Freedom and the Former Slave

I am a negro and was born some time during the war in Elbert County, Georgia, and I reckon by this time I must be a little over forty years old. . . . I never knew who my father was or anything about him. Shortly after the war, my mother died, and I was left to the care of my uncle. All this happened before I was eight years old, and so I can't remember very much about it. When I was about ten years old, my uncle hired me out to Captain _____. I had already learned how to plow, and was also a good hand at picking cotton. . . . I had not been at the Captain's a month before I was put to work on the farm, with some twenty or thirty other negroes—men, women and children. From the beginning, the boys had the same tasks as the men and women. There was no difference. We all worked hard during the week and would frolic on Saturday nights and often on Sundays. And everybody was happy. The men got $3 a week and the women $2. I don't know what the children got.

Every week, my uncle collected my money for me, but it was very little of it that I ever saw. My uncle fed and clothed me, gave me a place to sleep, and allowed me ten or fifteen cents a week for "spending change," as he called it. I must have been seventeen or eighteen years old before I got tired of that arrangement, and felt that I was man enough to be working for myself and handling my own wages. The other boys about my age and size were "drawing" their own pay, and they used to laugh at me and call me "Baby" because my old uncle was always on hand to "draw" my pay.

Worked up by these things, I made a break for liberty. Unknown to my uncle or the Captain, I went off to a neighboring plantation and hired myself out to another man. The new landlord agreed to give me forty cents a day and furnish me one meal. I thought that was doing fine. Bright and early one Monday morning, I started for work, still not letting the others know anything about it. But they found it out before sundown. The Captain came over to the new place and brought some kind of officer of the law. The officer pulled out a long piece of paper from his pocket and read it to my new employer. When this was done, I heard my new boss say:

"I beg your pardon, Captain. I didn't know this nigger was bound to you, or I wouldn't have hired him."

"He certainly is bound to me," said the Captain. "He belongs to me until he is twenty-one, and I'm going to make him know his place."

So I was carried back to the Captain's. That night he made me strip off my clothing down to my waist, had me tied to a tree in his backyard, ordered his foreman to give me thirty lashes with a buggy whip across my bare back, and stood by until it was done. After that experience, the Captain made me stay on his place night and day,—but my uncle still continued to "draw" my money.

I was a man nearly grown before I knew how to count from one to one hundred. I was a man nearly grown before I ever saw a colored school teacher. I never went to school a day in my life. Today, I can't write my own name, though I can read a little. I was a man nearly grown before I ever rode on a railroad train, and then I went on an excursion from Elberton to Athens. What was true of me was true of hundreds of other negroes around me—way off there in the country, fifteen or twenty miles from the nearest town.

When I reached twenty-one, the Captain told me I was a free man, but he urged me to stay with him. He said he would treat me right, and pay me as much as anybody else would. The Captain's son and I were about the same age, and the Captain said that as he had owned my mother and uncle during slavery, and as his son didn't want me to leave them (since I had been with them so long), he wanted me to stay with the old family. And I stayed. I signed a contract—that is, I made my mark—for one year. The Captain was to give me $3.50 a week, and furnish me a little house on the plantation—a one-room log cabin similar to those used by his other laborers.

During that year, I married Mandy. For several years, Mandy had been the house-servant for the Captain, his wife, his son, and his three daughters, and they all seemed to think a good deal of her. As an evidence of their regard, they gave us . . . furniture, which cost about $25, and we set up housekeeping in one of the Captain's two-room shanties. I thought I was the biggest man in Georgia. Mandy still kept her place in the "Big House" after our marriage. We did so well for the first year, that I renewed my contract for the second year, and for the third, fourth, and fifth year I did the same thing. Before the end of the fifth year, the Captain had died, and his son, who had married some two or three years before, took charge of the plantation. Also, for two or three years, this son had been serving at Atlanta in some big office to which he had been elected. I think it was in the Legislature or something of that sort—anyhow, all the people called him Senator. At the end of the fifth year, the Senator suggested I sign up a contract for ten years; then he said, we wouldn't have to fix up papers every year. I asked my wife about it; she consented; so I made a ten-year contract.

Not long afterward, the Senator had a long, low shanty built on his place. A great big chimney with a wide open fireplace, was built at one end of it, and on each side of the house, running length wise, there was a row of frames or stalls just large enough to hold a single mattress. The places for these mattresses were fixed one above the other, so that there was a double row of these stalls or pens on each side. They looked for all the world like stalls for horses. . . .

Nobody seemed to know what the Senator was fixing for. All doubts were put aside one bright day in April when about forty able-bodied negroes, bound in iron chains, and some of them handcuffed, were brought out to the Senator's farm in three big wagons. They were quartered in the long, low shanty, and it was afterward called the stockade. This was the beginning of the Senator's convict camp. These men were prisoners who had been leased by the Senator from the state of Georgia at about $200 each per year, the State agreeing to pay for guards and physicians, for necessary inspection, . . . all rewards for escaped convicts, . . . and all other . . . camp expenses. When I saw these men in shackles, and the guards with their guns, I was scared nearly to death. I felt like running away, but I didn't know where to go to. And if there had been any place to go to, I would have had to leave my wife and child behind.

We free laborers held a meeting. We all wanted to quit. We sent a man to tell the Senator about it. Word came back that we were all under contract for ten years and that the Senator would hold us to . . . the contract, or put us in chains and lock us up—the same as the other prisoners. . . . We learned that we could not lawfully break our contract for any reason and go and hire ourselves to somebody else without the consent of our employer; and, more than that, if we got mad and ran away, we could be run down by bloodhounds, arrested . . . and be returned to our employer, who, according to the contract, might beat us brutally or administer any other kind of punishment that he thought proper. In other words, we had sold ourselves into slavery—and what could we do about it? The white folks had all the courts, all the guns, all the hounds, all the railroads, all the telegraph wires, all the newspapers, all the money, and nearly all the land—and we had only our ignorance, our poverty,

and our empty hands. We decided that the best thing to do was to shut our mouths, say nothing, and go back to work. And most of us worked side by side with those convicts during the remainder of the ten years.

. . . this first batch of convicts was only the beginning. Within six months, another stockade was built, and twenty or thirty other convicts were brought to the plantation, among them six or eight women! The Senator had bought an additional thousand acres of land, and to his already large cotton plantation, he added two great big saw-mills and went into the lumber business. Within two years, the Senator had in all nearly 200 negroes working on his plantation—about half of them convicts. The only difference between the free laborers and the others was that the free laborers could come and go as they pleased, at night—that is, they were not locked up at night, and were not . . . whipped for slight offenses.

The troubles of the free laborers began at the close of the ten-year period. . . . They all wanted to quit when the time was up. . . . They all refused to sign new contracts—even for one year, not to say anything of ten years. And just when we thought that our bondage was at an end, we found that it had really just begun.

Two or three years before . . . the Senator had established a large store, which was called the commissary. All of us free laborers . . . [had] to buy our supplies—food, clothing, etc.—from that store. We never used any money in our dealings with the commissary, only tickets or orders, and we had a general settlement once each year, in October. In this store we were charged all sorts of high prices for goods, because every year we would come out in debt to our employer. If not that, we seldom had more than $5 or $10 coming to us—and that for a whole year's work. Well, at the close of the tenth year, when we kicked and meant to leave the Senator, he said to some of us with a smile (and I will never forget that smile—I can see it now): "Boys, I'm sorry you're going to leave me. I hope you will do well in your new places—so well that you will be able to pay me the little balances which most of you owe me."

Word was sent out for all of us to meet him at the commissary at 2 o'clock. There he told us that, after we had signed what he called a written acknowledgement of our debts, we might go and look for new places. The storekeeper took us one by one and read to us statements of our accounts. According to the books there was no man of us who owed the Senator less than $100; some of us were put down for as much as $200. I owed $165, according to the bookkeeper. These debts were not accumulated during one year, but ran back for three or four years, so we were told—in spite of the fact that we understood that we had had a full settlement at the end of each year.

But no one of us would have dared to dispute a white man's word—oh, no; not in those days. Besides, we fellows didn't care anything about the amounts—we were after getting away; and we had been told that we might go, if we signed the acknowledgements. We would have signed anything, just to get away. So we stepped up, we did, and made our marks. That same night we were rounded up by a constable and ten or twelve white men, who aided him, and we were locked up, every one of us, in one of the Senator's stockades. The next morning it was explained to us by the two guards appointed to watch us that, in the papers we had signed the day before, we had not only made acknowledgement of our indebtedness, but that we had also agreed to work for the Senator until the debts were paid by hard labor. And from that day forward, we were treated just like convicts. Really, we had made ourselves lifetime slaves . . ."

The New Slavery in the South "An Autobiography," by a Georgia Negro Peon, *Independent,* LVI, 25 February 1904, 409–14.

Questions on:
Freedom and the Former Slave

Use the reading to respond to the following:

1. A sharecropper is someone who works land that he or she does not own and is paid for work in a percentage of that year's crops. Find and underline / highlight passages from the text that illustrate what the life of a sharecropper might be like.
2. How does the life of this former slave demonstrate how sharecroppers lived in poverty?
3. Sharecropping has been called worse than slavery. Find and underline / highlight passages from the text that illustrate why life after the 13th Amendment could be considered worse than slavery.
4. Often former slaves were known to have said that they had nothing but freedom. What freedoms did the former slave gain when the 13th Amendment was ratified? Find specific examples from the text that show these freedoms.