Kentucky Slave Laws

Creator: State of Kentucky
Date: 1794-1846
Source type: Laws (Adapted)

Introduction: Every Southern state passed laws to control the movements and activities of enslaved African Americans, and to prevent slave rebellions. White lawmakers in slave-holding border states, such as Kentucky, were particularly concerned about runaway slaves who “stole themselves” by attempting escape to a Northern free state.

1794: Enslaved blacks who were freed by their masters had to carry certificates of freedom.

1798: Enslaved persons found outside their plantation without a written pass would receive ten lashes as punishment. Any citizen was allowed to apprehend a suspected runaway and be eligible for the reward.

1823: No slave was allowed to work on a steamboat.

1830: Any white or free black person found guilty of enticing a slave to run away, forging free papers, helping a slave escape out of the state, or concealing a runaway slave, faced fines as high as $500.

1840: There was a 10pm curfew for slaves; slaves who violated the curfew could face twenty lashes as punishment.

1846: The penalty for encouraging slaves to run away or rebel was increased from a fine to imprisonment. County patrols were required to ride through the county on horseback at night to enforce slave laws.
John Parker’s Autobiography

Creator: John Parker  
Date: 1996 (publication date of book based on interviews done in 1885)  
Source type: Autobiography (Adapted)

Introduction: John Parker, a former slave who became a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, writes about the many obstacles that runaways faced, and how “friends” in the North tried to help them.

Every night of the year runaways, alone or in groups, made their way to the country north. Traps and snares were set for them, into which they fell by the hundreds and were returned to their homes. But once they were infected with the spirit of freedom, they would try again and again, until they succeeded or were sold south...

The success of the fugitives depended upon a few conscientious men north of the Mason-Dixon Line who served the helpless fugitives who came to their doors. The fugitives had to take care of themselves south of the line, but once across the Ohio River they were in the hands of friends.

As a result, every precaution was taken to prevent the fugitive from successfully passing through this forbidden land. The woods were patrolled nightly by constables. Any man they found, black or white, had to give a good reason for being out, especially if he were a stranger. Every ford was watched, while along the creeks and the river, the skiffs were not only pulled up on the shore, but were padlocked to trees, and the oars removed. There were dogs in every dooryard, ready to run down the fugitives.

Once word came from south that runaways were on their way, the whole countryside turned out, not only to stop the fugitives, but to claim the reward for their capture. Everything was organized against the slaves’ getaway.

But in spite of the odds against them, there were a surprising number who did make good their escape.
Oral History of a Former Slave

Creator: Dennis Simms and a WPA interviewer
Date: 1937
Source type: Oral History (Adapted)

Introduction: In this 1937 interview with the WPA, ex-slave Dennis Simms describes the whippings given to slaves who left their plantations without permits, and the punishments suffered by those who tried to escape.

The overseer kept a pretty close eye on us. We all hated what they called the “nine ninety-nine.” This was a flogging that went on until you fell over unconscious or begged for mercy. We stuck pretty close to the cabins after dark, because if we were caught roaming about we would be unmercifully whipped.

If a slave was caught beyond the limits of the plantation where he was employed, and wasn’t in the company of a white person or didn’t have a written permit from his master, any person who apprehended him was permitted to give him 20 lashes across the bare back.

If a slave went to another plantation on lawful business but without a written permit from his master, the owner of the plantation would usually give the offender 10 lashes. We were never allowed to congregate after work, never went to church, and could not read or write for we were kept in ignorance. We were very unhappy.

Sometimes Negro slave runaways who were apprehended by the patrollers, who kept a constant watch for escaped slaves, besides being flogged, would be branded with a hot iron on the cheek with the letter ‘R’.

We all thought of running off to Canada or to Washington, but feared the patrollers.