

James Curry escapes from slavery

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

"Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave." *The Liberator*, January 10, 1840.

As you read...

James Curry was born in 1815 in Person County, North Carolina. He was the son of an enslaved woman and free black man. When Curry was two years old, his father traveled south with a white man, who sold him into slavery. Neither Curry nor his mother saw his father again.

When Curry was 22, he escaped from slavery. He made it to Canada and lived as a free man. In 1865, he returned to North Carolina in hopes of being reunited with his family.

This excerpt from his autobiography was first published in 1840, when Curry was living in Canada.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What, according to Curry, were the differences between the work of a slave and a free person?
2. How did masters try to extract more work from their slaves? What strategies did they use?
3. Why do you think Curry asked his master for permission to marry? Why do you think the master refused?
4. In what ways did masters demand that slaves show deference — submission and respect? Why did slaves comply?
5. When Curry disobeyed, how was he punished? What threats did his master use to try to keep Curry obedient?
6. How many times was Curry nearly captured on his escape? Who helped him? Who tried to capture him?
7. What did Curry lose by leaving North Carolina and fleeing to Canada? What did he say he was prepared to lose? What does his story tell us about the sacrifices slaves were willing to make in order to be free?

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After I was sixteen, I was put into the field to work² in the spring and summer, and in the autumn and winter, I worked in the hatter's shop with my uncle. We raised on the plantation, principally, tobacco, some cotton, and some grain. We commenced work as

soon as we could see in the morning, and worked from that time until 12 o'clock before breakfast, and then until dark, when we had our dinner, and hastened to our night-work for ourselves. We were not driven as field slaves generally are, and yet when I hear people here say they work as hard as the slaves, I can tell them from experience, they know nothing about it. And even if they did work as hard, there is one striking difference. When they go home at night, they carry to their families the wages of their daily labor; and then they have the night for rest and sleep. Whereas, the slave carries to his family at night, only a weary body and a sick mind, and all he can do for them is done during the hours allowed him for sleep. A slave, who was hired during one summer by Thomas Maguhee, a rich slaveholder in our neighborhood, soon after his return, passed with me, one day, near a field on his plantation. Pointing to it, he said, 'I never saw blood flow any where as I've seen it flow in that field. It flows there like water. When I went there to work, I was a man but now, I am a boy. I could then carry several bushels on my shoulder, but now I cannot lift one to it.' So very hard had he been worked. When arranging the slaves for hoeing in the field, the overseer takes them, one at a time, and tries their speed, and places them accordingly in the row, the swiftest first and so on. Then they commence, and all must keep up with the foremost. This Thomas Maguhee used to walk into his field, with his hat close down on his head, and holding his cane over his shoulder. When he came up to the poor slaves, as they were tugging at their hoes, he would call out, 'boys!' Then they must all raise their hats and reply simultaneously, 'Sir.' 'Move your hoes.' They would spring forward and strive to increase their speed to the utmost; but presently he would call out again, 'boys!' Again the hats were raised as they answered, 'Sir.' 'I told you to move your hoes, and you hav'nt moved them yet. I have twice to threat and once to fall. (That is, if you do not move faster, I shall knock you down.) Now the poor creatures must make their last effort, and when he saw that their every power was exerted, he would set his hat on the top of his head, taking down his cane, set his arms akimbo and strut through the field....

When in my twentieth year, I became attached to a free colored girl, who lived about two miles from our plantation. When I asked my master's consent to our marriage, he refused to give it, and swore that he would cut my throat from ear to ear, before I should marry a free nigger; and with thus he left me. I did not expect him to consent, but I had determined to do in this as I pleased; I knew he would not kill me, because I was money to him, and all the time keeping freedom in my view, I knew I could run away if he punished me. And so we were married. We did not dare to have any even of the trifling ceremony allowed to the slaves³, but God married us. It was about two months before he said any thing to me about it. He then attacked me one Sabbath morning, and told me I had broken his orders. He said I should not have my free wife, for he would separate us, as far as there was land to carry me. I told him if I was separated from her, I should choose to be sent away. He then told me that she was a bad girl, and endeavored by his falsehoods to make me believe it. My indignation was roused, I forgot whom I was talking to, and was on the point of giving him the lie, when I recollected myself and smothered my feelings. He then again said he would cut my throat from ear to ear, and if he had his pen-knife, he would do it now. I told him he might kill me if he chose, I had rather die than be separated from my wife. A man with whom he had been negotiating for overseer, was standing by, and he said to my master, I would not do that; you know what the Scripture says about separating man and wife⁴; and he soon desisted and never said any more about it.

But notwithstanding my union with the object of my affection, and the comparatively good treatment I received, I still cherished the longing for liberty, which, from my childhood, had been the prevailing desire of my heart. Hitherto, my attachment to my relations, to my mother in particular, had determined me to remain as long as a strict performance of my allotted labors saved me from being whipped; but the time came, when, having obtained a knowledge of the course which would carry me to Pennsylvania, I only waited for an occasion to escape. It is very common for slaves, when whipped or threatened with a whipping, to run into the woods, and after a short time, when subdued by hunger, not knowing whither to flee for relief, to return and throw themselves upon the mercy of their masters. Therefore, when a slave runs away, on such an occasion, it is expected that he will soon return, and little trouble is taken about it for some days. For such an occasion I now waited, and it was not long before it came without my seeking it. In May, 1837, just after I was 22 years old, the overseer sent a boy to me one evening, with a horse, bidding me go with him to feed him. It was then between nine and ten o'clock at night. I had toiled through the day for my master, had just got my dinner, and was on my way to the hatter's shop for my night's work, when the boy came to me. I did not think it necessary for me to go with him, so I told him where to put the horse, and that the feed was all ready and he might throw it in; and then I went to my work at the shop, where I was allowed to make hats, using nothing of my master's, except tools and the dye, which would be thrown away after my uncle had done with it. In a few minutes, the overseer came in and asked me why I did not go with the boy. I began to reply, by telling him that I thought he did not care if the horse was but fed, and the boy could just as well do it alone; he said he would let me know that I should obey my orders, and if I did not move and feed the horse, he would thrush me as long as he could find me. I went to the house to obey him, and he followed me; but the horse was fed when I got there. He then swore that he would flog me because I had not obeyed his orders. He took a hickory rod and struck me some thirty or forty strokes, over my clothes. My first impulse was to take the stick out of his hand, for I was much stronger than he. But I recollected that my master was in the house, and if I did so, he would be called, and probably I should be stripped and tied, and instead of thirty or forty, should receive hundreds of stripes. I therefore concluded it was wisest to take quietly whatever he choose to inflict, but as the strokes fell upon my back, I firmly resolved that I would no longer be a slave. I would now escape or die in the attempt. They might shoot me down if they chose, but I would not live a slave. The next morning, I decided, that, as my master was preparing for one of his slave-driving expeditions to Alabama, I would wait until he was gone; that when he was fairly started on his journey, I would start on mine, he for the south, and I for the north. In the meantime, I instructed my two younger brothers in my plans. It happened that on the afternoon of the 14th of June, about three weeks after the whipping I received, and just after my master had set off for Alabama, as we were going to the field after breakfast, to ploughing, the overseer got very angry with me and my two brothers, and threatened to whip us before night. He said that as he could not do it himself, there were men in the neighborhood he could get to help him, and then he walked away. This was our opportunity. We took our horses round to the road fence and hitched them, and ran for my wife's house. There I changed my clothes, and took my leave of her, with the hope of being soon able to send for her from a land of freedom, and left her in a state of distress which I cannot describe. We started without money and without clothes, except what we wore, (not daring to carry a bundle,) but with our hearts full of hope. We

travelled by night, and slept in the woods during the day. After travelling two or three nights, we got alarmed and turned out of the road, and before we turned into it again, it had separated, and we took the wrong road. It was cloudy for two or three days, and after travelling three nights, we found ourselves just where we were three days before, and almost home again. We were sadly disappointed, but not discouraged; and so, turning our faces again northward, we went on.

Near Petersburg, we passed a neat farm-house, with every thing around it in perfect order, which had once been shown to me by a slave, as I was driving my master's team to the city. 'That,' said he, 'belongs to a Friend⁵; they never hold slaves.' Now I was strongly tempted to stop there, and ask instruction in my northward course, as I knew the way no farther; but I dared not. So, not knowing the north star, we took the two lower stars of the great bear for our guide, and putting our trust in God, we passed Petersburg⁶. We suffered much from hunger. There was no fruit and no grain to be found at that season, and we sometimes went two days, and sometimes three, without tasting food, as we did not dare to ask, except when we found a slave's, or free colored person's house remote from any other, and then we were never refused, if they had food to give. Thus we came on, until about forty-five miles from Washington, when, having in the night obtained some meal, and having then been three days without food, my poor brothers begged me to go out of the woods in the day time, and get some fire in order to bake us some bread. I went to a house, got some and returned to the woods. We made a fire in the hollow stump of a tree, mixed our meal with water, which we found near, and wrapping it in leaves, threw it in and baked it. After eating heartily, we began to bake some to carry with us, when, hearing a noise in the bushes, we looked up, and beheld dogs coming towards us, and behind them several white men, who called out, 'O! you rascals, what are you doing there? Catch him! catch him!' The dogs sprang towards us. My feelings I cannot describe, as I started, and ran with all my might. My brothers, having taken off their coats and hats, stopped to pick them up, and then ran off in another direction, and the dogs followed them, while I escaped, and never saw them more. I heard the dogs barking after them, when I had got as much as a mile from where we started. Oh! then I was most miserable, left alone, a poor hunted stranger in a strange land—my brothers gone. I know not how to express the feelings of that moment. After listening awhile, I went forward. I had lost my way, and knew not where I was, but I looked at the sun, and as near as I could, pursued a northward course. In that afternoon I was attacked by a wild beast. I knew not what it was. I thought, surely I am beset this day, but unlike the men, more ferocious than wild beasts, I succeeded in driving him away, and that night crossed a branch of the Potomac. Just before I reached the town of Dumfries⁷, I came across an old horse in a field with a bell on his neck. I had been warned by a colored man, a few nights before, to beware of Dumfries. I was worn out with running, and I took the bell off the horse's neck, took the bell collar for a whip, and putting a hickory bark round his head for a bridle, I jumped on his back, and thus mounted, I rode through Dumfries. The bull-dogs lay along the street, ready to seize the poor night traveller, but, being on horse-back, they did not molest me. I have no doubt that I should have been taken up, if I had been on foot. When I got through the town, I dismounted, and said to my horse, 'go back to your master, I did not mean to injure him, and hope we will get you again, but you have done me a great deal of good.' And then I hastened on, and got as far from him as I could before morning. At Alexandria⁸, I crossed the Potomac river, and came to Washington, where I made friends with a colored family, with whom I rested eight

days. I then took the Montgomery road, but, wishing to escape Baltimore, I turned off, and it being cloudy, I lost my course, and fell back again upon the Potomac river, and travelled on the tow path of the canal⁹ from Friday night until Sunday morning, when I lay down and slept a little, and then, having no place to hide for the day, I determined to go on until I could find a place of safety. I soon saw a man riding towards me on horse-back. As he came near, he put his eyes upon me, and I felt sure that he intended to question me. I fell to praying to God to protect me, and so begging and praying fervently, I went forward. When he met me, he stopped his horse, leaned forward and looked at me, and then, without speaking, rode on again. I still fully believe it was at first his intention to question me. I soon entered a colored person's house on the side of the canal, where they gave me breakfast and treated me very kindly. I travelled on through Williamsport and Hagerstown¹⁰, in Maryland, and, on the 19th day of July, about two hours before day. I crossed the line into Pennsylvania, with a heart full of gratitude to God, believing that I was indeed a free man, and that now, under the protection of law, there was 'none who could molest me or make me afraid.' In the course of the morning, I was spoken to by a man, sitting at the window of a house in Chambersburg, who asked me if I wanted a job of work. I replied that I did, and he took me into his garden, and set me to work. When the job there was done, he told me I might clean his carriage. At dinner, I ate in the kitchen with a colored woman. She inquired where I came from, I told her the name of the town in Pennsylvania. Said she, 'I didn't know but you came from Virginia, or Maryland, and sometimes, some of our colored friends come from there hither, and think they are free, but the people about here are very ugly, and they take them and carry them back; and if you haven't sufficient free papers, I would advise you not to stay here to-night.' This was enough for me. I had discovered that the man was very curious about me, and seemed disposed to keep me at work upon little jobs until night. I went out, and jumped over the garden wall, and was soon on the turnpike road. I was very fearful, and came on tremblingly; but near Philadelphia¹¹, I fell in with members of the Society of Friends¹², whom I never feared to trust, who 'took in the stranger,' and I worked for them until Christmas.

After finding, to my great disappointment, that I was now a free man, and that I could not send for my wife from here, I determined to go to Canada. But the situation of that country at that time was such¹³, that my friends thought it not best for me to go immediately, and advised me to come into the State of Massachusetts, as the safest place for me until the difficulties in Canada were passed away. I was taken by kind friends to New York, from whence the Abolitionists sent me to Massachusetts, and here I have found a resting place, and have met with friends who have freely administered to my necessities, and whose kindness to the poor fugitive I shall ever remember with emotions of heartfelt gratitude. And here I have fulfilled the promise made in slavery to my Maker, that I would acknowledge him before men, when I came into a land of freedom. And although I have suffered much, very much in my escape, and have not here found that perfect freedom which I anticipated, yet I have never for one moment regretted that I thus sought my liberty.

In a few days I start for Canada, fully believing that he who has thus far protected me, will guide me safely, where, under the free government of Queen Victoria¹⁴, I may feel myself a man. I trust in God.

On the web

Colonial Slave Resistance

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/colonialslaveresistance.pdf>

In this lesson from the Civic Education Consortium, students will work to see beyond the stereotypical image of slaves as docile archetypes and examine the various ways slaves, as rational men and women, resisted their unjust circumstances to the best of their ability.

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Notes

1. See <http://maps.google.com/maps?f=d&source=embed&saddr=person+county,+NC+&daddr=petersburg,+VA+to:dumfries,+VA+to:alexandria&w%3BFRQqYAIIdPlx5-w%3B&mra=ls&via=7,8&sll=36.440727,-78.574696&sspn=0.01885,0.083256&ie=UTF8&>
2. Prior to his sixteenth birthday, Curry worked as a domestic servant.
3. Slave unions were not legally considered marriages in North Carolina or in other southern states. Sometimes a minister performed a ceremony, although it was not legally binding. Most often, to show their union, the couple would hold hands and jump over a broom that was held over the base of a door.
4. When asked if a man could divorce his wife, Jesus replied, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6).
5. A member of the Society of Friends, or Quakers.
6. Petersburg, Virginia, is about 130 miles from Person County, and would have taken about 40 hours to reach on foot.
7. Dumfries, Virginia, is about 100 miles north of Petersburg.
8. Alexandria, Virginia, is about 25 miles north of Dumfries.
9. A towroad is a road that runs alongside a canal or road. Animals or people would pull a barge or boat up a river as they walked along the side of the canal.
10. Hagerstown, Maryland, is about 80 miles northwest of Alexandria.
11. Philadelphia is about 400 miles north of Person County.
12. Since the late 18th century, the Society of Friends (Quakers) had been opposed to slavery. Friends were instrumental in setting up the Underground Railroad and in helping slaves reach Canada.
13. From late 1837 through the first part of 1838, there was a rebellion in the British colony of Upper Canada (Southern Ontario near Toronto). It was an uprising of several hundred men, many of whom were English and Scottish, against British colonial government. The instability inspired a brief rebellion among French Canadians in Lower Canada (Southern Quebec). The rebellions

were ultimately unsuccessful, and it would be another thirty years before Canada was granted independence by Great Britain.

14. Queen Victoria was the head of state of Britain from 1837 to 1901. By the time of Queen Victoria's reign, the monarch was a ceremonial figure, and British colonies such as Canada were governed by the Parliament in England and by local elected legislative assemblies in the colonies.

About the author

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