

The Peculiar Institution: Slave Narratives

In 1852, first time author, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a novel – *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. One the first day of sales, March 20, 1852, the novel sold 3,000 copies, and soon sold out its complete print run. In the first year of publication, 300,000 copies were sold in the U.S. and more than one million copies were sold in Great Britain. As the *New York Times* reported, the book “is at every railway book-stall in England, and in every third traveller's hand. The book is a decided hit.”¹ *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became the best selling novel of the 19th century and the second best selling book of that century, following the Bible.

Although the book was widely read, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was roundly criticized by slavery supporters and caused outrage in the American South. Several Southern novelists declared the book to be utterly false and others went so far as to accuse Stowe of criminal and slanderous behavior.² George Frederick Holmes' review blasted that “*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a fiction. It is a fiction throughout; a fiction in form; a fiction in its facts; a fiction in its representations and coloring; a fiction in its statements; a fiction in its sentiments; a fiction in its morals....”³ Southern writers began to respond to *Uncle*

Tom's Cabin with counter novels arguing that the condition of slaves that Stowe described was overblown and incorrect. These Southern authors' novels depicted benign white patriarchal masters who presided over childlike slaves as members of a benevolent extended family.⁴

One year later, as a way to respond to the criticism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This was intended to answer the charge that she had depicted American slavery unfairly. She attempted to show that the characters and incidents of the novel were sometimes modeled upon actual persons and actual events; but, when actual people or incidents were not portrayed, they might logically be assumed to exist under slavery,

⁴ See Mary Henderson Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1852); Charles Jacobs Peterson, *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, Ltd., 1852); William L.G. Smith, *Life at the South; or 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' As It Is* (Buffalo: Geoffrey H. Derby & Co., 1852); William Gilmore Simms, *The Sword and the Distaff* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853); and Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1854). Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), identified 27 proslavery works published between 1852 and the Civil War. These novels adopted a variety of polemical strategies, from defending the plantation as a good place to attacking the North for its treatment of working classes as “white slaves.” They depict slaves as happy in slavery or racially unfit for freedom. These novels gained the title as “anti-Tom” novels. A collection of 18 anti-Tom novels can be found at: <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/proslav/antitons.html>

¹“American Slavery; English Opinion of ‘Uncle Tom's Cabin,’” *New York Times*, II:313 (September 18, 1852), 6.

²Charles S. Watson, “Simms Review of Uncle Tom's Cabin,” *American Literature*, 48:3 (November 1976), 365-368.

³George Frederick Holmes, “Uncle Tom's Cabin,” *Southern Literary Messenger*, XVIII (December 1852), 721.

and that ultimately, public opinion in the South and also in the North had ignored the cruelties and injustices of slavery.

Whether or not Stowe adequately proved her descriptions of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we can still assess the conditions of slaves and slavery by looking carefully at first person narratives written by emancipated, fugitive, and freed people. These slave narratives appeared in many forms. Some were brief stories reported in abolitionist newspapers and magazines; others were privately printed tracts and pamphlets sold at rallies or from door-to-door salesmen in order to raise money for the abolitionist cause.

The rise of slave narratives followed the expansion of slavery. Even though Congress had ended U.S. participation in the Atlantic slave trade in 1808, the number of slaves in the United States continued to grow during the first half of the nineteenth century. The acquisition of new western territories allowed slavery to spread beyond its colonial-era strongholds. Congress banned slavery north of the Ohio River in 1787, but it did not interfere with the expansion of slavery south of that border in new states like Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi. In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase opened the door to slavery west of the Mississippi River. Of course, white settlers of these new territories would not have taken slaves with them were it not profitable to do so. They found those profits by shifting their production away from tobacco and rice, the cash crops of the eastern seaboard, to cotton and sugarcane. The invention of the cotton gin increased the productivity of slave labor by reducing the hours necessary to process cotton for market. By the 1830s, cotton accounted for more than 50 percent of U.S. exports, and Great Britain, the world's leading industrial nation, imported more than 70 percent of the cotton used in its textile mills from the United States.

The expansion of slavery in the South did not go unnoticed in the northern states. During the 1830s, an abolitionist movement emerged in the North that called for the immediate emancipation of American slaves. Inspired by evangelical fervor, abolitionists defined slavery as a sin weighing on the soul of the nation, and they used the same fiery rhetoric as revivalist preachers to condemn it.

They offered assistance to runaway slaves and publicized their stories in antislavery newspapers, pamphlets and magazines. Working together in this manner, runaway slaves and abolitionists also produced autobiographical slave narratives that provided some of the most important and controversial eyewitness testimonies about slavery in the antebellum South.

TASK:

You will be reading excerpts from eight slave narratives. Half of the narratives were from enslaved males and the other half from enslaved females.⁵ As you read the documents, use the Source Analysis Table to help you take notes about the information they convey about slavery in the United States. Not every category on the table will be relevant to each source. When you are finished collecting the data, you will be answering the following questions:

1. What insights do each of these sources offer into enslaved life in the narrator? (Using your notes from the Source Analysis Table, summarize what they tell you about the nature of slave work, family and culture.
2. Compare the narratives offered by men and then by women. Is there a fundamental difference between the types of stories told by women and men? If so, how would you account for these differences? Were there any issues unique to men? Were there any issues were unique to women?

⁵These slave narratives were taken from "North American Slave Narratives," Documenting the American South Collection found at the University of North Carolina. This collection includes all the existing autobiographical narratives of fugitive and former slaves published as broadsides, pamphlets, or books in English up to 1920. Also included are many of the biographies of fugitive and former slaves and some significant fictionalized slave narratives published in English before 1920. You will find the narratives at: <http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>

3. Look at the narrative written by Issac Williams about his mother, Aunt Sally. How would you compare his narrative written *about* a woman to the other narratives written *by* other women?
4. Each source contains a passage describing a confrontation between enslaved and master. What do these passages tell you about the different approaches these enslaved men and enslaved women took to resisting their masters?
5. Which of these narratives would you want to read in its complete form? Why?

Source Analysis Table

Source	Year	M/F	Description of slave work, family and culture	Descriptions of Masters and White society
Venture Smith				
Henry Watson				
Henry Bibb				
Solomon Northup				

Source	Evidence of Resistance	Your Reaction to this selection
Venture Smith		
Henry Watson		
Henry Bibb		
Solomon Northup		

Source	Year	M/F	Description of slave work, family and culture	Descriptions of Masters and White society
Sojourner Truth				
Isaac Williams Aunt Sally				
Harriet Jacobs				
Mattie Jackson				

Source	Evidence of Resistance	Your reaction to this Selection
Sojourner Truth		
Isaac Williams Aunt Sally		
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EVIDENCE:

Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa, but Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America.* (1798)

Venture Smith was born ca. 1729 in Dukandarra, Guinea, the oldest son of a prince. When he was a young child, he and his family were taken prisoner by an invading army, and his father was killed for refusing to comply with their demands. Following his father's brutal murder, Smith and his family were taken captive. When another army defeated his captors, Smith was sold to Robertson Mumford, and they departed for Barbados and Rhode Island. He grew up as a household slave and married Meg, another of Mumford's slaves, when he was 22. Shortly after, he and a few fellow slaves attempted to escape, but their plan was aborted. Smith and his wife were then sold to Thomas Stanton, a Connecticut schoolteacher. Smith described the conflicts he encountered with his new master's family and how he purchased freedom for his wife and family by hiring himself out to others, cutting wood, farming, and fishing. He eventually bought property in East Haddam, Connecticut, and continued to amass and cultivate adjacent property, eventually acquiring over one hundred acres. He died in September 1805. Smith's book may be the oldest autobiography by a black writer in the United States.

... This was the third time of my being sold, and I was then thirty-one years old. As I never had an opportunity of redeeming myself whilst I was owned by Miner, though he promised to give me a chance, I was then very ambitious of obtaining it. I asked my master one time if he would consent to have me purchase my freedom. He replied that he would. I was then very happy, knowing that I was at that time able to pay part of the purchase money, by means of the money which I some time since buried. This I took out of the earth and

tendered to my master, having previously engaged a free negro man to take his security for it, as I was the property of my master, and therefore could not safely take his obligation myself. What was wanting in redeeming myself, my master agreed to wait on me for, until I could procure it for him. I still continued to work for Col. Smith. There was continually some interest accruing on my master's note to my friend the free negro man above named, which I received, and with some besides which I got by fishing, I laid out in land adjoining my old master Stanton's. By cultivating this land with the greatest diligence and economy, at times when my master did not require my labor, in two years I laid up ten pounds. This my friend tendered my master for myself, and received his note for it.

Being encouraged by the success which I had met in redeeming myself, I again solicited my master for a further chance of completing it. The chance for which I solicited him was that of going out to work the ensuing winter. He agreed to this on condition that I would give him one quarter of my earnings. On these terms I worked the following winter, and earned four pounds sixteen shillings, one quarter of which went to my master for the privilege, and the rest was paid him on my own account. This added to the other payments made up forty four pounds, eight shillings, which I had paid on my own account. I was then about thirty five years old.

The next summer I again desired he would give me a chance of going out to work. But he refused and answered that he must have my labor this summer, as he did not have it the past winter. I replied that I considered it as hard that I could not have a chance to work out when the season became advantageous, and that I must only be permitted to hire myself

out in the poorest season of the year. He asked me after this what I would give him for the privilege per month. I replied that I would leave it wholly with his own generosity to determine what I should return him a month. Well then, said he, if so two pounds a month. I answered him that if that was the least he would take I would be contented.

Accordingly I hired myself out at Fisher's Island, and earned twenty pounds; thirteen pounds six shillings of which my master drew for the privilege, and the remainder I paid him for my freedom. This made fifty-one pounds two shillings which I paid him. In October following I went and wrought six months at Long Island. In that six month's time I cut and corded four hundred cords of wood, besides threshing out seventy-five bushels of grain, and received of my wages down only twenty pounds, which left remaining a larger sum. Whilst I was out that time, I took up on my wages only one pair of shoes. At night I lay on the hearth, with one coverlet over and another under me. I returned to my master and gave him what I received of my six months labor. This left only thirteen pounds eighteen shillings to make up the full sum for my redemption. My master liberated me, saying that I might pay what was behind if I could ever make it convenient, otherwise it would be well. The amount of the money which I had paid my master towards redeeming my time, was seventy-one pounds two shillings. The reason of my master for asking such an unreasonable price, was he said, to secure himself in case I should ever come to want. Being thirty-six years old, I left Col. Smith once for all. I had already been sold three different times, made considerable money with seemingly nothing to derive it from, been cheated out of a large sum of money, lost much by misfortunes, and paid an enormous sum for my freedom.

Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave* (1848)

Henry Watson was born into slavery near Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1813. Watson's master, whom he remembers only as "Bibb," worked primarily at raising slaves for sale. Watson's mother, the cook in the great house, was sold when Watson was eight. Shortly thereafter, Watson himself was sold to Parson Janer, with whom he remained only a brief time before being sent to auction in Richmond, Virginia. A slave trader named Denton sold Watson to the tyrannical Alexander McNeill, who kept Watson as a house slave for approximately five years. When Watson refused to inform on another slave, he was sent to work as a field hand on Alexander McNeill's farm. McNeill's brother, William, then purchased Watson. Initially, William McNeill was kind, but became cruel under the influence of his controlling and sadistic wife. Watson was then sold to an unnamed man who put him to work in a hotel dining room. Over the next few years, Watson developed a gambling habit, stabbed another slave, and was hired out and sold. A Northern man eventually alerted Watson to a means of escape on a ship bound for Boston. Upon reaching Boston at age 26, Watson met William Lloyd Garrison, who advised him to flee the country. Watson spent a few months in Britain but returned to the United States, where he remained, with his unnamed wife, for the rest of his life.

To give a sketch of all the cruelties that I witnessed on Mr. McNeill's place, would occupy more space in this little book than I desire. I will give a description of the manner in which the dead slaves are disposed of. On the death of a slave, I was sent by my master to the overseer, requesting him to send two boys to the house. On their arrival, he would order them to the hospital, or sick-house, as it is generally called, and they would take the body, fasten it in the blanket on which he died, put it on the hand-barrow, and carry it to its place of burial. This was generally done very hastily, on account of the climate. Thus are

they bundled into the earth, without minister or coffin, or permitting the husband, or wife, or mother, to see the last disposal of that which has been dear to them on earth.

I was on this farm about six years, five of which I was employed as house servant; and it is probable that I should have remained in the house, had I not refused to give him some information respecting a pig, which two of the men had stolen. This disobedience caused me much suffering. In the first place, I was severely whipped with a cowskin, the scars of which punishment I have to this day, and then I was sent to the field to work,-- the place I dreaded mostly. From morning till night could the whip be heard, accompanied with the cries and groans of the sufferers, whilst I was employed at the house. I was not under the direction of the cruel overseer, and consequently escaped his cruelty. A day seldom passed without witnessing several hundred lashes inflicted upon the slaves; each individual having a stated number of pounds of cotton to pick, the deficit of which was made up by as many lashes being applied to the poor slave's back as he was so unlucky as to fall short in the number of pounds of cotton which he was to have picked.

As I had not been accustomed to field-work, I found it impossible to keep up with the others. The overseer, seeing this, came up to me and asked me if I knew where I was; I said, I did; he then replied, that I had been at the house so long that I had got the devil in me; and if I did not keep my row up with the rest, he would give me a hundred lashes, and that d—d quick. To this I did not reply, but toiled on to the best of my knowledge, hoping to escape punishment; but all in vain; frequently was I whipped without any just cause. I do now think that he made me his particular victim on account of my

having been out of his power so long a time. I am incapable of describing the great difference between house and field labor. I have, since my settling in the North, heard many persons, in speaking of slavery as they have seen it in cities, towns, &c., where it exists in its mildest form, apologizing for it, holding it forth to the world as a great benefit to the black man. They say the slaves are nicely fed, clothed, and taken care of in a very comfortable manner. But, step back in the interior of slave States, on the plantations, where you see one hundred slaves in charge of a drunken overseer; thinly clad, and scantily fed; driven forth to labor from daylight till dark; where a slave for the most trivial offence may be whipped to death, for in case of death arising from whipping the overseer is indifferent,--he knows the master cannot use the word of his slave against him,--he will not acknowledge it himself. Thus there is nothing to restrain him from using the most unnatural and inhuman cruelty to the poor slaves.

About that time, his younger brother, William, visited the farm, with his wife, and had been at the house some two or three weeks before I saw him. A few days before he left I was sent for to come to the house, by the servant whom my master had bought to take my place when I was put in the field. On my approaching the house, I observed my master, his brother, and wife, standing in the door looking at me. Mr. William McNeill spoke to me, and told me that he had bought me. He then ordered me into the kitchen to wash, and sent me out a pair of pantaloons and a shirt, in which I appeared much better than in the ragged covering which I had cast off. I was then sent to the house, and there he made me acquainted with my duties as a body servant, which, as they were similar to those of my former master, it would be useless to describe. As I was delighted with this change, and there was something so

pleasing in the manner of my new master, so different from that of my old one, I entered into my duties with pleasure. In a few days I started with my master and mistress for Louisiana to visit her father's plantation, who was a sugar planter, and a more cruel one I do not think was to be found in that neighborhood. We remained a few weeks there, when my master made arrangements to visit Kentucky, leaving his wife behind. We went up the Mississippi as far as Memphis, there leaving the boat and taking the stage for Nashville, Tennessee; and from thence to Lexington, Kentucky. A few days after our arrival, my master made me acquainted with the object of his visit, which was to purchase slaves, intending to take them to Mississippi, where he was going to farming; and he instructed me to tell all slaves who should inquire of me if he was a good master, that he was, to which I readily assented; and, as he did not wish to purchase any that were not willing to go with him, he would frequently send them to me, and I gave them satisfactory proofs of his kindness. He soon got a sufficient number, and started for the Mississippi by land. They all started willingly on their journey, and arrived at its end without any difficulty. This to be wondered at, as none of the gang were ironed or shackled in any way.

Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1849)

Henry Bibb was born in Shelby County, Kentucky in 1815. His father was state senator James Bibb, and his mother was a slave named Mildred Jackson who worked for Willard Gatewood. Henry Bibb was married twice, once before his escape to a slave named Malinda, and again after his escape to a woman named Mary Miles. Throughout his life, Bibb attempted to escape from slavery many times, only to be recaptured and resold each time. In 1842, Bibb successfully escaped to Detroit and began lecturing on slavery and became a well-known African American activist. Bibb helped create Canada's first black newspaper, *Voice of the Fugitive* a publication that worked to convince African slaves to settle in Canada. He was also the founding director of a Canadian black colonization project, the Refugee Home Society. He died in 1854.

I was not used quite as bad as the regular field hands, as the greater part of my time was spent working about the house; and my wife was the cook.

This country was full of pine timber, and every slave had to prepare a light wood torch, over night, made of pine knots, to meet the overseer with, before daylight in the morning. Each person had to have his torch lit, and come with it in his hand to the gin house, before the overseer and driver, so as to be ready to go to the cotton field by the time they could see to pick out cotton. These lights looked beautiful at a distance.

The object of blowing the horn for them two hours before day, was, that they should get their bite to eat, before they went to the field, that they need not stop to eat but once during the day. Another object was, to do up their flogging which had been

omitted over night. I have often heard the sound of the slave driver's lash on the backs of the slaves, and their heart-rending shrieks, which were enough to melt the heart of humanity, even among the most barbarous nations of the earth.

But the Deacon would keep no overseer on his plantation, who neglected to perform this every morning. I have heard him say that he was no better pleased than when he could hear the overseer's loud complaining voice, long before daylight, in the morning, and the sound of the driver's lash among the toiling slaves.

This was a very warm climate, abounding with mosquitoes, galinippers [large mosquitos] and other insects which were exceedingly annoying to the poor slaves by night and day, at their quarters and in the field. But more especially to their helpless little children, which they had to carry with them to the cotton fields, where they had to set on the damp ground alone from morning till night, exposed to the scorching rays of the sun, liable to be bitten by poisonous rattle snakes which are plenty in that section of the country, or to be devoured by large alligators, which are often seen creeping through the cotton fields going from swamp to swamp seeking their prey.

The cotton planters generally, never allow a slave mother time to go to the house, or quarter during the day to nurse her child; hence they have to carry them to the cotton fields and tie them in the shade of a tree, or in clusters of high weeds about in the fields, where they can go to them at noon, when they are allowed to stop work for one half hour. This is the reason why so very few slave children are raised on these cotton plantations, mothers have no time to take care of them--and

they are often found dead in the field and in the quarter for want of the care of their mothers. But I never was eye witness to a case of this kind, but have heard many narrated by my slave brothers and sisters, some of which occurred on the deacon's plantation.

I have known the slaves to be so much fatigued from labor that they could scarcely get to their lodging places from the field at night. And then they would have to prepare something to eat before they could lie down to rest. Their corn they had to grind on a hand mill for bread stuff, or pound it in a mortar; and by the time they would get their suppers it would be midnight; then they would herd down all together and take but two or three hours rest, before the overseer's horn called them up again to prepare for the field.

At the time of sickness among slaves they had but very little attention. The master was to be the judge of their sickness, but never had studied the medical profession. He always pronounced a slave who said he was sick, a liar and a hypocrite; said there was nothing the matter, and he only wanted to keep from work.

Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (1853)

Solomon Northup was born a free man in Minerva, New York, in 1808. His father, Mintus, was originally enslaved to the Northup family from Rhode Island, but he was freed after the family moved to New York. As a young man, Northup helped his father with farming chores and worked as a raftsmen on the waterways of upstate New York. He married Anne Hampton and they had three children together. During the 1830s, Northup became locally renowned as an excellent fiddle-player. In 1841, two men offered Northup generous wages to join a traveling musical show, but soon after he accepted, they drugged him and sold him into slavery. After years of bondage, he came into contact with an outspoken abolitionist from Canada, who sent letters to notify Northup's family of his whereabouts. An official state agent was sent to Louisiana to reclaim Northup. After he was freed, Northup filed kidnapping charges against the men who had defrauded him, but the lengthy trial that followed was ultimately dropped because of legal technicalities, and he received no remuneration. Little is known about Northup's life after the trial, but he is believed to have died in 1863.

I was constantly employed on the plantation of Master Epps. He was considered but a small planter, not having a sufficient number of hands to require the services of an overseer, acting in the latter capacity himself. Not able to increase his force, it was his custom to hire during the hurry of cotton-picking.

On larger estates, employing fifty or a hundred, or perhaps two hundred hands, an overseer is deemed indispensable. These gentlemen ride into the field on horseback, without an exception, to my knowledge, armed with pistols, bowie knife, whip, and accompanied by several dogs. They follow,

equipped in this fashion, in rear of the slaves, keeping a sharp lookout upon them all. The requisite qualifications in an overseer are utter heartlessness, brutality and cruelty. It is his business to produce large crops, and if that is accomplished, no matter what amount of suffering it may have cost. The presence of the dogs are necessary to overhaul a fugitive who may take to his heels, as is sometimes the case, when faint or sick, he is unable to maintain his row, and unable, also, to endure the whip. The pistols are reserved for any dangerous emergency, there having been instances when such weapons were necessary.

Besides the overseer, there are drivers under him, the number being in proportion to the number of hands in the field. The drivers are black, who, in addition to the performance of their equal share of work, are compelled to do the whipping of their several gangs. Whips hang around their necks, and if they fail to use them thoroughly, are whipped themselves. They have a few privileges, however; for example, in cane-cutting the hands are not allowed to sit down long enough to eat their dinners. Carts filled with corn cake, cooked at the kitchen, are driven into the field at noon. The cake is distributed by the drivers, and must be eaten with the least possible delay.

At Huff Power, when I first came to Epps', Tom, one of Roberts' negroes, was driver. He was a burly fellow, and severe in the extreme. After Epps' removal to Bayou Boeuf, that distinguished honor was conferred upon myself. Up to the time of my departure I had to wear a whip about my neck in the field. If Epps was present, I dared not show any lenity, not having the Christian fortitude of a certain well-known Uncle Tom sufficiently to brave his wrath, by refusing to perform the office. In that way, only, I escaped the immediate martyrdom

he suffered, and, withal, saved my companions much suffering, as it proved in the end. Epps, I soon found, whether actually in the field or not, had his eyes pretty generally upon us. From the piazza, from behind some adjacent tree, or other concealed point of observation, he was perpetually on the watch. If one of us had been backward or idle through the day, we were apt to be told all about it on returning to the quarters, and as it was a matter of principle with him to reprove every offence of that kind that came within his knowledge, the offender not only was certain of receiving a castigation for his tardiness, but I likewise was punished for permitting it.

If, on the other hand, he had seen me use the lash freely, the man was satisfied. "Practice makes perfect," truly; and during my eight years' experience as a driver, I learned to handle the whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair's breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them. If Epps was observed at a distance, or we had reason to apprehend he was as sneaking somewhere in the vicinity, I would commence plying the lash vigorously, when, according to arrangement, they would squirm and screech as if in agony, although not one of them had in fact been even grazed. Patsey would take occasion, if he made his appearance presently, to mumble in his hearing some complaints that Platt was lashing them the whole time, and Uncle Abram, with an appearance of honesty peculiar to himself, would declare roundly I had just whipped them worse than General Jackson whipped the enemy at New-Orleans. If Epps was not drunk, and in one of his beastly humors, this was, in general, satisfactory. If he was, some one or more of us must suffer, as a matter of course. Sometimes his violence assumed a dangerous form, placing the lives of his human stock in

jeopardy. On one occasion the drunken madman thought to amuse himself by cutting my throat.

Sojourner Truth [Isabelle], *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York in 1828* (1850)

Given the name Isabella by her parents, Sojourner Truth was born into slavery, ca. 1788. Her parents were already old when she was born, and when their master died, no one was willing to buy Isabella's parents at auction. They were manumitted to avoid the expense of feeding them. Isabella, however was sold to John Nealy who whipped her frequently. She was purchased by a tavern owner named Scriver who Isabella said was a relatively humane master. Scriver sold Isabella to John Dumont to whom Isabella remained devoted. In recognition to Isabella's dedication, Dumont promised to release her from slavery in 1827, one year before her state-mandated manumission. When Isabella requested her release on the appointed date, however, Dumont refused. Isabella left Dumont and entered the home of Isaac Van Wagenen, who pays Dumont for the last year of Isabella's service. Van Wagenen then frees Isabella, whereupon Isabella takes the Van Wagenen surname. Isabella's first action as a free woman was to sue Solomon Gedney, for the recovery of her son, Peter, whom he had sold out-of-state illegally. With the help of lawyers, she obtained Peter's freedom and took him to New York City. In 1843, Isabella had a religious experience, causing her to change her name to Sojourner Truth and moved her to become an itinerant preacher.

The question in her mind, and one not easily solved, now was, 'How can I get away?' So, as was her usual custom, she 'told God she was afraid to go in the night, and in the day every body would see her.' At length, the thought came to her that she could leave just before the day dawned, and get out of the neighborhood where she was known before the people were much astir. 'Yes,' said she, fervently, 'that's a good thought! Thank you, God, for *that* thought!' So, receiving it as coming direct from God, she acted upon it, and one fine morning, a little before day-break, she might have been seen stepping stealthily away from the rear of Master Dumont's house, her

infant on one arm, and her wardrobe on the other; the bulk and weight of which, probably, she never found so convenient as on the present occasion, a cotton handkerchief containing both her clothes and her provisions.

As she gained the summit of a high hill, a considerable distance from her master's, the sun offended her by coming forth in all his pristine splendor. She thought it never was so light before; indeed, she thought it much too light. She stopped to look about her, and ascertain if her pursuers were yet in sight. No one appeared, and, for the first time, the question came up for settlement, 'Where, and to whom, shall I go?' In all her thoughts of getting away, she had not once asked herself whither she should direct her steps. She sat down, fed her infant, and again turning her thoughts to God, her only help, she prayed him to direct her to some safe asylum. And soon it occurred to her, that there was a man living somewhere in the direction she had been pursuing, by the name of Levi Rowe, whom she had known, and who, she thought, would be likely to befriend her. She accordingly pursued her way to his house where she found him ready to entertain and assist her, though he was then on his death-bed. He bade her partake of the hospitalities of his house, said he knew of two good places where she might get in, and requested his wife to show her where they were to be found. As soon as she came in sight of the first house, she recollected having seen it and its inhabitants before, and instantly exclaimed, 'That's the place for me; I shall stop there.' She went there, and found the good people of the house, Mr. and Mrs. Van Wagener, absent, but was kindly received and hospitably entertained by their excellent mother, till the return of her children. When they arrived, she made her case known to them. They listened to her story, assuring her

they never turned the needy away, and willingly gave her employment.

She had not been there long before her old master, Dumont, appeared, as she had anticipated; for when she took French leave of him, she resolved not to go too far from him, and not put him to as much trouble in looking her up--for the latter he was sure to do--as Tom and Jack had done when they ran away from him, a short time before. This was very considerate in her, to say the least, and a proof that 'like begets like.' He had often considered *her* feelings, though not always, and she was equally considerate.

When her master saw her, he said, 'Well, Bell, so you've run away from me.' 'No, I did not *run* away; I walked away by daylight, and all because you had promised me a year of my time.' His reply was, 'You must go back with me.' Her decisive answer was, 'No, I *won't* go back with you.' He said, 'Well, I shall take the *child*.' *This* also was as stoutly negatived.

Mr. Isaac S. Van Wagener then interposed, saying, he had never been in the practice of buying and selling slaves; he did not believe in slavery; but, rather than have Isabella taken back by force, he would buy her services for the balance of the year--for which her master charged twenty dollars, and five in addition for the child. The sum was paid, and her master Dumont departed; but not till he had heard Mr. Van Wagener tell her not to call him master,--adding, 'there is but *one* master; and he who is *your* master is *my* master.'

Isabella inquired what she *should* call him? He answered, 'Call me Isaac Van Wagener, and my wife is Maria Van Wagener.' Isabella could not understand this, and thought it a *mighty*

change, as it most truly was from a master whose word was law, to simple Isaac S. Van Wagener, who was master to *no* one. With these noble people, who, though they could not be the masters of slaves, were undoubtedly a portion of God's nobility, she resided one year, and from them she derived the name of Van Wagener; he being her last master in the eye of the law, and a slave's surname is ever the same as his master; that is, if he is allowed to have any other name than Tom, Jack, or Guffin. Slaves have sometimes been severely punished for adding their master's name to their own. But when they have no particular title to it, it is no particular offence.

Isaac Williams, *Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan (1858)*

Sally Williams was born 1796 in Fayetteville, North Carolina. At the age of 12, Sally went to work in the fields for her master. At 13, her mistress decided that Sally should be married. Her marriage was arranged with a young enslaved man from a neighboring plantation. After giving birth to three children, Sally was sold away from her children just as her children were sold off to different owners. Her oldest child, Isaac, eventually gained his own freedom, and twenty years after he was separated from his mother Sally, he was able to purchase her freedom and moved her to Detroit, Michigan.

For three weeks Sally was unable to lie down in bed, on account of the severe blows she had received at her whipping, and she was excused by her mistress from cooking, but at the end of that time she was thought well enough to resume her usual duties. All the cooking for the house was to be done by her, and, in addition to this, she had her daily task of sewing on the shirts and trowsers for the slaves. This she often had to do at night, by the light of the fire, when her day's house work was over. Sally's was no well-ordered northern kitchen, stocked with conveniences. It was a small cabin of one apartment, in the rear of her master's house. At one end was the fireplace, but about as much smoke settled down in the room as went up the chimney. She had very few cooking utensils, and was obliged to use the same kettle and the same spoon for half a dozen different purposes. Hurrying from morning till night, broiling over the fire or busy at her needle, her weeks went by. To make her labor yet harder, she had to cut her own fuel and to carry it from the woods to the house, often doing it at night and to bring all the water she used from a spring some distance away.

Mr. Cone was prospering in the world, and his wife spared no pains to improve in their style of living. She began to require more elaborately prepared meals, and poor Sally was taxed to the utmost to accomplish all which was expected of her. Every day, in her little kitchen, she made delicious pies and cakes for "the house," but she was never allowed to taste them--if she did, she was sure to be whipped for it by her mistress. Mrs. Cone was not above using the whip with her hands when anything offended her, and as Sally had been legally made over to her at the time of her purchase, she felt that she had a peculiar right to control her as she pleased. Sometimes she would make the women whip each other, but they soon learned to make seemingly heavy blows very light. Sally had always had tea and coffee and sugar in Fayetteville, and now it was very hard for her to be deprived of them when her labor was so severe. Sometimes, when the breakfast was unusually nice, her mistress would send her a cup of coffee, but this was not often; and so she sat up at night to knit and to do little odd jobs of sewing, that she might earn money enough to purchase these luxuries for herself. Mrs. Cone had had for years a habit of occasionally drinking brandy. As she grew older, her desire for it increased. Unknown to her husband, she kept it always in her closet, and although she never became intoxicated, she often drank so much as to be very irritable and unreasonable. When at length her husband discovered it, he was greatly grieved. He was a member of the church and of the temperance society, but he could not control his wife, for she would send slyly for brandy by the servants, who dared not disobey missis' orders; and so, when he saw that she was under its influence, he would shut himself up in his room, and sometimes ride over to his plantation and stay for days together. So Sally was left to the entire control of a woman always cold-hearted and exacting, and at times tyrannical and

cruel. Shut out from sympathy and friends, with nothing before her but thankless, monotonous toil, to what did she turn for comfort?--for the heart lives by loving, and must find rest somewhere. It was to God that she looked. One by one her earthly supports had been taken away, and she had learned to live by faith in the Invisible. Day by day, in her simple way, she was living out the truth of those texts which higher and more cultivated natures find it so difficult to receive and to practice, "Pray without ceasing," and "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"Every mornin'," said she, "I asked de Lord to go with me through de day--to help me make de pies an' cakes, an' to show me how to please missis, an' den I felt contented, whether I was whipped or not."

Had Sally forgotten the past, that she was thus quiet in the present? Oh, no! She never laid her weary head upon her pillow without thinking of her mother, and her husband, and her children, and praying God to bless them wherever they were, and to unite them to her in the "New Jerusalem." In this world she never thought again to see them.

**Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,
written by Herself (1860)**

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813. Jacobs learned to read, write, and sew under her first mistress, Margaret Horniblow, and hoped to be freed by her. However, when Jacobs was eleven years old, her mistress died and willed her to Dr. James Norcom, a binding decision that initiated a lifetime of suffering and hardship for Jacobs. Dr. Norcom, represented later as Dr. Flint in Jacobs's narrative, sexually harassed and physically abused the teenaged Jacobs as long as she was a servant in his household. Fearing Norcom's persistent sexual threats and hoping that he might relinquish his hold on her children, Jacobs hid herself in the storeroom crawlspace at her grandmother's house from 1835 until 1842. During those seven years Jacobs could do little more than sit up in the cramped space. She read, sewed, and watched over her children from a chink in the roof, waiting for an opportunity to escape to the North. Jacobs was finally able to make her way to New York City by boat in 1842 and was eventually reunited with her children there. Even in New York, however, Jacobs was at the mercy of the Fugitive Slave Law, which meant that wherever Jacobs lived in the United States, she could be reclaimed by the Norcoms and returned to slavery at any time. Around 1852, her employer, Cornelia Grinnell Willis, purchased her freedom from the Norcoms.

I would ten thousand times rather that my children should be the half-starved paupers of Ireland than to be the most pampered among the slaves of America. I would rather drudge out my life on a cotton plantation, till the grave opened to give me rest, than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress. The felon's home in a penitentiary is preferable. He may repent, and turn from the error of his ways, and so find peace; but it is not so with a favorite slave. She is not allowed

to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous.

Mrs. Flint possessed the key to her husband's character before I was born. She might have used this knowledge to counsel and to screen the young and the innocent among her slaves; but for them she had no sympathy. They were the objects of her constant suspicion and malevolence. She watched her husband with unceasing vigilance; but he was well practiced in means to evade it.

One day he caught me teaching myself to write. He frowned, as if he was not well pleased, but I suppose he came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme. Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand. I would return them, saying, "I can't read them, sir." "Can't you?" he replied; "then I must read them to you." He always finished the reading by asking, "Do you understand?" Sometimes he would complain of the heat of the tea room, and order his supper to be placed on a small table in the piazza. He would seat himself there with a well-satisfied smile, and tell me to stand by and brush away the flies. He would eat very slowly, pausing between the mouthfuls. These intervals were employed in describing the happiness I was so foolishly throwing away, and in threatening me with the penalty that finally awaited my stubborn disobedience. He boasted much of the forbearance he had exercised towards me, and reminded me that there was a limit to his patience. When I succeeded in avoiding opportunities for him to talk to me at home, I was ordered to come to his office, to do some errand. When there, I was obliged to stand and listen to such language as he saw fit to address to me. Sometimes I so openly expressed my contempt for him that he would become violently enraged, and

I wondered why he did not strike me. Circumstanced as he was, he probably thought it was better policy to be forbearing. But the state of things grew worse and worse daily...

I had entered my sixteenth year, and every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint. Angry words frequently passed between her and her husband. He had never punished me himself, and he would not allow any body else to punish me. In that respect, she was never satisfied; but, in her angry moods, no terms were too vile for her to bestow upon me. Yet I, whom she detested so bitterly, had far more pity for her than he had, whose duty it was to make her life happy. I never wronged her, or wished to wrong her; and one word of kindness from her would have brought me to her feet.

After repeated quarrels between the doctor and his wife, he announced his intention to take his youngest daughter, then four years old, to sleep in his apartment. It was necessary that a servant should sleep in the same room, to be on hand if the child stirred. I was selected for that office, and informed for what purpose that arrangement had been made. By managing to keep within sight of people, as much as possible during the day time, I had hitherto succeeded in eluding my master, though a razor was often held to my throat to force me to change this line of policy. At night I slept by the side of my great aunt, where I felt safe. He was too prudent to come into her room. She was an old woman, and had been in the family many years. Moreover, as a married man, and a professional man, he deemed it necessary to save appearances in some degree. But he resolved to remove the obstacle in the way of his scheme; and he thought he had planned it so that he should evade suspicion. He was well aware how much I prized my refuge by

the side of my old aunt, and he determined to dispossess me of it. The first night the doctor had the little child in his room alone. The next morning, I was ordered to take my station as nurse the following night.

The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences...

Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation; and it is seldom that they do not make them aware of this by passing them into the slave-trader's hands as soon as possible, and thus getting them out of their sight.

Mattie J. Jackson, *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson; Her parentage – Experience of Eighteen Years in Slavery – Incidents During the War – Her escape from Slavery. A True Story. As Given by Mattie (1866)*

The only available record of Mattie Jackson's life comes from her own narrative, which was recorded on her behalf by her stepmother, Dr. L. S. Thompson. Jackson was born around 1846 in St. Louis, Missouri, to an enslaved father named Westly Jackson and an enslaved mother, Ellen Turner, who was owned by a different master. Although Turner was repeatedly sold to owners who moved the family further apart, Westly Jackson fathered three daughters with Turner: Sarah Ann, Mattie Jane, and Esther J. With Turner's assistance, Westly Jackson eventually escaped to freedom in the North and became a preacher. Six years later, Turner remarried a man named George Brown, and the couple had two sons before Brown also escaped to Canada. Turner made six unsuccessful escape attempts herself, but was thwarted by exhaustion and the dependency of her children. Jackson, however, eventually escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad in 1863. Not long after her getaway, Jackson's sister, mother, and half-brother all successfully fled slavery. Jackson eventually reunited with her mother and half-brother, but they were never able to find her sister again. After Emancipation, Jackson returned to St. Louis with her mother.

Two years after my father's departure, my mother, with her two children, my sister and myself, attempted to make her escape. After traveling two days we reached Illinois. We slept in the woods at night. I believe my mother had food to supply us but fasted herself. But the advertisement had reached there before us, and loafers were already in search of us, and as soon as we were discovered on the brink of the river one of the spies made enquiries respecting her suspicious appearance. She was aware that she was arrested, consequently she gave a true account of herself--that she was in search of her husband. We were then

destitute of any articles of clothing excepting our wearing apparel. Mother had become so weary that she was compelled to leave our package of clothing on the way. We were taken back to St. Louis and committed to prison and remained there one week, after which they put us in Linch's trader's yard, where we remained about four weeks. We were then sold to William Lewis. Mr. Lewis was a very severe master, and inflicted such punishment upon us as he thought proper. However, I only remember one severe contest Mr. Lewis had with my mother. For some slight offence Mrs. Lewis became offended and was tartly and loudly reprimanding her, when Mr. L. came in and rashly felled her to the floor with his fist. But his wife was constantly pulling our ears, snapping us with her thimble, rapping us on the head and the sides of it. It appeared impossible to please her. When we first went to Mr. L.'s they had a cowhide which she used to inflict on a little slave girl she previously owned, nearly every night. This was done to learn the little girl to wake early to wait on her children. But my mother was a cook, as I before stated, and was in the habit of roasting meats and toasting bread. As they stinted us for food my mother roasted the cowhide. It was rather poor picking, but it was the last cowhide my mother ever had an opportunity to cook while we remained in his family.

Mr. L. soon moved about six miles from the city, and entered in partnership with his brother-in-law. The servants were then divided and distributed in both families. It unfortunately fell to my lot to live with Mrs. Larry. my mistress' sister, which rendered my condition worse than the first. My master even disapproved of my ill treatment and took me to another place; the place my mother resided before my father's escape. After a short time Mr. Lewis again returned to the city. My mother still remained as cook in his family. After six years' absence of my

father my mother married again a man by the name of George Brown, and lived with her second husband about four years, and had two children, when he was sold for requesting a different kind and enough food. His master considered it a great insult, and declared he would sell him. But previous to this insult, as he called it, my step-father was foreman in Mr. L.'s tobacco factory. He was trusty and of good moral habits, and was calculated to bring the highest price in the human market; therefore the excuse to sell him for the above offence was only a plot. The morning this offence occurred, Mr. L. bid my father to remain in the kitchen till he had taken his breakfast. After pulling his ears and slapping his face bade him come to the factory; but instead of going to the factory he went to Canada. Thus my poor mother was again left alone with two more children added to her misery and sorrow to toil on her weary pilgrimage.

We remained but a short time at the same residence when Mr. Lewis moved again to the country. Soon after, my little brother was taken sick in consequence of being confined in a box in which my mother was obliged to keep him. If permitted to creep around the floor her mistress thought it would take too much time to attend to him. He was two years old and never walked. His limbs were perfectly paralyzed for want of exercise. We now saw him gradually failing, but was not allowed to render him due attention. Even the morning he died she was compelled to attend to her usual work. She watched over him for three months by night and attended to her domestic affairs by day. The night previous to his death we were aware he could not survive through the approaching day, but it made no impression on my mistress until she came into the kitchen and saw his life fast ebbing away, then she put on a sad countenance for fear of being exposed, and told my mother

to take the child to her room, where he only lived one hour. When she found he was dead she ordered grave clothes to be brought and gave my mother time to bury him. O that morning, that solemn morning. It appears to me that when that little spirit departed as though all heaven rejoiced and angels veiled their faces.