



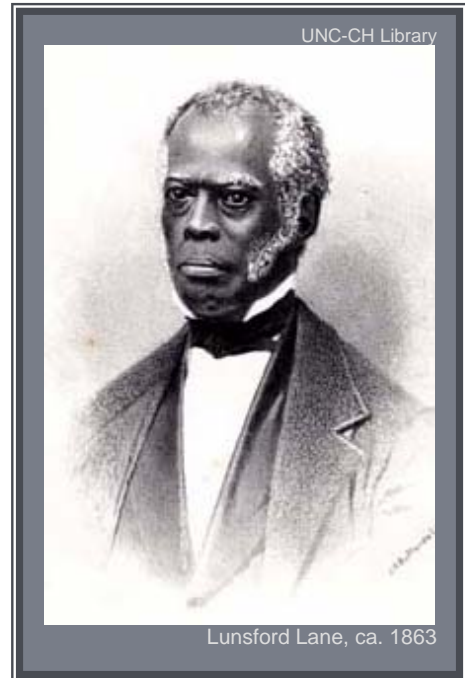
The Narrative of Lunsford Lane

Formerly of Raleigh, N.C. Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption by Purchase of Himself and Family from Slavery, and His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin. Published by Himself

Boston: 2d. edition, 1842

Excerpts: Lunsford Lane, tobacconist

Lunsford Lane was born a slave in 1803 in Raleigh, North Carolina, where his mother was a slave in the master's city house (and his father enslaved on a nearby plantation). After selling a basket of peaches as a boy, he realized the opportunities offered by profit-making ventures.



When I was ten or eleven years old, my master set me regularly to cutting wood, in the yard in the winter, and working in the garden in the summer. And when I was fifteen years of age, he gave me the care of the pleasure horses, and made me his carriage driver; but this did not exempt me from other labor, especially in the summer. Early in the morning I used to take his three horses to the plantation, and turn them into the pasture to graze, and myself into the cotton or cornfield, with a hoe in my hand, to work through the day and after sunset I would take these horses back to the city, a distance of three miles, feed them, and then attend to any other business my master or any of his family had for me to do, until bed time, when with my blanket in my hand, I would go into the dining room to rest through the night. The next day the same round of labor would be repeated, unless some of the family wished to ride out, in which case I must be on hand with the horses to wait upon them, and in the meantime to work about the yard. On Sunday I had to drive to Church twice, which with other things necessary to be done, took the whole day. So my life went wearily on from day to day, from night to night, and from week to week.

When I began to work, I discovered the difference between myself and my master's white children. They began to order me about, and were told to do so by my master and mistress. I found, too, that they had learned to read, while I was not permitted to have a book in my hand. To be in the possession of anything written or printed, was regarded as an offence. And then there was the fear that I might be sold away from those who were dear to me, and conveyed to the far South. I had learned that being a slave I was subject to this worst (to us) of all calamities and I knew of others in similar situations to myself, thus sold away. My friends were not numerous but in proportion as they were few they were dear and the thought that I might be separated from them forever, was like that of having the heart torn from its socket; while the idea of being conveyed to the far South, seemed infinitely worse than the terrors of death. To know, also, that I was never to consult my own will, but was, while I lived, to be entirely under the control of another, was another state of mind hard for me to bear. Indeed all things now made me *feel*, what I had before known only in words, that *I was a slave*. Deep was this feeling, and it preyed upon my heart like a never-dying worm. I saw no prospect that my condition would ever be changed. Yet I used to plan in my mind from day to day, and from night to night, how I might be free.

One day, while I was in this state of mind, my father gave me a small basket of peaches. I sold them for thirty cents, which was the first money I ever had in my life. Afterwards I won some marbles, and sold them for sixty cents, and some weeks after Mr. Hog from Fayetteville, came to visit my master, and on leaving gave me one dollar. After that Mr. Bennahan from Orange county, gave me a dollar, and a son of my master fifty cents. These sums, and the hope that then entered my mind of purchasing at some future time my freedom, made me long for money; and plans for money-making took the principal possession of my thoughts. At night I would steal away with my axe, get a load of wood to cut for twenty-five cents, and the next morning hardly escape a whipping for the offence. But I persevered until I had obtained twenty dollars. Now I began to think seriously of becoming able to buy myself; and cheered by this hope, I went on from one thing to another, laboring “at dead of night,” after the long weary day’s toil for my master was over, till I found I had collected one hundred dollars. This sum I kept hid, first in one place and then in another, as I dare not put it out, for fear I should lose it.

After this I lit upon a plan which proved of great advantage to me. My father suggested a mode of preparing smoking tobacco, different from any then or since employed. It had the double advantage of giving the tobacco a peculiarly pleasant flavor, and of enabling me to manufacture a good article out of a very indifferent material. I improved somewhat upon his suggestion, and commenced the manufacture, doing as I have before said, all my work in the night. The tobacco I put up in papers of about a quarter of a pound each, and sold them at fifteen cents. But the tobacco could not be smoked without a pipe, and as I had given the former a flavor peculiarly grateful, it occurred to me that I might so construct a pipe as to cool the smoke in passing through it, and thus meet the wishes of those who are more fond of smoke than heat. This I effected by means of a reed, which grows



plentifully in that region; I made a passage through the reed with a hot wire, polished it, and attached a clay pipe to the end, so that the smoke should be cooled in flowing through the stem like whiskey or rum in passing from the boiler through the worm of the still. These pipes I sold at ten cents apiece. In the early part of the night I would sell my tobacco and pipes, and manufacture them in the latter part. As the Legislature sit in Raleigh every year, I sold these articles considerably to the members, so that I became known not only in the city, but in many parts of the State, as a *tobacconist*. . . .

In 1828, at age 25, Lane received permission to marry Martha Curtis, the slave of a Raleigh lawyer. They had a son and a daughter, and Lane was able to continue his tobacco business while still enslaved by “hiring” his own time from his mistress. In 1835, after amassing \$1000, she allowed him to buy his freedom.

I commenced the manufacture of pipes and tobacco on an enlarged scale. I opened a regular place of business, labelled my tobacco in a conspicuous manner with the names of “*Edward and Lunsford Lane*,” and of some of the persons who sold it for me, — established agencies for the sale in various parts of the State, one at Fayetteville, one at Salisbury, one at Chapel Hill, and so on, — sold my articles from my place of business, and about town, also deposited them in stores on commission, and thus, after paying my mistress for my time, and rendering such support as necessary to my family, I found in the space of some six or eight years, that I had collected the sum of one thousand dollars. During this time I had found it politic to go shabbily dressed, and to appear to be very poor, but to pay my mistress for my services promptly. I kept my money hid, never venturing to put out a penny, nor to let any body but my wife know that I was making any. The thousand dollars was what I supposed my mistress [his master’s widow] would ask for me, and so I determined now what I would do.

I went to my mistress and inquired what was her price for me. She said a thousand dollars. I then told her that I wanted to be free, and asked her if she would sell me to be made free. She said she would; and accordingly I arranged with her, and with the master of my wife, Mr. Smith, already spoken of, for the latter to take my money¹ and buy of her my freedom, as I could not legally purchase it, and as the laws forbid emancipation except, for “meritorious services.” This done, Mr. Smith endeavored to emancipate me formally, and to get my manumission recorded; I tried also; but the court judged that I had done nothing “meritorious,” and so I remained, nominally

only, the slave of Mr. Smith for a year; when, feeling unsafe in that relation, I accompanied him to New York whither he was going to purchase goods, and was there regularly and formally made a freeman, and there my manumission was recorded. I returned to my family in Raleigh, and endeavored to do by them as a freeman should. I had known what it was to be a slave, and I knew what it was to be free. . . .

My manumission, as I shall call it; that is, the bill of sale conveying me to Mr. Smith, was dated Sept. 9th, 1835. I continued in the tobacco and pipe business, as already described, to which I added a small trade in a variety of articles; and some two years before I left Raleigh, I entered also into a considerable business in wood, which I used to purchase by the acre standing, cut it, haul it into the city, deposit it in a yard and sell it out as I advantageously could. Also I was employed about the office of the Governor as I shall hereafter relate. I used to keep one or two horses, and various vehicles, by which I did a variety of work at hauling about town. Of course I had to hire more or less help, to carry on my business.

In the manufacture of tobacco I met with considerable competition, but none that materially injured me. The method of preparing it having originated with me and my father, we found it necessary, in order to secure the advantage of the invention, to keep it to ourselves, and decline, though often solicited, going into partnership with others. Those who undertook the manufacture could neither give the article a flavor so pleasant as ours, nor manufacture it so cheaply, so they either failed in it, or succeeded but poorly.

Lane's wife and two children were sold to another owner who refused to give them sufficient food and clothing, knowing that Lane could provide for them from his business profits. Before Lane could purchase them, he had to flee North Carolina when white politicians, fearful of the growing influence of Lane and other free blacks, enforced a state laws prohibiting free blacks from other states from staying in North Carolina longer than twenty days. (Lane had earned “out of state” residency, according to his persecutors, by having gone to New York State with his owner to gain and record his freedom.) Lane was arrested, hauled off a train to be tarred and feathered, and barely made his escape to the North, with his family, in the spring of 1842. Soon after he published the first edition of his narrative, and he remained active as an abolitionist speaker. He continued his entrepreneurial ventures by selling herbal medicines (“Dr. Lane’s Vegetable Pills”) learned from his plantation experience. During the Civil War, Lane served as the steward of a private hospital for wounded soldiers in Boston. This is the last that is recorded of Lunsford Lane’s life, in a biography by William G. Hawkins published in 1863 (*Lunsford Lane: Another Helper from North Carolina*, full text online in Documenting the American South at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hawkins/menu.html).

¹ Legally, my money belonged to my mistress; and she could have taken it and refused to grant me my freedom. But she was a very kind woman for a slave owner; and she would under the circumstances, scorn to do such a thing. I have known of slaves, however, served in this way. [Footnote in Lane original.]

