

# Thompson, John

(1812-?),

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fugitive slave, memoirist, and sailor, was born into slavery on the Wagar plantation in southern Maryland, the son of two field slaves whose names remain unknown. Although there is little information about Thompson's life beyond his memoirs, his descriptions of his experiences in slavery as well as his adventures as a black seaman are important contributions to our knowledge of both those worlds.

John Thompson's recollections of his early years are vague at best. His realization that he was a slave came at age six, when he witnessed the sale of his oldest sister. Even at that early age, as Thompson recounted in his memoirs, he was engaged in backbreaking work in the corn, wheat, and tobacco fields of the Wagar plantations. Like many slave-narrative authors, including Harriet Jacobs , Henry Bibb , Solomon Northup, William Parker , Solomon Bayley , James Mars , and William Grimes , Thompson stressed the arbitrary violence of daily life and the dehumanizing effects of slavery on both slave and master. His early memories are replete with acts of barbarism inflicted on the slave population by members of the Wagar family, both children and adults.

The most important event of Thompson's youth came when he was assigned to carry the lunches of two young members of the Wagar clan to school each morning. Thompson remarked to one of the children, Henry Ashton, that he wanted to learn to read. Young Ashton volunteered to give him lessons, despite Thompson's warnings that Ashton's uncle, John Wagar, would object. For the next two years Henry taught Thompson from his own reading and spelling books. They would often leave early for school and then take advantage of the cover offered by the wooded terrain in the region. By the time the lessons ended two years later, John Thompson had mastered the rudiments of reading and writing. Thompson remarked that his new skills changed his life by allowing him access to the teachings of the Holy Bible. But they also made him a subversive influence on the slave culture of the Old South. Later in his life, the skills that contributed to his religious awakening also led to his decision to flee to the North.

Central to Thompson's narrative are the role of religion in the slave quarters and the shifting attitudes of the planter class to the upsurge in slave religiosity. Planter society in southern Maryland, according to Thompson, was predominantly Catholic or Episcopalian. By the 1820s new denominations were organizing meetings and making inroads in the slave quarters. The Methodists and Baptists used their plainspoken theology, revival techniques, and democratic ecclesiastical structures to win many slave converts. Thompson was especially enamored of Methodism, about which he wrote in ecstatic terms. In those years, however, the fervor generated by the Methodist "meetings" caused great anxiety in the hearts and minds of slaveholders, though they were loath to outlaw the denominations outright. Laws and ordinances were passed to regulate the movement and gathering of slaves, especially on Sundays.

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To be outside the slave quarters after dark was punishable by flogging or worse. Thompson claimed that the Wagar family went so far as to purchase a slave whose main talent was playing the fiddle, believing that music and dancing were safer emotional outlets for the enthusiasm of the slaves.

Interestingly, there was a noticeable shift in the minds of those Maryland tidewater planters concerning the influence of religion among the slaves. By the middle 1830s planters financed the construction of churches and the formation of slave congregations. They also advocated the preaching of a theology of submission among slaves. Religion became yet another mechanism of social control in slave society. Thompson's writing demonstrates that those beliefs were a double-edged sword. Slaves were apt to interpret Christian teaching in ways that helped them to endure the hardships of slavery and to craft a worldview of resistance and hope. When he fled the South, Thompson was aided along the way by his own faith as well as by other people of faith who provided the informal network that facilitated his escape.

Thompson's faith was not the only aspect of his life that proved subversive to the slave system. As he grew older, his literacy became another source of trouble and the inadvertent cause of his own growing awareness of his debased station in life. He claimed that for years he secretly carried with him a newspaper article containing an 1830 speech by John Quincy Adams, which served as an inspiration to him while he was in bondage. When it was accidentally discovered that he possessed the ability to read and write, the news spread among local slaveholders like wildfire. Local constables and magistrates instructed slave patrols to pay special attention to Thompson. On two occasions he was arrested on fabricated charges of writing "passes" for escaped slaves. In fact, it was that charge to which Thompson attributed his own escape. When three of Thompson's slave acquaintances disappeared one evening, the local magistrate put a three-hundred-dollar bounty on his head, prompting Thompson to flee northward.

Thompson's narrative does not end when he gains his freedom. Within a year of crossing into Pennsylvania, he made his way first to Philadelphia, where he continued to hone his reading and writing skills in night school, and finally to New Bedford, Massachusetts. New Bedford was the center of the American whaling industry and home to an estimated seven hundred fugitive slaves and free blacks, including Lewis Temple, who established his own whalecraft shop in the 1830s. Many fugitive slaves found places on whaling crews, and Thompson, too, looked to whaling as an effective means of evading the slave catchers who had dogged his path. He persuaded a captain preparing for a long journey to take him on as a steward.

Thompson learned the basics of keeping a ship's mess from another fugitive slave in New Bedford. Even after it was discovered that he had misrepresented his skills, the captain took pity on him, loaned him a cookbook, and gave him a few cursory lessons in the preparation of breads and pastries. Thus began a two-year voyage that very nearly took the fugitive slave around the world. The *Milwood* sailed along the Outer Banks of Newfoundland, south along the coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope to Madagascar, into the Indian Ocean, and as far as New Zealand before it returned to New Bedford. Thompson's memoir provides an in-depth description of nineteenth-century whaling practices. He was also a keen observer of the many peoples and cultures that he encountered along the way. He toured a mosque at prayer time and watched conflicts arising from a civil war in the Comoros islands. By the time of his return to the United States, Thompson was a tested seaman and cosmopolitan world traveler.

The scarcity of sources for Thompson's life is certainly frustrating to the historian, but the story he left behind is a treasure trove of information about both the Underground Railroad, made famous by Harriet Tubman, and the "maritime underground railroad," which enabled seafaring fugitives like Moses Roper to escape to freedom.

## Further Reading

Thompson, John. *The Life of John Thompson, A Fugitive Slave; Containing His History of 25 Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape* (1856)

Cecelski, David S. "The Shores of Freedom: The Maritime Underground Railroad in North Carolina, 1800-1861," *North Carolina Historical Review* 71 (April 1994): 174-206.

Grover, Kathryn. *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (2001)

Mathews, Donald G. *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (1965)

### See also

Bayley, Solomon <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34225>>

Bibb, Henry Walton <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34239>>

Grimes, William <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34422>>

Jacobs, Harriet <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34481>>

Mars, James <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34563>>

Parker, William <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34626>>

Roper, Moses <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34683>>

Tubman, Harriet <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34751>>