

Lunsford Lane buys his freedom

Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane...* (Boston: Published by the author, 1842), pp. 14–18.

As you read...

Lunsford Lane was born into slavery in Raleigh in 1803. He began earning money when he was very young — selling fruit, tobacco, and pipes, and cutting wood — and eventually made enough money to arrange for his freedom.

Because Lane had received his freedom in New York, he was in violation of a North Carolina law which forbade free blacks from other states from entering North Carolina. He was given twenty-one days to leave. Although his petition to stay in North Carolina was supported by prominent whites, he was forced to leave the state in 1841.

Lane went to the North, where he spoke at abolitionist meetings. By 1842, he was able to raise enough money to purchase his wife and seven children from slavery. When he returned to Raleigh to free them, though, he was arrested for spreading abolitionist messages, which was a crime in North Carolina. There was no evidence against him, and so he was freed. But a mob then captured Lane and tarred and feathered him. This was a common form of mob violence in which the mob would coat a person in hot tar and then cover him with feathers. It would take days for the tar to peel off, and when it did, and large pieces of the person's flesh would come off with it.

With the assistance of friends, Lane and his family were put on a train to Philadelphia. Lane spent the rest of his life in the North.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why do you think Lane avoided purchasing nice clothing? Why did he try to keep his wealth hidden?
2. What obstacles did Lane face when he tried to purchase his freedom? What does his story tell us about the difficulties enslaved people faced in trying to obtain their freedom through legal means?
3. What words did Lane use to describe being free?

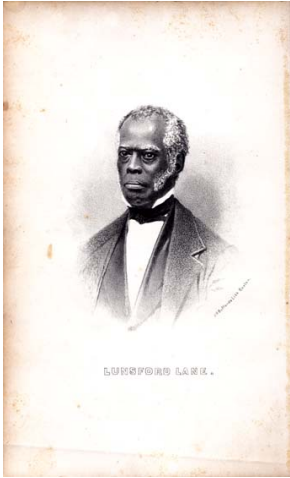


Figure 1. Lunsford Lane had a difficult life not only while he was enslaved but after he bought his freedom.

At this time an event occurred, which, while it cast a cloud over the prospects of some of my fellow slaves, was a rainbow over mine. My master died; and his widow, by the will, became sole executrix of his property. To the surprise of all, the bank of which he had been cashier presented a claim against the estate for forty thousand dollars. By a compromise, this sum was reduced to twenty thousand dollars; and my mistress, to meet the amount, sold some of her slaves, and hired out others. I hired my time of her¹, for which I paid her a price varying from one hundred dollars to one hundred and twenty dollars per year. This was a privilege which comparatively few slaves at the South enjoy; and in this I felt truly blessed.

I commenced the manufacture of pipes and tobacco on an enlarged scale. I opened a regular place of business, labelled my tobacco in a conspicuous manner with the names of “Edward and Lunsford Lane,” and of some of the persons who sold it for me, — established agencies for the sale in various parts of the State, one at Fayetteville, one at Salisbury, one at Chapel Hill, and so on, — sold my articles from my place of business, and about town, also deposited them in stores on commission, and thus, after paying my mistress for my time, and rendering such support as necessary to my family, I found in the space of some six or eight years, that I had collected the sum of one thousand dollars. During this time I had found it politic to go shabbily dressed, and to appear to be very poor, but to pay my mistress for my services promptly. I kept my money hid, never venturing to put out a penny, nor to let any body but my wife know that I was making any. The thousand dollars was what I supposed my mistress would ask for me, and so I determined now what I would do.

I went to my mistress and inquired what was her price for me. She said a thousand dollars. I then told her that I wanted to be free, and asked her if she would sell me to be made free. She said she would; and accordingly I arranged with her, and with the master of my wife, Mr. Smith, already spoken of, for the latter to take my money² and buy of her my freedom, as I could not legally purchase it, and as the laws forbid emancipation except, for “meritorious services.” This done, Mr. Smith endeavored to emancipate me formally, and to get my manumission recorded; I tried also; but the court judged that I had done nothing “meritorious,” and so I remained, nominally only, the slave of Mr. Smith for a year; when, feeling unsafe in that relation, I accompanied him to New York whither he was going to purchase goods, and was there regularly and formally made a freeman, and there my manumission was recorded. I returned to my family in Raleigh, and endeavored to do by them as a freeman should. I had known what it was to be a slave, and I knew what it was to be free.

But I am going too rapidly over my story. When the money was paid to my mistress and the conveyance fairly made to Mr. Smith, I felt that I was free. And a queer and a joyous feeling it is to one who has been a slave. I cannot describe it, only it seemed as though I was in heaven. I used to lie awake whole nights thinking of it. And oh, the strange thoughts that passed through my soul, like so many rivers of light; deep and rich were their waves as they rolled; — these were more to me than sleep, more than soft slumber after long months of watching over the decaying, fading frame of a friend, and the loved one laid to rest in the dust. But I cannot describe my feelings to those who have never been slaves; then why should I attempt it? He who has passed from spiritual death to life, and received the witness within his soul that his sins are forgiven, may possibly form some distant idea, like the ray of the setting sun from the far off mountain top, of the emotions of an

emancipated slave. That opens heaven. To break the bonds of slavery, opens up at once both earth and heaven. Neither can be truly seen by us while we are slaves.

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. Elsewhere, Lunsford wrote,

It is contrary to the laws of the State, for a slave to have command of his own time in this way, but in Raleigh it is sometimes winked at. I knew one slave-man who was doing well for himself, taken up by the public authorities and hired out for the public good, three times in succession for this offence. The time of hiring in such a case is one year. The master is subject to a fine. But generally as I have said, if the slave is orderly and appears to be making nothing, neither he nor the master is interfered with.

2. Elsewhere, Lunsford wrote,

Legally, my money belonged to my mistress; and she could have taken it and refused to grant me my freedom. But she was a very kind woman for a slave owner; and she would under the circumstances, scorn to do such a thing. I have known of slaves, however, served in this way.

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Figure 1 (page 2)

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