



“Should anyone venture to disobey this law”:

Slaves and the Slave Patrol

an incident in Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*, 1857

Austin Steward, who escaped from slavery in 1813, relates an incident in which about forty slaves attended a dance at a neighboring plantation without passes from their slaveholder. Steward describes the elaborate preparations for the dance and dinner, the long-awaited festivities, the patrol attack resulting in the death of six enslaved men and four patrollers, and the slaves' funeral the following day.

Slaves are never allowed to leave the plantation to which they belong, without a written pass. Should anyone venture to disobey this law, he will most likely be caught by the *patrol* and given thirty-nine lashes. This patrol is always on duty every Sunday, going to each plantation under their supervision, entering every slave cabin, and examining closely the conduct of the slaves; and if they find one slave from another plantation without a pass, he is immediately punished with a severe flogging.

I recollect going one Sunday with my mother to visit my grandmother; and while there, two or three of the patrol came and looked into the cabin, and seeing my mother, demanded her pass. She told them that she had one but had left it in another cabin, from whence she soon brought it, which saved her a whipping but we were terribly frightened.

The reader will obtain a better knowledge of the character of a Virginia patrol by the relation of an affair which came off on the neighboring plantation of Col. Alexander, in which some forty of Capt. Helm's slaves were engaged, and which proved rather destructive of human life in the end.

But I must first say that it is not true that slave owners are respected for kindness to their slaves. The more tyrannical a master is, the more will he be favorably regarded by his neighboring planters; and from the day that he acquires the reputation of a kind and indulgent master, he is looked upon with suspicion, and sometimes hatred, and his slaves are watched more closely than before.

Col. Alexander was a very wealthy planter and owned a great number of slaves, but he was very justly suspected of being a kind, humane, and indulgent master. His slaves were always better fed, better clad, and had greater privileges than any I knew in the Old Dominion [Virginia]; and of course, the patrol had long had an eye on them, anxious to flog some of “those pampered niggers, who were spoiled by the indulgence of a weak, inefficient, but well-meaning owner.”

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/NYPL



A SLAVE CAUGHT WITHOUT A PASS.

The Anti-Slavery Record, 1836

SLAVE PATROL REGULATIONS

ROWAN COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA, 1825

- 1st. Patrols shall be appointed, at least four in each Captain's district.
- 2d. It shall be their duty, for two of their number, at least, to patrol their respective districts once in every week; in failure thereof, they shall be subject to the penalties prescribed by law.
- 3d. They shall have power to inflict corporal punishment, if two be present agreeing thereto.
- 4th. One patroller shall have power to seize any negro slave who behaves insolently to a patroller, or otherwise unlawfully or suspiciously; and hold such slave in custody until he can bring together a requisite number of Patrollers to act in the business.
- 5th. Previous to entering on their duties, Patrols shall call on some acting magistrate, and take the following oath, to wit: "I, A. B. appointed one of the Patrol by the County Court of Rowan, for Captain B's company, do hereby swear, that I will faithfully execute the duties of a Patroller, to the best of my ability, according to law and the regulations of the County Court."

Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library

Col. A. gave his slaves the liberty to get up a grand dance. Invitations were sent and accepted to a large number of slaves on other plantations, and so, for miles around, all or many of the slaves were in high anticipation of joining in the great dance, which was to come off on Easter night. In the meantime, the patrol was closely watching their movements and evinced rather a joyful expectancy of the many they should find there without a pass, and the flogging they would give them for that, if not guilty of any other offense, and perhaps they might catch some of the Colonel's slaves doing something for which they could taunt "to know their place," by the application of the cowhide.

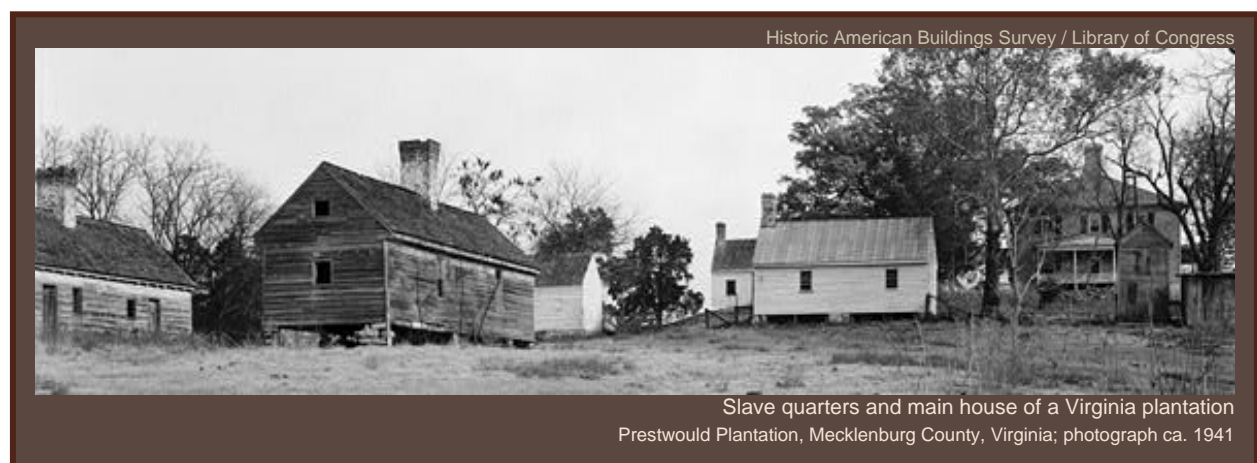
The slaves on Col. A's plantation had to provide and prepare the supper for the expected vast "turn out," which was no light matter; and as slaves like on such occasions to pattern as much as possible after their master's family, the result was, to meet the emergency of the case, they *took*, without saying "by your leave, Sir," some property belonging to their master, reasoning among themselves, as slaves often do, that it can not be *stealing* because "it belongs to massa, and so do *we*, and we only use one part of his property to benefit another. Sure, 'tis all massa's." And if they do not get detected in this removal of "massa's property" from one location to another, they think no more of it.

Col. Alexander's slaves were hurrying on with their great preparations for the dance and feast; and as the time drew near, the old and knowing ones might be seen in groups discussing the matter with many a wink and nod; but it was in the valleys and by-places where the younger portion were to be found, rather secretly preparing food for the great time coming. This consisted of hogs, sheep, calves; and as to master's *poultry*, that suffered daily. Sometimes it was missed, but the disappearance was always easily accounted for by informing "massa" that a great number of hawks had been around of late; and their preparation went on, night after night, undetected. They who repaired to a swamp or other by-place to cook by night, carefully destroyed everything likely to detect them before they returned to their cabins in the morning.

The night for the dance *came* at last, and long before the time the road leading to Col. Alexander's plantation presented a gay spectacle. The females were seen flocking to the place of resort with heads adorned with gaudy bandanna turbans and new calico dresses, of the gayest colors — their whole attire decked over with bits of gauze ribbon and other fantastic finery. The shades of night soon closed over the plantation, and then could be heard the rude music and loud laugh of the unpolished slave. It was about ten o'clock when the *aristocratic slaves* began to assemble, dressed in the cast-off finery of their master and mistress, swelling out and putting on airs in imitation of those they were forced to obey from day to day.

When they were all assembled, the dance commenced; the old fiddler struck up some favorite tune and over the floor they went; the flying feet of the dancers were heard, pat, pat, over the apartment till the clock warned them it was twelve at midnight, or what some call "low twelve" to distinguish it from twelve o'clock at noon; then the violin ceased its discordant sounds, and the merry dancers paused to take breath.

Supper was then announced, and all began to prepare for the sumptuous feast. It being the pride of slaves to imitate the manners of their master and mistress, especially in the ceremonies of the table, all



Historic American Buildings Survey / Library of Congress

Slave quarters and main house of a Virginia plantation
Prestwold Plantation, Mecklenburg County, Virginia; photograph ca. 1941

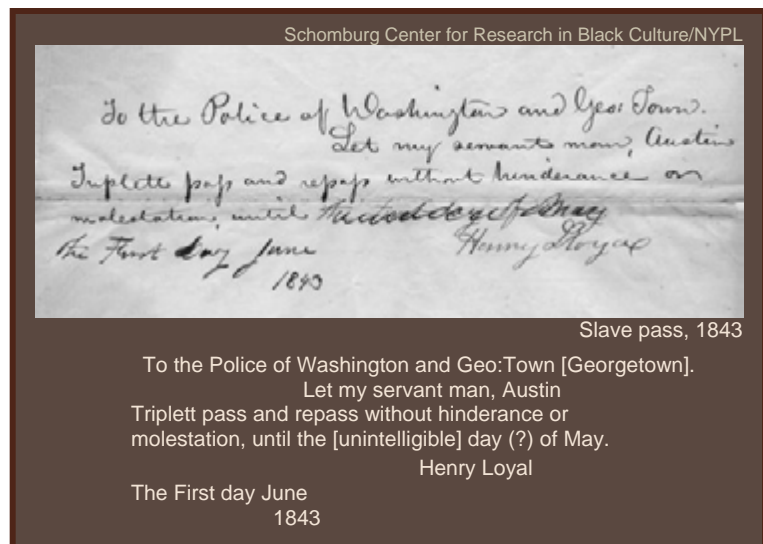
was conducted with great propriety and good order. The food was well cooked and in a very plentiful supply. They had also managed in some way to get a good quantity of excellent wine, which was sipped in the most approved and modern style. Every dusky face was lighted up, and every eye sparkled with joy. However ill fed they might have been, here, for once, there was plenty. Suffering and toil was forgotten, and they all seemed with one accord to give themselves up to the intoxication of pleasurable amusement.

House servants were of course “the stars” of the party; all eyes were turned to them to see how they conducted, for they, among slaves, are what a military man would call “fugle-men.” The field hands, and such of them as have generally been excluded from the dwelling of their owners, look to the house servant as a pattern of politeness and gentility. And indeed, it is often the only method of obtaining any knowledge of the manners of what is called “genteel society;” hence, they are ever regarded as a privileged class; and are sometimes greatly envied, while others are bitterly hated. And too often justly, for many of them are the most despicable tale-bearers and mischief-makers who will, for the sake of the favor of his master or mistress, frequently betray his fellow-slave, and by tattling, get him severely whipped; and for these acts of perfidy and sometimes downright falsehood, he is often rewarded by his master, who knows it is for his interest to keep such ones about him; though he is sometimes obliged, in addition to a reward, to send him away, for fear of the vengeance of the betrayed slaves. In the family of his master, the example of bribery and treachery is ever set before him, hence it is that insurrections and stampedes are so generally detected. Such slaves are always treated with more affability than others, for the slave-holder is well aware that he stands over a volcano that may at any moment rock his foundation to the center, and with one mighty burst of its long suppressed fire, sweep him and his family to destruction. When he lies down at night, he knows not but that ere another morning shall dawn, he may be left mangled and bleeding, and at the mercy of those maddened slaves whom he has so long ruled with a rod of iron.

But the supper, like other events, came to an end at last. The expensive table service, with other things, which had been secretly brought from the “great house,” was hurriedly cleansed by the slave and carefully returned. The floor was again cleared, the violin sounded, and soon they were performing another “break down,” with all the wild abandon of the African character — in the very midst of which the music suddenly ceased, and the old musician assumed a listening attitude. Every foot was motionless; every face terrified, and every ear listening for the cause of the alarm.

Soon the slave who was kept on the “lookout” shouted to the listeners the single word “patrol!” and then the tumult that followed that announcement is beyond the power of language to describe! Many a poor slave who had stolen from his cabin to join in the dance now remembered that they had no pass! Many screamed in affright, as if they already felt the lash and heard the crack of the overseer’s whip; others clenched their hands and assumed an attitude of bold defiance, while a savage frown contracted the brow of all. Their unrestrained merriment and delicious fare seemed to arouse in them the natural feelings of

self-defense and defiance of their oppressors. But what could be done? The patrol was nearing the building when an athletic, powerful slave, who had been but a short time from his “fatherland,” whose spirit the cowardly overseer had labored in vain to quell, said in a calm, clear voice, that we had better stand our ground, and advised the females to lose no time in useless wailing, but get their things and repair immediately to a cabin at a short distance, and there remain quiet, without a light, which they did



with all possible haste. The men were terrified at this bold act of their leader; and many with dismay at the thought of resistance, began to skulk behind fences and old buildings, when he opened the door and requested every slave to leave who felt unwilling to fight. None were urged to remain, and those who stood by him did so voluntarily.

Their number was now reduced to twenty-five men, but the leader, a gigantic African, with a massive, compact frame and an arm of great strength, looked competent to put ten common men to flight. He clenched his powerful fist and declared that he would resist unto death before he would be arrested by those savage men, even if they promised not to flog him. They closed the door and agreed not to open it; and then the leader cried, "Extinguish the lights and let them come! We will meet them hand to hand!" Five of the number he stationed near the door with orders to rush out if the patrol entered and seize their horses, cut the bridles, or otherwise unfit them for use. This would prevent them from giving an alarm and getting a reinforcement from surrounding plantations. In silence they awaited the approach of the enemy, and soon the tramping of horses' feet announced their approach, but when within a few yards of the house they halted, and were overheard by one of the skulking slaves, maturing their plans and mode of attack. There was great hesitancy expressed by a part of the company to engage in the affair at all.

"Coming events cast their shadow before."

The majority, however, seemed to think it safe enough, and uttered expressions of triumph that they had got the rascals at last.

"Are you not afraid that they will resist?" said the weaker party.

"Resist?" was the astonished answer. "This old fellow, the Colonel, has pampered and indulged his slaves, it is true, and they have slipped through our fingers whenever we have attempted to chastise them; but they are not such fools as to dare resistance! Those niggers know as well as we, that it is *death*, by the law of the State, for a slave to strike a white man."

"Very true," said the other, "but it is dark and long past midnight, and beside they have been indulging their appetites, and we cannot tell what they may attempt to do."

"Pshaw!" he answered, contemptuously, "they are unarmed, and I should not fear in the least to go in among them *alone*, armed only with my cowhide!"

"As you please, then," he said, rather dubiously, "but look well to your weapons; are they in order?"

"In prime order, Sir." And putting spurs to their horses were soon at the house, where they dismounted and requested one of the party to remain with the horses.

"What," said he, "are you so chicken-hearted as to suppose those d—d cowardly niggers are going to get up an insurrection?"

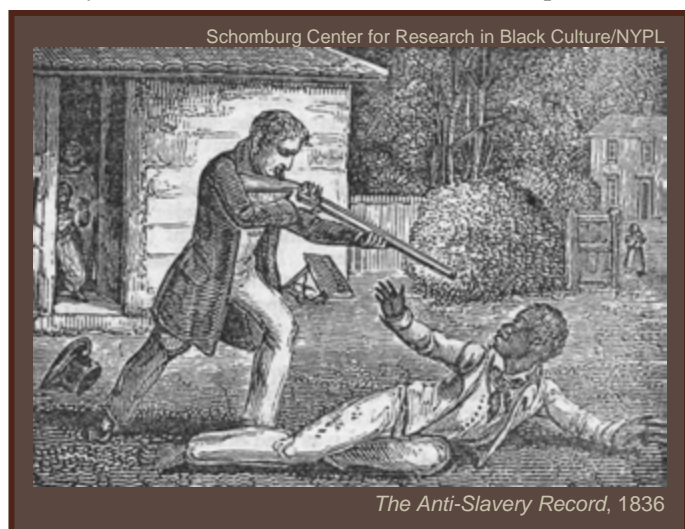
"Oh no," he replied, carelessly, but would not consent to have the horses left alone. "Besides," said he, "they may forget themselves at this late hour; but if they do, a few lashes of the cowhide will quicken their memory, I reckon."

The slaves were aware of their movements, and prepared to receive them.

They stepped up to the door boldly and demanded admittance, but all was silent; they tried to open it, but it was fastened. Those inside ranged on each side of the door and stood perfectly still.

The patrol finding the slaves not disposed to obey, burst off the slight fastening that secured the door, and the chief of the patrol bounded into their midst, followed by several of his companions, all in total darkness!

Vain is the attempt to describe the tumultuous scene which followed. Hand to hand they fought and struggled with each



other, amid the terrific explosion of firearms — oaths and curses, mingled with the prayers of the wounded, and the groans of the dying! Two of the patrol were killed on the spot and lay drenched in the warm blood that so lately flowed through their veins. Another, with his arm broken and otherwise wounded, lay groaning and helpless beside the fallen slaves who had sold their lives so dearly. Another of his fellows was found at a short distance, mortally wounded and about to bid adieu to life. In the yard lay the keeper of the horses, a stiffened corpse. Six of the slaves were killed and two wounded.

It would be impossible to convey to the minds of northern people the alarm and perfect consternation that the above circumstance occasioned in that community. The knowledge of its occurrence was carried from one plantation to another as on the wings of the wind; exaggerated accounts were given, and prophecies of the probable result made until the excitement became truly fearful. Every cheek was blanched and every frame trembled when listening to the tale that “insurrection among the slaves had commenced on the plantation of Col. Alexander; that three or four of the patrol had been killed, &c. [etc.]” The day after, people flocked from every quarter, armed to the teeth, swearing vengeance on the defenseless slaves. Nothing can teach plainer than this the constant and tormenting fear in which the slave-holder lives, and yet he repents not of his deeds.

The kind old Colonel was placed in the most difficult and unenviable position. His warm heart was filled with sorrow for the loss of his slaves, but not alone, as is generally the case in such instances, because he had lost so much property. He truly regretted the death of his faithful servants and boldly rebuked the occasion of their sudden decease. When beset and harrassed by his neighbors to give up his slaves to be tried for insurrection and murder, he boldly resisted, contending for the natural right of the slaves to act in their own defense, and especially when on his own plantation and in their own quarters. They contended, however, that as his slaves had got up a dance and had invited those of the adjoining plantations, the patrol was only discharging their duty in looking after them; but the gallant old Colonel defended his slaves, and told them plainly that he should continue to do so to the extent of his ability and means.

The poor slaves were sad enough on the morning after their merry meeting, and they might be seen standing in groups, conversing with a very different air from the one they had worn the day before.

Their business was now to prepare the bodies of their late associates for the grave. Robert, the brave African, who had so boldly led them on the night before, and who had so judiciously provided for their escape, was calmly sleeping in death’s cold embrace. He left a wife and five slave children. Two of the other slaves left families, whose pitiful cries it was painful to hear.

The Colonel’s family, deeply afflicted by what was passing around them, attended the funeral. One of the slaves, who sometimes officiated as a minister, read a portion of Scripture, and gave out two hymns — one of which commences with

Hark! from the tomb a doleful sound.”

Both were sung with great solemnity by the congregation, and then the good old man offered a prayer, after which he addressed the slaves on the shortness of human life and the certainty of death, and more than once hinted at the hardness of their lot, assuring, however, his fellow-slaves that if they were good and faithful, all would be right hereafter. His master, Col. Alexander, was deeply affected by this simple faith and sincere regard for the best interests of all, both master and slave.

When the last look at their fellow-servants had been taken, the procession was formed in the following manner: First, the old slave minister, then the remains of the dead, followed by their weeping relatives; then came the master and his family; next the slaves belonging to the plantation; and last, friends and strangers, black and white; all moved on solemnly to the final resting-place of those brave men, whose descendants may yet be heard from, in defense of right and freedom.