

## FREEDOM AND DIGNITY PROJECT

Michael Brown—Linden Avenue Middle School, Red Hook Central School

### **Topic Title: Resistance to Slavery**

### **Grade Level: 8th**

### **Overview of the Learning Experience:**

- Students will read, discuss and write about documents that surround some of the many ways North American Colonial slaves resisted their circumstances.
- There are many points in the United States history curriculum where slavery could be discussed. Historical documents addressed in this lesson date from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Goals and Objectives.
  - Improve understanding of the institution of slavery as practiced in North America.
  - Broaden understanding of the concept of resistance by investigating the myriad ways slaves found to maintain some stability in their lives, preserve their sense of human dignity, and survive the psychological pressure of subservience.
- Standards and Performance Indicators addressed:
  - Standard #1. Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.
  - Performance Indicator #3. Study about the major social, political, economic, cultural, and religious developments in New York State and United States history involves learning about the important roles and contributions of individuals and groups.

### **Essential Question(s):**

1. How does resistance to slavery demonstrate the resiliency and perseverance of the human spirit and a rejection of the slave owners' power over them?

**Time Allotment (classroom time):** 1 day.

### **Vocabulary (key terms):**

Retribution	Malingering
Hostility	Exploitation
Impudence	Sabotage
Vengeance	Revelation
Feigning	Infanticide

### **Materials/Resources:**

- On-line worksheet entitled "Slave Resistance".
- On-line primary source documents which include:

- Excerpt from Frederick Douglass's memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.
- Ophelia Egypt's testimony in Gerda Lerner's (ed.) *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*.
- Excerpt from Sarah Bradford's, *Harriet, The Moses of her People*
- Excerpt from Edgar McManus's, *Black Bondage in the North*.
- Excerpt from *Journal of Sojourner Truth*.
- Excerpt from Shane White's, *Somewhat More Independent*.

**Procedure:**

- Put students into pairs.
- Give each group a copy of each of the documents/readings.
- Give each group a copy of the worksheet, "Resistance to Slavery".
- Have students read the documents and complete the worksheet.
- Students report out after completing the assignment.
- Assign writing assignment on essential question as homework or class work the next day.

**Assessment:**

- Satisfactory completion of class work: in-class reading; completion of worksheet; and preparation for reporting out on additional methods of resistance.
- Apply rubric for writing assignment on essential question.

# Slave Resistance

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Of the tens of millions of Africans captured for the slave trade 500,000 survived to begin a life of toil and suffering in the Americas. The lives they led could differ dramatically depending upon where in the Americas they were sold. Those bound for the West Indies had very short life spans. Those sold in the New York area would be more likely to have their families remain together and they performed a variety of jobs rather than just planting and harvesting. Regardless of these geographic differences, slaves sought ways to survive, improve their condition, keep families together, and overcome the immense psychological burden of being treated as property. While running away was one the most dramatic, life-threatening avenues of resistance, there were many others.

Below are some of the ways slaves resisted. After you have read the handouts, identify the reading next to the act(s) of resistance you found there. Some of the items listed below will be found in the readings.

<u>Method of Resistance</u>	<u>Reading that Instanced this Method</u>
1. Breaking tools:-----	
2. Feigning illness:-----	
3. Helping others run away:-----	
4. Abortion/Infanticide:-----	
5. Learning to read and/or write:-----	
6. Teaching others to read and/or write:-----	
7. Singing songs:-----	
8. Negotiating freedom:-----	
9. Negotiating to work for people other than their owner:-----	
10. Refusing to obey master's orders:-----	
11. Organize Revolt:-----	
12. Stealing:-----	
13. Preserving African traditions:-----	
14. List others you found in the readings, but were not mentioned in the list above:	
a. _____	
b. _____	

Of the acts above that no reading mentioned, discuss in your group how these could be seen as acts of resistance. Make notes on the back of this page and be prepared to discuss your responses.

**Writing Assignment for homework tonight:** Write 250 words (typed) on the following topic: How does resistance to slavery demonstrate the resiliency and perseverance of the human spirit and the rejection of slave owner's power over them? Make sure you mention at least 5 ways slaves resisted that you *read about in class today*.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## Rubric for evaluation of Slave Resistance Lesson

### Class work

Completed readings:	10	9	8	7	6
Correctly identified readings to method of resistance	10	9	8	7	6
Demonstrated preparation to report on additional methods of resistance	10	9	8	7	6

### Writing on Essential Question

Addressed thesis (essential question) in introduction	10	9	8	7	6
Discussed 5 ways slaves resisted which were mentioned in the readings	10	9	8	7	6
Level of detail	10	9	8	7	6
Demonstrated the resiliency and perseverance of slaves	10	9	8	7	6
Discussed rejection of masters power over the slave	10	9	8	7	6
Conclusion returns to thesis	10	9	8	7	6

### **Wholistic evaluation of essay**

Demonstrated deep understanding of issues	Demonstrated satisfactory understanding of issues	Did not demonstrate sufficient understanding of issues
10    9    8	7    6    5	0

**Total** \_\_\_\_\_

Document 9.9

**Oral Testimony by an ex-slave, Ophelia Settle Egypt**, in Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Viking, 1973), pp. 34–38. From “Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves,” interviews by Ophelia Settle Egypt, J. Masuoka, and Charles S. Johnson. (Social Science Source Documents No.1. Nashville, Tenn: Fisk University, Social Science Institute, 1945). By permission of Fisk University Library Special Collections.

My mother was the smartest black woman in Eden. She was as quick as a flash of lightning, and whatever she did could not be done better. She could do anything. She cooked, washed, ironed, spun, nursed and labored in the field. She made as good a field hand as she did a cook. I have heard Master Jennings say to his wife, “Fannie has her faults, but she can outwork any nigger in the country. I’d bet my life on that.”

My mother certainly had her faults as a slave. She was very different in nature from Aunt Caroline. Ma fussed, fought, and kicked all the time. I tell you, she was a demon. She said that she wouldn’t be whipped, and when she fussed, all Eden must have known it. She was loud and boisterous, and it seemed to me that you could hear her a mile away. Father was often the prey of her high temper. With all her ability for work, she did not make a good slave. She was too high-spirited and independent. I tell you, she was a captain.

The one doctrine of my mother’s teaching which was branded upon my senses was that I should never let anyone abuse me. “I’ll kill you, gal, if you don’t stand up for yourself,” she would say. “Fight, and if you can’t fight, kick; if you can’t kick, then bite.” Ma was generally willing to work, but if she didn’t feel like doing something, none could make her do it. At least, the Jennings couldn’t make, or didn’t make her.

“Bob, I don’t want no sorry nigger around me. I can’t tolerate you if you ain’t got no backbone.” Such constant warning to my father had its effect. My mother’s unrest and fear of abuse spread gradually to my father. He seemed to have been made after the timid kind. He would never fuss back at my mother, or if he did, he couldn’t be heard above her shouting. Pa was also a sower of all seeds. He was a yardman, houseman, plowman, gardner, blacksmith, carpenter, keysmith, and anything else they chose him to be.

I was the oldest child. My mother had three other children by the time I was about six years old. It was at this age that I remember the almost daily talks of my mother on the cruelty of slavery. I would say nothing to her, but I was thinking all the time that slavery did not seem so cruel. Master and Mistress Jennings were not mean to my mother. It was she who was mean to them.

Master Jennings allowed his slaves to earn any money they could for their own use. My father had a garden of his own around his little cabin, and he also had some chickens. Mr. Dodge, who was my master’s uncle, and who owned the hotel in Eden, was pa’s regular customer. He would buy anything my pa brought to him; and many times he was buying his own stuff, or his nephew’s stuff. I have seen pa go out at night with a big sack and come back with it full. He’d bring sweet potatoes, watermelons, chickens and turkeys. We were fond of pig roast and sweet potatoes, and the only way to have pig roast was for pa to go out on one of his hunting trips. Where he went, I cannot say, but he brought the booty home. The floor of our cabin was covered with planks. Pa

had raised up two planks, and dug a hole. This was our storehouse. Every Sunday, Master Jennings would let pa take the wagon to carry watermelons, cider and ginger cookies to Spring Hill, where the Baptist church was located. The Jennings were Baptists. The white folks would buy from him as well as the free Negroes of Trenton, Tennessee. Sometimes these free Negroes would steal to our cabin at a specified time to buy a chicken or barbecue dinner. Mr. Dodge's slaves always had money and came to buy from us. Pa was allowed to keep the money he made at Spring Hill, and of course Master Jennings didn't know about the little restaurant we had in our cabin.

One day my mother's temper ran wild. For some reason Mistress Jennings struck her with a stick. Ma struck back and a fight followed. Mr. Jennings was not at home and the children became frightened and ran upstairs. For half hour they wrestled in the kitchen. Mistress, seeing that she could not get the better of ma, ran out in the road, with ma right on her heels. In the road, my mother flew into her again. The thought seemed to race across my mother's mind to tear mistress' clothing off her body. She suddenly began to tear Mistress Jennings' clothes off. She caught hold, pulled, ripped and tore. Poor mistress was nearly naked when the storekeeper got to them and pulled ma off.

"Why, Fannie, what do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Why, I'll kill her, I'll kill her dead if she ever strikes me again."

I have never been able to find out the why of the whole thing. . . .

Pa heard Mr. Jennings say that Fannie would have to be whipped by law. He told ma. Two mornings afterward, two men came in at the big gate, one with a long lash in his hand. I was in the yard and I hoped they couldn't find ma. To my surprise, I saw her running around the house, straight in the direction of the men. She must have seen them coming. I should have known that she wouldn't hide. She knew what they were coming for, and she intended to meet them halfway. She swooped upon them like a hawk on chickens. I believe they were afraid of her or thought she was crazy. One man had a long beard which she grabbed with one hand, and the lash with the other. Her body was made strong with madness. She was a good match for them. Mr. Jennings came and pulled her away. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't come at that moment, for one man had already pulled his gun out. Ma did not see the gun until Mr. Jennings came up. On catching sight of it, she said, "Use your gun, use it and blow my brains out if you will." . . .

That evening Mistress Jennings came down to the cabin.

"Well, Fannie," she said, "I'll have to send you away. You won't be whipped, and I'm afraid you'll get killed." . . .

"I'll go to hell or anywhere else, but I won't be whipped," ma answered.

"You can't take the baby, Fannie, Aunt Mary can keep it with the other children."

Mother said nothing at this. That night, ma and pa sat up late, talking over things, I guess. Pa loved ma, and I heard him say, "I'm going too, Fannie." About a week later, she called me and told me that she and pa were going to

Frederick Douglass

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An  
American Slave

**Chapter VI**



My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door,--a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. She had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver; and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. She was entirely unlike any other white woman I had ever seen. I could not approach her as I was accustomed to approach other white ladies. My early instruction was all out of place. The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. She did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face. The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her. Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music.

But, alas! this kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.

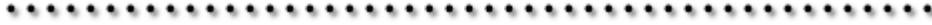
Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would ~spoil~ the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful

understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty--to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

I had resided but a short time in Baltimore before I observed a marked difference, in the treatment of slaves, from that which I had witnessed in the country. A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation. He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation. There is a vestige of decency, a sense of shame, that does much to curb and check those outbreaks of atrocious cruelty so commonly enacted upon the plantation. He is a desperate slaveholder, who will shock the humanity of his non-slaveholding neighbors with the cries of his lacerated slave. Few are willing to incur the odium attaching to the reputation of being a cruel master; and above all things, they would not be known as not giving a slave enough to eat. Every city slaveholder is anxious to have it known of him, that he feeds his slaves well; and it is due to them to say, that most of them do give their slaves enough to eat. There are, however, some painful exceptions to this rule. Directly opposite to us, on Philpot Street, lived Mr. Thomas Hamilton. He owned two slaves. Their names were Henrietta and Mary. Henrietta was about twenty-two years of age, Mary was about fourteen; and of all the mangled and emaciated creatures I ever looked upon, these two were the most so. His heart must be harder than stone, that could look upon these unmoved. The head, neck, and shoulders of Mary were literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head, and found it nearly covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress. I do not know that her master ever whipped her, but I have been an eye-witness to the cruelty of Mrs. Hamilton. I used to be in Mr. Hamilton's house nearly every day. Mrs. Hamilton used to sit in a large chair in the middle of the room, with a heavy cowskin always by her side, and scarce an hour passed during the day but was marked by the blood of one of these slaves. The girls seldom passed her without her saying, "Move faster, you ~black gip!~" at the same time giving them a blow with the cowskin over the head or shoulders, often drawing the blood. She would then say, "Take that, you ~black gip!~" continuing, "If you don't move faster, I'll move you!" Added to the cruel lashings to which these slaves were subjected, they were kept nearly half-

starved. They seldom knew what it was to eat a full meal. I have seen Mary contending with the pigs for the offal thrown into the street. So much was Mary kicked and cut to pieces, that she was oftener called "~pecked~" than by her name.

● [Continue to the next chapter](#)



[Copyright status.](#)

Document maintained at

<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/06.html> by the SunSITE  
Manager.

Last update 5/14/97. SunSITE Manager: [manager@sunsite.berkeley.edu](mailto:manager@sunsite.berkeley.edu)

## The Black Resistance

From the very beginning rebellious blacks made slavery expensive and dangerous for the masters. Besides those who opposed bondage by running away, many resisted by anti-social conduct and economic reprisals. Stealing and malingering became under slavery acts of sabotage against the system. Indeed, most slaves did not regard stealing as criminal at all, but rather as a form of self-help to mitigate their exploitation. Not that every theft was a conscious blow for freedom, but rather that crime itself was a logical response to slavery. The ordinary social conventions of honesty and respect for law were not virtues at all to the slave but only devices to facilitate his exploitation. By rejecting what white society esteemed, the blacks served notice that they were implacably at war with the system.

Frequently slave resentment flared into brutal reprisals against the master class. In 1708 a white New Yorker named Hallett, his wife, and their three children were murdered by two family slaves.<sup>1</sup> So shocking was the crime that the assembly gave the courts discretion to inflict terroristic punishments on slaves guilty of murder or conspiracy.<sup>2</sup> In 1729 a Negro was hanged in chains at Marlborough, Massachusetts, for killing his owner and her two children. The murders strained judicial sensibilities to the break-

1. E. B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 15 vols. (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1856-87), V, 39; hereafter cited as *N.Y. Col. Docs.*

2. *Colonial Laws of New York from 1664 to the Revolution*, 5 vols. (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1894), I, 631; hereafter cited as *N.Y. Col. Laws.*

ing point, for in the end the slave was tried and condemned without a grand jury indictment. The governor personally waived the grand jury hearing because it was feared that the slave, being ill, might die and thereby escape public execution.<sup>3</sup>

Poison was often used to strike at unpopular masters. A slave in Salem, Massachusetts, was flogged for slipping ratsbane into his owner's milk, and another in Sherburne was jailed for attempting to buy arsenic for use against a white who had struck him.<sup>4</sup> Some of the most brutal crimes were obviously acts of vengeance against the masters. In 1735 the Scarlett family of Pennsylvania was wiped out by a slave who put ratsbane into the skillet where chocolate was boiling for their breakfast.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the children of the master class provided targets for reprisals. In 1752 a Boston slave poisoned an infant, and another in Middletown, Connecticut, castrated his master's son.<sup>6</sup> Slaves committed such acts fully aware that their own lives would be forfeit. After killing his master, a black in Hopewell, Pennsylvania, hanged himself the following night.<sup>7</sup>

Source: McManus, Edgar, *Black Bondage in the North*, Syracuse Univ. Press, 1973

easier than aught we have in our more civilized homes; easier for the child, because it gets the motion without the least jar; and easier for the nurse, because the hammock is strung so high as to supersede the necessity of stooping.

#### SLAVEHOLDER'S PROMISES.

After emancipation had been decreed by the State, some years before the time fixed for its consummation, Isabella's master told her if she would do well, and be faithful, he would give her 'free papers,' one year before she was legally free by statute. In the year 1826, she had a badly diseased hand, which greatly diminished her usefulness; but on the arrival of July 4, 1827, the time specified for her receiving her 'free papers,' she claimed the fulfilment of her master's promise; but he refused granting it, on account (as he alleged) of the loss he had sustained by her hand. She plead that she had worked all the time, and done many things she was not wholly able to do, although she knew she had been less useful than formerly; but her master remained inflexible. Her very faithfulness probably operated against her now, and he found it less easy than he thought to give up the profits of his faithful Bell, who had so long done him efficient service.

But Isabella inwardly determined that she would remain quietly with him only until she had spun his wool—about one hundred pounds—and then she would leave him, taking the rest of the time to herself. 'Ah!' she says, with emphasis that cannot be written, 'the slaveholders are TERRIBLE for promising to give you this or

that, or such and such a privilege, if you will do thus and so; and when the time of fulfilment comes, and one claims the promise, they, forsooth, recollect nothing of the kind; and you are, like as not, taunted with being a liar; or, at best, the slave is accused of not having performed *his* part or condition of the contract.' 'Oh!' said she, 'I have felt as if I could not live through the *operation* sometimes. Just think of us! so eager for our pleasures, and just foolish enough to keep feeding and feeding ourselves up with the idea that we should get what had been thus fairly promised; and when we think it is almost in our hands, find ourselves flatly denied! Just think! how *could* we bear it? Why, there was Charles Brodhead promised his slave Ned, that when harvesting was over, he might go and see his wife, who lived some twenty or thirty miles off. So Ned worked early and late, and as soon as the harvest was all in, he claimed the promised boon. His master said, he had merely told him he 'would see if he could go, when the harvest was over; but now he saw that he *could not go*.' But Ned, who still claimed a positive promise, on which he had fully depended, went on cleaning his shoes. His master asked him if he intended going, and on his replying 'yes,' took up a sled-stick that lay near him, and gave him such a blow on the head as broke his skull, killing him dead on the spot. The poor colored people all felt struck down by the blow.' Ah! and well they might. Yet it was but one of a long series of bloody, and other most effectual blows, struck against their liberty and their lives.\* But to return from our digression.

The subject of this narrative was to have been free

\* Yet no official notice was taken of his more than brutal murder.

July 4, 1827, but she continued with her master till the wool was spun, and the heaviest of the 'fall's work' closed up, when she concluded to take her freedom into her own hands, and seek her fortune in some other place.

#### HER ESCAPE.

The question in her mind, and one not easily solved, now was, 'How can I get away?' So, as was her usual custom, she 'told God she was afraid to go in the night, and in the day every body would see her.' At length, the thought came to her that she could leave just before the day dawned, and get out of the neighborhood where she was known before the people were much astir. 'Yes,' said she, fervently, 'that's a good thought! Thank you, God, for *that* thought!' So, receiving it as coming direct from God, she acted upon it, and one fine morning, a little before day-break, she might have been seen stepping stealthily away from the rear of Master Dumont's house, her infant on one arm and her wardrobe on the other; the bulk and weight of which, probably, she never found so convenient as on the present occasion, a cotton handkerchief containing both her clothes and her provisions.

As she gained the summit of a high hill, a considerable distance from her master's, the sun offended her by coming forth in all his pristine splendor. She thought it never was so light before; indeed, she thought it much too light. She stopped to look about her, and ascertain if her pursuers were yet in sight. No one appeared, and, for the first time, the question came up for settlement, 'Where, and to whom, shall I go?' In all her thoughts of getting away, she had not once asked herself whither

she should direct her steps. She sat down, fed her infant, and again turning her thoughts to God, her only help, she prayed him to direct her to some safe asylum. And soon it occurred to her, that there was a man living somewhere in the direction she had been pursuing, by the name of Levi Rowe, whom she had known, and who, she thought, would be likely to befriend her. She accordingly pursued her way to his house, where she found him ready to entertain and assist her, though he was then on his death-bed. He bade her partake of the hospitalities of his house, said he knew of two good places where she might get in, and requested his wife to show her where they were to be found. As soon as she came in sight of the first house, she recollected having seen it and its inhabitants before, and instantly exclaimed, 'That's the place for me; I shall stop there.' She went there, and found the good people of the house, Mr. and Mrs. Van Wagener, absent, but was kindly received and hospitably entertained by their excellent mother, till the return of her children. When they arrived, she made her case known to them. They listened to her story, assuring her they never turned the needy away, and willingly gave her employment.

She had not been there long before her old master, Dumont, appeared, as she had anticipated; for when she took French leave of him, she resolved not to go too far from him, and not put him to as much trouble in looking her up—for the latter he was sure to do—as Tom and Jack had done when they ran away from him, a short time before. This was very considerate in her, to say the least, and a proof that 'like begets like.' He had often considered *her* feelings, though not always, and she was equally considerate.

When her master saw her, he said, 'Well, Bell, so you've run away from me.' 'No, I did not *run* away; I walked away by day-light, and all because you had promised me a year of my time.' His reply was, 'You must go back with me.' Her decisive answer was, 'No, I won't go back with you.' He said, 'Well, I shall take the child.' This also was as stoutly negatived.

Mr. Isaac S. Van Wagener then interposed, saying, he had never been in the practice of buying and selling slaves; he did not believe in slavery; but, rather than have Isabella taken back by force, he would buy her services for the balance of the year—for which her master charged twenty dollars, and five in addition for the child. The sum was paid, and her master Dumont departed; but not till he had heard Mr. Van Wagener tell her not to call him master,—adding, 'there is but *one* master; and he who is *your* master is *my* master.' Isabella inquired what she *should* call him? He answered, 'Call me Isaac Van Wagener, and my wife is Maria Van Wagener.' Isabella could not understand this, and thought it a *mighty change*, as it most truly was from a master whose word was law, to simple Isaac S. Van Wagener, who was master to *no* one. With these noble people, who, though they could not be the masters of slaves, were undoubtedly a portion of God's nobility, she resided one year, and from them she derived the name of Van Wagener; he being her last master in the eye of the law, and a slave's surname is ever the same as his master; that is, if he is allowed to have any other name than Tom, Jack, or Guffin. Slaves have sometimes been severely punished for adding their master's name to their own. But when they have no particular title to it, it is no particular offence.

## Incident in Troy, New York

In the spring of 1860, Harriet Tubman was requested by Mr. Gerrit Smith to go to Boston to attend a large Anti-Slavery meeting. On her way, she stopped at Troy to visit a cousin, and while there the colored people were one day startled with the intelligence that a fugitive slave, by the name of Charles Nalle, had been followed by his master (who was his younger brother, and not one grain whiter than he), and that he was already in the hands of the officers, and was to be taken back to the South. The instant Harriet heard the news, she started for the office of the United States Commissioner, scattering the tidings as she went. An excited crowd was gathered about the office, through which Harriet forced her way, and rushed up stairs to the door of the room where the fugitive was detained. A wagon was already waiting before the door to carry off the man, but the crowd was even then so great, and in such a state of excitement, that the officers did not dare to bring the man down. On the opposite side of the street stood the colored people, watching the window where they could see Harriet's sun-bonnet, and feeling assured that so long as she stood there, the fugitive was still in the office. Time passed on, and he did not appear. "They've taken him out another way, depend upon that," said some of the colored people. "No," replied others, "there stands Moses' yet, and as long as she is there, he is safe." Harriet, now seeing the necessity for a tremendous effort for his rescue, sent out some little boys to cry fire. The bells rang, the crowd increased, till the whole street was a dense mass of people. Again and again the officers came out to try and clear the stairs, and make a way to take their captive down; others were driven down, but Harriet stood her ground, her head bent and her arms folded. "Come, old woman, you must get out of this," said one of the officers; "I must have the way, cleared; if you can't get down alone, some one will help you." Harriet, still putting on a greater appearance of decrepitude, twitched away from him, and kept her place. Offers were made to buy Charles from his master, who at first agreed to take twelve hundred dollars for him; but when this was subscribed, he immediately raised the price to fifteen hundred. The crowd grew more excited. A gentleman raised a window and called out, "Two hundred dollars for his rescue, but not one cent to his master!" This was responded to by a roar of satisfaction from the crowd below. At length the officers appeared, and announced to the crowd, that if they would open a lane to the wagon, they would promise to bring the man down the front way.

The lane was opened, and the man was brought out -- a tall, handsome, intelligent white man, with his wrists manacled together, walking between the U. S. Marshal and another officer, and behind him his brother and his master, so like him that one could hardly be told from the other. The moment they appeared, Harriet roused from her stooping posture, threw up a window, and cried to her friends: "Here he comes -- take him!" and then darted down the stairs like a wild-cat. She seized one officer and pulled him down,



then another, and tore him away from the man ; and keeping her arms about the slave, she cried to her friends: "Drag us out! Drag him to the river! Drown him! but don't let them have him!" They were knocked down together, and while down, she tore off her sun-bonnet and tied it on the head of the fugitive. When he rose, only his head could be seen, and amid the surging mass of people the slave was no longer recognized, while the master appeared like the slave. Again and again they were knocked down, the poor slave utterly helpless, with his manacled wrists, streaming with blood. Harriet's outer clothes were torn from her, and even her stout shoes were pulled from her feet, yet she never relinquished her hold of the man, till she had dragged him to the river, where he was tumbled into a boat, Harriet following in a ferry-boat to the other side. But the telegraph was ahead of them, and as soon as they landed he was seized and hurried from her sight. After a time, some school children came hurrying along, and to her anxious inquiries they answered, "He is up in that house, in the third story." Harriet rushed up to the place. Some men were attempting to make their way up the stairs. The officers were firing down, and two men were lying on the stairs, who had been shot. Over their bodies our heroine rushed, and with the help of others burst open the door of the room, and dragged out the fugitive, whom Harriet carried down stairs in her arms. A gentleman who was riding by with a fine horse, stopped to ask what the disturbance meant; and on hearing the story, his sympathies seemed to be thoroughly aroused; he sprang from his wagon, calling out, "That is a blood-horse, drive him till he drops." The poor man was hurried in; some of his friends jumped in after him, and drove at the most rapid rate to Schenectady.

*Harriet, the Moses of her people*, by Sarah H. Bradford  
New York, For the Author by G.R. Lockwood & Son, 1886.

[back](#)

Part 4: [Narrative](#) | [Resource Bank Contents](#) | [Teacher's Guide](#)

Africans in America: [Home](#) | [Resource Bank Index](#) | [Search](#) | [Shop](#)

---

[WGBH](#) | [PBS Online](#) | ©

had raised up two planks, and dug a hole. This was our storehouse. Every Sunday, Master Jennings would let pa take the wagon to carry watermelons, cider and ginger cookies to Spring Hill, where the Baptist church was located. The Jennings were Baptists. The white folks would buy from him as well as the free Negroes of Trenton, Tennessee. Sometimes these free Negroes would steal to our cabin at a specified time to buy a chicken or barbecue dinner. Mr. Dodge's slaves always had money and came to buy from us. Pa was allowed to keep the money he made at Spring Hill, and of course Master Jennings didn't know about the little restaurant we had in our cabin.

One day my mother's temper ran wild. For some reason Mistress Jennings struck her with a stick. Ma struck back and a fight followed. Mr. Jennings was not at home and the children became frightened and ran upstairs. For half hour they wrestled in the kitchen. Mistress, seeing that she could not get the better of ma, ran out in the road, with ma right on her heels. In the road, my mother flew into her again. The thought seemed to race across my mother's mind to tear mistress' clothing off her body. She suddenly began to tear Mistress Jennings' clothes off. She caught hold, pulled, ripped and tore. Poor mistress was nearly naked when the storekeeper got to them and pulled ma off.

"Why, Fannie, what do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Why, I'll kill her, I'll kill her dead if she ever strikes me again."

I have never been able to find out the why of the whole thing. . . .

Pa heard Mr. Jennings say that Fannie would have to be whipped by law. He told ma. Two mornings afterward, two men came in at the big gate, one with a long lash in his hand. I was in the yard and I hoped they couldn't find ma. To my surprise, I saw her running around the house, straight in the direction of the men. She must have seen them coming. I should have known that she wouldn't hide. She knew what they were coming for, and she intended to meet them halfway. She swooped upon them like a hawk on chickens. I believe they were afraid of her or thought she was crazy. One man had a long beard which she grabbed with one hand, and the lash with the other. Her body was made strong with madness. She was a good match for them. Mr. Jennings came and pulled her away. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't come at that moment, for one man had already pulled his gun out. Ma did not see the gun until Mr. Jennings came up. On catching sight of it, she said, "Use your gun, use it and blow my brains out if you will." . . .

That evening Mistress Jennings came down to the cabin.

"Well, Fannie," she said, "I'll have to send you away. You won't be whipped, and I'm afraid you'll get killed." . . .

"I'll go to hell or anywhere else, but I won't be whipped," ma answered.

"You can't take the baby, Fannie, Aunt Mary can keep it with the other children."

Mother said nothing at this. That night, ma and pa sat up late, talking over things, I guess. Pa loved ma, and I heard him say, "I'm going too, Fannie." About a week later, she called me and told me that she and pa were going to

leave me the next day, that they were going to Memphis. She didn't know for how long.

"But don't be abused, Puss." She always called me Puss. My right name was Cornelia. I cannot tell in words the feelings I had at that time. My sorrow knew no bound. My very soul seemed to cry out, "Gone, gone, gone forever." I cried until my eyes looked like balls of fire. I felt for the first time in my life that I had been abused. How cruel it was to take my mother and father from me, I thought. My mother had been right. Slavery was cruel, so very cruel.

Thus my mother and father were hired to Tennessee. The next morning they were to leave. I saw ma working around with the baby under her arms as if it had been a bundle of some kind. Pa came up to the cabin with an old mare for ma to ride, and an old mule for himself. Mr. Jennings was with him.

"Fannie, leave the baby with Aunt Mary," said Mr. Jennings very quietly.

At this, ma took the baby by its feet, a foot in each hand, and with the baby's head swinging downward, she vowed to smash its brains out before she'd leave it. Tears were streaming down her face. It was seldom that ma cried, and everyone knew that she meant every word. Ma took her baby with her . . .

## Excerpt from "The Confessions of Nat Turner"

Now finding I had arrived to man's estate, and was a slave, and these revelations being made known to me, I began to direct my attention to this great object, to fulfil the purpose for which, by this time, I felt assured I was intended. Knowing the influence I had obtained over the minds of my fellow servants, (not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks--for to them I always spoke of such things with contempt) but by the communion of the Spirit whose revelations I often communicated to them, and they believed and said my wisdom came from God. I now began to prepare them for my purpose, by telling them something was about to happen that would terminate in fulfilling the great promise that had been made to me--About this time I was placed under an overseer, from whom I **ranaway** - and after remaining in the woods thirty days, I returned, to the astonishment of the negroes on the plantation, who thought I had made my escape to some other part of the country, as my father had done before. But the reason of my return was, that the Spirit appeared to me and said I had my wishes directed to the things of this world, and not to the kingdom of Heaven, and that I should return to the service of my earthly master--"For he who knoweth his Master's will,

---

Page 10

and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes, and thus, have I chastened you." And the negroes found fault, and **murmured** against me, saying that if they had my sense they would not serve any master in the world. And about this time I had a vision--and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened--the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams--and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it." I now withdrew myself as much as my situation would permit, from the intercourse of my fellow servants, for the avowed purpose of serving the Spirit more fully--and it appeared to me, and reminded me of the things it had already shown me, and that it would

then reveal to me the knowledge of the elements, the revolution of the planets, the operation of tides, and changes of the seasons. After this revelation in the year 1825, and the knowledge of the elements being made known to me, I sought more than ever to obtain true holiness before the great day of judgment should appear, and then I began to receive the true knowledge of faith. And from the first steps of righteousness until the last, was I made perfect; and the Holy Ghost was with me, and said, "Behold me as I stand in the Heavens"--and I looked and saw the forms of men in different attitudes--and there were lights in the sky to which the children of darkness gave other names than what they really were--for they were the lights of the Saviour's hands, stretched forth from east to west, even as they were extended on the cross on Calvary for the redemption of sinners. And I wondered greatly at these miracles, and prayed to be informed of a certainty of the meaning thereof--and shortly afterwards, while laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven-- and I communicated it to many, both white and black, in the neighborhood--and I then found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens. And now the Holy Ghost had revealed itself to me, and made plain the miracles it had shown me--For as the blood of Christ had been shed on this earth, and had ascended to heaven for the salvation of sinners, and was now returning to earth again in the form of dew-- and as the leaves on the trees bore the impression of the figures I had seen in the heavens, it was plain to me that the Saviour was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the

---

Page 11

great day of judgment was at hand. About this time I told these things to a white man, (Etheldred T. Brantley) on whom it had a wonderful effect--and he ceased from his wickedness, and was attacked immediately with a cutaneous eruption, and blood **ozed** from the pores of his skin, and after praying and fasting nine

days, he was healed, and the Spirit appeared to me again, and said, as the Saviour had been baptised so should we be also--and when the white people would not let us be baptised by the church, we went down into the water together, in the sight of many who reviled us, and were baptised by the Spirit-- After this I rejoiced greatly, and gave thanks to God. And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first. *Ques.* Do you not find yourself mistaken now? *Ans.* Was not Christ crucified. And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work--and until the first sign appeared, I should conceal it from the knowledge of men--And on the appearance of the sign, (the eclipse of the sun last February) I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons. And immediately on the sign appearing in the heavens, the seal was removed from my lips, and I communicated the great work laid out for me to do, to four in whom I had the greatest confidence, (Henry, Hark, Nelson, and Sam)--It was intended by us to have begun the work of death on the 4th July last--Many were the plans formed and rejected by us, and it affected my mind to such a degree, that I fell sick, and the time passed without our coming to any determination how to commence--Still forming new schemes and rejecting them, when the sign appeared again, which determined me not to wait longer.

Since the commencement of 1830, I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me. On Saturday evening, the 20th of August, it was agreed between Henry, Hark and myself, to prepare a dinner the next day for the men we expected, and then to concert a plan, as we had not yet determined on any. Hark, on the following morning, brought a pig, and Henry brandy, and being joined by Sam, Nelson,

Will and Jack, they prepared in the woods a dinner, where, about three o'clock, I joined them.

*Q.* Why were you so backward in joining them.

*A.* The same reason that had caused me not to mix with them for years before.

I saluted them on coming up, and asked Will how came he there, he answered, his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him. I asked him if he thought to obtain it? He said he would, or **lose** his life. This was enough to put him in full confidence. Jack, I knew, was only a tool in the hands of Hark, it was quickly agreed we should commence at home (Mr. J. Travis') on that night, and until we had armed and equipped ourselves, and gathered sufficient force, neither age nor sex was to be spared, (which was invariably adhered to.) We remained at the feast until about two hours in the night, when we went to the house and found Austin; they all went to the cider press and drank, except myself. On returning to the house, Hark went to the door with an axe, for the purpose of breaking it open, as we knew we were strong enough to murder the family, if they were awaked by the noise; but reflecting that it might create an alarm in the neighborhood, we determined to enter the house secretly, and murder them whilst sleeping. Hark got a ladder and set it against the chimney, on which I ascended, and hoisting a window, entered and came down stairs, unbarred the door, and removed the guns from their places. It was then observed that I must spill the first blood. On which, armed with a hatchet, and accompanied by Will, I entered my master's chamber, it being dark, I could not give a death blow, the hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife, it was his last word, Will laid him dead, with a blow of his axe, and Mrs. Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed. The murder of this family, five in

number, was the work of a moment, not one of them awoke; there was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten, until we had left the house and gone some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it; we got here, four guns that would shoot, and several old muskets, with a pound or two of powder. We remained some time at the barn, where we paraded; I formed them in a line as soldiers, and after carrying them through all the manoeuvres I was master of, marched them off to Mr. Salathiel Francis', about six hundred yards distant. Sam and Will went to the door and knocked. Mr. Francis asked who was there, Sam replied, it was him, and he had a

---

Page 13

letter for him, on which he got up and came to the door, they immediately seized him, and dragging him out a little from the door, he was dispatched by repeated blows on the head; there was no other white person in the family. We started from there for Mrs. Reese's, maintaining the most perfect silence on our march, where finding the door unlocked, we entered, and murdered Mrs. Reese in her bed, while sleeping; her son awoke, but it was only to sleep the sleep of death, he had only time to say who is that, and he was no more. From Mrs. Reese's we went to Mrs. Turner's, a mile distant, which we reached about sunrise, on Monday morning. Henry, Austin, and Sam, went to the still, where, finding Mr. Peebles, Austin shot him, and the rest of us went to the house; as we approached, the family discovered us, and shut the door. Vain hope! Will, with one stroke of his axe, opened it, and we entered and found Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Newsome in the middle of a room, almost frightened to death. Will immediately killed Mrs. Turner, with one blow of his axe. I took Mrs. Newsome by the hand, and with the sword I had when I was apprehended, I struck her several blows over the head, but not being able to kill her, as the sword was dull. Will turning around and discovering it, despatched her also. A general destruction of property and search for money and ammunition, always succeeded the murders. By this time my company amounted to fifteen, and nine men mounted, who started for

Mrs. Whitehead's, (the other six were to go through a by way to Mr. Bryant's and rejoin us at Mrs. Whitehead's,) as we approached the house we discovered Mr. Richard Whitehead standing in the cotton patch, near the lane fence; we called him over into the lane, and Will, the executioner, was near at hand, with his fatal axe, to send him to an untimely grave. As we pushed on to the house, I discovered some one run round the garden, and thinking it was some of the white family, I pursued them, but finding it was a servant girl belonging to the house, I returned to commence the work of death, but they whom I left, had not been idle; all the family were already murdered, but Mrs. Whitehead and her daughter Margaret. As I came round to the door I saw Will pulling Mrs. Whitehead out of the house, and at the step he nearly severed her head from her body, with his broad axe. Miss Margaret, when I discovered her, had concealed herself in the corner, formed by the projection of the cellar cap from the house; on my approach she fled, but was soon overtaken, and after

---

Page 14

repeated blows with a sword, I killed her by a blow on the head, with a fence rail.

Other blacks had similar attitudes but exhibited them in a more subtle fashion. Movements of the body, in particular the eyes, gave slaves and free blacks an opportunity to release their hostility non-verbally, and thus to avoid retribution. By their very nature such strategies only rarely enter what, for the eighteenth century anyway, is predominantly a white historical record. But with the aid of some studies of black behavior in twentieth-century ghettos it is possible to detect an occasional example of nonverbal hostility. Such studies make clear that one of the better-known ways of expressing impudence and disapproval of an authority figure is “rolling the eyes.” This movement is usually preceded by a stare, but not one in which there is eye contact. After the stare the eyes are moved from one side of the socket to the other, the eyelids being lowered, and the movement being always away from the other person. Sometimes the eye movement is accompanied by a slight lifting of the head or a twitching of the nose.<sup>83</sup> Consider, then, the case of Bill, who ran away in 1804. He “casts his eyes to the ground and raises them when spoken to, at which time he has a habit of inclining his head rather one side.”<sup>84</sup> Although these descriptions are not identical there is at least the possibility that Bill may have been engaged in something rather akin to “rolling the eyes.” This movement may or may not have had its origins in West Africa, but it is generally recognized as being distinctively black. Kenneth Johnson has pointed out that nonblacks often fail to recognize it and see its significance.<sup>85</sup>

Source: White, Shane, *Somewhat More Independent*