

Narratives of the Slave Trade
by *Abduhl Rahhahman and Joseph Bradley*

The following narratives of captivity and enslavement are by Abduhl Rahhahman (b. circa 1762), a Muslim prince who was captured at age 26 in a battle in Senegambia, and by James Bradley, who was captured at 2 or 3 from a village somewhere near the west African coast. Both worked as field hands in the United States, Rahhahman in Mississippi and Bradley in South Carolina and Arkansas. Compare their experiences to Joseph Wright's. How did their responses to enslavement differ? Did the experience of enslavement change their values? their faith? their feelings toward Africa? Sources: Abduhl Rahhahman's autobiography: *African Repository*, 111 (February, 1828), 364-67, IV (May, 1828), 77, 243, 379. Abduhl Rahhahman's interview with Dr. Cox: *African Repository*, IV (May, 1828), 77-80. James Bradley's letter: *Herald of Freedom*, March 7, 1835.

Abduhl Rahhahman (1828)

Our number for February contained some account of this very interesting individual, in a letter from a Gentleman of Natchez. A few days since we had the pleasure of receiving a communication from the same Gentleman, by the hand of Prince. The following is an extract:--

"It affords me the highest gratification to say, that the bearer of this letter is Prince, the Captive Moor, in whose behalf I addressed you in February last. Since the date of my letter, he has been manumitted, and now proceeds to Washington.

"Prince, ascertaining that he was about to proceed to his native country, became deeply solicitous that his aged wife might accompany him. I immediately issued a paper for subscriptions; and so great was the respect for this unfortunate man, that the sum of two hundred dollars, the price at which his wife was valued by her master, was raised I believe in twenty-four hours. We are able, of course, to forward her and Prince by the same conveyance. They have children, and most devoutly wish they might go with them, &c.

"Prince is extremely anxious to obtain an Arabic Testament. This, I presume, you can provide him. He leaves this place, Sir, with many benedictions. May the kindness of an overruling Providence protect him from the dangers of the mighty deep--return him in safety to the land of his nativity--make him an instrument of much good--may he be gathered to his fathers in peace."

We have repeatedly conversed with Prince, since his arrival in our City; nor have our expectations concerning him, in any respect been disappointed. He is intelligent, modest, and obliging. Though he has been in slavery forty years, his manners are not merely prepossessing, but dignified. He is now anxiously engaged in seeking to obtain the means of purchasing his children. A liberal subscription has been commenced in this District, and it is the purpose of Prince to visit our more northern cities for the same object. When we recollect the kindness of Prince's family in his own country to an American Citizen (unintentionally left by a vessel on the coast,) how this individual during a period of sickness was hospitably entertained by his Father for six months, and in all probability by this means, his life preserved; we cannot but regard this unfortunate man, as having peculiar claims upon the assistance of our countrymen. At our request, Prince has written a concise history of himself, and we have penned a translation of it from his own lips. The only liberty we have taken, is to correct those grammatical inaccuracies, which resulted from his imperfect knowledge of our language.

Abduhl Rah[h]ahman's History

"I was born in the City of Tombuctoo. My father had been living in Tombuctoo, but removed to be King in Teembo, in Foota Jallo. His name was Alman Abraham. I was five years old when my father carried me from Tombuctoo. I lived in Teembo, mostly, until I was twenty-one, and followed the horsemen. I was made Captain when I was twenty-one--after they put me to that, and found that I had a very good head, at twenty-four they made me Colonel. At the age of twenty-six, they sent me to fight the Hebohs, because they destroyed the vessels that came to the coast, and prevented our trade. When we fought, I defeated them. But they went back one hundred miles into the country, and hid themselves in the mountain.--We could not see them, and did not expect there was any enemy. When we got there, we dismounted and led our horses, until we were half way up the mountain. Then they fired upon us. We saw the smoke, we heard the guns, we saw the people drop down. I told every one to run until we reached the top of the hill, then to wait for each other until all came there, and we would fight them. After I had arrived at the summit, I could see no one except my guard. They followed us, and we ran and fought. I saw this would not do. I told every one to run who wished to do so. Every one who wished to run, fled. I said I will not run for an African. I got down from my horse and sat down. One came behind and shot me in the shoulder. One came before and pointed his gun to shoot me, but seeing my clothes, (ornamented with gold,) he cried out, that! the King. Then every one turned down their guns, and came and took me. When they came to take me, I had a sword under me, but they did not see it. The first one that came, I sprang forward and killed. Then one came behind and knocked me down with a gun, and I fainted. They carried me to a pond of water, and dipped me in; after I came to myself they bound me. They pulled off my shoes, and made me go barefoot one hundred miles, and led my horse before me. After they took me to their own country, they kept me one week. As soon as my people got home, my father missed me. He raised a troop, and came after me; and as soon as the Hebohs knew he was coming, they carried me into the wilderness. After my father came and burnt the country, they carried me to the Mandingo country, on the Gambia. They sold me directly, with fifty others, to an English ship. They took me to the Island of Dominica. After that I was taken to New Orleans. Then they took me to Natchez, and Colonel F. bought me. I have lived with Colonel F. 40 years. Thirty years I laboured hard. The last ten years I have been indulged a good deal. I have left five children behind, and eight grand children. I feel sad, to think of leaving my children behind me. I desire to go back to my own country again; but when I think of my children, it hurts my feelings. If I go to my own country, I cannot feel happy, if my children are left. I hope, by God's assistance, to recover them. Since I have been in Washington, I have found a good many friends. I hope they will treat me in other cities as they have treated me in the city of Washington, and then I shall get my children. I want to go to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and N. York, and then I shall return hither again.

Interview with Dr. Cox

"Dr. Cox was a surgeon on board a ship. He went ashore in Africa, and got lost. When he returned, he found the vessel gone. He set out to travel, and came into my country, Foota Jallo--our people saw him, and ran and told my father, that they saw a white man. My father told them to bring the white man here, that he might see him. They brought Dr. Cox, and my father asked

him whither he was going. He said he knew not where to go, that the ship had left him, and that he had a bad sore leg. My father inquired what was the matter with his leg. He said he had wounded it in travelling. My father told him, he had better go no farther, but stay with him, and he would get a woman to cure his leg. He was soon cured. My father told him to stay as long as he chose. He remained six months. One day my father asked him, if he wished to go to his own country. He said yes. My father said, what makes you desire to go back--you are treated well here? He answered, that his father and mother would be anxious, when the vessel returned without him, thinking he might be dead. My father told him, whenever you wish to go, I will send a guard to accompany you to the ship. Then fifteen men were sent with him by my father for a guard, and he gave him gold to pay his passage home. My father told the guard, that if a vessel was there, to leave the Doctor, but not to go on board the ship; and if there was no vessel, to bring the Doctor back. They waited some time, and then found the same vessel in which he came, and in that he took his passage. After that I was taken prisoner, and sent to Natchez. When I had been there sixteen years, Dr. Cox removed to Natchez, and one day I met him in the street. I said to a man who came with me from Africa, Sambo, that man rides like a white man I saw in my country. See when he comes by; if he opens but one eye, that is the same man. When he came up, hating to stop him without reason, I said master, you want to buy some potatoes? He asked, what potatoes have you? While he looked at the potatoes, I observed him carefully, and knew him, but he did not know me. He said boy, where did you come from? I said from Col. F's. He said, he did not raise you. Then he said, you came from Teembo? I answered, yes, sir. He said, your name Abduhl Rahahman? I said, yes, sir. Then springing from his horse, he embraced me, and inquired how I came to this country? Then he said, dash down your potatoes and come to my house. I said I could not, but must take the potatoes home. He rode quickly, and called a negro woman to take the potatoes from my head. Then he sent for Gov. W., to come and see me. When Gov. W. came, Dr. Cox said, I have been to this boy's father's house, and they treated me as kindly as my own parents. He told the Gov., if any money would purchase me, he would buy me, and send me home. The next morning he inquired how much would purchase me, but my master was unwilling to sell me. He offered large sums for me, but they were refused. Then he said to master, if you cannot part with him, use him well. After Dr. Cox died, his son offered a great price for me."

James L. Bradley (1835)

Dear Madam,--I will try to write a short account of my life, as nearly as I can remember; though it makes me sorrowful to think of my past days; for they have been very dark and full of tears. I always longed and prayed for liberty, and had at times hopes that I should obtain it. I would pray, and try to study out some way to earn money enough to buy myself, by working in the night-time. But then something would happen to disappoint my hopes, and it seemed as though I must live and die a slave, with none to pity me.

I will begin as far back as I can remember. I think I was between two and three years old when the soul-destroyers tore me from my mother's arms, somewhere in Africa, far back from the sea. They carried me a long distance to a ship; all the way I looked back, and cried. The ship was full of men and women loaded with chains; but I was so small, they let me run about on deck.

After many long days, they brought us into Charleston, South Carolina. A slaveholder bought me, and took me up into Pendleton County. I suppose that I staid with him about six months. He

sold me to a Mr. Bradley, by whose name I have ever since been called. This man was considered a wonderfully kind master; and it is true that I was treated better than most of the slaves I knew. I never suffered for food, and never was flogged with the whip; but oh, my soul! I was tormented with kicks and knocks more than I can tell. My master often knocked me down, when I was young. Once, when I was a boy, about nine years old, he struck me so hard that I fell down and lost my senses. I remained thus some time, and when I came to myself, he told me he thought he had killed me. At another time, he struck me with a currycomb, and sunk the knob into my head. I have said that I had food enough; I wish I could say as much concerning my clothing. But I let that subject alone, because I cannot think of any suitable words to use in telling you.

I used to work very hard. I was always obliged to be in the field by sunrise, and I labored till dark, stopping only at noon long enough to eat dinner. When I was about fifteen years old, I took what was called the cold plague, in consequence of being over-worked, and I was sick a long time. My master came to me one day, and hearing me groan with pain, he said, "This fellow will never be of any more use to me--I would as soon knock him in the head, as if he were an opossum." His children sometimes came in, and shook axes and knives at me, as if they were about to knock me on the head. But I have said enough of this. The Lord at length raised me up from the bed of sickness, but I entirely lost the use of one of my ankles. Not long after this, my master moved to Arkansas Territory, and died. Then the family let me out; but after [line illegible] the plantation, saying she could not do without me. My master had kept me ignorant of everything he could. I was never told anything about God, or my own soul. Yet from the time I was fourteen years old, I used to think a great deal about freedom. It was my heart's desire; I could not keep it out of my mind. Many a sleepless night I have spent in tears, because I was a slave. I looked back on all I had suffered--and when I looked ahead, all was dark and hopeless bondage. My heart ached to feel within me the life of liberty. After the death of my master, I began to contrive how I might buy myself. After toiling all day for my mistress, I used to sleep three or four hours, and then get up and work for myself the remainder of the night. I made collars for horses, out of plaited husks. I could weave one in about eight hours; and I generally took time enough from my sleep to make two collars in the course of a week. I sold them for fifty cents each. One summer, I tried to take two or three hours from my sleep every night; but I found that I grew weak, and I was obliged to sleep more. With my first money I bought a pig. The next year I earned for myself about thirteen dollars; and the next about thirty. There was a good deal of wild land in the neighborhood that belonged to Congress. I used to go out with my hoe, and dig up little patches, which I planted with corn, and got up in the night to tend it. My hogs were fattened with this corn, and I used to sell a number every day. Besides this, I used to raise small patches of tobacco, and sell it to buy more corn for my pigs. In this way I worked for five years, at the end of which time, after taking out my losses, I found that I had earned one hundred and sixty dollars. With this money I hired my own time for two years. During this period, I worked almost all the time night and day. The hope of liberty strung my nerves, and braced up my soul so much, that I could do with very little sleep or rest. I could do a great deal more work than I was ever able to do before. At the end of the two years, I had earned three hundred dollars, besides feeding and clothing myself. I now bought my time for eighteen months longer, and went two hundred and fifty miles west, nearly into Texas, where I could make more money. Here I earned enough to buy myself; which I did in 1833, about one year ago. I paid for myself, including what I gave for my time, about seven hundred dollars.

As soon as I was free, I started for a free State. When I arrived in Cincinnati, I heard of Lane

Seminary, about two miles out of the city. I had for years been praying to God that my dark mind might see the light of knowledge. I asked for admission into the Seminary. They pitied me, and granted my request, though I knew nothing of the studies which were required for admission. I am so ignorant, that I suppose it will take me two years to get up with the lowest class in the institution. But in all respects I am treated just as kindly, and as much like a brother by the students, as if my skin were as white, and my education as good as their own. Thanks to the Lord, prejudice against colour does not exist in Lane Seminary! If my life is spared, I shall probably spend several years here, and prepare to preach the gospel.

I will now mention a few things, that I could not conveniently bring in, as I was going along with my story.

In the year 1828, I saw some Christians, who talked with me concerning my soul, and the sinfulness of my nature. They told me I must repent, and live to do good. This led me to the cross of Christ;--and then, oh, how I longed to be able to read the Bible! I made out to get an old spelling-book, which I carried in my hat for many months, until I could spell pretty well, and read easy words. When I got up in the night to work, I used to read a few minutes, if I could manage to get a light. Indeed, every chance I could find, I worked away at my spelling-book. After I had learned to read a little, I wanted very much to learn to write; and I persuaded one of my young masters to teach me. But the second night, my mistress came in, bustled about, scolded her son, and called him out. I overheard her say to him, "You fool! what are you doing? If you teach him to write, he will write himself a pass and run away." That was the end of my instruction in writing; but I persevered, and made marks of all sorts and shapes I could think of. By turning every way, I was, after a long time, able to write tolerably plain.

I have said a good deal about my desire for freedom. How strange it is that anybody should believe any human being *could* be a slave, and yet be contented! I do not believe there ever was a slave, who did not long for liberty. I know very well that slave-owners take a great deal of pains to make the people in the free States believe that the slaves are happy; but I know, likewise, that I was never acquainted with a slave, however well he was treated, who did not long to be free. There is one thing about this, that people in the free States do not understand. When they ask slaves whether they wish for their liberty, they answer, "No;" and very likely they will go so far as to say they would not leave their masters for the world. But at the same time, they desire liberty more than anything else, and have, perhaps, all along been laying plans to get free. The truth is, if a slave shows any discontent, he is sure to be treated worse, and worked the harder for it; and every slave knows this. This is why they are careful not to show any uneasiness when white men ask them about freedom. When they are alone by themselves, all their talk is about liberty-- liberty! It is the great thought and feeling that fills the mind full all the time.

I could say much more; but as your letter requested a "short account" of my life, I am afraid I have written too much already, I will say but a few words more. My heart overflows when I hear what is doing for the poor broken-hearted slave, and free men of color. God will help those who take part with the oppressed. Yes, blessed be His holy name! He will surely do it. Dear madam, I do hope I shall meet you at the resurrection of the just. God preserve you, and walls of prejudice are broken down, the chains burst in pieces, and men of every color meet at the feet of Jesus, speaking kind words, and looking upon each other in love--willing to live together on earth, as they hope to live in Heaven!