

Narrative of the Life of James Banks, an Escaped Slave (1861)

James Banks was a fugitive slave from the South who escaped to New York. He originally hoped to sail for Australia, but eventually decided to travel to Liverpool (United Kingdom) on October 12, 1861. In this passage from his memoirs he describes his experience as a slave and the reasons for his decision to flee. (Source: "North American Slave Narratives, Beginnings to 1920" at the "Documenting the American South" website of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, docsouth.unc.edu.)

The overseer made his move towards me and said, "Lay down that pick, and cross your hands." I said, "I have done nothing, and I do not mean to let you whip me for nothing." He then called to the other men to come and assist him. The men gathered around me, but they all remembered what I had said the day before, that I would kill any man of them who should assist in overpowering me, and they were very shy. The overseer shouted them on and yet they did not take hold of me. M'Kalpin came with his large bully stick, which he leveled at my head, but he missed. I seized hold of his club as he struck at my head, and as quick as thought snatched it from his grasp, and sent him down to the dust. I must truly and freely confess to you that I was a desperate man. So I left my master M'Kalpin and his overseer literally crawling about on the ground like a pair of rickety boys. . . .

The first point I made for was the cane break swamp. This was a very extensive tract or land, mostly under water and overgrown by the common reeds of which canes are made. On my way to this break, I took my way into a small stream of water. This stream varied from four to twelve inches in depth. This would be the means of defeating the bloodhounds, as they cannot scent in the water. About two or three o'clock in the afternoon, I heard the sound of the horns, and the yelping of the hounds; but from the sound I knew they were not on my track, so I took encouragement for the night. When the night came on I took again to the road; and having remembered the direction in which I heard the running of the (railroad) cars, and watching the north star, I set out for my journey.

My journey lay through a very large track of the cotton country. Many a day I lay in the hot broiling sun watching the movements of the cotton gangs at work. One day I saw a gang of about forty cotton pickers under their overseer, coming in the direction where I was; and such was my location, that had I remained still, they would have come right upon me, so I had to crawl crosswise the rows of cotton so as to clear them. I could not stand on my feet, as they would see my head; and in crawling on my hands and knees, I could not help making a track by breaking down the cotton, and thus tracking them after me. It was a critical moment for me. When the gang came up, I was all of a tremble, expecting every moment to hear the overseer say --"Who has been in this cotton, breaking it down in this way?"

On the 15th of the month, while lying in ambush in a thickly shaded place, I espied (saw) a colored man passing near to me. He remained with me that day and night, and we traveled together. The next day we encamped in a place where we found a great many hazel nuts; of these we ate freely and filled our pockets. But by this time such kind of food did not nourish me; and I found my strength failing me daily. We started out early that night with a determination that we would stop at some farm house and ask for food.

My friend went first quietly up and looked about the cabins. He returned and reported to me that he saw no one but two colored women. I then went myself: but before I got to the cabin door I met an Irishman, whom I asked for a piece of bread. He told me to go into the cabin, and the women would give me bread. I went in; and while they were getting the bread, I found the cabin door blocked up by some twenty or thirty men. The principal man came up to me with a pistol, which he presented at my breast, and ordered me to surrender on pain of death. I was taken and put in irons; a blacksmith was called to fasten them on my limbs. We were required to tell from whom we had escaped, and all about ourselves. Both of us were locked up in a room and watched that night, and the next morning we were placed in a jail to await our owners. Here we were to be kept twelve days.

On the night of the eleventh day of our imprisonment, there being six others with me in the same cell, I gave directions to each man to take his shoes in his hand and follow me. The order was to creep barefooted down the steps. The jailer lived below, and he had a watch of several men in the back yard, so that the thing had to be done very stealthily. I then lifted the old door off the hinges. I looked out and saw the watches sitting on a pile of wood. Just as we were about to descend the stairs an Irishman, who was in the next cell, gave the alarm upon us. We ran

scattering for about half a mile, till we got to a small wood on the road, when we came together. About midnight we made the railroad again, and laid our course once more to the north.

I heard the sound of a person walking and secreted myself in some bushes close to the road, so as to see whether the person was white or black. I soon discovered that it was a black man. He was a slave in the neighborhood going four miles on that road to visit his wife, who belonged to a different master. We gained valuable information from him in regard to our whereabouts, and the proper way to conduct ourselves. He informed us that we were about forty miles from the river; and if we crossed at the point where the road would strike, we would find ourselves in Missouri. He also warned us that when we got into Illinois we would be in danger of being taken, nearly as much as in the Slave States. He stated that he himself had once escaped from his master, and after being in Illinois three days he was arrested and taken back.

The proud Ohio rolled her sullen waters along in nature's own majestic style. I placed the men in a position where they would not be easily seen, and with my heavy stick I went some distance up the shore, where I found a boat locked in a quiet place. With the use of my stick I loosed the boat. Returning quietly back, I assured my men that I was ready to take them over. Having been reared on the banks of the old Shenandoah river, I was at home in a small boat, and a pair of oars in my hands.

The part of Illinois we were in is inhabited a good deal by Kentuckians and Tennesseans, or settlers from those States, who watch for and catch escaping slaves, mainly to get the rewards offered for them. Feeling very much the need of food, and coming to a house which we found to be occupied by a free-colored man, we made application to him for food. He welcomed us in with the greatest apparent cordiality, and he said he knew our condition and sympathized with us. He ordered his wife to get us something to eat, and he went out, saying he was going to get some whiskey for us, that we must be cold and in need of it. After being gone awhile he came back and said he could not get the whiskey, as they had shut up. Supper being ready we sat down and were eating when there came a knock at the door. The door was pushed open, and, behold, a gang of enemies stood before us. The number I could not be certain about, but it was large, and they were all armed with guns. I knew at once that we had been betrayed by our black host.

We were confined in the Smithland jail, in Kentucky, seven months and two days. The life in this jail was more like a place of punishment than a place of detention, for it seemed to them that the worse we were treated the more likely we would be to tell where we came from. Our seat was the floor. Our bed was one blanket each and the floor. When we entered the Smithland jail our only hope was in strict secrecy in regard to our owners, not to tell their real names or place of abode. We might just as well turn and go back home ourselves, and better, because it would save the masters expense and would be likely to save us severer punishment.

I came to the conclusion that my only hope was to get out of the jail, and that as soon as possible. So I set about examining every part of our cell with this view. The structure of the jail was a log cabin interspiked, and the whole enclosed by a brick wall, some eighteen inches in thickness. The plan was first to burn through the log a space large enough to admit a man's body, and then to make use of the spikes in working through the brick wall. One night the jailer left a candle burning in the entry at the head of the stairs. We had a pole in the cell used for cleaning a vent; attaching a piece of cotton to the end of this, and extending it through the door to the candle, I got fire, and I now felt more confident than ever of success. We were allowed water in the jail, and in burning through the logs I could manage to keep the fire in bounds by occasionally applying water just where I wanted to restrict its progress. To prevent it blazing up, or smoking too much, I would let the ashes accumulate so as to suppress both smoke and blaze, something after the manner of burning charred or pit coal. On the third night, about eleven o'clock, in a pouring rain, we came out of Smithland goal, leaving the jailer and his family sound asleep. Being near the Ohio River, after looking along the shore for sometime, we found a boat in which we crossed to the Illinois side.