



SLAVE AUCTIONS

Selections from 19th-century narratives
of formerly enslaved African Americans

Many African Americans who had escaped slavery in the southern United States published autobiographies describing their lives as slaves and their new lives as free men and women. In the century before the end of the Civil War in 1865, 102 such narratives had been published, many by abolitionist societies, and another 53 were published in the postbellum years to 1900.¹ Central to many of these narratives are the authors' memories of slave sales and auctions, of being sold and separated from their families. Presented here are the memories of Henry Watson, Henry Bibb, Josiah Henson, William J. Anderson, and William Wells Brown.

Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave, 1848*

Born enslaved in Virginia, Henry Watson was sent to Richmond at age eight to be sold at auction.

At last everything was ready, and the traffic in human flesh began.

I will attempt to give as accurate an account of the language and ceremony of a slave auction as I possibly can. "Gentlemen, here is a likely boy; how much? He is sold for no fault; the owner wants money. His age is forty. Three hundred dollars is all that I am offered for him. Please to examine him; he is warranted sound. Boy, pull off your shirt — roll up your pants — for we want to see if you have been whipped." If they discover any scars they will not buy, saying that the nigger is a bad one. The auctioneer seeing this, cries, "Three hundred dollars, gentlemen, three hundred dollars. Shall I sell him for three hundred dollars? I have just been informed by his master that he is an honest boy and belongs to the same church that he does." This turns the tide frequently, and the bids go up fast; and he is knocked off for a good sum.

After the men and women are sold, the children are put on the stand. I was the first put up. On my appearance, several voices cried, "How old is that little nigger?" On hearing this expression, I again burst into tears and wept so that I have no distinct recollection of his answer. I was at length knocked down to a man whose name was Denton, a slave trader, then purchasing slaves for the Southern market. His first name I have forgotten.

Each one of the traders has private jails, which are for the purpose of keeping slaves in, and they are generally kept by some confidential slave. Denton had one of these jails to which I was conducted by his trusty slave, and on entering I found a great many slaves there, waiting to be sent off as soon as their numbers increased. These jails are enclosed by a wall about 16 feet high, and the yard-room is for the slaves to exercise in and consists of but one room, in which all sexes and ages are huddled together in a mass. I stayed in this jail but two days when the number was completed, and we were called out to form a line. Horses and wagons were in readiness to carry our provisions and tents so that we might camp out at night. Before we had proceeded far, Mr. Denton gave orders for us to stop for the purpose of handcuffing some of the men, which, he said in a loud voice, "had the devil in them." The men belonging to this drove were all married men, and all leaving their wives and children behind; he, judging from their tears that they were unwilling to go, had them made secure. We started again on our journey, Mr. Denton taking the lead in his sulky; and the driver, Mr. Thornton, brought the rear.

I will not weary my readers with the particulars of our march to Tennessee, where we stopped several days for the purpose of arranging our clothes. While stopping, the men were hired out to pick cotton. While in Tennessee we lost four of our number who died from exposure on the road. After the lapse of

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¹ Bibliography of all identified slave narratives published as broadsides, pamphlets, or books (in English) between 1749 and 1998; compiled by Dr. William L. Andrews, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/biblintro.html.

three weeks we started again on our journey, and in about four weeks arrived in Natchez, Miss., and went to our pen, which Mr. Denton had previously hired for us, and had our irons taken off and our clothes changed; for Mr. Denton was expecting visitors to examine the flock, as he would sometimes term us. There was a sign-board in front of the house, which informed traders that he had on hand blacksmiths, carpenters, field-hands; also several sickly ones, whom he would sell very cheap.

In a short time purchasers became plenty, and our number diminished. I was not sold for several weeks, though I wished to be the first, not wishing to witness his cruelty to his slaves any longer; for if they displeased him in the least, he would order them to be stripped and tied hand and foot together. He would then have his paddle brought, which was a board about two feet in length and one inch in thickness, having fourteen holes bored through it, about an inch in circumference. This instrument of torture he would apply until the slave was exhausted, on parts which the purchaser would not be likely to examine. This mode of punishment is considered one of the most cruel ever invented, as the flesh protrudes through these holes at every blow, and forms bunches and blisters the size of each hole, causing much lameness and soreness to the person receiving them. This punishment is generally inflicted in the morning, before visitors come to examine the slaves.

Just before the doors are opened, it is usual for the keeper to grease the mouths of the slaves so as to make it appear that they are well and hearty, and have just done eating fat meat; though they seldom, if ever, while in the custody of the keeper, taste a morsel of meat of any kind.

At length, a man made his appearance; the very man of all others I had ever seen, from whom I should shrink and be afraid. He was dark-complexioned, had sharp, grey eyes, a peaked nose, and compressed lips; indeed, he was a very bad-looking man. I never wish to look upon his face again. His name was Alexander McNeill, a member of the firm of McNeill, Fiske & Co. He said he wanted a boy to bring up to suit himself. He took a great fancy to me, and after some discussion about the price, agreed at last to give five hundred dollars for me. I quit my old quarters and went with my new master to his store. He told me my duty for the future would be to wait upon him — “to jump when I was spoken to, run when sent upon errands, and if I did not mind my P’s and Q’s, I should be flogged like h—I.”

Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself, 1849*

Henry Bibb, after escaping to Canada and returning later to free his wife and child, was recaptured in Kentucky and sold with them in New Orleans.

When we arrived at the city of Vicksburg [Mississippi], he intended to sell a portion of his slaves there and stopped for three weeks trying to sell. But he met with very poor success.

We had there to pass through an examination or inspection by a city officer, whose business it was to inspect slave property that was brought to that Market for sale. He examined our backs to see if we had been much scarred by the lash. He examined our limbs to see whether we were inferior.

As it is hard to tell the ages of slaves, they look in their mouths at their teeth and prick up the skin on the back of their hands, and if the person is very far advanced in life, when the skin is pricked up, the pucker will stand so many seconds on the back of the hand.

But the most rigorous examinations of slaves by those slave inspectors is on the mental capacity. If they are found to be very intelligent, this is pronounced the most objectionable of all other qualities connected with the life of a slave. In fact, it undermines the whole fabric of his chattelhood; it prepares for what slaveholders are pleased to pronounce the unpardonable sin when committed by a slave. It lays the foundation for running away and going to Canada. They also see in it a love for freedom, patriotism, insurrection, bloodshed, and exterminating war against American slavery.

Hence they are very careful to inquire whether a slave who is for sale can read or write. This question has been asked me often by slave traders and cotton planters, while I was there for market. After conversing with me, they have sworn by their Maker that they would not have me among their negroes and that they saw the devil in my eye; I would run away, &c [etc.].

I have frequently been asked also if I had ever run away, but Garrison would generally answer this

question for me in the negative. He could have sold my little family without any trouble for the sum of one thousand dollars. But for fear he might not get me off at so great an advantage, as the people did not like my appearance, he could do better by selling us all together. They all wanted my wife, while but very few wanted me. He asked twenty-five hundred dollars but was not able to get us off at that price.

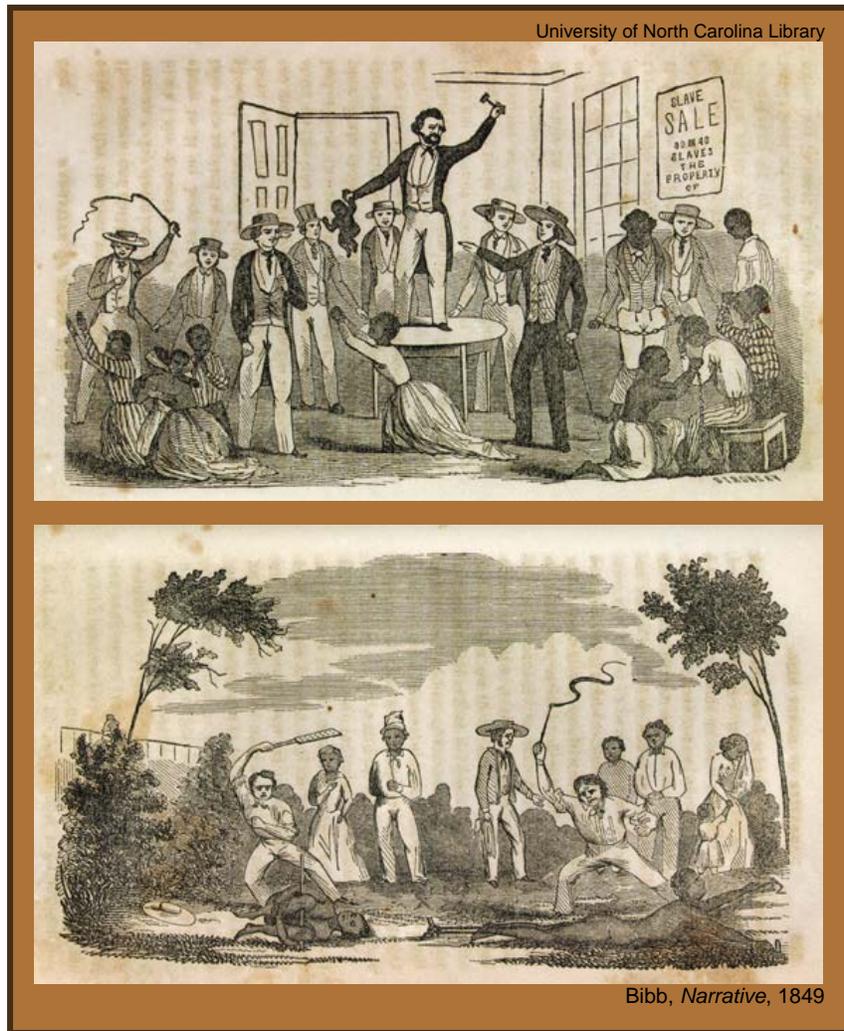
He tried to speculate on my Christian character. He tried to make it appear that I was so pious and honest that I would not run away for ill treatment, which was a gross mistake, for I never had religion enough to keep me from running away from slavery in my life.

But we were taken from Vicksburgh to the city of New Orleans where we were to be sold at any rate. We were taken to a trader's yard or a slave prison on the corner of St. Joseph street. This was a common resort for slave traders and planters who wanted to buy slaves; and all classes of slaves were kept there for sale, to be sold in private or public — young or old, males or females, children or parents, husbands or wives.

Everyday at 10 o'clock they were exposed for sale. They had to be in trim for showing themselves to the public for sale. Everyone's head had to be combed and their faces washed, and those who were inclined to look dark and rough were compelled to wash in greasy dish water, to look slick and lively.

When spectators would come in the yard, the slaves were ordered out to form a line. They were made to stand up straight and look as sprightly as they could; and when they were asked a question, they had to answer it as promptly as they could and try to induce the spectators to buy them. If they failed to do this, they were severely paddled after the spectators were gone. The object for using the paddle in the place of a lash was to conceal the marks which would be made by the flogging. And the object for flogging under such circumstances is to make the slaves anxious to be sold.

The paddle is made of a piece of hickory timber, about one inch thick, three inches in width, and about eighteen inches in length. The part is applied to the flesh is bored full of quarter-inch auger holes, and every time this is applied to the flesh of the victim, the blood gushes through the holes of the paddle or a blister makes its appearance. The persons who are thus flogged are always stripped naked and their hands tied together. They are then bent over double, their knees are forced between their elbows, and a stick is put through between the elbows and the bend of the legs in order to hold the victim in that position, while the paddle is applied to those parts of the body which would not be so likely to be seen by those who wanted to buy slaves.



Josiah Henson, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life*, 1858

Josiah Henson was born enslaved in Maryland. As a young boy he was sold along with his mother and five siblings when their owner died. Although soon reunited with his mother, he never saw his brothers and sisters again.

Common as are slave-auctions in the southern states, and naturally as a slave may look forward to the time when he will be put up on the block, still the full misery of the event — of the scenes which precede and succeed it — is never understood till the actual experience comes. The first sad announcement that the sale is to be, the knowledge that all ties of the past are to be sundered, the frantic terror at the idea of being sent “down south,” the almost certainty that one member of a family will be torn from another, the anxious scanning of purchasers’ faces, the agony at parting, often forever, with husband, wife, child — these must be seen and felt to be fully understood. Young as I was then, the iron entered into my soul. The remembrance of the breaking up of McPherson’s estate [the property of his first owner] is photographed in its minutest features in my mind. The crowd collected round the stand, the huddling group of negroes, the examination of muscle, teeth, the exhibition of agility, the look of the auctioneer, the agony of my mother — I can shut my eyes and see them all.

My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand. Her turn came, and she was bought by Isaac Riley of Montgomery county. Then I was offered to the assembled purchasers. My mother, half distracted with the thought of parting forever from all her children, pushed through the crowd while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where Riley was standing. She fell at his feet and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother only could command to buy her *baby* as well as herself, and spare to her one, at least, of her little ones. Will it, can it, be believed that this man, thus appealed to, was capable not merely of turning a deaf ear to her supplication, but of disengaging himself from her with such violent blows and kicks as to reduce her to the necessity of creeping out of his reach and mingling the groan of bodily suffering with the sob of a breaking heart? As she crawled away from the brutal man I heard her sob out, “Oh, Lord Jesus, how long, how long shall I suffer this way!” I must have been then between five and six years old. I seem to see and hear my poor weeping mother now.

This was one of my earliest observations of men, an experience which I only shared with thousands of my race, the bitterness of which to any individual who suffers it cannot be diminished by the frequency of its recurrence, while it is dark enough to overshadow the whole after-life with something blacker than a funeral pall. Almost immediately, however, whether my childish strength at five or six years of age was overmastered by such scenes and experiences, or from some accidental cause, I fell sick, and seemed to my new master so little likely to recover that he proposed to R., the purchaser of my mother, to take me too at such a trifling rate that it could not be refused. I was thus providentially restored to my mother; and under her care, destitute as she was of the proper means of nursing me, I recovered my health and grew up to be an uncommonly vigorous and healthy boy and man.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / NYPL

NEGROES
FOR SALE.

I will sell by Public Auction, on Tuesday of next Court, being the 29th of November, *Eight Valuable Family Servants*, consisting of one Negro Man, a first-rate field hand, one No. 1 Boy, 17 years of age, a trusty house servant, one excellent Cook, one House-Maid, and one Seamstress. The balance are under 12 years of age. They are sold for no fault, but in consequence of my going to reside North. Also a quantity of Household and Kitchen Furniture, Stable Lot, &c. Terms accommodating, and made known on day of sale.

Jacob August, jr.
P. J. TURNBULL, Auctioneer.
Warronton, October 28, 1859.

Printed at the News office, Warronton, North Carolina.

North Carolina, 1859

William J. Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave; Sold Eight Times! In Jail Sixty Times!! Whipped Three Hundred Times!!! or The Dark Deeds of American Slavery Revealed, 1857*

Born in Virginia to a free mother and enslaved father, William Anderson was kidnapped as a child and sold into slavery. His owner took him and nearly seventy other newly purchased slaves, chained together, to his Mississippi plantation.

In due time we arrived safely in the slave pen at Natchez [Mississippi], and here we joined another large crowd of slaves which were already stationed at this place. Here scenes were witnessed which are too wicked to mention. The slaves are made to shave and wash in greasy pot liquor to make them look sleek and nice; their heads must be combed and their best clothes put on; and when called out to be examined they are to stand in a row — the women and men apart — then they are picked out and taken into a room, and examined. See a large, rough slaveholder take a poor female slave into a room, make her strip, then feel of and examine her as though she were a pig, or a hen, or merchandise. O, how can a poor slave husband or father stand and see his wife, daughters and sons thus treated.

I saw there, after men and women had followed each other, then — too shocking to relate — for the sake of money they are sold separately, sometimes two hundred miles apart, although their hopes would be to be sold together. Sometimes their little children are torn from them and sent far away to a distant country, never to see them again. O, such crying and weeping when parting from each other! For this demonstration of natural human affection the slaveholder would apply the lash or paddle upon the naked skin. The former was used less frequently than the latter, for fear of making scars or marks on their backs, which are closely looked for by the buyer. I saw one poor woman dragged off and sold from her tender child — which was nearly white — which the seller would not let go with its mother. Although the master of the mother importuned him a long time to let him have it with its mother, with oaths and curses he refused. It was too hard for the mother to bear; she fainted and was whipped up.

It is impossible for me to give more than a faint idea of what was enacted in the town of Natchez, for there were many slave pens there in 1827. For some reason or other, which I never knew, I was sold first. A hellish, rough-looking, hard-hearted, slave-driving slaveholder by the name of Rocks bought me from T. L. Pain, Denton & Co. We were delayed a few days before we got a boat for the residence of Mr. Rocks. I had an opportunity of seeing the distress of the poor slaves of Natchez, but in a few years afterwards God visited them with an awful overthrow. A dreadful hurricane destroyed houses and boats of all kinds, and many lives of nobles were lost in oblivion.

William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself, 1849*

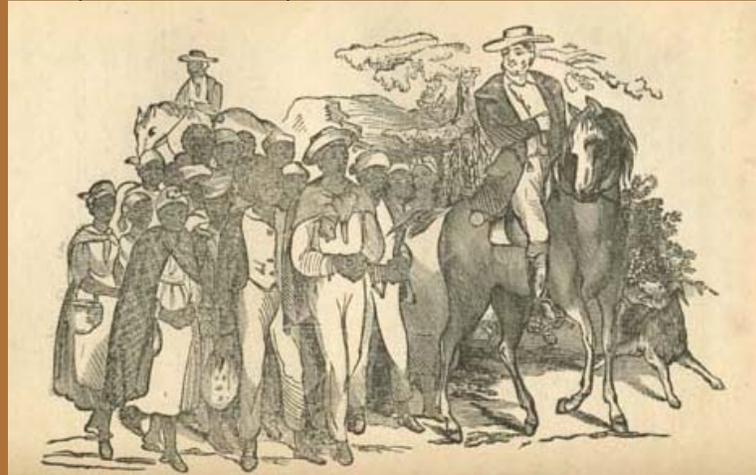
Hired out by his master to a "soul-driver" who transported slaves on steamboats down the Mississippi River to New Orleans for sale, William Wells Brown witnessed the business of large-scale slave commerce.

There was on the boat a large room on the lower deck, in which the slaves were kept, men and women, promiscuously — all chained two and two, and a strict watch kept that they did not get loose; for cases have occurred in which slaves have got off their chains, and made their escape at landing-places while the boats were taking in wood — and with all our care, we lost one woman who had been taken from her husband and children, and having no desire to live without them, in the agony of her soul jumped overboard and drowned herself. She was not chained.

It was almost impossible to keep that part of the boat clean.

On landing at Natchez, the slaves were all carried to the slave-pen and there kept one week, during which time several of them were sold. Mr. Walker fed his slaves well. We took on board, at St. Louis, several hundred pounds of bacon (smoked meat) and corn-meal, and his slaves were better fed than slaves generally were in Natchez, so far as my observation extended.

At the end of a week, we left for New Orleans, the place of our final destination, which we reached in two days. Here the slaves were placed in a negro-pen, where those who wished to purchase could call and



"The slave-trader Walker and the author driving a gang of slaves to the southern market," in Brown, *Narrative*, 1849

examine them. The negro-pen is a small yard, surrounded by buildings, from fifteen to twenty feet wide, with the exception of a large gate with iron bars. The slaves are kept in the buildings during the night and turned out into the yard during the day. After the best of the stock was sold at private sale at the pen, the balance were taken to the Exchange Coffee House Auction Rooms, kept by Isaac L. McCoy, and sold at public auction. After the sale of this lot of slaves, we left New Orleans for St. Louis.

On our arrival at St. Louis, I went to Dr. Young, and told him

that I did not wish to live with Mr. Walker any longer. I was heartsick at seeing my fellow-creatures bought and sold. But the Dr. had hired me for the year, and stay I must. Mr. Walker again commenced purchasing another gang of slaves. He bought a man of Colonel John O'Fallon, who resided in the suburbs of the city. This man had a wife and three children. As soon as the purchase was made, he was put in jail for safe keeping until we should be ready to start for New Orleans. His wife visited him while there several times, and several times when she went for that purpose was refused admittance.

In the course of eight or nine weeks Mr. Walker had his cargo of human flesh made up. There was in this lot a number of old men and women, some of them with grey locks. We left St. Louis in the steamboat *Carlton*, Captain Swan, bound for New Orleans. On our way down, and before we reached Rodney, the place where we made our first stop, I had to prepare the old slaves for market. I was ordered to have the old men's whiskers shaved off and the grey hairs plucked out, where they were not too numerous, in which case he had a preparation of blacking to color it, and with a blacking-brush we would put it on. This was new business to me, and was performed in a room where the passengers could not see us. These slaves were also taught how old they were by Mr. Walker, and after going through the blacking process, they looked ten or fifteen years younger; and I am sure that some of those who purchased slaves of Mr. Walker were dreadfully cheated, especially in the ages of the slaves which they bought.

We landed at Rodney, and the slaves were driven to the pen in the back part of the village. Several were sold at this place during our stay of four or five days, when we proceeded to Natchez. There we landed at night, and the gang were put in the warehouse until morning, when they were driven to the pen. As soon as the slaves are put in these pens, swarms of planters may be seen in and about them. They knew when Walker was expected, as he always had the time advertised beforehand when he would be in Rodney, Natchez, and New Orleans. These were the principal places where he offered his slaves for sale. . . .

The next day we proceeded to New Orleans, and put the gang in the same negro-pen which we occupied before. In a short time, the planters came flocking to the pen to purchase slaves. Before the slaves were exhibited for sale, they were dressed and driven out into the yard. Some were set to dancing, some to jumping, some to singing, and some to playing cards. This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy. My business was to see that they were placed in those situations before the arrival of the purchasers, and I have often set them to dancing when their cheeks were wet with tears. As slaves were in good demand at that time, they were all soon disposed of, and we again set out for St. Louis.