



## *Sketches of Slave Life*

Peter Randolph

(Events described: 1830s-1840s)

*Peter Randolph grew up in slavery on a plantation in Prince George County, Virginia, but he was emancipated in his early 20s by the terms of his late master's will. He then relocated to Boston, Massachusetts, where he became a Baptist minister. He published a memoir of his experiences in slavery in order to support the anti-slavery movement; he had learned to read and write while enslaved, mostly by teaching himself. In the following excerpts from his memoir, Randolph contrasts two kinds of Christian worship experienced by enslaved African Americans: preaching delivered to them by slaveholders, and secretive worship services organized by slaves themselves.*

### Religious Instruction

Many say the negroes receive religious education—that Sabbath worship is instituted for them as for others, and were it not for slavery they would die in their sins—that really, the institution of slavery is a benevolent missionary enterprise. Yes, they are preached to, and I will give my readers some faint glimpses of these preachers and their doctrines and practices.

In Prince George County, there were two meetinghouses intended for public worship. Both were occupied by the Baptist denomination. These houses were built by William and George Harrison, brothers. Mr. G. Harrison's was built on the line of his brother's farm, that their slaves might go there on the Sabbath and receive instruction, such as slaveholding ministers would give. The prominent preaching to the slaves was, "'Servants, obey your masters.' Do not *steal* or *lie*, for this is very wrong. Such conduct is sinning against the Holy Ghost *and is base ingratitude to your kind masters, who feed, clothe, and protect you.*" All gospel, my readers! It was great policy to build a church for the "*dear slave*" and allow him the wondrous privilege of such holy instruction! Edloe's<sup>a</sup> slaves sometimes obtained the consent of Harrison to listen to the Sabbath teachings so generously dealt out to his servants. Shame! shame! to take upon yourselves the name of Christ, with all that blackness of heart. [...]

There was another church, about fourteen miles from the one just mentioned. It was called "Brandon's church," and there the white Baptists worshipped. Edloe's slaves sometimes went there. The colored people had a very small place allotted them to sit in, so they used to get as near the window as they could to hear the preacher talk to his congregation. But sometimes, while the preacher was exhorting to obedience, some of those outside would be selling refreshments, cake, candy, and rum, and others would be horse racing. This was the way, my readers, the word of God was delivered and received in Prince George County. The gospel was so mixed with slavery that the people could see no beauty in it and feel no reverence for it.

There was one Brother Shell, who used to preach. One Sabbath, while exhorting the poor, impenitent, hard-hearted, ungrateful slaves, so much beloved by their masters, to repentance and prayerfulness—while entreating them to lead good lives that they might escape the wrath (of the

---

<sup>a</sup> Carter Edloe, who was Randolph's master.

lash) to come—some of his crocodile tears overflowed his cheek, which so affected his hearers that they shouted and gave thanks to God that Brother Shell had at length felt the Spirit of the Lord in his heart; and many went away rejoicing that a heart of stone had become softened. But, my readers, Monday morning Brother Shell was afflicted with his old malady, hardness of heart, so that he was obliged to catch one of the sisters by the throat and give her a terrible flogging.

The like of this is the preaching, and these are the men that spread the gospel among the slaves. Ah! such a gospel had better be buried in oblivion, for it makes more heathens than Christians. Such preachers ought to be forbidden by the laws of the land ever to mock again at the blessed religion of Jesus, which was sent as a light to the world. [...]

Mr. James L. Goltney was a Baptist preacher and was employed by Mr. M. B. Harrison to give religious instruction to his slaves. He often used the common text: “Servants, obey your masters.” He would try to make it appear that he knew what the slaves were thinking of—telling them they thought they had a right to be free, but he could tell them better—referring them to some passages of scripture. “It is the devil,” he would say, “who tells you to try and be free.” And again, he bid them be patient at work, warning them that it would be his duty to whip them if they appeared dissatisfied—all which would be pleasing to God! “If you run away, you will be turned out of God’s church until you repent, return, and ask God and your master’s pardon.” In this way he would continue to preach his slaveholding gospel.

This same Goltney used to administer the Lord’s Supper to the slaves. After such preaching, let no one say that the slaves have the gospel of Jesus preached to them.

One of the Baptist ministers was named B. Harrison. He owned slaves and was very cruel to them. He came to an untimely end. While he was riding out one afternoon, the report of a gun was heard, and he was found dead—his brains being blown out. It could never be found who killed him, and so he went to judgment with all his sins on his head.

Mr. L. Hanner was a Christian preacher, selecting texts like the following: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach deliverance to the captives, he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.” But Hanner was soon mobbed out of Prince George County and had to flee for his life, and all for preaching a true gospel to colored people. [...]

### Sabbath and Religious Meetings

On the Sabbath, after doing their morning work, and breakfast over (such as it is), that portion of the slaves who belong to the church ask of the overseer permission to attend meeting. If he is in the mood to grant their request, he writes them a pass, as follows:

Permit the bearer to pass and repass to ——— this evening, unmolested.

Should a pass not be granted, the slave lies down and sleeps for the day—the only way to drown his sorrow and disappointment. [...]

Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamps, out of

reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees and bending them in the direction of the selected spot. Arrangements are then made for conducting the exercises. They first ask each other how they feel, the state of their minds, etc. The male members then select a certain space, in separate groups, for their division of the meeting. Preaching in order, by the brethren; then praying and singing all round until they generally feel quite happy. The speaker usually commences by calling himself unworthy and talks very slowly until, feeling the Spirit, he grows excited, and, in a short time, there fall to the ground twenty or thirty men and women under its influence. Enlightened people call it “excitement”; but I wish the same was felt by everybody, so far as they are sincere.

The slave forgets all his sufferings, except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming, “Thank God, I shall not live here always!” Then they pass from one to another, shaking hands and bidding each other farewell, promising, should they meet no more on earth, to strive and meet in heaven, where all is joy, happiness, and liberty. As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise.

Most of the songs used in worship are composed by the slaves themselves and describe their own sufferings. Thus:

O, that I had a bosom friend  
to tell my secrets to,  
one always to depend upon  
in everything I do!

How I do wander, up and down!  
I seem a stranger, quite undone;  
none to lend an ear to my complaint,  
no one to cheer me, though I faint.

Some of the slaves sing—

No more rain, no more snow,  
no more cowskin on my back;

then they change it by singing—

Glory be to God that rules on high.

Sometimes the slaves meet in an old log cabin, when they find it necessary to keep a watch. If discovered, they escape if possible; but those who are caught often get whipped. Some are willing to be punished thus for Jesus’s sake. In some places, if the slaves are caught praying to God, they are whipped more than if they had committed a great crime. The slaveholders will allow the slaves to dance but do not want them to pray to God.

**Source:** Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the “Peculiar Institution,”* 2nd ed. (Boston: Published for the author, 1855), 62-69, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t2b85cf1z>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Section headings retained from the source publication (but in the source they represent different heading levels, a distinction not preserved here). A passage about music relocated in order to keep thematically related material together. Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and formatting of block quotations emended in line with modern conventions. Capital letters at the beginning of poetic lines converted to lowercase for readability. Italics for emphasis retained from the source. The name of a county regularized; an instance of *&c.* converted to *etc.*

The use of lowercase for the racial labels *negroes*, *colored*, and *white* reproduces the usage of the source publication. The term *Spirit* is consistently capitalized here, though inconsistently so in the source. The words *gospel*, *word*, *scripture*, and *slavery*, capitalized in the source, are converted here to lowercase.

These edited excerpts from Randolph’s autobiography are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



© 2022 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.