

Resource Sheet #2

James Watkins (alias Sam Berry) (b. circa 1821 - d.)

MSA SC 5496 - 8792

Fled from Slavery, Baltimore County, Maryland, 1844

Biography:

James Watkins, originally named Sam Berry and commonly referred to as Ensor Sam, was born around 1821 on Abraham Ensor's plantation near Cockeyville, Maryland. Ensor had made his enslaved father, Amos Salisbury, an overseer on the plantation. Amos refused to acknowledge Watkins as his son and often beat him. When he was barely one year old, James was separated from his mother, Milcah Berry. Aunt Comfort, an elderly slave woman, took care of James as one of the many slave children separated from their mothers. Abraham Ensor died in 1836, and his estate passed into the hands of his son Luke, who often beat his slaves. In one instance, Watkins was knocked unconscious after Ensor conked him on the head with the end of a whip.

Around the age of twenty, Watkins made his first attempt at escaping to the North. Buoyed by the encouragement of Irish workers in the area, Watkins set off for Canada carrying only a walking stick, a three day supply of cornbread, and a "dirk," a small hand-held weapon often used by escaping slaves. He did not make it far as on the third day of his voyage James was recaptured by associates of Ensor and returned to the plantation. As punishment he was whipped, and to ensure Watkins would not escape again, he was forced to wear a metal yoke with two bells on it for three months.

In 1842 or 1843, Watkins converted to the Methodist faith after he left the plantation to attend a Methodist camp meeting. Imbued with his newfound salvation, he returned to the plantation in broad daylight where Ensor found him and tied him up to whip him for his disobedience. After fervently praying for his salvation while Ensor rounded up his son to help him with the whipping, Watkins was miraculously spared when Ensor changed his mind and declined to whip him. Instead, Ensor and his son took him down and helped restore circulation to his arms.

Watkins made his second escape attempt in May of 1844. Traveling with only a walking stick, he was nearly captured twice by people trying to claim the reward for his return. In one instance, two men and a woman assaulted him before he managed to make his escape. Upon reaching Pennsylvania, Watkins met with several sympathizers who led him to a series of "safe houses" in the area. He was advised to change his name to avoid slave bounty hunters. Watkins abandoned his slave name, Sam Berry, and began calling himself James Watkins. After being shuttled to Philadelphia and then New York, Watkins eventually settled in Hartford, Connecticut. There he found steady employment, married a free woman, and was taught to read by his employer's daughter.

In May of 1849, Watkins returned to Maryland with hopes of meeting and possibly freeing his mother and other family members. When he arrived, he found that his mother had been manumitted by Ensor because of her advanced age and decreased value. She informed him that Ensor had told the slaves that Watkins had been sold to a rice farmer from the Deep South for

misbehaving instead of telling them that he had actually escaped. This was a common practice among slaveholders of this time – they used the fear of being sold to the South as a deterrent to misbehaving slaves. Watkins returned to Hartford alone, but soon raised enough money among abolitionists in that area to purchase several of his brothers and sisters.

In 1850, the federal government began strictly enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act, forcing Watkins to move yet again. Watkins sailed for England in January of 1851, leaving his family behind in Hartford. For more than two years he traveled the country giving speeches on the evils of slavery to fascinated audiences. Even after his friends in Hartford purchased his freedom from Ensor, Watkins remained in England and continued his tours. Watkins' narrative ends with him in England in the early-1850s.

<http://www.msa.md.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/008700/008792/html/008792bio.html>