1. Slave Husbands and Wives Correspond, 1840s–1850s

Sargry Brown to Mores Brown, October 27, 1840

Dear Husband—

this is the third letter that I have written to you, and have not received any from you; and don’t the reason that I have not received any from you. I think very hard of it. The trader has been here three times to Look at me. I wish that you would try to see if you can get any one to buy me up there. If you don’t come down here this Sunday, perhaps you won’t see me any more. Give my love to them all, and tell them all that perhaps I shan’t see you any more. Give my love to your mother in particular, and to many wives, and to aunt betsy, and all the children; tell Jane and Mother they must come down a fortnight before Christmas. I wish to see you all, but I expect I never shall see you all—never no more.

I remain your Dear and affectionate Wife.

Sargry Brown.

James Phillips to Mary Phillips, June 20, 1852

Dear Wife—I will now write to you to inform you where I am and my health. I am well, and I am in hope when you receive this, it may find you well also. I am now in a trader’s hands, by the name of Mr. Branton, and he is going to start South with a lot of negroes in August. I do not like this country at all, and had almost rather die than to go South. Tell all of the people that if they can do anything for me, now is the time to do it. I can be bought for $900. Do pray, try and get Brant and Mr. Byers and Mr. Weaver to send or come on to buy me, and if they will only buy me back, I will be a faithful man to them so long as I live. Show Mr. Brant and Mr. Weaver this letter, and tell them to come on as soon as they possibly can to buy me. My master is willing to sell me to any gentleman who will be so kind as to come on to buy me. They have got poor James Phillips here with leg irons on to keep him from getting away; and do pray gentlemen, do not feel any hesitation at all, but come on as soon as you can and buy me. Feel for me now or never. If any of you will be so kind as to come on to buy me, inquire for Cochran’s Jail. I can be found there, and my master is always at the Jail himself. My master gave me full consent to have this letter written, do not feel any hesitation to come on and see about poor James Phillips. Dear wife, show it to these men as soon as you get it, and let them write back immediately what they intend to do. Direct your letter to my master William A. Branton, Richmond, Va. Try and do something for me as soon as you can, for I want to get back very bad indeed. Do not think anything at all of the price, for I am worth twice that amount. I can make it for any person who will

buy me, in a short time. I have nothing more to write, only I wish I may be bought and carried back to Harrisburg in a short time. My best love to you, my wife. You may depend I am almost dying to see you and my children. You must do all you can for your husband.

Your husband,

James Phillips.

2. Frederick Douglass Describes Separation and Sexual Abuse, 1845

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time: A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimates can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.

My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsy Bailey, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather.

My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a custom common, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.

The father saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired


Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (New York: Signet, 1968; originally published 1845), pp. 21–23.