

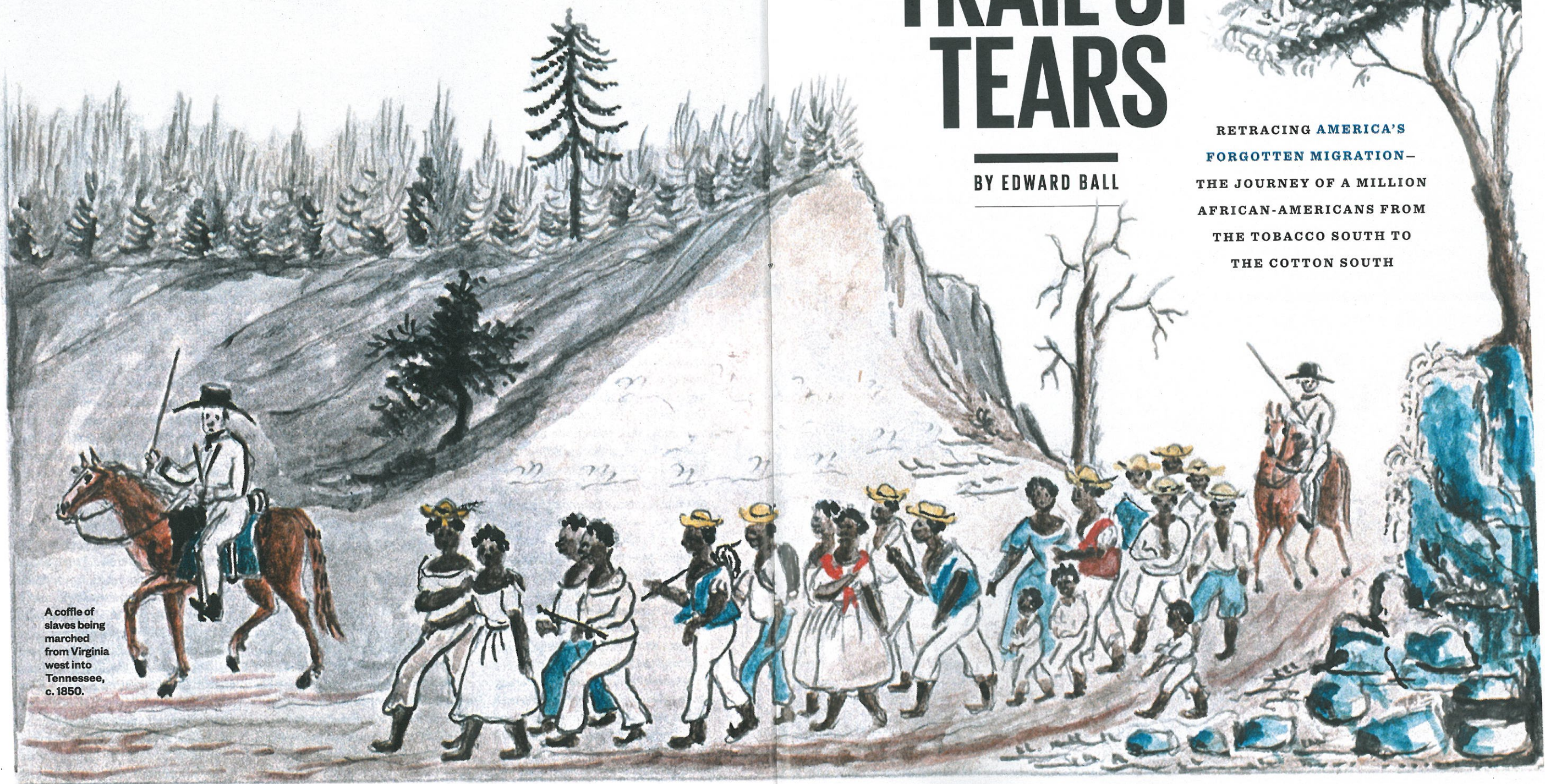


SECRETS OF
AMERICAN
HISTORY

SLAVERY'S TRAIL OF TEARS

BY EDWARD BALL

RETRACING AMERICA'S
FORGOTTEN MIGRATION—
THE JOURNEY OF A MILLION
AFRICAN-AMERICANS FROM
THE TOBACCO SOUTH TO
THE COTTON SOUTH



A coffle of slaves being marched from Virginia west into Tennessee, c. 1850.

When Delores McQuinn was growing up, her father told her a story about a search for the family's roots.

He said his own father knew the name of the people who had enslaved their family in Virginia, knew where they lived—in the same house and on the same land—in Hanover County, among the rumples hills north of Richmond.

"My grandfather went to the folks who had owned our family and asked, 'Do you have any documentation about our history during the slave days? We would like to see it, if possible.' The man at the door, who I have to assume was from the slaveholding side, said, 'Sure, we'll give it to you.'

"The man went into his house and came back out with some papers in his hands. Now, whether the papers were trivial or actual plantation records, who knows? But he stood in the door, in front of my grandfather, and lit a match to the papers. 'You want your history?' he said. 'Here it is.' Watching the things burn. 'Take the ashes and get off my land.'

"The intent was to keep that history buried," McQuinn says today. "And I think something like that has happened over and again, symbolically."

McQuinn was raised in Richmond, the capital of Virginia and the former

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capital of the Confederacy—a city crowded with monuments to the Old South. She is a politician now, elected to the city council in the late 1990s and to the Virginia House of Delegates in 2009. One of her proudest accomplishments in politics, she says, has been to throw new light on an alternate history.

For example, she persuaded the city to fund a tourist walk about slavery, a kind of mirror image of the Freedom Trail in Boston. She has helped raise money for a heritage site incorporating the excavated remains of the infamous slave holding cell known as Lumpkin's Jail.

"You see, our history is often buried," she says. "You have to unearth it."

Not long ago I was reading some old letters at the library of the University of North Carolina, doing a little unearthing of my own. Among the hundreds of hard-to-read and yellowing

papers, I found one note dated April 16, 1834, from a man named James Franklin in Natchez, Mississippi, to the home office of his company in Virginia. He worked for a partnership of slave dealers called Franklin & Armfield, run by his uncle.

"We have about ten thousand dollars to pay yet. Should you purchase a good lot for walking I will bring them out by land this summer," Franklin had written. Ten thousand dollars was a considerable sum in 1834—the equivalent of nearly \$300,000 today. "A good lot for walking" was a gang of enslaved men, women and children, possibly numbering in the hundreds, who could tolerate three months afoot in the summer heat.

Scholars of slavery are quite familiar with the firm of Franklin & Armfield, which Isaac Franklin and John Armfield established in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1828. Over the next decade,

with Armfield based in Alexandria and Isaac Franklin in New Orleans, the two became the undisputed tycoons of the domestic slave trade, with an economic impact that is hard to overstate. In 1832, for example, 5 percent of all the commercial credit available through the Second Bank of the United States had been extended to their firm.

This letter from 1834 held riches, and "I will bring them out by land" was, for me, the invaluable line: It referred to a forced march overland from the fields of Virginia to the slave auctions in Natchez and New Orleans. The letter was the first sign that I might be able to trace the route of one of the Franklin & Armfield caravans.

With that signal from Natchez, Armfield began vacuuming up people from the Virginia countryside. The partners employed stringers—headhunters who worked on commission—collecting enslaved people up and down the East Coast, knocking on doors, asking tobacco and rice planters whether they would sell. Many slaveholders were inclined to do so, as their plantations made smaller fortunes than many princeling sons would have liked.

It took four months to assemble the big "coffle," to use a once-common word that, like so much of the vocabulary of slavery, has been effaced from the language. The company's agents sent people down to Franklin & Armfield's slavepens (another word



LUMPKIN'S JAIL.

"YOU HAVE TO UNEARTH IT" Virginia Delegate Delores McQuinn (right) has helped raise funds for a heritage site that will show the excavated remains of Lumpkin's slave jail (above).

PP.2-3: THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION. GIFT OF DR. AND MRS. RICHARD M. KAIN IN MEMORY OF GEORGE HAY KAIN; SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA LIBRARY



that has disappeared) in Alexandria, just nine miles south of the U.S. Capitol: seamstresses, nurses, valets, field hands, hostlers, carpenters, cooks, houseboys, coachmen, laundresses, boatmen. There were so-called fancy girls, young women who would work mainly as concubines. And, always, children.

Bill Keeling, male

Age 11, height 4'5"

Elisabeth, female

Age 10, height 4'1"

Monroe, male

Age 12, height 4'7"

Lovey, female

Age 10, height 3'10"

Robert, male

Age 12, height 4'4"

Mary Fitchett, female

Age 11, height 4'11"

By August, Armfield had more than 300 ready for the march. Around the 20th of that month the caravan began to assemble in front of the company's offices in Alexandria, at 1315 Duke Street.

In the library at Yale I did a bit more unearthing and found a travelogue by a man named Ethan Andrews, who happened to pass through Alexandria a year later and witness the organizing of an Armfield coffle. His book was not much read—it had a due-date notice from 50 years ago—but in it Andrews described the scene as Armfield directed the loading for an enormous journey.

"Four or five tents were spread, and the large wagons, which were to accompany the expedition, were stationed" where they could be piled high with "provisions and other necessaries." New clothes were loaded in bundles. "Each negro is furnished with two entire suits from the shop," Andrews noted, "which he does not wear upon the road." Instead, these clothes were saved for the end of the trip so each slave could dress well for sale. There was a pair of carriages for the whites.

In 1834, Armfield sat on his horse in front of the procession, armed with a gun and a whip. Other white men, similarly armed, were arrayed behind him. They were guarding 200 men



and boys lined up in twos, their wrists handcuffed together, a chain running the length of 100 pairs of hands. Behind the men were the women and girls, another hundred. They were not handcuffed, although they may have been tied with rope. Some carried small children. After the women came the big wagons—six or seven in all. These carried food, plus children too small to walk ten hours a day. Later the same wagons hauled those who had collapsed and could not be roused with a whip.

Then the coffle, like a giant serpent, uncoiled onto Duke Street and marched west, out of town and into a momentous event, a blanked-out saga, an unremembered epic. I think of it as the Slave Trail of Tears.

The Slave Trail of Tears is the great missing migration—a thousand-mile-long river of people, all of them black, reaching from Virginia to Louisiana. During the 50 years before the Civil War, about a million enslaved people moved from the Upper South—Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky—to the Deep South—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama. They were made to go, deported, you could say, having been sold.

This forced resettlement was 20 times larger than Andrew Jackson's "Indian removal" campaigns of the 1830s, which gave rise to the original

POINT OF DEPARTURE Richmond was a hub for exporting slaves southward. In 1857 alone, says historian Maurie McInnis (above), sales came to more than \$440 million in today's dollars.

Trail of Tears as it drove tribes of Native Americans out of Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama. It was bigger than the immigration of Jews into the United States during the 19th century, when some 500,000 arrived from Russia and Eastern Europe. It was bigger than the wagon-train migration to the West, beloved of American lore. This movement lasted longer and grabbed up more people than any other migration in North America before 1900.

The drama of a million individuals going so far from their homes changed the country. It gave the Deep South a character it retains to this day; and it changed the slaves themselves, traumatizing uncountable families.

But until recently, the Slave Trail was buried in memory. The story of the masses who trekked a thousand miles, from the tobacco South to the cotton South, sometimes vanished in an economic tale, one about the invention of the cotton gin and the rise of "King Cotton." It sometimes sank into a political story, something to do with the Lou-

vice provost at the University of Virginia, who curated the Richmond exhibit, stood in front of a slave dealer's red flag that she tracked down in Charleston, South Carolina, where it had lain unseen in a box for more than 50 years. It sat under a piece of glass and measured about 2 by 4 feet. If you squinted, you could see pinholes in it. "Red flags fluttered down the streets in Richmond, on Wall Street in Shockoe Bottom," she said. "All the dealers pinned little scraps of paper on their flags to describe the people for sale."

Virginia was the source for the biggest deportation. Nearly 450,000 people were uprooted and sent south from the state between 1810 and 1860. "In 1857 alone, the sale of people in Richmond amounted to \$4 million," McInnis said. "That would be more than \$440 million today."

Outside universities and museums, the story of the Slave Trail lives in shards, broken and scattered.

The phrase "sold down the river," for instance. During the move to the Deep South, many slaves found themselves on

Maryland." A padlock was added to the handcuffs, and the hasp of each padlock closed on a link in a chain 100 feet long. Sometimes, as in Ball's case, the chain ran through an iron neck collar. "I could not shake off my chains, nor move a yard without the consent of my master."

(My own ancestors held slaves in South Carolina for six generations. I have studied Charles Ball and found no family link to him. But names and history contain shadows.)

Franklin & Armfield put more people on the market than anyone—perhaps 25,000—broke up the most families and made the most money. About half of those people boarded ships in Washington or Norfolk, bound for Louisiana, where Franklin sold them. The other half walked from the Chesapeake to the Mississippi River, 1,100 miles, with riverboat steerage for short distances along the way. Franklin & Armfield's marches began in the late summer, sometimes the fall, and they took two to four months. The Armfield coffle of 1834 is better documented

"A SINGULAR SPECTACLE," SOME 200 MEN "MANACLED AND CHAINED TO EACH OTHER," LINING UP IN DOUBLE FILE. "I HAD NEVER SEEN SO REVOLTING A SIGHT BEFORE."

isiana Purchase and the "first South-west"—the young states of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

Historians know about the Slave Trail. During the last ten years, a number of them—Edward Baptist, Steven Deyle, Robert Gudmestad, Walter Johnson, Joshua Rothman, Calvin Schermerhorn, Michael Tadman and others—have been writing the million-person-migration back into view.

Some museum curators know about it, too. Last fall and this past spring, the Library of Virginia, in Richmond, and the Historic New Orleans Collection, in Louisiana, working separately, put together large exhibitions about the domestic slave trade. Both institutions broke attendance records.

Maurie McInnis, a historian and

steamboats winding down the Mississippi to New Orleans. There they were sold to new bosses and dispersed in a 300-mile radius to the sugar and cotton plantations. Many went without their parents, or spouses, or siblings—and some without their children—whom they were made to leave behind. "Sold down the river" labels a raft of loss.

The "chain gang" also has roots in the Slave Trail. "We were handcuffed in pairs, with iron staples and bolts," recalled Charles Ball, who marched in several coffles before he escaped from slavery. Ball was bought by a slave trader on Maryland's Eastern Shore, and later wrote a memoir. "My purchaser . . . told me that we must set out that very day for the South," he wrote. "I joined fifty-one other slaves whom he had bought in

than most slave marches. I started following its footsteps, hoping to find traces of the Slave Trail of Tears.

The coffle headed west out of Alexandria. Today the road leaving town becomes U.S. Route 50, a big-shouldered highway. Part of Virginia's section of that highway is known as the Lee-Jackson Highway, a love note to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, the two Confederate generals. But when the slaves marched, it was known as Little River Turnpike. The coffle moved along at three miles an hour. Caravans like Armfield's covered about 20 miles a day.

People sang. Sometimes they were forced to. Slave traders brought a banjo or two and demanded music. A clergyman who saw a march toward Shenan-

doah remembered that the gang members, "having left their wives, children, or other near connections and never likely to meet them again in this world," sang to "drown the suffering of mind they were brought into." Witnesses said "Old Virginia Never Tire" was one song all the coffles sang.

After 40 miles, the Little River Turnpike met the town of Aldie and became the Aldie and Ashby's Gap Turnpike, a toll road. The turnpike ran farther west—40 miles to Winchester, and then to the brow of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Every few miles, Armfield and his chained-up gang came to a toll station. He would stop the group in its tracks, pull out his purse and pay the man. The tollkeeper would lift the bar, and the coffle would march under it.

About August 25, they reached Winchester and turned south, entering the Shenandoah Valley. Among the people who lived in these parts was John Randolph, a congressman and a cousin of Thomas Jefferson. Randolph once wrote a friend to complain that the road was "thronged with droves of these wretches & the human carcass-butcherers, who drive them on the hoof to market." Comparing Virginia to a stop on the West African slave trade, Randolph sighed, "One might almost fancy oneself on the road to Calabar."

The gang headed down the Great Wagon Road, a route that came from Pennsylvania, already some centuries old—"made by the Indians," in the euphemism. Along the way, the coffle met other slave gangs, construction crews rebuilding the Wagon Road, widening it to 22 feet and putting down gravel. They were turning out the new Valley Turnpike, a macadam surface with ditches at the sides. The marchers and the road-work gangs, slaves all, traded long looks.

Today the Great Wagon Road, or Valley Turnpike, is known as U.S. Route 11, a two-lane that runs between soft and misty mountains, with pretty byways. Long stretches of U.S. 11 look much like the Valley Turnpike did during the 1830s—rolling fields, horses and cattle on hills. Northern Shenandoah was wheat country then,

with one in five people enslaved and hoeing in the fields. Today a few of the plantations survive. I stop at one of the oldest, Belle Grove. The Valley Turnpike once ran on its edge, and the coffle of 300 saw the place from the road.

Relatives of President James Madison put up the stone mansion at Belle Grove during the 1790s, and it lives on as a fine house museum run by a historian, Kristen Laise. A walk through the house, a look at the kitchen where all the work was done, a walk through the slave cemetery, a rundown of the people who lived and died here, white and black—thanks to Laise, Belle Grove is not a house museum that shorts the stories of slaves.

Recently, Laise tells me, she stumbled on evidence that in the 1820s a large number of people went up for sale at Belle Grove. She pulls out an October 1824 newspaper ad, placed by Isaac Hite, master of Belle Grove (and brother-in-law to President Madison). "I shall proceed to sell sixty slaves, of various ages, in families," Hite said. Hite expressed regret that he had to charge interest if buyers insisted on using credit. The nicest families in the Shenandoah tipped people into the pipeline south.

I pull in at various towns and ask around. In Winchester, the Winchester-Frederick County Visitor Center. In Edinburg, a history bookshop. In Staunton, the Visitor Center. In Roanoke, at a tourist information outlet called Virginia's Blue Ridge.

Do you know anything about the chain gangs that streamed southwest through these parts?

No. Never heard of it. You say it was 150 years ago?

Well, more like 175.

Don't know what you're talking about.

People do know, however, about Civil War battles. The bloodletting here has a kind of glamour. A few people launch into stories about the brave Confederates. A few bring up their own ethnic lore.

Well, Germans and Scots-Irish settled the Shenandoah, that's who was here.

A woman at a tourist store clarified. My oh my, the Scots-Irish—they were like made of brass.



One night in September 1834, a traveler stumbled into the Armfield coffle's camp. "Numerous fires were gleaming through the forest: it was the bivouac of the gang," wrote the traveler, George Featherstonhaugh. "The female slaves were warming themselves. The children were asleep in some tents; and the males, in chains, were lying on the ground, in groups of about a dozen each." Meanwhile, "the white men . . . were standing about with whips in their hands."

Featherstonhaugh, a geologist on a

MAP SOURCES: DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP LAB, UNIV. OF RICHMOND; EDWARD BALL; GUILBERT GATES; DACUS THOMPSON; SONYA WAYNARD

surveying tour for the federal government, described the slave trader as a raw man in nice clothes. John Armfield wore a big white hat and striped pants. He had a long dark coat and wore a mustache-less beard. The surveyor talked to him for a few hours and saw him as "sordid, illiterate and vulgar." Armfield, it seems, had overpowering bad breath, because he loved raw onions.

Early the next morning, the gang readied again for the march. "A singular spectacle," Featherstonhaugh wrote. He

counted nine wagons and carriages and some 200 men "manacled and chained to each other," lining up in double file. "I had never seen so revolting a sight before," he said. As the gang fell in, Armfield and his men made jokes, "standing near, laughing and smoking cigars."

On September 6, the gang was marching 50 miles southwest of Roanoke. They came to the New River, a big flow about 400 feet across, and to a dock known as Ingles Ferry. Armfield did not want to pay for passage, not

with his hundreds. So one of his men picked a shallow place and tested it by sending over a wagon and four horses. Armfield then ordered the men in irons to get in the water.

This was dangerous. If any man lost his footing, everyone could be washed downstream, yanked one after another by the chain. Armfield watched and smoked. Men and boys sold, on average, for about \$700. Multiply that by 200. That comes to \$140,000, or about \$3.5 million today. Slaves were routinely

insured—plenty of companies did that sort of business, with policies guarding against “damage.” But collecting on such “damage” would be inconvenient.

The men made it across. Next came wagons with the young children and those who could no longer walk. Last came the women and girls. Armfield crossed them on flatboats.

Today, on the same spot, a six-lane bridge crosses the New River, and there is a town called Radford, population 16,000. I walk First Street next to the river and stop in front of a shop, “Memories Past and Present—Antiques and Collectibles.” A man named Daniel starts a conversation.

Local. Born 50 miles that way, Radford for 20 years. On the dark slope after 40, since you ask.

Daniel is pleasant, happy to talk about his hardscrabble days. He is white, a face etched by too much sun.

Trailer-park childhood. Life looking up since the divorce.

It is an easy chat between strangers, until I bring up the slave days. Daniel’s expression empties. He shakes his head. His face acquires a look that suggests the memory of slavery is like a vampire visiting from a shallow grave.

Armfield and his caravan came to the Shenandoah from Alexandria. Other coffles came from the direction of Richmond. One of them was led by a man named William Waller, who walked from Virginia to Louisiana in 1847 with 20 or more slaves.

In the deep archive of the Virginia Historical Society I discovered an extraordinary batch of letters that Waller wrote about the experience of selling people he had known and lived with for much of his life. Waller’s testimony, to my knowledge, has never been examined in detail. He was an amateur slave trader, not a pro like Armfield, and his journey, though from another year, is even better documented.

Waller was 58, not young but still fit. Thin and erect, a crease of a smile, vigorous dark eyes. He wore “my old Virginia cloth coat and pantaloons” on his march, as he told his wife, Sarah Garland—the daughter of a congressman and a grand-

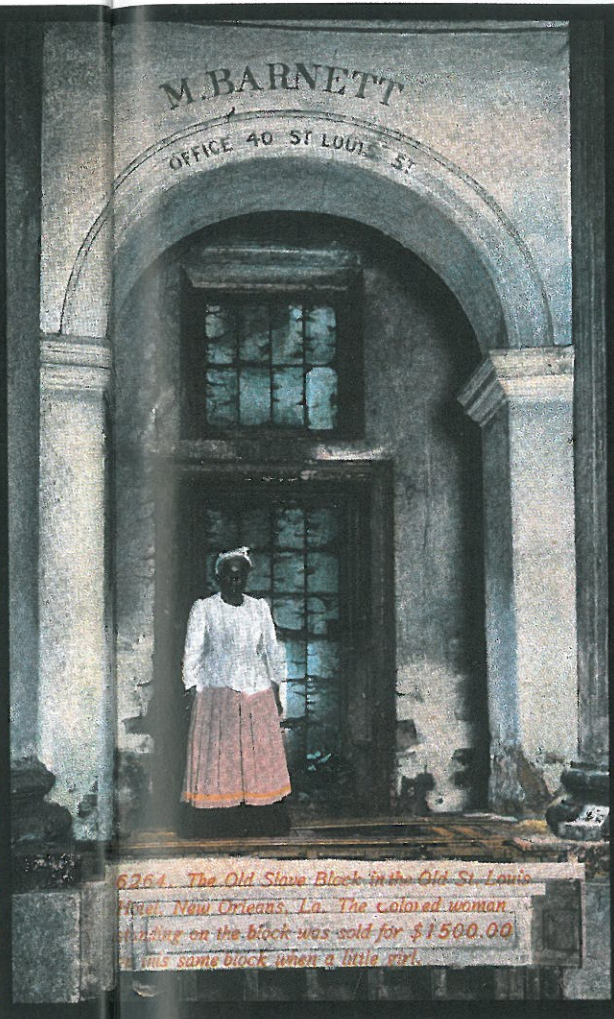


FOR SALE.

ONE HUNDRED NEGROES FOR SALE, At FOSTER’S SLAVE DEPOT, 157 Common street, at this time, 100 likely Negroes for sale, viz: No. 1 Field Hands, Cooks, Washers, and Ironers; a No. 1 Carpenter, a No. 1 Engineer. Through the entire year will be found a large and well selected lot of Negroes, purchased expressly for this market, and will be receiving new supplies every week during the season. Having leased the house formerly occupied by Messrs. Peterson & Stewart as a Slave Depot, in addition to my place, will be able to furnish traders with Negroes for sale comfortable quarters. I shall in all cases endeavor to give satisfaction to all parties.

THOS. FOSTER,
157 Common street.

se24 6ra



daughter of Patrick Henry, the orator and patriot. She was fancier than he.

The Wallers lived outside Amherst, Virginia, and owned some 25 black people and a plantation called Forest Grove. They were in debt. They had seen the money others were making by selling out and decided to do the same. Their plan was to leave a few slaves behind with Sarah as house servants and for William to march nearly all the rest to Natchez and New Orleans.

Waller and his gang reached the Valley Turnpike in October. “This morning finds us six miles west of Abingdon,” Waller wrote home from one of the richer towns. “The negroes are above all well—they continue in fine spirits and life and appear all happy.”

The sound of Waller’s letters home—he wrote some 20 of them on the Slave Trail—is upbeat, a businessman send-

SOLD AND BOUGHT As owners in the Upper South liquidated their assets (above, a newspaper ad), traders assembled groups of slaves in pens (top, in Alexandria, Virginia) and then shipped or marched them southwest. Many of those journeys ended in New Orleans, on the auction block at the St. Louis Hotel (above right).

ing word that there’s nothing to worry about. “The negroes are happy,” he says repeatedly.

But something happened early on, although it is not clear just what. Waller had been on the trail for two weeks when he wrote home to say, “I have seen and felt enough to make me loathe the vocation of slave trading.” He did not give details.

It is rare to have a glimpse of slaves enchained in a coffle, because the documentary evidence is thin, but Waller’s march is an exception. The people who

accompanied him included a boy of 8 or 9 called Pleasant; Mitchell, who was 10 or 11; a teenage boy named Samson; three teenage sisters, Sarah Ann, Louisa and Lucy; Henry, about 17; a man named Nelson and his wife; a man in his 20s called Foster; and a young mother named Sarah, with her daughter Indian, about age 2. There were others. The three sisters had been taken from their parents, as had Pleasant, Mitchell and Samson. Most of the others were under 20. As for Sarah and Indian, they had been taken from Sarah’s husband and her mother. Waller planned to sell all of them.

As he pushed his “hands” down the pike, Waller felt guilty about Sarah and Indian, he told his wife. “My heart grieves over Sarah and I do wish it could be different,” he wrote. “But Sarah seems happy.”

Days and nights down the Valley Turnpike, the spine of the Blue Ridge, destination Tennessee, where Armfield would hand over his coffle and board a stagecoach back to Alexandria.

As U.S. 11 steps into Tennessee, the road finds the Holston River and runs parallel to it. Here the mountains thicken into the Appalachian South of deep hollows and secret hills. In the old days, there were few black people here, a lot of Quakers and the beginning of an antislavery movement. The Quakers have largely gone, and there are still many fewer black people than back in Virginia, 100 miles east.

I take the old route to Knoxville, but then get onto the freeway, Interstate 40. The path of I-40 west roughly matches a turnpike that once ran 200 miles across the Cumberland Plateau. The coffles followed the same route—through Kingston, Crab Orchard, Monterey, Cookeville, Gordonsville, Lebanon and, finally, Nashville.

At this point in the journey, other spurs, from Louisville and Lexington to the north, joined the main path of the Slave Trail. The migration swelled to a widening stream.

Armfield and his gang of 300 had marched for a month and covered more than 600 miles. When they reached Nashville, they would be halfway.

Isaac Franklin, Armfield’s partner, kept house in Louisiana, but his thoughts were often in Tennessee. He had grown up near Gallatin, 30 miles northeast of Nashville, and he went there during off months. In 1832, at age 43, supremely rich from 20 years as a “long-distance trader,” Franklin built a big house on 2,000 acres outside Gallatin. He called it Fairvue. Columned, brick and symmetrical, it was just about the finest house in the state, people said, second only to the Hermitage, the estate of President Andrew Jackson. Fairvue was a working plantation, but it was also an announcement that the boy from Gallatin had returned to his humble roots in majesty.

When Armfield turned up with his gang in Gallatin, he seems to have handed the group not to Isaac Franklin, but to

Franklin’s nephew James Franklin.

In Gallatin, I drive out to look at the old Franklin estate. After the Civil War, it held on as a cotton plantation, and then became a horse farm. But in the 2000s, a developer began building a golf course on the fields where the colts ran. The Club at Fairvue Plantation opened in 2004, and hundreds of houses sprang up on half-acre plots.

Approaching the former Franklin house, I pass the golf course and clubhouse. A thicket of McMansions follows, in every ersatz style. Palladian manse, Empire français, Tudor grand, and a form that might be called Tuscan bland. People still come to show their money at Fairvue, like Franklin himself.

I ring the doorbell at the house the Slave Trail built. It has a double portico, with four Ionic columns on the first level and four on the second. No answer, despite several cars in the drive. More than one preservationist had told me that the current owners of Fairvue are hostile to anyone who shows curiosity about the slave dealer who built their lovely home.

The man may be gone, but generations later, some of his people are still around. I ask a Nashville museum director, Mark Brown, for help in finding a member of the family in the here and now. Two phone calls later, one of the living Franklins answers.

Kenneth Thomson opens the door to his house, which is clapboard and painted a pretty cottage yellow—quaint, not grand. Thomson says he is 74, but he looks 60. Short white hair, short white beard, khakis, cotton short-sleeve with flap pockets and epaulets. Shoes with crepe soles. A reedy voice, gentle manners. Thomson is an antiques dealer, mostly retired, and an amateur historian, mostly active.

“I am president of the Sumner County Hysterical Society,” he cracks, “the only place you get respect for knowing a lot of dead people.”

The first thing that meets the eye in Thomson’s house is a large portrait of Isaac Franklin. It hangs in the living room, above the sofa. The house

bursts with 19th-century chairs, rugs, settees, tables and pictures. Reading lights look like converted oil lamps. He takes a seat at his melodeon, a portable organ that dates from the 1850s, and plays a few bars of period-appropriate music. It is plain that in this branch of the Franklin family, the past cannot be unremembered.

"Isaac Franklin had no children who survived," Thomson had told me on the phone. "His four children all died before they grew up. But he had three brothers, and there are hundreds of their descendants living all around the country. My direct ancestor is Isaac's brother James. Which means that Isaac Franklin was

was dabbling in some slave dealing on these trips—small amount, nothing big. He showed young Isaac how it was done, apprenticed him. Now, I heard this more than 50 years ago from my great-grandfather, who was born in 1874, or two generations closer than me to the time in question. So it must be true. The family story is that after Uncle Isaac came back from service during the War of 1812, which sort of interrupted his career path, if you call it that, he was all for the slave business. I mean, just gung-ho."

Thomson gets up and walks through the house, pointing out the ample Franklin memorabilia. A painting of the man-



my great-great-great-great-uncle."

It is an important gloss, as it turns out: "You see," Thomson said, "my forebear James Franklin was the family member who introduced Isaac Franklin to the slave business."

Taking a seat in an armchair upholstered in wine-colored brocade, he picks up the story. It was at the beginning of the 1800s. When the brothers were growing up in Gallatin, James Franklin, eight years older than Isaac, took his sibling under his wing. "They packed flatboats with whiskey, tobacco, cotton and hogs, floated them down to New Orleans, sold the goods on the levee, and then sold the boat," Thomson says. "My ancestor James

sion at Fairvue. A sofa and chair that belonged to Isaac Franklin's parents. A Bible from the family of John Armfield. "After Isaac died, in 1846, they published the succession, an inventory of his belongings," he says. "It ran to 900 pages. He had six plantations and 650 slaves."

What was it like to be in the room with Isaac Franklin?

"He knew what manners and culture were," Thomson says. "He knew how to be a gentleman. Most slave traders at that time were considered common and uncouth, with no social graces. Uncle Isaac was different. He had the equivalent of an eighth-grade education. He was not ignorant. He could write a letter."

At the same time, "that doesn't mean that he didn't have bad habits," Thomson clarifies. "He had some of those. But bad habits concerning sex were rampant among some of those men. You know they took advantage of the black women, and there were no repercussions there. Before he married, Isaac had companions, some willing, some unwilling. That was just part of life." I read, in many places, that slave traders had sex with the women they bought and sold. And here, someone close to the memory of it says much the same.

"Isaac had a child by a black woman before he married," Thomson says. In 1839, at age 50, he married a woman named Adelia Hayes, age 22, the daughter of a Nashville attorney. White. "So Isaac had at least one black child, but this daughter of his left the state of Tennessee, and nobody knows what happened to her. Actually, Uncle Isaac sent her off because he didn't want her around after he married."

It is possible, of course, that Isaac Franklin sold his daughter. It would have been the easiest thing to do.

Thomson brings out an article that he wrote some years ago for the *Gallatin Examiner*. The headline reads, "Isaac Franklin was a Well-liked Slave Trader." The thousand-word piece is the only thing Thomson has published on the subject of his family.

How does a person inside the family measure the inheritance of slave trading? Thomson takes a half-second. "You can't judge those people by today's standards—you can't judge anybody by our standards. It was a part of life in those days. Take the Bible. Many things in the Old Testament are pretty barbaric, but they are part of our evolution."

Thomson warms up, shifts in his seat. "I do not approve of revisionist historians. I mean, people who do not understand the old lifestyles—their standpoint on life, and their education, are what today we consider limited. That applies

"YOU CAN'T JUDGE" Kenneth Thomson (right, at home in Gallatin, Tennessee) is an indirect descendant of slave trader Isaac Franklin. An album (above left) identifies two members of another branch of the family.





to Southern history, to slave history.

"You know, I have been around blacks all my life. They are great people. When I grew up, we were servant. All the servants were black. We had a nurse, a woman who used to be called a mammy. We had a cook, a black man. We had a maid, and we had a yard man. We had a guy that doubled as a driver and supervised the warehouse. And we had all these servants till they died. I wasn't taught to be prejudiced. And I'll tell you what nobody ever talks about. There were free blacks in the South that owned slaves. And there were lots of them. They didn't buy slaves in order to free them, but to make money."

Thomson emphasizes these last sentences. It is a refrain among Southern whites who remain emotionally attached to the plantation days—that one in 1,000 slaveholders who were black vindicates in some fashion 999 who were not.

Are we responsible for what the slave traders did?

"No. We cannot be responsible, should not feel like we're responsible. We weren't there." Are we accountable? "No. We are not accountable for what happened then. We are only accountable if it is repeated."

Thomson is sensitive to the suggestion that the family took benefit from the industrial-scale cruelty of Franklin & Armfield.

"In my family, people looked after their slaves," he said. "They bought shoes for them, blankets for them, brought in doctors to treat them. I never heard of any mistreatment. On the whole, things weren't that bad. You see, blacks were better off coming to this country. It is a fact that the ones over here are far ahead of the ones over there in Africa. And you know that the first legal slaveholder in the United States was a black man? That's on the Internet. You need to look that up. I think that's interesting. Human bond-

"WE CARRIED ON" Florence Hall Blair (at home in Nashville) is a descendant of a slave who worked on Isaac Franklin's estate. "If you carry hatred or strong dislike for people," she says, "all you are doing is hurting yourself."

age began I don't know when, but early, thousands of years ago. I think slavery developed here primarily because of the ignorance of the blacks. They first came over here as indentured servants, as did the whites. But because of their background and lack of education, they just sort of slid into slavery. No, I don't believe in revisionist history."

I grew up in the Deep South, and I am familiar with such ideas, shared by many whites in Mr. Thomson's generation. I do not believe that black people were responsible for their own enslavement, or that African-Americans should be grateful for slavery because they are better off than West Africans, or that a black man was author of the slave system. But I recognize the melody, and let the song pass.

Kenneth Thomson brings out some daguerreotypes of the Franklins and others in his family tree. The pictures are beautiful. The people in them are well-dressed. They give the impression of perfect manners.

"The way I see it," he says, "there are a lot of people you have to bury to get rid of. To get rid of their attitudes."

Ben Key was a slave to Isaac Franklin at Fairvue. He was born in 1812 in Virginia. Franklin probably bought him there and brought him to Tennessee in the early 1830s. For reasons unknown, Franklin did not send Key through the burning gates of the Slave Trail, but made him stay in Tennessee.

At Fairvue, Key found a partner in a woman named Hannah. Their children included a son named Jack Key, who was freed at the end of the Civil War, at age 21. Jack Key's children at Fairvue included Lucien Key, whose children included a woman named Ruby Key Hall—

"Who was my mother," says Florence Blair.

Florence Hall Blair, born and raised in Nashville, is 73, a retired nurse. She lives 25 miles from Gallatin, in a pretty brick, ranch-style house with white shutters. After 15 years at various Tennessee hospitals, and after 15 years selling makeup for Mary Kay Cosmetics (and driving a pink Cadillac, because

she moved a ton of mascara), she now occupies herself with family history.

A lot of black people, she said, do not want to know about their ancestry. "They don't do family history, because they think, 'Oh, it was too cruel, and so brutal, and why should I look at it up close?' I am not one of those people."

Her research "is like a poke salad," she says, dropping a Tennessee-ism. A plate of pokeweed yanked up from the field and put on the table is one way of saying "a mess." Blair shifts metaphors. "Researching people who were slaves is like a mystery tale. You see the names. You don't know what they did. Some names in the lists are familiar. You find them repeatedly. But you don't know who the old ones are.

"So Ben Key's son Hilery Key, who was a slave born in 1833, and brother to Jack Key, my great-grandfather, was one of the 22 men who founded the Methodist Episcopal Church in this area. He was a minister. It must be in the genes, because I have a brother who is a minister, and a cousin who is a minister, and another relative. And in Gallatin there is a church named after one of the Key family preachers. Mystery solved," she says.

What do you think about Isaac Franklin? I wonder aloud.

"I don't feel anything per se," she says, benignly. "It's been a long time. And that's what the times were." She deflects the subject politely.

"I feel a certain detachment from it, I suppose. And that includes about Isaac Franklin. I think Franklin was a cruel individual, but he was human. His humanity was not always visible, but it was there. So as far as hating him, I don't have a strong dislike for him. Time kind of mellows you out. The older I get, the more tolerant I become. It was like that. He did it, but it is what it is. If you carry hatred or strong dislike for people, all you are doing is hurting yourself."

She laughs, surprisingly. "I wouldn't have made it too well in slavery days, because I am the kind of person who just could not imagine you would treat me the way they treated people. 'You going to treat me less than a dog? Oh, no.' They probably would have had to kill me, with

my temperament." She laughs again.

"You know, we carried on. Now I have five adult children, eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. I am married to a man with four children. Put them all together, we are like a big sports team. On holidays it is something, we have to rent a community center.

"We carried on."

As autumn gathered in 1834, the caravan that John Armfield handed over left Tennessee, bound for Natchez. Records of that part of the journey do not survive, nor do records about the individual slaves in the coffle.

Like other Franklin gangs, the 300 probably got on flatboats in the Cumberland River and floated three days down to the Ohio River, and then drifted down another day to reach the Mississippi. A flatboat could float down the Mississippi to Natchez in two weeks.

The previous year, Franklin & Armfield had moved their jail and slave market in Natchez to a site on the edge of town called Forks of the Road. There—and this is conjecture, based on what happened to other gangs—half of the big gang might have been sold. As for the other half, they were probably herded onto steamboats and churned 260 miles south to New Orleans, where Isaac Franklin or one of his agents sold them, one or three or five at a time. And then they were gone—out to plantations in northern Louisiana, or central Mississippi, or southern Alabama.

Although the Armfield gang vanishes from the record, it is possible to follow in detail a coffle of people on the journey from Tennessee to New Orleans, thanks to William Waller's letters.

In Knoxville, in October 1847, Waller readied his gang of 20 or more for the second half of their journey. He expected another month on the road. It would turn out to be four.

On Tuesday, October 19, the troop headed southwest, Waller leading from his horse and his friend James Taliaferro bringing up the rear, both

men armed. No steamboats for this group. Waller was pinching pennies.

In Virginia, the coffles marched from town to town. But here, they were marching through wilderness. Waller's letters are imprecise on his route, and by 1847 there were a few roads from Tennessee into Mississippi. But during the 50 years coffles were sent on the Slave Trail, the road most taken was the Natchez Trace.

The trace was a 450-mile road—"trace" being the colonial word for a native trail through forest—and the only overland route from the plateau west of the Appalachian Range leading to the Gulf of Mexico. The Natchez people first carved the footpath some 500 years before and used it until about 1800, when they were massacred and dispersed, at which point white travelers took possession of their highway.

The Natchez Trace Parkway, with asphalt flat like silk, now follows the old route. Remnants of the original Trace remain out in the woods, 100 yards from the breakdown lane, mostly untouched.

Starting in Nashville I drive down the parkway. Overland coffles would have used the road that molds off in the trees. In place of towns were "stands" every 10 or 15 miles. These were stores and taverns with places to sleep in the back. Gangs of slaves were welcome if they slept in the field, far from business. Their drivers paid good money for food.

After Duck River, in Tennessee, came the Keg Springs Stand. After Swan Creek, McLish's Stand. After the Tennessee River, where the Trace dips into Alabama for 50 miles, Buzzard Roost Stand. Swinging back into Mississippi, Old Factor's Stand, LeFleur's Stand, Crowder's Stand, others.

Waller reached Mississippi by that November. "This is one of the richest portions of the state and perhaps one of the most healthy," he wrote home. "It is a fine country for the slave to live in and for the master to make money in." And by the way, "The negroes are not only well, but appear happy and pleased with the country and prospect before them."

At the village of Benton a week before Christmas 1847, Waller huddled

A DIVERGENCE A sign (opposite) marks the site of the market just outside Natchez where slaves were bargained over rather than auctioned.

with his gang in a ferocious storm. "Exceedingly heavy and continued rains have stopped our progress," he told his wife. "We have been stopped for two days by the breaking up of turnpikes and bridges. Although today is Sunday my hands are engaged in repairing the road to enable us to pass on."

I put the car on the shoulder and walk into the woods to find the real Natchez Trace. It is easily stumbled into. And it really is a trace, the faint line of what used to be a wagon road. The cut is about 12 feet wide, with shallow ditches on each side. Spindly pine and oaks away off the roadbed, a third-growth woods. Cobwebs to the face, bugs buzzing, overhanging branches to duck. On the ground, a carpet of mud, and leaves beneath it, and dirt under the leaves.

The path the slaves took is beautiful. Nearly enclosed by green curtains of limbs, it feels like a tunnel. I squish through the mud, sweating, pulling off spiders, slapping mosquitoes and horseflies. It is 8 p.m., and the sun is failing. The fireflies come out in the dwindling dusk. And as night closes, the crickets start their scraping in the trees. A sudden, loud drone from every direction, the natural music of Mississippi.

It was typical on the Slave Trail: People like Waller marched a coffle and sold one or two people along the way to pay the travel bills. Sarah and Indian, the mother and daughter, wanted to be sold together. The three sisters, Sarah Ann, Louisa and Lucy, also wanted to be sold together, which was not likely to happen, and they knew it.

But as Waller drifted through Mississippi, he couldn't sell anyone.

"The great fall in cotton has so alarmed the people that there is not the slightest prospect of our selling our negroes at almost any price," he wrote home.

When cotton retailed high in New York, slaveholders in Mississippi bought people. When cotton went low,

they did not. In winter 1848, cotton was down. "Not a single offer," Waller wrote.

His trip on the Slave Trail, like most others', would end in Natchez and New Orleans. Buyers by the hundreds crammed the viewing rooms of dealers in Natchez and the auction halls of brokers in New Orleans.

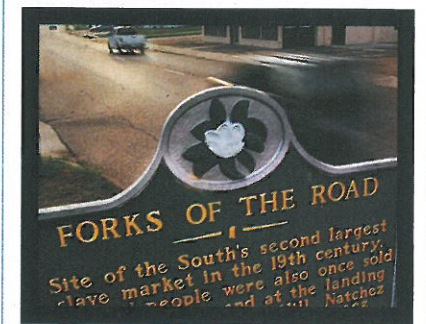
There was one place en route, however, with a small slave market—Aberdeen, Mississippi. Waller decided to try to sell one or two people there. At Tupelo, he made a daylong detour to Aberdeen but soon despaired over his prospects there: The market was crowded "with nearly 200 negroes held by those who have relations & friends, who of course aid them in selling."

Waller dragged his gang northwest, four days and 80 miles, to Oxford, but found no buyers. "What to do or where to go I know not—I am surrounded by difficulty," he brooded. "I am enveloped in darkness; but still, strange to say, I live upon hope, the friend of man."

It is peculiar that a man can pity himself for being unable to sell a room-

to a one-room barbershop with a corrugated metal front. Pretense and bluster rub shoulders with the plain and dejected. The old railroad station, a wooden building with deep eaves, is a used-record store.

Near a school playground in the middle of Raymond, I find the Dabney family graveyard, surrounded by an iron fence. Several of Thomas Dabney's children lie beneath granite stones. His plantation is gone, but this is where he arranged for a married couple, neighbors, to see Waller's Virginia gang. "They came to look at my negroes & wanted to buy seven or eight, but they



"THEOPHILUS FREEMAN, WHO SOLD SOLOMON NORTHUP, OF TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE, OPERATED OVER THERE... BY 1835 THIS PLACE WAS ABUZZ WITH LONG-DISTANCE TRADERS."

ful of teenagers he has known since their birth, but as Florence Blair says, that's what it was.

"My plan is; take my negroes to Raymond about 150 miles from here and put them with Mr. Dabney and look out for purchasers," Waller told his wife. Thomas Dabney was an acquaintance from Virginia who had moved to Raymond, on the Natchez Trace, 12 years earlier and doubled his already thick riches as a cotton planter. "He writes me word that a neighbor of his will take six if we can agree upon price."

Today as then, Raymond, Mississippi, is a crossroads, population 2,000. At the central square are the contradictions of a Deep South village, both of Waller's time and the present. A magnificent Greek Revival courthouse stands next

objected to the price," Waller said. Dabney told him that "I must not take less than my price—they were worth it."

Waller was touched. "Is not this kind?" He later wrote home, "I have sold! Sarah & child \$800... Henry \$800. Sarah Ann \$675, Louisa \$650. Lucy \$550... Col. Dabney has taken Henry and is security for the balance—the three sisters to one man." He was relieved. "All to as kind masters as can be found."

Sarah Waller wrote in return, "I was much pleased to learn by your letter that you had sold at such fine prices." Then she added, "I wish you could have sold more of them."

Waller himself was a little defensive about this people-selling business. He complained that his wife's brother

Samuel had condescended to him a few months before. "Samuel Garland said something about negro trading that makes me infer the Church is displeased with me. As far as I am concerned I have had pain enough on the subject without being censured in this quarter."

The remainder of the gang pushed on to Natchez.

Natchez, pearl of the state, stands on a bluff above the Mississippi. Beautiful houses, an antique village, a large tourist trade. But the tourist money is fairly recent. "There is no branch of trade, in this part of the country, more brisk and profitable than that of buying and selling negroes," a traveler named Estwick Evans wrote about Natchez in the early 19th century.

Just outside town, the Trace comes to an end at a shabby intersection. This is Forks of the Road, the Y-shaped junction formed by St. Catherine Street and Old Courthouse Road, where Isaac Franklin presided. His slave pen appears on old maps, labeled "negro mart."

See more historical images related to the Slave Trail at Smithsonian.com/trace

of Mr. Ware," as he put it, "I passed over a hundred miles with no white persons visible and got here to Natchez in four days." He trotted into town in early 1848, the dwindling gang behind him. "This is the oldest settled portion of the state and bears the appearance of great comfort, refinement and elegance," Waller wrote.

He was not describing the Forks, a mile east of the "nice" part of town. At the Forks, Waller found a poke salad of low wooden buildings, long and narrow, each housing a dealer, each with a porch and a dirt yard in front. The yards were parade grounds that worked like showrooms. In the morning during winter, the high selling season, black people were marched in circles in front of the dealers' shacks.

Slaves for sale wore a uniform of sorts. "The men dressed in navy blue suits with shiny brass buttons . . . as they marched singly and by twos and threes in a circle," wrote Felix Hadsell, a local man. "The women wore calico dresses and white aprons" and a pink ribbon at the neck with hair carefully braided. The display was weirdly silent. "No commands given by anyone, no noise about it, no talking in the ranks, no laughter or merriment," just marching, round and round.

After an hour of this, the showing of the "lively" stock, the enslaved stood in rows on long overhanging porches.

They were sorted by sex and size and made to stand in sequence. Men on one side, in order of height and weight, women on the other. A typical display placed an 8-year-old girl on the left end of a line, and then ten people like stair steps up to the right end, ending with a 30-year-old woman, who might be the first girl's mother. This sorting arrangement meant that it was more likely children would be sold from their parents.

At the Forks, there were no auctions, only haggling. Buyers looked at the people, took them inside, made them undress, studied their teeth, told them to dance, asked them about their work, and, most important, looked at their backs. The inspection of the back made or broke the deal. Many people had scars from whipping. For buyers, these were interpreted not as signs of a master's cru-

elty, but of a worker's defiance. A "clean back" was a rarity, and it raised the price.

After examining the people on display, a buyer would talk to a seller and negotiate. It was like buying a car today.

"Call me Ser Boxley," he says. "It is an abbreviation, to accommodate people."

The man in the South who has done the most to call attention to the Slave Trail was born in Natchez in 1940. His parents named him Clifton M. Boxley. During the black power years of the 1960s he renamed himself Ser Seshsh Ab Heter. "That's the type of name I should have had if traditional African cultures had stayed intact, compared to Clifton Boxley, which is the plantation name, or slave name," he says.

Ser Boxley was a big young man during the 1950s, raised in the strait-jacket of Jim Crow.

"I tried picking cotton right here, outside Natchez, and I never could pick 100 pounds," he says. Machines did not replace human hands until the 1960s. "You would get paid \$3 for 100 pounds of picking cotton—that is, if you were lucky to find a farmer who would employ you."

Boxley is 75. He is bearded white and gray, and half bald. He is direct, assertive and arresting, with a full baritone voice. He does not make small talk.

"I am drafted by the inactivity of others to do history work," he tells me. "I want to resurrect the history of the enslavement trade, and for 20 years, that is where I've focused."

He carries a poster, 4 by 6 feet, in the back of his red Nissan truck. It reads, in uppercase Helvetica, "STAND UP HELP SAVE FORKS OF THE ROAD 'SLAVE' MARKET SITES NATCHEZ MS." He often holds the sign while standing next to the patch of grass that is the only visible remnant of Forks of the Road.

When I meet Boxley he wears red pants, brown slip-ons and a blue T-shirt that says, "Juneteenth—150th Anniversary." Since 1995, he has annoyed the state of Mississippi and worried tourist managers with his singular obsession to mark the lives of those who passed down the Slave Trail through Forks of the Road.

He lives alone in a five-room cottage

in a black section of town, away from the camera-ready center of Natchez. The tan clapboard house—folding chairs and a hammock in the front yard, cinder blocks and planks for front steps—overflows inside with books, LPs, folk art, old newspapers, knickknacks, clothes in piles and unidentifiable hoards of objects.

"Watch out for my Jim Crow kitchen," he says from the other room.

In the kitchen are mammy salt shakers, black lawn jockeys, Uncle Tom figurines and memorabilia of other irritating kinds—lithographs of pickaninnies eating watermelon, an "African" figure in a grass skirt, a poster for Country Style Corn Meal featuring a bandanna-wearing, 200-pound black woman.

In a front room, a parallel—dozens of photos of the slave factories of Ghana and Sierra Leone, where captives were held before being sent to the Americas.

Boxley left Natchez in 1960, at age 20. He spent 35 years in California as an activist, as a teacher, as a foot soldier in anti-poverty programs. He came home to Natchez in 1995 and discovered Forks of the Road.

The site is empty but for the five markers, paid for by the City of Natchez. The current names of the streets that form the Forks—Liberty Road and D'Evereaux Drive—differ from the old ones.

"I wrote the text for four of the markers," he says, sitting on a bench and looking over the grass. "You feel something here? That's good. They say there were no feelings here."

He tells the back story. "In 1833, John Armfield shipped a gang of people to Natchez, where Isaac Franklin received them. Some had cholera, and these enslaved people died. Franklin disposed of their bodies in a bayou down the road. They were discovered, and it caused a panic. The city government passed an ordinance that banned all long-distance dealers selling people within the city limits. So they relocated here, at this

GUARDIAN OF THE FORKS Ser Boxley (right) returned to his hometown of Natchez at age 55. "Nowhere in this chattel-slavery museum town could I find . . . stories that reflected the African-American presence."



junction, a few feet outside the city line.

"Isaac Franklin put a building right where that muffler shop is—see the peach-colored shed, across the street? Theophilus Freeman, who sold Solomon Northup, of *Twelve Years a Slave*, operated over there. Across the street was another set of buildings and dealers. You have Robert H. Elam operating in the site over there. By 1835 this place was abuzz with long-distance traders.

"When I got back to Natchez, at age 55, I saw the large tourism industry, and I noticed that nowhere in this chattel-slavery museum town could I find, readily and visibly, stories that reflected the African-American presence." So he started advocating for the Forks.

He waves to a passing Ford.

"Ten years ago there was an old beer garden standing on this site, where whites watched football and drank, and there was a gravel lot where trucks were parked." The city bought the half-acre lot in 1999, thanks largely to his agitation. Since 2007, a proposal to incorporate the site into the National Park Service has been creeping toward approval. An act of Congress is needed.

"My aim is to preserve every inch of dirt in this area," Boxley says. "I am fighting for our enslaved ancestors. And this site speaks to their denied humanity, and to their contributions, and to America's domestic slave traffickers. The public recognition for Forks of the Road is for the ancestors who cannot speak for themselves."

I ask him to play a debating game. Imagine a white woman asks a question: *This story is hard for me to listen to and to understand. Can you tell it in a way that is not going to injure my sensitivity?*

"You got the wrong person to ask about sparing your feelings," Boxley replies. "I don't spare anything. It is the humanity of our ancestors denied that I am interested in. This story is your story as well as an African-American story. In

UNMARKED HISTORY New Orleans was the biggest slave market in the country. Curator Erin Greenwald (above) says the city's total number of slavery-related monuments, markers or historic sites is precisely one.



fact, it is more your story than it is mine."

A black man asks: *I am a middle-class father. I work for the government, I go to church, have two kids, and I say this story is too painful. Can you put it aside?*

Boxley lets less than a second pass. "I say, your great-great-grandparents were enslaved persons. The only reason your black behind is here at all is because somebody survived that deal. The only reason why we are in America is because our ancestors were force-brought in chains to help build the country. The way you transcend the hurt and pain is to face the situation, experience it and cleanse yourself, to allow the humanity of our ancestors and their suffering to wash through you and settle into your spirit."

A hundred yards from Forks of the Road, there is a low brick bridge across a narrow creek. It is 12 feet wide, 25 feet long and covered with kudzu, buried beneath mud and brush.

"A month ago the bridge was uncovered with a backhoe by a developer," Boxley says. "Hundreds of thousands crossed this way—migrants, enslaved people, whites, Indians." He turns.

"Peace out," he says, and he is gone.

William Waller left for New Orleans during the second week of January 1848, taking an 18-hour steamboat ride. James Ware, Waller's broker, was having no luck selling the truncated coffer in Mississippi. Among them were the field hand Nelson, plus

his wife; a man called Piney Woods Dick and another nicknamed Run-away Boots. There was also Mitchell, a boy of 10 or 11, and Foster, 20-ish and strong, his "prize hand." In Louisiana the top prices could be had for a "buck," a muscled man bound for the hell of the sugar fields.

Waller had never been to such a big city. "You cannot imagine it," he wrote home. As the steamboat churned to dock, it passed ships berthed five or six deep, "miles of them, from all nations of the earth, bringing in their products and carrying away ours." The arrival, gangplank on the levee, cargo everywhere. "You then have to squeeze through a countless multitude of men, women, and children of all ages, tongues, and colors of the earth until you get into the city proper."

He had heard bad things about New Orleans, expected to be frightened by it, and was. The people "are made in part of the worst portion of the human race," he wrote. "No wonder that there should be robberies and assassinations in such a population."

Greenwald, a curator at the Historic New Orleans Collection. "There is one marker on a wall outside a restaurant called Maspero's. But what it says is wrong. The slave-trade site it mentions, Maspero's Exchange, was diagonally across the street from the sandwich place."

Greenwald stands in front of two beige livery coats hanging behind a pane of glass. The labels in the coats once read, "Brooks Brothers." She is in the French Quarter, in a gallery of the archive where she works, and all around her are artifacts about the slave trade. The two livery coats, big-buttoned and long-tailed, were worn by an enslaved carriage driver and a doorman.

"Brooks Brothers was top-of-the-line slave clothing," Greenwald says. "Slave traders would issue new clothes for people they had to sell, but they were usually cheaper." She is petite, talkative, knowledgeable and precise. This year, she curated an exhibition at the Historic New Orleans Collection, "Purchased Lives: New Orleans and the Domestic Slave Trade, 1808-1865."

people's names, their color and place of origin. "All these people came from Virginia," she says. "So it is likely they were force-marched from Albemarle County, Virginia, to Louisville, and then boarded a steamer downriver to here." She waves a hand toward the Mississippi levee two blocks away.

She points to a beautiful piece of silk printed with the sentence, "Slaves must be cleared at the Customs House." "It's a sign that probably hung in staterooms on steamships." A kind of check-your-luggage announcement.

"Now those," gesturing at some more yellowed papers, "are the worst for me," she says. "They are a manifest, or list, of one group of 110 people moved by Isaac Franklin in 1829. They record the names, heights, ages, sex and coloration as determined by the person looking at them. And there are many children on the list alone. . . ."

"You have this understanding that children were involved. But here is a group with dozens, aged 10 to 12. Louisiana had a law that said children under 10 could not be separated from their

"ONE THING THAT IS HARD TO DOCUMENT BUT IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE IS THE 'FANCY TRADE.' THE 'FANCY TRADE' MEANT WOMEN SOLD AS FORCIBLE SEX PARTNERS."

During the 50 years of the Slave Trail, perhaps half a million people born in the United States were sold in New Orleans, more than all the Africans brought to the country during two centuries of the Middle Passage across the Atlantic.

New Orleans, the biggest slave market in the country, had about 50 people-selling companies in the 1840s. Some whites went to the slave auctions for entertainment. Especially for travelers, the markets were a rival to the French Opera House and the Théâtre d'Orléans.

Today in New Orleans, the number of monuments, markers and historic sites that refer in some way to the domestic slave trade is quite small. I make a first estimate: zero.

"No, that's not true," says Erin

As she talks and points out objects, I notice something I had never seen during many visits to this archive: black people. Although the Historic New Orleans Collection is the city's most serious and extensive history center, it attracted few blacks until this year.

"We in New Orleans have come a long way since Hurricane Katrina in terms of the comfort level of addressing certain subjects. Katrina was cataclysmic, and it changed the way people thought about our collective history," Greenwald says. "We had never done a dedicated exhibition on the slave trade, on slavery. And it was really past time."

She points to a document from the steamer *Hibernia*, which arrived from Louisville in 1831. The paper lists

mothers. And you see a lot of records in which there are an unusual number of 10-year-olds alone. These children were not 10. They were probably younger, but nobody was checking."

Developing the exhibit, Greenwald and her team created a database of names of the enslaved who were shipped from the Eastern states to New Orleans. William Waller and his gang, and other hundreds of thousands arriving by foot, did not leave traces in government records. But people who arrived by ship did.

"We studied hundreds of shipping manifests and compiled a list of 70,000 names. Of course, that is only some."

In 1820, the number of ships carrying slaves from Eastern ports into

New Orleans was 604. In 1827, it was 1,359. In 1835, it was 4,723. Each carried 5 to 50 slaves.

The auction advertisements at the end of the Slave Trail always said, "Virginia and Maryland Negroes."

"The words 'Virginia Negroes' signaled a kind of brand," Greenwald says. "It meant compliant, gentle and not broken by overwork."

"One thing that is hard to document but impossible to ignore is the 'fancy trade.' New Orleans had a niche market. The 'fancy trade' meant women sold as forcible sex partners. They were women of mixed race, invariably. So-called mulatresses."

Isaac Franklin was all over this market. In 1833, he wrote the office back in Virginia about "fancy girls" he had on hand, and about one in particular whom he wanted. "I sold your fancy girl Alice for \$800," Franklin wrote to Rice Ballard, a partner then in Richmond. "There is great demand for fancy maids, [but] I was disappointed in not finding your Charlottesville

you can see in faded paint its old sign, which reads, "— CHANGE." The St. Louis Hotel was razed in 1916, but it was in the hotel that the Slave Trail ended in the most spectacular scenes.

At the center of the hotel was a rotunda 100 feet in diameter—"over which rises a dome as lofty as a church spire," a reporter for the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* wrote. "The floor is a marble mosaic. One half the circumference of the rotunda is occupied by the bar of the hotel," and the other half by entrances to the vaulted room. There were two auction stands, each five feet above the floor, on either side of the rotunda. And beneath the dome, with sunlight shafting down through windows in the apse, both auction stands did business simultaneously, in French and in English.

"The auctioneer was a handsome young man, devoting himself exclusively to the sale of young mulatto women," the reporter wrote of a sale in 1855. "On the block was one of the most beautiful young women I ever saw. She

begged her new master to "buy little Jimmie too," but he refused, and the child was dragged away. "She burst forth in the most frantic wails that ever despair gave utterance to."

William Waller's depression lifted after he left New Orleans and returned to Mississippi. "I have sold out all my negroes to one man for eight thousand dollars!" he told his wife. Then came second thoughts, and more self-pity: "I have not obtained as much as I expected, but I try and be satisfied."

James Ware, the slave dealer Waller had met in Natchez, had come through on the sales, and he offered Waller an itemized statement. "The whole amount of sales for the twenty"—the entire group that had come with him from Virginia—"is \$12,675." (About \$400,000 now.) The journey ended, the business done, Waller headed home. It was March 13, 1848.

"I am now waiting for a safe boat to set out for you," he wrote. "Perhaps in an hour I may be on the river."

"'AIN'T YOU MY CHILD?'" GLENN RECALLED. " 'TELL ME, AIN'T YOU MY CHILD WHOM I LEFT ON THE ROAD NEAR MR. MOORE'S BEFORE THE WAR?'"

maid that you promised me." Franklin told the Virginia office to send the "Charlottesville maid" right away by ship. "Will you send her out or shall I charge you \$1,100 for her?"

To maximize her price, Franklin might have sold the "Charlottesville maid" at one of the public auctions in the city. "And the auction setting of choice was a place called the St. Louis Hotel," Greenwald says, "a block from here."

The St. Louis Hotel is one of several places that can be identified as once-upon-a-time slave-trading sites. Next door to it was another, the New Orleans Exchange. The exchange's granite facade can be still found on Chartres Street near the corner of St. Louis Street. On the lintel above the door

was about sixteen, dressed in a cheap striped woolen gown, and bareheaded."

Her name was Hermina. "She was sold for \$1250 to one of the most lecherous-looking old brutes I ever set eyes on," the reporter noted. That is the equivalent of \$35,000 today.

Here, too, in the St. Louis Hotel's beautiful vaulted room, families at the end of the Slave Trail were divided. The same reporter described "a noble-looking woman with a bright-eyed seven-year-old." When mother and boy stepped onto the platform, however, no bids came for them, and the auctioneer decided on the spur of the moment to put the boy on sale separately. He was sold to a man from Mississippi, his mother to a man from Texas. The mother

On April 1, Waller reached home. His wife and children greeted him. Also, an elderly black woman named Charity, whom he and Sarah had kept at home, knowing that no one would offer money for her. The slave cabins were vacant.

The first polite questions appeared in newspapers in the summer of 1865, right after the Civil War and Emancipation. Former slaves—there were four million—asked by word of mouth, but that went nowhere, and so they put announcements in the papers, trying to find mothers and sisters, children and husbands swept away from them by the Slave Trail.

Hannah Cole was one of them, maybe the first. On June 24, 1865, two months after the truce at Appomattox,

in a Philadelphia newspaper called the *Christian Recorder*, she posted this:

Information Wanted. Can anyone inform me of the whereabouts of John Person, the son of Hannah Person, of Alexandria, Va., who belonged to Alexander Sancter? I have not seen him for ten years. I was sold to Joseph Bruin, who took me to New Orleans. My name was then Hannah Person, it is now Hannah Cole. This is the only child I have and I desire to find him much.

It was not an easy matter to place an ad. It took two days' wages if you earned 50 cents a day, what "freedpeople"—a new word—were starting to get for work. It meant hiring someone who could write. Literacy had been against the law for slaves, so few of the four million knew how to write.

But the idea grew.

The editors of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* published their paper in New Orleans, but it went out to Methodist preachers in Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas and Louisiana. The paper started a column called "Lost Friends," a page on which people called out for family that had disappeared on the Slave Trail. One lost friend wrote:

Mr. Editor—I was bred and born in Virginia, but am unable to name the county, for I was so young that I don't recollect it; but I remember I lived twelve miles from a town called Danville. . . . I was sold to a speculator whose name was Wm. Ferrill and was brought to Mobile, Alabama at the age of 10 years. To my recollection my father's name was Joseph, and my mother's Milly, my brother's Anthony, and my sister's Maria. . . . My name was Annie Ferrill, but my owners changed my name.

The black churches picked it up. Every Sunday, preachers around the South looked out at congregations and read announcements from "Lost Friends" and columns like it. A message from a woman who had been snatched from her mother when she was a girl might reach hundreds of thousands.

I wish to inquire for my relatives, whom I left in Virginia about 25 years ago. My mother's name was Matilda; she lived near Wilton, Va., and belonged to a

Mr. Percifield. I was sold with a younger sister—Bettie. My name was Mary, and I was nine years old when sold to a trader named Walker, who carried us to North Carolina. Bettie was sold to a man named Reed, and I was sold and carried to New Orleans and from there to Texas. I had a brother, Sam, and a sister, Annie, who were left with mother. If they are alive, I will be glad to hear from them. Address me at Morales, Jackson Co., Texas.—Mary Haynes.”

Year after year the notices spread—hundreds, and then thousands. They continued in black newspapers until World War I, fully 50 years after Emancipation.

For almost everyone, the break was permanent, the grief everlasting. But the historian Heather Williams has unearthed a handful of reunions. One in particular gives the flavor.

Robert Glenn was sold at age 8 from his mother and father in North Carolina and spent the rest of his childhood in Kentucky. After Emancipation, now a “freedman” of about 20, Glenn remembered the name of his hometown—Roxboro. He knew how rare this was, so he decided to go back to his birthplace and look for his parents.

“I made a vow that I was going to North Carolina and see my mother if she was still living. I had plenty of money for the trip,” he said. After a few days Glenn turned up in Roxboro. And there, in an accident hardly repeated by any of the million on the Slave Trail of Tears, he found his mother.

“I shook my mother’s hand and held it a little too long, and she suspicioned something,” Glenn said. She had seen him last when he was 8, and did not recognize him. The expectation of so many slaves was that their families would be annihilated, and so it became important to be able to forget.

“Then she came to me and said, ‘Ain’t you my child?’” Glenn recalled. “‘Tell me, ain’t you my child whom I left on the road near Mr. Moore’s before the war?’ I broke down and began to cry. I did not know before I came home whether my parents were dead or alive.” And now, “mother nor father did not know me.”○