

**BACKGROUND:** *Charles Thompson was born in Atala County, Mississippi on March 3, 1833. When his enslaver, a man named Kirkwood, died sometime around 1842, Thompson's family was split up—divided among Kirkwood's heirs. James Wilson inherited Thompson and two of sisters.*

*Thompson recounts the traumatic separation from his mother and father, which he likened to a death. He also recounts a heartbreaking reunion with his uncle Ben. Their reunion was short-lived, however, because when Wilson decided to move over one hundred miles away, Ben refusing to be separated from his wife, enslaved on another plantation, ran away. Thompson details the ways in which Ben and his wife were able to subvert efforts to capture him.*

*In addition to his Uncle Ben's efforts to resist separation, Thompson's narrative details other means of resistance. Thompson learned to read and write—skills forbidden to enslaved people. He also used his religion to help him maintain hope in salvation. He also ran away several times before successfully fleeing enslavement.*

*The excerpts below come directly from Thompson's autobiography.*

---

Page 17

My father and mother both being slaves, of course my pedigree is not traceable, by me, farther back than my parents. Our family belonged to a man named Kirkwood, who was a large slave-owner. Kirkwood died when I was about nine years old, after which, upon the settlement of the affairs of his estate, the slaves belonging to the estate were divided equally, as to value, among the six heirs. There

---

Page 18

were about seventy-five slaves to be divided into six lots; and great was the tribulation among the poor blacks when they learned that they were to be separated.

When the division was completed two of my sisters and myself were cast into one lot, my mother into another, and my father into another, and the rest of the family in the other lots. Young and slave as I was, I felt the pang of separation from my loved and revered mother; child that I was I mourned for mother, even before our final separation, as one dead to me forever. So early to be deprived of a fond mother, by the "law," gave me my first view of the curse of slavery. Until this time I did not know what trouble was, but from then until the tocsin of freedom was sounded through the glorious Emancipation Proclamation by the immortal Abraham Lincoln, I passed through hardship after hardship, in quick succession, and many, many times I have almost seen and tasted death.

I bade farewell to my mother, forever, on this earth. Oh! the pangs of that moment. Even after thirty years have elapsed the scene comes vividly to my memory as I write. A gloomy, dark cloud seemed to pass before my vision, and the very air seemed to still with awfulness. I felt bereaved, forlorn, forsaken, lost. Put yourself in

---

Page 19

my place; feel what I have felt, and then say, God is just; he will protect the helpless and right the wronged, and you will have some idea of my feelings and the hope that sustained me through long and weary years of servitude. My mother, my poor mother! what must she have suffered. Never will I forget her last words; never will I forget the earnest prayers of that mother begging for her child, and refusing to be comforted. She had fallen to the lot of Mrs. Anderson, and she pleaded with burning tears streaming down her cheeks,

“He is my only son, my baby child, my youngest and the only son I have; please let me have him to go with me!”

Anderson spoke roughly to her and told her to hold her peace; but with her arms around me she clung to me and cried the louder, “Let me have my child; if you will let me have my baby you may have all the rest!”

Mothers can realize this situation only, who have parted with children whom they never expected to see again. Imagine parting with your dearest child, never to see it again; to be thrown into life-servitude in one part of the country and your dear child in the same condition six hundred miles away. Although my mother was black, she had a soul; she had a heart to feel just as you have, and I, her child, was being ruthlessly

Page 20

torn from her by inexorable “law.” What would you have done if you had been in her place? She prayed to God for help.

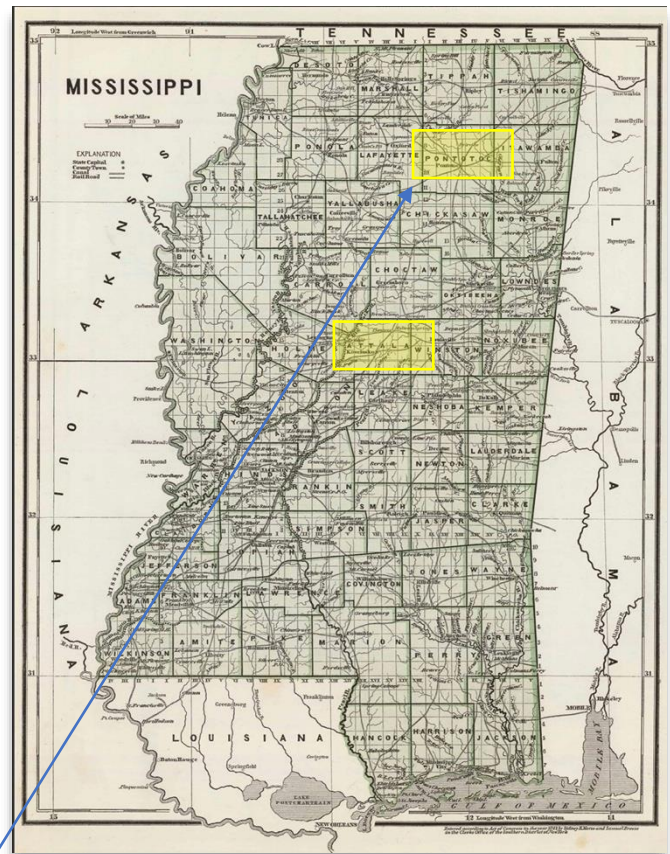
My kind old father consoled and encouraged my mother all he could, and said to her, “Do not be discouraged, for Jesus is your friend; if you lack for knowledge, he will inform you, and if you meet with troubles and trials on your way, cast all your cares on Jesus, and don’t forget to pray.” The old man spoke these words while praying, shouting, crying, and saying farewell to my mother. He had, in a manner, raised nearly all the colored people on the plantation; so he had a fatherly feeling for all of them. The old man looked down on me, and said, “My child, you are now without a father and will soon be without a mother; but be a good boy, and God will be father and mother to you. If you will put your trust in him and pray to him, he will take you home to heaven when you die, where you can meet your mother there, where parting will be no more. Farewell.” I was then taken from my mother, and have not seen or heard of her since—about twenty-nine years ago. Old Uncle Jack, as my father was called by the plantation people, spoke words of comfort to all of us before we were parted.

The lot of human chattels, of which I was

Page 21

one, was taken to their new home on Wilson’s plantation, in the same county as the Kirkwood plantation. Wilson told my sisters and myself that our mother and ourselves were about six hundred miles apart.

After I had been in my new home about two years, Wilson bought my uncle Ben from a man named Strucker, who lived in the same neighborhood, but he did not buy uncle Ben’s wife. Two years later Wilson moved to another plantation he owned in Pontotoc County, Mississippi, about one hundred miles distant



Sidney E. Morse and Samuel Breese, *Morse’s North American Atlas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1842). <https://ccn.loc.gov/map54000295>

from his Atala County plantation. Ben not being willing to go so far from his wife, ran away from his master. Wilson, however, left word that if any one would catch and return Ben to him, he would pay two hundred dollars. This was a bait not to be resisted. The professional slave-hunters, with their blood-hounds, were soon on the track. They failed to get the poor hunted man, though. Ben was a religious, God-fearing man, and placed firm reliance on the help of the Almighty, in his serious trials, and never failed to find help when most needed. He stayed under cover in the woods, in such lurking places as the nature of the country provided, in the day time, and at night would cautiously approach his wife's cabin, when, at

---

Page 22

an appointed signal, she would let him in and give him such food and care as his condition required. The slaves of the South were united in the one particular of helping each other in such cases as this, and would adopt ingenious telegrams and signals to communicate with each other; and it may well be believed that the inventive genius of the blacks was, as a general thing, equal to all emergencies, and when driven to extremities they were brave to a fault. Ben's wife, in this instance, used the simple device of hanging a certain garment in a particular spot, easily to be seen from Ben's covert, and which denoted that the coast was clear and no danger need be apprehended. The garment and the place of hanging it had to be changed every day, yet the signals thus made were true to the purpose, and saved uncle Ben from capture. Uncle Ben was closely chased by the hounds and inhuman men-hunters; on one occasion so closely that he plunged into a stream and followed the current for more than a mile. Taking to the water threw the hounds off the scent of the track. Before reaching the stream, uncle Ben was so closely pursued that one of the men in the gang shot at him, the bullet passing unpleasantly close to him. His wife heard the hounds and the gun-shot. This race

---

Page 23

for life and liberty was only one of a continued series, and was repeated as often as blood-hounds could find a track to follow. At night Ben was very much fatigued and hungry, and his only hope of getting anything to eat was to reach his wife's cabin. How to do this without being observed, was the question. As well as he was able, about midnight he left his retreat and approached the cabin. It was too dark to see a signal if one had been placed for him in the usual manner. After waiting for some time a bright light shot through the cracks in the cabin for an instant, and was repeated at intervals of two or three minutes, three or four times. This was the night-signal of "all right" agreed upon between uncle Ben and his wife, and was made by placing the usual grease light under a vessel and raising the vessel for a moment at intervals. Ben approached the cabin and gave his signal by rapping on the door three times, and after a short pause three more raps. Thus they had to arrange to meet; the husband to obtain food to sustain life, and the wife to administer to him. On this particular night their meeting was unusually impressive. She had heard the death-hounds, the sound of the gun-shot, and she knew the yelps of the hounds and the shot

---

Page 24

were intended for Ben, her husband. With no crime laid to him, he was hunted down as a wild beast. Made in God's own image, he is made a slave, a brute, an outcast, and an outlaw because his skin is black. Thus they met, Ben and his wife. After the usual precautions and mutual congratulations they both kneeled before the throne of God and thanked him for their preservation thus far, and throwing themselves upon his goodness and bounty, asked help in their need and safety in the future. Without rising from his knees, Ben, even in the anguish of his heart, consoled his wife, remarking, "that the darkest hour is always just before daylight."

The blacks of the South have their own peculiar moral maxims, applicable to all situations in life, and the slaves not knowing how to read committed such Bible truths as were read to them from time to time. It is true they were generally superstitious in a great degree, as all ignorant persons are; yet their native sense of right led them to adopt the best and most religious principles, dressed in homely "sayings," their circumstances permitted.

Ben dare not stay very long at a time in his wife's cabin, as a strict watch was constantly kept, that the runaway might be apprehended.

---

Page 25

Bidding his wife farewell, Ben hastened back to one of a number of his hiding-places, there to stay through the day, unless routed out by the blood-hounds. He was fortunate, however, in the help of God, for his safety, and the efforts of the hounds and the hounds' followers were futile.

Finally, Wilson gave up chasing Ben with blood-hounds, and resolved to try a better and more human method. He bought Ben's wife and left her with Strucker, with instructions to send her and Ben to his plantation if Ben was willing for the arrangement. Ben soon got word of how matters stood with reference to himself, and concluded if he could live with his wife on the same plantation that it was the very best he could do, so he acceded to the wishes of Wilson, and was sent with his wife to Wilson.

The happiness of this couple was unbounded when they found they could once more live together as God intended they should, and the poor wife in her great gratitude cried, "God is on our side!" Ben replied that he had told her on one occasion that God was on their side, and that "the darkest hour was just before day."

The usual expression used by the blacks when

---

Page 26

a runaway returned to his master was that he "had come out of the woods;" that is, he had left his hiding place in the woods and returned to the plantation to work.

When I heard that uncle Ben had come out of the woods, and was coming to live on our plantation, my joy knew no bounds. On the day when he was expected to arrive I got permission to go out on the road some distance and meet them. Early in the morning I caught a horse and started. Every wagon I met filled me with hope and fear blended; hope that the wagon contained my uncle and aunt, and fear that it did not. I rode on, on, on, all that day, until my heart was sick with hope deferred. I had received orders before starting that if I did not meet them that day to return home. But I was so far from home, and with straining my eyes to catch a glimpse of my uncle, added to my keen disappointment in not seeing them, made me feel tired, sick, and worn out. So I stopped at a friendly cabin that night, after telling the inmates who I was and what my errand was. Early the next morning I was out, and the anxiety to see my uncle was so great I thought I would ride out the road a short distance in the hope of meeting him, notwithstanding my orders to return

---

Page 27

home. After traveling about an hour I met the wagon containing uncle Ben and his wife. The joy of that moment to me is inexpressible. Having been deprived of mother and father he was the only relative my sisters and myself could ever have any hopes of seeing again. My heart rejoiced exceedingly. I was, as it were, a new boy entirely, so overcome was I. We all arrived home that same day, and it was a much more

pleasant trip than I had taken the day before. On that day it was all anxiety, mixed with hope and fear; to-day it was all joy and thanksgiving, again proving uncle Ben's saying that "the darkest hour is always just before day. My sisters were simply wild with joy when we arrived. They ran out the road to meet, us crying, "There comes uncle Ben; we have one more friend!" We were all comforted and rejoiced to a very great extent, and we felt indeed that we had "one more friend" with us. We were as happy as slaves could be, and spent all the time we could together—uncle Ben, his wife, my sisters, and myself.

---

Page 30

**[After Ben's return, Wilson cautiously made plans to punish him...]**

Wilson finally took Ben's wife to a man in Oxford, about twenty-five miles distant, and came back circulating the word among the blacks that he had sold her. Wilson had made arrangements at Oxford with some professional slave-hunters to catch Ben if he ever came to see his wife, for which purpose she had been taken there.

After a time Ben was informed that he and his wife had been sold by Wilson to a man in Oxford, and of course believing such to be the fact, he went there to see her, and make arrangements for the future. His wife was told by the man with whom Wilson had left her that he had bought both her and Ben, and wished her to get Ben to "come out of the woods." Laboring under this delusion, Ben was trapped while in bed for the first time in a

---

Page 31

month. The cabin was surrounded by armed men, when Ben was overpowered, chained, and put in jail for safe keeping until Wilson should come after him. Living in the woods so long and the harsh treatment he was now receiving wore Ben down considerably; yet, believing that "the darkest hour is just before day," he relied on God's help in his misery.

Wilson came for Ben in due time, and after chaining him securely around the neck he fastened one end of the chain to the rear of his buggy and literally, a part of the time, dragged him to Holly Springs, about thirty miles from Oxford, where he sold him to a man who had the reputation of being the hardest master in the country. Wilson afterwards took Ben's wife home. Thus they were separated,—Ben and his wife,—never to meet again on this earth.