



The Escape of William Wells Brown

*Narrative of William W. Brown,
A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*

1847 EXCERPTS

Born enslaved in Kentucky in 1814, William Wells Brown attempted twice in his youth to escape but was recaptured both times. At age twenty he succeeded in his third attempt by fleeing from a steamboat on the Ohio River and traveling across Ohio to Cleveland, as we read in these excerpts. We begin in chapter ten as Brown returns to his master's home in St. Louis, Missouri, after having been hired out to work on a Mississippi River steamboat, the *Otto*.

After leaving the steamer *Otto*, I resided at home in Mr. Willi's family [in St. Louis] and again began to lay my plans for making my escape from slavery. The anxiety to be a freeman would not let me rest day or night. I would think of the northern cities that I had heard so much about — of Canada, where so many of my acquaintances had found refuge. I would dream at night that I was in Canada, a freeman, and on waking in the morning, weep to find myself so sadly mistaken.

"I would think of Victoria's domain,
And in a moment I seemed to be there!
But the fear of being taken again,
Soon hurried me back to despair." . . .

Victoria's domain,
i.e., Canada, in the
British empire under
Queen Victoria

Captain Price purchased me in the month of October [1834], and I remained with him until December, when the family made a voyage to New Orleans in a boat owned by himself and named the *Chester*. I served on board as one of the stewards. On arriving at New Orleans, about the middle of the month, the boat took in freight for Cincinnati [Ohio]; and it was decided that the family should go up the river in her, and what was of more interest to me, I was to accompany them.

The long looked for opportunity to make my escape from slavery was near at hand.

Captain Price had some fears as to the propriety of taking me near a free State or a place where it was likely I could run away with a prospect of liberty. He asked me if I had ever been in a free State. "Oh yes," said I, "I have been in Ohio; my master carried me into that State once, but I never liked a free State."

It was soon decided that it would be safe to take me with them, and what made it more safe, Eliza was on the boat with us, and Mrs. Price, to try me, asked if I thought as much as ever of Eliza. I told her that Eliza was very dear to me indeed, and that nothing but death should part us. It was the same as if we were married. This had the desired effect. The boat left New Orleans, and proceeded up the river.

Eliza: an enslaved girl purchased by Mrs. Price who hoped to pressure Brown to marry in order to prevent his running away



frontispiece, 4th U.S. ed., 1849



Bachmann, *Bird's eye view of junction of the Ohio & Mississippi Rivers, 1861*, detail, looking south from Cairo, Illinois, down the Mississippi River; Ohio River to the east (left); Mississippi River continuing to the northwest (right); Tennessee River flowing south, at left of map (labels added)

I had at different times obtained little sums of money which I had reserved for a "rainy day." I procured some cotton cloth and made me a bag to carry provisions in. The trials of the past were all lost in hopes for the future. The love of liberty, that had been burning in my bosom for years, and had been well nigh extinguished, was now resuscitated. At night,

when all around was peaceful, I would walk the decks, meditating upon my happy prospects. . . .

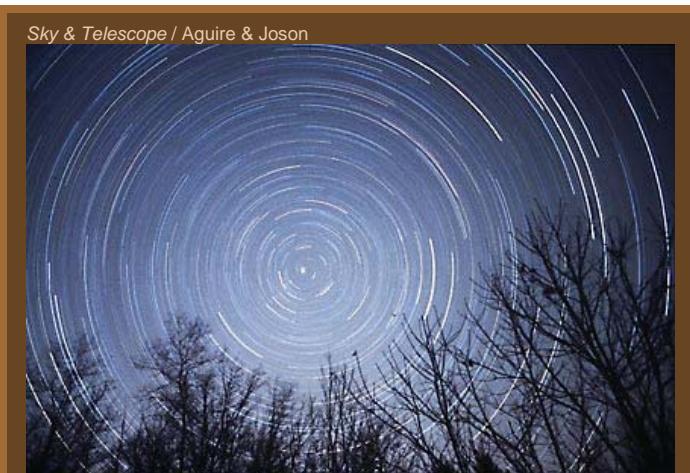
The first place in which we landed in a free State was Cairo [Illinois], a small village at the mouth of the Ohio river. We remained here but a few hours, when we proceeded to Louisville [Kentucky]. After unloading some of the cargo, the boat started on her upward trip. The next day was the first of January. I had looked forward to New Year's day as the commencement of a new era in the history of my life. I had decided upon leaving the peculiar institution that day.

During the last night that I served in slavery, I did not close my eyes a single moment. When not thinking of the future, my mind dwelt on the past. The love of a dear mother, a dear sister, and three dear brothers, yet living, caused me to shed many tears. If I could only have been assured of their being dead, I should have felt satisfied; but I imagined I saw my dear mother in the cotton field, followed by a merciless task-master, and no one to speak a consoling word to her! I beheld my dear sister in the hands of a slave-driver, and compelled to submit to his cruelty! None but one placed in such a situation can for a moment imagine the intense agony to which these reflections subjected me.

CHAPTER XI

At last the time for action arrived. The boat landed at a point which appeared to me the place of all others to start from. I found that it would be impossible to carry anything with me but what was upon my person. I had some provisions and a single suit of clothes, about half worn. When the boat was discharging her cargo, and the passengers engaged carrying their baggage on and off shore, I improved the opportunity to convey myself with my little effects on land. Taking up a trunk, I went up the wharf and was soon out of the crowd. I made directly for the woods, where I remained until night, knowing well that I could not travel, even in the State of Ohio, during the day, without danger of being arrested.

I had long since made up my mind that I would not trust myself in the hands of any man, white or colored. The slave is brought up to look upon every white man as an enemy to him and his race; and twenty-one years in slavery had taught me that there were traitors, even among colored people. After



Sky & Telescope / Aguirre & Joson
Time-lapse photograph of the northern night sky, 2001. The stars appear to rotate around the North Star (Polaris) which, being in line with the earth's axis, seems fixed in the sky, providing a navigation aid at night.

when necessary. And but for this I should certainly have frozen to death, for I was determined not to go to any house for shelter. I knew of a man belonging to Gen. Ashly, of St. Louis, who had run away near Cincinnati on the way to Washington, but had been caught and carried back into slavery; and I felt that a similar fate awaited me, should I be seen by any one. I travelled at night and lay by during the day.

On the fourth day my provisions [food] gave out, and then what to do I could not tell. Have something to eat, I must; but how to get it was the question! On the first night after my food was gone, I went to a barn on the roadside and there found some ears of corn. I took ten or twelve of them and kept on my journey. During the next day, while in the woods, I roasted my corn and feasted upon it, thanking God that I was so well provided for.

My escape to a land of freedom now appeared certain, and the prospects of the future occupied a great part of my thoughts. What should be my occupation was a subject of much anxiety to me, and the next thing what should be my name? I have before stated that my old master, Dr. Young, had no children of his own, but had with him a nephew, the son of his brother, Benjamin Young. When this boy was brought to Doctor Young, his name being William, the same as mine, my mother was ordered to change mine to something else. This, at the time, I thought to be one of the most cruel acts that could be committed upon my rights; and I received several very severe whippings for telling people that my name was William, after orders were given to change it. Though young, I was old enough to place a high appreciation upon my name. It was decided, however, to call me "Sandford," and this name I was known by, not only upon my master's plantation, but up to the time that I made my escape. I was sold under the name of Sandford.

But as soon as the subject came to my mind, I resolved on adopting my old name of William, and let Sandford go by the board, for I always hated it. Not because there was anything peculiar in the name, but because it had been forced upon me. It is sometimes common at the south for slaves to take the name of their masters. Some have a legitimate right to do so. But I always detested the idea of being called by the name of either of my masters. And as for my father, I would rather have adopted the name of "Friday" and been known as the servant of some Robinson Crusoe than to have taken his name. So I was not only hunting for my liberty but also hunting for a name, though I regarded the latter as of little consequence if I could but gain the former. Travelling along the road, I would sometimes speak to myself, sounding my name over, by way of getting used to it, before I should arrive among civilized human beings.

On the fifth or sixth day, it rained very fast, and it froze about as fast as it fell, so that my clothes were one glare of ice. I travelled on at night until I became so chilled and benumbed — the wind blowing into

dark, I emerged from the woods into a narrow path, which led me into the main travelled road. But I knew not which way to go. I did not know North from South, East from West. I looked in vain for the North Star; a heavy cloud hid it from my view. I walked up and down the road until near midnight, when the clouds disappeared and I welcomed the sight of my friend — truly the slave's friend — the North Star!

As soon as I saw it, I knew my course, and before daylight I travelled twenty or twenty-five miles. It being in the winter, I suffered intensely from the cold, being without an overcoat and my other clothes rather thin for the season. I was provided with a tinder-box so that I could make up a fire

tinder-box:
small container with material to start a fire, e.g., straw and a flint; used before the development of matches

And as for my father:
Brown's father was George Higgins, a white man and a relative of Brown's first owner in Kentucky

my face — that I found it impossible to go any further, and accordingly took shelter in a barn, where I was obliged to walk about to keep from freezing.

I have ever looked upon that night as the most eventful part of my escape from slavery. Nothing but the providence of God, and that old barn, saved me from freezing to death. I received a very severe cold which settled upon my lungs, and from time to time my feet had been frost-bitten so that it was with difficulty I could walk. In this situation I travelled two days, when I found that I must seek shelter somewhere, or die.

The thought of death was nothing frightful to me, compared with that of being caught and again carried back into slavery. Nothing but the prospect of enjoying liberty could have induced me to undergo such trials, for

“Behind I left the whips and chains,
Before me were sweet Freedom’s plains!”

This, and this alone, cheered me onward. But I at last resolved to seek protection from the inclemency of the weather, and therefore I secured myself behind some logs and brush, intending to wait there until some one should pass by; for I thought it probable that I might see some colored person, or, if not, some one who was not a slaveholder; for I had an idea that I should know a slaveholder as far as I could see him.

The first person that passed was a man in a buggy-wagon. He looked too genteel for me to hail him. Very soon, another passed by on horseback. I attempted speaking to him, but fear made my voice fail me. As he passed, I left my hiding place and was approaching the road when I observed an old man walking towards me, leading a white horse. He had on a broad-brimmed hat and a very long coat, and was evidently walking for exercise. As soon as I saw him and observed his dress, I thought to myself, “You are the man that I have been looking for!” Nor was I mistaken. He was the very man!

On approaching me, he asked me, “if I was not a slave.” I looked at him some time and then asked him “if he knew of any one who would help me, as I was sick.” He answered that he would, but again asked if I was not a slave. I told him I was. He then said that I was in a very pro-slavery neighborhood, and if I would wait until he went home, he would get a covered wagon for me. I promised to remain. He mounted his horse and was soon out of sight.

After he was gone, I meditated whether to wait or not, being apprehensive that he had gone for some one to arrest me. But I finally concluded to remain until he should return, removing some few rods to watch his movements. After a suspense of an hour and a half or more, he returned with a two-horse covered wagon, such as are usually seen under the shed of a Quaker meeting-house on Sundays and Thursdays, for the old man proved to be a Quaker of the George Fox stamp.

He took me to his house, but it was some time before I could be induced to enter it; not until the old lady came out did I venture into the house. I thought I saw something in the old lady’s cap that told me I was not only safe, but welcome, in her house. I was not, however, prepared to receive their hospitalities. The only fault I found with them was their being too kind. I had never had a white man to treat me as an equal, and the idea of a white lady waiting on me at the table was still worse! Though the table was loaded with the good things of this life, I could not eat. I thought if I could only be allowed the privilege of eating in the kitchen, I should be more than satisfied!

Finding that I could not eat, the old lady, who was a “Thompsonian,” made me a cup of “composition,” or “number six;” but it was so strong and hot that I called it “number

THE FLYING SLAVE

AIR — “*To Greece we give our shining blades,*”

The night is dark, and keen the air,
And the Slave is flying to be free;
His parting word is one short prayer;
O God, but give me Liberty!

Farewell — farewell!

Behind I leave the whips and chains,
Before me spreads sweet Freedom’s plains.

One star shines in the heavens above,
That guides him on his lonely way —
Star of the North — how deep his love
For thee, thou star of Liberty!

Farewell — farewell!

Behind he leaves the whips and chains,
Before him spreads sweet Freedom’s plains.

*The Anti-Slavery Harp:
A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*
compiled by William W. Brown, 1848

rod: one rod =
5.5 yards

George Fox:
founder of the
Society of
Friends
(Quakers)

Thompsonian:
proponent of the
herbal remedies
espoused by
Samuel Thompson,
including an herbal
“composition tea”

seven!" However, I soon found myself at home in this family. On different occasions, when telling these facts, I have been asked how I felt upon finding myself regarded as a man by a white family, especially just having run away from one. I cannot say that I have ever answered the question yet.

The fact that I was in all probability a freeman sounded in my ears like a charm. I am satisfied that none but a slave could place such an appreciation upon liberty as I did at that time. I wanted to see mother and sister, that I might tell them "I was free!" I wanted to see my fellow slaves in St. Louis and let them know that the chains were no longer upon my limbs. I wanted to see Captain Price and let him learn from my own lips that I was no more a chattel, but a man! I

was anxious, too, thus to inform Mrs. Price that she must get another coachman. And I wanted to see Eliza more than I did either Mr. or Mrs. Price!

The fact that I was a freeman — could walk, talk, eat and sleep as a man, and no one to stand over me with the blood-clotted cowhide — all this made me feel that I was not myself.

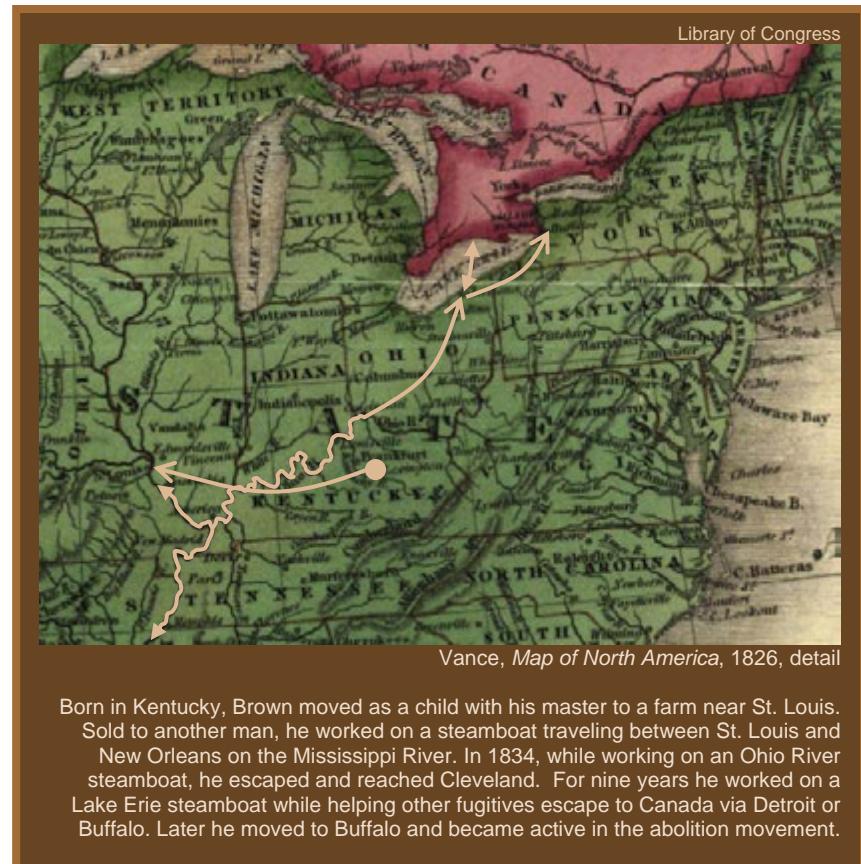
The kind friend that had taken me in was named Wells Brown. He was a devoted friend of the slave, but was very old and not in the enjoyment of good health. After being by the fire awhile, I found that my feet had been very much frozen. I was seized with a fever which threatened to confine me to my bed. But my Thompsonian friends soon raised me, treating me as kindly as if I had been one of their own children. I remained with them twelve or fifteen days, during which time they made me some clothing, and the old gentleman purchased me a pair of boots.

I found that I was about fifty or sixty miles from Dayton in the State of Ohio, and between one and two hundred miles from Cleaveland, on Lake Erie, a place I was desirous of reaching on my way to Canada. This I know will sound strangely to the ears of people in foreign lands, but it is nevertheless true. An American citizen was fleeing from a democratic, republican, Christian government, to receive protection under the monarchy of Great Britain. While the people of the United States boast of their freedom, they at the same time keep three millions of their own citizens in chains; and while I am seated here in sight of Bunker Hill Monument, writing this narrative, I am a slave, and no law, not even in Massachusetts, can protect me from the hands of the

Bunker Hill: famed
1775 battle in Boston,
early in the American
Revolution

Before leaving this good Quaker friend, he inquired what my name was besides William. I told him that I had no other name. "Well," said he, "thee must have another name. Since thee has got out of slavery, thee has become a man, and men always have two names."

I told him that he was the first man to extend the hand of friendship to me, and I would give him the privilege of naming me.



"If I name thee," said he, "I shall call thee Wells Brown, after myself."

"But," said I, "I am not willing to lose my name of William. As it was taken from me once against my will, I am not willing to part with it again upon any terms."

"Then," said he, "I will call thee William Wells Brown."

"So be it," said I; and I have been known by that name ever since I left the house of my first white friend, Wells Brown.

After giving me some little change, I again started for Canada. In four days I reached a public house and went in to warm myself. I there learned that some fugitive slaves had just passed through the place. The men in the bar-room were talking about it, and I thought that it must have been myself they referred to, and I was therefore afraid to start, fearing they would seize me; but I finally mustered courage enough and took my leave. As soon as I was out of sight, I went into the woods and remained there until night, when I again regained the road and travelled on until next day.

Not having had any food for nearly two days, I was faint with hunger and was in a dilemma what to do, as the little cash supplied me by my adopted father, and which had contributed to my comfort, was now all gone. I however concluded to go to a farm-house and ask for something to eat. On approaching the door of the first one presenting itself, I knocked and was soon met by a man who asked me what I wanted. I told him that I would like something to eat. He asked where I was from and where I was going. I replied that I had come some way and was going to Cleveland.

After hesitating a moment or two, he told me that he could give me nothing to eat, adding, "that if I would work, I could get something to eat."

I felt bad, being thus refused something to sustain nature, but did not dare tell him that I was a slave.

Just as I was leaving the door with a heavy heart, a woman, who proved to be the wife of this gentleman, came to the door and asked her husband what I wanted? He did not seem inclined to inform her. She therefore asked me herself. I told her that I had asked for something to eat. After a few other questions, she told me to come in and that she would give me something to eat.

I walked up to the door, but the husband remained in the passage, as if unwilling to let me enter.

She asked him two or three times to get out of the way and let me in. But as he did not move, she pushed him on one side, bidding me walk in! I was never before so glad to see a woman push a man aside! Ever since that act, I have been in favor of "woman's rights!"

After giving me as much food as I could eat, she presented me with ten cents, all the money then at her disposal, accompanied with a note to a friend, a few miles further on the road. Thanking this angel of mercy from an overflowing heart, I pushed on my way, and in three days arrived at Cleveland, Ohio.

Being an entire stranger in this place, it was difficult for me to find where to stop. I had no money, and the lake being frozen, I saw that I must remain until the opening of navigation or go to Canada by way of Buffalo. But believing myself to be somewhat out of danger, I secured an engagement at the

Dedication to First Edition

TO WELLS BROWN, of OHIO

Thirteen years ago I came to your door, a weary fugitive from chains and stripes. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was hungry, and you fed me. Naked was I, and you clothed me.* Even a name by which to be known among men, slavery had denied me. You bestowed upon me your own. Base indeed should I be, if I ever forget what I owe to you, or do anything to disgrace that honored name!

As a slight testimony of my gratitude to my earliest benefactor, I take the liberty to inscribe to you this little Narrative of the sufferings from which I was fleeing when you had compassion upon me. In the multitude that you have succored, it is very possible that you may not remember me; but until I forget God and myself, I can never forget you.

Your grateful friend,
WILLIAM WELLS BROWN
[1847]

* "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Matthew 25:35-36 (Bible, New Testament, New International Version). [NHC note]

Mansion House as a table waiter, in payment for my board. The proprietor, however, whose name was E. M. Segur, in a short time hired me for twelve dollars per month, on which terms I remained until spring, when I found good employment on board a lake steamboat.

I purchased some books and at leisure moments perused them with considerable advantage to myself. While at Cleaveland I saw, for the first time, an anti-slavery newspaper. It was the “*Genius of Universal Emancipation*,” published by Benjamin Lundy, and though I had no home, I subscribed for the paper. It was my great desire, being out of slavery myself, to do what I could for the emancipation of my brethren yet in chains, and while on Lake Erie I found many opportunities of “helping their cause along.”

It is well known that a great number of fugitives make their escape to Canada by way of Cleaveland, and while on the lake I always made arrangement to carry them on the boat to Buffalo or Detroit, and thus effect their escape to the “promised land.” The friends of the slave, knowing that I would transport them without charge, never failed to have a delegation when the boat arrived at Cleaveland. I have sometimes had four or five on board at one time.

In the year 1842 I conveyed, from the first of May to the first of December, sixty-nine fugitives over Lake Erie to Canada. In 1843, I visited Malden, in Upper Canada, and counted seventeen in that small village, whom I had assisted in reaching Canada. Soon after coming North I subscribed for *The Liberator*, edited by that champion of freedom, William Lloyd Garrison. I had heard nothing of the anti-slavery movement while in slavery, and as soon as I found that my enslaved countrymen had friends who were laboring for their liberation, I felt anxious to join them and give what aid I could to the cause.

I early embraced the temperance cause and found that a temperance reformation was needed among my colored brethren. In company with a few friends I commenced a temperance reformation among the colored people in the city of Buffalo and labored three years, in which time a society was built up, numbering over five hundred out of a population of less than seven hundred.

temperance cause:
movement to curb
the excessive use of
alcoholic beverages,
and, later in the 1800s,
to advocate the
prohibition of alcohol

In the autumn, 1843, impressed with the importance of spreading the anti-slavery truth as a means to bring about the abolition of slavery, I commenced lecturing as an agent of the western New York Anti-Slavery Society, and have ever since devoted my time to the cause of my enslaved countrymen.

<p>University of North Carolina Library</p> <p>THREE YEARS IN EUROPE: OR, PLACES I HAVE SEEN AND PEOPLE I HAVE MET. BY W. WELLS BROWN, A FUGITIVE SLAVE. WITH A MEMOIR OF THE AUTHOR, BY WILLIAM FARMER, Esq.</p> <p>LONDON: CHARLES GILPIN, 5, BISHOPSGATE STREET, WHITEHORN. EDINBURGH: OLIVER AND BOYD. 1852.</p>	<p>Cornell University Library</p> <p>CLOTEL; OR, THE PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER: A Narrative of Slave Life IN THE UNITED STATES. BY WILLIAM WELLS BROWN, A FUGITIVE SLAVE, AUTHOR OF "THREE YEARS IN EUROPE." With a Sketch of the Author's Life.</p> <p>London: PARTRIDGE & OAKLEY, PATRONS OF THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN AND FUGITIVE SLAVES. 1853.</p>	<p>CORNELL UNIVERSITY LIBRARY</p> <p>THE ESCAPE; OR, A LEAP FOR FREEDOM. BY W. BROWN, IN FIVE ACTS. AUTHOR OF "CLOTEL," "THE HISTORY OF PLATES AND PEOPLE AMERICAN." "LOOK ON THIS PICTURE, BUT ON THIS!" — HAMLET. BOSTON: R. P. WALLACE, 21 CORNHILL. 1858.</p>
<p>First travel book, 1852</p>	<p>First novel, 1853</p>	<p>First drama, 1858</p>
<p>In the 1850s, William Wells Brown authored the first travel book, the first novel, and the first drama to be published by an African American.</p>		