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COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATION

WILLIAM A. PROVINE, D.D., *Editor*,
30 Memorial Building, Nashville, Tenn.

JOHN H. DEWITT, LL.D., *President*,
405 Seventh Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn.

J. TYREE FAIN, *Treasurer*,
Nashville Trust Building, Nashville, Tenn.

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LETTERS TO A PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES*

BY WM. E. BEARD

“Would you mind looking over a lot of old papers to see if they have any historical value?”

The message came from a friend who was dismantling a handsome old home. To an amateur antiquary such a prospect was more alluring than a picnic invitation to a young child, and advantage was taken of it at the first opportunity.

A letter selected from the somewhat dusty mass of papers, singled out because of the conspicuous dab of wax with which it was sealed, looked promising. The sealing wax bore the imprint of a figure and around it was inscribed in capitals “PRESIDENT U. S.”

An examination of the contents revealed that the letter was written by John Tyler at the “President’s Mansion, Wednesday Morning,” to James K. Polk, the President-elect, asking permission to postpone a dinner to the Polks and the Vice-president-elect, preliminary to the change in administration, from “Friday night” to the night following, March 1, 1845, as the former date was “the anniversary of the very melancholy affair on board the Princeton, which involved in the same fate with others, Mr. Gardiner, the father of Mrs. Tyler.”

The reason for the postponement recalled the gay excursion down the Potomac with its ghastly denouement, the explosion of the Princeton’s big gun while surrounded by half the notables of Washington, and the ensuing romance which terminated in the marriage of the beautiful Julia Gardiner to the Old Dominion’s last President.

The next letter examined was not so suggestive of interest, nor the next. Then came one from Kinderhook, N. Y., introducing one of Martin Van Buren’s friends to President Polk, and then directly the acceptance by “Mrs. Madison” of a White House dinner invitation. And so the examination went on.

*James K. Polk.

AFRICAN SLAVERY AS I KNEW IT IN SOUTHERN ARKANSAS*

REV. S. H. CHESTER, DD.

I was born at the little village of Mount Holly in Southern Arkansas on January 17th, 1851. Our community consisted of about a dozen families, nearly all of them personally related as members of the Highland Clan of Middle North Carolina, nearly all of them communing members of the Presbyterian Church, all of them farmers engaged in raising cotton on the lands sold to them as pioneer settlers for a nominal price by the government, and all of them owners of African slaves. They were also a high toned, honorable, pious God fearing people.

Of slavery as an institution, as it existed in the South before the Civil War, or anywhere else in the world at any time in the world's history, I am far from being an apologist. All intelligent Southerners are now glad that it is sixty years behind us, even more for the slave-holders sake than for that of his former slaves. Apart from the question of its morality or immorality it is an institution inherently susceptible of cruel abuse, and my blood boils now when I remember some of the abuses of it I personally witnessed in my boyhood days. But these abuses were practically non-existent in the little colony with which this story is concerned, and many others like it all over the Southern States.

PLANTATION LIFE

My father was the owner of about a dozen slaves. Some members of our colony owned as many as thirty or forty. They were housed in the same kind of one-room log cabin that the boys of the family and any surplus visiting friends were housed in. In winter they were clothed in the manner required for their comfort and health, as both the self-interest and the humanity of their owners dictated. They were fed abundantly from the same vegetable garden and the same smoke-house and store room that supplied the family table.

In the following incidents, illustrating our relations with them I use only their given names, as they did not usually assume surnames until after emancipation. As titles of respect the older ones were called "Uncle" and "Aunt."

"UNCLE ANDREW"—GENTLEMAN OF THE OLD-SCHOOL

Andrew was the son of an imported African. He was very bright mentally and a very fine specimen of physical

*A Chapter from *Pioneer Days in Arkansas*. See p. 209.

manhood. The children of the family taught him to read and write and he soon learned enough arithmetic to keep accounts. He was proud and high spirited and could never be brought to recognize anyone but his owner as in authority over him. As my father's medical practice kept him much away from home, and because of Andrew's character and intelligence, he was installed as foreman of the plantation. He was allowed a piece of ground to cultivate for himself on which he usually raised about two bales of cotton, which were sold with the plantation crop and the proceeds applied, in part to the purchase of a Sunday suit of clothes, and in part to the purchase of flour and molasses, out of which his wife made ginger-cakes which were sold at a handsome profit to the children of the Old Field School. On Sunday morning he usually appeared dressed for church in his broad-cloth suit and silk top hat and white starched shirt and high collar, in spirit and in appearance, except for his color, a veritable gentleman of the old school. He was in every way a much superior man to some of his race that figured as members of Congress and Governors of States in reconstruction days. What became of him after emancipation we never knew. His wife belonged to a neighbor who refugeed with his slaves to Texas during the War and he was sold to go with his wife, and never returned to Arkansas. The custom of selling their slaves promiscuously and separating families was one which did not prevail in our colony. True, he did not represent a very numerous type, but on almost every Southern plantation there would be one or more like him whose relation to their owner had little more of slavery in it than the name.

MANUEL THE SHOE-BLACK

Andrew had a brother named Manuel, who was lazy and good-for-nothing and a great night prowler. He must have sat for the picture on the box top of Mason's blacking. He was our shoe-black and in imagination I can see him now as he sat in front of his cabin on Sunday morning with his shoe brush, brushing and nodding alternately. He was a thief and one night broke into the village store. Hearing foot-steps approaching he tried to make his exit through the back window, but after making his jump found himself fast stuck in an open barrel of tar. The only thing about him that suggested any association with the good was that he died young, before the day of emancipation, and thereby escaped finishing his career in the State prison.

SAM, THE AFRICAN

"Uncle" Sam was a native African, old and infirm as I first remember him. His shoulders were stooped, and his

hair and whiskers were white, emphasizing by contrast the blackness of his skin. His teeth were also white and perfectly preserved, and as they stood out conspicuously from his prognathous jaw gave an almost animal aspect to his general appearance. He never learned to speak English except in a broken and almost unintelligible way. All the children were mortally afraid of him, and although we could not resist the temptation to tease him occasionally all he had to do was to turn and jabber at us to put us to ignominious flight. His job was to drive up the cows from their range in the woods and separate them from their calves for their milking. On one of these expeditions he got lost and wandered about in the woods for a week with nothing to eat but roots and berries, and, as he declared, so frightened at night by the screaming of panthers and the howling of wolves that he did not sleep at all.

He seemed to know instinctively when his time to die had come, and, not wishing to be annoyed by deathbed attentions, went into the woods and lay down at the root of a tree and died.

Supposing such as he to be brought to this country from Africa it is a fair question what would become of them if left to their own resources with no one to take care of them?

ALEX, THE PLAYMATE

My most intimate friend and companion was a boy of my own age, named Alex, with whom I roamed the fields and woods in search of mischief and adventure, and hauled nuts from the woods at Christmas time in a wagon of our own manufacture, with a goods-box body and black gum wheels, with a yoke of unbroken yearlings which could only be held in parallel position by tying their tails together. Our friendship was cemented by many a joint experience of castigation when we were caught, as was often the case, cooperating in some flagrant misdemeanor.

BERRYMAN, THE GARDENER

“Uncle” Berryman, was my mother’s gardener and was a horticultural artist. In his half-acre garden, every vegetable of that climate grew under his tillage in perfection. His beds were arranged in symmetrical squares and borders with roses and pinks and geraniums and heliotrope, and his garden fence was covered with the yellow jessamine vine, which in the early spring lit up the entire scene with a blaze of glory. Although illiterate, he was a Virginia gentleman of courtly manners and of keen native wit. He was also very religious, and in talking with the young people, white

and black, much of his conversation was on that subject. In his preachments to us he dealt largely in the terrors of the law. One of his theological tenets was that up to nine years of age, our parents were responsible for us, but after that if we died without being converted we would certainly be lost. Accepting his view of the matter without question, I remember that I looked forward almost with terror to the day when I would be nine years old.

An old woman belonging to my uncle whom we called "Granny" held the view that the age of responsibility was twelve years and when my brother one morning proudly announced to her his twelfth birthday he was greeted with the reply, "Yes, jis ready now to die and go to hell!"

BILL, THE SPORT

Bill was a young man of sportive disposition. He was fond of playing the banjo for the other negroes to dance by, and was thereby a grief of mind to Uncle Berryman. One evening Uncle Berryman climbed to the top of his cabin for his evening prayer, made in a voice that could be heard across the yard. He prayed first for every member of the family by name, and then paid his respects to Bill as follows: "Lord hab mercy on dat dar Bill, for Thou knowest he's a torn down rahscal."

He served as body servant to my older brother in the War, having frequent opportunities to obtain his freedom by escaping to the Federal lines, of which he never sought to avail himself.

RECONSTRUCTION DAYS

After the War, under our "Carpet-Bag" regime, the negroes were often incited to assert their alleged withheld rights by force if necessary. The result was a constant succession of alarms and rumors of uprisings. It happened one night that all the family had gone from home except myself, and that late in the afternoon a rumor was circulated of a threatened uprising that night. I did not believe it, but naturally felt some anxiety and decided to sit up and read instead of going to bed. Sitting with my gun across my lap I read until about two o'clock in the morning, when I heard foot-steps coming up to my door which opened on the back yard. I could not imagine for what friendly purpose anyone would be coming to my room at that hour, so I stood up, gun in hand, and answered the visitor's knock by an invitation to come in. Uncle Berryman opened the door, and as he saw my attitude, exclaimed: "What is you doin' wid dat dar gun?" I answered, "Well, Berryman, what are you doing at my room door at two o'clock in the morn-

ing?" He had seen my light shining through the crack of his cabin a hundred yard away, and thinking I must be sick, or that something must be wrong, had come to see about it. Somehow I could never feel any more uneasiness about uprisings, and if anyone had attempted to do me harm, I feel sure that Berryman would have answered my call for help and would have risked his own life in my defense.

WILLIS, MORE MOUTH THAN WISDOM

Willis, our house boy was of a physical type that has been made famous in the picture of the "Gold Dust Twins." He had a very black skin and very white teeth and a mouth like a large red rose. He had great self-confidence, and when told that the War was over and that he was free, he went immediately to the County seat to interview the new officials in the hope of getting into politics. Not succeeding in this, he returned home and announced to Uncle Berryman his purpose to enter the gospel ministry, whereupon the following conversation ensued:

Uncle B. "What is you gwine to preach about? You don't know nuthin' to preach."

Willis: "Yes, but the Lawd said he'd be mouf and wisdom unto me."

Uncle B.; "Well, he sho gi' you mouf, but I aint seen whar he gi' you any wisdom yit."

Willis spent about a year seeking employment in some gentlemen's occupation, but had finally to return to the one for which he was trained. With the politeness and graciousness of manner characteristic of his race, he had no superior as a house servant. As long as he lived he paid periodical visits to the old home and never ceased to regard himself as a member of the family.

JACOB, THE PIOUS

Jacob was for many years a trusted family servant of my uncle Colin McRae, and was allowed free access to everything about the house. He was ostentatiously pious and an important member of the colored Baptist Church. But after emancipation he fell from grace and stole a hog. He was called up for consultation as to what might be done about it, for it was a matter of family distress, and the following conversation ensued:

Mr. McR.: "Well Jacob, I am very sorry, but I have lost confidence in you."

Jacob: "Well Marse Colin, I aint los confidence in you yit."

The appeal was irresistible and through the family intercession he was saved that time from the clutches of the

law. He proved unable, however, to resist similar subsequent temptations and had finally to go to the penitentiary.

OVERSEERS

The relations of master and slave that I have been describing were practically universal on the smaller plantations, where the owner and the sons of the family acted as managers. It was on the larger estates where "overseers" were employed that the abuses referred to were chiefly found. The profession of overseer was regarded as incompatible with social respectability, and by the negroes they were both hated and despised. There was only one farm in our community on which an overseer was employed, and the way he was regarded by both white and black was revealed in this incident:

His name (which I venture to give because he was never married and it now has no living representative) was Robert Goodwin—familiarly called "Bob Good'n." On one occasion a woman on the place applied for admission to the Baptist Church and according to the requirements of that Church she was asked to relate her experience of conversion to the congregation. Her account ran about as follows:

"One day I was walkin' across de field and stumped my toe and fell down and said 'dam it.' When I got up I felt awful bad, and went and axed Ole Missis what must I do. Ole Missis said 'go pray.' I went and prayed and kept on prayin' till at las I felt sho de Lawd had forgive me." She was then asked if she had any hard feelings against anybody. She answered, "No, I believes I loves ev'body. I love Ole Missis and Ole Marster and Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Marse Henry and all de good folks heah in de church. I loves ev'body cep'n 'tis Bob Good'n." The exception was sustained and she was unanimously voted in.

ROB, THE COON-HUNTER

Between one of our slaves named Rob and our entire family there was a devoted attachment that survived the War and lasted until the day of his death. He was the companion of our coon hunts and many a night sitting at the root of a tree up which a coon had taken refuge, waiting for daybreak to cut the tree, Rob entertained us with "Uncle Remus" stories which his forebears had brought from Africa long before Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus had been heard of. There were some variations in the stories, but they belonged to the same African folk lore.

THE "ARMY OF OCCUPATION"

For several years after the War we had an "Army of Occupation" which ran true to form, marching over the coun-

try and taking what they wanted without consent or compensation. My father had a handsome black horse named "Rebel" which he rode in his medical practice and which was a great family pet. One day Rebel was standing hitched at the front gate when a company of soldiers passed by. Without asking any questions they took him along with them. That afternoon Rob failed to report for his usual work about the house, and we wondered if he had at last forsaken us and gone over to the enemy. But next morning about sunrise he appeared on Rebel's back, who was breathing heavily and flecked with foam. He had followed the soldiers on foot twenty miles to where they had camped for the night. He concealed himself till everything was quiet and the lights were out, and then quietly unhitched the horse and sprung on his back and started at a gallop for home. There was a broad grin on his face when he arrived, and the welcome he received was of course enthusiastic. This act of devotion to the family interest was done at the risk of his life, for of course if he had been discovered, he would immediately have become the target for a fusillade of musket balls.

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 And so these good people solved their race problem. And only so can the much more difficult and complicated race and class problems that abound in all parts of the earth be solved, by the privileged classes, so long as there are privileged classes, exercising their privilege in a spirit of justice and kindness to those holding the unprivileged position.

Montreat, N. C.