
69. Letter by a Fugitive Slave (1840)

Source: Letter from Joseph Taper to Joseph Long, November 11, 1840 in the Joseph Long Papers located in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University. Reprinted with the permission of Duke University Manuscript Library.

No one knows how many slaves succeeded in escaping from bondage before the Civil War—a rough estimate would be around 1,000 per year. Some settled in northern cities like Boston, Cincinnati, and New York. But because the Constitution required that fugitives be returned to slavery, many continued northward until they reached Canada.

Formidable obstacles confronted fugitive slaves, including the presence of slave patrols in every southern county. Not surprisingly, most successful runaways originated in states that bordered on freedom, such as Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky, rather than in the Deep South. One was Joseph Taper, a slave in Frederick County, Virginia, who in 1837 ran away to Pennsylvania with his wife and children. Two years later, learning that a “slave catcher” was in the neighborhood, he and his family fled to Canada. In 1840, Taper wrote the following letter to a white acquaintance in Virginia. He recounted some of his experiences, and rejoiced in finally living in a country where slavery did not exist and the law treated all persons equally regardless of race.

ST. CATHERINES W C, NOV 11th 1840

Dear Sir,

I now take this opportunity to inform you that I am in a land of liberty, in good health. After I left Winchester I staid in Pennsylvania two years, and there met some of your neighbors who lived in the house opposite you, & they were very glad to see me; from there I moved to this place where I arrived in the month of August 1839.

I worked in Erie Penn where I met many of our neighbors from New Town. I there recieved 26 dollars a month.

Since I have been in the Queens dominions I have been well contented, Yes well contented for Sure, man is as God intended he should be. That is, all are born free and equal. This is a wholesome law, not like the Southern laws which puts man made in the image of God, on level with brutes. O, what will become of the people, and where will they stand in the day of Judgment. Would that the 5th verse of the 3d chapter of Malachi were written as with the bar of iron, and the point of a diamond upon every oppressors heart that they might repent of this evil, and let the oppressed go free. I wish you might tell Addison, John, and Elias to begin to serve the Lord in their youth, and be prepared for death, which they cannot escape, and if they are prepared all will be well, if not they must according to scripture be lost forever, and if we do not meet in this world I hope we shall meet in a better world when parting shall be no more. . . .

We have good schools, and all the colored population supplied with schools. My boy Edward who will be six years next January, is now reading, and I intend keeping him at school until he becomes a good scholar.

I have enjoyed more pleasure with one month here than in all my life in the land of bondage. . . .

My wife and self are sitting by a good comfortable fire happy, knowing that there are none to molest [us] or make [us] afraid. God save Queen Victoria, The Lord bless her in this life, and crown her with glory in the world to come is my prayer,