

Ball, Charles

(1781?- ?),

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fugitive slave, soldier, and slave narrative author, was born on a tobacco plantation in Calvert County, Maryland, the son of slave parents whose names are unknown. When Charles was four years old, his mother and siblings were sold to slave traders to settle their late master's debts; he never saw them again. Charles was sold to John Cox, a local slave owner, and continued to live near his father and grandfather. After the sale of Charles's mother, his father sank into a deep depression, eventually escaping from slavery on the eve of his purchase by a slave trader. Charles grew close to his octogenarian grandfather, a former African warrior who had arrived in Maryland about 1730.

Cox died when Charles Ball was twelve, and the young slave worked for his late master's father until he was twenty years old. During this time Ball married a slave named Judah who worked on a neighboring plantation as a chambermaid. Ball was the subject of a two-year lawsuit between a Mr. Gibson, who purchased him from the senior Cox, and Levin Ballard, who purchased him from Cox's children. Ball eventually worked for Ballard for three years before being sold to a slave trader from Georgia. Ball was separated from his wife and children without being allowed to say goodbye to them. He and fifty-one other slaves, bound by neck irons, handcuffs, and chains, were forced to travel on foot for more than a month from Maryland to Columbia, South Carolina. Ball recalled in his memoir, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (1836), "I felt indifferent to my fate. It appeared to me that the worst had come, that could come, and that no change of fortune could harm me."

In South Carolina, Ball was auctioned to the owner of a large cotton plantation. Upon the marriage of his master's daughter, Ball moved to Georgia to serve her and her new husband in September 1806. After the death of his new master in a duel, however, the Georgia estate, along with its slaves, was leased in January 1807 for seven years to another man. Ball seems to have enjoyed an unusually close relationship with his new master, traveling with him to purchase cattle and horses from the Cherokee and to Savannah, Georgia, to buy supplies for the plantation, as well as exerting authority on the plantation as overseer. After his master died around May 1807, Ball was severely beaten by his mistress's visiting brothers. He made his first escape from slavery in August of that year.

Despite being caught and imprisoned in Virginia, where he escaped from jail, Ball successfully walked from Georgia to Maryland in a year, traveling by night and foraging for food. Reunited with his wife and children about May 1808, he worked as a freeman in Maryland then enlisted as a seaman and cook under Commodore Barney in December 1813. Ball was dispatched by the United States to negotiate with several hundred slaves who had escaped from slavery under British protection. Unsuccessful, Ball himself was given the opportunity to travel to Trinidad with the other "contraband." He declined on the

basis that he was already free. Discharged in 1814 and widowed in 1816, Ball worked in Maryland and Washington, D.C. In 1820 he invested his savings in a farm and dairy near Baltimore. He married—this wife's name is unknown—and fathered four more children.

Ball's domestic happiness was destroyed in June 1830 when he was captured and returned to slavery by his former mistress's brother. In Milledgeville, Georgia, at the residence of his new master, Ball unsuccessfully sued for his freedom. Finally he managed to escape, only to be recaptured and sold. After a week Ball once again escaped, this time heading east instead of north, to Savannah. While loading cotton on a Philadelphia-bound ship, Ball persuaded a free black sailor to allow him to stow away on the ship. Hidden among bales of cotton and equipped with only a jug of water, bread, and molasses, Ball safely made the journey to Philadelphia, emerging, undetected, free once again. Upon his arrival he was assisted by an unnamed Quaker who provided him with clothing and lodging. After a few weeks Ball returned to his home in Baltimore, only to find that his wife and children, all of whom were legally free, had been captured and sold into slavery. He never saw them again. Afraid of being enslaved again, Ball moved to Pennsylvania, where he composed his memoirs.

Ball is best known as the subject of a popular and controversial slave narrative that was printed at least six times before the Civil War, including in an unauthorized, unattributed, abridged version, *Fifty Years in Chains* (1859). This novel-like account of slavery was popular not only for its subject's sensational adventures and its detailed descriptions of life in the South but also for its restraint. Acknowledging “the bitterness of heart that is engendered by a remembrance of unatoned injuries,” Ball's ghostwriter, the Pennsylvania attorney Isaac Fischer, was careful to exclude “every sentiment of this kind” from his rendering of Ball's life. This editorial censorship, combined with Fischer's inclusion of anecdotes from sources other than Ball in the narrative, led both contemporary critics and recent scholars to question the authenticity of the text, and even the existence of its subject. Most agree, however, that despite its embroidery and its silences, the narrative tells the true story of a courageous man who refused to be broken by an inhuman system.

Further Reading

Ball, Charles. *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (1836).

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1986).

Davis, Charles T., and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative* (1985).

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See also

Slave Narratives <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-43390>>

Slavery <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-45025>>

