

# 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.