

BACKGROUND: *Ismael Campbell was first sold away from his mother at the age of nine. Campbell worked as a tanner, stable hand, farmer, carpenter, cotton-picker, and overseer. In each new situation, he endured violence and indignities. Even in households where enslavers were “kind” he found himself subject violence and degradation and vulnerable to sale, repeatedly tearing him from his family and community. In some situations, he was allowed to grow his own food and earn money by hiring himself out. Although these slight freedoms made his life tolerable in these moments, ultimately, they did not change his enslaved status. Perhaps the most important aspect of the skills and knowledge he acquired was the geographic knowledge and relationships he forged that facilitated his escape. Campbell eventually made his way to Canada where he met up with one of his brothers. There, they bought a plot of land and built a farm. Eventually, Campbell returned to Kentucky to free his daughter, and helped several friends and family members find their way to freedom.*

The excerpts below come directly from Campbell’s autobiography.

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... I was now about nine years old.

The estate was appraised, and mistress allowed to continue on until the first of the year. On New Year’s day we went to the auctioneer’s block, to be hired to the highest bidder for one year. This scattered my old associates far and wide, casting each among strangers, and perhaps hard masters.

I was sold to one Ezekiel Edwards, a Tanner, for ten dollars. He owned no slaves but hired all his help—so I ground tan for that year.

Mr. Edwards was not married, but boarded with a widow lady in Morganfield, Mrs. Kate Thornton, more familiarly known as Aunt Katy, who, after my day’s work was over, I used to wait on and run her errands, which in a very short time made me a great favorite with her.

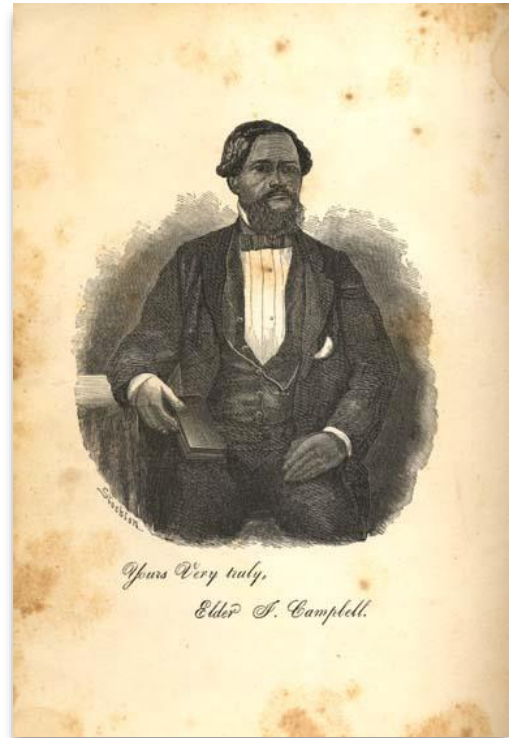
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In the fall, however, Mr. Edwards took to himself a wife, and then he took me to live at home with him; the other hands still boarded at Aunt Katy’s.

An incident occurred about this time which so impressed my mind with the terror of being sold to the South, that I believe I should have rather died than that such should have been my fate. There was a colored man and his wife living at this time on the opposite of the road, where I was grinding bark. She heard that her master had sold her to a slave dealer. The thoughts of being parted from her husband made her grieve so hard that it unstrung her mind, and she cut her throat with a razor. Such is the terror among all the more intelligent slaves of going South (meaning Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, etc.) that they had rather suffer death.

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ANOTHER New Year had come, and again we were to be put on the auctioneer's block, to be hired to the highest bidder for another year. One by one they went, until my turn came, and I was bid off to a Mr. John Wing, of Morganfield, a merchant—an Englishman by birth. I did not remain with him long, as the executors had settled up old master's estate, and all the slaves had either to be sold or divided among the heirs. The division was performed as follows:—The names of five were put down on strips of paper, and then drawn like a lottery. The man who owned my uncle and mother put them in with the others, thinking that he would lose the old ones and get some of the young ones.

My brother Washington was a smart and very sprightly young man, and was wanted by several. The man who owned my mother said he was determined to have him, but his brother-in-law was equally as anxious; however, when the tickets were drawn, it so proved that neither of them

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had drawn him, but he was drawn by master's youngest child, a young lady, then about my age. The man who had owned my mother again drew my uncle, Aunt Fanny, an old woman about the same age as my mother, myself and sister. But, as his wife was so taken with my mother, they hired her from her owner. This brought my mother and sister and myself together.

Mr. Lucius Devaull was our new master's name. He was a prominent member of the M. E. Church, class-leader, a good singer and good hand to pray; but, should he get angry, would give vent to his temper by oaths, always asking forgiveness the moment his anger subsided.

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About this time I was twelve year's old and was getting along as happily as could be expected. But disappointment must come. One day master told me that he was going to sell me before long. I afterwards found out that old master Russell was very much in debt, and that each one of the heirs had to pay a portion of the amount, and that as I was the youngest, mine was going to part with me for that purpose. This grieved me very much to think of being parted from mother again, and I thought that the Lord would prevent my being sold, so I chose the old wheat yard, and prayed earnestly every day that the Lord would not let my master sell me; pleading that if I was sold my mother would be bereft of her only help, and that I would try and be a good boy. But the Lord had other ends, which I was not able to comprehend.

One morning my master told me to catch two of the horses, Kate and Dragon, and put the saddles on them. He then told me to get on Kate while he bestrode Dragon, and off we rode, without any word as to where we were going or on what mission. As we passed the cattle-pen my mother was milking the cows, and comprehending that I was going to be sold, came to me and bade me good-bye, urging me to be good boy; not to be saucy to any one, to be honest and trustworthy, and, if she never saw me again in this world, to meet her in heaven. Master sit on his horse impatiently while mother was talking, but never said a word either as consolation or information as to where I was I going.

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We rode about six miles without halting; we then stopped for breakfast. Here master met some of his friends, who, knowing his purpose, told him where he could get the money for me. After breakfast all the party again mounted their horses and rode into Livinton County, and as night was approaching, halted

before a large house and halloed, not liking to alight before they were sure they would be hospitably received. In a few minutes out came an old man in his shirt sleeves, as I then thought, looking more like a slave than an owner or master of such a fine looking place.

They told him their mission, and that they did not wish to go further that night. He invited them to alight, had our horses taken care of, and we went to partake of supper. While we were all talking together in the kitchen, the house girl came in for me, and said they wanted to see me in the house. I followed her, and found myself in the presence of the man and his wife. After looking at me some minutes, feeling my flesh to see that I was strong and solid, he asked me how I would like them for master and mistress. I answered politely, "I don't know, sir." The lady said "We are going to buy you from your master in the morning." Then the girl led me back to the kitchen, and I thought to myself, I wish you were both dead.

After I became more familiarized with the boys I asked them what kind of master and mistress they were? One of them said the old man was

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the very devil, "and if they buy you, you will wish they were dead in less than a week."

"Why, you all look very well," I replied.

"Yes, but they whip like the d—I, and do not give us half enough to eat; well, if we did not get any more than they give us, we would not be able to work at all.

"Then, how do you get it," I asked.

"Oh, if they buy you, you'll soon find out how we get it."

We then retired for the night, some to sleep, but I to ponder over my future.

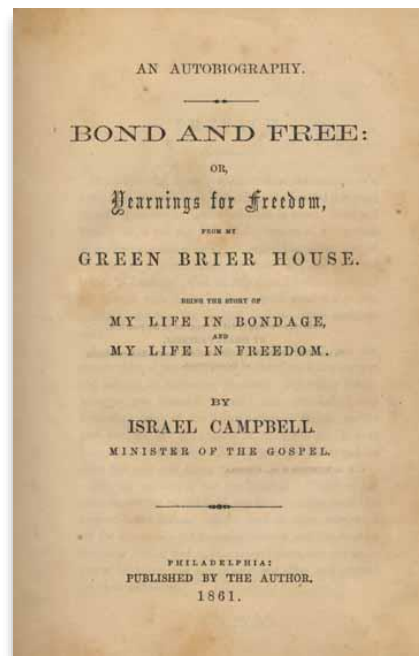
The next morning they ordered their horses to be caught and saddled, and all master's party, with the landlord, rode off to Princeton, telling me to stay there until they returned.

When master Lucius had settled all his business and was ready to return home, he came to me and said, "Israel, I have sold you to this gentleman, and you must try and be a good boy, and if you do not, he will have to make you good; after handing me a Pistareen he rode off, leaving me behind, but carrying away instead **three** hundred and fifty dollars—unequal exchange, thought I, bringing me on a horse and taking away my value in his pocket.

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The place where he lived was an old town, about one hundred and ten miles from Nashville, and twenty-five miles from the mouth of the Cumberland River, by the name of Centreville, and master was said to keep the best tavern in that part of Kentucky. After I had lived here a little over two years, master took a notion to go to Mississippi. He advertised and sold every thing except his slaves. He then purchased a large



flat-boat and after we had all embarked we rowed down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. In going down the rivers we often met large steamboats which would terribly frighten old mistress. All the way she was praying and crying. Among the boys there was one who was her

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favorite, named King, and when she saw one of the boats coming, she would cry to King to pull with all his might, and see her out of danger, as she was sure they would kill them.

[Campbell learns he has been sold.]

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ON the morning of the third day, while we were stopping at Squire Waddleton's, Master Crookesty told me he had sold me to a Mr. Garner, who he said was a very good man, and I want you to get ready and we will go over there and see him. I did as he commanded, and after master had made out a bill of sale, we went over to Mr. Garner's.

This Mr. Garner was a poor man as regards property. He owned, however, four slaves, and hired his brother-in-law to work his farm. He had married his second wife, and was, as to size, a heavy man, weighing about two hundred pounds. He worked regularly with the hands, and was his own overseer. We made a very good crop the first year I was with him. By the time cotton-picking time came around, I had learned the art a little better than I understood it when I had to pick water-melons to make up my task, and did not have to do any such thing to make up my number of pounds and save my back.

My new master was not a fast picker, and I tried

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to pick as much as he did. In a little while I could go far ahead of him. He had a pretty fast picker by the name of Uncle Bob, and after I had come to outstrip master, we used to run races, so that before cotton-picking was over I could go ahead of Uncle Bob.

[Permitted to leave to visit his family, Campbell writes about their reunion.]

About this time I arrived at the house of a family of colored people I had known in Mississippi. I rode up to the gate, and hoisted my umbrella, as the sun was very hot. The old lady was sitting in the door, with watermelons on either side of her, which they had for sale. Wishing to see if they would recognize me, I halted and exchanged compliments.

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The old lady asked me if I did not want to buy a watermelon.

"How do you sell them?" I asked.

"Some fourpence, some sixpence, and some ninepence."

I got off my horse and fastened him. The old lady told her daughter to hand me a melon. She brought me two for my choice and handed me a chair. I was not in a hurry about cutting the melon, for I wanted

something more substantial first, and I knew that when they recognized me, any thing they had would not be too good for me. So I began a conversation by asking Aunt Betsey if there were any religious people about there?

“Yes, sir,” she answered, “some few.”

Aunt Betsey thought she recognized my voice; and, had I taken off my hat, she would have known me immediately. At length she asked—

“Ain’t this Brother Israel?”

I answered, “No; this is as fair a white man as there ever was,” and I lifted my hat, and she knew me at once. She kissed me, and we rejoiced together over our meeting. After dinner, I bid them farewell, and went on towards my mistress’ father’s. The next day I got within twenty miles of where my mother lived, and the next day reached her residence. It was the same place I had left when I was twelve years old. The first person I saw was one of my young mistresses, and I asked her if there was a lady living there by the name of Aunt Nelly.

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She said there was; and then turned to the kitchen and called my mother, telling her that there was a gentleman who wished to see her.

When she came to where I was, she bid me good-day.

I then began asking her about her children,—if she had sons named Daniel, Washington, Nelson and Abraham, and daughters, one of whom was living in Illinois, Eliza and Nancy?

She said she had; and, in answer to my questions about them, I learned that Daniel was living in Hopkins County with Mistress Sally, old master’s widow; that Washington had been sold to a man in St. Louis; that Nelson was sold to a man in Illinois; and that Abraham was living with Mistress Sally. The daughter who was living in Illinois had been to see her the week before I arrived. Eliza was living on the Red River with old master’s son Samuel, and Nancy had been sold to a Baptist minister by the name of Morrison, who lived about five miles the other side of Morganfield.

I at last asked her if she had a son named Israel?

Whether my voice changed, or whether she had noticed a resemblance before, I do not know; but she looked up in my face and said—

“Yes, and this is he.”

Then we had a happy greeting. Mother was so rejoiced at seeing me, that she could not contain her feelings, and began praising the Lord for His

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wonderful loving kindness,—that the dead is alive, and the lost is found. “The Lord has sent my dear son back to see me once more!”

So loud was her rejoicing and crying, that she alarmed the white people, and they came out to see what was the matter.

Mother had changed very little since I saw her last, only age had made deeper furrows on her cheeks; but the same form, eye and manners still remained as of old.

We then went toward the house, mother still crying and rejoicing. She went up to the people who had come out and said—

“The Lord has answered my prayers. I have went to this stump and prayed to the Lord to let me see him once more, and the Lord has answered my prayers.”

My horse was then put away, and I made myself at home. After dinner, mother went with me to see Master Lucius Devaull. Mother did not go up to the house with me, but waited a short distance off. None of them knew me. I asked for Mr. Devaull, and was invited in and asked to take a chair. Mr. Lucius was not at home. I then asked his wife if they had not at one time owned a yellow boy named Israel?

She said, “Yes, sir, is this him?”

She was very glad to see me, and called her daughter Mary, who went almost wild when she recognized me. After talking awhile on old times and how things were getting along at present,

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I went into the woods to see my Uncle Washington, who was making rails. He did not recognize me. I made myself known. He was very glad to see me, but he was in great trouble at this time. His wife had been taken from him and sold in a distant part of the country; and so much did it affect him, that he could not be comforted, and was morose and melancholy.

“’Tis hard to part with those we love,
Even by the cold hand of death;
With double force the arrow’s driven,
When living, of them bereft.”

The next day I saw my youngest brother. He was quite a small boy when I left; but now he was larger than myself, and it hardly seemed possible, for a day or two, that he could be my brother.

On Saturday my uncle and mother went with me across to Illinois to see our relations living there. We had to have a pass to cross over the Ohio River; and, as master was away, one of the young men copied the one master wrote for and signed it. We found them all well. Mother introduced me as a Baptist minister. We sat there some time talking of different things, but neither my sister nor brother recognized me. At length my mother asked them if they did not know their brother?

“Yes,” said my sister, “you told us he was a brother Baptist.”

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My mother said, “But this is one of your own brothers,—one of my own sons.”

They could not tell who I was, however, until mother informed them. Then we had renewed greetings. My sister shook my hands and kissed me, so glad was she to see me. “She never,” she said, “expected to see me again in this world.”

The next day being Sunday, they had a meeting, and they asked me to preach for them. My text was the history of Joseph. I compared his case to my own,—our being sold from our parents and leading many weary years in slavery, from which, while he had gone to his rest, I was yet to be delivered; but I felt that God would, in His own good time, bring all things to pass for the best.