

An Account of Runaway Slaves



\$100 REWARD !

Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, 11 May 1910, p3:

**AN ACCOUNT OF
RUNAWAY SLAVES**
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Hartford Was Starting
Point of Story.
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GRAPHIC NARRATION OF RACE
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Word-Picture of Days Before
Great War Between
North and South.

The Courier-Journal of recent date contained the following interesting story by Col Ion B. Nall the incidents mentioned originating in Hartford. The old court house, upon which the boys were perched was burned during the Civil War, but was on the same ground which is occupied by the present building. The runaway negroes were named "Griff" Nall, Wes Taylor, Levi Barrett and "Had" Taylor. The young physician was Dr John E. Pendleton, who afterward became a noted surgeon in the Confederate army He was accompanied in his race for the runaway slaves by Mr. Randall Taylor, son of the late I Harrison D. Taylor. We give the story in full, with above information, feeling that it will be of keen interest to many of our readers.

It is Sunday afternoon in August eighteen hundred and fifty-six – the weather hot and dry. In a small town in Western Kentucky two well-grown schoolboys climbed to the belfry of the old styled courthouse and were lying on the projecting base, getting the benefit of what breeze there was to be had. They had gone over the Greek verbs and the Latin pronouns in their lessons for the morrow and now silently contemplated the quiet, peaceful scenes beneath

The town looked the picture of repose – few of the inhabitants were stirring. It had been a day of rest, seemingly given over to contentment. Birds were not singing; dogs were not barking; cattle were not lowing; children, even, had ceased their noisy games A blue, thin smoke curled upward from many chimneys where the evening meal was being made ready. The big red and sinking sun was about to disk the hill range two miles westward. The big silver sphere was already above the eastern horizon.

Such a scene these boys were looking down upon. But hark! A dust cloud arose in the north road! A horseman came at speed; he seemed excited; he had ridden fast and his horse's flanks were flecked with foam. He met a citizen and they conversed a moment The citizen flew up the street, shouting aloud. Two or three men gathered on the corner and to them the horseman imparted his news. They scattered and each one became a round-robin to spread the report. Men, women and children, old and young, black and white seemed to spring up from the ground as if it had been sown with the seeds of humanity and the springtime had come. The boys were soon clambering down the creaky ladder to Join the buzzing tumult.

Let us be calm! This Is not fiction, but facts, as the writer recalls them. Remember it was at a time when a war cloud might have been seen on our horizon had we not all – I mean the older heads preferred to be blind. They kept on voting for extreme measures on both sides. They applauded demagogues and followed after hot headed leaders. "Will there be war?" "Oh no! The other side will back down!" Thus were they deluded, thus led into the vortex of death and ruin. They were sowing the wind. The "Irrepressible Conflict" was the grim reaper to come when the harvest should too ready.

But to resume. The news was that four black men – slaves owned in our town – had been seen making their way northward – running away. At that time nothing short of the fell I tocsin of war itself could have aroused the people of a border town. Ere darkness had fallen, nearly the whole population had gathered at a central point – some with guns and pistols, some on foot, some on horseback – all eager to pursue and only awaiting the word.

A few well-mounted and bold riders were chosen and instructed what to do. Handbills with rewards were drawn and given to the fleetest. The runaways were on foot with about a day start, but good horses would overcome that. Thus the chase began. Four men were gone, and they took with them \$4,000 worth of other people's (their master's property). What booted it that these effects were muscle and bone? Was not slavery legalized by the Constitution of the United States and by the laws of Kentucky? On the very spot where this excitement ran, white men could buy and sell black men. And yet could we have placed there at that instant the Eiffel Tower and climbed

to its top we could perhaps have seen to the north a golden thread winding by day among the bluffs and dense forests along its course; by night a silvery sheen on placid water, calm and at peace, except when struck by the oar of some canoe stolen from the south shore by someone eager to reach the other. This was the Ohio river, and runaway slaves crossed at frequently in summer to escape from thralldom. It was a mile wide. On the other side no one could own a slave, throughout this free territory because Chief Justice Taney had already indicated that they could not find asylum in it. They fled to Canada if they were not captured on the way. Great Britain afforded a refuge denied I by Columbia. Heaven erected n lighthouse above the harbor. The North Star was hung in it. Runaways followed the road after crossing the river. They traveled only at night. They pursued the course toward the North Star The four men left their homes on Saturday night. Thus it might be nearly a day before they would be missed. They walked rapidly and all together they kept the road now, knowing they would not be pursued the first night. It was the full moon, and they turned out, if anyone was coming, to let him pass. They left tell-tale tracks in the dust. They reached and crossed the river early on the second night and before their pursuers reached it. They went in twos, each party guided by the star above.

The pursuing party was hastily formed. It consisted of the most daring riders mounted on fleetest horses in the town. It was dark before they started. The best riders reached the chief town on the river before daylight. There they aroused the printers, not new to the work, and there were sent flying through the mails and by trusty agents handbills with the usual picture in that part of runaway with the bundle over his shoulder. They were dispatched to every ferry and crossroads in that part of Southern Indiana. Having aroused the river country, the slave hunters rode northward. The pursuit was systematic. Traveling both by day and night, they soon came abreast of the runaways. The negroes recognized them by day from their hiding places on the wooded hills. They separated next night, each taking care of himself – each pursuing the course toward the North Star. They dared not take roads and crossed forests and cornfields. For two nights they dodged their pursuers and made some progress The bag of corn dodgers and bacon gave out. They became weak and hungry. The pursuing party passed on, scattering the handbills with the tempting reward. One of the negros tore one from a gate post, where he crossed a public read.

As the Kentuckians passed ahead, the Indianaians arose behind them. There were men in Indiana who made good wages by capturing runaways for the rewards. They were organized and knew every by-path It was said that they had their partners on the South side, inducing the slaves to runoff and guiding them safe across the river and far on their journey. They were then betrayed into the hands of “friends” who held them for the reward This was negro evidence, though, and did not go in Kentucky courts. If these men had been proven guilty in Kentucky they would have been lynched. The poor wretched negroes were at last forced to approach houses for food, as roasting ears were all that was left to them and they dared not light fires to cook them. There were men in Indiana who abominated slavery and these runaways did not ask of them in vain, notwithstanding Justice Taney’s law. But tell were not of this way of thinking. One asked for bread and was covered by a shotgun. He surrendered. Another was taken at a bridge and a third was I trailed by dogs, surprised and taken in his hiding place in daylight. The fourth was successful in passing the cordon of guards and escaped to Canada. The three were taken by the Indianaians. It is supposed they had no part in inciting the runaway, for they returned with the Kentuckians to get the rewards.

The little town in the slave state was kept in a state of excitement for a week. A neighborhood of anti-slavery people a few miles out was kept under surveillance. The negroes were afraid to stir at night so awed were they by the unusual display of arms made by the citizens,

but they caught every word that fell upon their ears. They ventured to ask questions of children about the runaways. They were not entirely ignorant of the coming conflict. They bided the time.

It was daylight on the Sunday morning following the escape that the band of captors, with their prisoners, reached the town. The noise of their approach aroused every living thing. They went to the jail and the three negroes were locked up. A great crowd had gathered around, eagerly seizing upon every detail of the pursuit and capture. The Indianaians were lionized. They got their rewards and departed for home. The kind-hearted jailer gave his prisoners a good breakfast. The latter seemed thoroughly cowed. They were in doubt as to their fate. This was decided on that day. One had been master. He was carriage driver and boss of the younger slaves. Why did he run away? Domestic infelicity. Can we imagine such a state under such conditions? Yes, he had a wife and had fallen out with her. He took this way of leaving her forever. Asked what he desired to do, he chose to be sold South. One of the pursuing party, a young physician took him next day to Alabama and brought back his value in current money. Another was reprimanded, and, on a promise to do so no more, restored to his former relations in his masters household. And you, Levi why did you leave? This one belonged to a man who owned and operated a small factory. There was no McKinley bill then. The business was wool carding. The plant one of those old wheezy treadmills, where the old dun horse and little blind mule on the wheel were no less slaves than the poor negro in the dingy carding-room – one and alike with the burry wool and the strong-smelling grease – day by day and until late at night. The master was not an unkind man but people's wool needs must be carded even in the heat of summer, and unconsciously he overlooked the burden he put on his slave in his efforts to accommodate the public. The slave bore the burden for years, but at last naturally sought to escape it. But he toiled on there, the narrator does not know how many years longer. His master was a man of eccentricities. One of these was that he was more concerned about small matters than larger ones. This trait was fully exemplified when he went to jail that morning to reclaim his property. Several persons were standing in the hall at the time. They expected the master would berate the runaway for his conduct and especially that he would allude to the big reward he had been compelled to pay out. The negro crouched in fear, but the master, in his customary jerky tones merely said: Levi, you black rascal where's that hatchet you carried off?" The ten-cent hatchet caused him more annoyance than the hundred dollar reward.

But Taney's and shotguns and bloodhounds and lynchings failed to suppress the "irrepressible conflict." It burst upon the country with all its fury and lasted many weary years. At its most critical period Rosecranz buried the dead at Stone river and Bragg performed this sad rite at Chickamauga. Again the armies confronted each other under the brow of Lookout. The Southern cavalry passed to the rear of the Northern army, destroying wagon trains and bridges. It swept on through Northern Alabama, where negroes were driving out long trains of wagons loaded with meat and grain to replenish the depleted stores for the South.

The cavalry were passing this train on the some road "Hello, Doctor, is that you?" called out one of the drivers to one of the officers. Turning, the officer beheld the man he had once sold into slavery. They grasped hands in friendship and Uncle Griff drank to the full of the best brandy in the hospital stores captured that day. Both were serving to the Con federacy now.

Peaceful years followed the times of strife and the country settled back into something like its former condition. The Doctor at his old home rose to eminence in his profession. By and by the runaway darkey also returned to his old home and became a pensioner on the charity of the man who had held him out of freedom for so many years. And this charity was never stinted nor grudgingly given. There was always good fellowship between the old-time masters and the slaves when "out of politics."



The preceding story was related by Ion Beverly Nall (1841-1917). He was a native of Hartford, Ohio County, KY. His father, John Gatewood Nall, and Larkin Nall, were listed as being slave owners in the 1850 Slave Schedule of Ohio County. Ion's sister, Ida Emily, married Dr. John Edward Pendleton (1830-1897), who is named in the story. Ion & Dr. Pendleton served on opposite sides during the Civil War. Ion Nall was a lieutenant colonel in the 17th KY Infantry of the Union army. For a quarter of a century he was the owner and editor of the "Farmers Home Journal". He was buried in Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, KY.

Griff Nall, one of the four escaped slaves in the preceding account, may be the Griff Nall, colored, whose death was noted in the following item in the Hartford newspaper:

Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 4 September 1889, p3:

Old Uncle Griff Nall, of color, of Hartford, died Monday night. He was about 80 years old.

