

# LETTERS

ON

## AMERICAN SLAVERY,

ADDRESSED TO

MR. THOMAS RANKIN,

MERCHANT AT MIDDLEBROOK, AUGUSTA CO., VA.

---

BY JOHN RANKIN,

PASTOR OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES OF RIPLEY  
AND STRAIT-CREEK, BROWN COUNTY, OHIO.

---

BOSTON:  
PUBLISHED BY GARRISON & KNAPP,  
NO. 11, MERCHANT'S HALL.

1833.

**From Letter # 3:**

As involuntary slavery is opposed to all the original properties of human nature, it may be expected to involve its subjects in a vast variety of the most serious evils. And some of these, according to an intimation given in my last, I am now to point out more fully than the limits of the preceding letter would permit me to do. And this I do in order to illustrate and enforce those arguments against slavery, which arise from the nature of man.

The first evil I shall mention as resulting from a state of mancipation [slavery], is that of gross ignorance. It must be obvious to everyone capable of reflection, that a variety of circumstances combine to deprive slaves of the means of mental improvement. They are chained down to a life of laborious servitude, without the hope of release; and the gloomy prospect of such a life sinks every rising hope, cuts off every inducement to literary enterprise, and totally indisposes the mind to the labor of acquiring useful knowledge. And of such indisposition, gross ignorance is the certain result. Hence were the means of instruction afforded them, they would in many cases prove entirely unsuccessful. But we often find on the part of the master still less inclination to afford such means, than there is in the slave to improve them when afforded. The education of slaves must be attended with much loss of labor as well as considerable expense, and this is very inconsistent with the main object of their mancipation [enslavement].

\* \* \*

And to this we may add, that when the slave population becomes extensive, a carnal policy dictates the necessity of [censorship] suppressing the means of information, lest the oppressed should come to know their rights, and endanger the state. This kind of policy prevails to such a degree in every slaveholding State, that there are very few places in which there is not strong opposition made to every benevolent attempt to teach the poor slaves to read even the words of eternal life!

\* \* \*

Though there is no law in Kentucky designed to prohibit the teaching of slaves, yet such is the opposition made against it by the populace, that but few Sabbath-schools for the instruction of the Africans are permitted to exist in the State.

It often happens that the benevolent teachers of Sabbath-schools find themselves, and their poor, unoffending scholars, on the sacred moving, surrounded by men armed with whips, clubs and guns, for the violent dispersion of the unhappy and innocent victims of their rage! Thus Sabbath-schools are broken up in Kentucky with a violence and cruelty that ought to shame the most unfeeling band of Algerines! Nor is such violent opposition to teaching slaves confined to the more ignorant parts of the State; it is equally manifested in the most enlightened places. A few years since [ago] in the neighborhood of Lexington, and in one of the oldest and best settlements in the State, a Sabbath-school was instituted, and taught by some very respectable gentleman, and the prospect of doing good was exceedingly fair; but, alas! all the rising hopes of benevolence were soon blasted.

One sacred [Sunday] morning the poor slaves assembled at the school-room with the pleasing expectation of learning to read the word of eternal life; but to their sad surprise, about sixty men soon appeared for their dispersion, armed with clubs and guns, and thus the school was dispersed never to meet again!

It is painful to record such instances of cruel outrage on oppressed innocence and humane feeling; and I do it not by way of reproach, but because it is necessary to show the real state of things even where slavery assumes her mildest aspect; for I still believe that slaves fare upon the whole better in Kentucky than they do in other slaveholding States.

But the [atheist, anti-Bible] spirit which, in Kentucky, is so strongly manifested by the populace, has, it seems, in Virginia found its way into the Legislature.\* And, as I am informed, a law has, sometime since, actually passed prohibiting all, and every person from teaching a school for the benefit of slaves, under the penalty of twenty lashes!

And thus the last hope of the poor, oppressed African is cut off—the clouds of ignorance, like the shades of eternal night, must ever settle around him! And thus the innocent and good citizen, whose feeling stoops to the most oppressed and degraded of our race, in order to grasp them from interminable ruin, must be subjected to the painful and shameful penalty of twenty lashes, as the reward of most disinterested acts of kindness, and that in a land far-famed for the equity and mildness of its government!

**From Letter # 5:**

The longer I reflect upon involuntary slavery, the more I abhor it, as being a combination of the most flagrant injustice and cruelty. It makes an innocent man the property of another, who may, if he please, deprive him of all the comforts of life, and subject him to a thousand sufferings. This appears to me as most unjust and cruel, when I consider that the very best of men are fallen creatures, and, as such, naturally disposed to tyrannize over the subjects of their power.

\* \* \*

1. The [unconstitutional] law of involuntary slavery makes the slave the property of his master, who is no more bound to supply his natural wants, than he is to supply those of his beasts. But notwithstanding the slave is shoved down to the rank of the beast, he is still a man, and needs comfortable clothing to shield him from the chilling blasts of winter, as well as for the sake of decent appearance.

And this the master is not bound to give him, but may either clothe him in rags or turn him naked, as an inordinate [covetous] love of gain may dictate.

Hence in some parts of Alabama you may see slaves in the cotton-fields without so much as even a single rag upon them, shivering before the chilling blasts of mid-winter.

In some sections of old Virginia, they have been seen naked as in the hour of their birth attending on their master's table. And doubtless the like may be seen in South Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi.

Indeed in every slaveholding state many slaves suffer extremely, both while they labor and while they sleep, for want [lack] of clothing to keep them warm. Often they are driven through frost and snow without either stocking or shoe, until the path they tread is dyed with the blood that issues from their frost-worn limbs!

And when they return to their miserable huts at night they find not there the means of comfortable rest; but on the cold ground they must lie without covering, and shiver while they slumber.

In connection with their extreme sufferings occasioned by want [lack] of clothing I shall notice those which arise from the want [lack] of food. As the making of grain is the main object of their mancipation [enslavement], masters will sacrifice as little as possible in giving them food. It often happens that what will barely keep them alive, is all that a cruel [covetous] avarice will allow them. Hence, in some instances, their allowance has been reduced to a single pint of corn each during the day and night. And some have no better allowance than a small portion of cotton seed!! And in some places the best allowance is a peck of corn each during the week, while perhaps they are not permitted to taste meat so much as once in the course of seven years, except what little they may be able to steal!

Thousands of them are pressed with the gnawings of cruel hunger during their whole lives; an insatiable [slaver] avarice will not grant them a single comfortable meal to satisfy the cravings of nature! Such cruelty far exceeds the powers of description.\*

\* \* \*

It seems to me astonishing that any government, much more that of the United States, should sanction such a source of monstrous crime as slavery evidently is! And I am still more astonished that you, my brother, should countenance it in the least degree, either in theory or practice. It is fraught with such horrible abominations as ought to shock you and cause you to shrink from its first approaches.

I would rather beg my bread from door to door, long as I live, than enslave even the meanest of my fellow creatures. My soul abhors the crime.

**From Letter # 6**

It often happens that the poor slave, while laboring in the field, is suddenly seized by the cruel slave driver, bound fast in iron fetters, and hurried off to a far distant market, without being permitted to return to his hapless hut, and there pour out his bursting floods of sorrow in taking his final leave of his disconsolate wife and children!! Had he ten thousand worlds he would gladly give them all for the warm embraces of his affectionate wife and fondling babes! Oh! what would he not give for the privilege of bathing the object of his affection in his parting tears! The inmost recesses of his nature ardently crave the mingled floods of final separation!! But alas! he must see the objects of his love no more! no more enjoy the warm embrace! and no more must he clasp to his tender heart his prattling babes! Hopeless man! witness the anguish of his heart! see what torrents gush from his eyes! behold his downcast and sorrowful aspect! listen to his plaintive sighs! hear his piteous cries and agonizing groans! His trembling nature racked in every part by the rising billows of sudden and overwhelming grief, calls for pity in accents melting as the doleful notes of expiring life!

But all is in vain! The cruel [demonized] slave driver, long accustomed to such scenes of sorrow, remains unmoved by the agonizing groans of suffering humanity; he is so far estranged from every tender feeling, that he even sports himself with the sufferings of his fellow creatures; the groans of the poor slave seem to be as music to his ears, and the blood elicited by his torturing lash appears to be delightful to his eyes!

In vain the bereaved husband, with languishing eye, looks for pity—the cruel whip urges him on to a far distant land—away he must move, loaded with weighty fetters, which are but faint emblems of his still more weighty sorrows—his affections linger far behind—his mind wanders far back, and hovers round the now disconsolate hut, where once the kind attentions of an affectionate wife and the innocent prattling of his sportive babes dispelled the gloom and sweetened the toils of a servile life.

O could he now awake and find that all has been a frightful dream, how would his sorrowful heart rejoice! but, alas! all is dreadful reality. The last hope is gone! All that could cheer the heart and bear up the desponding mind amidst the sufferings and toils of unjust and cruel bondage, is gone! forever gone! horrible tyrants have robbed him of the last drop of consolation! His wife and children, unconscious of what has happened, long and anxiously wait his return; but, ah! he is never to return! never again to cheer the dreary hut with his presence, or gladden the hearts of his wife and children by his visits of love! His innocent hands are bound with cruel fetters, and wicked monsters are dragging him to a far distant land where he must throughout life endure still harder bondage, and even that embittered by the loss of all that is dear to an affectionate father and tender husband.

At length the sad news arrives at the miserable hut that the father and husband is gone! gone in chains! gone to a distant land! gone to return no more! gone, not down to the peaceful chambers of death no more to weep, no more to sigh; but gone to a land where slavery sits upon her ebon throne, and thence dispenses all her blackest horrors! a land where starvation reigns in all its

meager forms! and where cruelty deals out long years of death! Hapless mother! hapless children!

By relentless tyranny bereaved of every hope, of all that is dear on earth, and doomed to linger out a servile life in hopeless grief! The little hut is filled with throbs and sighs, and agonizing groans! It is now more like the abodes of ruined spirits, in which doleful despair in midnight horror reigns, than like the abodes of man!

In the public papers of slaveholding States, you may see fathers and mothers, and husbands and wives, and children advertised for public sale, and that in connection with a variety of beasts.