

SLAVES IN THE OLDEN DAYS

REMINISCENCES OF UNCLE ANTHONY AND AUNT BETSEY.

SLAVERY IN NEW-JERSEY IN THE BEGINNING OF THIS CENTURY—WHAT TWO OCTOGENARIANS SAY ABOUT THEIR EARLY LIFE—CRUELTY OF DUTCH FARMERS.

Uncle Anthony Thompson and Aunt Betsey Berry are the only persons now living in Essex County, N. J., who were born in slavery in New-Jersey. Uncle Anthony lives in a little weather-beaten cottage near the base of Eagle Rock, the highest point on the Orange Mountains. In 1833 he purchased the place for \$800, and he has lived there ever since. He was born in Raritan, Somerset County, N. J., in 1798. His mother was a slave in the family of the Rev. Philip Duryce, of Raritan, and she and her babe were sold to David Still, who resold them to Samuel M. Ward, of Cranetown, now Montclair, in Essex County. Mr. Ward died in 1832, after promising to give Anthony and his mother their freedom. Mrs. Ward died a few months after her husband's death, and then Anthony became a free man at the age of 34 years. His mother, who was too old to work, was sold at auction by the town, that being the custom in those days. Anthony got her and cared for her until she died. He entered the service of the grandfather of the Rev. Dr. Williams, the present venerable Rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, in Orange, and he has known five generations of the family. Anthony got a fair education in the district school, joined the First Presbyterian Church, of which he was one of the three oldest members until he joined the Second Presbyterian Church, and recently he went over to the First Reformed Church. His maternal great-grandfather was a chief of the Guinea negroes in Africa. Anthony has no children, but he has been married twice, his second wife being a portly and pleasant woman about 50 years old. He has large features, coal-black eyes and a frame that was once muscular and powerful.

"I never saw a slave whipped in New-Jersey unless he deserved it," said Uncle Anthony to a *Times* reporter, "but I heard of some cruelty up in the Dutch settlements about Quackanock and Stone House Plains. I was kindly treated, and, so far as I know, all the slaves in Essex County had kind masters. Friends loaned me money to buy mother with, and I gave \$100 to a young man who bid her in for that sum up at the old Park House. He gambled away the money and went to the bad, but the town gave me my mother. She often told me that she had seen slave mothers sold away from their children in New-Jersey, and she had seen slave women severely whipped. Some men in Newark and up on the mountain owned from five to twelve slaves when I was a lad, and up in Bergen County all the Dutch farmers had slaves. After I got my freedom I went into the service of 'Governor' Benjamin Williams at Tory Corner, who was the head man about Orange. He owned nearly all the land in these parts, and he settled all the disputes among farmers. His family and the Harrison family bought hundreds of acres of land from the Indians for rum and old clothes, so the folks used to say. I've heard Gov. Ben say that when Steve Harrison made a four-wheeled wagon people came from all parts to see the wonderful invention. Only clumsy ox-carts were known to the farmers before that time, and a trip to New-York was like going to Europe now.

"When I was a small boy," said Uncle Anthony, "all the country between the mountain and Newark was almost a howling wilderness, with the exception of the few houses in Orange and Bloomfield. There was no tavern until you got to Caldwell, beyond the mountain, or else up at Stone House Plains, where young fellows used to drink and dance with the girls. Nearly all the land as far as you could see was owned by the Harrison, Williams, and Dodd families, and everybody went to the First Church, in Orange, where the slaves were boxed up in one corner like horses in a stall. In the new First Church the slaves had a place in the gallery. I married a daughter of 'Piddler Tom' when I was a very young man. He played for the white folks in Newark and over the mountains, and when he drew the bow across the fiddle the girls came from far and near. Apple-parings and potato-pulls were followed by supper and a dance in the barns. At big weddings the Dominie kissed the bride, drank apple-jack toddy and cider, and got the pick of the eating."

Aunt Betsey Berry was found in her cozy home on Main-street, in East Orange, chatting with the pretty daughter of one of her rich New-York neighbors. She had on a neat black house cap, a plain dress of brown stuff, with a white linen collar about her neck, and her eyes shone like black diamonds when she became excited. For over 40 years she has rented the little house in which she lives, and which is neatly furnished. Her husband died 26 years ago. He earned his freedom after they were married. They had 13 children, 5 of whom are living. Aunt Betsey has a kindly word for her neighbors, but she is very bitter against the old families that owned slaves up in Bergen County. She likes to have the Bible read to her, but she says that she does not believe that the persons who were cruel to her in slave days can now be occupying "reserved seats in heaven." She was born at Quockanock, in Bergen County, and is now 85 years old.

"Folks as hed slaves here in New-Jersey was jest as cruel as the folks in the South," said Aunt Betsey to *THE TIMES's* reporter. "In every place there is good an' bad folks, an' there was good an' bad masters and missus in New-Jersey. Families was broke up an' sold up in Bergen County in my time, an' my mother was sold away from me when I was a wee little baby, so little that I can't remember her except like in a dream. First I remember I was called Betsey Jacobus, an' that was because I was owned by the Jacobus family up at Quockanock. Henry Jacobus was my own master, an' he was good to me sometimes, but the rest of the family cuffed me about. I knowed slaves as was whipped so bad by the old Dutch farmers that they died, an' one man named Still had to bury his dead nigger under the barn. I was small when I seen women whipped with bunches of twigs until the blood run in streams, an' they afterward showed me their backs all covered with outs an' black welts. Nobody can't tell me that slaves wasn't whipped in them days, an' nobody can't scarcely believe how bad an' cruel some masters was in them days. Some of the slaves used to fight for themselves toward the last, an' you couldn't blame them if they did nigh kill the masters sometimes. Good masters sent the black children to school, but them kind of folks was scarce. Once I asked to go to school, an' old Jacobus said: 'What! You nigger. I'll take you to the barn an' give you school if you ever mention it again.' An' so I didn't get any learnin'. The farmers had from 3 to 12 slaves, an' Miss Van Wagenen, over nigh to Plainfield, had more than 20. An' yet she died poor, and I've had old Missus Jacobus ask me for help after I got free. Them folks was too proud an' lazy to work after the slaves was freed, an' so they lost their property.

"One of old man Jacobus's daughters-in-law once attempted to whip me." Aunt Betsey went on to say. "The folks was at church, an' she told me to fetch her some apple-jack from the cellar barn. I wouldn't, because it was Sunday, an' then she said she would flog me. But I was a powerful strong young girl then, an' dared her to do it. She struck me once with the whip, an' then I got hold of her long black hair, an' yanked her down, an' I tell you what, didn't we have it lively for awhile, an' didn't she holler for help. I got her down with my knees between her shoulders, an' when she hollered I got up an' run way. I was supple then, an' I meant to run away if they whipped me, but when old master got home an' heard the story he scolded her for whippin' me. He said he could do all that business himself. He didn't like her, an' I knowed it. That's why I showed fight. Another of the family once choked me by the throat, an' she said she'd get her husband to whip me, but the old man called her a she devil, an' warned her I was desp'et. Women folks was the cruelest to the slaves. Its all right for some folks to boast of their Dutch ancestors, but there is lots that hold their heads high now who came from a cruel stock. They made slaves go bare-footed for fear they'd run off while church was in! That's religion an' plety for you! Black folks, they thought, hadn't white souls. Wonder if the Lord thinks so? When the manumitting law was passed I was bound to get my freedom. Two men went my security, an' I was three years paying \$350 for my free papers. I got 50 cents a day workin' out. Livin' was cheap, for butter was only 12 cents a pound, an' a quarter of flour only 50 cents. Besides, I mostly got my meals at the house I worked a day in. Didn't I scrimp an' save every penny I earned an' that was given me, an' wasn't I a proud woman when I was free! A Queen couldn't be prouder. Before that I marrie James Berry, who was a slave for old Dr. Pierson here in Orange, but who was born in the Berry family. My husband worked out his freedom for \$400, and was five years doin' it. I tell my children that they don't know what it is to live when they grumble about hard work. They'd ought to thank God every minute that they is free, even if they live on one meal a day. Nobody can tell me how good the masters was in New-Jersey, for I know what I seen with my own eyes an' felt with my own body. Other slaves had twenty times worse times than I had, an' my lot was bad enough.

"I've lived in Orange since I got my freedom," said Aunt Betsey, after a pause. "an' I must say that the folks have been very good to me. I worked out washin' till a year ago, but now these bones of mine is gettin' stiff and lame."

The New York Times

Published: October 1, 1882

Copyright © The New York Times