

12-2 | Witness to the Punishment of a Runaway Slave

LEVI COFFIN, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (1876)

Enslaved African Americans coped with the brutalities of their bonded lives in myriad ways, which sometimes included running away. Countless thousands escaped their masters' reach by heading north and seeking aid on the Underground Railroad. Others were captured and punished. Levi Coffin (1798–1877), a Quaker abolitionist, devoted his energies to helping runaway slaves by hiding them and providing material support as they made their escape. Here he recounts the tragic fate of one fugitive whom he could not help.

Sometimes I witnessed scenes of cruelty and injustice and had to stand passively by. The following is an instance of that kind: I had been sent one day on an errand to a place in the neighborhood, called Clemen's Store, and was returning home along the Salem road, when I met a party of movers, with wagons, teams, slaves and household goods, on their way to another State. After passing them I came to a blacksmith's shop, in front of which were several men, talking and smoking, in idle chat, and proceeding on my way I met a negro man trudging along slowly on foot, carrying a bundle. He inquired of me regarding the party of movers; asked how far they were ahead, etc. I told him "About half a mile," and as he passed on, the thought occurred to me that this man was probably a runaway slave who was following the party of movers. I had heard of instances when families were separated—the wife and children being taken by their owners to another part of the country—of the husband and father following the party of emigrants, keeping a short distance behind the train of wagons during the day, and creeping up to the camp at night, close enough for his wife to see him and bring him food. A few days afterward I learned that this man had been stopped and questioned by the party of men at the blacksmith's shop, that he had produced a pass, but they being satisfied that it was a forgery had lodged him in jail at Greensboro, and sent word to his master concerning him. A week or two afterward I was sent to a blacksmith's shop, at Greensboro, to get some work done. The slave's master had, that very day, arrived and taken possession of him, and brought him to the blacksmith's shop to get some irons put on him before starting back to his home. While a chain was being riveted around the negro's neck, and handcuffs fastened on his wrists, his master upbraided him for having run away. He asked:

"Wer'n't you well treated?"

"Yes, massa."

"Then what made you run away?"

"My wife and children were taken away from me, massa, and I think as much of them as you do of yours, or any white man does of his. Their massa tried

Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad; Being a Brief History of the Labors of a Lifetime in Behalf of the Slave, with the Stories of Numerous Fugitives, Who Gained Their Freedom Through His Instrumentality, and Many Other Incidents*, Second Edition—With Appendix (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880), 17–20.

to buy me too, but you would not sell me, so when I saw them go away, I followed." The mere recital of his words can convey little idea of the pitiful and pathetic manner in which they were uttered; his whole frame trembled, and the glance of piteous, despairing appeal he turned upon his master would have melted any heart less hard than stone.

The master said, "I've always treated you well, trusting you with my keys, and treating you more like a confidential servant than a slave, but now you shall know what slavery is. Just wait till I get you back home!" He then tried to make the negro tell where he had got his pass, who wrote it for him, etc., but he refused to betray the person who had befriended him. The master threatened him with the severest punishment, but he persisted in his refusal. Then torture was tried, in order to force the name from him. Laying the slave's fettered hand on the blacksmith's anvil, the master struck it with a hammer until the blood settled under the finger nails. The negro winced under each cruel blow, but said not a word. As I stood by and watched this scene, my heart swelled with indignation, and I longed to rescue the slave and punish the master. I was not converted to peace principles then, and I felt like fighting for the slave. One end of the chain, riveted to the negro's neck, was made fast to the axle of his master's buggy, then the master sprang in and drove off at a sweeping trot, compelling the slave to run at full speed or fall and be dragged by his neck. I watched them till they disappeared in the distance, and as long as I could see them, the slave was running.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Though Coffin's memoirs were published more than a decade after the abolition of slavery, what impact might anecdotes such as the one he recounts have had on the antislavery movement?
2. Compare and evaluate the treatment of slaves from the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century by identifying similarities and differences in Coffin's account of the punishment of the escaped slave and the Virginia codes concerning outlying slaves (Document 3-3).
3. What can you infer from Coffin's story about the efforts of enslaved African Americans to mitigate the brutalities of the slave system?

12-5 | Southern Hospitality on Display

SUSAN DABNEY SMEDES, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (1887)

The planter class in the Old South cultivated a self-image as benevolent stewards whose sense of *noblesse oblige* led naturally to their open hospitality and gentle nurturing of their “servants,” a common euphemism for slaves. The reality was frequently at odds with the romance they created. The image was part of their broader appreciation of the differences they drew between themselves and northerners, whom they frequently viewed as less genteel, cold-fisted capitalists intruding into their affairs. Susan Smedes’s memoir of her father, Thomas Smith Gregory Dabney, is a classic example of the genre: a flattering portrait of a “good master” who treated his slaves as family, and whose love and affection was returned by the grateful servants. Here, Smedes remembers holiday celebrations on her father’s Burleigh plantation in Lebanon, Mississippi, where he had moved his family in the early 1830s, part of the migration of planters in search of more productive soil.

A Southern Planter

Perhaps no life was more independent than that of a Southern planter before the late war. One of the Mississippi neighbors said that he would rather be Colonel Dabney on his plantation than the President of the United States.

Managing a plantation was something like managing a kingdom. The ruler had need of a great store, not only of wisdom, but of tact and patience as well.

When there was trouble in the house the real kindness and sympathy of the servants came out. They seemed to anticipate every wish. In a thousand touching little ways they showed their desire to give all the comfort and help that lay in their power. They seemed to claim a right to share in the sorrow that was their master’s, and to make it their own. It was small wonder that the master and mistress were forbearing and patient when the same servants who sorrowed with them in their affliction should, at times, be perverse in their days of prosperity. Many persons said that the Burleigh servants were treated with overindulgence. It is true that at times some of them acted like spoiled children, seeming not to know what they would have. Nothing went quite to their taste at these times. The white family would say among themselves, “What is the matter now? Why

Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (Baltimore: Cushings & Bailey, 1887), 115-117, 160-163.

these martyr-like looks?" Mammy Maria usually threw light on these occasions. She was disgusted with her race for posing as martyrs when there was no grievance. A striking illustration of this difficulty in making things run smoothly occurred one summer, when the family was preparing to go to the Pass. The mistress made out her list of the servants whom she wished to accompany her. She let them know that they were to be allowed extra time to get their houses and clothes in order for the three months' absence from home. Some of them answered with tears. It would be cruel to be torn from home and friends, perhaps husband and children, and not to see them for all that time. Sophia regretfully made out a new list, leaving out the most clamorous ones. There were no tears shed nor mournful looks given by the newly elected, for dear to the colored heart was the thought of change and travel. It was a secret imparted by Mammy Maria to her mistress that great was the disappointment of those who had overacted their part, thereby cutting themselves off from a much-coveted pleasure. . . .

Holiday Times on the Plantation

A life of Thomas Dabney could not be written without some reference to the Christmas at Burleigh. It was as looked forward to not only by the family and by friends in the neighborhood and at a distance, but by the house and plantation servants. The house was crowded with guests, young people and older ones too. During the holiday season Thomas and his guests were ready to accept invitations to parties in other houses, but no one in the neighborhood invited company for Christmas-Day, as, for years, everybody was expected at Burleigh on that day. On one of the nights during the holidays it was his custom to invite his former overseer and other plain neighbors to an eggnog-party. In the concoction of this beverage he took a hand himself, and the freedom and ease of the company, as they saw the master of the house beating his half of the eggs in the great china bowl, made it a pleasant scene for those who cared nothing for the eggnog.

During the holidays there were refreshments, in the old Virginia style, of more sorts than one. The oysters were roasted on the coals on the dining-room hearth, under the eyes of the guests.

Great bunches of holly and magnolia, of pine and mistletoe, were suspended from the ceiling of hall and dining-room and drawing-room.

Sometimes, not often, there was a Christmas-tree, — on one occasion one for the colored Sunday-school. One Christmas everybody hung up a sock or stocking; a long line, on the hall staircase. There were twenty-two of them, white silk stockings, black silk stockings, thread and cotton and woollen socks and stockings. And at the end of the line was, side by side with the old-fashioned home-spun and home-knit sock of the head of the house, the dainty pink sock of the three-weeks-old baby.

Who of that company does not remember the morning scramble over the stockings and the notes in prose and poetry that tumbled out!

The children's nurses modestly hung their stockings up by the nursery fireplace.

Music and dancing and cards and games of all sorts filled up a large share of the days and half the nights. The plantation was as gay as the house. The negroes in their holiday clothes were enjoying themselves in their own houses and in the "great house" too. A visit of a day to one of the neighboring towns was considered by them necessary to the complete enjoyments of the holidays.

They had their music and dancing too. The sound of the fiddles and banjos, and the steady rhythm of their dancing feet, floated on the air by day and night to the Burleigh house. But a time came when this was to cease. The whole plantation joined the Baptist church. Henceforth not a musical note nor the joyful motion of a negro's foot was ever again heard on the plantation. "I done buss' my fiddle an' my banjo, an' done fling 'em 'way," the most music-loving fellow on the place said to the preacher, when asked for his religious experience. It was surely the greatest sacrifice of feeling that such a race could make. Although it was a sin to have music and dancing of their own, it was none to enjoy that at the "great house." They filled the porches and doors, and in serried ranks stood men, women, and children, gazing as long as the music and dancing went on. Frequently they stood there till the night was more than half gone. In the crowd of faces could be recognized the venerable ones of the aged preachers, surrounded by their flocks.

Christmas was incomplete until the master of the house had sung his songs. He was full of action and gesture. His family used to say that although he was in character and general bearing an Englishman, his French blood asserted itself in his manner. In his motions he was quick, and at times, when he chose to make them so, very amusing, yet too full of grace to be undignified. He was fond of dancing, and put fresh interest in it, as he did in everything that he joined in.

On Christmas mornings the servants delighted in catching the family with "Christmas giff!" "Christmas giff!" betimes in the morning. They would spring out of unexpected corners and from behind doors on the young masters and mistresses. At such times there was an affectionate throwing off of the reserve and decorum of every-day life.

"Hi! ain't dis Chris'mus?" one of the quietest and most low-voiced of the maid-servants asked, in a voice as loud as a sea-captain's. One of the ladies of the house had heard an unfamiliar and astonishingly loud laugh under her window, and had ventured to put an inquiring head out.

In times of sorrow, when no Christmas or other festivities gladdened the Mississippi home, the negroes felt it sensibly. "It 'pears so lonesome; it mak' me feel bad not to see no comp'ny comin'," our faithful Aunt Abby said on one of these occasions. Her post as the head maid rendered her duties onerous when the house was full of guests. We had thought that she would be glad to have a quiet Christmas, which she could spend by her own fireside, instead of attending to the wants of a houseful of young people.

In the presence of the guests, unless they were old friends, the dignity of the family required that no light behavior should be indulged in, even though it

were Christmas. In no hands was the dignity of the family so safe as with negro slaves. A negro was as proud of the "blood" of his master and mistress as if it had been his own. Indeed, they greatly magnified the importance of their owners, and were readily affronted if aspersion of any sort were cast on their master's family. It was very humiliating to them, for they are all aristocrats by nature, to belong to what they call "poor white trash."

Our steady Lewis was often sent to take us to evening entertainments, on account of his being so quiet and nice in his ways. On one of these occasions he became so incensed that he refused to set his foot on that plantation again. Mammy Maria informed us of the cause of Lewis's anger. One of the maids in the house in which we were spending the evening had insulted him by saying that her mistress wore more trimming on her clothes than his young ladies did!

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Analyze and evaluate Smedes's description of the family's relationship with the slaves living and working at the Burleigh plantation. What point of view about the slaves' feelings toward the family does she emphasize?
2. From the portrait Smedes offers of her father, what do you imagine his reaction would have been had one of his slaves escaped, like the slave in Coffin's anecdote?
3. Analyze the role hospitality played in shaping a southern planter's perception of his roles and responsibilities on the plantation and within the broader community. To what extent did his welcoming generosity have political implications? What role did slaves play in the hospitality of the plantation?

12-6 | Free Blacks Push for Elevation of the Race *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention (1848)*

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was busy in 1848. In July, he attended the women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York, speaking eloquently on behalf of women's right to vote. In September, Douglass was in Cleveland, Ohio, presiding over the Colored National Convention of free African Americans. This convention, attended only by African American men, was part of the era's "convention movement," an organizational approach to reform that emphasized collective action. This meeting endorsed a series of resolutions addressed to the "mutual improvement and social elevation" of free blacks.

2. Resolved, That whatever is necessary for the elevation of one class is necessary for the elevation of another; the respectable industrial occupations, as mechanical trades, farming or agriculture, mercantile and professional

- business, wealth and education, being necessary for the elevation of the whites; therefore those attainments are necessary for the elevation of us.
Adopted.
3. Resolved, That we impressively recommend to our brethren throughout the country, the necessity of obtaining a knowledge of mechanical trade, farming, mercantile business, the learned professions, as well as the accumulation of wealth,—as the essential means of elevating us as a class.—Adopted.
 4. Resolved, That the occupation of domestics and servants among our people is degrading to us as a class, and we deem it our bounden duty to discountenance such pursuits, except where necessity compels the person to resort thereto as a means of livelihood.
 5. Resolved, That as Education is necessary in all departments, we recommend to our people, as far as in their power lies, to give their children especially, a business Education.
 6. Resolved, That the better to unite and concentrate our efforts as a people, we recommend the formation of an association, to be known as the ——. [Referred to a Committee, and subsequently the whole Resolution referred to the next Convention.]
 7. Resolved, That while our efforts shall be entirely moral in their tendency, it is no less the duty of this Convention to take Cognizance of the Political action of our brethren, and recommend to them that course which shall best promote the cause of Liberty and Humanity.
 8. Resolved, That we recommend to our brethren throughout the several states, to support no person or party, let the name or pretensions be what they may, that shall not have for their object the establishment of equal rights and privileges, without distinction of color, clime or condition.
 9. Resolved, That holding Liberty paramount to all earthly considerations, we pledge ourselves, to resist properly, every attempt to infringe upon our rights.
 10. Resolved, That Slavery is the greatest curse ever inflicted on man, being of hellish origin, the legitimate offspring of the Devil, and we therefore pledge ourselves, individually, to use all justifiable means for its speedy and immediate over-throw.
 11. Whereas a knowledge of the real moral, social, and political condition of our people is not only desirable but absolutely essential to the intelligent prosecution of measures for our elevation and improvement, and whereas our present isolated condition makes the attainment of such knowledge exceedingly difficult, Therefore Resolved, That this National Convention does hereby request the colored ministers and others [*sic*] persons throughout the Northern States, to collect, or cause to be collected accurate statistics of the condition of our people, during the coming year, in the various stations and circuits in which they may find themselves located, and that they be, and hereby are requested to prepare lists, stating—
 - 1st. The number of colored persons in the localities where they may be stationed; their general moral and social condition; and especially how many

- are farmers and mechanics, how many are merchants or storekeepers, how many are teachers, lawyers, doctors, ministers, and editors; how many are known to take and pay for newspapers; how many literary, debating, and other societies, for moral, mental, and social improvement; and that said ministers be, and hereby are, respectfully requested to forward all such information to a Committee of one, who shall be appointed for this purpose, and that the said Committee of one be requested to make out a synopsis of such information and to report the same to the next colored National Convention.
12. Resolved, That Temperance is another great lever for Elevation, which we would urge upon our people and all others to use, and earnestly recommend the formation of societies for its promotion.
 13. Resolved, That while we heartily engage in recommending to our people the Free Soil movement, and the support of the Buffalo Convention, nevertheless we claim and are determined to maintain the higher standard and more liberal views which have heretofore characterized us as abolitionists.
 14. Resolved, That as Liberty is a right inherent in man, and cannot be arrested without the most flagrant outrage, we recommend to our brethren in bonds, to embrace every favorable opportunity of effecting their escape.
 15. Resolved, that we pledge ourselves individually, to use all justifiable means in aiding our enslaved brethren in escaping from the Southern Prison House of Bondage.
 16. Resolved, that we recommend to the colored people every where, to use every just effort in getting their children into schools, in common with others in their several locations.
 17. Whereas, American Slavery is politically and morally an evil of which this country stands guilty, and cannot be abolished alone through the instrumentality of moral suasion and whereas the two great political parties of the Union have by their acts and nominations betrayed the sacred cause of human freedom, and
Whereas, a Convention recently assembled in the city of Buffalo having for its object the establishment of a party in support of free soil for a free people, and Whereas said Convention adopted for its platform the following noble expression, viz; "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor and Free Men," and believing these expressions well calculated to increase the interest now felt in behalf of the down-trodden and oppressed of this land; therefore,
Resolved, That we recommend to all colored persons in possession of the right of the elective Franchise, the nominees of that body for their suffrages, and earnestly request all good citizens to use their united efforts to secure their election to the chief offices in the gift of the people.
Resolved, that the great Free Soil Party of the United States, is bound together by a common sentiment expressing the wish of a large portion of the people of this Union, and that we hail with delight this great movement as the dawn of a bright and more auspicious day. [The Resolutions were rejected, but the Preamble prefixed to the 13th Resolution.]

18. Resolved, That Love to God and man, and Fidelity to ourselves ought to be the great motto which we will urge upon our people. . . .
23. Resolved, That among the means instrumental in the elevation of a people and believing the North Star, published and edited by Frederick Douglass and M. R. Delany at Rochester, fully to answer all the ends and purposes of a national press, we therefore recommend its support to the colored people throughout North America.
24. Resolved, That the Convention recommend to the colored citizens of the several Free States, to assemble in Mass State Conventions annually, and petition the Legislatures thereof to repeal the Black Laws, or all laws militating against the interests of colored people.
25. Whereas, we firmly believe with the Fathers of '76, that "taxation and representation ought to go together"; therefore,
Resolved, That we are very much in doubt as to the propriety of our paying any tax upon which representation is based, until we are permitted to be represented.
26. Resolved, That, as a body, the professed Christian American Churches generally, by their support, defence, and participation in the damning sin of American Slavery, as well as cruel prejudice and proscription of the nominally free colored people, have forfeited every claim of confidence on our part, and therefore merit our severest reprobation.
27. Resolved, That Conventions of a similar character to this are well calculated to enhance the interests of suffering humanity, and the colored people generally, and that we recommend such assemblages to the favorable consideration of our people.
28. Resolved, That the next National Convention of Colored Freemen shall be held in Detroit, Michigan, or at Pittsburgh, Pa., some time in the year 1850.
29. Resolved, That among the many oppressive schemes against the colored people in the United States, we view the American Colonization Society as the most deceptive and hypocritical—"clothed with the livery of heaven to serve the devil in," with President Roberts, of Liberia, a colored man, for its leader.
30. Resolved, That we tender to the citizens of Cleveland our unfeigned thanks for the noble resolution passed by them in approval of the doings of this Convention.
31. Resolved, That the prejudice against color, so called, is vulgar, unnatural, and wicked in the sight of God, and wholly unknown in any country where slavery does not exist. . . .
33. Whereas, we fully believe in the equality of the sexes, therefore,
Resolved, That we hereby invite females hereafter to take part in our deliberations.
34. Whereas, a portion of those of our colored citizens called barbers, by refusing to treat colored men on equality with the whites, do encourage prejudice among the whites of the several States; therefore,

Resolved, That we recommend to this class of men a change in their course of action relative to us; and if this change is not immediately made, we consider them base serviles, worthy only of the condemnation, censure, and defamation of all lovers of liberty, equality, and right.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Summarize the goals and means of achieving them as adopted by the delegates to the Colored National Convention. What can you infer about their approach to reform from the resolutions they passed?
2. How do the resolutions passed by the convention reflect the historical context of reform and politics during the antebellum period?

■ COMPARATIVE QUESTIONS ■

1. Explain and evaluate the multiple perspectives on southern slavery to identify similarities and differences in the way the institution was perceived during the period. To what extent do the points of view of these sources impact the interpretation of slavery they present?
2. How can you interpret the historical evidence in this chapter to construct an argument about the lives of enslaved African Americans? What evidence might point to ways slaves exercised some degree of power and autonomy within a system of white dominance?
3. How do your insights about the historical context of antebellum slavery help you understand the broader history of American race relations?
4. In addition to slave songs, what types of primary source evidence would help historians understand slavery from the perspective of the slaves themselves, most of whom left no written records?
5. What historical patterns of continuity or change concerning the politics of slavery can you observe, comparing 1850s Charleston with Luis Brandaon's 1610 letter (Document 1-6), Virginia's slave codes (Document 3-3), and the free blacks' 1777 petition (Document 6-3)?