

## Fifty Years a Slave

Like William Allen, Francis Frederick was born in Virginia; unlike Allen he was not born free. This fact Frederick vehemently asserts in an autobiographical pamphlet, titled *Life and Sufferings of Francis Fedric, While in Slavery: An Escaped Slave after 51 Years in Bondage: A True Tale, Founded on Facts, Shewing the Horrors of the Slave System*.<sup>1</sup> 'I was born in Old Virginia, in Forquair [Fauquier] County, within nine miles of Cedar Run. My father was a slave, and worked for a tyrant master of the name of Carter; my mother was a slave, and worked for a tyrant master of the name of Parker.'<sup>2</sup>

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1. Francis Fedric, *Life and Sufferings of Francis Fedric, While in Slavery: An Escaped Slave after 51 Years in Bondage; A True Tale Founded on Facts, Shewing the Horrors of the Slave System* (Birmingham: Thomas & Jones, 1859; reprinted in *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky: A Narrative by Francis Fedric, Escaped Slave*, ed. with an Introduction by C.L. Innes (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), p. 99. Frederick's first two autobiographies are published under the name of Fedric, and some newspaper reports refer to him by this name. However, his marriage announcement in Toronto, his final autobiography and the majority of newspaper reports spell his name as Frederick, so I shall use that version.
  2. Throughout his time as an enslaved person, Francis would have been known by his first name only or by his enslaver's name, i.e. as Francis Parker. Accordingly, I shall refer to him by his first name when

Just twelve pages long, Francis Frederick's first version of his autobiography is a fiercely polemical pamphlet, setting out, as the subtitle announces, to show 'the horrors of the slave system'. Although based on Frederick's oral account of his life, this narrative's mode of expression is often literary, suggesting that it was a collaborative narrative, revised by a scribe with additions to the details given by Frederick. Thus, the second paragraph moves from specific and personal memories to wider generalisations:

My history and experiences by this time of course are affected by the known wasteful character of the slave system wherever it prevails, wasteful of all cultivation of mind and manners – of the fertility of the soil and of human labour – of social properties and religious observances; and whatever good of any kind may be obtained is in spite of the blighting tendencies of the nefarious system.<sup>3</sup>

In this pamphlet we are told that Frederick's grandmother was brought from Africa to Maryland, and then purchased by Richard Parker's father, Alexander, who took her to Fauquier County, in northern Virginia. (Alexander Parker, who was a doctor, had owned property and lived in Bristol, as well as Virginia.) Francis' mother was a field hand and, consequently, could spend very little time with her nine children (two boys and seven girls). Indeed, he comments:

so hard worked as she was, she had little thought of spiritual things as affecting herself or her children, and so far as her instruction was concerned, I should have been as ignorant as the beasts that perish, but I rejoice that for a period of ten years she also experienced the consolation of religion. (SLVK, p. 100)

Here, Frederick emphasises the second theme in his narrative, the over-riding importance of Christianity. He suffers because of his faith,

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discussing his first fifty years, and shall add his chosen surname, Frederick, thereafter.

3. Innes, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky*, p. 99. (Hereafter referred to as SLVK.)

but he is also saved physically and spiritually through the support of Christians and his own religious commitment. These two themes, spiritual redemption and the horrors of slavery, combine to give the narrative maximum appeal to the large audiences that gathered in churches throughout Britain to see this ageing and crippled black man, hear the dramatic account of his personal suffering under slavery, and appreciate his religious fervour.

Identified while enslaved as Francis Parker, to show whose 'property' he was, and usually addressed simply by his first name, Francis' early years were even harsher and more dehumanising than those of William and Ellen Craft. Born about 1805, he, his brother and seven sisters were set to work from a very early age in the tobacco fields. At night they fought to get a meagre share of Indian corn broth served in troughs before sleeping 'huddled together like swine' in the straw with the other children. Out in the fields they were shoeless and hatless, 'their feet often in great chaps, sore and bleeding, their woolly heads sun-burnt to a reddish earth-colour' (*SLVK*, p. 100).

When Francis was about fourteen, Richard Parker was among a number of plantation owners who decided to move from Virginia to Mason County, Kentucky, together with most of his 100 or so enslaved people. Here, the Parker family had purchased just under 2,000 acres of land about twenty miles south of Maysville, an important trading town on the banks of the Ohio River. When the enslaved men and women arrived, they were set to clearing and fencing the uncultivated land, sowing bluegrass for the cattle to graze and building log cabins for the new people Parker intended to buy at the slave market for breeding and selling. Until 1833, when Kentucky introduced a non-importation act, enslaved people were brought from the eastern and southern states to work on the new plantations in the state. However, Kentucky always had a significant number of citizens, including groups of free black people, who opposed slavery. Although migrants from other states were still allowed to bring enslaved men and women with them, the non-importation act was passed by men who favoured increased settlement by smallholders and free labourers as a means of reducing the enslaved population. However, the act was also supported by those who wished to increase the value of those they had enslaved.

By 1850 the power of the slaveholders had become stronger. Some participants in the 1849-50 Kentucky state constitutional convention proposed gradual, compensated emancipation, but they were voted down by a small majority and the act was repealed, giving slave owners

an even firmer hold on the human property they claimed. Section three of Kentucky's 1850 Constitution declared: 'The right of property is before and higher than any constitutional sanction; and the right of the owner of a slave to such slave, and its increase, is the same, and as inviolable as the right of the owner of any property whatever.'

Following the passing of the new constitution several slave traders set up business in Lexington and in Maysville, by then the capital of Mason County, making profits of up to \$150 (equivalent to approximately \$6,067, or £4,823, today) on each enslaved person subsequently sold in Natchez, Mississippi.<sup>4</sup>

Two or three years after the Parkers settled in Kentucky, Francis was selected to work in the house instead of the fields, a move which, at first, he welcomed, as it meant he had access to more food while he helped in the kitchen and waited at table. Mrs Parker made a point of teaching him to speak 'properly', so that he could convey messages to her neighbours, members of the family or other servants. At this time, Francis tells us, he 'only knew how to say "dis" and "dat", "den" and "dere", and a few such monosyllables' (*SLVK*, p. 22).

In 1847, when Francis was about 42 years old, Richard Parker died. His son, Addison, inherited his property and all he had enslaved. Addison Parker was a gambler and a vicious drunkard, who took out his frustrations on the enslaved, 'running frequently from the parlour to the kitchen to vent his wrath upon the slaves there' with a twisted cow-hide whip. Francis tells how he 'lived in terror which was renewed by the sound of anyone approaching the kitchen' (*SLVK*, p. 101).

A few years earlier, around 1844, when he was nearly forty, Francis had been visited by a local woman evangelist who encouraged him to learn more about the Bible and offered interpretations which encouraged resistance to slavery. Now, in about 1848, he sought

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4. Upon becoming the fifteenth state in the Union, Kentucky formally legalised slavery by including the institution in the state's constitution. Article IX explained that slavery could only be abolished by the consent of the owner or by compensated emancipation. Although Kentucky slavery was brutal and dehumanising, some aspects of Kentucky law were less strict than the laws in several other slave states. For example, Kentucky did not outlaw teaching the enslaved to read and write, nor did it prohibit owners from freeing their slaves, or force freed black people to leave the state.

permission to attend a religious meeting on the next plantation. The permission was refused, not only because Addison Parker liked to exercise his power to constrain the lives of the enslaved, but also because, like other slave owners, he feared that these religious gatherings might encourage rebellion. As explained in Chapter 4 above, an 1831 uprising in Virginia led by the enslaved preacher, Nat Turner, who claimed to have been sent by God to eradicate slavery, resulted in the deaths of more than fifty white people and left a traumatic memory. More recently, in 1843, Henry Highland Garnet, the young black Presbyterian pastor in New York State with whom William Allen worked in the 1840s, had invoked Nat Turner as a true patriot. His address to the National Convention of Colored Citizens ended with this explicit call on all who were enslaved to rebel:

Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been – you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. Rather die free men than live to be slaves. Remember that you are FOUR MILLIONS!<sup>5</sup>

For the majority of enslaved people in the South, however, religious meetings were less about violent rebellion than about an opportunity to express, together with others, their fundamental desire and hope for freedom in a life after slavery in this world and the next. It was a desire and hope anchored in belief in a compassionate God, who had redeemed His chosen people from bondage, and empathy with the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Group identification and expression of even the desire for freedom was impossible when in the presence of their white masters and mistresses; at these religious meetings the hymns and chants, as well as the call and response readings and sermons, a traditional African mode which also communicated well to an illiterate congregation, allowed the enslaved to give full voice to their suppressed feelings.

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5. From 'An Address to the Slaves of the United States', by H.H. Garnet to the National Convention of Colored Citizens, Buffalo, NY, 16 August 1843.

Determined to attend the religious meeting, Francis sneaked out after his master had gone to sleep. His absence was discovered and he was threatened with a severe flogging. At this point he ran away and hid in a nearby swamp called Bear Wallow. To escape the dogs sent to track him, he first hid in a tree and then in a narrow cave, where the sound of wolves and the movement of snakes in the cave and across his body kept him awake.

The 1859, twelve-page narrative of Frederick's life devotes a large portion – over a third – to his nine-week ordeal while hiding in Bear Wallow swamp. Here he survived for a while on berries and by stealing bread and, on one occasion, a hambone from nearby farmhouses. Frederick's scribe evokes a specifically American landscape replete with Gothic terror, detailing the 'doleful cry' of the whippoorwill, the croaking of the frogs, the rustle of the blowing snake and other reptiles creeping over him, the howling of the wolves in the distance.

Francis' desperation and emotions are also conveyed in the style of sentimental fiction of the time, as in the passage dramatically expressing his relief, fear and confusion when at last a young enslaved girl brings him some bread, telling him also of a large reward placed on his head and the threat of a thousand lashes when he is caught. It is a passage which creates a sense of hybrid oral and literary narrative, giving a sense of immediacy of expression:

When she handed it over to me, I felt how! what! I can scarcely say, I was so grateful. I have spoken of hunger, hunger was not now uppermost in my thoughts. The river, can I cross it? Shall I be able after all to get away? Shall I reach Canada, the land of the free? Shall I, can I, escape the thousand lashes? They will torment me unto death if I am caught. (SLVK, p. 101)

Nevertheless, Francis' faith also sustained him. Despite his hunger and fear of recapture and its consequences, he tells us, in the words of his scribe, that he:

was much engaged in prayer, and enjoyed a peaceful calm, which none but him that feels it knows, a peace which knows no earthly sorrow, it came from the poor sinner's friend. I felt that only God's care over me had preserved me in life so many days in the wilderness waste.

After nine weeks, desperate hunger drove Francis to seek help and intercession from the Reverend Brush, a Methodist minister. The Reverend Brush promptly returned him to Addison Parker, who tied him to a tree and personally gave him 107 lashes with his cow-hide whip, despite pleas from Addison's wife that he should be merciful.

During the next six years, Francis became a particular victim of Addison Parker's drunken rages and spite. He was frequently flogged. Then, one freezing January, he was sent out to work in the fields to husk Indian corn. The cold damaged his hands permanently and frostbite crippled his feet, so that he could no longer work. Parker tried to sell him but was unable to find a buyer for an elderly disabled slave. 'This', Francis relates, 'made my master more hardened towards me, and the trader took it as an insult in offering such useless property as he said I was. My master took out his revolver and said he had a good mind to blow my brains out.' Despite what had happened previously, in autumn 1854 Francis again went to a prayer meeting without permission and, this time, was given 215 lashes, as his fellow slaves reported, for at the end the now 50-year-old crippled man was almost unconscious and 'so enfeebled [that he thought he] never should live after it' (SLVK, p. 110).

Francis could bear no more. He had hesitated to escape in the past because his mother and five sisters were still held as slaves on the plantation. Now he sought help from a sympathetic neighbouring farmer, who told him to come on a Friday night with nothing but the clothes he was wearing and he would let him ride in his wagon to Maysville, thus escaping, as Francis relates via his scribe, 'from the power of my cruel master, whose heart was blacker than the veriest black African that I had ever seen' (SLVK, p. 10). In Maysville, Francis was hidden in a garret for 24 hours, fearing discovery at every moment, before being ferried over the Ohio River at night, and then conveyed from house to house along the Underground Railroad in Ohio.

Along the banks of the Ohio were many sympathisers who took great risks to help enslaved people to escape across the river. Between 1844 and 1864 44 men and women in Kentucky were convicted of the crime of helping runaways; some were severely beaten in prison and eight died there.<sup>6</sup> Horace Washington, who escaped to Canada from

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6. Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 254.

a plantation almost next to the one owned by the Parkers, wrote that he was helped to cross the Ohio River by a white man who 'sent others across by hundreds'.<sup>7</sup> Arnold Granston, himself enslaved on a plantation near Maysville, describes how he took nearly one hundred fugitives across the river, making three or four trips a month. It would have to be on the blackest of nights; and he would meet them 'without a single light', asking 'What you say?' and, if they responded with the secret password, 'Menare' (perhaps from the Latin *manere* – to remain or to stay), he would take them on board.<sup>8</sup> In Ripley, on the other side of the river, John Parker, himself formerly enslaved but who had bought his freedom, owned a house that became a focus for assisting escapees. John Parker described Ripley as 'the real terminus of the Underground Railroad,[<sup>9</sup>] [where] every night of the year saw runaways, singly or in groups. making their way slyly north'.<sup>10</sup> Another committed abolitionist in Ripley was the Reverend John Rankin, who housed many fugitives, including the enslaved woman and child who escaped across the ice covering the Ohio River and became the inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's Eliza.<sup>11</sup>

After the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act escapees were no longer protected once they reached the state of Ohio. Hence, they were moved quickly further north via a series of safe houses to Canada. Once Francis had landed on the other side of the Ohio River, he was taken to a house just outside Ripley and given something to eat and drink. That same

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7. Ibid., p. 249.

8. Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), p. 96.

9. According to John Rankin the 'Underground Railroad was so-called because they who took passage on it disappeared from public view as really as if they had gone into the ground'. Terms from rail travel were used to describe the people and places involved: for example, there were 'tracks', 'conductors', 'stations' and 'station masters', 'passengers', 'cargo' and 'terminals'. No real underground railway existed in America until the mid-1860s.

10. Hagedorn, *Beyond the River*, pp. 233, 234 ff. See also Stuart Seely Sprague, ed., *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (New York: Norton, 1996).

11. Hagedorn, *Beyond the River*, p. 300, n. 135.

night he was driven in a wagon accompanied by 'eight or ten young men with revolvers' about twenty miles further north (SLVK, p. 86). From there he was taken further, in stages and always by night, until in late November 1854 they reached a house in northern Ohio. It must have been a painful journey, for Francis was covered with deep wounds from the brutal whipping Addison Parker had given him. Francis tells us:

I came on for 160 miles to the Under Ground Station [*sic*] and was then cured of my flogging. There were two kind children of the names of John and Charlotte; John was twelve and Charlotte ten years of age. You will excuse me not giving the names of these children more explicit; to expose it would prevent others from helping a poor slave out of captivity, and we never do expose their real names. (SLVK, pp. 110-11)

During his six-month stay in John and Charlotte's parents' house while he was treated for the wounds inflicted by Parker's vicious flogging, Francis was taught to read by John and Charlotte, first learning the alphabet, and then gradually making out words syllable by syllable. By the end of the six months, despite at first believing that, at the age of fifty and physically disabled, he was too old to learn, he was able to read the first chapter of St John's gospel, to the family's delight and his. After reading this section of the Gospel, Francis sang a 'slave hymn' for them and the family knelt as he 'offered prayers for them as they did not despise [his] black face, thanking God that he had brought me to such Christian people' (SLVK, p. 111).

When Francis seemed strong enough, he was sent on to Canada. On 1 May 1855, he left that kind and courageous family, who had defied fines and possible imprisonment to shelter and care for him. He was escorted under cover to Sandusky on the edge of Lake Erie, thence by boat across the lake to Michigan and, finally, via Lake Ontario into Canada. 'When I was safe landed in Upper Canada', he reports, 'I shall never forget how I jumped and skipped about when I was told my master could not take me again into slavery' (SLVK, p. 111).

In the 1850s hundreds of escaped slaves made the crossing from Detroit or Sandusky into Ontario. One boat, *The Mayflower*, carried