

Excerpt from the Narrative of Lunsford Lane

On the 30th of May, 1803, I was ushered into the world but I did not begin to see the rising of its dark clouds, nor fancy how they might be broken and dispersed, until some time afterwards... When I was ten or eleven years old, my master set me regularly to cutting wood, in the yard in the winter, and working in the garden in the summer. And when I was fifteen years of age, he gave me the care of the pleasure horses, and made me his carriage driver; but this did not exempt me from other labor, especially in the summer. Early in the morning I used to take his three horses to the plantation, and turn them into the pasture to graze, and myself into the cotton or cornfield, with a hoe in my hand, to work through the day and after sunset I would take these horses back to the city, a distance of three miles, feed them, and then attend to any other business my master or any of his family had for me to do, until bed time, when with my blanket in my hand, I would go into the dining room to rest through the night. The next day the same round of labor would be repeated, unless some of the family wished to ride out, in which case I must be on hand with the horses to wait upon them, and in the meantime to work about the yard. On Sunday I had to drive to Church twice, which with other things necessary to be done, took the whole day. So my life went wearily on from day to day, from night to night, and from week to week... When I began to work, I discovered the difference between myself and my master's white children. They began to order me about, and were told to do so by my master and mistress. I found, too, that they had learned to read, while I was not permitted to have a book in my hand. To be in the possession of anything written or printed, was regarded as an offence. And then there was the fear that I might be sold away from those who were dear to me, and conveyed to the far South. I had learned that being a slave I was subject to this worst (to us) of all calamities and I knew of others in similar situations to myself, thus sold away... To know, also, that I was never to consult my own will, but was, while I lived, to be entirely under the control of another, was another state of mind hard for me to bear. Indeed all things now made me feel, what I had before known only in words, that I was a slave. Deep was this feeling, and it preyed upon my heart like a never--dying worm. I saw no prospect that my condition would ever be changed. Yet I used to plan in my mind from day to day, and from night to night, how I might be free.

One day, while I was in this state of mind, my father gave me a small basket of peaches. I sold them for thirty cents, which was the first money I ever had in my life. Afterwards, I won some marbles, and sold them for sixty cents, and some weeks after Mr. Hog from Fayetteville, came to visit my master, and on leaving gave me one dollar. After that Mr. Bennahan from Orange county, gave me a dollar, and a son of my master fifty cents. 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. Now I began to think seriously of becoming able to buy myself; and cheered by this hope, 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 one hundred dollars. This sum I kept hid, first in one place and then in another, as I dare not put it out, for fear I should lose it.

After this I lit upon a plan which proved of great advantage to me. My father suggested a mode of preparing smoking tobacco, different from any then or since employed. It had the

double advantage of giving the tobacco a peculiarly pleasant flavor, and of enabling me to manufacture a good article out of a very indifferent material. I improved somewhat upon his suggestion, and commenced the manufacture, doing as I have before said, all my work in the night. The tobacco I put up in papers of about a quarter of a pound each, and sold them at fifteen cents. But the tobacco could not be smoked without a pipe, and as I had given the former a flavor peculiarly grateful, it occurred to me that I might so construct a pipe as to cool the smoke in passing through it, and thus meet the wishes of those who are more fond of smoke than heat. This I effected by means of a reed, which grows plentifully in region; I made a passage through the reed with a hot wire, polished it, and attached a clay pipe to the end, so that the smoke should be cooled in flowing through the stem like whiskey or rum in passing from the boiler through the worm of the still. These pipes I sold at ten cents apiece. In the early part of the night I would sell my tobacco and pipes, and manufacture them in the latter part. As the Legislature sit in Raleigh every year, I sold these articles considerably to the members, so that I became known not only in the city, but in many parts of the State, as a tobacconist.

Lunsford Lane explains in this section of his slave narrative about his "marriage" to a woman Martha Curtis with whom he had two children. "Marriage" is in quotation marks because enslaved people could not be legally married, but they still had ceremonies and considered themselves husband and wife in God's eyes. At any time a master could separate a slave husband and wife, or separate them from their children. Lane was fortunate that this did not happen to his family. His wife was sold to another master in Raleigh, a Mr. Smith, who did not provide food and clothing for Lane's wife and children. This was a break in custom because it was generally the slave owner's responsibility to such necessities for all his/her slaves. Therefore Lane had to provide decent food and clothing for his wife, children, as well as for himself, which caused him to be penniless despite all of his labors at night preparing tobacco and manufacturing pipes for sale. He was losing hope at ever being able to purchase his own and his family's freedom when out of the blue, Lunsford Lane's circumstances dramatically changed.

My master died; and his widow, by the will, became sole executrix of his property. To the surprise of all, the bank of which he had been cashier presented a claim against the estate for forty thousand dollars. By a compromise, this sum was reduced to twenty thousand dollars; and my mistress, to meet the amount, sold some of her slaves, and hired out others. I hired my time of her,* for which I paid her a price varying from one hundred dollars to one hundred and twenty dollars per year. This was a privilege which comparatively few slaves at the South enjoy; and in this I felt truly blessed.

I commenced the manufacture of pipes and tobacco on an enlarged scale. I opened a regular place of business, labelled my tobacco in a conspicuous manner with the names of "Edward and Lunsford Lane," and of some of the persons who sold it for me,--established agencies for the sale in various parts of the State, one at Fayetteville, one at Salisbury, one at Chapel Hill, and so on,--sold my articles from my place of business, and about town, also deposited them in stores on commission, and thus, after paying my mistress for my time, and rendering such support as necessary to my family,

* It is contrary to the laws of the State, for a slave to have command of his own time in this way, but in Raleigh it is sometimes winked at. I knew one slave-man who was doing well for himself,

taken up by the public authorities and hired out for the public good, three times in succession for this offence. The time of hiring in such a case is one year. The master is subject to a fine. But generally as I have said, if the slave is orderly and appears to be making nothing, neither he nor the master is interfered with.

I found in the space of some six or eight years, that I had collected the sum of one thousand dollars. During this time I had found it politic to go shabbily dressed, and to appear to be very poor, but to pay my mistress for my services promptly. I kept my money hid, never venturing to put out a penny, nor to let any body but my wife know that I was making any. The thousand dollars was what I supposed my mistress would ask for me, and so I determined now what I would do.

I went to my mistress and inquired what was her price for me. She said a thousand dollars. I then told her that I wanted to be free, and asked her if she would sell me to be made free. She said she would; and accordingly I arranged with her, and with the master of my wife, Mr. Smith, already spoken of, for the latter to take my money* and buy of her my freedom, as I could not legally purchase it, and as the laws forbid emancipation except, for "meritorious services." This done, Mr. Smith endeavored to emancipate me formally, and to get my manumission recorded; I tried also; but the court judged that I had done nothing "meritorious,"

* Legally, my money belonged to my mistress; and she could have taken it and refused to grant me my freedom. But she was a very kind woman for a slave owner; and she would under the circumstances, scorn to do such a thing. I have known of slaves, however, served in this way.

and so I remained, nominally only, the slave of Mr. Smith for a year; when, feeling unsafe in that relation, I accompanied him to New York whither he was going to purchase goods, and was there regularly and formally made a freeman, and there my manumission was recorded. I returned to my family in Raleigh, and endeavored to do by them as a freeman should. I had known what it was to be a slave, and I knew what it was to be free.

But I am going too rapidly over my story. When the money was paid to my mistress and the conveyance fairly made to Mr. Smith, I felt that I was free. And a queer and a joyous feeling it is to one who has been a slave. I cannot describe it, only it seemed as though I was in heaven. I used to lie awake whole nights thinking of it. And oh, the strange thoughts that passed through my soul, like so many rivers of light; deep and rich were their waves as they rolled;--these were more to me than sleep, more than soft slumber after long months of watching over the decaying, fading frame of a friend, and the loved one laid to rest in the dust.

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