

Seminar: Slavery and Resistance
Tutor: Dr Sergio Lussana

1. Former slave Frederick Douglass recalls a fight with overseer, Mr. Covey

You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man. On one of the hottest days of the month of August, 1833, Bill Smith, William Hughes, a slave named Eli, and myself, were engaged in fanning wheat. Hughes was clearing the fanned wheat from before the fan, Eli was turning, Smith was feeding, and I was carrying wheat to the fan. The work was simple, requiring strength rather than intellect; yet, to one entirely unused to such work, it came very hard. About three o'clock of that day, I broke down; my strength failed me; I was seized with a violent aching of the head, attended with extreme dizziness; I trembled in every limb. Finding what was coming, I nerved myself up, feeling it would never do to stop work. I stood as long as I could stagger to the hopper with grain. When I could stand no longer, I fell, and felt as held down by an immense weight. The fan of course stopped; every one had his own work to do; and no one could do the work of the other, and have his own go on at the same time.

Mr. Covey was at the house, about one hundred yards from the treading-yard where we were fanning. On hearing the fan stop, he left immediately, and came to the spot where we were. He hastily inquired what the matter was. Bill answered that I was sick, and there was no one to bring wheat to the fan. I had by this time crawled away under the side of the post and rail-fence by which the yard was enclosed, hoping to find relief by getting out of the sun. He then asked where I was. He was told by one of the hands. He came to the spot, and, after looking at me awhile, asked me what was the matter. I told him as well as I could, for I scarce had strength to speak. He then gave me a savage kick in the side, and told me to get up. I tried to do so, but fell back in the attempt. He gave me another kick, and again told me to rise. I again tried, and succeeded in gaining my feet; but, stooping to get the tub with which I was feeding the fan, I again staggered and fell. While down in this situation, Mr. Covey took up the hickory slat with which Hughes had been striking off the half-bushel measure, and with it gave me a heavy blow upon the head, making a large wound, and the blood ran freely; and with this again told me to get up. I made no effort to comply, having now made up my mind to let him do his worst. In a short time after receiving this blow, my head grew better. Mr. Covey had now left me to my fate. At this moment I resolved, for the first time, to go to my master, enter a complaint, and ask his protection. In order to this, I must that afternoon walk seven miles; and this, under the circumstances, was truly a severe undertaking. I was exceedingly feeble; made so as much by the kicks and blows which I received, as by the severe fit of sickness to which I had been subjected. I, however, watched my chance, while Covey was looking in an opposite direction, and started for St. Michael's. I succeeded in getting a considerable distance on my way to the woods, when Covey discovered me, and called after me to come back, threatening what he would do if I did not come. I, disregarded both his calls and his threats, and made my way to the woods as fast as my feeble state would allow; and thinking I might be overhauled by him if I kept the road, I walked through the woods, keeping far enough from the road to avoid detection, and near enough to prevent losing my way. I had not gone far before my little strength again failed me. I could go no farther. I fell down, and lay for a considerable time. The blood was yet

oozing from the wound on my head. For a time I thought I should bleed to death; and think now that I should have done so, but that the blood so matted my hair as to stop the wound. After lying there about three quarters of an hour, I nerved myself up again, and started on my way, through bogs and briers, barefooted and bareheaded, tearing my feet sometimes at nearly every step; and after a journey of about seven miles, occupying some five hours to perform it, I arrived at master's store. I then presented an appearance enough to affect any but a heart of iron. From the crown of my head to my feet, I was covered with blood. My hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my shirt was stiff with blood. My legs and feet were torn in sundry places with briers and thorns, and were also covered with blood. I suppose I looked like a man who had escaped a den of wild beasts, and barely escaped them. In this state I appeared before my master, humbly entreating him to interpose his authority for my protection. I told him all the circumstances as well as I could, and it seemed, as I spoke, at times to affect him. He would then walk the floor, and seek to justify Covey by saying he expected I deserved it. He asked me what I wanted. I told him, to let me get a new home; that as sure as I lived with Mr. Covey again, I should live with but to die with him; that Covey would surely kill me; he was in a fair way for it. Master Thomas ridiculed the idea that there was any danger of Mr. Covey's killing me, and said that he knew Mr. Covey; that he was a good man, and that he could not think of taking me from him; that, should he do so, he would lose the whole year's wages; that I belonged to Mr. Covey for one year, and that I must go back to him, come what might; and that I must not trouble him with any more stories, or that he would himself *get hold of me*. After threatening me thus, he gave me a very large dose of salts, telling me that I might remain in St. Michael's that night, (it being quite late,) but that I must be off back to Mr. Covey's early in the morning; and that if I did not, he would *get hold of me*, which meant that he would whip me. I remained all night, and, according to his orders, I started off to Covey's in the morning, (Saturday morning,) wearied in body and broken in spirit. I got no supper that night, or breakfast that morning. I reached Covey's about nine o'clock; and just as I was getting over the fence that divided Mrs. Kemp's fields from ours, out ran Covey with his cowskin, to give me another whipping. Before he could reach me, I succeeded in getting to the cornfield; and as the corn was very high, it afforded me the means of hiding. He seemed very angry, and searched for me a long time. My behavior was altogether unaccountable. He finally gave up the chase, thinking, I suppose, that I must come home for something to eat; he would give himself no further trouble in looking for me. I spent that day mostly in the woods, having the alternative before me,--to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to death. That night, I fell in with Sandy Jenkins, a slave with whom I was somewhat acquainted. Sandy had a free wife who lived about four miles from Mr. Covey's; and it being Saturday, he was on his way to see her. I told him my circumstances, and he very kindly invited me to go home with him. I went home with him, and talked this whole matter over, and got his advice as to what course it was best for me to pursue. I found Sandy an old adviser. He told me, with great solemnity, I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me. He said he had carried it for years; and since he had done so, he had never received a blow, and never expected to while he carried it. I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would

have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it; but Sandy impressed the necessity with much earnestness, telling me it could do no harm, if it did no good. To please him, I at length took the root, and, according to his direction, carried it upon my right side. This was Sunday morning. I immediately started for home; and upon entering the yard gate, out came Mr. Covey on his way to meeting. He spoke, to me very kindly, bade me drive the pigs from a lot near by, and passed on towards the church. Now, this singular conduct of Mr. Covey really made me begin to think that there was something in the *root* which Sandy, had given me; and had it been on any other day than Sunday, I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root, and as it was, I was half inclined to think the *root* to be something more than I at first had taken it to be. All went well till Monday morning. On this morning, the virtue of the *root* was fully tested. Long before daylight I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed, the horses. I obeyed, and was glad to obey. But whilst thus engaged, whilst in the act of throwing down some blades from the loft, Mr. Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me. As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment--from whence came the spirit I don't know--I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and, as I did so, I rose. He held onto me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. Mr. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came, and, while Covey held me, attempted to tie my right hand. While he was in the act of doing so, I watched my chance, and gave him a heavy kick close under the ribs. This kick fairly sickened Hughes, so that he left me in the hands of Mr. Covey. This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes, but Covey also. When he saw Hughes bending over with pain, his courage quailed. He asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. With that, he strove to drag me to a stick that was lying just out of the stable door. He meant to knock me down. But just as he was leaning over to get the stick, I seized him with both hands by his collar, and brought him by a sudden snatch to the ground. By this time, Bill came. Covey called upon him for assistance. Bill wanted to know what he could do. Covey said, "Take hold of him, take hold of him!" Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out. We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. He would occasionally say, he didn't want to get hold of me again. "No," thought I, "you need not; for you will come off worse than you did before."

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a

determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.

From this time I was never again what might be called fairly whipped, though I remained a slave four years afterwards. I had several fights, but was never whipped.

Source: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), pp. 65-72.

2. A former slave recalls leaving his plantation illegally to visit his girlfriend

Yes, I've heard that some slaves tried to run off to the north when the war started, but them Patter Rollers would always catch them and bring them back to their Maser after giving them a good whipping. If they didn't do right the Patter Rollers were always watching him to see that he did. We could not go from one plantation to another without a pass from our Maser or Mistress. If they caught us on some other plantation without a pass we got 39 licks with a rawhide whip the first time and increased the licks each time they caught us. When they got through with us we would be beat nearly to-death. Of course, I've slipped off lots of times when Maser would be sound asleep and the Patter Rollers never did catch me. But you know son, I was taking a great chance. I would go and see my girl lots of nights and one time I crawled 100 yards to her room and got in the bed with her and lay there until nearly daylight talking to her. One time I was there with her and them Patter Rollers come that night and walked all around in that room and this here negro was in her bed down under that moss and they never even found me. I sure was scared.

Source: Rawick, *American Slave*, supp. ser. 2, vol. 6, pt. 5, pp. 2160-61.

3. Taking a whipping for a loved one

Marse Mack's overseer, I doan know his name, wus gwine ter whup my mammy onct, an' pappy do' he ain't neber make no love ter mammy comes up an' takes de whuppin' fer her. Atter dat dey cou'ts on Sadday an' Sunday an' at all de sociable till dey gits married.

Source: Rawick, *American Slave*, vol. 14, pt. 1, p. 101.

4. Fighting the Patrollers

There was ways of beating the padderollers. De best way was to head 'em off. I 'member once when we was gonna have a meetin' down in de woods near de river. Well, dey made me the lookout boy, an' then de paddyrollers come down de lane past de church – you see they was 'spectin' dat the niggers gonna hold a meetin' dat night – well, sir, dey tell me to step out f'm de woods an' let 'em see me. Well, I does, an' de paddyrollers dat was on horseback come a chasin' arter me, jus' a-gallopin' down de lane to beat de band. Well I was jus' ahead of 'em, an' when they got almost up wid me I jus' ducked into de woods. Course, the paddyrollers couldn't stop so quick an' kep' on 'roun' de ben', an' den dere came a-screamin' an' cryin' dat make you think dat hell done bust loose. Dem ole paddyrollers done rid plumb into a great line of grape vines dat de slaves had stretched 'cross de path. An' dese vines tripped up de horses an' throwed de ole paddyrollers off in de bushes. An' some landed mighty hard, cause dey was a-limpin' roun' an' cussin' an' callin' fo' de slaves to come an' help dem, but dem slaves got plenty o' sense. Dey lay in de bushes an' hole dere sides a-laughin', but ain't none o' em gonna risk bein' seen.

Source: Perdue, Barden, Phillips (eds.), *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 290.

5. Secretly praying

When we prayed by ourse'ves we daren't let the white folks know it and we turned a wash pot down to the ground to cotch the voice. We prayed a lot to be free and the Lord done heered us. We didn't have no song books and the Lord done give us our songs and when we sing them at night it jus' whispering to nobody hear us. One went like this:

“My knee bones am aching,
My body's rackin' with pain,
I 'lieve I'm a chile of God,
And this ain't my home,
'Cause Heaven's my aim.”

Source: Rawick, *American Slave*, vol. 4, pt. 2, pp. 6-7.

6. A formerly enslaved woman recalls her days of slavery

Lias 'inning wusn' a mean man. He couldn' lick pa cus dey grow up to - gedder or at least he didn' try. But he liked his woman slave. One day ma aus in de field workin: alone an' he went there an' try to rape 'er. Ma pull his ears almos' off so he let 'er off.

Source: Rawick, *American Slave*, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 167.

7. A formerly enslaved woman recalls her days working as a house slave

Old mistress got sick and I would fan her with a brush, to keep the flies off her. I would hit her all in the face; sometimes I would make out I was sleep and beat her in the face. She was so sick she couldn't sleep much, and couldn't talk, and when old master come in the house she would try to tell him on me, but he thought she meant I would just go to sleep. Then he would tell me to go out in the yard and wake up. She couldn't tell him that I had been hitting her all in the face. I done that woman bad. She was so mean to me.

Source: Rawick, *American Slave*, vol. 18, Volume 18, p. 134.

8. Contraception

Our negro women they like to have depopulated this country on the negro race. They got to chewing cotton roots to keep from giving births to babies and they finally made a law against that but it did not help much. If slavery had lasted much longer they would not have been any slaves except the old ones they had here left, cause when slavery was ended they was not being any new slaves born, we had done quit breeding.

Source: Rawick, *American Slave*, supp. ser. 2, vol. 6, pt. 5, p. 2284.

9. Diary entry from a Virginian slaveholder

8 January 1852

Informed by overseer that some one had broken a room where shad were kept & stolen 150. Ordered all the negro men to be called up, measured the tracks in the house, and found upon comparing them with the shoes of William Lewis Davy & Tom that the [sic] corresponded. Gave each a severe whipping but could not get them to confess William & Jim confessed that they had stolen shad out on a former occasion but not last Saturday night, both much frightened Davy took his whipping without confessing anything, found him very obstinate & not minding much the lash. The worse feature in the system of slavery is the punishment to be inflicted, which gives me a distaste for the whole institution

Source: Richard Eppes Diary, 8 January 1852, M, pt. 3, reel 12, *Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War*, (ed). Kenneth Stampp (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1985-2001).

10. Former slave Fred James recalls his days of slavery

Some slaves dat lived on places close to us would run off sometimes and hide in de woods, and live dar in a den which dey dug. At night dey would go out and hunt food, like hogs; den kill 'em at night and dress 'em. Most of de day dey would stay in de den.

Source: Rawick, *American Slave*, vol. 3, p. 15.

One Hundred Dollars Reward.
RANAWAY from the Subscriber, sometime in September last, four Negro Men, viz :--
ISAAC, SCIPIO, JERRY, and KASEY.
ISAAC is about thirty years of age, of middle stature, spare make, with some marks of the whip upon his back. He can read a little, has some knowledge of figures and the carpenter's trade, & has a downcast look when spoken to. He had on when he went off a blue cloth coat, olive colored pantaloons, and a Castor hat.
SCIPIO is about 5 feet 10 or 11 inches high, spare make, and about the same age of Isaac.
JERRY is a stout fellow, about 6 feet high, and 26 or 27 years of age, and has a sulky look.
KASEY is about 5 feet 8 or 10 inches high, very stout, between 45 and 50 years of age, and limps a little in walking, caused by having his thigh broken.
I expect they are endeavoring to get northwardly to some non slaveholding State, as Isaac for some time had a disposition that way, and no doubt has enticed the rest away with him. I expect they were all in company with another of my negro men, who went off at the same time, and who has since been lodged in Granville Jail.
Masters of Vessels and others are hereby forbidden against harboring or carrying off said fellows. I will give the above reward for their delivery to me, or confinement in any jail, or for information so that I get them again—or Twenty-Five dollars for any one of them.
NATHAN B. WHITFIELD
Rockford, Lenoir County, } 12 1/2
November 15th, 1826. }

11. A Runaway slave advertisement from North Carolina

Source: *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, (Raleigh, NC)
November 21, 1826.