

## Introduction

Benjamin Drew, a Boston abolitionist acting in cooperation with officers of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society, visited various towns of Upper Canada around the middle 1850's, interviewing scores of refugees from the slave states and copying their words soon after they were spoken. For reasons of safety, he protected the identity of his informants and used fictitious names. There were about 30,000 Negroes at that time in Upper, Canada, mostly adults who had once been slaves. John P. Jewett, the prominent abolitionist-minded publisher of Boston who had unexpectedly reaped a fortune from printing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, vouched for the integrity and intelligence of Drew.

The testimony tends to stress well-known gross abuses, but some of the ex-slaves offer fresh insights into the working of the plantation system.

## Testimony of Harry Thomas

I was born in Brunswick, partly raised in Southampton, ten miles below Bethlehem, Virginia. Was then bought by a "nigger-trader," J---- B----, and was sold to J---- S----, in South Carolina. The treatment there was barbarous. At sixteen years old, they gave me a task, splitting rails, which I did in the time, then went to take my rest. His wife was harder than he was,-she told me to make lights in the road, setting fire to rubbish, it being a new place. I got through at ten o'clock: boss came home, I went in again. She ordered me to put on water to scour the floors, etc. I would n't,-I went over to her father's "nigger-house" all night. Next morning, the master came for me, took me home, stripped me stark naked, made a paddle of thick oak board, lashed me across a pine log, secured my hands and feet, and whipped me with the paddle. His little boy saw it and cried,-he cursed him away,-his wife came,-he cursed her away. He whipped till he broke the paddle. After that, he took me to the house, and hit me with a hickory stick over the head and shoulders, a dozen times or more: then he got salt and water, and a corn cob, and scrubbed me. Then he sent me to water the hogs, naked as I was, in January. I ran into the woods, and went back to the same house, and the colored people gave me some old rags to keep me from freezing.

I recovered from that beating, and at length ran away again, because he refused to let me go to see my friends. I was caught by a colored man, who took me to my master's step-father's,-he whipped me till he was satisfied, then master came, and whipped me with a leather strap. I ran right off again; was caught and put in a potato house. After

that I was put in the field to knock along the best way I could, but I was not able to work.

My master removed to Mississippi, taking me with him, the year before Gen. Jackson commenced fighting the Creek Indians. This big scar on my left cheek, I got in a runaway scrape. A man who got up with me, jabbed me with the muzzle of a gun, which knocked me back into the mud: then he tied me. That time, I received three hundred lashes; one of the slaves who helped tie me, fainted at seeing me so abused. I have a cut with a knife made by J---- S---- after I had worked for him all day, because he could not flog me, as he liked.

I staid awhile, then ran away again,-then a man caught me, and another came with him home, who wished to buy me. I was a smart-looking boy-he offered one thousand dollars for me: master would n't sell. For running away, I received a hundred lashes on the bare back. I was then sold to his cousin, J-----Y-----, in Mississippi. I lived with him ten years; I suppose I must have been about thirty-two. At first, Y.'s treatment was fair. I was foreman. He got rich, and grew mean, and I left him. I was caught and taken back again. He took me to the blacksmith's shop and had a ring made of axe-bar iron, which I wore on my right leg from the middle of May to the middle of September. I worked with it on, and slept with it on all that time.

After he got it off, I worked awhile,-again I went off, went into Alabama, was out from October to March,-then was put in jail, where I lay three months, as they could not hear from my owner, who had moved off to the Choctaw purchase. My boss came and took me out of jail, chained me to his horse with plough traces, and was taking me on his way, when Gen. S----,of Georgia bought me. He put me in his kitchen to cook for him. But I was not satisfied with him, although he used me well. The fact is, I wanted to be free. I ran away and left him,-he had me caught, and sold me to S---- N---- who took me to New Orleans. Nobody there liked my countenance at all-no one would give a cent for me. N----- took me to Natchez and sold me, after a week, to a young man named G---- S----, who had a cotton plantation a few miles above Natchez. He treated me well at first. He would not allow any to leave the place to see their friends without a pass from him or the overseer. I went out to see my friends, and was flogged with a bull whip on the bare back-a whip heavier and larger than a horsewhip, with a buck-skin cracker on the lash. I ran away again-they caught me and put plough traces around my body, and put me to work hoeing cotton and

corn. Not long after, they put on an iron collar. I made an errand-went to the woods-and the overseer sent all hands to hunt for me. They found me, and brought me back to the driver. The old driver gave me two blows with the bull whip; the young driver stopped him. The overseer came up and knocked me down with his fist by a blow on the head. I fainted, was taken to a tree, and when I came to, the overseer was bleeding me. Word came to the overseer, from my master's grandmother, the same day, that my master was gone away, and unless he took off my chains, I would die before his return. The overseer took them all off.

At night, I dressed up and started off, steering by the north star. I walked seven hundred and fifty miles nights,-then, in Kentucky, I was betrayed by a colored man, and lay in jail fifteen months. I would n't tell them where I belonged. Then, under terror of the whip, I told them all about it. A Dr. J---- N---- had bought the chance of me,-he took me to Nashville, where I waited on him, his partner, and took care of his horses about four years. I started to run away from him on his partner's horse-I had one hundred and fifty dollars with me. He overtook me and took away my money. Then he put me in jail and sold me to an old broken down trader. I left him, proceeded north, was caught in Indiana, and taken to Evansville jail. They would not receive me there, and I was taken to Henderson, on the Kentucky side, and put in jail there. My owner put on handcuffs and locked me into the wagon besides with plough chains. I travelled three days thus in succession-he chaining me at night to his bedstead. On the third night, I was eating in the tavern kitchen where we stopped; I concluded to try for the North once more, I went out and hammered off my chains-found some assistance to get off my cuffs, and came on my way, travelling altogether nights by the north star, and lying by in the day.

In Ohio, I found the best kind of friends, and soon reached Canada. When I first came, I joined the soldiers just after the rebellion: then practised up and down the province as a physician, from the knowledge I had obtained from a colored man in Mississippi, who knew roots and herbs,-but there were many kinds I wanted which I could not find here.

I am now hiring a piece of land in Buxton. My calculation is, if I live, to own a farm if I can. My health is good, and the climate agrees with me-and it does with colored men generally.

Slavery is barbarous. In my view, slaveholders, judged by the way they treat colored people, are the worst persons on earth.

Source: From Revolution to Reconstruction (<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/>)