Florida Slave Narratives: Lycurgas, Edward

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"Pap tell us 'nother story 'bout do war—and 'bout de fust time you saw mamma."

It has been almost 60 years since a group of children gathered about their father's knee, clamoring for another story. They listened round-eyed to stories they already knew because "pap" had told them so many times before. These narratives along with the great changes he has seen, were carefully recorded in the mind of Edward, the only one of this group now alive.

"Pap" was always ready to oblige with the story they never tired of. He could always be depended upon to begin at the beginning, for he loved to tell it.

"It all begun with our ship being took off the coast of Newport News, Virginia. We wuz runnin' the blockade—sellin' guns and what-not to them Northerners. We aint had nothin' to do wid de war, unnerstand, we English folks was at'ter de money. Whose War? The North and South's, of course. I hear my captain say many a time as how they was playin' ball wid the poor niggers. One side says 'You can't keep your niggers lessen you pay em and treat em like other folks.' Mind you dat wasn't de rale reason, they was mad at de South but it was one of de ways dey could be hurted—to free de niggers."

"De South says 'Dese is our niggers and we'll do dum as we please,' and so de rumpus got wuss dan it was afore. The North had all do money, and called itself de Gov'ment. The South aint had nothin', but a termination not to be out-did, so we dealt wid de North. De South was called de Rebels."

"So when dey see a ship off they coast, they hailed it and when we kep goin', they fired at us. 'Twan't long afore we was being unloaded and marched off to the lousiest jail I ever been in. My

captain kep tellin' em we was English subjects and could not be helt. Me, I was a scairt man, cause I was always free, and over here dey took it for granted dat all black men should be slaves."

"The jailer felt of my muscles one day, when he had marched me out at the point of his musket to fill de watering troughs for de horses. He wanted to know who I blong ter, and offered to buy me. When nobody claimed me, they was forced to let me go long wid de other Britishers and as our ship had been destroyed, we had to git back home best we could. Dey didn't dare hold us no longer."

"As de war was still being fit, we was forced to separate, cause a lot of us would cause spicion, traipsing 'bout do country. Me—I took off southward and way from de war belt, traveling as far as Saint Augustine. It was a dangerous journey, as anybody was liable to pick me off for a runaway slave. I was forced to hide in de day time if I was near a settlement and travel at night. I met many runaway slaves. Some was trying to get North and fight for de freeing of they people; others was jes runnin' way cause dey could. Many of dem didn't had no idea where dey was goin' and told of havin' good marsters. But one and all dey had a good strong notion ter see what it was like to own your own body."

"I felt worlds better when I reached Saint Augustine. Many ships landed there and I knowed I could get my way back at least to de West Indies, where I come frum. I showed my papers to everybody dat mounted ter anything and dey knowed I was a free nigger. I had plenty of money on me and I made a big ter do mong de other free men I met. One day I went to the slave market and watched em barter off po niggers lake dey was hogs. Whole families sold together and some was split—mother gone to one marster and father and children gone to others."

"They'd bring a slave out on the flatform and open his mouth, pound his chest, make him harden his muscles so the buyer could see what he was gittin'. Young men was called 'bucks' and young women 'wenches'. The person that offered the best price was de buyer. And dey shore did git rid uf some pretty gals. Dey always looked so shame and pitiful up on dat stand wid all dem men standin' dere lookin' at em wid what dey had on dey minds shinin' in

they eyes One little gal walked up and left her mammy mourning so pitiful cause she had to be sold. Seems like dey all belong in a family where nobody ever was sold. My she was a pretty gal."

"And dats why your mamma's named Julia stead of Mary Jane or Hannah or somethin' else—She cost me $950.00 and den my own freedom. But she was worth it—every bit of it!"

"After that I put off my trip back home and made her home my home for three years. Den with our two young children we left Floridy and went to the West Indies to live. We traveled bout a bit gettin as far as England. We got letters from your ma's folks and dey jes had to see her or else somebody would'er died, so we sailed back into de war."

"Freedom was declared soon after we got back to dis country and de whole country was turned upside down. De po niggers went mad. Some refused to work and dey didn't stay in one place long 'nough to do a thing. De crops suffered and soon we had starvation times for 'bout two years. After dat everybody lernt to think of a rainy day and things got better."

Edward recalls of hearing his father tell of eating wild hog salad and cabbage palms. It was a common occurence to see whole families subsisting on any wild plant not known to be poisonous if it contained the least food value. The freedmen helped those who were newly liberated to gain a footing. Prior to Emancipation they had not been allowed to associate with slaves for fear they might engender in them the desire to be free. The freedmen bore the brunt of the white man's suspicion whenever there was a slave uprising. They were always accusing them of being instigators. Edward often heard his mother tell of the "patter-rollers", a group of white men who caught and administered severe whippings to these unfortunate slaves. They also corraled slaves back to their masters if they were caught out after nine o'clock at night without a pass from their masters.

George Lycurgas was born at Liverpool, England and became a seaman at an early age. Edward thinks he might have had a fair education if he had had the chance. The mother, Julia Gray,

Lycurgas, was the daughter of Barbara and David Gray, slaves of the Flemings of Clay County, Florida.

These slaves were inherited from generation to generation and no one ever thought to sell one except for punishment or in dire necessity. They were treated kindly and like most slaves of the wealthy, had no knowledge of the real cruelties of slavery, but upon the death of their owner it became necessary to parcel the slaves out to different heirs, some of whom did not believe in holding these unfortunates. These would-be abolitionists were not averse to placing at auction their share of the slaves, however.

It was on this occasion that George Lycurgas saw and bought the girl who was to become his wife. Both are now dead, also all of the several children except Edward who tells their story here.

Edward Lycurgas was born on October 28, 1872, at Saint Augustine, Florida shortly after the return of the family from the West Indies. He lived on his father's farm sharing at an early age the hard work that seemed always in abundance, and listening in awe to the stories of the recent war. He heard his elders give thanks for their freedom when they attended church and wondered what it was all about.

No one failed to attend church on Sundays and all work ceased in a vicinity where a camp meeting was held. Farmers flocked to the meeting from all parts of Saint Johns County. They brought food in their large baskets. Some owned buggies but most of them hauled their families in wagons or walked. The camp meetings would sometimes last for several days according to the spiritual fervor exhibited by those attending.

Lycurgas recalls the stirring sermons and spirituals that rang through the woods and could be heard for several miles on a clear day. And the river baptisms! These climaxed the meetings and were attended by large crowds of whites in the neighborhood. All candidates were dressed in white gowns, stockings and towels would about their heads bandana fashion. Two by two they marched to the river from the spot where they had dressed. There was always some stiring song to accompany their slow march to the

river. "Take me to the water to be baptized" was the favorite spiritual for this occasion.

As in all things, some attended camp meetings for the opportunity it afforded them to indulge in illicit love making. Others went to show their finery and there was plenty of it according to Lycurgas' statement. There seemed to be beautiful clothing, fine teams and buggies everywhere—a sort of reaction from the restraint upon them in slavery. Many wore clothing they could not afford.

There seemed to be a deeper interest in politics during these times. Mass meetings, engineered by "carpet baggers" were often held and largely attended, although the father of Edward did not hold with these activities very much. He often heard the preacher point out Negroes who attended the meetings and attained prominence in politics as an example for members of his flock to follow. He believes he recalls hearing the name of Joseph Gibbs.

Next to the preacher, the Negro school teacher was held in greatest respect. Until the year of the "shake" (earthquake of 1886) there were no Negro school teachers on Saint John's County and no school buildings. They attended classes at the fort and were taught by a white woman who had come from "up nawth" for this purpose. Edward was able to learn very little from his blue back Webster because his help was needed on the farm.

He was a lover of home, very shy and did not care much for courting. He remained with his parents until their deaths and did not leave the vicinity for many years. He is still unmarried and resides at the Clara White Mission, Jacksonville, Florida, where he receives a small salary for the piddling jobs about the place that he is able to do.

Source:
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