

# History of a scout

Vincent Colyer, *Brief report of the services rendered by the freed people to the United States Army, in North Carolina* (New York: V. Colyer, 1864), pp. 17–22.

## As you read...

Unfortunately, we don't have this man's story in his own words, but his story is consistent with other accounts of slavery in the nineteenth century. We also know that there were hundreds of formerly enslaved people who lived for years in the woods as fugitive slaves, subsisting off the land and trading with poor whites and other slaves.

Vincent Colyer was from New York City. After the Union victory at New Bern, General Burnside appointed Vincent Colyer "Superintendent of the Poor" in the captured territory. Colyer's major responsibility was employing the thousands of slaves who had escaped to the Union lines, where they knew they would be free. Colyer recorded the experiences of African Americans he met at New Bern and published their stories in 1864.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why was William Kinney sold? How many times was he sold?
2. How were the men and women who were sold as slaves treated?
3. What comparisons did Kinney make between slavery in Virginia and North Carolina?
4. What motivated Kinney to escape slavery? Why did he choose to stay in North Carolina rather than escaping to the North?
5. How did Kinney survive in the woods? Where did he live and what did he eat?
6. How often did Kinney see his family?
7. Why did Kinney want a pass? Where was he going and why?
8. What instructions did Colyer give to Kinney? Why do you think Kinney was eager to help the Union?
9. Colyer replaced most of the names of people and places in Kinney's story with asterisks to protect their privacy — but he left Jim McDaniel's name. Why do you think he might have done that?

I will preface his story by saying that he was a tall, intelligent looking, well formed negro, of a singularly modest, refined and ingenuous look. His long incarceration in the woods, and non-communion with his fellows, had given him a meditative air and manner that was peculiar. He told his story without any apparent idea that it was in the least remarkable or uncommon, or with a thought of being a hero, yet with a full consciousness of the injustice and wrong to which he had in common with his race been subjected to while in slavery.

His dignity, earnestness, and uncomplaining resignation of manner should be known to have the story rightly appreciated.

My name is William Kinney; I belonged to \* \* \* who lived on \* \* \* in Jones County, North Carolina, where I was born, in what year, I could never ascertain. After \* \* \*'s death, his son \* \* \* drew lots and obtained me and left me to his \* \* \*'s son \* \* \* This \* \* \* sent me to Richmond to be sold, about six years ago. I was taken to jail, and after remaining there about two months, I was brought out and placed in the slave pen. They made us (there was a number from different parts of the country, all strangers to me,) strip stark naked; the women in one part of the room, the men in another; a rough cotton screen separating the two sexes. We were stood off at a short distance from our purchasers, and our physical condition fully considered and remarked upon, holding up our hands, turning round, and then we were sold accordingly. They did not call us "people," but "stock." ' I had been used in North Carolina to the title, "droves of people," but there in Richmond, they called us "droves of stock," "heads of stock," &c. After knocking about between different purchasers, I was traded off to go South. \* \* \* and \* \* \*, traders, bought me, and afterwards sold me to a man named \* \* \* to go South in Alabama. They took me out of Richmond jail, and in company with one hundred others, men, women and children, they put me on the train on the Weldon and Goldsborough Railroad. We were to go to Wilmington, and from there by water to Alabama. When the train had passed Goldsborough, and was below Strickland's depot, on the Goldsborough and Wilmington Railroad, it was night. Knowing that I was then as near to the residence of my wife and children, as I ever probably should be, I made an excuse to look out of the door, and watching my chance, while the train was in full motion, passing through a wood, I jumped off. I was three days and four nights in the woods before I got anything to eat. Bruised badly, and suffering from the strain of jumping off the train, being compelled to avoid every habitation, and in the woods and swamps I had a hard time of it. At the close of the fourth night, a colored man, a slave, gave me some food. After a while I reached my home and met my wife. It was still dark, and having had a word of good cheer from her, and kisses from my three children, I took a little food and returned to the woods, five miles away.

I have a son twenty-three years old, whom you know as \* \* \*, he works on the fort for the United States Government; and a daughter twenty-three years old, who was sold to a planter, I believe in Alabama; and four small children under the age of twelve years, two of whom have been born since I lived in the woods. These six children were all by the same wife \* \* \*. I staid in the woods in a close jungle, so thick that you could not penetrate it, except with the axe; and from that time to this, (it was February 12th, 1857, mid-winter, when I jumped off the train) now over five years, I have lived in that woods. I dared not permit myself to be seen by a white man for months, and then only by one or two of the very poorest, who traded with me in small things. I slept under the boughs and on a bed of pine blooms for a month or two (mid-winter and plenty of rain) until spring, when I began to build me a hut. I cut down small trees, and from an old fence got some boards, and soon built a place large enough to sleep in. I had to get a saw, so as not to make a noise; the sound of an axe would be heard a much greater distance. There were a great many cattle and swine in the glades among the reeds on which they feed in the fall. I have seen three and four hundred in a drove. They get so wild and skittish that the owners rarely keep any account of them. The poor people about, frequently kill them, and the owners seem not to be aware of it, or do not care for it. They are generally lean and thin cattle while left in this way. I killed one occasionally, and by trading a pig which I had killed and dressed, and leaving it in a place designated, a poor white man with whom I accidentally became acquainted; by previous arrangement brought a gun and left it in the same place. I took the gun and he took the pig, of course without meeting each other. Afterwards I exchanged other things; the hide of a

cow, &c., for shot and powder. If I had received them from him in person, or he had been found out, his punishment would have been very severe; but I saw him but rarely, as my acquaintance was too dangerous a thing for him. Once I was hunted out by bloodhounds. One Jim McDaniel kept a pack of these dogs, and they were put on my track.<sup>2</sup> There were eight dogs, and they were upon me before I had time to prepare. With an old scythe which I had made into a cutlass, I killed two and crippled another, but I was forced to fly to the middle of the swamp to get clear of them, wading up to my middle in water and mud. After some days I returned to my hut, and found that my pursuers had robbed me of everything, and nearly destroyed the hut. This would not be considered worth much to most people under ordinary circumstances, but it was a great loss to me, and besides, compelled me to change my hiding place. As I had been from youth up always in delicate health (was "sickly," as they called me,) and was sold to the traders by my owner \* \* \* very low, and he had got his money, they did not make that careful search for me they would otherwise have done. My wife's owner offered \$400 for me, but my master thought he could get more than that for me in Richmond, and so I was sent there. The Alabama planter, who bought me, paid \$700 for me, I was told. I never dared to stay at my wife's cabin more than a few minutes at a time, although it was always night when I visited her. She has been as faithful a wife to me as woman could be, and though she has had two children since I have lived in the woods, their resemblance to the others is so striking, that their master troubled my wife very much to get her to betray my whereabouts.

As soon as possible after the United States army took Newbern, I came within the Union lines. I have worked a month for you on the fort, have eight dollars, wages received there, in my pocket, and now hearing that my wife's owner has run away, and she and the children are up in the country alone, I have come to you for a pass to go and bring them down.

I listened to his simple story, and then asked him if he would be willing, while after his wife, to go a little further, up to Kingston and thereabout, and take a good look at the rebel encampments, make a careful note on his memory of their number and situation, inquire of the negroes in their cabins all about the enemy, and bring this information for us, with his wife and children on his return. I told him I would pay him handsomely if he brought us information of value. He said he would gladly, he knew every inch of the road. I gave him rations for three days, some small change in silver, and a pass. Two weeks after this the tall form of this negro stood before me, he had returned with his wife and four children. He said, "Sir, this is the first time in five years I have dared to stand before a white man, and call my wife and children my own."

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## On the web

### Freed people at New Bern

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4835>

Excerpt from the report of Vincent Colyer, Superintendent of the Poor for Union-occupied North Carolina during the Civil War, about his work with freedmen and escaped slaves. Includes historical commentary.

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## Notes

1. Asterisks or dashes were used when the name of a person or place had been removed, usually to protect someone's privacy.
2. Coyer added, in a footnote, "This man and his dogs were captured by Col. Mix's cavalry a short time since, and he is now in Newbern jail" — arrested, presumably, for what he did to William Kinney.