A Narrative of Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley

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Solomon Bayley was born into slavery in Delaware, sometime around 1771, and this book is a memoir that he wrote about his escape to freedom. Beginning in 1779, Delaware state law decreed that any slave who was taken outside of the state borders had to automatically receive his or her freedom. In Bayley’s case, his owner took him into the state of Virginia and so Bayley went to the courts and tried to sue for his freedom. His case never went to trial, however, because his owner kidnapped him in order to keep him as a slave. Bayley escaped while they were in transit and, once he had eluded his captors, he started walking all the way from Virginia back to Delaware. As far as we know, Bayley did this without any aid from the Underground Railroad; he journeyed on his own, mostly travelling by night when it was easier to hide, and then sleeping by day. Bayley eventually encounters another escaped slave, and in the manuscript displayed here he describes how slave catchers try to apprehend them. Bayley escapes, but he sees the slave catchers murder his companion. This “narrative of remarkable incidents” was written in 1825, when participation in the Underground Railroad constituted a criminal offense. If Solomon did get any help along the way, it would have been in his best interest not to say anything. So doing would endanger the people operating the Railroad and the people trying to use it to reach safety.

When Bayley finally reaches Delaware, he goes back to the courts and sues for his freedom. The law is actually on his side at this point in history, so it makes sense to try to use the legal system against his enslaver. But the case just drags on, mainly because his owner is being uncooperative and is probably just stalling for time. After a lot of back and forth, Bayley purchases his freedom outright, but he has a wife and son who are still living in slavery in the area. He is eventually able to convince his wife’s owner to sell her to him, so that he can buy her freedom, but acquiring his son is another difficult matter. As his son’s public auction draws near, Bayley grows more and more despondent, as he doesn’t believe he has enough money left to save him. Bayley describes the auction in meticulous detail recounting how he is initially outbid. However, after some of his friends step in and throw in enough money, Bayley is able to secure his son’s freedom, and his immediate family is together once again.

Bayley wrote this Narrative while he was living in Camden, Delaware, where he was working as a farmer. (He had originally worked as a carpenter, but he was bothered by the fact that he was mostly making barrels for use in the alcohol trade, which he thought was morally offensive). An abolitionist met him, got interested in his story, and convinced him that he should put together a record of what he had gone through. This book is published in England as a piece of evidence for the abolitionist movement. Solomon Bayley’s Narrative is actually the only known example of a memoir that was written and published by an enslaved Delawarean, which makes it an extremely valuable piece of firsthand testimony.