

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 Thomas Hedgebeth

I was born free, in Halifax Co. North Carolina, where I lived thirty-five years. About ten years ago, I removed to Indiana. My father was a farmer, half white, who ran through his farm. If a white man there brings a great account, the white man would carry it against the colored,-the law there does not favor colored people. I cannot read or write. A free-born man in North Carolina is as much oppressed, in one sense, as the slave: I was not allowed to go to school. I recollect when I was a boy, a colored man came from Ohio, and opened a school, but it was broken up. i was in the field ploughing with my father,-he said he wished we could go and learn. I think it an outrageous sin and shame, that a free colored man could not be taught. My ignorance has a very injurious effect on my prospects and success. I blame the State of North Carolina-the white people of that State-for it. I am now engaged in a troublesome lawsuit, about the title to my estate, which I would not have got into, had I known how to read and write.

There were lots of slaves in the neighborhood where I was raised. After I grew up to take notice of things, I found I was oppressed as well as they. I thought it a sin then, for one man to hold another. I never was allowed to visit among the slaves,-had I been caught visiting them, I should have been fined: if a slave had visited me, he would have been whipped. This prevented my having much intercourse with them, except when I was hired to work by the masters. The conversation among the slaves was, that they worked hard, and got no benefit,-that the masters got it all. They knew

but little about the good of themselves,-they often grumbled about food and clothing,-that they had not enough. I never heard a colored man grumbling about that here. They were generally religious,- they believed in a just God, and thought the owners wrong in punishing them in the way they were punished. A good many were so ignorant that they did not know any better, than to suppose that they were made for slavery, and the white men for freedom. Some, however, would talk about freedom, and think they ought to be free.

I have often been insulted, abused, and imposed upon, and had advantage taken of me by the whites in North Carolina, and could not help myself.

When I was twenty-one, I went to vote, supposing it would be allowed. The 'Squire, who held the box objected, and said no colored man was allowed to vote. I felt very badly about it,-I felt cheap, and I felt vexed: but I knew better than make an answer,-I would have been knocked down certain. Unless I took off my hat, and made a bow to a white man, when I met him, he would rip out an oath,- "d-n you, you mulatto, ain't you got no politeness? do n't you know enough to take off your hat to a white man?" On going into a store, I was required to take off my hat.

I have seen slaves with whom I worked, nearly starved out, and yet stripped and whipped; blood cut out of them. It makes my flesh creep now to think of it-such gashes as I've seen cut in them. After a whipping, they would often leave and take to the woods for a month or two, and live by taking what they could find. I've often heard it said that's the cause of colored people in the South being dishonest, because they are brought up so as to be obliged to steal. But I do not consider it dishonest-I always thought it right for a slave to take and eat as much as he wanted where he labored.

At some places where I have worked, I have known that the slaves had not a bite of meat given them. They had a pint of corn meal unsifted, for a meal,-three pints a day. I have seen the white ixien measure it and the cook bake it, and seen them eat: that was all they had but water-they might have as much of that as they wanted. This is no hearsay-I've seen it through the spring, and on until crop time: three pints of meal a day and the bran and nothing else. I heard them talk among themselves about having got a chicken or something, and being whipped for it. They were a bad looking set-some twenty of them-starved and without clothing enough for decency. It ought to

have been a disgrace to their master, to see them about his house. If a man were to go through Canada so, they'd stop him to know what he meant by it-whether it was poverty or if he was crazy,-and they'd put a suit of clothes on him. I have seen them working out in the hot sun in July or August without hats-bareheaded. It was not from choice,-they could n't get hats.

I have seen families put on the block and sold, some one way, some another way. I remember a family about two miles from me, -a father and mother and three children. Their master died, and they were sold. The father went one way, the mother another, with one child, and the other two children another way. I saw the sale- I was there-I went to buy hogs. The purchaser examined the persons of the slaves to see if they were sound,-if they were "good niggers." I was used to such things, but it made me feel bad to see it. The oldest was about ten or eleven years. It was hard upon them to be separated-they made lamentations about it. I never heard a white man at a sale express a wish that a family might be sold together.

On removing to Indiana, the white people did not seem so hostile altogether, nor want the colored people to knuckle quite so low. There were more white people who were friendly than in North Carolina. I was not allowed my vote nor my oath. There were more who wished colored people to have their rights than in North Carolina,-I mean there were abolitionists in Indiana.

I came here a year last spring, to escape the oppression of the laws upon the colored men. After the fugitive slave bill was passed, a man came into Indianapolis, and claimed John Freeman, a free colored man, an industrious, respectable man, as his slave. He brought *proofs* enough. Freedman was kept in jail several weeks,-but at last it turned out that the slave sought, was not Freeman, but a colored man in Canada, and F. was released. The danger of being taken as Freeman was, and suffering from a different decision, worked on my mind. I came away into Canada in consequence, as did many others. There were colored people who could have testified to Freeman's being free from his birth, but their oath would not be taken in Indiana.

In regard to Canada, I like the country, the soil, as well as any country I ever saw. I like the laws, which leave a man as much freedom as a man can have,-still there is prejudice here. The colored people are trying to remove this by improving and

educating themselves, and by industry, to show that they are a people who have minds, and that all they want is cultivating.

I do not know how many colored people are here-but last summer five hundred and twenty-five were counted leaving the four churches.