



SLAVES' RESISTANCE on Southern Plantations

Selections from the WPA Slave Narratives

Over 2300 former slaves were interviewed during the Great Depression of the 1930s by members of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal agency in the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Many recount acts of resistance — direct and indirect — performed despite the risk of severe punishment. Praying for strength was an act of resistance in itself, explains Delia Garlic. “We didn’t ‘spect nothin’ but to stay in bondage ‘till we died.”

Note: Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to them-selves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. Some white interviewers, despite project guidelines for transcribing the narratives, used stereotypical patterns of representing black speech. See “A Note on the Language of the Narratives” at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and “Guidelines for Interviewers” at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf.

■ One day I remembers my brother, January, was cotched ober [caught over] seein’ a gal on de next plantation. He had a pass but de time on it done gib out. Well suh, when de massa found out dat he wuz a hour late, he got as mad as a hive of bees. So when brother January he come home, de massa took down his long mule skinner¹ and tied him wid a rope to a pine tree. He strip’ his shirt off and said:

“Now, nigger, I’m goin’ to teach you some sense.”

Wid dat he started layin’ on de lashes. January was a big, fine lookin’ nigger: de finest I ever seed. He wuz jus’ four years older dan me, an’ when de massa begin a beatin’ him, January neber said a word. De massa got madder and madder kaze [because] he couldn’t make January holla.

“What’s de matter wid you, nigger?” he say. “Don’t it hurt?”

January, he neber said nothin’, and de massa keep a beatin’ till little streams of blood started flowin’ down January’s chest, but he neber holler. His lips wuz a quiverin’ and his body wuz a shakin’, but his mouf it neber open; and all de while I sat on my mammy’s and pappy’s steps a cryin’. De niggers wuz all gathered about an some uv ’em couldn’t stand it; dey hadda go inside dere cabins. Atter while, January, he couldn’t stand it no longer hisself, and he say in a hoarse, loud whisper:

“Massa! Massa! have mercy on dis poor nigger.”

William Colbert, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ Sometimes a stripped Nigger would say some hard things to the white man with the strap in his hand, though he knew that he (the Negro) would pay for it dearly, for when a slave showed spirit that way the master or overseer laid the lash on all the harder.

W. B. Allen, enslaved in Alabama ■



“January neber said a word”
William Colbert, 1937



“I give up for dead”
Sarah Douglas (with her husband), ca. 1937

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¹ January Colbert was the mule driver (“mule skinner”) on the plantation.

■ We was scart of Solomon and his whip, though, and he didn't like frolickin'. He didn't like for us niggers to pray, either. We never heard of no church, but us have prayin' in the cabins. We'd set on the floor and pray with our head down low and sing low, but if Solomon heared he'd come and beat on the wall with the stock of his whip. He'd say, "I'll come in there and tear the hide off you backs." But some the old niggers tell us we got to pray to Gawd that he don't think different of the blacks and the whites. I know that Solomon is burnin' in hell today, and it pleasures me to know it.

Mary Reynolds, enslaved in Louisiana ■

■ When we prayed by ourse'ves we daren't let the white folks know it and we turned a wash pot down to the ground to catch the voice. We prayed a lot to be free and the Lord done heered us. We didn't have no song books and the Lord done give us our songs and when we sing them at night it jus' whispering so nobody hear us. One went like this:

"My knee bones am aching,
My body's rackin' with pain,
I 'lieve I'm a chile of God,
And this ain't my home,
'Cause Heaven's my aim."

Anderson Edwards, enslaved in Texas ■

■ We slips off and have prayer but daren't 'low [allow] the white folks know it and sometimes we hums 'ligious songs low like when we's workin'. It was our way of prayin' to be free, but the white folks didn't know it.

Millie Ann Smith, enslaved in Texas ■

■ I tell you chile, it was pitiful, but God did not let it last always. I have heard slaves morning and night pray for deliverance. Some of 'em would stand up in de fields or bend over cotton and corn and pray out loud for God to help 'em and in time you see, He did.

Clayborn Gantling, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ Jus' fore de war, a white preacher he come to us slaves and says: "Do you wan' to keep you homes whar you git all to eat, and raise your chillen, or do you wan' to be free to roam roun' without a home, like de wil' animals? If you wan' to keep you homes you better pray for de South to win. All day wan's to pray for de South to win, raise the hand." We all raised our hands 'cause we was skeered not to, but we sho' didn' wan' de South to win.

Dat night all de slaves had a meetin' down in de hollow. Ole Uncle Mack, he gits up and says: "One time over in Viginny dere was two ole niggers, Uncle Bob and Uncle Tom. Dey was mad at one 'nuther and one day dey decided to have a dinner and bury de hatchet. So dey sat down, and when Uncle Bob wasn't lookin' Uncle Tom put some poison in Uncle Bob's food, but he saw it and when Uncle Tom wasn't lookin', Uncle Bob he turned de tray roun' on Uncle Tom, and he gits de poison food. "Uncle Mack," he says: "Dat's what we slaves is gwine [going to] do, jus' turn de tray roun' and pray for de North to win."

William M. Adams, enslaved in Texas ■



Anderson Edwards, ca. 1937



Millie Ann Smith, ca. 1937

■ One reason Marse Morgan thought so much o' me, dey say I was a right pert young'n an' caught on to anything pretty quick. Marster would tell me, "Loosanna, if you keep yo' ears open an' tell me what de darkies talk 'bout, dey'll be somp'n' good in it for you." (He meant for me to listen when dey'd talk 'bout runnin' off an' such.) I'd stay 'roun' de old folks an' make lak I was a-playin'. All de time I'd be a-listenin'. Den I'd go an' tell Marster what I hear'd. But all de time I mus' a-had a right smart mind, 'cause I'd play 'roun' de white folks an' hear what dey'd say an' den go tell de Niggers. Don't guess de marster ever thought 'bout me doin' dat.

Anna Baker, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ It seems like this overseer was of the meanest kind, always whipping the slaves for no reason at all, and the slaves tried to figure out a way to even up with him by chasing him off the place.

One of the slaves told how to cure him. Get a King snake and put the snake in the overseer's cabin. Slip the snake in about, no, not about, but just exactly nine o'clock at night. Seems like the time was important, why so, I don't remember now.

That's what the slaves did. Put in the snake and out went the overseer. Never no more did he whip the slaves on that plantation because he wasn't working there no more! When he went, where he went, or how he went nobody knows, but they all say he went. That's what counted — he was gone!

Mattie Logan, enslaved in Mississippi ■

■ You see, my mamma belong to old William Cleveland and old Polly Cleveland, and they was the meanest two white folks what ever lived, 'cause they was allus beatin' on their slaves. . . [Polly] whipped my little sister what was only nine months old and jes' a baby to death. She come and took the diaper offen my little sister and whipped till the blood jes' ran — jes' 'cause she cry like all babies do, and it kilt my sister. I never forgot that, but I got some even with that old Polly devil and it's this-a-way.

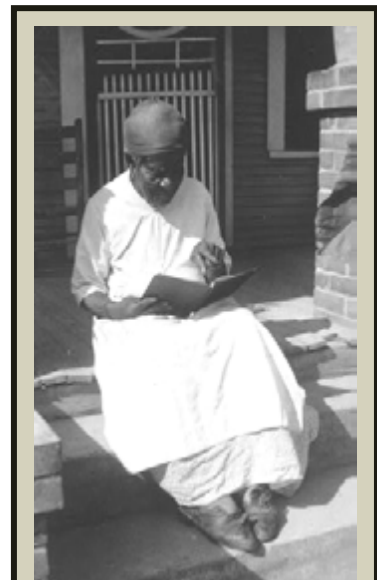
You see, I's 'bout 10 year old and I belongs to Miss Olivia, what was that old Polly's daughter, and one day old Polly devil comes to where Miss Olivia lives after she marries, and tries to give me a lick out in the yard, and I picks up a rock 'bout as big as half your fist and hits her right in the eye and busted the eyeball, and tells her that's for whippin' my baby sister to death. You could hear her holler for five miles, but Miss Olivia, when I tells her, says, "Well I guess mamma has larnt her lesson at last." But that old Polly was mean like her husband', old Cleveland, till she die, and I hopes they is burnin' in torment now.

Mary Armstrong, enslaved in Missouri ■

■ My poppa was strong. He never had a lick in his life. He helped the marster, but one day the marster says, "Si, you got to have a whoppin'," and my poppa says, "I never had a whoppin' and you cain't whop me." An' the marster says, "But I kin kill you," an' he shot my poppa down. My mama tuk him in the cabin and put him on a pallet. He died.

Anne Clark, enslaved in Mississippi and Tennessee ■

■ Hugh White wuz so mean to his slaves that I know of two gals that killt themselves. One nigger gal Sudie wuz found across the bed with a pen knife in her hand. He whipped another nigger gal most to death for fergiting to put onions in the stew. The next day she went down to the river and fer nine days they searched fer her and her body finally



Mary Armstrong, ca. 1937



Anne Clark, ca. 1937

washed upon the shore. The master could never live in that house again as when he would go to sleep he would see the nigger standing over his bed. Then he moved to Richmond and there he stayed until a little later when he hung himself.

Sophia Word, enslaved in Kentucky ■

■ Aunt Adeline . . . hung herself on a black jack tree on the other side of the pool. It was a pool for ducks and stock.

She hung herself to keep from getting a whooping. Mother raised (reared) her boy. She told mother she would kill herself before she would be whooped. I never heard what she was to be whooped for. She thought she would be whooped. She took a rope and tied it to a limb and to her neck and then jumped. Her toes barely touched the ground. They buried her in the cemetery on the old Ed Cotton place. I never seen her buried.

T. W. Cotton, enslaved in Arkansas ■

■ My mother told me that he [the master] owned a woman who was the mother of several chillun and when her babies would get about a year or two of age he'd sell them and it would break her heart. She never got to keep them. When her fourth baby was born and was about two months old she just studied all the time about how she would have to give it up and one day she said, "I just decided I'm not going to let old Master sell this baby; he just ain't going to do it." She got up and give it something out of a bottle and purty soon it was dead. 'Course didn't nobody tell on her or he'd of beat her nearly to death.

Lou Smith, enslaved in Mississippi ■

■ I has thought many times through all dese years how mammy looked dat night [Garlic was taken away to be sold]. She pressed my han' in bofe of hers an' said "Be good an' trus' in de Lawd."

Trustin' was de only hope of de pore black critters in dem days. Us jest prayed fer strength to endure it to de end. We didn't 'spect nothin' but to stay in bondage 'till we died.

Delia Garlic, enslaved in Virginia ■

■ I wuz one slave dat de poor white man had his match. See Miss Sue? [interviewer] Dese here ol' white men said, "what I can't do by fair means I'll do by foul." One tried to throw me, but he couldn't. We tusseled an' knocked over chairs an' when I got a grip I scratched his face all to pieces; an dar wuz no more bothering Fannie from him; but oh, honey, some slaves would be beat up so, when dey resisted, an' sometimes if you'll 'belled [rebelled] de overseer would kill yo'. Us Colored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you.

Fannie Berry, enslaved in Virginia ■

■ Plenty of the colored women have children by the white men. She know better than to not do what he say. Didn't have much of that until the men from South Carolina come up here and settle and bring slaves. Then they take them very same children what have they own blood and make slaves out of them. If the Missus find out she raise revolution. But she hardly find out. The white men not going to tell and the nigger women were always afraid to. So they jes go on hopin' that things won't be that way always.

W. L. Bost, enslaved in North Carolina ■



Delia Garlic, ca. 1937



W. L. Bost, ca. 1937

■ The master who owned her [Jordan's mother] before Mister Clark was one of them white mens who was always whipping and beating his slaves and mammy couldn't stand it no more.

That's the way she tells me about it. She just figured she would be better off dead and out of her misery as to be whipped all the time, so one day the master claimed they was something wrong with her work and started to raise his whip, but mammy fought back and when the ruckus was over the Master was laying still on the ground and folks thought he was dead, he got such a heavy beating.

Mammy says he don't die and right after that she was sold to Mister Clark I been telling you about. And mammy was full of misery for a long time after she was carried to Mark Lowery's plantation where at I was born during the War.

Josie Jordan, enslaved in Tennessee ■

■ The last whipping old miss give me she tied me to a tree and oh my Lord! old miss whipped me that day. That was the worse whipping I ever got in my life. I cried and bucked and hollered until I couldn't. I give up for dead and she wouldn't stop. I stop crying and said to her, "Old miss, if I were you and you were me I wouldn't beat you this way." That struck old miss's heart and she let me go and she did not have the heart to beat me any more.

Sarah Douglas, enslaved in Alabama ■



Felix Haywood, ca. 1937

■ Did you every stop to think that thinking don't do any good when you do it too late? Well, that's how it was with us. If every mother's son of a black had thrown 'way his hoe and took up a gun to fight for his own freedom along with the Yankees, the war'd been over before it began. But we didn't do it. We couldn't help stick to our masters. We couldn't no more shoot 'em than we could fly. My father and me used to talk 'bout it.

Felix Haywood, enslaved in Texas ■

■ Master Brown's boy and I were the same age you see (14 years old) and he would send me to school to protect his kids, and I would have to sit up there until school was out. So while sitting there I listened to what the white teacher was telling the kids, and caught on how to read, write and figger — but I never let on, 'cause if I was caught trying to read or figger dey would whip me something terrible. After I caught on how to figger the white kids would ask me to teach them.

Hal Hutson, enslaved in Tennessee ■

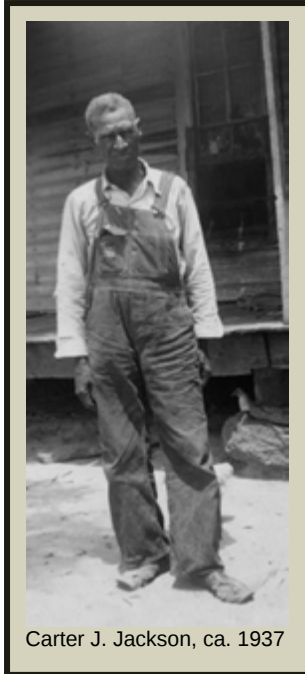
■ I have no education. I can neither read nor write. As a slave I was not allowed to have books. On Sundays I would go into the woods and gather ginseng which I would sell to the doctors for from 10¢ to

15¢ a pound and with this money I would buy a book that was called the Blue Back Speller. Our master would not allow us to have any books and when we were lucky enough to own a book we would have to keep it hid, for if our master would find us with a book he would whip us and take the book from us. After receiving three severe whippings I gave up and never again tried for any learning, and to this day I can neither read not write.

George Thompson, enslaved in Kentucky ■

■ If you didn't git better rations and things to eat in de house, it was your own fault, I tells you! You just have to help de chillun to take things and while you doin' dat for them, you take things for yourself. I never call it stealin'. I just call it takin' de jams, de jellies, de biscuits, de butter and de 'lasses [molasses] dat I have to reach up and steal for them chillun to hide 'way in deir little stomachs, and me, in my big belly.

Mary Raines, enslaved in South Carolina ■



Carter J. Jackson, ca. 1937

■ I used to steal some chickens, 'cause we didn't have 'nough to eat, and I don' think I done wrong, 'cause the place was full of 'em. We sho' earned what we et. I'd go up to the big house to make fires and lots of times I seed the mantel board lined with greenbacks, 'tween mantel and wall and I's snitched many a \$50.00 bill, but it [Con]'federate money.

Carter J. Jackson, enslaved in Alabama and Texas ■

■ Some of them slaves was so poorly thin they ribs would kinder rustle against each other like corn stalks a-drying in the hot winds. But they gets even one hog-killing time, and it was funny too, mammy said.

They was seven hogs, fat and ready for fall hog-killing time. Just the day before old master told off they was to be killed, something happened to all them porkers. One of the field boys found them and come a-telling the master: "The hogs is all died, now they won't be any meats for the winter."

When the master gets to where at the hogs is laying, they's a lot of Negroes standing round looking sorrow-eyed at the wasted meat. The master asks: "What's the illness with 'em?"

"Malitis." They tell him, and they acts like they don't want to touch the hogs. Master says to dress [prepare] them anyway for they ain't no more meat on the place.

He says to keep all the meat for the slave families, but that's because he's afraid to eat it hisself account of the hogs got malitis.

"Don't you-all know what is malitis?" Mammy would ask the children when she was telling of the seven fat hogs and seventy lean slaves. And she would laugh, remembering how they fooled the old master so's to get all them good meats.

"One of the strongest Negroes got up early in the morning," Mammy would explain, "'long 'fore the rising horn called the slaves from their cabins. He skitted to the hog pen with a heavy mallet in his hand. When he tapped Mister Hog 'tween the eyes with that mallet, 'malitis' set in mighty quick, but it was a uncommon 'disease,' even with hungry Negroes around all the time."

Josie Jordan, enslaved in Tennessee ■

■ Us got provisions 'lowanced to us every Saturday night. If you had two in the family, they 'lowanced you one-half gallon 'lasses [molasses] and 12 to 15 pounds bacon and a peck of meal. We have to take the meal and parch it and make coffee out of it. We had our flours. One of them we called biscuit flour and we called it "shorts." We had rye and wheat and buck grain.

If they didn't provision you 'nough, you jus' had to slip 'round and git a chicken. That easy 'nough, but grabbin' a pig a sho' 'nough problem. You have to cotch him by the snoot so he won't squeal, and clomp him tight while you knife him. That ain't stealin', is it? You has to keep right on workin' in the field, if you ain't 'lowanced 'nough, and no nigger like to work with his belly groanin'.

Richard Carruthers, enslaved in Tennessee and Texas ■

■ Old Judge bought every rougish nigger in the country. He'd take him home and give him the key to everything on de place and say to help hisself. Soon as he got all he wanted to eat he'd quit being a rogue. Old Judge said that was what made niggers steal — they was hungry.

Morris Hillyer, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ We lived toby [tolerably] well and didn't starve fer we had enough to eat but we didn't have as good as the master and mistress had. We would slip in the house after the master and mistress wuz sleeping and cook to suit ourselves and cook what we wanted.

The Mistress had an old parrot and one day I wuz in the kitchen making cookies, and I decided I wanted some of them so I tooks me out some and put them on a chair and when I did this the mistress



Millie Williams, ca. 1937

entered the door. I picks up a cushion and throws over the pile of cookies on the chair and mistress came near the chair and the old parrot cries out, Mistress burn, Mistress burn, then the mistress looks under the cushion and she had me whupped but the next day I killed the parrot, and she often wondered who or what killed the bird.

Sophia Word, enslaved in Kentucky ■

■ When de nigger leaves de plantation without no pass, and de padder rollers kotched [patrollers² caught] him, dey gives him 39 licks with de bullwhip. When we's in de fields and sees de padder roller ride by, we starts murmerin' out loud, "Patter de pat, patter de pat." One after 'nother took it up and purty soon everybody murmer-in'. We allus do dat to let everybody know de padder roller 'round.

Millie Williams, enslaved in Tennessee and Texas ■

■ Talking 'bout niggers running away, didn't my step-pappy run away? Didn't my uncle Gabe run away? The frost would jest bite they toes most nigh off too, whiles they was gone. They put Uncle Isom

(my step-pappy) in jail and while's he was in there he killed a white guardman. Then they put in the paper, "A nigger to kill," and our Master seen it and bought him. He was a double-strengthened man, he was so strong. He'd run off so help you God. They had the blood hounds after him once and he caught the hound what was leading and beat the rest of the dogs. The white folks run up on him before he knowed it and made them dogs eat his ear plumb out. But don't you know he got away anyhow. One morning I was sweeping out the hall in the big house and somebody come a-knocking on the front door and I goes to the door. There was Uncle Isom wid rags all on his head. He said, "Tell ole master heah I am." I goes to Master's door and says, "Master Colonel Sam, Uncle Isom said heah he am." He say, "Go 'round to the kitchen and tell black mammy to give you breakfast." When he was thoo' eating they give him 300 lashes and, bless my soul, he run off again.

When we went to a party the nigger fiddlers would play a chune dat went lak this:

I fooled Ole Mastah 7 years
Fooled the overseer three;
Hand me down my banjo
And I'll tickle your bel-lee.

Harriett Robinson, enslaved in Texas ■

■ My mother's brother, "Uncle Dick," and "Uncle July" swore they would not work longer for masters; so they ran away and lived in the woods. In winter they would put cotton seed in the fields to rot for fertilizer and lay in it for warmth. They would kill hogs and slip the meat to some slave to cook for food. When their owners looked for them, "Bob Amos" who raised "nigger hounds" (hounds raised solely to track Negro slaves) was summoned and the dogs located them and surrounded them in their hide-out; one went one way and one the other and escaped in the swamps; they would run until they came to a fence — each kept some "graveyard dust"³ and a few lightwood splinters" with which they smoked their feet and jumped the fence and the dogs turned back and could track no further. Thus, they stayed in the woods until freedom, when they came out and worked for pay.

Samuel Simeon Andrews, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ Long as I lived I minded what my white folks told me, 'cept one time. They was a nigger workin' in the fiel' and he kept jerkin' the mules and Massa Oll got mad, and he give me a gun and said, "Go out there and kill that man." I said, "Massa Oll, please don't tell me that. I ain't never kilt nobody and I don't

² patrollers: white men who patrolled the countryside for escapes slaves and those traveling without passes.

³ "graveyard dust": used as magic to throw the dogs off their scent. Andrews is responding to a question about "slaves' belief in magic and spells."



Cato Carter, ca. 1937

want to.” He said, “Cato, you do what I tell you.” He meant it. I went out to the nigger and said, “You has got to leave this minute, and I is, too. ’cause I is ’spose to kill you, only I ain’t and Massa Oll will kill me.” He drops the hanes and we run and crawled through the fence and ran away.

I hated to go, ’cause things was so bad, and flour sold for \$25.00 a barrel, and pickled pork for \$15.00 a barrel. You couldn’t buy nothin’ lessen with gold. I had plenty of ’federate money, only it wouldn’t buy nothin’.

But today I is a old man and my hands ain’t stained with no blood. I is allus been glad I didn’t kill that man.

Cato Carter, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ My mammy’s name was Harriet Clemens. When I was too little to know anything ’bout it she run off an’ lef’ us. I don’t ’member much ’bout her ’fore she run off, I reckon I was mos’ too little.

She tol’ me when she come after us, after de war was over, all ’bout why she had to run away: It was on ’count o’ de Nigger overseers. (Dey had Niggers over de hoers an’ white mens over de plow han’s.) Dey kep’ a-tryin’ to mess ’roun’ wid her an’ she wouldn’t have nothin’ to do wid ’em. One time while she was in de fiel’ de overseer asked her to go over to de woods

wid him an’ she said, “All right, I’ll go find a nice place an’ wait.” She jus’ kep’ a-goin. She swum de river an’ run away. She slipped back onct or twict at night to see us, but dat was all.

Anna Baker, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ [I guess] I could be called a called a ‘conductor’ on the underground railway, only we didn’t call it that then.⁴ I don’t know as we called it anything — we just knew there was a lot of slaves always a-wantin’ to get free, and I had to help ’em. . . .

Mr. Tabb was always specially good to me. He used to let me go all about — I guess he had to; couldn’t get too much work out of me even when he kept me right under his eyes. . . .

It was ’cause he used to let me me go around in the day and night so much that I came to be the one who carried the runnin’ away slaves over the river. . . .

No, I never got anything from a single one of the people I carried over the river to freedom. I didn’t want anything; after I had made a few trips I got to like it, and even though I could have been free any night myself, I figgered I wasn’t gettin’ along so bad so I would stay on Mr. Tabb’s place and help the others get free. I did it for four years.

I don’t know to this day how he never knew what I was doing; I used to take some awful chances, and he knew I must have been up to something; I wouldn’t do much work in the day, would never be in my house at night, and when he would happen to visit the plantation where I had said I was goin’ I wouldn’t be there. Sometimes I think he did know and wanted me to get the slaves away that way so he wouldn’t have to cause hard feelins’ by freein’ ’em. . . .

Finally, I saw that I could never do any more good in Mason County,⁵ so I decided to take my freedom, too. I had a wife by this time, and one night we quietly slipped across and headed for Mr. Rankin’s bell and light.⁶ It looked like we had to go almost to China to get across that river; I could hear the bell and see the light on Mr. Rankin’s place, but the harder I rowed, the farther away it got, and I knew if I didn’t make it I’d get killed. But finally, I pulled up by the lighthouse, and went on to my freedom — just a few months before all of the slaves got theirs.

Arnold Gragston, enslaved in Kentucky ■

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⁴ Gragston took several hundred fugitive slaves across the Ohio River to freedom before escaping himself shortly before the end of the Civil War.

⁵ For two years Gragston knew that he was being watched and several times escaped capture in Kentucky.

⁶ The home of Rev. John Rankin on the Ohio River was a well-known “station” on the Underground Railroad.