

Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South*



ABOUT THE READING Jacob Stroyer was born a slave on a plantation in South Carolina in 1849. He remained a slave in South Carolina until he gained his freedom during the Civil War. He settled in Massachusetts, where he became a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Stroyer's *My Life in the South* provides a vivid description of what he saw and endured as a slave. In this passage, Stroyer describes the terror that many slaves felt as they were sold away from family and friends.

VOCABULARY

wringing twisting hands in anguish

consolation comfort



As you read think about how slaves reacted to being shipped away from friends and relatives.

When the day came for them to leave, some, who seemed to have been willing to go at first, refused, and were handcuffed together and guarded on their way to the cars by white men. The women and children were driven to the depot in crowds, like so many cattle, and the sight of them caused great excitement among master's negroes. Imagine . . . people shedding tears and yelling at the tops of their voices in anguish and grief.

The victims were to take the cars from a station called Clarkson turnout, which was about four miles from master's place. The excitement was so great that the overseer and driver could not control the relatives and friends of those that were going away, as a large crowd of both old and young went down to the depot to see them off. Louisiana was considered by the slaves as a place of slaughter, so those who were going did not expect to see their

The slaves from Stroyer's plantation were overcome with sadness at the sight of other slaves about to be loaded onto the train.

Source: *My Life in the South*, by Jacob Stroyer, Salem: Observer Book and Job Print, 1890.

friends again. While passing along, many of the negroes left their masters' fields and joined us as we marched to the cars; some were yelling and **wringing** their hands, while others were singing little hymns that they were accustomed to for the **consolation** of those that were going away, such as

“When we all meet in heaven,
There is no parting there;
When we all meet in heaven,
There is parting no more.”

We arrived at the depot and had to wait for the cars to bring the others from the Sumterville Jail, but they soon came in sight, and when the noise of the cars died away we heard wailing and shrieks from those in the cars. While some were weeping, others were fiddling, picking banjo, and dancing as they used to do in their cabins on the plantations. Those who were so merry had very bad masters, and even though they stood a chance of being sold to one as bad or even worse, yet they were glad to be rid of the one they knew.

While the cars were at the depot, a large crowd of white people gathered, and were laughing and talking about the prospect of negro traffic; but when the cars began to start and the conductor cried out, “all who are going on this train must get on board without delay,” the colored people cried out with one voice as though the heavens and earth were coming together, and it was so pitiful, that those hard hearted white men who had been accustomed to driving slaves all their lives, shed tears like children. As the cars moved away we heard the weeping and wailing from the slaves as far as human voice could be heard; and from that time to the present I have neither seen nor heard from my two sisters, nor any of those who left Clarkson depot on that memorable day.

Slaves were sometimes packed into train cars for transport.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. How did slaves living near the train depot react to the departure of the slaves who had been sold?

2. Why did some slaves seem happy to be leaving?

3. How do the white people at the depot react to the scene? Why do you think the writer mentions their reactions?
