

Brief Biography of Lunsford Lane

Lunsford Lane was born into slavery in Raleigh, North Carolina. He is a very significant 19th century figure because he provides a rare and detailed first-hand account in his slave narrative of how an enslaved individual could manage to become an independent business owner and entrepreneur while still a slave.

From an early age, Lane was fascinated by money and the prospect of accumulating it. Having received a couple of dollar tips from acquaintances of his master, Lane later wrote that:

these sums and the hope that then entered my mind of purchasing at some future time my freedom, made me long for money; and plans for money-making took the principal possession of my thoughts. At night I would steal away with my axe, get a load of wood to cut for twenty-five cents and the next morning hardly escape a whipping for the offence. But I persevered until I had obtained twenty dollars....I went on from one thing to another laboring at dead of night, after the long weary day's toil for my master was over till I found I had collected a hundred dollars.

As he matured, Lane and his father created a unique recipe for pipe-smoking tobacco that they began selling to state legislators who came to Raleigh, the state capital, when the legislature was in session. They created packaging for their special “brand” of pipe tobacco called “Edward and Lunsford Lane,” and in addition to preparing the tobacco, he began manufacturing special pipes for smoking it with the help of hired workers.

Because the legislators came from all over the state, the brand became widely known and Lane set up distributorships in shops in major towns throughout North Carolina. Perhaps part of Lane’s marketing strategy was to “hook” the state’s lawmakers on his product so they would not use their legal power to halt his business activity, which was in fact against the law. There were attitudes and laws against slaves’ starting their own independent businesses, but in Lane’s case these laws were ignored. Clearly this was at least in part because Lane knew how to conduct himself as an enslaved businessman. He describes how he took great pains to *not* appear too successful for fear of drawing too much attention. For example, he and his family wore old, tattered clothes when they could have afforded better. Lane was able to earn enough money to arrange to purchase his own and his family’s freedom. He eventually settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, became a speaker on the abolitionist circuit, and wrote his narrative, which is considered the most detailed personal account of the activities of an enslaved business owner to have survived.

References

Lane, Lunsford. *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C. Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption by Purchase of Himself and Family from Slavery, and His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin. Published by Himself.* Boston: J.G. Torrey, Printer, 1842.

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