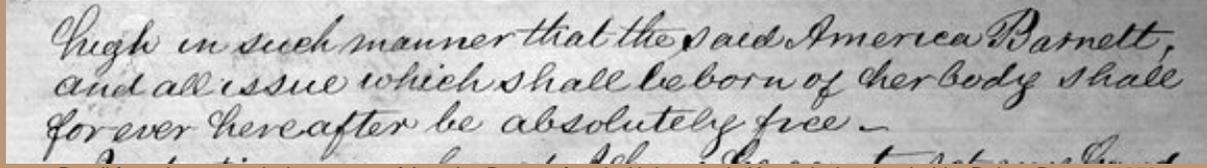




National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center



Detail from the manumission papers of America Barnett, freed with her son in Kentucky by slaveholder Robert Barnett, 1859
"in such manner that the said America Barnett, and all issue which shall be born of her body shall forever hereafter be absolutely free"

SLAVE to FREE

BEFORE GENERAL EMANCIPATION

SELECTIONS FROM 19TH- & 20TH-CENTURY SLAVE NARRATIVES

Before the general emancipation of American slaves during the Civil War, many secured their own freedom through escape, self-purchase, being freed through a slaveholder's will or through an indenture contract. How did it feel to shed the status of "slave" and become free? How did legally freed and "fugitive" African Americans differ in their immediate response to freedom? Presented here are excerpts from:

- interviews conducted in 1855 with African Americans who had fled slavery and settled in Canada (especially after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850), published by Benjamin Drew, a journalist and abolitionist, in *A North-side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves* (1856) *
- interviews conducted in the mid 1930s with former slaves in the southern U.S. by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency during the Great Depression¹
- the 1843 narrative of Moses Grandy, who purchased his freedom after two failed attempts (one in which his owner took his money and then sold him to another) and later tried to locate and purchase the freedom of his children.

■ I served twenty-five years in slavery, and about five I have been free. I feel now like a man, while before I felt more as though I were but a brute. When in the United States, if a white man spoke to me, I would feel frightened, whether I were in the right or wrong; but now it is quite a different thing, — if a white man speaks to me, I can look him right in the eyes — if he were to insult me, I could give him an answer. I have the rights and privileges of any other man.

WILLIAM GROSE, enslaved in Virginia, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

■ I escaped from Norfolk, Va. A man who has been in slavery knows, and no one else can know, the yearnings to be free, and the fear of making the attempt. It is like trying to get religion, and not seeing the way to escape condemnation.

JOHN ATKINSON, enslaved in Virginia, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

■ The man that owned me was not fit to own a dog. I had been wanting to get away for the last twenty years. I grieved over my condition and groaned over it. A few months ago, I succeeded in escaping. After I got among abolitionists, I was almost scared; they used [treated] me so well, I was afraid of a trick. I had been used so ill before that I did not know what to make of it to be used decently.

JOHN SEWARD, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

■ I was born in Maysville, Ky. I got here last Tuesday evening and spent the Fourth of July in Canada. I felt as big and free as any man could feel, and I worked part of the day for my own benefit: I guess my master's time is out.

BEN BLACKBURN, enslaved in Kentucky, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Some spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing modernized; all italics in original texts. Full text of the Moses Grandy narrative and of the Drew interviews in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/index.html. Full text of the WPA interviews in American Memory (Library of Congress) at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. Some white interviewers, despite project guidelines for transcribing the narratives, used stereotypical patterns of representing black speech. See "A Note on the Language of the Narratives" at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and "Guidelines for Interviewers" at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf.

I know that liberty is far preferable for every colored man to slavery. I know many who are very anxious to be free, but they are afraid to start. Money is almost necessary to start with. When I set out, I had seven dollars: it cost me five to get over a river on my way. They knew I must cross, and they charged me as much as they thought I could pay.

SAM DAVIS, enslaved in Virginia, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

I consider that the slaves in Savannah, where I was born and raised, are poor ignorant creatures: they don't know their condition. It is ignorance that keeps them there. If they knew what I know, they could not be kept there a moment. Let a man escape and have but a month's freedom, and he will feel the greatest animosity against slavery. I can't give slavery any name or description bad enough for it.

PATRICK SNEAD, enslaved in Georgia, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

William Henry Bradley. This is my name since I left slavery: in slavery I was known as ABRAM YOUNG.

WILLIAM HENRY BRADLEY, enslaved in Maryland, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■



I feel much better satisfied for myself since I have been free than when I was a slave; but I feel grieved to think that my friends are in slavery. I wish they could come out here.

ROBERT BELT, enslaved in Maryland, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

My brother was set free in this way: his master was a millwright and told him if he would serve him so many years he would set him free. He did so — meanwhile building a large merchant mill and employing my brother in it. My brother was subsequently employed in this mill as a miller and received high wages, his employer thinking there never was such a man, from his trustworthiness and the general confidence he could repose in him. His good opportunities enabled him to advance nearly money enough to free myself and a younger brother — the deficiency we borrowed and afterward paid up. The sum paid for the two was seven hundred dollars, our master favoring us in the price.

I was never sent to any school. Since I have been free I have learned to read and write.

Yet although I was nominally free and had free papers, I did not consider myself free in the eye of the law: the freedom was limited. The papers said I was to have as much liberty as was allowed to a free man of color. I saw at once that I was not really free; that there was a distinction made. I wished then to emigrate to some place where I could be really a FREE MAN.

I heard that in Canada colored men were free; therefore I came here and am only sorry to say that I did not come years before I did.

ABY B. JONES, enslaved and freed in Kentucky, moved to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

It is above my language to tell how overjoyed I was on getting into Canada. Nothing harasses a man so much as slavery. There is nothing under the sun so mean: after a man is dead, they won't let him rest. It is a horrible thing to think of, the ignorance slaves are brought up in. There is not a man born who can represent slavery so bad as it is.

I work here at blacksmithing: I own this shop. I have plenty of work and good pay.

WILLIAM STREET, enslaved in Tennessee, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

I felt, when free, as light as a feather — a burden was off of me. I could get up and go to my work without being bruised and beaten. The worst thought was for my children [whom he had not been able to purchase and had been taken to Texas] — what they might have to go through. I cannot hear from them.

I have lived in Canada one year. I find the people laboring well generally: as industrious as any men. The law is the same for one as another. We have our meetings and gatherings here, and have no trouble at all. I am doing as well, for a poor man, as I can expect — I get a good living.

ISAAC GRIFFIN, enslaved in Kentucky; purchased himself, his wife, and one of his children; moved to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

[As a slave] I hired my time and made some money. I bought my wife's freedom first and sent her away. I got off [escaped] by skill. I have children and grandchildren in slavery.

I had rather starve to death here, being a free man, than to have plenty in slavery. I cannot be a slave anymore — nobody could hold me as a slave now, except in irons. Old as I am, I would rather face the Russian fire, or die at the point of the sword, than go into slavery. . . .

Before I came here, I resided in the free States. I came here in consequence of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill. It was a hardship at first; but I feel better here — more like a man — I know I am — than in the States. I suffer from want of education. I manage by skill and experience and industry — but it is as if feeling my way in the dark.

PHILIP YOUNGER, enslaved in Virginia, Tennessee, and Alabama; escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

Even now the thought of my cruel abuses begins sometimes to creep up and kindle my feelings, until I feel unhappy in my own house, and it seems as if the devil was getting the better of me. I feel, then, that I could destroy that tyrant who, knowing that I was a man, cut me with a whip in a manner worse than I will name. Then I think, "What is the use? Here I am, a free man in Canada, and out of his power." Yet I feel the stirrings of revenge.

JOHN LITTLE, enslaved in North Carolina, escaped to Canada; Drew interview 1855 ■

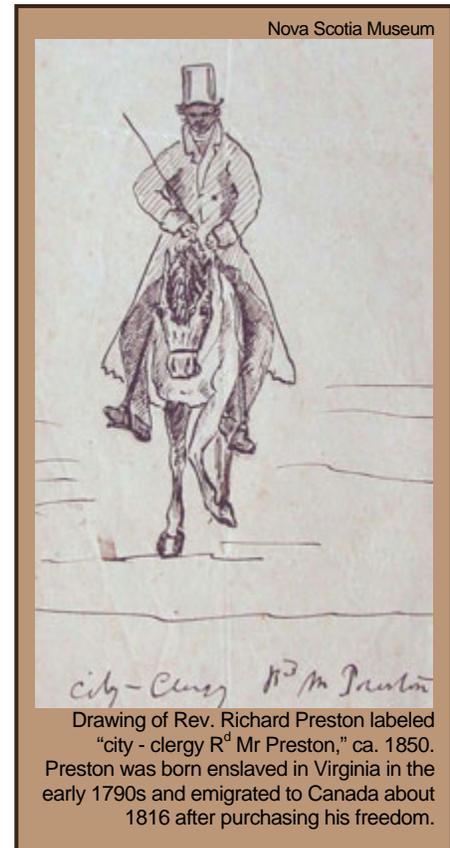
I did not know, when I was a slave, that any white person had any sympathy for me. I thought all white people were alike and had no sympathy for colored people. I did not know the difference until I reached a free State, when I saw the white people use [treat] the colored people like folks. . . .

The barbarity of slavery I never want to see again. I have children now who have got the yoke on them. It almost kills me to think that they are there, and that I can do them no good. There they are — I know how it is — it brings distress on my mind — there they are, working till late at night; off before day; and where there is no humanity — where the lash is not spared.

MARY YOUNGER, enslaved in the southern U.S., escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

Many a time my master has told me things to try me. Among others, he said he thought of moving up to Cincinnati and asked me if I did not want to go. I would tell him, "No! I don't want to go to none of your *free* countries!" Then he'd laugh — but I did want to come — surely I did. A colored man tells the truth here — there he is afraid to.

LEONARD HARROD, enslaved in the District of Columbia, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana; escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■



I felt so thankful on reaching a land of freedom, that I couldn't express myself. When I look back at what I endured, it seems as if I had entered a Paradise. I can here sing and pray with none to molest me. I am a member of the Baptist Church and endeavor to live a Christian life.

I rent a piece of land, and make out to live. My family are sickly, so that I have not been able to purchase land. But I am not discouraged and intend to work on while I have health and strength, and to live such a life as I should wish when I come to die.

ELI JOHNSON, enslaved in Virginia and Kentucky, escaped to Canada; Drew interview, 1855 ■

■ My mother was born a slave near Alexandria [Virginia]. The marster's daughter, Miss Liza, read to my mother, so she got some learning. When my mother's owner died he left her to Miss Liza, and then my father met my mother and told her they should get married. My mother said to Miss Liza: "I'd like fine to marry Preston Martin." Miss Liza says, "You can't do that, 'cause he's a free nigger and your children would be free. You gotta marry one of the slaves." Then Miss Liza lines up 10 or 15 of the slave men for my mother to pick from, but mother says she don' like any of 'em, she wants to marry Preston Martin. Miss Liza argues but my mother is just stubborn, so Miss Liza says, "I'll talk to the marster." He says, "I can't lose property like that, and if you can raise \$1,200 you can buy yourse'f free." So my mother and my father saves money and it takes a long time, but one day they goes to the marster and lays down the money, and they gits married. Marster don' like it, but he's promised and he can't back out.

So me and my brothers and sisters is free.

JAMES MARTIN, enslaved in Virginia, WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

■ We was known as "Free Niggers." Master said he didn't believe it was right to own human beings just because dey was black, and he freed all his slaves long before de War. He give 'em all freedom papers and told dem dat dey was as free as he was and could go anywhere dey wanted. Dey didn't have no where to go so we all stayed on wid him. It was nice though to know we could go where we pleased 'thout having to get a pass and could come back when we pleased even if we didn't take advantage of it.

JAMES SOUTHALL, enslaved in Tennessee, WPA interview, 1937 ■

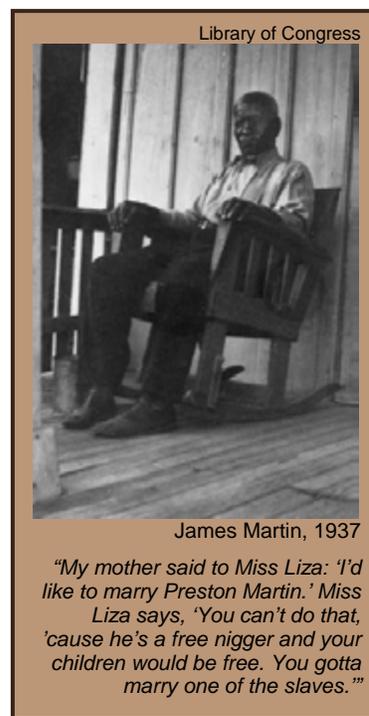
■ My mother was a white woman. Her name was Tempie James. She lived on her father's big plantation on the Roanoke River at Rich Square, North Carolina. . . . Tempie James fell in love with this Negro coachman. Nobody knows how long they had been in love before Tempie's father found it out, but when he did he locked Tempie in her room. For days he and Miss Charlottie, his wife, raved, begged and pleaded, but Tempie just said she loved Squire. "Why will you act so?" Miss Charlottie was crying. "Haven't we done everything for you and given you everything you wanted?"

Tempie shook her head and said: "You haven't given me Squire. He's all I do want."

Then it was that in the dark of the night Mr. James sent Squire away; he sent him to another state and sold him.

But Tempie found it out. She took what money she could find and ran away. She went to the owner of Squire and bought him, then she set him free and changed his name to Walden Squire Walden. But then it was against the law for a white women to marry a Negro unless they had a strain of Negro blood, so Tempie cut Squire's finger and drained out some blood. She mixed this with some whiskey and drank it, then she got on the stand and swore she had Negro blood in her, so they were married. She never went back home and her people disowned her. . . .

. . . Once when we were children my sister and I were visiting in Rich Square. One day we went out to pick huckleberries. A woman came riding down the road on a horse. She was a tall woman in a long



James Martin, 1937

"My mother said to Miss Liza: 'I'd like to marry Preston Martin.' Miss Liza says, 'You can't do that, 'cause he's a free nigger and your children would be free. You gotta marry one of the slaves.'"

grey riding habit. She had grey hair and grey eyes. She stopped and looked at us. “My,” she said, “whose pretty little girls are you?”

“We’re Squire Walden’s children,” I said.

“She looked at me so long and hard that I thought she was going to hit me with her whip, but she didn’t, she hit the horse. He jumped and ran so fast I thought she was going to fall off, but she went around the curve and I never saw her again. I never knew until later that she was Mis’ Charlottie James, my grandmother.

MILLIE MARKHAM, enslaved in North Carolina; WPA interview, 1937 ■

■ My master’s father, before he died, told his chillun, dat at his death he wanted each child to put their slaves out to work until dey earned \$800 a piece, to earn their own freedom, in dat way each slave paid it dem selves. He did not believe it was right to keep dem in slavery all their lives. But de war came and dey were free without having to work it out.

GUS SMITH, enslaved in Missouri; WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

■ My aunt’s husband was freed at least 15 years before de war started. His master died and he was freed by a will when the master went to de court house in Ste. Genevieve. Now, just listen good. Dis master willed 800 acres to his slaves who divided up de farm. Before he died he put down in a way dat his daughters and sons-in-laws could not break it ’cepting dey would raise several thousand dollars. De old slaves would sit down and tell us bout it. De master turns in and pays de taxes up for 100 years. One of de trustees for de will was a Dr. Herdick and Henry Rozier both of Ste. Genevieve. My uncle’s part was 40 acres and it was dis farm where I went when I come out from under de shelter of de whitefolks.

PETER CORN, enslaved in Missouri; WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

■ My granpa was so trusty and hon’able his old marster give him and granma they freedom when he died. He give him a little piece of land and a mule, and some money, and tole him he didn’t b’long to nobody, and couldn’t work for nobody ’cept for pay. He couldn’t free granpa’s chilrun, ’cause they already b’longed to their young marsters and mistisses.

ELLEN CLAIBOURNE, enslaved in Georgia; WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

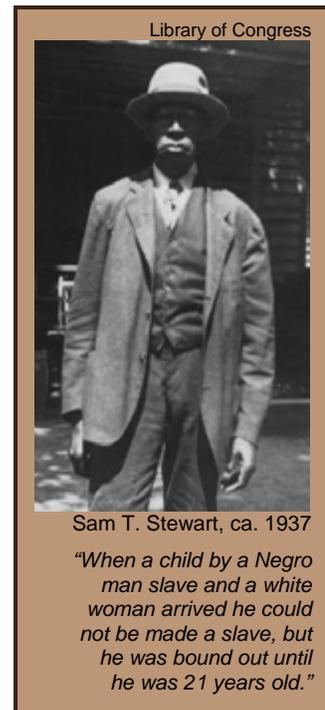
■ The free Negro was a child by a white man and a colored woman, or a white woman and a Negro slave. A child by a white man and a Negro woman was set free when the man got ready. Sometimes he gave the free Negro slaves. . . .

When a child by a Negro man slave and a white woman arrived he could not be made a slave, but he was bound out until he was 21 years old. The man, who ever wanted him, had him bound to him by the courts and was his gardeen [guardian] until he was 21 years old. He could not be made a slave if he was born of a free woman.

SAM T. STEWART, enslaved in North Carolina; WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

■ The people ’round here calls me “Lee” Star, and I want to tell you, Lee Star is a free-born man. But of course, things bein’ as they were, both my mother and father were slaves. That is for a few years. They lived in Greenville, Tennessee. My mother, Maria Guess, was free’d before the emancipation, by the good words of her young white mistress, who told ’em all when she was about to die, she wanted ’em to set Marie free, ’cause she didn’t want her little playmate to be nobodys else’s slave. They was playmates you see. My mother was eleven years old when she was freed.

When she was about fourteen and my father Henry Dunbar wanted to marry he had to first buy his freedom. In them times a slave couldn’t marry a free’d person. So he bought his freedom from his Marster Lloyd Bullen, and a good friend of Andrew Johnson, the president. My father an’ him was friends too. So he bought his



freedom, for just a little of somethin'. I disremember what, 'cause they didnt aim to make him buy his freedom high.

JOSEPH LEONIDAS STAR, enslaved in Tennessee; WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

■ When, at length, I had repaid Captain Minner and had got my free papers [in 1833 in North Carolina], so that my freedom was quite secure, my feelings were greatly excited. I felt to myself so light that I almost thought I could fly, and in my sleep I was always dreaming of flying over woods and rivers. My gait was so altered by my gladness that people often stopped me, saying, "Grandy, what is the matter?" I excused myself as well as I could, but many perceived the reason and said, "Oh! he is so pleased with having got his freedom." Slavery will teach any man to be glad when he gets freedom. . . . [Grandy then moved north to New England.]

My son's master at Norfolk [Virginia] sent a letter to me at Boston to say that if I could raise 450 dollars I might have his freedom. He was then fifteen years old. I had again saved 300 dollars. I knew the master was a drinking man, and I was therefore very anxious to get my son out of his hands. I went to Norfolk, running the risk of my liberty and took my 300 dollars with me to make the best bargain I could. Many gentlemen, my friends in Boston, advised me not to go myself; but I was anxious to get my boy's freedom, and I knew that nobody in Virginia had any cause of complaint against me; so, notwithstanding their advice, I determined to go.

When the vessel arrived there, they said it was against the law for me to go ashore. The mayor of the city said I had been among the cursed Yankees too long. He asked me whether I did not know that it was unlawful for me to land, to which I replied that I did not know it, for I could neither read nor write. The merchants for whom I had formerly done business came on board and said they cared for neither the mare (mayor) nor the horse, and insisted that I should go ashore. I told the mayor the business on which I came, and he gave me leave to stay nine days, telling me that if I were not gone in that time he would sell me for the good of the State.

I offered my boy's master the 300 dollars: he counted the money but put it back to me, refusing to take less than 450 dollars. I went on board to return to Boston. We met with head winds and put back three times to Norfolk, anchoring each time just opposite the jail. The nine days had expired, and I feared the mayor would find me on board and sell me. I could see the jail full of colored people and even the whipping post, at which they were constantly enduring the lash. While we were lying there by the jail, two vessels came from Eastern Shore, Virginia, laden with cattle and colored people. The cattle were lowing for their calves, and the men and women were crying for their husbands, wives, or children. The cries and groans were terrible, notwithstanding there was a whipper on board each vessel trying to compel the poor creatures to keep silence. These vessels lay close to ours. I had been a long time away from such scenes; the sight affected me very much and added greatly to my fears. . . .

. . . On arriving at Boston, I borrowed 160 dollars of a friend and going to New York I obtained the help of Mr. John Williams to send the 450 dollars to Norfolk. Thus, at length, I bought my son's freedom. I met him at New York and brought him on to Boston.

Six others of my children, three boys and three girls, were sold to New Orleans. Two of these daughters have bought their own freedom. . . .

Of my other children, I only know that one, a girl named Betsy, is a little way from Norfolk in Virginia. Her master, Mr. William Dixon, is willing to sell her for 500 dollars.

I do not know where any of my other four children are, nor whether they be dead or alive.

MOSES GRANDY, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America*, 1843 ■

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