to their state of mind—and there are numbers of similar examples in the narrative literature.

Lewis Clarke of Kentucky recalled meeting two slaves sent out to dig a grave for their departed owner and recounted their conversation at the gravesite:

Two slaves were sent out to dig a grave for old master. They dug it very deep. As I passed by I asked Jess and Bob what in the world they dug it so deep for. It was down six or seven feet. I told them there would be a fuss about it, and they had better fill it up some. Jess said it suited him exactly. Bob said he would not fill it up; he wanted to get the old man as near *home* as possible. When we got a stone to put on his grave, we hauled the largest we could find, so as to fasten him down as strong as possible.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Quoted in Margaret Young Jackson, pp. 232-233.

⁴⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 234-235.

And another from North Carolina, remembered by Lunsford Lane: One evening, Derby, a slave of the state treasurer, passed by to tell of the funeral of another respected state officer. The family of the deceased was greatly pleased that Derby had voluntarily placed crape on his hat as a sign of mourning—"they thought it evinced great consideration for the family and friends, and for which he deserved great praise." Derby told his black friends that his motives were misunderstood and "he would be glad to have kept it upon his hat until they were all as decently placed beneath the sod as Secretary White, if that would aid him in securing his freedom."⁴⁶

Slaves on Solomon Northup's Louisiana plantation referred to their master privately as "hogeve" and "hogjaw"—⁴⁷ hardly terms of endearment. Another slave, "Faithful Jack," recalled a supposed conversation he had with his master at the deathbed. "Farewell, massa!" he told his buddies he had said. "Pleasant journey: you soon be dere, massa—[it's] all de way down hill!"⁴⁸ Others remembered refusing to be buried in the same grave as their owners in fear of the devil, "Old Sam," taking the wrong body.⁴⁹

The ultimate in irreverences was the occasional letter fugitives sent to former masters after they had successfully "taken the long walk." Jackson Whitney made his "feet feel for Canada" when his master attempted to sell him after having previously agreed to let Whitney buy himself out of slavery. Whitney told William Riley, his former master, that he could now put his "conscience in his pocket"—a variation of the expression "to put a slave in one's pocket," which meant "to sell a slave." The slave informed his previous owner that he was now working for another fugitive from Kentucky whose farm was large, productive, and "so level that there are not hills enough on it to hide a dog. . . ." The country was not cold and barren, as he had been told, but beautiful and fertile. Whitney only wished his master could see how enjoyable his life was. He also said he knew the Lord would punish Riley for forcing him to abandon his family. The letter concluded: "You must not

⁴⁶ Rev. William G. Hawkins, ed., *Lunsford Lane or Another Helper from North Carolina* (Boston, 1863), p. 84.

⁴⁷ *Twelve Years A Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup* (New York, 1853), pp. 197, 220.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Margaret Young Jackson, pp. 304-305.

⁴⁹ *Narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke*, p. 119.

consider that it is a slave talking to 'massa' now, but one as free as yourself. . . . I pretended all the time that I thought you or some one else had a better right to me than I had to myself, which, you know, is rather hard thinking."⁵⁰

A slave who settled in Windsor, Canada West, wrote her mistress that she loved the white children she had nursed so faithfully but she appreciated "breathing free air" more. When safely out of the country, a young man returned by mail the keys to his master's storehouse.⁵¹ Milton Clarke taunted his owner with a note from Oberlin telling him not to worry too much about his ex-slave or the loss of the two hundred dollars a year Clarke paid him for the right to hire his own time (find self-employment): "he had found by experience he had wit enough to take care of himself, and he thought the care of his master was not worth the two hundred dollars a year which he had been paying for it, for four years; that, on the whole, if his master would be quiet and contented, he thought he should do very well."⁵²

IV

A considerable portion of most slave narratives deals with the methods of escape. The narrative literature probably acquired some of its popularity in the 1840's and 1850's because of the excitement of these tales. The melodrama and romance of the escape—the elements that Harriet Beecher Stowe skillfully weaves into *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—are less significant, however, than the evidence of the demands of courage and imagination required for execution of a successful escape plan. Such shrewdness and guile were characteristic of slave response in other less dramatic aspects of the plantation experience. For many slaves deception was a socially useful weapon of survival.

A number of the most impressive stories of practiced deceit deal with stealing food. As Eugene D. Genovese has shown in his brilliant analysis of the plantation economy, it was difficult to sup-

⁵⁰ *The Weekly Anglo-African*, July 23, 1859.

⁵¹ *The Liberator*, January 5, 1855.

⁵² *Narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke*, pp. 47-48.

**Narrative of the
Life and Adventures of
HENRY BIBB,**

An American Slave

Written by himself

with an Introduction
by Lucius C. Matlack

INTRODUCTION

by Lucius C. Matlack

From the most obnoxious substances we often see spring forth, beautiful and fragrant, flowers of every hue, to regale the eye, and perfume the air. Thus, frequently, are results originated which are wholly unlike the cause that gave them birth. An illustration of this truth is afforded by the history of American slavery.

Naturally and necessarily the enemy of literature, it has become the prolific theme of much that is profound in argument, sublime in poetry, and thrilling in narrative. From the soil of slavery itself have sprung forth some of the most brilliant productions, whose logical levers will ultimately upheave and overthrow the system. Gushing fountains of poetic thought, have started from beneath the rod of violence, that will long continue to slake the feverish thirst of humanity outraged, until swelling to a flood it shall rush with wasting violence over the ill-gotten heritage of the oppressor. Startling incidents authenticated, far excelling fiction in their touching pathos, from the pen of self-emancipated slaves, do now exhibit slavery in such revolting aspects as to secure the execrations of all good men and become a monument more enduring than marble, in testimony strong as sacred writ against it.

Of the class last named, is the narrative of the life of Henry Bibb, which is equally distinguished as a revolting portrait of the hideous slave system, a thrilling narrative of individual suffering, and a triumphant vindication of the slave's manhood and mental dignity. And all this is associated with unmistakable traces of originality and truthfulness.

To many, the elevated style, purity of diction, and easy flow of language, frequently exhibited, will appear unaccountable and contradictory, in view of his want of early mental culture. But to the thousands who have listened with delight to his speeches on anniversary and other occasions, these same traits will be noted as unequivocal evidence of originality. Very few men present in their written composition so perfect a transcript of their style as is exhibited by Mr. Bibb.

Moreover, the writer of this introduction is well acquainted with his handwriting and style. The entire manuscript I have examined and prepared for the press. Many of the closing pages of it were written by Mr. Bibb in my office. And the whole is preserved for inspection now. An examination of it will show that no alteration of sentiment, language, or style was necessary to make it what it now is, in the hands of the reader. The work of preparation for the press was that of orthography and punctuation merely, an arrangement of the chapters, and a table of contents—little more than falls to the lot of publishers generally.

The fidelity of the narrative is sustained by the most satisfactory and ample testimony. Time has proved its claims to truth. Thorough investigation has sifted and analyzed every essential fact alleged, and demonstrated clearly that this thrilling and eloquent narrative, though stranger than fiction, is undoubtedly true.

It is only necessary to present the following documents to the reader to sustain this declaration. For convenience of reference, and that they may be more easily understood, the letters will be inserted consecutively, with explanations following the last.

The best preface to these letters is the report of a committee appointed to investigate the truth of Mr. Bibb's narrative as he has delivered it in public for years past.

REPORT

OF THE UNDERSIGNED, COMMITTEE APPOINTED BY THE DETROIT LIBERTY ASSOCIATION TO INVESTIGATE THE TRUTH OF THE NARRATIVE OF HENRY BIBB, A FUGITIVE FROM SLAVERY, AND REPORT THEREON:

Mr. Bibb has addressed several assemblies in Michigan, and his narrative is generally known. Some of his hearers, among whom were Liberty men, felt doubt as to the truth of his statements. Respect for their scruples and the obligation of duty to the public induced the formation of the present Committee.

The Committee entered on the duty confided to them, resolved on a searching scrutiny, and an unreserved publication of its result. Mr. Bibb acquiesced in the inquiry with a praiseworthy spirit. He attended before the Committee and gave willing aid to its object. He was subjected to a rigorous examination. Facts—dates—persons—and localities were demanded and cheerfully furnished. Proper inquiry—either by letter, or personally, or through the medium of friends was then made from *every* person, and in *every* quarter

likely to elucidate the truth. In fact no test for its ascertainment, known to the sense or experience of the Committee, was omitted. The result was the collection of a large body of testimony from very diversified quarters. Slave owners, slave dealers, fugitives from slavery, political friends and political foes contributed to a mass of testimony, every part of which pointed to a common conclusion—the undoubted truth of Mr. Bibb's statements.

In the Committee's opinion no individual can substantiate the events of his life by testimony more conclusive and harmonious than is now before them in confirmation of Mr. Bibb. The main facts of his narrative, and many of the minor ones are corroborated beyond all question. No inconsistency has been disclosed nor anything revealed to create suspicion. The Committee have no hesitation in declaring their conviction that Mr. Bibb is amply sustained, and is entitled to public confidence and high esteem.

The bulk of testimony precludes its publication, but it is in the Committee's hands for the inspection of any applicant.

A. L. PORTER,
C. H. STEWART,
SILAS M. HOLMES.

DETROIT, *April 22, 1845.*

Committee.

From the bulk of testimony obtained, a part only is here introduced. The remainder fully corroborates and strengthens that.

[No. 1. An Extract]

DAWN MILLS, FEB. 19th, 1845.

CHARLES H. STEWART, ESQ.

MY DEAR BROTHER:

Your kind communication of the 13th came to hand yesterday. I have made inquiries respecting Henry Bibb which may be of service to you. Mr. Wm. Harrison, to whom you allude in your letter, is here. He is a respectable and worthy man—a man of piety. I have just had an interview with him this evening. He testifies, that he was well acquainted with Henry Bibb in Trimble County, Ky., and that he sent a letter to him by Thomas Henson, and got one in return from him. He says that Bibb came out to Canada some three years ago, and went back to get his wife up, but was betrayed at Cincinnati by a colored man—that he was taken to Louisville but got away—was taken again and lodged in jail, and sold off to New Orleans, or he, (Harrison,) understood that he was taken to New Orleans. He testifies that Bibb is a

Methodist man, and says that two persons who came on with him last Summer, knew Bibb. One of these, Simpson Young, is now at Malden. * * *

Very respectfully, thy friend,

HIRAM WILSON.

[No. 2.]

BEDFORD, TRIMBLE Co., KENTUCKY.

March 4, 1845.

SIR:—Your letter under date of the 13th ult., is now before me, making some inquiry about a person supposed to be a fugitive from the South, “who is lecturing to your religious community on Slavery and the South.”

I am pleased to inform you that I have it in my power to give you the information you desire. The person spoken of by you I have no doubt is Walton, a yellow man, who once belonged to my father, William Gatewood. He was purchased by him from John Sibly, and by John Sibly of his brother Albert G. Sibly, and Albert G. Sibly became possessed of him by his marriage with Judge David White's daughter, he being born Judge White's slave.

The boy Walton at the time he belonged to John Sibly, married a slave of my father's, a mulatto girl, and sometime afterwards solicited him to buy him; the old man after much importuning from Walton, consented to do so; and accordingly paid Sibly eight hundred and fifty dollars. He did not buy him because he needed him, but from the fact that he had a wife there, and Walton on his part promising every thing that my father could desire.

It was not long, however, before Walton became indolent and neglectful of his duty; and in addition to this, he was guilty, as the old man thought, of worse offences. He watched his conduct more strictly, and found he was guilty of disposing of articles from the farm for his own use, and pocketing the money.

He actually caught him one day stealing wheat—he had conveyed one sack full to a neighbor and whilst he was delivering the other my father caught him in the very act.

He confessed his guilt and promised to do better for the future—and on his making promises of this kind my father was disposed to keep him still, not wishing to part him from his wife, for whom he professed to entertain the strongest affection. When the Christmas Holidays came on, the old man, as is usual in this country, gave his negroes a week Holiday. Walton, instead of regaling himself by going about visiting his colored friends, took up his line of march for her Britanic Majesty's dominions.

He was gone about two years I think, when I heard of him in Cincinnati; I repaired thither, with some few friends to aid me, and succeeded in securing him.

He was taken to Louisville, and on the next morning after our arrival there, he escaped, almost from before our face, while we were on the street before the Tavern. He succeeded in eluding our pursuit, and again reached Canada in safety.

Nothing daunted he returned, after a lapse of some twelve or eighteen months, with the intention, as I have since learned, of conducting off his wife and eight or ten more slaves to Canada.

I got news of his whereabouts, and succeeded in recapturing him. I took him to Louisville and together with his wife and child, (she going along with him at her owner's request,) sold him. He was taken from thence to New Orleans—and from hence to Red River, Arkansas—and the next news I had of him he was again wending his way to Canada, and I suppose now is at or near Detroit.

In relation to his character, it was the general opinion here that he was a notorious liar, and a rogue. These things I can procure any number of respectable witnesses to prove.

In proof of it, he says his mother belonged to James Bibb, which is a lie, there not having been such a man about here, much less brother of Secretary Bibb. He says that Bibb's daughter married A. G. Sibly, when the fact is Sibly married Judge David White's daughter, and his mother belonged to White also and is now here, free.

So you will perceive he is guilty of lying for no effect, and what might it not be supposed he would do where he could effect anything by it.

I have been more tedious than I should have been, but being anxious to give you his rascally conduct in full, must be my apology. You are at liberty to publish this letter, or make any use you see proper of it. If you do publish it, let me have a paper containing the publication—at any rate let me hear from you again.

Respectfully yours, &c.,

SILAS GATEWOOD.

To C. H. STEWART, ESQ.

[No. 3. An Extract.]

CINCINNATI, *March* 10, 1845.

MY DEAR SIR:—Mrs. Path, Nickens and Woodson did not see Bibb on his first visit, in 1837, when he staid with Job Dundy, but were subsequently told of it by Bibb. They first saw him in May,

1838. Mrs. Path remembers this date because it was the month in which she removed from Broadway to Harrison street, and Bibb assisted her to remove. Mrs. Path's garden adjoined Dundy's back yard. While engaged in digging up flowers, she was addressed by Bibb, who was staying with Dundy, and who offered to dig them up for her. She hired him to do it. Mrs. Dundy shortly after called over and told Mrs. Path that he was a slave. After that Mrs. Path took him into her house and concealed him. While concealed, he astonished his good protectress by his ingenuity in bottoming chairs with cane. When the furniture was removed, Bibb insisted on helping, and was, after some remonstrances, permitted. At the house on Harrison street, he was employed for several days in digging a cellar, and was so employed when seized on Saturday afternoon by the constables. He held frequent conversations with Mrs. Path and others, in which he gave them the same account which he has given you.

On Saturday afternoon, two noted slave-catching constables, E. V. Brooks and O'Neil, surprised Bibb as he was digging in the cellar. Bibb sprang for the fence and gained the top of it, where he was seized and dragged back. They took him immediately before William Doty, a Justice of infamous notoriety as an accomplice of kidnappers, proved property, paid charges and took him away.

His distressed friends were surprised by his re-appearance in a few days after, the Wednesday following, as they think. He reached the house of Dr. Woods, (a colored man since deceased,) before day-break, and staid until dusk. Mrs. Path, John Woodson and others made up about twelve dollars for him. Woodson accompanied him out of town a mile and bid him "God speed." He has never been here since. Woodson and Clark saw him at Detroit two years ago.

Yours truly,

WILLIAM BIRNEY.

[No. 4.]

LOUISVILLE, *March* 14, 1845.

MR. STEWART.—Yours of the 1st came to hand on the 13th inst. You wished me to inform you what became of a boy that was in the work-house in the fall of '39. The boy you allude to went by the name of Walton; he had ran away from Kentucky some time before, and returned for his wife—was caught and sold to Garrison; he was taken to Louisiana, I think—he was sold on Red River to a planter. As Garrison is absent in the City of New Orleans at

this time, I cannot inform you who he was sold to. Garrison will be in Louisville some time this Spring; if you wish me, I will inquire of Garrison and inform you to whom he was sold, and where his master lives at this time.

Yours,
W. PORTER.

[No. 5.] BEDFORD, TRIMBLE COUNTY, KY.
C. H. STEWART, ESQ.,

SIR.—I received your note on the 16th inst., and in accordance with it I write you these lines. You stated that you would wish to know something about Walton H. Bibb, and whether he had a wife and child, and whether they were sold to New Orleans. Sir, before I answer these inquiries, I should like to know who Charles H. Stewart is, and why you should make these inquiries of me, and how you knew who I was, as you are a stranger to me and I must be to you. In your next if you will tell me the intention of your inquiries, I will give you a full history of the whole case.

I have a boy in your county by the name of King, a large man and very black; if you are acquainted with him, give him my compliments, and tell him I am well, and all of his friends. W. H. Bibb is acquainted with him.

I wait your answer.

Your most obedient,

March 17, 1845.

W. H. GATEWOOD.

[No. 6.] BEDFORD, KENTUCKY, April 6th, 1845.
MR. CHARLES H. STEWART.

SIR:—Yours of the 1st March is before me, inquiring if one Walton Bibb, a colored man, escaped from me at Louisville, Ky., in the Spring of 1839. To that inquiry I answer, he did. The particulars are these: He ran off from William Gatewood some time in 1838 I think, and was heard of in Cincinnati. Myself and some others went there and took him, and took him to Louisville for sale, by the directions of his master. While there he made his escape and was gone some time, I think about one year or longer. He came back it was said, to get his wife and child, so report says. He was again taken by his owner; he together with his wife and child was taken to Louisville and sold to a man who traded in negroes, and was taken by him to New Orleans and sold with his

wife and child to some man up Red River, so I was informed by the man who sold him. He then ran off and left his wife and child and got back, it seems, to your country. I can say for Gatewood he was a good master, and treated him well. Gatewood bought him from a Mr. Sibly, who was going to send him down the river. Walton, to my knowledge, influenced Gatewood to buy him, and promised if he would, never to disobey him or run off. Who he belongs to now, I do not know. I know Gatewood sold his wife and child at a great sacrifice, to satisfy him. If any other information is necessary I will give it, if required. You will please write me again what he is trying to do in your country, or what he wishes the inquiry from me for:

Yours, truly,

DANIEL S. LANE.

These letters need little comment. Their testimony combined is most harmonious and conclusive. Look at the points established.

1. Hiram Wilson gives the testimony of reputable men now in Canada, who knew Henry Bibb as a slave in Kentucky.

2. Silas Gatewood, with a peculiar relish, fills three pages of foolscap, "being anxious to give his rascally conduct in full," as he says. But he vaults over the saddle and lands on the other side. His testimony is invaluable as an endorsement of Mr. Bibb's truthfulness. He illustrates all the essential facts of this narrative. He also labors to prove him deceitful and a liar.

Deceit in a slave is only a slight reflex of the stupendous fraud practiced by his master. And its indulgence has far more logic in its favor than the ablest plea ever written for slave holding, under ever such peculiar circumstances. The attempt to prove Mr. Bibb in the lie is a signal failure, as he never affirmed what Gatewood denies. With this offset, the letter under notice is a triumphant vindication of one whom he thought thereby to injure sadly. As Mr. Bibb has most happily acknowledged the wheat (see page [166],) I pass the charge of stealing by referring to the logic there used, which will be deemed convincing.

3. William Birney, Esq., attests the facts of Mr. Bibb's arrest in Cincinnati, and the subsequent escape, as narrated by him, from the declaration of eyewitnesses.

4. W. Porter, Jailor, states that Bibb was in the workhouse at

Louisville, held and sold afterwards to the persons and at the places named in this volume.

5. W. H. Gatewood, with much Southern dignity, will answer no questions, but shows his relation to these matters by naming "King"—saying, "W. H. Bibb is acquainted with him," and promising "a full history of the case."

6. Daniel S. Lane, with remarkable straightforwardness and stupidity, tells all he knows, and then wants to know what they ask him for. The writer will answer that question. He wanted to prove by two or more witnesses the truth of his own statements; which has most surely been accomplished.

Having thus presented an array of testimony sustaining the facts alleged in this narrative, the introduction will be concluded by introducing a letter signed by respectable men of Detroit, and endorsed by Judge Wilkins, showing the high esteem in which Mr. Bibb is held by those who know him well where he makes his home. Their testimony expresses their present regard as well as an opinion of his past character. It is introduced here with the greatest satisfaction, as the writer is assured, from an intimate acquaintance with Henry Bibb, that all who know him hereafter will entertain the same sentiments toward him:

DETROIT, *March 10, 1845.*

The undersigned have pleasure in recommending Henry Bibb to the kindness and confidence of Anti-slavery friends in every State. He has resided among us for some years. His deportment, his conduct, and his christian course have won our esteem and affection. The narrative of his sufferings and more early life has been thoroughly investigated by a Committee appointed for the purpose. They sought evidence respecting it in every proper quarter, and their report attested its undoubted truth. In this conclusion we all cordially unite.

H. Bibb has for some years publicly made this narrative to assemblies, whose number cannot be told; it has commanded public attention in this State, and provoked inquiry. Occasionally too we see persons from the South, who knew him in early years, yet not a word or fact worthy of impairing its truth has reached us; but on the contrary, every thing tended to its corroboration.

Mr. Bibb's Anti-slavery efforts in this State have produced incalculable benefit. The Lord has blessed him into an instrument of

great power. He has labored much, and for very inadequate compensation. Lucrative offers for other quarters did not tempt him to a more profitable field. His sincerity and disinterestedness are therefore beyond suspicion.

We bid him "God-speed," on his route. We bespeak for him every kind consideration.

H. HALLOCK,
President of the Detroit Lib. Association.
CULLEN BROWN, *Vice-President.*
S. M. HOLMES, *Secretary.*
J. D. BALDWIN,
CHARLES H. STEWART,
MARTIN WILSON,
WILLIAM BARNUM.

DETROIT, Nov. 11, 1845.

The undersigned, cheerfully concurs with Mr. Hallock and others in their friendly recommendation of Mr. Henry Bibb. The undersigned has known him for many months in the Sabbath School in this City, partly under his charge, and can certify to his correct deportment, and commend him to the sympathies of Christian benevolence.

ROSS WILKINS.

The task now performed, in preparing for the press and introducing to the public the narrative of Henry Bibb, has been one of the most pleasant ever required at my hands. And I conclude it with an expression of the hope that it may afford interest to the reader, support to the author in his efforts against slavery, and be instrumental in advancing the great work of emancipation in this country.

NEW YORK CITY, *July* 1st, 1849.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This work has been written during irregular intervals, while I have been travelling and laboring for the emancipation of my enslaved countrymen. The reader will remember that I make no pretension

to literature; for I can truly say, that I have been educated in the school of adversity, whips, and chains. Experience and observation have been my principal teachers, with the exception of three weeks schooling which I have had the good fortune to receive since my escape from the "grave yard of the mind," or the dark prison of human bondage. And nothing but untiring perseverance has enabled me to prepare this volume for the public eye; and I trust by the aid of Divine Providence to be able to make it intelligible and instructive. I thank God for the blessings of Liberty—the contrast is truly great between freedom and slavery. To be changed from a chattel to a human being, is no light matter, though the process with myself practically was very simple. And if I could reach the ears of every slave to-day, throughout the whole continent of America, I would teach the same lesson, I would sound it in the ears of every hereditary bondman, "break your chains and fly for freedom!"

It may be asked why I have written this work, when there has been so much already written and published of the same character from other fugitives? And, why publish it after having told it publicly all through New England and the Western States to multiplied thousands?

My answer is, that in no place have I given orally the detail of my narrative; and some of the most interesting events of my life have never reached the public ear. Moreover, it was at the request of many friends of down-trodden humanity, that I have undertaken to write the following sketch, that light and truth might be spread on the sin and evils of slavery as far as possible. I also wanted to leave my humble testimony on record against this man-destroying system, to be read by succeeding generations when my body shall lie mouldering in the dust.

But I would not attempt by any sophistry to misrepresent slavery in order to prove its dreadful wickedness. For, I presume there are none who may read this narrative through, whether Christians or slaveholders, males or females, but what will admit it to be a system of the most high-handed oppression and tyranny that ever was tolerated by an enlightened nation.

HENRY BIBB

I

Sketch of my Parentage.—Early separation from my Mother.—Hard Fare.—First Experiments at running away.—Earnest longing for Freedom.—Abhorrent nature of Slavery.

I was born May 1815, of a slave mother, in Shelby County, Kentucky, and was claimed as the property of David White Esq. He came into possession of my mother long before I was born. I was brought up in the Counties of Shelby, Henry, Oldham, and Trimble. Or, more correctly speaking, in the above counties, I may safely say, I was *flogged up*; for where I should have received moral, mental, and religious instruction, I received stripes without number, the object of which was to degrade and keep me in subordination. I can truly say, that I drank deeply of the bitter cup of suffering and woe. I have been dragged down to the lowest depths of human degradation and wretchedness, by Slaveholders.

My mother was known by the name of Mildred Jackson. She is the mother of seven slaves only, all being sons, of whom I am the eldest. She was also so fortunate or unfortunate, as to have some of what is called the slaveholding blood flowing in her veins. I know not how much; but not enough to prevent her children though fathered by slaveholders, from being bought and sold in the slave markets of the South. It is almost impossible for slaves to give a correct account of their male parentage. All that I know about it is, that my mother informed me that my father's name was JAMES BIBB. He was doubtless one of the present Bibb family of Kentucky; but I have no personal knowledge of him at all, for he died before my recollection.

The first time I was separated from my mother, I was young and small. I knew nothing of my condition then as a slave. I was living with Mr. White, whose wife died and left him a widower with one little girl, who was said to be the legitimate owner of my mother,