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The Slaves Speak:
A Glimpse into the World of the Slave

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies in the School
for Summer and Continuing Education of Georgetown University
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THE SLAVES SPEAK:

A GLIMPSE INTO THE WORLD OF THE SLAVE

A Thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

Daria Hutchinson

School of Summer and Continuing Education

Georgetown University

Washington, D.C.

December 4, 1995
THE SLAVES SPEAK:
A GLIMPSE INTO THE WORLD OF THE SLAVE

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ABSTRACT

Historians have studied the institution of slavery using the view of the slave owner, while largely ignoring the perception of the slave. This thesis will examine the slavery experience, through the autobiographies of five fugitive slaves and one free man kidnapped into slavery. These autobiographies record the unique experiences of the individual authors and their accounts of the larger slave community. Louis Hughes, James W. C. Pennington, Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown and Solomon Northrup serve as voices of the black slavery experience, contributing their personal perspective to slave life.

In this thesis I will provide the authors’ views on slave family life, concentrating on the roles of the parents, the importance of relationships between family members and the problems associated with marriage and family separation. I will also discuss the larger slave community including the distinct components of slave culture that allowed for independence from the master. I will address both violent and nonviolent resistance to the institution and the manner of each author’s escape. In closing, this thesis
establishes the influence of slavery on the authors’ lives, demonstrating how their experiences helped shape the future of the anti-slavery movement.

These autobiographies illustrate black survival and resistance within the peculiar institution, adding a meaningful dimension to the study of slavery. Though cruelly exploited, the slave could create a defense, in family, community and culture, that prevented him from becoming a total victim. By giving equal weight to the views of the slave, historians not only build a more thorough understanding of slavery, but add a rich resource to the study of the institution. The slave narrative combined with the testimony of the slave holder supports a more accurate representation of slavery in Nineteenth Century America.
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INTRODUCTION

Historians have studied the institution of slavery using the records and testimony of the slave holder and overseer, while essentially disregarding the slave's perception of their own bondage. This thesis will explore the slavery experience through the autobiographies of five fugitive slaves and one free man abducted into slavery. The authors: Louis Hughes, James W.C. Pennington, Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northrup are all spokespersons of their own black experience and witness to the arrangement of the slave community. These narratives help assemble a credible record of slave life in nineteenth century America illustrating black survival and resistance within the institution. Examination of these autobiographies will reveal a deeper understanding of the slave experience and provide a comprehensive look into slavery's framework.

I selected these authors because of my personal interest in the narratives and the distinct outlook they add to the discussion of slave life and culture. Each author makes a meaningful assessment of the institution of slavery by contributing their individual perspectives. These authors represent different regions of the South, allowing for comparison among the states of Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, Kentucky and Maryland. The first section of this thesis will introduce these authors providing background information on their beginnings and family.

The slave family served an important function in the survival of the slave. In each narrative the author reveals the importance of family. The family unit provided a coping
mechanism for facing the daily trials of slave life. Family bonds, though frail, granted a temporary haven from the oppression of slavery. Each author begins his narrative by introducing the reader to his family. The reference made to mothers, fathers, siblings, wives and children exhibits the significance authors placed in their family ties. Family members supplied a shield from abuse and taught survival skills in bondage. The second chapter will focus on the slave family, concentrating on the roles of the mother and father and the importance of relationships between family members. Marriage was not recognized as a legal contract between slaves and therefore failed to protect slave couples from such terrors as the punishment of their mates. The slave additionally lived in constant fear of separation from family members. This chapter will also discuss the problems faced by the slave family surrounding marital bonds and separation.

Just as the slave family provided a release from the persecution of slavery, the unique components of slave culture furnished another outlet. American slave culture possessed distinct qualities that allowed independence from the controlling world of the master. Distinct culture distanced the slave from his master allowing personal freedom. The third chapter will center on slave culture, incorporating the functions of religious belief, song and superstition in the slave community. This chapter will also examine the slave community. The slave community functioned as an extended family, supplementing the nuclear family. Slaves inevitably faced separation from family members and the community supplied support lost in the division of family.

Chapter four will examine slave resistance to the institution. This resistance
occurred in both nonviolent and violent forms. Nonviolent means of resistance included learning to read and write and temporary escape from their masters to avoid punishment. Violent struggles also occurred when slaves confronted masters and overseers trying to avoid floggings. If a slave overcame his master in a struggle, he received better treatment and a new sense of hope. This empowerment in both violent and nonviolent forms led the desire of permanent escape to freedom. The subsequent portion of this chapter will share the author’s attempts of escape and their final achievement of this goal.

In closing, this thesis will address how slavery affected the lives of the authors. Each author held a passion for freedom that inspired them for the remainder of their lives. These authors went on to become leading figures in the anti-slavery movement as editors, lecturers and writers. We revisit the author’s passion for freedom in reading the fugitive narratives repeating their importance in compiling a balanced account of the institution of slavery.
I. THE AUTHORS

This thesis will examine the autobiographies of Louis Hughes, James W.C. Pennington, Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northrup. These authors inhabited different areas of the South, yet their narratives exhibit coherence on the importance of family, community and resistance in slavery. Though descriptions of daily routine are consistently presented throughout the narratives, the variation lies in the perceptions of the individual authors. These individuals effectively present unique and comprehensive observations on the subject of slavery, making them excellent choices for study.

Solomon Northrup was born a free man in Minerva, New York in July of 1908. His father, Mintus Northrup was a slave, but attained emancipation after the death of his owner. During his childhood, Solomon and his brother Joseph worked on his father’s farm. He spent his spare time learning to read and write and became adept at playing the violin.¹ At the age of twenty-one, Solomon married Anne Hampton and fathered three children, Elizabeth, Margaret and Alonzo. His autobiography Twelve Years a Slave, Narrative of Solomon Northrup, recounts his kidnaping into slavery at the age of thirty. Northrup’s background provides a vast contrast to the other authors studied here. His freedom, education and close relationship with his father isolated him from the world of

slavery. Northrup’s father was a landowner. This not only gave him the opportunity to be self-sufficient but allowed him to participate in the voting process, two rare prospects for black men in the 1800’s. Northrup’s background adds an interesting contrast in his account of slavery.

Frederick Douglass was born in Talbot County, Maryland in February of 1817.\(^2\) He spent his first years with his grandmother, Betsy Bailey on a farm owned by Colonel Lloyd. Frederick’s mother, a field hand on an adjoining farm would visit him occasionally in the evening. She traveled after dark on foot, returning to her quarters before daybreak. This made her journeys’ difficult and infrequent. Frederick rarely saw his mother and knew nothing concerning the origins of his father. When Douglass became a little older, he was placed under the care of a woman named Aunt Katy, a cook in charge of all the young plantation children. Here, he met for the first time, his brother Perry and his sisters, Sarah and Eliza. His autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, follows his remarkable life from enslavement to freedom. Spending most of his slave life separated from family and friends, he faced his troubles alone. This makes his accomplishments even more exceptional. Douglass overcame insurmountable odds becoming one of the most respected figures of his time. His views add an important dimension to the examination of slavery, portraying the life of an intellectually

\(^2\)Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, (New York: Pathway Press, 1941) 31-33.]
gifted man.

James W. C. Pennington was also born on the Eastern shore of Maryland during the early 1820's. Pennington did not use names in his narrative when speaking of his family or owners. He was still considered a fugitive, when he wrote his autobiography, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, and wished to protect himself and his family from persecution. Pennington’s parents did not originally belong to the same owner. His father was united with the family when James was four years old. Pennington came from a large family of twelve brothers and sisters. His family all lived on the same plantation except his older brother, hired out and sold as a stonemason when James was eleven.  

Pennington had the unique experience of living his entire slave life with most of his family. He had the love and support of his family along with the presence of a father figure. This was a comfort not granted to many slaves. It was for this specific that I sought to use Pennington’s perspective on slavery.

Henry Bibb was born in Shelby County, Kentucky in May of 1815. Henry’s mother was a slave named Mildred Jackson. His father, a white man named James Bibb died when Henry was still a baby.  

Henry spent most of his childhood separated from his mother and seven brothers. His master, David White Esquire hired out Henry’s

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services for eight years financing the education of his daughter. Henry always felt the
dering to be free and became an expert at running away while still very young. He made
many successful trips between the slave and free states during his lifetime. Henry’s
recapture always resulted while returning to free his family. Narrative of the Life and
Adventures of Henry Bibb, portrays his ingenuity and desire for freedom. More
importantly, it conveys the deep commitment Henry sustained concerning the welfare of
his family.

Historians often describe the narrative of William Wells Brown as one of a
typical fugitive slave. Brown was born in 1814 on a plantation near Lexington,
Kentucky. He was one of seven boys born to a white man and a slave woman.5 Brown
spent his first twenty years in St. Louis, Missouri, holding various positions such as a
house servant, a field hand, a printer’s helper and a soul driver for a slave trader, named
James Walker. The Narrative of William Wells Brown, differs from other narratives of
the time because of the role Brown plays in the story. Rather than combating his slave
owners using physical strength, Brown relied on his cunning to advance his interests.
Slaves often used deception against their oppressors rather than physical violence.
Brown’s story focuses on the daily survival techniques he employed to gain measures of
independence from his masters. The everyday aspect of his writing provides an

5William Wells Brown, Narrative of William W. Brown: A Fugitive Slave, found in
insightful view of many master - slave relationships.

The final subject I chose for my research was Louis Hughes. Louis was born in the Rivanna River Valley, near Charlottesville, Virginia in 1832. He was the son of a white man and a slave woman. His master, Doctor John Louis sold Hughes from his mother and two brothers at the age of eleven. He spent the next portion of his life working as a field hand on a Mississippi cotton plantation. Later he served as a house servant in the home of his master, Edward McGee in Memphis, Tennessee. Louis was born in the latter period of slavery. His book, *Thirty Years a Slave*, traces his life through the end of the Civil War, making his viewpoint valuable to my study.

These narratives expose many facets of slavery overlooked in the testimony of the owner. The authors help expose the Black community under slavery, emphasizing not only the slaves’ labor, but his complete life. The individuals chosen are exceptional representatives of the black experience, contributing personal observations on family, culture, community and resistance. These important aspects of slave life created a conventional support, preventing the slave from becoming the complete victim of his master. The treatment of the slaves and the consequences of that treatment is uncovered in the study of slave society. Through these narratives, we find ways to understand the slaves’ daily adjustment and resistance to their condition.

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II. FAMILY LIFE

The family was an important survival element in the life of a slave. Though not recognized in the eyes of the slave holder, family was a vital part of slave life. "Probably never before in history has a people been so nearly completely stripped of its social heritage. . . . American slavery destroyed household gods and dissolved the bonds of sympathy and affection between men of the same blood and household. Through force of circumstance, slaves had to acquire a new language, adopt new habits of labor, and take over, however imperfectly, the folkways of the American environment." 7

Despite these obstacles, parents and family members instilled a sense of self worth and provided understanding, protection and companionship. These functions, though limited, gave some slaves a sense of connection. This connection prevented a slave from becoming completely dependent on the master.

The role of the mother in a slave family was perhaps the most important in a slave's life. Many slave children knew of their mothers because the law of slavery provided that the child always followed the conditions of his mother. 8 A mother and child often formed the strongest bond in the slave family. A mother taught her children important lessons including obedience, to avoid the blows of the master. She likewise


8 Pennington, 207.
would not tolerate total submission to the owner. Because of the close bonds formed between mother and child, many slaves declined to leave their mothers if given the opportunity to escape without them. William Wells Brown intended to escape at a very young age, but held his mother in such a high regard that he could not bear the thought of leaving her behind. He recalled how his mother carried him out to the field and the floggings she had received for leaving her work to nurse him. He remembered her cheerful face always there to greet him. His love and obligation for his mother outweighed all of his desires to be free.\(^9\)

Frederick Douglass never lived with his mother, he only saw her occasionally in the cover of the night. Of these occasions, Douglass noted; “These little glimpses of my mother, obtained under such circumstances and against such odds, meager as they were are ineffaceably stamped upon my memory.”\(^10\) Frederick recalled the aid given him by his mother while living on the large plantation of Colonel Lloyd. After leaving the care of his grandmother, he was placed under the care of the plantation cook, he knew as Aunt Katy. Aunt Katy often punished Douglass by making him go all day without food. During one scolding, Frederick’s mother arrived unexpectedly for a visit. He vividly remembered that she brought him a large ginger cake and severely scolded Aunt Katy for her cruelty. Douglass recalled; “That night I learned as I had never learned before,

\(^9\)Brown, 188-189.

\(^{10}\)Douglass, 41.
that I was not only a child, but somebody’s child. I was grander upon my mother’s knee than a king upon a throne.”

Louis Hughes last saw his mother at the age of eleven. His master, Washington Fitzpatrick hired him out for work on a canal boat. He had little idea that he would never return to his family. Although the idea of travel intrigued him, his thoughts focused only on his mother; “Of the boat and the trip and the scenes along the route I remember little - I only thought of my mother and my leaving her.”

The sense of belonging to a family, whether it was a mother, father, sibling or relative made the slave sense his humanity more deeply. He was not a possession of his owner but a member of a family.

The role of the father in the slave family was often less important than the mother’s role because most slave children had little knowledge of their fathers. Men often lived separately from their wives. When they did live with their mates, the owner frequently restricted the father’s authority over his family. The owner could exert control over the father making him powerless. Usually, slave children received little information concerning their fathers. Some knew their father’s name and others had no knowledge of them. Four authors in this study: Henry Bibb, Louis Hughes, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown had white fathers. Thus, they were virtually cut off from

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11Ibid, 41.

12Hughes, 6.

from their paternal roots. White men rarely acknowledged their mulatto children, and if they did, rarely had anything to do with raising them. "The slave woman was often abandoned and fared no better than the other slaves."  

James W. C. Pennington was an exception to the rule of missing fathers, he lived with both of his parents until his escape at the age of twenty-one. This was a very unusual circumstance for a slave. Besides his parents, Pennington also had the support of eleven brothers and sisters. Only his oldest brother lived apart from the family. The other members all lived together on the same plantation. They gathered nightly for meetings to talk over the day’s events and keep one each others spirits up. Pennington’s close relationship with his family becomes apparent while he deliberates leaving the plantation; "I had a father and mother whom I dearly loved, I also had six sisters and four brothers on the plantation. The question was, shall I hide my purpose from them? moreover, how will my flight affect them when I’m gone? Will they not be suspected? Will not the whole family be sold off as a disaffected family, as is generally the case when one of its members flies?"  

Although James Pennington surely held concern for his own safety, he also exhibited fear for the safety of his family.

The conditions of slavery inhibited the slave family in many ways. Owners did not recognize marriage among slaves as a legitimate contract, but encouraged it to  

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14Frazier, 62.
15Pennington, 215.
prevent slaves from exhibiting defiant behavior or running away. Owners used the fear of repercussions against family members as a tool to assert control over rebellious behavior. Marriage bonds posed major problems for the slave. Not only did marriage diminish the likelihood of escape, it also forced slaves to witness brutal punishment on their mates and children. Louis Hughes was often forced to observe his wife’s punishment. Once, he helplessly watched as the McGee’s tied his wife to a joist and took turns beating her. He exclaimed; “I was trembling from head to foot, for I was powerless to do anything for her.”

Slaves cherished the monogamous relationship but conditions often worked against that ideal. Therefore, William Wells Brown decided not to marry until after he gained his freedom. Those who did marry often wed a mate on another plantation to avoid observing the daily cruelty imposed upon their loved ones. Henry Bibb married a slave named Malinda, who lived on a nearby plantation. Both Henry and Malinda had great respect for the institution of marriage. In their union, the couple agreed they would work tirelessly to gain freedom from slavery. Shortly after the marriage, his master’s brother purchased Henry. His new owner greatly reduced the number of visits allowed to Malinda and his late returns often provoked floggings. Finally, Malinda’s owner, Mr. Gatewood purchased Henry seeking to resolve the problem. Unfortunately, this only made matters worse, as Henry was repeatedly subjected to Malinda’s

\[16\] Hughes, 99.
mistreatment; "With my new residence I confess that I was much dissatisfied. Not that Gatewood was a more cruel master than my former owner - not that I was opposed to living with Malinda, who was then the centre and object of my affections - but to live where I must be witness to her insults, scourges and abuses such are common to be inflicted upon slaves, was more than I could bear." 17 Although Henry took great delight in his family, he could never look at them without feeling remorse. Under the institution of slavery, he had no true control over the life of himself and his wife. Henry knew their livelihood depended upon the will of their owner and personally vowed to father no other children in slavery.

Ironically, slaves also lived with the constant fear of family separation. Although many slave owners attempted to keep families together, to preserve order and control over the group, ultimately, they exposed slaves to painful separation from loved ones. All of the authors experienced some form of painful separation from family members while enslaved. Owners could sell a slave at any moment turning a bearable situation into an agonizing one without warning. The reasons for separation ranged from the death of a master dividing families according to inheritance to the lure of money offered owners by slave traders. 18 Those willing to purchase the services of slaves for yearly contracts also posed a threat of separation. Many owners often hired out children for

17Bibb, 80.

18Blassingame, 173-74.
these contracts to learn trades such as masonry, or carpentry. Children still too young to work were often left to the charge of an older slave woman during the day. Louis Hughes observed slave children on Edward McGee’s Memphis plantation, placed under the supervision of a single slave woman. The number of slave newborns and infants ranged from eight to twelve at one time. This number would be overwhelming for three young women let alone one. 19 As a result, she neglected many children during the day. Parents, unable to see their children in the day tried to make up for neglect in the evening hours.

Despite the many barriers placed in the way of slave family life, the conventional functions remained intact. The family endured as an important survival element. Family members instilled a sense of self worth, protection, understanding and companionship. They provided a shield from abuse and taught survival techniques in bondage. These functions, though limited, provided an attachment preventing the slave from totally resigning himself to the master. 20 “Slaves struggled with some fair degree of success to maintain a consistent family structure against the opposition of the masters, who often did break up slave families.” 21 They could establish a family life with nearly all the characteristics attributed to other communities.

19 Hughes, 44.

20 Blassingame, 191.

II. CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Just as slave family softened oppressions of slavery, the unique components of slave culture supplied another outlet. Slave culture provided independence from the controlling world of the master. The distinct components of this culture included religious belief, song and superstition. The slave community also established personal freedom, setting the slave apart from the master. Community served as an extension of the family in which all adults looked after all children and division between adult responsibilities was minimal. Although a slave faced the certainty of separation from his nuclear family, he could rely on the community to support him in their absence. An older person was always present to take over the role of absent parents. This was a system employed utilized by slaves to insure their survival.

Slave holders generally granted slaves some leisure time, routinely Saturday evening and Sunday. Slaves generally went unsupervised during these relaxation periods. This made recreation time extremely important to them. Slaves occupied some of their personal time performing needed chores, such as cleaning and washing clothes or working on a family garden. The remainder of this time was spent relaxing, socializing or attending religious services. Religious services and camp meetings served as a buffer, opposing the harsh reality of daily life. These meetings furnished opportunities for socializing with neighboring plantations and allowed for leadership

\[22\] Blassingame, 105.
positions among members of the community.

William Wells Brown attended worship every evening, while serving under Captain William Reynold. Reynold held a nightly service and hired a preacher for Sunday sermons. He required that all the slaves on the plantation attend the services.\textsuperscript{23} Louis Hughes attended two weekly services on Edward McGee's Mississippi plantation. One service was a prayer meeting held for the men on Saturday evening. The other service on Sunday morning included the entire slave community.

Solomon Northrup noticed radical differences between his owners' religious services. His first owner, William Ford taught his slaves of the rewards received by those showing kindness to others and reliance to God. Ford also allowed a Bible to circulate among the slave quarters.\textsuperscript{24} This was an uncommon practice. Owners viewed this as encouraging learning among slaves. Northrup viewed this as a symbol of sympathy for the slaves' present struggle. He perceived Ford as a compassionate man giving the slaves hope for a future life. William Ford later hired out Northrup to his brother-in-law, Peter Tanner, who also read the Bible to his slaves on the Sabbath. His teachings greatly contrasted those of his Master Ford. Tanner used the Bible readings to warn of the consequences of disobedience. Northrup noted Tanner reciting the forty-seventh verse of Luke declaring the need to flog those who disobeyed their lord. Tanner

\textsuperscript{23}Brown, 190.

\textsuperscript{24}Northrup, 274-75.
promised one hundred fifty lashes for disobedience, using the Bible readings as a control gauge over his slaves.\textsuperscript{25}

Some owners preached the gospel to their slaves imparting that God would reward their obedience in their next life. Slaves often rejected this religious teaching, since it provided justification to slavery. Henry Bibb stated; "This kind of preaching has driven thousands into infidelity. They view themselves as suffering unjustly under the lash, without friends, without the protection of the law or gospel, and the green eyed monster staring them in the face."\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, many slaves refused to place their trust in their owners' religion. Slaves attended some camp meetings with their owners but also held worship services on their own. They often imitated portions of their master's service, modifying the approach to fit their own lives. Unsupervised religious service was usually forbidden, compelling slaves to attend in secrecy. Slave ministers, also known as exhorters had no connection with religious organization. James W. C. Pennington knew an exhorter, who spoke every Sabbath on an area plantation, also taking charge of all the slave burials in the community. This man was unable to read and knew nothing of the Bible, he simply sang and spoke from his heart. Pennington ranked his sermons among the most moving he ever heard.\textsuperscript{27} In rejecting the conventional

\textsuperscript{25}Northrup, 292.

\textsuperscript{26}Bibb, 69.

\textsuperscript{27}Pennington, 254.
religion of their owners, slaves gained temporary freedom and a sense of control over their lives. Many slaves expressed their religious beliefs through singing spirituals. Contrary to the belief that songs originated by slaves expressed happiness and resignation to their situation, they more accurately depicted sadness and suffering. Slave spirituals also asserted the hope slaves held for rebellion and freedom from their oppressors. Slaves unable to fight or resist, released tension through song. Frederick Douglass felt the songs exposed the evils of slavery more than any word ever written on the subject. He stated in his writing; “Like tears they were a relief to aching hearts.”

William Wells wrote down a moving song he frequently heard slaves sing, while working as a soul driver on a steam boat:

“O, gracious Lord! When shall it be,
That we poor souls shall all be free;
Lord, break them slavery powers,
Will you go along with me?
Lord break them slavery powers,
Go sound the Jubilee!

Dear Lord, dear Lord, when slavery’ll cease,
Then we poor souls will have our peace;- There’s a better day a coming,
Will you go along with me?
There’s a better day a coming,
Go sound the Jubilee!”

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28Douglass, 63.

29Brown, 197.
The inspiration for these songs came from the slave's personal experience. The songs often contained hidden meanings so the master could not understand them. Before attempting his first escape, Frederick Douglass was often engaged singing the tune of "Canaan, Sweet Canaan". This song describes the hope of reaching heaven, but for Douglass it also conveyed his desire of reaching freedom in the North. Douglass explained; "On the lips of some it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but on the lips of our company it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage to a free State, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery."\(^{30}\)

Superstition served as another custom that distanced slaves from their masters. The slave's belief in conjurers, magic and superstition assembled an unconventional shield against submission to their masters. Conjurers used cunning to avoid punishment from the master and gained followers using their knowledge of medicinal herbs to heal sickness.\(^{31}\) Louis Hughes tested the powers of a conjurer by carrying a leather voodoo bag containing roots, nuts and pins. The conjurer professed the bag would keep Louis from harm though, he observed the floggings came anyway.\(^{32}\) Slaves passed these bags down through their families and many completely believed in their powers. Henry Bibb held great faith in the powers of conjuring, while a young man. One conjurer gave

\(^{30}\)Douglass, 178.

\(^{31}\)Blassingame, 109.

\(^{32}\)Hughes, 108.
Henry a powder of alum and salt to sprinkle on his master along with a bitter root to chew. He instructed Henry to use these items whenever threatened with a whipping. This method seemed to work at first. As a result, Henry began showing disrespect for his master, feeling more confident about the powers. Henry then found that the powder could not protect him from an enraged master. Soon after this experience, he tested the powers of another conjurer, who convinced him that a mixture of manure, red pepper and white hair sprinkled on the master’s belongings would shield him. When this proved ineffective, it convinced Henry that his best chance of protecting himself was escape.  

William Wells Brown went to see an old slave named Frank during his stay in St. Louis. The community highly respected Frank as a local fortune teller. William, who doubted Franks’ abilities but wanted assurance of his escape plans reflected; “I am no believer in soothsaying; yet, I am sometimes at a loss to know how Uncle Frank could tell so accurately how things would occur in the future. Among the many things he told me was one which was enough to pay me for all the trouble of hunting him up. It was that I should be free!”

These forms of diverse culture helped cultivate a strong fellowship in the slave community. Often separated from family, the slave turned toward the community for support. The unified community safeguarded members from some master’s abuses.

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33Bibb, 70-71.

34Brown, 215.
Values and ideals of the slave community provided another buffer against total domination. Solomon Northrup illustrated one example of the kindness slaves showed toward each other in his narrative. Solomon was isolated from his family, while a slave in the Louisiana Bayou, but experienced the protection of his fellow slaves on the plantation. He returned this kindness while working for his master’s brother-in-law, Peter Tanner. Tanner ordered Solomon to watch three slaves placed in the stocks for stealing melons, leaving him with the key while attending Sunday services. Solomon knew the misery of baking in the hot sun, without water and released the men with the promise that they would return to the stocks before the masters arrival. The four men appreciative of Solomon’s kindness, guided him to the master’s melon patch where they passed the morning.\textsuperscript{35} The principles of the community compelled members to support slaves that disobeyed plantation rules. Cooperation brought the slave community together, fostering the pursuit for personal freedom.\textsuperscript{36}

Religion provided the slave a “sense of autonomy - of constituting not merely a community unto themselves but a community with leaders of their own choice.”\textsuperscript{37} Slaves made religion their own transforming it into a religion of spiritual resistance. The

\textsuperscript{35}Northrup, 293.

\textsuperscript{36}Blassingame, 105-106.

slave spirituals expressed this new religion while retaining the practices of their African heritage. "The religion of the slaves kept alive in them the desire and basis for a struggle for freedom. On a more immediate level it made their daily lives more bearable. If the community was not yet strong enough to overcome adversity, it could least bear with it."38 Community gave the slave the ability to survive hardship in the present, which was essential to defeating adversity in the future. Religion and community provided the basis for the independent struggle against slavery.

38 Rawick, 33.
IV. RESISTANCE AND ESCAPE

Resistance to slavery occurred in a variety of forms, many nonviolent in nature, some violent. Nonviolent means of resistance included learning to read and write or temporary escape from the master. Through reading, slaves obtained a greater knowledge and desire for freedom. With this knowledge, they gained equal status with the master. Therefore, owners forbid reading among slaves. Frederick Douglass learned to read as a child, while living in Baltimore, Maryland. His mistress, Sophia Auld felt it was her obligation to teach him the Bible scriptures. These lessons abruptly came to a halt when his master, Hugh Auld learned of their existence, but the spark had already been lit in Frederick’s soul. He stated; “Wise as Mr. Auld was, he underrated my comprehension, and had little idea of the use to which I was capable of putting the impressive lesson he was giving to his wife. He wanted me to be a slave; I had already voted against that on the home plantation of Colonel Lloyd. That which he most loved, I most hated; and the very determination which he expressed to keep me in ignorance only rendered me the more resolute to seek intelligence.”

Douglass also became involved in the operation of two Sabbath schools, while residing in St. Michaels, Maryland. The first school lasted only two weeks before his master, Thomas Auld discovered and ‘broke it up.’ The second school proved more

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39Douglass, 90.

40Ibid., 125.
successful. Douglass operated this school, a year later while working under Mr. William Freeland. He successfully instructed his fellow slaves every Sunday and three evenings a week for an entire year. In the summer, the school took place outside. In the winter, it moved into the home of a Black free man who lived in the neighborhood. Teaching school gave Douglass a true sense of purpose. He noted: “I felt a delight in circumventing the tyrants and in blessing the victims of their curses.”

Louis Hughes pursued reading with a fellow slave named Thomas, the coachman for his master. Thomas snuck off the plantation at night and met with a group of workers from the area who taught him to read and write. In turn, Thomas instructed Louis in his studies. Their master, Jack McGee grew suspicious of their activities when he found some markings on the side of the barn and kept the two men closely watched. Mr. McGee soon discovered that the men had learned to read and write when he intercepted letters written by Thomas at the local post office. These lessons ended with Thomas’ escape but gave Louis an even stronger conviction to be free.

Resistance could turn violent when slaves confronted masters, trying to avoid floggings. A slave only chose this route when faced with extreme punishment or fear for their life. Fighting back against a white man could lead to severe beatings and even lynching. If a slave overcame his master in a struggle, he sometimes received better

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41Ibid., 172.
42Hughes, 100-103.
treatment because the owner no longer felt the same sense of control. Frederick Douglass experienced this after a confrontation with his master Edward Covey. A brother-in-law to Thomas Auld, Covey was in charge of breaking Frederick's will. Frederick had suffered several beatings at the hands of Covey before resolving he would take no more. When confronted by Covey one morning, he first defended, then matched the blows of both Covey and his cousin Hughes. This conflict continued for two hours ending in Frederick's successful resistance. He peacefully spent the rest of his time in Covey's service. Douglass saw this conflict as a turning point in his life. No man ever flogged him again and his will to be free grew stronger than ever.\footnote{Douglass, 157-162.}

Solomon Northrup twice grappled with his master, John Tibeats when threatened with floggings. He imparted his thoughts upon being ordered to strip his clothes for a flogging, "I felt, ... I had been faithful - that I was guilty of no wrong whatever, and deserved commendation rather than punishment. My fear changed to anger, and before reaching me I had made up my mind not to be whipped, let the result be life or death."\footnote{Northrup, 282.} Solomon prevailed over Tibeats in both struggles but along with each victory brought the reality that his troubles would intensify; "I dared not murder him, and I dared not let him live. If I killed him, my life must pay the forfeit - if he lived,
my life would only satisfy his vengeance. A voice whispered within me to fly.\footnote{Ibid., 296.} A small minority of slaves chose to revolt from their masters openly, though they had little chance of success. Owners crushed revolts with relative ease, preventing the practice from becoming a common occurrence. Nat Turner led the most disastrous slave revolt South Hampton, Virginia in 1831. This conflict ended in the execution of fifty-five whites and forty blacks, including Turner. None of the authors became involved in a revolt, but they possessed many qualities associated with rebel leaders including youth, presence and the ability to read.\footnote{Blassingame, 217-222.}

The slaves longing for freedom inevitably resulted in action. An escape sometimes spanned a few days, allowing a temporary respite but, more often, it fueled the desire of permanent escape to freedom. Henry Bibb attempted escape three times before gaining his freedom. His recapture always occurred while returning to help his family. Because of his rebellious behavior, his owner, David White Esquire sold his wife and child into the deep south. He never saw them again. White then sold Henry to a group of gamblers. Fortunately, the gamblers liked Henry and devised a way to award him his freedom while recovering the money they used for his purchase. After giving Henry detailed directions to Canada, the gamblers sold him to an ailing Cherokee Indian. Shortly after his purchase, the Indian died, giving Henry the opportunity for
flight. After his successful escape, he later made one final attempt to recover his family. He learned that his wife had given up on his return and was living with a white man. This was a devastating blow for Henry, who did not remarry for eight years.⁴⁷

William Wells Brown found his way to freedom on the freight boat owned by his master John Young. He was traveling on the boat with the Young family and made his escape upon reaching Ohio. William traveled for six days, in harsh winter weather without aid or shelter. His feet became extremely frostbitten and he finally realized that without some help he would die. William luckily approached a Quaker named Wells Brown for assistance. Brown took William home and nursed him back to health. Before leaving his company, Brown suggested that William adopt his name. He approved, adding Wells Brown to his first name. He went on to Cleveland, where he remained and worked until the spring, then crossed over Lake Erie into Canada. Securing a position working on a steamboat, he traveled between Cleveland and Canada. During his employment on the steamship, he arranged passage for sixty-nine fugitive slaves, aiding their escape.⁴⁸

Frederick Douglass made his escape using a friend’s sailor’s protection papers. The sailors’ papers verified him as a free American sailor. Though he did not match the description of the paper’s bearer, he trusted its official appearance to provide enough

⁴⁷Bibb, 140-162.

⁴⁸Brown, 216-223.
cover for escape. He purchased passage on a train to Wilmington, connected with a steamboat headed for Philadelphia, then went on to New York that evening by train. After arriving in New York, he sent the papers back to his friend through the mail. Many slaves employed this practice to gain their freedom. Success involved great danger for both individuals and required a great deal of trust between them. Douglass did not reveal his method of escape until forty years later while revising his first narrative. He intended this as protection for those assisting in his escape. His silence also allowed others the opportunity to escape using the same strategy.  

Louis Hughes made his successful bid for freedom at the close of the Civil War. The Union soldiers had already reached Tennessee, liberating the surrounding towns but, his master held all the slaves on the plantation. Louis and another slave named George planned an escape to Memphis, where they could find help and return to liberate their wives. Upon reaching Memphis, they enlisted the help of two Union soldiers and returned to the plantation. While the soldiers spoke with Mr. McGee’s about requisitioning grain for their horses, Louis and George gathered their families to leave. The McGee’s made no attempt to stop them as they knew of slavery’s abolition. The two families and nine other slaves left the McGee plantation on July 3, 1865, three months after the end of the Civil War.

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49Douglass, 218-223.

50Hughes, 172-190.
James W. C. Pennington made his quest for freedom at the age of twenty-one. He knew that it was imperative to keep his plans secret. Unfortunately, this made it impossible to bid his family farewell. He successfully traveled three days, when a group of men recaptured him outside Baltimore. After three days and two attempts, Pennington finally managed to elude his captors, escaping again into the woods. He traveled by night, reaching Pennsylvania a few days later. Pennington remained in Pennsylvania the next year with the aid of several Quaker families, spending much of his time alone studying the Bible. He then traveled to New York City, taking evening classes to further his studies and went on to become a teacher. After reaching Pennsylvania, he made several bids to purchase the freedom of his parents. He eventually obtained the freedom of his father and two brothers. Several of his sisters married free men, who bought their freedom. His master sold his mother into the deep south and died a slave.\footnote{Pennington, 215-252.}

A native Canadian, going by the name of Bass, aided Solomon Northrup’s escape from slavery. Solomon worked with Bass building a new home for his master, Edwin Epps. One afternoon, Solomon overheard Bass arguing with his master over the legality of slavery. Upon hearing Bass denounce the institution, Solomon resolved to confide in him regarding his origins. After conveying his story, Solomon urged Bass to obtain proof of his freedom. Bass wrote letters to a judge and a customs officer in the
New York area. He also wrote to Mr. Parker and Mr. Perry, friends of Solomon’s living near his home. The letter sent to his Parker and Perry was forwarded to his wife, Anne. Anne obtained the services of Henry Northrup Esquire, who personally traveled to the Bayou Boeuf to coordinate Solomon’s release. This effort might have gone unresolved if not for an encounter with Bass, who exposed Solomon’s whereabouts and a current name: Platt. Without this information, the lawyer would never have discovered Solomon’s identity. Solomon returned North with Henry Northrup stopping in Washington D.C.. Solomon sought to prosecute James Burch for his illegal abduction, but the jury acquitted Burch of the crime. Solomon then traveled on to his home in New York ending his twelve years of slavery.52

“Under slavery, as under any other social system, those at the bottom were not always totally dominated by the master class. They found ways of subverting the worst of the system and even at times of dominating their masters. While owners oppressed and exploited Blacks, they fought back in a constant struggle, by all available means.”53 Each man, in these narratives successfully escaped from slavery, but thousands of slaves sought freedom only to be recaptured, whipped, given harder work or sold into the deep South. Only a small number managed to reach free soil. Although we will never hear many of these slaves’ voices, the voice of the slave narrative, with that of the

52Northrup, 371-406.

53Rawick, 95.
overseer and master can provide a consistent account regarding the institution of slavery.
CONCLUSION

The fundamental importance of the slave narrative is the perspective gained through the view of the slave. The statements they contain may be partial or prejudice but no more, and probably a good deal less, than those formed by owners and overseers. These narratives serve as records of black suffering and injustice, providing a fairer meaning of what slavery was to the slave. Each author had a great passion for freedom. This passion fueled their desire to escape and continued to influence them in later life. These authors went on to become leading figures in the anti-slavery movement as professionals, editors, lecturers and writers.

The University of Heidelberg awarded James W.C. Pennington the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Yale University refused his admission, but he attended lectures, standing in the hallway of lecture classrooms. He spent his later career as a prominent teacher and minister, constantly working to improve conditions for Black Americans. He is also credited with writing the first book on African American History in America for school children.\(^{54}\)

William Wells Brown became a member and agent of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society, using every opportunity to speak out against the evils of slavery. "He was one of the most militant and astute Garrisonians in the country."\(^{55}\) His refusal

\(^{54}\)Pennington, 193.

\(^{55}\)Gilbert Osofsky, 44.
to pay his former owner, Enoch Price, for his freedom resulted in his exile from the United States, in 1849. He spent the next five years in Europe, lecturing and publishing five books based on his life in slavery. Brown returned to the United States in 1854, after British abolitionists paid his ransom, and resumed his work with the anti-slavery society. He also became a highly recognized playwright.\(^{56}\)

Henry Bibb spent the remainder of his life assisting other fugitive slaves in their pursuit of freedom. He fulfilled this pledge by helping to organize a settlement for both fugitive slaves and freemen in Canada. Eight years after the loss of his wife and child, he married Mary E. Miles of Boston. Bibb attended many meetings in Boston to encourage support of his colony over Liberia as a fugitive settlement. In addition, he served as founder and editor for the publication, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, until his premature death at the age of thirty-eight.\(^{57}\)

Solomon Northrup and Louis Hughes did not enter public life to the same extent as the other authors, but continued their activity in the anti-slavery movement. Solomon Northrup returned to his family in New York, traveling to many organizations to speak about his slavery experience.\(^{58}\) Abolitionists published his narrative, simultaneously in Buffalo, New York and London in 1853. Louis Hughes settled in Milwaukee,

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\(^{57}\)Gilbert Osofsky, 44.

\(^{58}\)Ibid, 44.
Wisconsin, attending a freeman’s school in the evening. Hughes worked in the nursing profession traveling throughout the country and published his narrative in 1897.\textsuperscript{59}

Frederick Douglass went on to a celebrated public career, waging a vicious war against slavery. Douglass worked on the anti-slavery publication, The North Star becoming a faithful advocate of William Lloyd Garrison. Following the Civil War, he continued his work, speaking for the rights of Black Americans and women and fulfilling numerous government appointments. Six years before his death in 1895, President Benjamin Harrison appointed Douglass to the position of Minister to Haiti.\textsuperscript{60}

We must include slave experience in the United States as a central component of the history of America. The historical evolvement of black society through culture, religion and community lends valuable insight to America’s national development. Often represented as a possession, the slave’s perspective is often given little recognition in addressing their own history. The fact that slavery played a primary role in the history of America, gives great consequence to the voice of the slave. In giving equal weight to the views of the slave, historians not only build a thorough understanding of slavery but add a rich resource to the study of the institution. The slave narratives allow for comparison with the testimony of the slave holder and overseer and provide a fuller, more honest, representation of slavery in Nineteenth Century America.

\textsuperscript{59}Hughes, 199-209.

\textsuperscript{60}Douglass, 410-450.
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