

An Escaped Slave's Story

Edited by W. M. Baillie

The Richardson Family Papers in the Society's manuscript collection include several folders relating to John Lyman Richardson, who lived at Grovania near the Columbia/Montour County line. Among these is a single sheet dated April 22nd (probably 1864) in which a onetime slave named W. C. Patterson tells briefly the extraordinary story of his life: born a free man, he traveled just before the Civil War to New Orleans and there was enslaved. He escaped, was recaptured, escaped again and eventually made his way to St. Louis, where during the War thousands of escaped southern slaves gathered under Union Army protection.

John L. Richardson probably knew Patterson and may well have taught him to write and encouraged him to write out his little autobiography. Richardson, a longtime educator, had gone from Pennsylvania to St. Louis to teach freedmen reading and writing.

Richardson's life is treated at some length in the Beers *Historical & Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties*. He was born September 15, 1816 in Jericho, Vermont to an old New England family—both his father and mother were descended from settlers who came from England in the 1630s. At the age of nineteen he began teaching, then studied for four years at Burr Seminary in Vermont. He taught in various places, including Otsego County, New York, and Luzerne County, Pennsylvania.¹

In 1855, while he was principal of Madison Academy in Waverly, PA, Richardson was appointed superintendent of the public schools of Luzerne County, a newly-enacted position which he filled capably for several years. The idea of a county superintendent was strongly opposed by many people as interference with local control of schools, but Richardson's "enlightened attention to [his] duties" enabled him to establish the superintendent's authority and influence over public schooling.

Beers' *Annals* comments that "It seems but natural that a man of such high character and strong sense of justice should have been active in the Abolition cause and later in the betterment of conditions among the former slaves." In April 1863 Richardson accepted an appointment to organize schools for newly-freed slaves in St. Louis on behalf of the American Missionary Association; his salary was to be just \$20 per month plus board—a large reduction from his previous earnings. During his first year there he was busy in organizing schools and employing teachers for them. It is in St. Louis, presumably, that he met W. C. Patterson and received the former slave's brief autobiographical sketch.²

There was violent opposition in St. Louis, however, against teaching African-Americans to read and write. After a few years Richardson had to leave because, as a protégé learned in a letter from him, "the Southerners was burning the school houses down and he was coming back."³

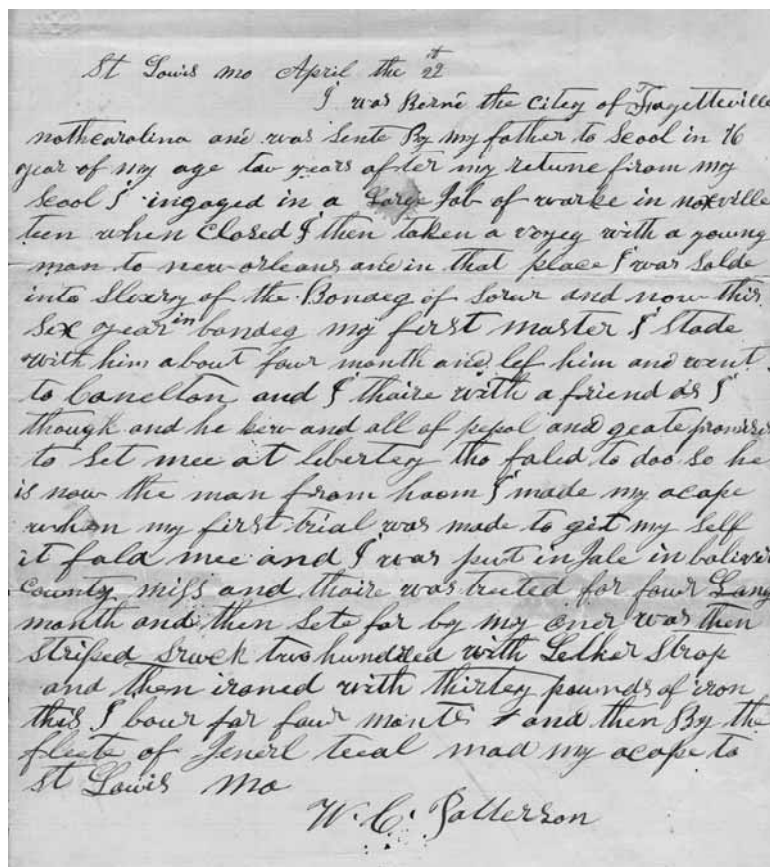
He spent some time traveling to ask for contributions to help freedmen; his notebooks record amounts from 25¢ to \$5 gathered from individuals in towns such as Tioga and Blossburg in Pennsylvania, Butternut, NY, and North Guilford, CT. In his "Collection Book 1867" we find a section of a speech he gave to ask for money, appealing to his audience's sense of basic fairness:

In presenting the righteous claims of the freedmen of this country for your sympathy and support it is not important that we discuss the equality or inequality of the races; for if the African is superior to the Anglo-Saxon he needs present aid, if he is only equal he needs aid and if he is an inferior he needs all the more aid. Aid is what the black man now needs in this country unless we admit the assumption that his normal condition is that of slavery. If God really designed the African for this condition then we should not seek to raise him above it. If God designed him for slavery, then we should not seek his freedom. If God made him to be a

slave, then recent proclamation of Emancipation was a great sin. All efforts to educate him should be at once abandoned, and the sooner he shall be remanded back to his former condition the better.³

But of course, Richardson expected his hearers to conclude, Emancipation was right and hence the African deserves our support.

In 1879 Richardson retired to a farm he bought in Grovania (Cooper Township, Montour County, on the Columbia County line). He died in March, 1885 and was buried at Danville's Odd Fellows cemetery. His son John L. Richardson became the treasurer of the Richard Manufacturing Company of Bloomsburg, and it was probably through his family that the Richardson papers came to the Society's collections.



St Louis mo April the 22^d
I was Borne the citey of Fayetteville
northcarolina and was Sente By my father to scool in 16
year of my age tow years after my retune from my
scool I ingaged in a Large Job of worke in noxville
teen when closed I then taken a voyeg with a young
man to new-orleans and in that place I was Solde
into Slavery of the Bondeg of Sorur and now this
Six year in bondeg my first master I stade
with him about four month and lef him and went
to Canelton and I thaire with a friend as I
though and he kew and all of pepol and geate promises
to Set mee at libertye tho faled to doo so he
is now the man from hacin I made my acap
when my first trial was made to get my self
it fald mee and I was put in jale in bolivar
County miss and thaire was treated for four Long
month and then sete for by my enor was then
Striped druck two hundred with Lelker Strop
and then ironed with thirtty pounds of iron
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St Louis mo
W. C. Patterson

Reproduced above is the original life story written by escaped slave W. C. Patterson.⁴ Following are two transcriptions, first in a literal reproduction and then regularized. The writer evidently had only very rudimentary training in writing and spelling, but he had an extraordinary story to tell. I have not been able to learn more about him than what he tells here; his last escape "by the fleet of General Teel" possibly refers to a flotilla of Union forces on the Mississippi.

St Louis mo April the 22^d

I was Borne the citey of Fayetteville northcarolina and was Sente By my father to Scool in 16 year of my age tow years after my retune from my Scool I ingaged in a Large Job of worke in noxville teen [Knoxville, TN] when closed I then taken a voyeg with a young man to new-orleans and in that place I was Solde into Slavery of the Bondeg of Sorur and now this Six year in bondeg my first master I stade with him about four month and lef him and went to Canelton and I thaire with a friend as I though and he kew and all of pepol and geate promises to Set mee at libertye tho faled to doo so he is now

the man from whom I made my escape when my first trial was made to get my self it failed me and I was put in Jail in Bolivar County miss [Mississippi] and there was treated for four long months and then sent for by my owner was then striped struck two hundred with Lether Strop and then ironed with thirty pounds of iron this I bore for four months and then By the fleet of General Thiel made my escape to St Lewis mo

W. C. Patterson

St. Louis, MO April 22 [?1864]

I was born in the city of Fayetteville, North Carolina and was sent by my father to school in the 16th year of my age. Two years after my return from school I engaged in a large job of work in Knoxville, Tennessee. When that closed I then took a voyage with a young man to New Orleans, and in that place I was sold into slavery, the Bondage of Sorrow, and now this six years [I spent] in bondage. My first master I stayed with him about four months and left him and went to Canelton [? Canton, MS], and I [stayed] there with a friend, as I thought, and he knew and all of people and got promises to set me at liberty though [he] failed to do so; he is now the man from whom I made my escape. When my first trial was made to get my self [free] it failed me and I was put in jail in Bolivar County, Mississippi and there was treated for four long months and then sent for by my owner. [I] was then stripped, struck two hundred [strokes] with a leather strop, and then ironed [put in irons] with thirty pounds of iron; this I bore for four months and then by the fleet of General Thiel made my escape to St. Louis, Missouri.

W. C. Patterson

NOTES

1. Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1915, vol. 1, pp. 483-88; most of the biographical information herein is from this work. Richardson was named for his mother's father, Revolutionary War veteran John Lyman (1760-1840), who descended from 1631 immigrant Richard Lyman, a founder of Hartford, CT.
2. S. L. Jocelyn (American Missionary Association, New York City) to J. L. Richardson, 26 Feb 1863; CCHGS, Richardson Papers, MS Box #8, folder #3.
3. Ann Elizabeth Green to Laura A. (Richardson) Miller, 7 Oct. 1921; Richardson Papers, folder #3.
4. Richardson Papers, folder #8.

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