

[Ohio, Hamilton County to Richmond, Ind., etc.]
Josiah Henson, abductor.

Father Henson's Story of His Own Life,
1858.

Chapter XVI.

Conducting Slaves to Canada.

[p.144] The degraded and hopeless condition of a slave, can never be properly felt by him while he remains in such a position. Often I had tasted the blessing of freedom, my mind reverted to those whom I knew were groaning in captivity, and I at once proceeded to take measures to free as many as I could. x x x

I was once attending a very large meeting at Fort Erie, at which a great many colored people were present. In the course of my preaching I tried to impress upon them the importance [p.145] of the obligations they were under; first, to God, for their deliverance; and then, secondly, to their fellow-men, to do all that was in their power to bring others out of bondage. In the congregation was x x James Lightfoot, who x x x x had obtained his freedom by fleeing to Canada x x x When the service was concluded he begged to have an interview x x x further conversation" [after a week]. He then informed me where he came from x x and that he had left behind a dear father and mother, 3 sisters and 4 brothers; and that they lived on the Ohio River, not ^{far} from the city of Maysville. x x

[p.146] x x professed himself ready to cooperate x x
During the short period of his freedom he had accumulated
some little property the whole of which, he stated, he would
cheerfully devote to carrying out those measures; x x x
[Another conversation, whereupon Mr. Henson consented to try
to free them] x x x "commenced the journey alone, on foot, &
travelled thus about 400 miles. x x x I passed through the
States of N. Y., Pa., and O. x x & crossed the Ohio River into
Kentucky, and [p.147] ultimately found his friends in the
place he had described.

I was an entire stranger to them, but I took with me a
small token of their brothers x x x But his parents had
become so far advanced in years that they could not undertake
the fatigue; his sisters had a number of children, and they
could not travel; his 4 Brothers and a nephew were young men,
and sufficiently able for the journey, but the thought of
leaving their father, and mother and sisters, were too pain-
ful; and they also considered it unsafe to make the attempt
then, x x so they declined going at that time, but promised
that they would go in a year, if I would return for them.

To this I assented and then went between 40 & 50 miles
[p.148] into the interior of Kentucky, having heard that there
was a large party ready to attempt their escape, if they had
a leader to direct their movements. I travelled by night
resting by day, and at length reached Bourbon County, the
place where I expected to find these people. After a delay
of about a week, spent in discussing plans, making arrange-
ments, and other matters, I found that there were about 30
collected from different States, who were disposed to make

Henson leads out 30

30 fugitives

the attempt. At length, on a Saturday night, we started. The agony of parting can be better conceived than described; as in their case, husbands were leaving wives, mothers their children, and children their parents. This at first sight will appear strange, and even incredible, but, when we take into consideration the fact, that at any time they were liable to be separated by being sold to what are termed "nigger traders," and the probability that such an event would take place, it will, I think, cease to excite any surprise.

We succeeded in crossing the Ohio River (p.149) in safety, and arrived in Cincinnati the 3rd night after our departure. Here we procured assistance; and, after stopping a short time to rest, we started for Richmond, Ind., this is a town which had been settled by Quakers, and there we found friends indeed, who at once helped us on our way, without loss of time; and after a difficult journey of 2 weeks, through the wilderness reached Toledo, O., a town on the Southwestern shore of Lake Erie, and there we took passage for Canada, which we reached in safety. I then went home to my family, taking with me, a part of this large party, the rest finding their friends scattered in other towns, x x x x x

Chapter XVII.

[p.150] Second Journey on the Underground Railroad.

I remained at home, working on my farm, until the next autumn, soon after which time I had promised to assist in the restoring to liberty the friends of James Lightfoot, x x In pursuance of this promise, I again started on my long journey into Kentucky.

On my way, that strange occurrence happened, called the
great meteoric shower. x x x [p.151] I reached Lancaster, Ohio,
in the morning x x x

Lancaster
Fairfield Co
Portsmouth

On arriving at Portsmouth, in the State of Ohio, I had
a very narrow escape from being detected. x x x I reached
Portsmouth in the morning, and waited until 2 in the after-
noon for the steamboat, so that I might not arrive in
Maysville till after dark. While in the town I was obliged
to resort to a stratagem, in order to avoid being questioned
by the Kentuckians I saw in the place. To this I procured
some dried leaves, put them into a cloth and bound it all
round my face, reaching nearly to my eyes, and pretended to
[p.152] be so seriously affected in my head and teeth as not
to be able to speak. x x x I succeeded in avoiding any un-
pleasant consequences. I got on board the boat and reached
Maysville Ky. in the evening, about a fortnight from the
time I had left Canada.

By boat to
Maysville

On landing a wonderful providence happened to me. The
2nd person I met in the street was Jefferson Lightfoot,
brother of the James Lightfoot previously mentioned, and one
of the party who had promised to escape if I would assist
them. He stated that they were still determined to make the
attempt and the following Saturday night was named to
[p.153] put it into execution, and preparations for the journey
were at once commenced. The reason why Saturday night was
chosen on this and the previous occasion was, that from not
having to labor on the next day, and being allowed to visit
their families, they would not be missed until the time came

for their usual appearance in the field, at which period they would be some 50 or 100 miles away. During the interval I had to keep myself concealed by day, and used to meet them by night to make the necessary arrangements.

For fear of being detected, they started off without bidding their father or mother farewell, and then, in order to prevent the hounds from following on our trail we seized a skiff, a little below the city, and made our way down the river. It was not the shortest way, but it was the surest.

It was 65 miles from Maysville ^{to Cincinnati} ~~to Cincinnati~~, and we thought we could reach that city before daylight, and then take the stage to Sandusky. Our boat sprung a leak before we had got half way, and we [p.154] narrowly escaped being drowned; x x we then took another boat, but this detention prevented us from arriving at Cincinnati in time for the stage. Day broke upon us when we were about 10 miles above the city, and we were compelled to leave our boat from fear of being apprehended. x x x we thought we would go on foot. When we got within 7 miles of Cincinnati, we came to the Miami River and we could not reach the city without crossing it.

This was a great barrier to us, for the water appeared to be deep, and we were afraid to ask the loan of a boat x x We went 1st up and then down the river, x x x I then said x x x, "Boys, let us go up the river & try again." We started, and after going about a mile we saw a cow come out [p.155] of a wood, and going to the river x x The cow remained until we approached her within a rod or two; she then walked into the river, and went straight across without swimming, which

the Fordung Miami River

caused me to remark, "The Lord sent that cow to show us where to cross the river!" This has always seemed to me to be a very wonderful event.

Having urged our way with considerable haste, we were literally saturated with perspiration, though it was snowing at the time, x x x x x there was a large quantity of ice in the river. But as it was a question of life or death with us, there was no time left for reasoning; I therefore advanced- they reluctantly following the youngest [p.156] of the Lightfoots ere we had reached midway of the river, was seized with violent contraction of the limbs, which prevented further self-exertion on his part, he was therefore carried the remainder of the distance. After resorting to continued friction he partially recovered, and we proceeded on our journey. We reached Cincinnati about eleven on Sunday morning- ^{Cincinnati} too late for the stage that day; but having found some friends, we hid ourselves until Monday evening, when we recommenced our long and toilsome journey, through mud and rain and snow, towards Canada. We had increased our distance about 100 miles, by going out of our road to get among the Quakers. [The boy got worse and had to be carried on a kind of litter].

[p.157] He x begged to be left in some secluded spot, to die alone x xx With very considerable reluctance we acceded to his request and laid him in a sheltered place. x x x We had not, however, proceeded more than 2 miles x x x when one of the brothers of the dying man made a sudden stop, and expressed his inability to proceed whilst he had the consciousness that he had left his brother to perish, x x

x x x [They all returned, to the sick man, then set out again, and saw a wagon. "When I came up with the driver, I bade him good day. He said, "Where is thee going?"

"To Canada." I saw his coat, heard his thee and thou, & set him down for a Quaker. I therefore plainly told him our circumstances. He at once stopped his horses, and expressed his willingness to assist us. x x x

[p.159] Immediately on viewing the sufferer he was moved to tears, and without delay turned his horses' heads to proceed in the direction of his home, although he had intended to go to a distant market with a load of produce for sale. The reception we met with from the Quaker's family overjoyed our hearts, x x x

We remained with this happy family for the night, and received from them every kindness. It was arranged that the boy should remain behind until x x x he should recover. We were kindly provided by them with a sack of biscuit and a joint of meat and once more set our faces in the direction of Lake Erie. [Met a white man] x x (p.160) We travelled in company and found that his presence was of signal service to us in delivering us out of the hands of the slave-hunters who were now on our track, x x x We had resolved on reaching the lake, a distance of 40 miles, by the following morning; we, therefore, walked all night.

Just as the day was breaking, we reached a wayside tavern, immediately contiguous to the lake, and our white companion having knocked up the landlord, ordered breakfast for six. x x x

Met a Quaker
of his wagon

breakfast for
six

(p.160) Just as our breakfast was ready whilst half asleep and half awake, an impression came forcibly upon me that danger was nigh, and that I must at once leave the house. I immediately urged my companions to follow me (p.161) out, [they did] x xx We retired to the yard at the side of the house x x Presently we heard the tramping of horses, and were at once warned of the necessity of secreting ourselves. We crept beneath a pile of bushes x x which permitted a full view of the road. The horsemen came to a dead stop at the door of the house, and commenced their inquiries; my companions at once recognized the parties on horseback, and whispered their names to me x x x Our white friend proceeded to the door in advance of the landlord, x x He was at once interrogated by the slave hunters whether he (p.162) had seen any negroes pass that way. He said, yes, he thought he had. Their number, was demanded, and they were told about six, & that they were proceeding in the direction of Detroit, and that they might be some few miles on the road. They x x x were soon out of sight. [Went into the house and took breakfast quickly] After what had transpired, the landlord became acquainted with our circumstances, and at once offered to sail us in his boat across to Canada. We were happy enough to have such an offer, and soon the white sail of our little bark was laying to the wind, and we were gliding along on our way with the land of liberty in full view. Words cannot describe the feelings experienced by my companions as they neared the shore; their bosoms were swelling with inexpressible joy as they mounted the seats of the boat, ready, eagerly, to

Danger

Pursuers

*Sail to
Canada*

spring [p.163] forward, that they might touch the soil of
the freeman. And when they reached the shore, they danced
and wept for joy, and kissed the earth on which they first
stepped, no longer the Slave-but the Free.

*Kiss Canada
soil.*

After the lapse of a few months, on one joyous Sabbath
morning, I had the happiness of clasping the poor boy we had
left in the kind care of the Quaker, no longer attenuated
in frame, but robust and healthy, and surrounded by his family.

x x x x

It is one of the greatest sources of my happiness to know,
that by similar means to those above narrated, I have been
instrumental in delivering one hundred and eighteen human
beings out of the cruel and merciless grasp of the slave-
holder.

Mr. Frank Taylor, the owner of the Lightfoots, x x x
soon after he missed his slaves, fell ill x x x; but, on re-
covering [p.164] he was persuaded by his friends to free the
remainder of the family of the Lightfoots, which he at
length did; and, after a short lapse of time, they all met
x x in Canada, where they are now living.

*all the
Lightfoots
in Canada*