

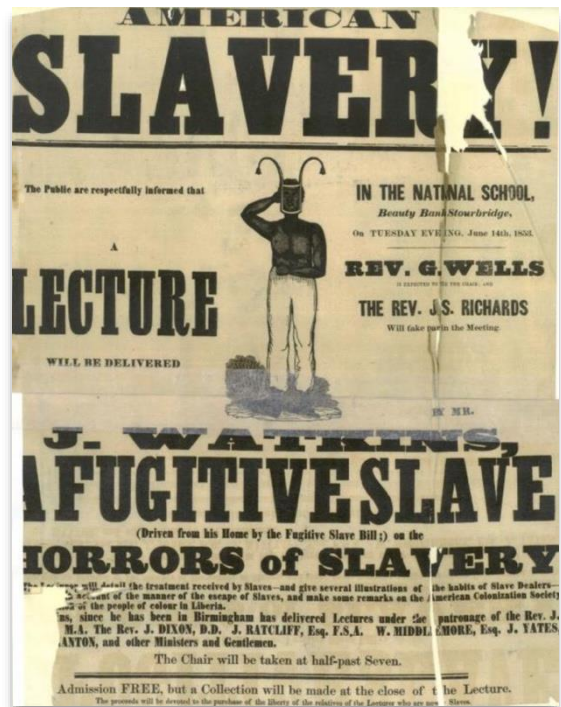
BACKGROUND: James Watkins was born in Cuckerville, Baltimore County, Maryland sometime around 1823. Born Sam Berry, he changed his name after escaping slavery. In part motivated by the recent sale of several of his siblings, Watkins first attempted to escape when he was approximately seventeen years old. In 1844, his bid for freedom was successful. He escaped to Connecticut where he lived as a free man. Here, he eventually met and married a free Black woman named Mary. Together they had three children.

In 1849, he returned to Maryland to visit his mother, who in old age, had been freed. In 1850, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Watkins emigrated to England. There, he became a lecturer and wrote his autobiography in which he recounts his experiences in slavery and as an abolitionist in England.

In 1852, he published his first memoir, *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins*. In 1860, he published a revised version of his autobiography, *Struggles for Freedom*. The excerpts below come directly from Watkins' memoir.

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I still continued Mr. Ensor's slave, and got on for a length of time as comfortably as most do in my situation; but, from the frequent whippings and ill-treatment which I received, as well as witnessed, I began to feel a longing desire for freedom. I felt as though I had been unfortunate in being born black, and wished that I could by any means change my skin into a white one, feeling certain that I should then be free. Seeing my poor mother frequently shedding tears, I used anxiously to press her to tell me why she did so, and would often say, "Mother, why do you weep?" "Oh!" she would say, "I am sick at heart to think that I am a poor wretched slave for life, and you and your brothers and sisters are in the same condition." I, of course, sympathised very deeply with my poor mother, particularly as at this time two brothers and a sister of mine were sold by Mr. Ensor; also a cousin, a girl nearly white, and a daughter of my Aunt Comfort. This was a sore trial to my poor mother and aunt, and I thought they would never see through their grief at parting with their children, which proved to be for ever, as they never saw them again. I shall never forget going down to Baltimore to take a last farewell of my relatives. I had to intercede with Mr. Ensor for a length of time before he would consent to let me go on such an errand. At last, after ridiculing the idea of black people having any feelings, he consented,



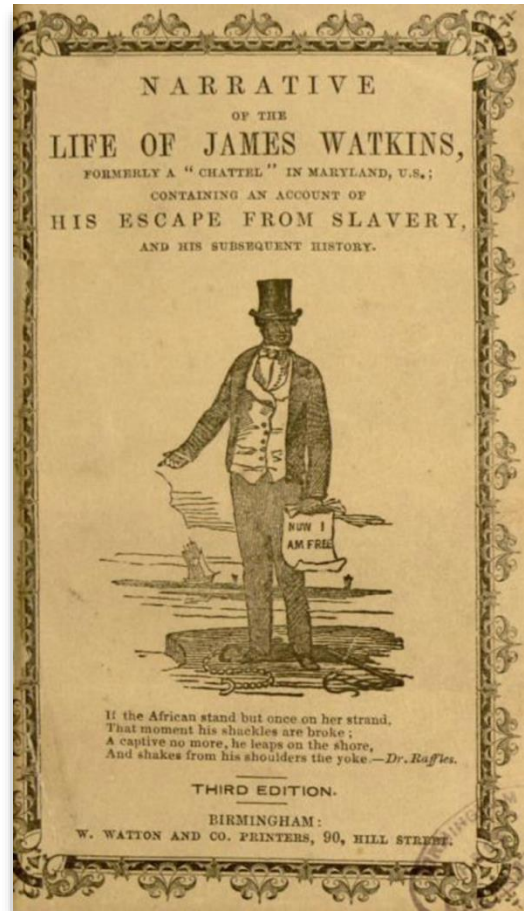
Broadside advertising Watkins' lecture in Stourbridge, England. <https://manchestermill.co.uk/p/from-maryland-to-manchester-the-extraordinary>

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and to Baltimore I went, along with my poor mother. We found our relatives in a large prison, in Pratt-street, together with eight or nine hundred other slaves, who belonged to two slave dealers, named Slater and Woodfork, who had bought them for the southern market; and although they do all they can to keep up the spirits of the poor wretches, by supplying them with plenty of whisky, and amusements of various kinds, yet the grief and anguish that prevailed amongst them were beyond description. My mother and I

were only allowed about half an hour to take leave of those whom we were about to lose for ever. I shall never forget the parting as long as I live; I really thought it would have killed my mother, and have no doubt that her health and spirits then received a very severe shock.

These separations made me sigh for freedom with an intensity of feeling such as I had hitherto been a stranger to, and I resolved on making an attempt to escape the very first opportunity that should present itself. I set about obtaining every information in my power on the subject, and for that purpose frequently made stolen visits to some limekilns, about two or three miles from our quarters, ostensibly to give the men a hand at their work, but really to hear something about freedom, and--don't laugh--to help the poor fellows to eat their supper, my visits being always paid in the evening, where I frequently remained till three o'clock in the morning. I often met persons there who would say something sympathising to me on my cruel bondage; I well remember meeting with two Irishmen at this place, who listened to my tale of woe with manifest feelings of interest; they told me there was a country where I should be free if I could get there; but I could not conceive where this country could be, or how I was to get to it, nor, in fact, how I was to keep myself anywhere, for Mr. Ensor had always tried to make us believe that we could not take care of ourselves if we had the liberty, so that my poor mind was in such a dark state that I was far off being in a condition to seek for freedom in right good earnest.



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Since I have been in England, I have often been surprised to hear working men declare that they, too, know what slavery is. They argue that they are compelled to work very hard and long for little pay, and this they call "slavery," forgetting that they can, at any time, give a fortnight or a month's notice to their employers that they are going to leave, and then they are at liberty to improve their circumstances if they can. All this is very different to being placed on the auction block, and knocked off to the highest bidder, with the same ease and as little consideration as a piece of old furniture is done in any English market-place. Before a slave can get a "fresh shop," however skilful he may be, he must go through the same process that a horse does that changes masters. When I hear people talk thus, I think they don't comprehend the subject. I can truly say, that were Luke Ensor to make me an offer to clothe me in the best broad cloth, place a gold chain and watch about my neck, give me a horse to ride upon, and feed me on the best his plantation could produce, on the condition that I would return to him a slave, that is, his property, I would spurn the offer with indignation, and be horror-stricken at the idea of the proposition; I should fly from him as from the face of Satan, for I prize my freedom above every earthly blessing.

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There is not a nation in the world will tolerate such horrible cruelties as I have shown in this narrative on their fellow men who happen to have the misfortune to be possessed of a skin of a rather darker hue than themselves, save in that country alone where they boast so strongly of having such unparalleled freedom. Under such pretended boast of freedom, this country alone sanctions, by law, the buying and selling of men, women, and children, at so much the pound weight, the selling of women for the most vile purposes, who are put upon the block of the auctioneer and knocked off by the hammer of these merciless men as beasts, furniture, and property would be in this country, and frequently sold for the purpose of sending the Word of God to the heathens, and building Christian churches. Notwithstanding such are the feelings, prejudices, and practices of the nation as a whole, we must, in justice, say that there are thousands of white men in the United States, such as the Hon. Charles Sumner, and many

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others, who are standing up with undaunted courage to proclaim the rights of their coloured brethren, and who are working with unflinching zeal and energy to bring about that most devoutly wished for and happy period when that system known as "American Slavery" shall be buried in the oblivion of the past.

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My readers will perhaps to some extent sympathise with me in this matter, when I tell them that I have seen my own sisters sold for this vile purpose, and at a time, too, when my aged mother was tottering on the brink of the grave, having just lived long enough to witness the shame and dishonour of her daughters. Though I was myself a slave, and my limbs in thralldom, my soul was unfettered and unenslaved, and, slave as I was, senseless animal as I was considered, my feelings were such that I would rather, a thousand times rather, have seem them laid in their graves than condemned to such a fate. But alas! my case was not a solitary one. There are thousands of my race whose hearts are being daily torn with similar misfortunes.

Perhaps, however, the most horrible phase in this horrible system is the fact that it is no unfrequent occurrence for slave masters to sell

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their own children, simply because the mothers of those children, though they have been treated as their wives, are their slaves. But what can we think of the conscience, of the heart, of the common humanity, of the man who will sacrifice his own offspring for the sake of filthy lucre, who will sell his own flesh and blood in order to fill his pocket.

I am happy, however, to be able to say, that though it is no uncommon thing still for religious people to be the owners of slaves, there has been a division amongst the Methodists, and no less than 400,000 followers of Mr. Wesley, disgusted and indignant at this degrading and iniquitous system, have formed a distinct society, determined no longer to be connected with a slave-trading church, and the example of the noble band has been followed by other denominations of Christians.