

# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

*escape from slavery*

## ON THE PLANTATION: LIFE AS SLAVE

My name is Walter, and I was born a slave, in Virginia.

I've been working these tobacco fields since I was a boy. Planting . . . harvesting . . . binding and stacking. Backbreaking work, sunup to sundown. I sleep in a small wooden cabin with another family, an old hay mattress on the floor for a bed, no privacy. Still, I wouldn't be a house slave here for nothing. The mistress won't even get up to go across the room to get a drink of water. A Negro has to bring it to her.

I was sold to this plantation in Kentucky when I was barely old enough to walk. I can still remember my mother running out of the big house, begging the master not to sell her baby. I was on the back of a wagon . . . the horses had started to pull away. The wagon wheels kicked up a great cloud of dust, her cries faded, and that was the last time I ever saw my mother.

Some time ago, I showed a God-given talent for woodwork. The master let me try my hand at carpentry and building, and I began to dream of using my skills to buy my freedom, like I heard of some slaves doing.

But then the master died. The son who inherited me has no interest in farming and told me that a skilled slave is worth a lot of money in the Deep South.

I cannot bear the thought of picking cotton for the rest of my life in Mississippi. By my reckoning, I am almost 20 years old. I was born a slave. But I do not intend to die one.