



In several hundred narratives published in the 1800s, formerly enslaved African Americans portrayed the unique relationship of master and slave as they experienced it in the "peculiar institution." Presented here are the perspectives of William J. Anderson, Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, James Curry, Frederick Douglass, Moses Grandy, William Grimes, Harriet Jacobs, Solomon Northup, Austin Steward, and an "unnamed runaway slave."

## Frederick Douglass

*"Why are some people slaves, and others masters?"*

■ *Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves, and others masters? Was there ever a time when this was not so? How did the relation commence?* These were the perplexing questions which began now to claim my thoughts, and to exercise the weak powers of my mind, for I was still but a child, and knew less than children of the same age in the free states. As my questions concerning these things were only put to children a little older, and little better informed than myself, I was not rapid in reaching a solid footing. By some means I learned from these inquiries, that "God, up in the sky," made everybody, and that he made *white* people to be masters and mistresses and *black* people to be slaves. This did not satisfy me, nor lessen my interest in the subject. I was told, too, that God was good, and that He knew what was best for me and best for everybody. This was less satisfactory than the first statement because it came, point blank, against all my notions of goodness. It was not good to let old master cut the flesh off Esther [his aunt] and make her cry so. Besides, how did people know that God made black people to be slaves? Did they go up in the sky and learn it? or did He come down and tell them so? All was dark here. It was some relief to my hard notions of the goodness of God that, although he made white men to be slaveholders, he did not make them to be *bad* slaveholders, and that in due time he would punish the bad slaveholders — that he would, when they died, send them to the bad place where they would be "burnt up." Nevertheless, I could not reconcile the relation of slavery with my crude notions of goodness.

Then, too, I found that there were puzzling exceptions to this theory of slavery on both sides, and in the middle. I knew of blacks who were *not* slaves; I knew of whites who were *not* slaveholders; and I knew of persons who were *nearly* white, who were slaves. *Color*, therefore, was a very unsatisfactory basis for slavery.

Once, however, engaged in the inquiry, I was not very long in finding out the true solution of the matter. It was not *color*, but *crime*, not *God*, but *man*, that afforded the true explanation of the existence



of slavery; nor was I long in finding out another important truth, viz [that is to say]: what man can make, man can unmake. The appalling darkness faded away, and I was master of the subject. There were slaves here, direct from Guinea [west Africa]; and there were many who could say that their fathers and mothers were stolen from Africa — forced from their homes, and compelled to serve as slaves. This, to me, was knowledge; but it was a kind of knowledge which filled me with a burning hatred of slavery, increased my suffering, and left me without the means of breaking away from my bondage. Yet it was knowledge quite worth possessing. I could not have been more than seven or eight years old when I began to make this subject my study. It was with me in the woods and fields, along the shore of the river, and wherever my boyish wanderings led me; and though I was, at that time, quite ignorant of the existence of the free states, I distinctly remember being, *even then*, most strongly impressed with the idea of being a freeman some day. This cheering assurance was an inborn dream of my human nature — a constant menace to slavery — and one which all the powers of slavery were unable to silence or extinguish.

■ Slaveholders have been known to send spies among their slaves, to ascertain, if possible, their views and feelings in regard to their condition. The frequency of this has had the effect to establish among the slaves the maxim that a still tongue makes a wise head. They suppress the truth rather than take the consequence of telling it, and, in so doing, they prove themselves a part of the human family. If they have anything to say of their master, it is generally something in his favor, especially when speaking to strangers. I was frequently asked, while a slave, if I had a kind master, and I do not remember ever to have given a negative reply. Nor did I, when pursuing this course, consider myself as uttering what was utterly false; for I always measured the kindness of my master by the standard of kindness set up by slaveholders around us. However, slaves are like other people and imbibe similar prejudices. They are apt to think *their condition* better than that of others. Many, under the influence of this prejudice, think their own masters are better than the masters of other slaves; and this, too, in some cases, when the very reverse is true.

■ There was a whisper, that my master was my father; yet it was only a whisper, and I cannot say that I ever gave it credence. Indeed, I now have reason to think he was not. Nevertheless the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that, by the laws of slavery, children in all cases are reduced to the condition of their mothers. This arrangement admits of the greatest license to brutal slaveholders and their profligate sons, brothers, relations and friends, and gives to the pleasure of sin the additional attraction of profit. A whole volume might be written on this single feature of slavery, as I have observed it.

One might imagine that the children of such connections would fare better in the hands of their masters than other slaves. The rule is quite the other way, and a very little reflection will satisfy the reader that such is the case. A man who will enslave his own blood may not be safely relied on for magnanimity. Men do not love those who remind them of their sins — unless they have a mind to repent — and the mulatto child's face is a standing accusation against him who is master and father to the child.

■ While I heard of numerous murders committed by slaveholders on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, I never knew a solitary instance in which a slaveholder was either hung or imprisoned for having murdered a slave. The usual pretext for killing a slave is that the slave has offered resistance. Should a slave, when assaulted, but raise his hand in self-defense, the white assaulting party is fully justified by southern, or Maryland, public opinion, in shooting the slave down.

—Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855

I ought, perhaps, to blame slavery more than my master's [brutality]. The disposition to tyrannize over those under us is universal, and there is no one who will not occasionally do it. I had too much sense and feeling to be a slave, too much of the blood of my father, whose spirit feared nothing. I was therefore, perhaps, difficult to govern in the way in which it was attempted.

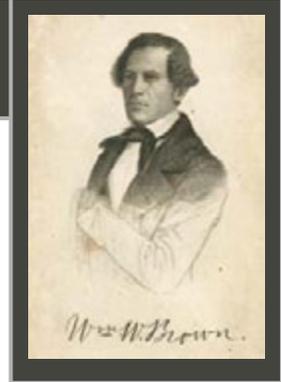
William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, The Runaway Slave*, 1825

## William Wells Brown

*“such is the position which an American slave occupies”*

■ My mother was a field hand, and one morning was ten or fifteen minutes behind the others in getting into the field. As soon as she reached the spot where they were at work, the overseer commenced whipping her. She cried, “Oh! pray — Oh! pray — Oh! pray” — these are generally the words of slaves, when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. I heard her voice and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any farther. The cold chills ran over me and I wept aloud. After giving her ten lashes, the sound of the whip ceased, and I returned to my bed and found no consolation but in my tears. Experience has taught me that nothing can be more heart-rending than for one to see a dear and beloved mother or sister tortured, and to hear their cries, and not be able to render them assistance. But such is the position which an American slave occupies.

—William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*, 2d. ed., 1849



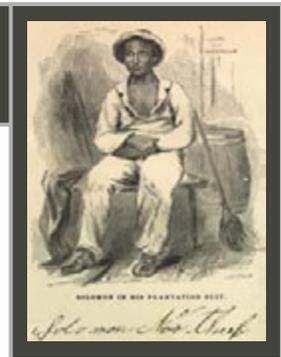
## Solomon Northup

*“[slaveowners] become brutified and reckless of human life”*

■ The existence of Slavery in its most cruel form among them [slaveowners] has a tendency to brutalize the humane and finer feelings of their nature. Daily witnesses of human suffering — listening to the agonizing screeches of the slave — beholding him writhing beneath the merciless lash — bitten and torn by dogs — dying without attention, and buried without shroud or coffin — it cannot otherwise be expected than that they should become brutified and reckless of human life.

It is true there are many kind-hearted and good men in the parish of Avoyelles [Louisiana] — such men as William Ford — who can look with pity upon the sufferings of a slave, just as there are, over all the world, sensitive and sympathetic spirits who cannot look with indifference upon the sufferings of any creature which the Almighty has endowed with life. It is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives. He cannot withstand the influence of habit and associations that surround him. Taught from earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears, that the rod is for the slave's back, he will not be apt to change his opinions in maturer years.

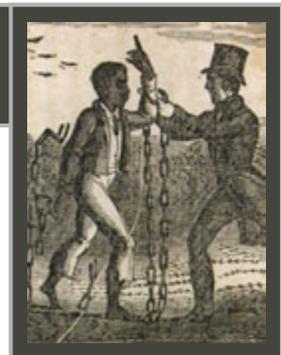
—Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853*, 1853



## Unnamed Runaway Slave

*“They do not want them to think.”*

■ They [slaveowners] do not like to have any kind of seriousness in the slaves. *They do not want them to think.* If they see one of them looking sober they tell him to be merry. They say he is hatching up some kind of deviltry. They used to say so to me, for I never could laugh and joke as the rest did. I never saw a slave who could read. They would not let us touch a book, but whipped us for that as much as anything.



If we hated master ever so much, we did not dare to show it, but we must always look pleased when he saw us, and we were afraid to speak what we thought because some would tell master. I knew that I was wronged, and I have laid many a time and thought how to get revenge, but something always said “don’t do it.” We had heard a little about a free country. A man called Sailor Jack once came among us and told us that there were no slaves in his land; but we did not believe him, and some of the slaves got angry when anything was said about it. They would say it was all a lie. That we were made to serve Buckra [master] and that was what we had got to do all our lives, and our best way was to bear it as well as we could. They said it only made us unhappy to keep talking all the time about freedom, and that if there was any free country, Buckra’s land was so big we could never get there, so the best way was to say no more about it. I did not really believe there was any free country till two days before I left slavery.

\_\_\_ “Recollections of Slavery by a Runaway Slave,” *The Emancipator*, Aug. 23, Sept. 13 & 20, Oct. 11 & 18, 1838

## James Curry

*“No slaves think they were made to be slaves.”*

man took hold of me and asked my master if this was one of Lucy’s boys. Being told that I was, he said, ‘Well, his father was a free man and perhaps when he gets to be a man, he’ll be wanting to be free too.’ Thinks I to myself, indeed I shall. But if he had asked me if I wanted to be free, I should have answered, ‘No, Sir.’ Of course, no slave would dare to say, in the presence of a white man, that he wished for freedom. But among themselves, it is their constant theme. No slaves think they were made to be slaves.



■ I have been told that Paul Cammon [Cameron], son of Judge Cammon, who owned a plantation out of the town where he lived, used to go out once in two or three weeks, and while there have one or two slaves tied and whip them unmercifully for no offense but merely, as he said, *to let them know he was their master*.

■ . . . when I hear people here say they work as hard as the slaves, I can tell them from experience, they know nothing about it. And even if they did work as hard, there is one striking difference. When they go home at night, they carry to their families the wages of their daily labor, and then they have the night for rest and sleep. Whereas the slave carries to his family at night only a weary body and a sick mind, and all he can do for them is done during the hours allowed him for sleep.

■ From my childhood until I was sixteen years old, I was brought up a domestic servant. I played with my master’s children, and we loved one another like brothers. This is often the case in childhood, but when the young masters and misses get older, they are generally sent away from home to school, and they soon learn that slaves are not companions for them. When they return, the love of power is cultivated in their hearts by their parents, the whip is put into their hands, and they soon regard the negro in no other light than as a slave.

\_\_\_ “Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave,” *The Liberator*, 10 January 1840

My name is Moses Grandy: I was born in Camden County, North Carolina. I believe I am fifty-six years old. Slaves seldom know exactly how old they are; neither they nor their masters set down the time of a birth; the slaves, because they are not allowed to write or read; and the masters, because they only care to know what slaves belong to them.

Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*, 1843

## Harriet Jacobs

*“the master had a right to do what he pleased with his own property”*



■ Slaveholders pride themselves upon being honorable men, but if you were to hear the enormous lies they tell their slaves, you would have small respect for their veracity. I have spoken plain English. Pardon me. I cannot use a milder term. When they visit the north and return home, they tell their slaves of the runaways they have seen and describe them to be in the most deplorable condition. A slaveholder once told me that he had seen a runaway friend of mine in New York and that she besought him to take her back to her master, for she was literally dying of starvation, that many days she had only one cold potato to eat and at other times could get nothing at all. He said he refused to take her because he knew her master would not thank him for bringing such a miserable wretch to his house. He ended by saying to me, “This is the punishment she brought on herself for running away from a kind master.”

This whole story was false. I afterwards staid with that friend in New York, and found her in comfortable circumstances. She had never thought of such a thing as wishing to go back to slavery. Many of the slaves believe such stories, and think it is not worth while to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom.

■ They put him [a slave dead from severe punishment] into a rough box and buried him with less feeling than would have been manifested for an old house dog. Nobody asked any questions. He was a slave, and the feeling was that the master had a right to do what he pleased with his own property. And what did *he* care for the value of a slave? He had hundreds of them. When they had finished their daily toil, they must hurry to eat their little morsels and be ready to extinguish their pine knots before nine o'clock when the overseer went his patrol rounds. He entered every cabin to see that men and their wives had gone to bed together, lest the men, from over-fatigue, should fall asleep in the chimney corner and remain there till the morning horn called them to their daily task. Women are considered of no value unless they continually increase their owner's stock [of enslaved children]. They are put on a par with animals. This same master shot a woman through the head who had run away and been brought back to him. No one called him to account for it. If a slave resisted being whipped, the bloodhounds were unpacked and set upon him to tear his flesh from his bones. The master who did these things was highly educated and styled a perfect gentleman. He also boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower.

I could tell of more slaveholders as cruel as those I have described. They are not exceptions to the general rule. I do not say there are no humane slaveholders. Such characters do exist, notwithstanding the hardening influences around them. But they are “like angels' visits — few and far between.”

■ If God has bestowed beauty upon her [a female slave], it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. I know that some are too much brutalized by slavery to feel the humiliation of their position, but many slaves feel it most acutely and shrink from the memory of it. I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs nor how I am still pained by the retrospect. My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there. The light heart which nature had given me became heavy with sad forebodings. The other slaves in my master's house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me, but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof, and they were aware that to speak of them was an offense that never went unpunished. . . .

The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the

other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences. . . .

You may believe what I say, for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify from my own experience and observation that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual, the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters and makes the wives wretched. And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation.

Yet few slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is of blighted cotton crops — not of the blight on their children’s souls.

\_\_\_Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861

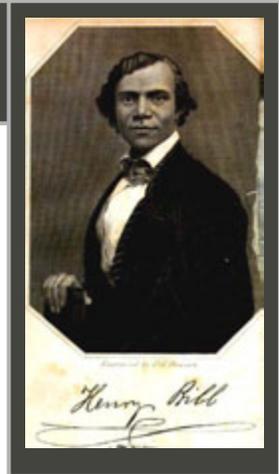
## Henry Bibb

*“if I must be a slave, I had by far rather be a slave to an Indian”*

■ The next morning I went home with my new master [a Cherokee Indian] and, by the way, it is only doing justice to the dead to say that he was the most reasonable and humane slaveholder that I have ever belonged to. . . .

He was the owner of a large plantation and quite a number of slaves. He raised corn and wheat for his own consumption only. There was no cotton, tobacco, or anything of the kind produced among them for market. And I found this difference between negro slavery among the Indians and the same thing among the white slaveholders of the South. The Indians allow their slaves enough to eat and wear. They have no overseers to whip nor drive them. If a slave offends his master, he sometimes, in a heat of passion, undertakes to chastise him, but it is as often the case as otherwise that the slave gets the better of the fight and even flogs his master,\* for which there is no law to punish him; but when the fight is over that is the last of it. So far as religious instruction is concerned, they have it on terms of equality, the bond and the free. They have no respect of persons [do not discriminate], they have neither slave laws nor negro pews. Neither do they separate husbands and wives, nor parents and children. All things considered, if I must be a slave, I had by far rather be a slave to an Indian than to a white man, from the experience I have had with both.

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



## Austin Steward

*“that abject and humble state which Slavery requires”*

■ Everywhere that Slavery exists, it is nothing but *slavery*. I found it just as hard to be beaten over the head with a piece of iron in New York as it was in Virginia. Whips and chains are everywhere necessary to degrade and brutalize the slave, in order to reduce him to that abject and humble state which Slavery requires. Nor is the effect much less disastrous on the man who holds supreme control over the soul and body of his fellow beings. Such unlimited power, in almost every instance, transforms the man into a tyrant, the brother into a demon.



\* This singular fact is corroborated in a letter read by the publisher, from an acquaintance while passing through this country in 1849. [Footnote in original]

■ A white person, too poor to own slaves, is as often looked upon with as much disdain by the miserable slave as by his wealthy owner. This disposition seems to be instilled into the mind of every slave at the South, and indeed, I have heard slaves object to being sent in very small companies to labor in the field, lest that some passer-by should think that they belonged to a poor man who was unable to keep a large gang. Nor is this ridiculous sentiment maintained by the slaves only; the rich planter feels such a contempt for all white persons without slaves that he does not want them for his neighbors. I know of many instances where such persons have been under the necessity of buying or hiring slaves just to preserve their reputation and keep up appearances; and even among a class of people who profess to be opposed to Slavery have I known instances of the same kind, and have heard them apologize for their conduct by saying that “when in Rome, we must do as the Romans do.”

■ There is no one, I care not how favorable his condition, who desires to be a slave, to labor for nothing all his life for the benefit of others. I have often heard fugitive slaves say that it was not so much the cruel beatings and floggings that they received which induced them to leave the South, as the idea of dragging out a whole life of unrequited toil to enrich their masters.

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

Had I the ability of language and learning, I would try to portray the condition of the slave. To be a slave — a human one of God’s creatures — reduced to chattelism — bought and sold like goods or merchandise, oxen or horses! He has nothing he can call his own — not his wife, or children, or his own body. If the master could take the soul, he would take it, but I believe the lord takes care of that.

William J. Anderson, *Life of William J. Anderson, Twenty-Four Years a Slave*, 1857