



Suicide among Slaves: A “Very Last Resort”

“In the United States today, suicide is less common among African Americans in general than in whites,” writes Dr. David Lester, a psychologist

and specialist in suicide research, “. . . [which] may represent an African worldview which accepts suicide only as a very last resort in the face of extreme stress . . .”¹ Calculating an approximate suicide rate among enslaved African Americans, Lester notes the difficulty of identifying unambiguous data on slaves’ deaths, whether natural or at their own hand. Thus, analysis of the number, motivation, and consequences of slave suicide must include anecdotal evidence, i.e., first-person accounts and second-hand reports to supplement numerical data from census and plantation records. The selections below offer a representative sample of this evidence from slave narratives, former slave interviews (as transcribed by the interviewers²), and antebellum African American newspapers.

■ They say Negroes won’t commit suicide, but Isom [Hutchinson’s father] told us of a girl that committed suicide. There was a girl named Lu who used to run off and go to the dances. The patrollers³ would try to catch her but they couldn’t because she was too fast on her feet. One day they got after her in the daytime. She had always outran them at night. She ran to the cabin and got her quarter which she had hid. She put the quarter in her mouth. The white folks didn’t allow the slaves to handle no money. The quarter got stuck in her throat, and she went on down to the slough and drowned herself rather than let them beat her, and mark her up. Then patrollers sure would get you and beat you up. If they couldn’t catch you when you were running away from them, they would come on your master’s place and get you and beat you. The master would allow them to do it. They didn’t let the patrollers come on the Blackshear place, but this gal was so hard-headed ’bout goin’ out that they made a ’ception to her. And they intended to make her an example to the rest of the slaves. But they didn’t get Lucy.

IDA BLACKSHEAR HUTCHINSON, enslaved in Alabama, WPA interview, 1938 ■

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

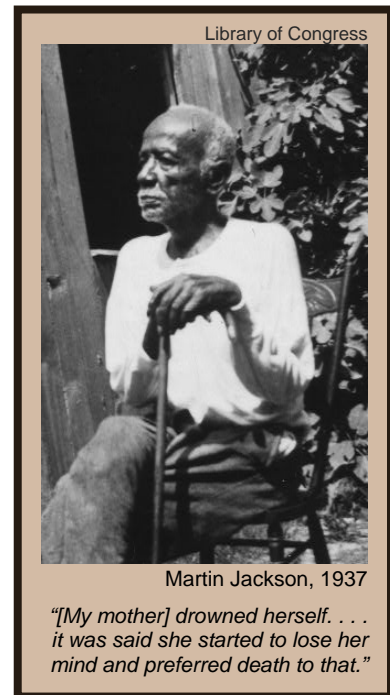
She hung herself to keep from getting a whooping. Mother raised (reared) her boy. She told mother she would kill herself before she would be whooped. I never heard what she was to be whooped for. She thought she would be whooped. She took a rope and tied it to a limb and to her neck and then jumped. 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 [male], enslaved in Arkansas, WPA interview, 1939 ■

■ My mother was drowned years before when I was a little boy. I only remember her after she was dead. I can take you to the spot in the river today where she was drowned. She drowned herself. I never knew the reason behind it, but it was said she started to lose her mind and preferred death to that.

MARTIN JACKSON, enslaved in Texas, WPA interview, 1937 ■

■ One time dat I heard of a slave that had ’scaped and when dey tried to ketch him he jumped in de creek an’ drown hisself. He was brought from over in Geo’gia. He hadn’t been in Alabama long ’fore him an’ two more tried to ’scape; two of ’em was caught an’ brought



National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. WPA interviews online as digital images from the Library of Congress at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html. Nineteenth-century slave narratives online in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ David Lester, Center for the Study of Suicide, “Suicidal Behavior in African-American Slaves,” *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 37:1 (1998), 1-13.

² Selections from the WPA narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves 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.

³ Patrollers: White men in “slave patrols” who searched for runaway slaves and slaves traveling without passes.

back but dis yuther one went to de lan' of sweet dreams.

WILLIAM HENRY TOWNS, enslaved in Alabama, WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

■ One day atter ole marster wuz gone [on a trip] de oberseer tried ter run de hawg over gran' paw an' wuz cussin' him scan'-lous. Gran' paw cussed back at him an' den de oberseer started ter beat him. Gran' paw drawed de hoe back ober his haid an' tells him dat if'en he comes a step closter dat he am gwine [going to] ter bust his haid open. De oberseer come on an' de hoe 'cends on his haid choppin' hit wide open.

Ole marster ain't dar so young marster makes seberal of de slaves hold him while he lashes him wid de cowhide. He cuts his back all ter pieces an' den he throws him in de barn, chained down ter de flo'.

Gran' mammy snuke out ter see him an' whisper ter him through de cracks, but one night she goes out dar ter de barn an' he am gone. She runs ter young marster an' axes him whar am gran' paw an' he tells her dat he am sold ter a man from Mississippi an' dat if'en she whimpers 'bout him sellin' de black bastard dat he will whup her, den wash her down wid vinegar, red pepper an' salt.

Pore gran' maw am nigh 'bout crazy so she walks off'en de plantation. Down on de aidge of de plantation runs de Neuse [River] so gran' maw gits dar, an' jumps in.

. . . Dey said dat ole marster had a fit most when he fin's out 'bout what been done dar while he am gone, so he am extra good ter mammy.

ANNIE TATE, enslaved in North Carolina, WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

■ Poor A'nt Nellie! De pattyrollers whipped her one day. She took an went up in the barn — hid in de hay.

When night come she crawled out an' went out in the woods an' climbed top of a hill an' rolled down. We missed her but didn't think de gal wuz gwine kill herself like she had tol' me day befo'; "Fannie, I don had my las' whippin. I'm gwine to God." The bread whar her old mistress had don' give her wan't never been touched an' was found beside her. The buzzards had carried poor Nellie's head down de woods an' picked her eyes out.

FANNIE BERRY, enslaved in Virginia, WPA interview, ca. 1936 ■

■ His slaves used to run away whenever they got a chance. I 'member he had a real pretty gal on his place. . . One of the overseers was crazy about her, but her mother had told her not to let any of 'em go with her. So this old overseer would stick close 'round her when they was workin', just so he could get a chance to say somethin' to her. He kept followin' this child and followin' this child until she almost went crazy. Way afterwhile she run away and come to our house and and stayed 'bout three days. When my marster found out she was there, he told her she would have to go back, or at least she would have to leave his place. He didn't want no trouble with nobody. When that child left us she stayed in the woods until she got so hungry she just had to go back. This old man was mad with her for leavin', and one day while she was in the field he started at her again and she told him flat footed she warn't goin' with him he took the big end of his cow hide and struck her in the back so hard it knocked her plumb crazy. It was a big lake of water about ten yards in front of 'em, and if her mother hadn't run and caught her she would have walked right in it and drowned.

UNNAMED FORMER SLAVE, enslaved in Georgia, WPA interview, ca. 1937 ■

■ My master kept a large dairy, and she [Hayden's mother] was the milk-woman. Lexington was a small town in those days, and the dairy was in the town. A man . . . saw my mother when she was about her work. He made proposals of a base nature to her. When she would have nothing to say to him, he told her that she need not be so independent, for if money could buy her he would have her. My mother told old mistress, and begged that master might not sell her. But he did sell her. My mother had a high spirit, being part Indian. She would not consent to live with this man, as he wished; and he sent her to prison, and had her flogged, and punished in various ways, so that at last she began to have crazy turns. When I read in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" about Cassy, it put me in mind of my mother, and I wanted to tell Mrs.

S—— about her. She tried to kill herself several times, once with a knife and once by hanging. She had long, straight black hair, but after this it all turned white, like an old person's.

LEWIS HAYDEN, enslaved in Kentucky, interviewed in 1853, published in *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitives in Canada*, ed. Benjamin Drew, 1856 ■

■ There was on the boat [Mississippi River steamboat] 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.

WILLIAM WELLS BROWN, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*, 1847 ■

■ *Suicide.* The negro woman [Lucy] confined in our jail as a runaway, put an end to her existence on the 28th [-] by hanging herself. Her master came to this place the day on which it occurred and going to the jail, was recognised by the woman as her master. He had left the jail but a short time when it was discovered that the woman had destroyed herself. We have never known an instance where so much firmness was exhibited by any person as was by this negro. The place from which she suspended herself was not high enough to prevent her feet from touching the floor; and it was only by drawing her legs up and remaining in that position that she succeeded in her determined purpose.

RUTHERFORD [NC] GAZETTE, n.d.; reprinted in *Southern Gazette*, 23 Sept. 1837; reprinted in "What Has the North to Do with Slavery?" *Colored American*, 17 Feb. 1838 ■

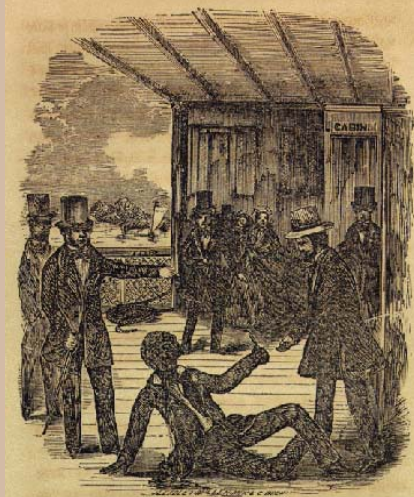
■ I recall to mind, right here, a terrible scene that I witnessed on a plantation belonging to Mr. Bris, who owned about nine hundred slaves. At this time the slaves did not know how to run away; they would run to the woods, remain there and then come back. One day three men ran away from the plantation and remained a number of months; when they came back he ordered them to be tied up to the whipping post. He used the lash himself; he lashed them until he no longer had strength to do it, then he ordered them taken down and sent to the next overseer, and ordered them to be again whipped, and for the second time they were beaten, and after he had whipped them as long as could, they were taken down and sent to another overseer. He refused to whip them and ordered them back again to their master, but they tried to escape. The master chased them on horseback, one gave himself up, the other two still running, the slave owner said he would have them, but sooner than be taken, they ran and jumped into a red hot furnace and put an end to their lives.

LEWIS CHARLTON, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton, and Reminiscences of Slavery*, ed. Edward Everett Brown, 1847 ■

■ There have been hours in my unhappy life, many of them, when the contemplation of death as the end of earthly sorrow — of the grave as a resting place for the tired and worn out body — has been pleasant to dwell upon. But such contemplations vanish in the hour of peril. No man, in his full strength, can stand undismayed, in the presence of the "king of terrors." Life is dear to every living thing; the worm that crawls upon the ground will struggle for it. At that moment [while battling a white overseer in self-defense] it was dear to me, enslaved and treated as I was.

SOLOMON NORTHUP, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 1853 ■

■ "Desperation of A Fugitive Slave" When we had passed a few miles out of Albany [New York], the boat hove to, and there came on board four men — one of the number a colored man. The white men repaired [went] to their state-rooms, leaving the colored man on deck, after the boat had returned to the channel. He attracted my attention, by his dejected appearance and apparent hopeless despair. He was, I judged, about forty years of age; his clothing coarse and very ragged; and the most friendless, sorrowful looking being I ever saw. He spake to no one, but silently paced the deck; his breast heaving with inaudible sighs; his brow contracted with a most terrible frown; his eyes dreamily fastened on the floor, and he appeared to be considering some hopeless undertaking. I watched him attentively, as I walked to



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Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*, 1857

and fro on the same deck, and could clearly discover that some fearful conflict was taking place in his mind; but as I afterwards repassed him he looked up with a happy, patient smile, that lighted up his whole countenance, which seemed to say plainly, I see a way of escape, and have decided on my course of action. His whole appearance was changed; his heart that before had beat so wildly was quiet now as the broad bosom of the Hudson, and he gazed after me with a look of calm deliberation, indicative of a settled, but desperate purpose. I walked hastily forward and turned around, when, Oh, my God! what a sight was there! Holding still the dripping knife, with which he had cut his throat! and while his life-blood oozed from the gaping wound and flowed over his tattered garments to the deck, the same exultant smile beamed on his ghastly features!

The history of the poor, dejected creature was now revealed: he had escaped from his cruel task-master in Maryland; but in the midst of his security and delightful enjoyment, he had been overtaken by the human blood-hound, and returned to his avaricious and tyrannical master, now conducting him back to a life of Slavery, to which he rightly thought death was far preferable.

AUSTIN STEWARD, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*, 1857 ■

■ The following anecdote was related to us on 1st Monday by a gentleman recently from Georgia, now in this city: George, a slave, belonged to a family in the State of Georgia, near the Ochmulgee River whom he served faithfully. He was an excellent machanic and during the life of his owners or claimants (for he never had an owner) they would take no money for him, and in consequence of his faithfulness to them, at their death, George was willed a freeman!

Poor George then looked upon himself as one of the lords, even of the accursed soil of Georgia. But George was doomed to disappointment. The unjust heirs broke the will, seized his person, and thrust him into the dark caverns of slavery again! Bound for a new residence, they started down the Ochmulgee. George was on board the steamboat bound for his destination, but the vicious robbers of his liberty knew not where. George looked sad, and talked but little.

The steamer glided along, with a crowd of guests, unconscious of their weary fellow passenger. In the night a splash was heard which awakened the attention of boatmen, passengers; all looked with anxiety, but seeing all appeared to be safe, it was just a conclusion, that this must have been the noise occasioned by the falling in of the bank of the river. Morning came, the grindstone of the boat was missed, information was given, and search being made, George was gone, they knew not where.

The river was ordered to be scoured by the eager master, thirsting after the blood of the mechanic. It was scoured and George was found with the grindstone tied to his neck. Reposing in the depth of the Ochmulgee, preferring as a man, Death before slavery! George had tasted liberty!!!

"AN ENSLAVED MAN'S NOBLE SUICIDE," originally published in the African American newspaper *The Mystery*, reprinted in *The Liberator*, 20 October 1843 ■

■ Brethren, our last word to you is to bid you be of good cheer, and not to despair of your deliverance. Do not abandon yourselves, as have many thousands of American slaves, to the crime of suicide. Live! Live to escape from slavery! Live to serve God! Live till He shall Himself call you into eternity! Be prayerful — be brave — be hopeful. "Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh."

LETTER TO THE AMERICAN SLAVES, Cazenovia [NY] Fugitive Slave Law Convention, August 1850 ■

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