

A LIFE SKETCH OF WILLIAM FLEMING ROBINSON

APRIL 10, 1832 - JUNE 21, 1928

My Mother was born a slave some where in Virginia. When quite young she was brought to Kentucky with a company of slaves, owned by Simon Lettrell.

He settled in Mason County, Ky. in a small place known as Helena Station. As it was the custom of slave holders, who possessed a number of slaves to hire some of them out as field hands or cooks, my Mother was hired out to a family by the name of Runyon in Mayslick, Ky. as a cook. The family consisted of the father, mother and a grown son James.

In April, 1832 the year of the great cholera plague, I was born in the Runyon home in Mayslick, Mason Co., Ky. The house a large two story wooden structure, was situated on a hill, surrounded by a large plot of ground. Later it was owned by Henry Alexander, a wealthy colored man, who conducted two large stores for many years in Mayslick and Mt. Sterling. He later sent his daughters and son to Oberlin, Ohio, to be educated, two daughters, Louise and Mrs. Harriet Gibbs were graduated from College, a third daughter, Rachel and his only son Horace

were students here, but did not finish. After my birth, James Runyon, my father left Kentucky for the east, and so far as I know he and his parents, who soon followed him, never returned south.

At the early age of six I was taken from my Mother and sent to the home of Simon Lettrell, my mother's owner. There my task was to keep the flies from annoying him, in this I was assisted by my brother George, this was our daily task for the entire summer, he died the 6th of Sept. He was very cruel and seemed to take pleasure in beating me every day except Sunday because I could not speak the word Hannah plain, the next day after his death I had no trouble in speaking it correctly. He used to take me to the store and make me count, I don't remember how or when I learned to count.

After his death all the small children were put out to service for their food and clothing. I was sent up in Fleming Co. to Patsy Summers, whose six children were all grown. I remained here seven years, where I saw no colored people not even my Mother. Just once my older brother George, who was hired two miles from me, slipped down to my place and managed to call me to a crack in the fence and talked with me a while.

The tasks marked out for me in this place were; every morning to go to the pasture for the cows, make the fire in the fire place, go the spring for water hang the tea-kettle on the crane and fill it. We had no matches when the fire went out we would go to the neighbors for a chunk of fire. The cooking was all done in the big fire-place, in the ashes and on the crane.

I often had to help beat out hominy, the corn was scalded little before we beat it out. It would be cooked all day long over the fire-place. Another task was to carry eggs to market, which I sold for 5 cents a dozen. I also carried corn to mill to be ground, the bag of corn was put across the back of the horse and I was placed on top of the bag, sometimes we both slipped off and I would have to stand by and wait until some one came along to put us back.

We had plenty to eat, but wore no clothes excepting a tow linen shirt. Before leaving this place I was given my first pair of trousers, or rather the whole suit, by a tailor who took a fancy to me, when I was about ten years old.

I remained in this place until a horse kicked me and broke my leg. I was carried to a shed about 3 o'clock

that afternoon, where I lay until a doctor came at 8 o'clock that night to set it. It was never set right and always troubled me. It was the cause of my being refused admittance to the army when I volunteered during the Civil War. After remaining there a week helpless, in great pain, with no attention scarcely, word was sent to my boss, that I would die if I had to stay there with no care, he immediately sent a sled drawn by two horses, with a bed tick of straw on it for me to return on it at once. The doctor said he didn't see how I lived under the treatment I received.

Before I fully recovered, I took white swelling and was obliged to use crutches for a year, after that I sprained my ankle.

My young master married and had a family, I had to care for his children at night the year round. I watched by them one half the night and Jane a slave girl about my own age had to watch the rest of the night, we slept on a pallet on the floor. In the daytime I worked in two acres of garden, one-half acre in water-mellons, the rest in sweet potatoes and other vegetables, I also looked after the flowers. I was allowed to serve melons to my friends. He would give melons to any one who ask for them, but he hated a rogue, he had one man whipped because he stole them, said if he had come and asked for them, he would have given them to him.

A horse was kept in the stable for me to ride on errands, his wife had a milder horse, I had to accompany her when she went out riding, when we were out of sight she would compell me to change horses, on one occasion my horse Fidgety became scared at a hog on the road and ran away. She clung on until a gate stopped him. She got home first and my boss cursed me, but I couldn't help it, as she compelled me to change horses.

I was sent once at mid-night for the doctor my horse got scared and went through Helena at top speed, I brought the doctor back with me, the next day I found my hat which I had lost the night before.

Watching the white children going to and coming from school, arouse in me a great desire to learn to read, I finally succeded in getting a spelling book and found some of the children willing to tell me the letters, when I could slip to a crack in the fence and ask them. My mistress also helped on the sly.

When I was about 18 my master accidently learned that I could read, he caught me reading the Bible one day, lying under a cherry tree, with my broken arm in a sling, he

told his wife, she gave me a New Testament soon after that and I don't believe he ever knew she gave it to me. My nephew brought it to me from Kentucky after the war, I still have it in 1927 when this was written.

Slaves had to break hemp all over 100 lbs. they paid us one cent a pound in this way, I saved up nearly \$50.00. We were also given one-half acre of land to raise produce on, which we sold. Hempseed would come up in the corn, my brother George and I would buy this from others, we used to cut hempseed until after mid-night the loss laid no claim to the hempseed, after cutting it we would beat it out and sell it for 75 cents or \$1.00 per bushell to white people. The wife of my master was always telling me ways to make money, she seemed glad to have me make it.

My Mother was hired out as a cook in hotels in Maysville, Sinking Springs and other places. I visited her once in Maysville, while there a white man saw me and ask me if my master wanted to sell me, if so he would buy me. I burned the note as I could read at that time.

At the age of 23 I decided to seek my freedom. My master said I knew too much, and he had better sell me or he would lose me. My niece over-heard him and told me, I warned her to tell no one else, I was then living in a log cabin alone.

Sunday morning I asked for a pass, my sister Emily who was working there brought it out to me, I bade her goodbye, I never saw her or my Mother again.

Armstead White, my uncle Barnard and my brother George joined me in Mayslick and we walked ten miles to Maysville. I had on two suits of clothes and it was a very hot day. We reached Maysville about 11 o'clock and kept out of sight until the churches were dismissed in the evening, when we mingled with the crowd and went down to the river bank, where a man was waiting for us with a skiff, he took us nine miles down the river, to Ripley, Ohio. It cost us \$100.00 to cross the river, \$25.00 apiece, as there were four of us.

It was ten o'clock P.M. when we climbed up the bank and was hidden by others waiting, both white and colored men, about 20 in all on horse back. We traveled all night and hid in the daytime. Night after night we traveled in this way, with guides who were always on hand at every station of the under-ground railroad until we were north of Columbus O. and near New London.

Slave-holders were on our trail and even rode into the yard once near our hiding place, and inquired if four men on foot, one a cripple had passed that way recently, our Quaker friends soon sent them on their way. Later they got ahead of us and we had

to stay three days hidden in a haymow, our meals were brought to us by white men mostly Quakers, who were watching the slave holders and came for us when they had gone. We all carried guns and had decided to die rather than be taken back, as captured slaves were always sold down the river, where escape would be impossible.

When we came through Chillicothe, we found a man there, who had escaped from Kentucky some time before, he was chased, but not captured, he had returned several times to Kentucky and helped many other slaves to escape.

At one place where we stopped, we were induced to leave all of our clothing excepting what we wore, to make it easier for us to travel, the white people gave us three addresses, we wrote there for our clothes after we were finally settled, but the people never answered.

Under-ground guides came as far as New London with us, there we took the train for the first time. While waiting for the train, a man stepped and said; "You're making your escape ain't you?" I answered: "No Sir, we have been off here working, just finished up and going home," he left us.

On the train we saw a man who looked exactly like our master, it frightened us a good deal, the only difference

I could see between them was, this man had no wart on his neck, while our boss did. We went on to Grafton on the train, then came up to Oberlin, arriving late in the afternoon of a June day in 1855. We had been on the road two weeks, and were thankful to find ourselves on free soil at last. Armstead White continued his journey on to Canada, to join his wife, whom I always knew as Aunt Nellie White, she ran off before we did, with all of her children and went to Canada. She was used to riding on the stagecoach, this time she was on her way to freedom, so the driver of the coach was sued for a large sum.

White while walking the twelve miles to Maysville, when asked where he was going, said he was going to Canada, they took it as a joke, but next day they heard he was on his way to Canada for sure. Lucian Lettrell my master said; he hoped I would be caught, he had no men left now, his slave family was made up entirely women and boys. My mother's youngest sister Martha disappeared and was never seen or heard from again, she was sold some where.

Bob Nelson an ignorant man, his wife and a large family of children escaped from Kentucky and came to Oberlin carrying their bed-clothes and household goods and were not caught. Their

wonderful escape created great excitement. Smarter people had often started but were caught and returned.

Rattlesnake Bridge a long covered bridge was a most dangerous place to pass. Many slaves had been caught there, we had been advised to go around it, which we did. Quakers were our greatest friends and helped us a great deal. One night our Quaker guides lost their way in the thick darkness, but as I kept my eye constantly on the North Star, we were able with it as our guide to find our way finally.

My Mother was a very fine cook and never had to work in the fields, she was sold back to some one in Mayslick after I left, later she went blind. She was married to George Davis before I left Kentucky. She was the mother of about fifteen children. One daughter Emily was married and had several children. when I came away, two daughters, Ellen and Nancy are still living in Flemingsburg, Ky. other children were Mandy, Levi, Oliver, Maria, Fannie and George. Mother died soon after the Civil War.

The next morning after our arrival in Oberlin, James Fitch a white man came to see us shook hands and said he was glad we were free, and gave us our first job at once, splitting rails at \$1.00 per hundred and fifty cents per cord to cut up 700 rails. When that was finished a Mr. Allen gave us another job near the

Jarvis farm, of cutting 1000 cords at fifty cents per cord. Next we found a job in Carlisle cutting a meadow of 60 acres with a soythe, but we were cheated out of a part of our money on this job. After that we had no trouble getting work.

A number of influential citizens came to see us and offered to help us, Dr. Siddall offered to teach us writing at night, after I learned I taught others at night. I also attended night school taught by Miss Fannie Jackson, a student in Oberlin College. Later I attended the Public Schools for a short time. Miss Mary Monroe and several in the class were very kind and helpful.

We made our home for a short time with Dock Gaskins, who had escaped ahead of us and was living in Oberlin, he and his sister Aunt Sarah Baker were like a mother and father to us. Later we rented a room at ten cents a week where we slept. In about three months a Mr. Gray, a Missionary going to Africa owning a home on East Lorain Street sold it to us for \$550.00. He took a mortgage in the bank, got his money and left for Africa. We soon paid for the house and 1 1/4 acres of land. Aunt Sarah Baker, my uncle's sister-in-law lived with us, and kept house until her son came from Canada and bought her a home out in the country. After she left I looked after the cooking and buying for the three of us, also worked in the woods.

On December 1, 1864, I was married to Nora Jane Nowell. She was living on E. Lorain St. with her widowed Mother and three younger brothers, they had come to Oberlin from Va. My uncle Barnard who had traveled north with us, in spite of his affliction, a stiff leg, passed away before I married. My brother George married Amanda Scott, and for several years we all lived in the same house, but in separate apartments.

Later I purchased one acre of land on N. Main St. from Theodore Keep and built a house, into which we moved over fifty years ago. Later I purchased twelve more acres from Mrs. Keep after his death, on which I raised fruit and vegetables for market.

In 1911 I made my first visit back to my old home in Ky. accompanied by my daughter Frankie, I found only a few of my old acquaintances living. The grandson of my former master invited me to his home to meet his wife and daughter, he asked many questions concerning his father and grandfather.

Before my marriage, I spent one year in Windsor Canada, with my friend who traveled north with me, Armstead White and family.

The above is the story of the life and experiences of William Fleming Robinson, as told by himself to his children and friends many times. The following articles were written by his relatives who knew him best, after his passing on June 21, 1928.

William Fleming Robinson was born in Mayslick, Ky. April 10, 1832, and passed away Thursday afternoon June 21, 1928 at the age of 96 years two months and eleven days.

He came to Oberlin by the underground railroad in June 1855. With the exception of a year spent in Canada he has been a resident of Oberlin since that time.

After rooming three months, he with his brother George and an uncle who had made the trip north with him, purchased a home on E. Lorain St. They made their home until he built, some 55 years ago, the home in which he passed peacefully away Thursday.

He was married Dec. 1, 1864 to Nora Jane Nowell, who had lived with her widowed mother and three brothers near his E. Lorain St. home. To this union was born seven sons and three daughters. His wife passed away June 25, 1906, his youngest daughter Mrs. Grace Dickason, in Dec. 1919, and a son Merton in Feb. 1922.

He leaves eight children, Mrs. Nellie Brown and James W. Robinson of Washington, D.C., Howard of Chicago, Edward of Massilon, O. and William, Harry, John and Frankie of Oberlin O. He leaves also two sisters in Flemingsburg, Ky. seventeen Grand children, nine great grand children and other relatives and a host of friends in whose memory and esteem he has a permanent place.

Most of his life in Oberlin has been spent as a gardener. He always found a ready market for his fruits and vegetables in the homes and dormitories here.

He was known both as a fair and honest dealer in every way and as a personality interesting at all times.

He was a member of the United Church and enjoyed attending the services as long as his health permitted. He was a faithful husband and father a valued and helpful neighbor, whose life lives on vividly in the memory of all who knew him.

TRIBUTE BY HIS SON-IN-LAW

William Fleming Robinson, Sr. 96, possibly the oldest citizen in Oberlin, Ohio, passed away Thursday afternoon June 21, 1928. For 73 years he has lived in Oberlin, having gone there from Ky. by the underground railroad, where he was a slave. Having thus obtained his emancipation he set out to improve himself. Having been taught secretly to read while a slave in Ky. his yearning to better prepare himself found him doing night school studying in Oberlin while seeking a livelihood. Thus he obtained a fair education and caught the vision of its worth.

REMARKABLE CHARACTER

Born in Mayslick, Ky. in 1832 and spending nearly a quarter of a century there, he went to Oberlin in 1855 where the very

atmosphere and friendly environment combined to make the man whose life for nearly three quarters of a century was an exemplary light to all of the five thousand or more citizens of the conservative College city of Oberlin.

His sane philosophy of life was acceptable to and sought by hundreds of Oberlin's population. The College presidents, professors and other citizens in every walk of life were his intimate friends and acquaintances. Rev. Dr. Pyl, his pastor, in the brief funeral services said that he Mr. Robinson, had such a forgiving spirit, for he forgave those who had brought on so many of his hardships in the early days as a slave and that with all these he was a friend, a guide and a father of unusual ability. He said further that Mr. Robinson got so much out of life because he put the sweetness of life into his very relationship of man with man. That his honesty and integrity made him a remarkable man with a remarkable character.

TYPICAL FAMILY

Mr. Robinson married Miss Nora Nowell of Oberlin Dec. 1, 1864. To this union ten children were born: Frankie, William, Jr. James, Harry, John, Nell, (now Mrs. Herman Brown) Merton, Deceased, Grace, (Mrs. H. L. Dickason) Deceased, Edward (Deceased) and Howard. This family of seven boys and three girls kept the home fires burning in annual reunions.

Twenty-two years ago his wife passed away, Frankie the oldest child, gave up her career as a teacher, took charge of the home and for all these years, gave an ungrudging, unstinted and undivided service to her father in particular and to the family unit in general, divine principle of "Honor thy father and--" has never been better exemplified than in the way that she looked after her father. The other children followed in a large way the precept "Teach a child the way he should goetc". and rendered their several parts in making the home what it should be for their widowed father. Seventeen grand children survive, fifteen of whom were present at the funeral. Seventeen grand children also survive, eight of whom were present also at the last rites.

HIS VISION

Coming out of slavery through the underground railroad, convinced by the university of hard knocks and converted to a life of service, he together with his wife, made it possible for all of his children to get a well rounded education, four of whom completed Oberlin College, while the others were prepared in and found themselves in other technical fields.

He kept pace with modern tendencies but reflected his conservative life as a definite balance wheel in life's problems. He saw life from every angle and his interpretations thereof have meant much to many a young life that has come to Oberlin College in quest of Knowledge.

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