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not legally a human being. As she wrote, “then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave.”² Harriet was taken to live in the home of her mistress, Margaret Horniblow, who taught her to read and to sew. Margaret Horniblow died when Harriet was eleven and willed young Harriet to her three-year-old niece, Mary Matilda Norcom. Harriet then went to live in the Norcom household.

Harriet became a house servant and thus did not have to do the backbreaking work of a field hand. But as she matured, she attracted the unwanted sexual attentions of her young owner’s father, Dr. James Norcom. Miserable, she turned to a young white male neighbor, who offered to protect her. She bore two children by this man, Samuel Tredwell Taylor. But all the while, Dr. Norcom would not leave her alone. He used her children to try to persuade her to accept his attentions. When he threatened to sell her children if she did not relent, Harriet decided to escape. It was the only way she felt she could protect her young ones. Eventually, she made her way to New York City. Even in a free state, however, she was constantly in danger of being captured by slave catchers and returned to slavery in the South.

John P. Parker was born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1827. He never knew his father, only that he was a white man and “one of the aristocrats of Virginia.”³ His mother was a slave, and thus all the children she bore were slaves as well. When Parker was eight years old, he was chained to an old male slave, walked to the capital city of Richmond, and sold to a local family. Not long afterward, he was sold again, this time to a slave trader. Chained to a group of other slaves—men, women, and children—he was marched deep into the South and sold in Alabama. It was June when the coffle, or file of slaves bound together, started on their journey. The mountains of Virginia were in bloom. “Every thing seemed to be gay except myself,” Parker later recalled. He picked up a stick and began to strike at each flowering shrub. “That was my only revenge on things that were free.”⁴



A rare photograph of an even rarer event—several generations of one slave family together. It was much more common for families to be broken up and sold, often never to see each other again.

Three



John P. Parker Escapes

THE FIRST TIME JOHN P. PARKER HAD A CHANCE TO ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY, he was in Philadelphia. Coincidentally, he was there around 1843, the year Harriet Jacobs and her friend Hannah Pritchard arrived by boat from North Carolina in their flight to the North. Far from being a fugitive, however, Parker was a body servant to the two young sons of his master. They were on their way to college at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and the plan was for Parker to accompany them as their servant. He was looking forward to the opportunity to learn along with his young masters, for like Harriet Jacobs he was one of the rare southern slaves who had been taught to read and write.

Parker's life had improved somewhat since his childhood march to the Deep South as part of a slave coffle. He had escaped the fate of most of his fellow captives, who had been put to work either clearing fields for cotton planting or growing cotton. As he recalled years later, "Cotton

was in demand, each field was a gold mine, so that Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri, where cotton could not be raised, were the new breeding places for the slaves, who were sold south like their mules to clear away their forests. It was into this situation that the men and women of our caravan were hurled, while the boys and girls were sent on into towns until they were stronger.”¹

Parker was taken into Mobile, Alabama, where he was bought by a physician whom Parker later described as a gentleman and kind hearted. As well as he treated his young slave, however, the doctor was not the one to teach him to read and write. An Alabama law, strictly enforced, forbade the education of slaves. But that did not stop the doctor's young sons from sharing their lessons with their playmate and from smuggling books to him from the family library. If he was not driving the doctor around in a wagon to visit patients, Parker would sneak into the barn and read up in the hayloft. When it came time for the boys to go to Yale, Parker was delighted to learn that he would be going with them. The boys promised him all the books he could read, and he looked forward to getting an unofficial college education while his young masters got theirs. He was given a complete new outfit of clothes for the trip. He was sixteen years old and thrilled at the prospects for his future, considering that he was a slave.

Parker accompanied the doctor and the two boys as they traveled from Mobile to New Orleans by boat, up the Mississippi by steamboat, then on to Pittsburgh. From Pittsburgh, they went by carriage to Philadelphia—a hotbed of abolitionism, although Parker did not know that. He was standing outside the hotel where they were staying one evening, when a distinguished-looking gentleman approached him and whispered, “Look out tonight.” That evening when Parker went to his room, he found a note on his pillow that read, “Be ready tonight.”² Puzzled, he took the note to his master, who quickly understood that Philadelphia abolitionists were planning to liberate his slave. That was

JOHN P. PARKER ESCAPES



Abolitionist groups assumed many forms, each with its own antislavery philosophy. This Oberlin, Ohio, group advocated action. They rescued slaves who were about to be returned to their masters.

the end of Parker's hopes to "attend college." Rather than going to New Haven, he returned with his owner to Mobile.

Parker was apprenticed to a plasterer, whose physical abuse sent Parker to the local slave hospital. While there, Parker saw the white woman who ran the hospital beating an ailing slave woman. He was so angry that he seized the whip and beat the offender. Aware that not even his influential owner could protect him, he decided to run away. He sneaked on board a steamer bound for New Orleans and on arrival hid out on the docks. Aching with hunger, he found his way to a large house, where a black cook pretended not to notice him. She stirred a large pot of soup steaming on the fire, laid out a bowl and spoon, and then left the