

Why Did They Pick Up A Pen?: Former Slaves Writing to their Former Owners
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November 3, 2017

On August 7, 1865, an escaped slave, Jourdan Anderson decided to write a letter to his former owner. His owner, Colonel P.H. Anderson, had previously that year written him about coming back to work on his plantation. Jourdan had escaped, with his wife, from his master, in 1864, and together they went to Ohio where Jourdan could work for pay. In his reply, Jourdan rejected the offer, explaining that he much preferred his current life in freedom, and stating that he would rather “stay here and starve- and die” than go back to slavery (Anderson). In the year 1860, Anderson had been one of the approximate four million slaves in the United States (Gates). Before and during the Civil War, thousands of slaves, like Anderson, had escaped their masters in search of a new life in freedom. Then, in the year 1865, the 13th amendment officially abolished slavery in the United States, freeing the millions of slaves still in bondage. Remarkably, many of these former slaves chose to write letters to their former owners. Why did they feel compelled to write these letters? What was their purpose in writing? Many slaves had a relationship with their owners and, at times, at least some level of respect for their owners. They wanted their owners to understand what had driven their quest for freedom and how it felt to finally be free. Other slaves’ purpose when writing was to present to their owners a convincing argument of why slavery was wrong, cruel and unjust. They hoped to change their owners feelings about slavery. Slaves wrote their former masters to communicate how the state of being slave or free drastically changed their sense of worth, their opportunities, and their daily lives.

The institution of slavery destroyed many slaves' sense of human dignity and worth. In their letters, many slaves tell their owners how slavery was against the way God intended man to live. Frederick Douglass publicly wrote to his former master, Thomas Auld, in 1847, and recounted his life experience from slavery to freedom. As a six year old boy, Frederick Douglass did not understand why he was a slave. "I had, through some medium, I know not what, got some idea of God, the Creator of all mankind, the black and the white, and that he had made the blacks to serve the whites as slaves. How he could do this and be good, I could not tell. I was not satisfied with this theory, which made God responsible for slavery, for it pained me greatly." (Douglass) He continued, "I was puzzled with this question, till one night, while sitting in the kitchen, I heard some of the old slaves talking of their parents having been stolen from Africa by white men, and were sold here as slaves. The whole mystery was solved at once." (Douglass) God was not responsible for slavery and man was not intended to be owned. Frederick Douglass did not know that there was a world where he could be free until one day, he overheard the older slave women talking about the differences between slave states and free states. That was the moment Frederick Douglass got his first glimpse of a way to freedom. "From that time, I resolved that I would some day run away." (Douglass). In his letter to Thomas Auld, Frederick Douglass told his former master that they were not different from each other. They should be treated in the same manner. In freedom, Douglass had the ability to do all the things his owner could do. "We are distinct persons, and are each equally provided with faculties necessary to our individual existence." (Douglass)

Joseph Taper, a slave from Frederick County, Virginia, who escaped with his family to Pennsylvania in 1837, wrote a letter in which he referenced Malachi 3:5. This scripture says, "So

I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice.” Taper’s use of this scripture was fitting to include in his letter. This scripture reveals how the oppression of slavery was against the will of the Lord. Joseph Taper also stated in his letter, that he was content as a free man, living the way God intended man to live. He told his owner that all men are born free, contrary to “Southern law which puts man, who is made in the image of God, on the level of brutes” (Taper). Man was ultimately, from the beginning of time, meant to live free. He was never intended to be owned and forced to work. Jourdan Anderson also made the argument that slavery was against the will of God. In his response to his former owner’s request for him to return to work, Anderson states, “We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense.” (Anderson).

Slaves were not paid for their work. Interestingly, Jourdan Anderson decided to ask his master to pay him and his wife back for their fifty-two total years of service to him. “ I served you faithfully for thirty-two years and Mandy twenty years. At twenty-five dollars a month for me, and two dollars a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to eleven thousand six hundred and eighty dollars. Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back and deduct what you paid for our clothing, and three doctor’s visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to.” (Anderson). The request for the wages was a test to see if his master understood the value of their work for him. After

slaves were freed, they had a longing to tell their owners that what they did was wrong and that humans were meant to be free.

Along with a sense of self worth, freedom brought much more opportunity to former slaves. Frederick Douglass said that being free gave him a “rich experience” of which “I could never dreamed of as a slave” (Douglass). Slaves were not normally educated. It was a rare occurrence for a slave to be able to read and write. Yet, once free, there were schools for their children. Most former slaves had a strong desire to keep their children in school to get an education because they knew what it was like to be uneducated. In his letter, Joseph Taper wrote, “We have good schools, and all the colored population supplied with schools. My boy Edward who will be six years next January, is now reading, and I intend to keep him in schools until he becomes a good scholar.” (Taper) Children had the ability to dream and to go after their dreams. It was possible for them to have a future outside of the fields. “These dear children of ours - Not to work up into rice, sugar and tobacco, but to watch over, or guard, and protect, and to rear them up in the nurture and admonition of the gospel.”(Douglass) In addition to access to schools, slaves had greater opportunity to practice their religion. Most slaves were allowed to attend church freely. While enslaved, the majority of slaves practiced the religion their master followed. Jack Hannibal wrote to his former mistress in August 1878 from his new home in Alabama, “I am still trying to serve the same God you taught me about in North Carolina, and am a member of the Methodist Church.” (Hannibal) Once they were free, they were able to choose their religion and how and where they would worship. Along with self worth, freedom brought an improved physical condition. Most slaves, if they could afford it, were healthier as free people. They were not deprived of the care of a doctor or medicine. They had the choice to

take their families to the doctor and receive medical assistance when they were sick. In order to support a family, adults now had the opportunity to work for pay. Frederick Douglass wrote in his letter to his former master, that once he had earned his first free dollar he was overjoyed. “It was mine. I could spend it as I pleased” (Douglass). Former slaves were allowed to learn an occupation and fulfill their own dream to have a purpose and meaning in the world. There were many more opportunities for education, religion, paid work and self determination when the slaves began to live in freedom.

Along with opportunity, freedom brought practical changes, positive and negative, to the former slaves’ daily lives. The self determination that was so coveted by the slaves brought with it the responsibility of providing for themselves. This was a new adjustment for the slaves. As “Shorty” Wadley Clemons says in an interview about being a slave for 20 years, “I had plenty to eat, plenty close to wear and when I gets sick, Ole Massa come give me some medicine...” (Clemons). When African Americans were enslaved, their most basic needs were provided for them. They most often knew where their next meal was coming from. And, they knew they had a place to sleep every night. If they had a serious ailment they would receive medical care because their owners wanted them healthy enough to work. They were not worried about the essentials of life. “In freedom I’s own the home and raise the family. All that cause me worryment and in slavery I has no worryment. But I takes the freedom.” This is what an unknown slave said about the difference between life as a slave and life as a free man (Genovese, 128). In freedom, slaves were able to make their own decisions, which is an innate desire of all humans. However, they weren’t adequately prepared for this. When enslaved, slaves were looked after and watched very carefully. They were given specific directions of what to do and

when to do it. So, when they were freed, the majority of them did not even know where to begin. They were given the freedom to live like the whites yet they had no clue how to provide for themselves. This difficulty in learning how to navigate life without the help of others was a challenge of being free. Abram Harris said “ After us was free, de white folks have to teach us just like a child” (Harris). For the slaves, being free brought lots of challenges but the struggles did not minimize the contentment that came with being free.

For most slaves, freedom was a reward that was worth any price. There was a humanity and peace that came with living as the free person that God created all men to be. There was opportunity and a chance to make your own decisions about your life. “I felt like it be Heaven here on earth to git freedom, ‘spite de fac’ I allus had de good Marster. He sho’ was good to us, but you knows dat ain’t same as bein’ free.” This is what Green Crumby said about the difference between living as a slave and as a free man (Genovese, 127). When former slaves wrote to their former owners with reflections of their life in freedom, there was a similarity to the words in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” When the abolition movement shattered the chains of slavery, former slaves grasped freedom with a sense of worth, opportunity and hope.

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