

Slave Narrative Excerpts

Document A:

Henry Watson was born enslaved in Virginia and was sent to Richmond at age eight to be sold at auction.

Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave, 1848

Each one of the traders has private jails, which are for the purpose of keeping slaves in, and they are generally kept by some confidential slave . . . These jails are enclosed by a wall about 16 feet high, and the yard-room is for the slaves to exercise in and consists of but one room, in which all sexes and ages are huddled together in a mass. I stayed in this jail but two days when the number was completed, and we were called out to form a line. Horses and wagons were in readiness to carry our provisions and tents so that we might camp out at night. Before we had proceeded far, Mr. Denton gave orders for us to stop for the purpose of handcuffing some of the men, which, he said in a loud voice, “had the devil in them.” The men belonging to this drove were all married men, and all leaving their wives and children behind; he, judging from their tears that they were unwilling to go, had them made secure. We started again on our journey, Mr. Denton taking the lead in his sulky; and the driver, Mr. Thornton, brought the rear.

...While in Tennessee we lost four of our number who died from exposure on the road. After the lapse of three weeks we started again on our journey, and in about four weeks arrived in Natchez, Miss., and went to our pen, which Mr. Denton had previously hired for us, and had our irons taken off and our clothes changed; for Mr. Denton was expecting visitors to examine the flock, as he would sometimes term us. There was a sign-board in front of the house, which informed traders that he had on hand blacksmiths, carpenters, field-hands; also several sickly ones, whom he would sell very cheap.

Just before the doors are opened, it is usual for the keeper to grease the mouths of the slaves so as to make it appear that they are well and hearty, and have just done eating fat meat; though they seldom, if ever, while in the custody of the keeper, taste a morsel of meat of any kind. At length, a man made his appearance; the very man of all others I had ever seen, from whom I should shrink and be afraid...he was a very bad-looking man. I never wish to look upon his face again. His name was Alexander McNeill, a member of the firm of McNeill, Fiske & Co. He said he wanted a boy to bring up to suit himself. He took a great fancy to me, and after some discussion about the price, agreed at last to give five hundred dollars for me. I quit my old quarters and went with my new master to his store. He told me my duty for the future would be to wait upon him—“to jump when I was spoken to, run when sent upon errands, and if I did not mind my P’s and Q’s, I should be flogged like h—I.”

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Document B:

Henry Bibb, after escaping to Canada and returning later to free his wife and child, was recaptured in Kentucky and sold with them in New Orleans.

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

We had there to pass through an examination or inspection by a city officer, whose business it was to inspect slave property that was brought to that Market for sale. He examined our backs to see if we had been much scarred by the lash. He examined our limbs to see whether we were inferior. As it is hard to tell the ages of slaves, they look in their mouths at their teeth and prick up the skin on the back of their hands, and if the person is very far advanced in life, when the skin is pricked up, the pucker will stand so many seconds on the back of the hand.

But the most rigorous examinations of slaves by those slave inspectors is on the mental capacity. If they are found to be very intelligent, this is pronounced the most objectionable of all other qualities connected with the life of a slave. In fact, it undermines the whole fabric of his chattelhood; it prepares for what slaveholders are pleased to pronounce the unpardonable sin when committed by a slave. It lays the foundation for running away and going to Canada. They also see in it a love for freedom, patriotism, insurrection, bloodshed, and exterminating war against American slavery.

Hence they are very careful to inquire whether a slave who is for sale can read or write. This question has been asked me often by slave traders and cotton planters, while I was there for market. After conversing with me, they have sworn by their Maker that they would not have me among their negroes and that they saw the devil in my eye; I would run away, &c [etc.].

I have frequently been asked also if I had ever run away, but Garrison would generally answer this question for me in the negative. He could have sold my little family without any trouble for the sum of one thousand dollars. But for fear he might not get me off at so great an advantage, as the people did not like my appearance, he could do better by selling us all together. They all wanted my wife, while but very few wanted me. He asked twenty-five hundred dollars but was not able to get us off at that price.

He tried to speculate on my Christian character. He tried to make it appear that I was so pious and honest that I would not run away for ill treatment, which was a gross mistake, for I never had religion enough to keep me from running away from slavery in my life. But we were taken from Vicksburgh to the city of New Orleans where we were to be sold at any rate. We were taken to a trader's yard or a slave prison on the corner of St. Joseph street. This was a common resort for slave traders and planters who wanted to buy slaves; and all classes of slaves were kept there for sale, to be sold in private or public— young or old, males or females, children or parents, husbands or wives.

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Document C:

Born in Virginia to a free mother and enslaved father, William Anderson was kidnapped as a child and sold into slavery. His owner took him and nearly seventy other newly purchased slaves, chained together, to his Mississippi plantation.

Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave; Sold Eight Times! In Jail Sixty Times!! Whipped Three Hundred Times!!! or The Dark Deeds of American Slavery Revealed, 1857

In due time we arrived safely in the slave pen at Natchez [Mississippi], and here we joined another large crowd of slaves which were already stationed at this place. Here scenes were witnessed which are too wicked to mention. The slaves are made to shave and wash in greasy pot liquor to make them look sleek and nice; their heads must be combed and their best clothes put on; and when called out to be examined they are to stand in a row—the women and men apart—then they are picked out and taken into a room, and examined. See a large, rough slaveholder take a poor female slave into a room, make her strip, then feel of and examine her as though she were a pig, or a hen, or merchandise. O, how can a poor slave husband or father stand and see his wife, daughters and sons thus treated.

I saw there, after men and women had followed each other, then—too shocking to relate—for the sake of money they are sold separately, sometimes two hundred miles apart, although their hopes would be to be sold together. Sometimes their little children are torn from them and sent far away to a distant country, never to see them again. O, such crying and weeping when parting from each other! For this demonstration of natural human affection the slaveholder would apply the lash or paddle upon the naked skin. The former was used less frequently than the latter, for fear of making scars or marks on their backs, which are closely looked for by the buyer. I saw one poor woman dragged off and sold from her tender child—which was nearly white—which the seller would not let go with its mother. Although the master of the mother importuned him a long time to let him have it with its mother, with oaths and curses he refused. It was too hard for the mother to bear; she fainted and was whipped up.

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Document D:

Solomon Northup, a free African American from New York, was kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1841. In his memoir, Northup recalls his experience at a New Orleans auction.

Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841

Next day many customers called to examine Freeman's "new lot." The latter gentleman was very loquacious, dwelling at much length upon our several good points and qualities. He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase. Sometimes a man or woman was taken back to the small house in the yard, stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale.

One old gentleman, who said he wanted a coachman, appeared to take a fancy to me. From his conversation with Burch, I learned he was a resident in the city. I very much desired that he would buy me, because I conceived it would not be difficult to make my escape from New-Orleans on some northern vessel. Freeman asked him fifteen hundred dollars for me. The old gentleman insisted it was too much, as times were very hard. Freeman, however, declared that I was sound and healthy, of a good constitution, and intelligent. He made it a point to enlarge upon my musical attainments.

The same man also purchased Randall. The little fellow was made to jump, and run across the floor, and perform many other feats, exhibiting his activity and condition. All the time the trade was going on, Eliza was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She besought the man not to buy him, unless he also bought her self and Emily. She promised, in that case, to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively. Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her. He would not have such work—such snivelling; and unless she ceased that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Yes, he would take the nonsense out of her pretty quick—if he didn't, might he be d—d. Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman, could not wholly silence the afflicted mother. She kept on begging and beseeching them, most piteously not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy. A great many times she repeated her former promises—how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would labor day and night, to the last moment of her life, if he would only buy them all together. But it was of no avail; the man could not afford it. The bargain was agreed upon, and Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him; embraced him passionately; kissed him again and again; told him to remember her—all the while her tears falling in the boy's face like rain.

Freeman damned her, calling her a blubbering, bawling wench, and ordered her to go to her place, and behave herself; and be somebody. He swore he wouldn't stand such stuff but a little longer. He would soon give her something to cry about, if she was not mighty careful, and that she might depend upon.

The planter from Baton Rouge, with his new purchases, was ready to depart.

"Don't cry, mama. I will be a good boy. Don't cry," said Randall, looking back, as they passed out of the door.
