

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 2: "Flight to Freedom"

Interview with a former Kentucky slave about escape and capture

The following excerpt is from an oral history interview with Peter Bruner who was ninety-one years old in 1936 when the interview was conducted by Evelyn McLemore. This interview was part of the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s that resulted in the Slave Narrative Collection, at the Library of Congress. The collection consists of more than two thousand interviews with former slaves, most of them first-person accounts of slave life that describe in their own words what it felt like to be a slave in the United States.

Peter Bruner, was born in Winchester, Kentucky, Clark Co., in 1845. His master was John Bell Bruner, who at that time treated him fairly well. When Peter was 10 years of age his master brought him and his sister to Irvine. After arriving in Irvine, Peter's master was very cruel to him. They only got cornbread, fat meat and water to eat. If his master's hunger was not satisfied, he would even take this little from them....Often he was whipped because his mistress said the washing was not clean when it was....

Peter, endured torture as long as he could and finally decided to escape. He went to Richmond, Kentucky on to Lexington. On his way he made a contract with a man to drive his horses to Orleans, but was caught while in Lexington. On his way they caught him and took him to jail and he remained until his master came for him. This did not down him, for just as soon as he could he escaped again, and this time got as far as Xenia, Ohio, but was again caught and brought back. This time he was severely beaten for three hours.

When 17 years old, Peter was hired out to Jimmy Benton, who was more cruel than John Bruner, but was again brought back. It was then he tried again to escape. This time he went through Madison County near Sugar Creek. This was about the year 1861, when the war had begun. Again he was caught and taken back, but this time by Joe Bruner. He escaped several times, but never could seem to get anywhere. Once when he and another slave, Phil, escaped they were caught and made to walk the entire distance barefoot. After this Peter, was chained each night to a chair. One morning while eating his breakfast he heard a knock at the door and on opening it he found a troop of Union Home Guards. Jim Benton and John Bruner were taken to prison...Soon after John was released from Prison, Peter escaped again. This time he had joined a regiment in the [Civil] war." (p. 88-89)

Source: Kentucky Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project. 1936-38 (Applewood Books, Library of Congress)