

BACKGROUND: Henry Watson was born enslaved near Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1813. His mother was sold away when he was eight years old. Henry was soon sold too.

Parson Janer purchased Henry and then sold him to a slave trader who took him to Richmond, Virginia where he was sold again. In Richmond, a slave trader named Denton purchased Henry. Denton put Henry in a coffle, a group of enslaved people chained together, and forced them to walk over 1,000 miles to Natchez, Mississippi.

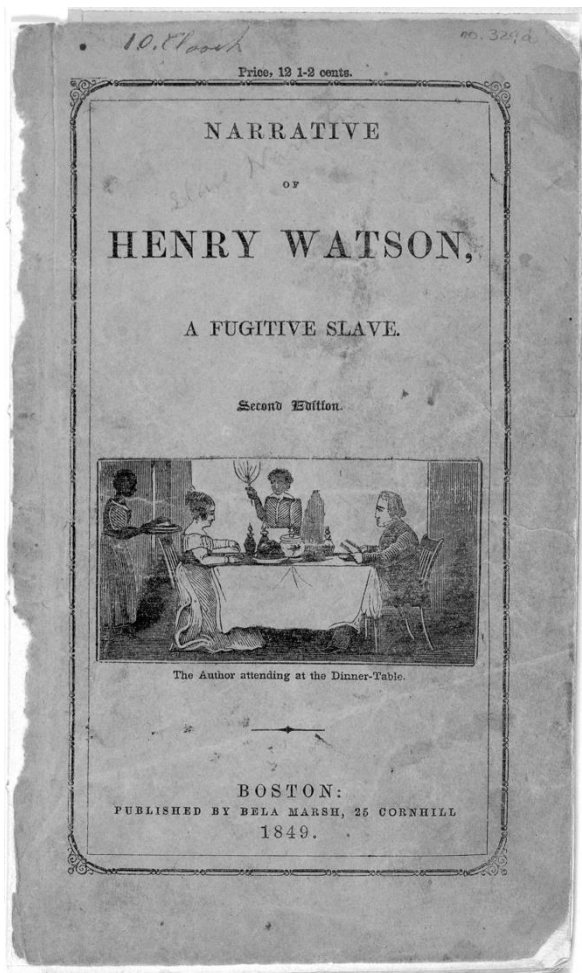
After arriving in Natchez, a major slave-trading city located along the Mississippi River, Henry was sold again, this time to a man named Alexander McNeill. Over the next several years, Henry Watson was sold at least three more times until he escaped enslavement by hiding on a ship bound for Boston.

In Boston, the twenty-six-year-old Watson, met William Lloyd Garrison. He told Garrison the story of his life in slavery and his escape to freedom.

The excerpt below is from Henry Watson's narrative published in 1848.

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... The same man that brought me, came for me and ordered me to take a seat on the stage-coach, and the next day I found myself in Richmond, and stopped at the Eagle Hotel, kept by Mr. Holman, where I remained two or three days, and then was carried to the auction room; entering which, I found several slaves, seated around the room waiting for the hour of sale.



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Some were in tears; others were apparently cheerful. This brought to my mind my mother, and caused me to shed many tears; but they fell unheeded. The auctioneer was busy examining the slaves before the sale commenced. At last everything was ready, and the traffic in human flesh began. I will

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attempt to give as accurate an account of the language and ceremony of a slave auction as I possibly can. "Gentlemen, here is a likely boy; how much? He is sold for no fault; the owner wants money. His age is forty. Three hundred dollars is all that I am offered for him. Please to examine him; he is warranted sound. Boy, pull off your shirt—roll up your pants—for we want to see if you have been whipped." If they discover any scars, they will not buy; saying that the n----- is a bad one. The auctioneer seeing this, cries, "Three hundred dollars, gentlemen, three hundred dollars. Shall I sell him for three hundred dollars? I have just been informed by his master, that he is an honest boy, and belongs to the same church that he does." This turns

the tide frequently, and the bids go up fast; and he is knocked off for a good sum. After the men and women are sold, the children are put on the stand. I was the first put up. On my appearance, several voices cried, "How old is that little n-----?" On hearing this expression, I again burst into tears, and wept so that I have no distinct recollection of his answer. I was at length knocked down, to a man whose name was Denton, a slave trader, then purchasing slaves for the Southern market. His first name I have forgotten. Each one of the traders has private jails, which are for the purpose of keeping slaves in; and they are generally kept by some confidential slave. Denton had one of these jails, to which I was conducted by his trusty slave; and on entering I found a great many slaves there, waiting to be sent off as soon as their numbers increased. These jails are enclosed by a wall about 16 feet high, and the yard-room is for the slaves to exercise in; and consists of but one room, in

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which all sexes and ages are huddled together in a mass. I stayed in this jail but two days, when the number was completed, and we were called out to form a line. Horses and wagons were in readiness to carry our provisions and tents, so that we might camp out at night. Before we had proceeded far, Mr. Denton gave orders for us to stop, for the purpose of handcuffing some of the men, which, he said in a loud voice, "had the devil in them." The men belonging to this drove were all married men, and all leaving their wives and children behind; he, judging from their tears that they were unwilling to go, had them made secure. We started again on our journey, Mr. Denton taking the lead in his sulky; and the driver, Mr. Thornton, brought the rear. I will not weary my readers with the particulars of our march to Tennessee, where we stopped several days for the purpose of arranging our clothes. While stopping, the men were hired out to pick cotton. While in Tennessee, we lost four of our number, who died from exposure on the road. After the lapse of three weeks, we started again on our journey, and in about four weeks arrived in Natchez, Miss., and went to our pen, which Mr. Denton had previously hired for us; and had our irons taken off and our clothes changed; for Mr. Denton was expecting visitors to examine the flock, as he would sometimes term us. There was a sign-board in front of the house, which informed traders that he had on hand, blacksmiths, carpenters, field-hands; also several sickly ones, whom he would sell very cheap. In a short time purchasers became plenty, and our number diminished. I was not sold for several weeks, though I wished to be the first, not wishing to witness his cruelty to his slaves any longer; for

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if they displeased him in the least, he would order them to be stripped, and tied hand and foot together. He would then have his paddle brought, which was a board about two feet in length and one inch in thickness, having fourteen holes bored through it, about an inch in circumference. This instrument of torture he would apply, until the slave was exhausted, on parts which the purchaser would not be likely to examine. This mode of punishment is considered one of the most cruel ever invented, as the flesh protrudes through these holes at every blow, and forms bunches and blisters the size of each hole, causing much lameness and soreness to the person receiving them. This punishment is generally inflicted in the morning, before visitors come to examine the slaves. Just before the doors are opened, it is usual for the keeper to grease the mouths of the slaves, so as to make it appear that they are well and hearty, and have just done eating fat meat; though they seldom, if ever, while in the custody of the keeper, taste a morsel of meat of any kind.

At length, a man made his appearance; the very man of all others I had ever seen, from whom I should shrink, and be afraid. He was dark-complexioned, had sharp, grey eyes, a peaked nose, and compressed lips; indeed, he was a very bad-looking man. I never wish to look upon his face again. His name

was Alexander McNeill, a member of the firm of McNeill, Fiske & Co. He said he wanted a boy to bring up to suit himself. He took a great fancy to me, and after some discussion about the price, agreed at last to give five hundred dollars for me. I quit my old quarters, and went with my

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new master to his store. He told me my duty for the future would be, to wait upon him,--"to jump when I was spoken to, run when sent upon errands, and if I did not mind my P's and Q's, I should be flogged like h--l."

As I did not like my new master's appearance, I at once concluded to please him in all things. But it was all in vain; for the first morning I was severely flogged for not placing his clothes in the proper position on the chair. The second morning I received another severe flogging for not giving his boots as good a polish as he thought they had been accustomed to. Thus he went on in cruelty, and met every new effort of mine to please him with fresh blows from his cowhide, which he kept hung up in his room for that purpose. In a few days he made arrangements for a journey, on which I was to accompany him. The object of his journey was made known to me by some of his servants; and, as that journey turned out to be of great importance to me, I will give it to the world, as I got it from my author. My master was a married man. Although I had never seen my mistress, as she was living with her mother, sixty miles from the city,--she having found out, while living with her husband in the city, that he had made a wife of one of his slaves, had left him, and had gone to her mother; and the object of his journey was to induce her to come back and live with him. I accompanied him on this journey; and, although he made every effort on his part to induce her to return, she refused to do so. He returned to Natchez, enraged at his ill success, and determined never to make another attempt at reconciliation. He concluded to leave the city, and he purchased a farm near Vicksburg, on the Mississippi River,

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upon which he settled. My master always was a cruel man; but ever since his unsuccessful effort at reconciliation with his wife, he became a perfect tyrant, lashing his slaves without mercy. This shows one of the many ways in which the licentious slaveholder inflicts pain on poor slaves; robbing them, by force, of their virtue, then lacerating their backs for having allowed themselves thus to be forced. He had not been long on his farm before he took another of his slave-women to wife, by whom he had two children. These children were not treated any better than any other slave's; the mother being out in the field all the day, and in his room at night. Upon this farm were one hundred field-hands, and two house servants, the cook and myself. For the accommodation of the field-hands there were twenty-seven cabins, one hospital, one jail, one gin-house; at which house, as in the jail, there are two pair of stocks, for the torture of slaves.

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