To whom it may concern:

These will certify that the bearer, Dea. James Mars, has been known to me and to the citizens of this town for a long period of years, as an honest, upright, truthful man,—a good citizen, an officer in his church, and a man whose life and character have gained the approbation, the esteem, and the good wishes of all who know him. Born a slave, the good providence of God has long since made him free, and, I trust, also taught him that “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

INTRODUCTION

When I made up my mind to write this story, it was not to publish it, but it was at the request of my sister that lived in Africa, and has lived there more than thirty years. She had heard our parents tell about our being slaves, but she was not born until a number of years after they were free. When the war in which we are now engaged began, the thought came to her mind that her parents and brothers and sisters were once slaves, and she wrote to me from Africa for the story. I came to Norfolk on a visit at the time the war broke out, and some in Norfolk remember that I was once a slave. They asked me about it; I told them something about it; they seemed to take an interest in it, and as I was in Norfolk now, and having an opportunity to write it, I thought I would write it all through. In telling it to those, there were a great many things that I did not mention that I have written. After I had written it out, I saw that my brother and my other sister would think that I might give them the same; and my children had often asked me to write it. When I had got it written, as it made more writing than I was willing to undertake to give each of them one, I thought I would have it printed, and perhaps I might sell enough to pay the expenses, as many of the people now on the stage of life do not know that slavery ever lived in Connecticut.

A SLAVE BORN AND SOLD IN CONNECTICUT

The treatment of slaves was different at the North from the South; at the North they were admitted to be a species of the human family. I was told when a slave boy, that some of the people said that slaves had no souls, and that they would never go to heaven, let them do ever so well.

My father was born in the State of New York, I think in Columbia county. He had, I think, three different masters in that State, one by the name of Vanepps, and he was Gen. Van Rensaeler's slave in the time of the Revolution, and was a soldier in that war; he was then owned by a man whose name was Rutser, and then was owned in Connecticut, in Salisbury, and then by the minister in North Canaan.
My mother was born in old Virginia, in Loudin county; I do not remember the name of the town. The minister of North Canaan, whose name was Thompson, went to Virginia for a wife, or she came to him; in some way they got together, so that they became man and wife. He removed her to Canaan, and she brought her slaves with her, and my mother was one of them. I think there were two of my mother’s brothers also. The Rev. Mr. Thompson, as he was then called, bought my father, and he was married to my mother by him. Mr. Thompson ministered to the people of Canaan in holy things; his slaves worked his farm. For a short time things went on very well; but soon the North and the South, as now, fell out; the South must rule, and after a time the North would not be ruled. The minister’s wife told my father if she only had him South, where she could have at her call a half dozen men, she would have him stripped and flogged until he was cut in strings, and see if he would do as she bid him. She told him, You mind, boy, I will have you there yet, and you will get your pay for all that you have done. My father was a man of considerable muscular strength, and was not easily frightened into obedience. I have heard my mother say she has often seen her mother tied up and whipped until the blood ran across the floor in the room where she was tied and whipped.

Well, as I said, the South and the North could not agree; the South seceded and left the North; the minister’s wife would not live North, and she and her husband picked up and went South, and left my father and mother in Canaan to work the farm, and they lived on the farm until I was eight years old. My mother had one child when she came from the South; I was the first she had after she was married. They had five children born in Canaan,—three died in infancy. I was born March 3d, 1790.

Mr. Thompson used to come up from Virginia and talk about our going South. He would pat me on the head and tell me what a fine boy I was. Once when he was in Canaan, he asked me if I would not like to go with him and drive the carriage for my mistress. He said if I would go he would give me twenty-five cents, or as it was then called, twenty-five coppers. I told him I wanted the money first. He gave me a quarter, and then I would not agree to go, and he put me in the oven; that I did not like, and when I got out I would not give him the money, but his business I did not yet know. He had come to sell his farm and to take us all South. My father said he would not go alive; the minister told him he must go; my father said he never would. Well, the man that had formerly ministered to the people in holy things, sold the farm, and stock, and tools, and effects, with a few exceptions. He kept a pair of horses and harness, a wagon, a bed, and a few such articles. The harness and wagon he kept to take us to the South with. After he sold his place, he took us all to a wealthy friend of his, until he had settled up all his affairs, so as to show to the world that he was an honest and upright man. He would have them think that he feared God and let alone evil; for he was born or raised in the State of New York, and had taught the people of North Canaan the way to do, as you will see, for in former days he spoke to the people from the pulpit morally, and they thought much of the man. He had taught them slavery was right, and that the Great Almighty God had sanctioned the institution, and he would practice it. He now made his arrangements to set out on his journey; the day was fixed to leave his much-loved people and home for his southern home, where he had obtained a new home and friends and acquaintances.
My father, although a slave without education, was intensely watching the movements of the teacher of the people, but kept all that he saw to himself, yet he was steadily planning his escape. The set day had now within about thirty-six hours come; all went on well with the man from the South. He had had no thought but all was well; those fine chattels were his, and would fetch him in a southern market, at a moderate estimate, two thousand dollars; they would furnish him pocket change for some time, and also his loving wife could have a chance to wreak her vengeance on my father for what she called disobedience.

It was a matter of doubt with my father what course to take,—how he could get away with his family the best and safest; whether to go to Massachusetts, which joined Canaan on the north, or to Norfolk, which joined Canaan on the east. Very fortunately for us, there was at that time an unpleasant feeling existing between the two towns or the inhabitants of Canaan and Norfolk. He said that the people of Canaan would side with their former pastor, and he found that the people of Norfolk would take sides against Canaan and their pastor; then he thought the best that he could do would be to take his family to Norfolk, where they would be the safest. He concluded to take them to Norfolk, but how was he to get them there with what he wanted to take with them? He came to the conclusion that the horses he had for a long time driven might as well help him now in this hour of distress as not.

He got a colored man to help him that was stout and healthy. They hitched up the parson's team, put on board what few things he had and his family, in the still of a dark night, for it was very dark, and started for Norfolk, and on the way we run afoul of a man's wood-pile, for it was so dark he could not see the road; but we got off from the wood-pile without harm, and arrived in Norfolk about one o'clock. I think we stopped at a tavern kept by Mr. G. Pettibone, and in him we found a friend. We unloaded what we had, and father and the man that was with him took the team back to Canaan, so that the parson might set out on his journey and not have to wait for his team, and father returned to where he had left his family. He felt that he had done all for the parson that he well could, for he had taken away his family off from his hands, so that the parson would be relieved from the care that must necessarily occur in such a long journey with a family on his hands to see to, and my father thought that the parson's old Jewel would be relieved from some of her pardoned habits and from a promise she had so often made to him when she got him South. Well, how the parson felt when he had got himself out of bed, and found that he was left to pursue his journey alone, the reader can tell as well as I, for he was a big and bristle man; but I will leave him for a while, and see what is to be done with us.

After the death of Mr. Munger, I married a wife and lived in Norfolk a few years; we had two children. We went to Hartford after a while; I worked for the then known firm of E. & R. Terry.