

BACKGROUND: J. H. Banks was born on January 3, 1833, in Rockingham County, Virginia. His mother, Mary Francis, was born in Henrico, Virginia. His father, commonly called Novel, was also born in Rockingham County, Virginia. Banks's parents were among the thirty people Charles L. Yancey enslaved on the 400 acres of land where they grew wheat, corn, rye, hemp, tobacco, and flax and raised livestock. Fifteen of those thirty people were Banks's siblings. After Yancey's death, they remained with his widow.

The following excerpts are taken from an account related to and recorded by J.W.C. Pennington, who was also born enslaved and managed to escape.

The excerpt begins with Banks's recollections of his enslaver's difficulties in hiring and keeping an overseer. Yancey eventually served as his own overseer. As his economic troubles continued, he began to sell the people he enslaved to cover his debts.

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But still his fortune had so far decayed that he felt necessary to resort to another plan to save himself; and, reader, what do you think that plan was? Having thus given up employing overseers, he acted as his own boss, and, whenever he found himself in pressing need of cash, he would sell off a slave. He turned off his last overseer in the spring, and in the next fall, he sold two of his slaves; one was my sister Charlotte, whom I loved most dearly. Reader, you may judge how I felt to see my sister leave me well and hearty, and to think I should never see her again!

My dear mother and father witnessed the same, and were most deeply moved at the sight. My mother, indeed, seemed to show all the symptoms of a distracted mind and a broken heart. And, what wonder—to see a beloved daughter separated from her embraces in her declining years, was almost too much for her reason, This sister was about nineteen years of age. She was one year older than myself. She was sold to the far South, and for no crime. We never heard from her, and cannot tell whether she is dead or alive, or if dead, where her bones lie.

My father did not say much in this trial, but he

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laboured under great distress. My master could see in his daily deportment that he was greatly troubled. So one day, he asked my father, what was the matter with him? He said—"I do not see any use in telling you what you know as well as I do myself." "Novel," said master, "is that the way to answer me?" "How am I to know your feelings?" Ans.— "Why, master, if I should see one of your daughters sold away from you, and you did not ever expect to see her again in this life, I could give a pretty close guess how you felt; and now, if you can just place yourself in my stead, and think how you would feel at a separation such as I had to endure, and then my other children weeping around me, you can tell what the matter is with me." Ans.— "Well, Novel," said he, "it is distressing, I have no doubt, but you know my situation. I owe some debts; they have got to be paid, and I cannot raise the money off the farm, and if I do not sell some of you, the sheriff will sell you for me." Ans.— "If you had the money you paid overseers to abuse your people, you would not have owed these debts. I knew sometime ago that you would find out your mistake when it

was too late.” Master—“I have been losing ever since I employed the overseers: I have been falling back every year.”

At this my father went on to remind him how faithfull [sic] he had been to him all his days; how he had laboured for his benefit, and then to think that he would take his children and sell them before his face, was enough to break a heart of stone! Master—“Very true, you have been a faithful servant; but if I have to sell, and must sell, I have to sell to the best advantage.” My sister, being therefore one of the most valuable, and bringing the heaviest price, she and another friend had to go first, this was what he meant. My father replied—“If you are going to be selling off my children, one after another in this way, I rather you would sell me at once, for I do not wish to witness the selling

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of my children.” My master said to him—“You and I have been raised together, and therefore, I do not wish to part with you, unless you do some heavy fault.” My father answered him to this effect—“If you have no more regard for my children than to sell them off, I do not believe you have much regard for me. If I were now a young man, and more valuable on that account, and, like my daughter Charlotte, would bring a heavy price, I believe you would sell me as quickly as you would any of them, for you have just told me that you ‘must sell to the best advantage,’—so I see it is not my advantage you are seeking, nor that of my family, but your own. It is of very little consolation to me that you now profess to feel such an attachment to me on account of our having been brought up together—that you are unwilling to sell me unless I commit some crime, when you take my children whom I have brought up, and who have committed no crime, and sell them from me; and, besides, as you have never known me to commit a crime, light or heavy, it is still a poorer consolation to tell me that you do not wish to sell me, where I cannot witness the selling of my children, unless I commit some heavy crime! Do you wish to tempt me to commit some crime?” This was a puzzler for master to answer.

The reader will understand, and be fully assured, that I witnessed all that I have just stated—that it is all true to the very letter; for at this period of the history of our family, and that of master, not a daily occurrence [sic] passed without the most strict and painful notice of us all, as we were fully aware that we were passing through a crisis.

The telegraph, which by the speed of lightning carries news from one end of this land to another, does not more certainly report news than the slaves do one to another. And, in our families, when one member suffers, all suffer with that member. So it was with us. All eyes were at first turned to that beloved sister,

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who was bound in chains, and led away South. Then our mother’s deep and painful grief; and then our father’s silent, manly, but solemn sorrow, which commanded even the attention of the heartless wretch, who for gain had pocketed the proceeds of his daughter. Alas! what shall be said of American slavery, in the face of such facts as these?

[The chapter continued with the recounting of a discussion between Banks, Banks's father, and their enslaver about the profitability of selling enslaved people and the breakup of the Banks family by the selling of the Banks's sisters to pay the enslaver's debts.]

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CHAPTER III.

CONTINUATION OF FAMILY EVENTS.--THE SELLING OF MY SECOND SISTER, ETC.

AFTER what I have stated in the last chapter matters went on for about eight months quite well: with the exception of the recollection of my sister Charlotte, who had been sold away, nothing occurred to make any unpleasant impression upon us, and we began to think that our family would not again be invaded by the barbarous "soul driver," or the "Georgia man."

But while we were indulging in this hope the thing I much dreaded came upon me. I had a sister, named Martha, then about seventeen years of age. As my sister Charlotte was next older than myself, so Martha was next younger. I loved my sister Charlotte, but Martha seemed still more dear to me, and hence I felt more severely her loss. And then, too, the disappointment! We were hoping for a change. But, above all, the mean way in which the thing was done by master. The parents of the other two girls both belonged to him. So he went to those parents and attempted to pacify them by telling them that he would get good places for their daughters where they could write and hear from them. He also came to my father and me and told us that he would get a good place for my sister, in Gardensville, a place on the Richmond, about sixty miles distant from us, so that when I went to Richmond, as I did once a year, to drive cattle to market, I could see her. This looked very plausible; but we doubted

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it. However, there was no help. My dear sister Martha, and two other young female friends were taken away from us; not by death—not by the officer who punishes for crime, which they had not committed—but by the very man who told my father eight months prior that he would do as he liked, and sell to the best advantage. This was keeping his promise with a vengeance; so we felt it to be at the time, and so I feel at this moment.

Hitherto, I had been made to feel sad by a sense of my wrongs and oppression. I often dwelt upon the subject of my condition, until reason almost seemed to be lost in the reveries of the past, and the gloomy prospects of the future. But at this time my indignation was stirred to the deepest depth; my master often assuring me that he would get my sister a place in Gardensville, where I could see her once a year. He went with my sister and the other two girls, and after being gone about ten or twelve days, he came home and told me that he had sold my sister Martha to a man in Gardensville. He told me the name of the man, and the street he lived in; but I did not believe him, and, therefore, I determined to take the first chance to find out the truth about the case.

I knew a white man of the name of Kyte,—a friendly man, who was acquainted with our family and my master and all his slaves, and, of course, would know the girls that were sold by my master. He was also acquainted in Gardensville. As my friend Mr. Kyte was going to Gardensville, I asked

him to make inquiries about my sister Martha, and whether she was in the place. On his return he informed me that my sister was not in Gardenville; that master had sold her to a man in that place who is a n----- trader, and who took her to Richmond and sold her to the highest bidder on the auction block; and said your master knew at the time he sold her that the man did not mean to retain her.

[In the intervening paragraphs, Banks recollects when he learned that he, too, was to be sold.]

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The bargain being thus closed with Tollerber for me at 1,200 dollars, myself and the other man were placed in a waggon [sic], both being handcuffed, and then made fast to the waggon [sic] with strong ropes. In this way he started with us for Harrisburgh, a distance of twelve miles. Thomas went with him to help him to guard us. We arrived in Harrisburgh about noon, where we remained till five o'clock in the afternoon, waiting for the stage. In the meantime, Johnson brought into the room where we were locked up, another man, thus making our number three in all. I had many acquaintances and friends in this place, both white and coloured. They all expressed much surprise at seeing me on my

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way to the Richmond auction block; and they felt much sympathy in my case. The fact of my being sold was as yet unknown to my parents and friends. I was glad to embrace this chance, to send my last farewell to them, and to request that they would remember me.

Leaving Harrisburgh, we proceeded by stage to Stanton, where we arrived at eleven o'clock at night, and lodged during that night, and also next day and night.

On the morning of the following day, we took the cars for Richmond. Arriving in Richmond between eleven and twelve o'clock, we were again lodged in gaol. I should have stated that at Stanton, Johnson added another victim to our number in the person of a young female, who appeared some seventeen or eighteen years of age. I have no knowledge where she was sold from; but her lonely and dejected appearance reminded me of my sisters.

MY FATE IN RICHMOND.—THE AUCTION BLOCK, ETC.

THIS gaol in which I was placed is called the Trader's Gaol. There is a tavern connected with it; or it is connected with a sort of hotel, for the accommodation of that class of persons.

In describing this gaol, I must ask the reader to notice that it is one of the most gloomy places I ever had been in before. It was a place having a wall some twelve feet high, enclosing a space of considerable extent as a yard where the slaves can walk around; adjoining are lock-up places where they sleep during the night.

This tavern was frequented by no travelers, no boarders, except those who were engaged in the nefarious slave trade. Even planters who come to the yard to purchase slaves do not stop there; but only come at

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certain hours to pass into the yard, and look at the supply of slaves.

During the time I was there, I saw things I never wish to see again. This establishment was so constructed, I should think, as to hold some two or three hundred. There are no beds, or comfortable means of lodging either men, women, or children. They have to lie or sit by night on boards. The food is of the coarsest kind. Sales take place every day. And oh, the scenes I have witnessed! Husbands sold, and their wives and children left for another day's auction; or wives sold one way, and husbands and fathers another, at the same auction. The distresses I saw made a deep impression upon my mind, My attention was diverted from myself by sympathy with others.

I must here relate the case of a poor man, who was entrapped by his master. He was sent into town, I believe, with a load of wood, without the slightest knowledge that his master had any intention of selling him. When he got near the gaol, if I mistake not, as he was passing it, he was stopped, walked in, and sold to the traders. He left his family in the morning, expecting to be back at night. If his wife and children had all lain before him upon the cooling board, he could not have felt worse than he did. He had been completely deceived. I talked with him, and he told me that he had no knowledge of what his master had sold him for.

These traders are a class of men who are despised by all on account of the roughness of their manners and the coarseness of their feelings. The slaves say that they are men without conscience. When we say of a man that he has no conscience, he is characterised as classed with the lowest grade of humanity.

On the morning of the 19th of June those of us belonging to Johnson, consisting of three men and one woman, were brought out to the auction-block. I was asked by different planters if I would live with

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them as a head man. To all whom I replied that I did not wish to act in that capacity. Then came to me S. S. M'Kalpin, and asked me if I would live with him if he bought me. I told him I did not know whether I would or not, as I did not know anything about him. I asked where he lived? He informed me that he lived in Green county, Alabama. He enquired of me if I ever ran away? I replied that I had not ran away from any master; yet I did not know what I might do if I could not do any better. He said that he did not wish to buy any one who would run away from him, and that none of his men had ever ran away from him. He did not ask me, as others had, whether I would be his head man. He asked me what work I could do? I told him, and further said that I would be willing to go with him if he treated me well.

When I was placed on the block he bid me up to 1484 dollars, when I was struck off to him. He also bought another of Johnson's men who was in company with me. The men were then taken to another gaol. where we remained till the 24th of the month. In the meantime he bought eight more slaves who made up his number. This said man had in the March previous bought twenty-eight slaves in the market[.] He had purchased a new farm, and had taken a contract to finish three miles of railroad, and his intention was to make use of us upon the road till it was finished, and afterwards to place us on the new cotton farm. The twenty-eight slaves he bought in March had put in a crop of corn as their first work, and his plan was that when this crop came off the ground he would be ready for the cotton crop. All this he told me, and he was also careful to tell me that the twenty-eight Virginians liked their homes very much.

On the 24th of the month we left Richmond for Alabama. He had two daughters at school in Station, whom he was going to visit; he intended also to spend some time at the White Sulphur Spring, as he did not

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contemplate going directly home. We were placed in charge of a nephew of his named Bell. He gave me instructions to see that every thing went on strait, and that anything we wanted the young man would see that we had it, which promised well for the first. Leaving Richmond, Virginia, our course lay through North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, into Alabama, all by rail, till we got to Montgomery, which now has the bad eminence of being the seat of Government of the Confederate States. At this place we took a steamer and went 110 miles to a small place which I do not recollect. From this we went by land some thirty miles to M'Kalpin's old farm, where we met as new comers with all his old hands.

As a reflection, I must now say that the nearer I got home the harder the aspect of things looked for coloured people. As I passed through Alabama, where-ever I saw coloured people they looked desolate in the extreme. They were poorly clad, and had the appearance of being poorly fed. It is a dense cotton region, and in the hoeing season.

At M'Kalpin's farm we arrived on the Sabbath. I had a full view of his slaves, young and old; he had about 100; and some young men who were not more than nineteen or twenty looked like men forty or fifty years old. Be it remembered that this farm is in the midst of the cotton paradise. Let it be remembered that in this region a generation of slaves is completely used up in eight years.

The same day we were sent on to the other plantation. The overseer whose name was Mable, ordered one of his boys to show us the way. There we were handed over to an overseer named Hickman; and thus ended my journey from old Virginia to Alabama. In another chapter I will relate how I fared while there, and how I got away.

[After a long, arduous journey, Banks reached the free state of Illinois.]

I arrived at the town of Peotone, in Will county, State of Illinois, making in all, from the time I was sold from Virginia, a period of time a little short of thirteen months.

I found ready employment among the farmers of that country, and I deem it my duty here to state, as an act of gratitude, that I found a genuine friend in the person of Mr. J. P. Dean of that

place; but owing to the existence of the fugitive law and my liability under it I never informed him of any part of this history. I felt as if I should rather be in a country

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where I should be free from the liability of arrest and where I should be justly treated. With that intention I came to the city of New York, to take passage to Australia, but failing to get a steamer I set out for Liverpool with the same view. While on my way I resolved to have my history published, and to spend the winter here improving my education, and to proceed to Australia at a future time.

I left New York by the steamship "Edinburgh," October 12th, and arrived at Liverpool, the 24th day of the same month, 1861.