

JOURDON ANDERSON
Letter to My Old Master (1865)

The Civil War gave some four million slaves their freedom, but freedom wasn't quite so simple. Where would the former slaves live? How would they put food on the table? If those issues weren't challenging enough, freed slaves also had to contend with former owners who were not happy about what the war had done. Some ex-Confederates refused to acknowledge that defeat meant emancipation. They tried to force their slaves to stay under their control because they still needed help planting and harvesting their crops. Having become accustomed to the benefits of enslaved workers, most of them balked at paying their former slaves a living wage. Consider the example of Jourdon Anderson, who, like many slaves, had adopted the surname of his owner, Colonel P. H. Anderson of Big Spring, Tennessee. In 1864, as Union troops took control of Tennessee, Jourdon Anderson and his wife and children had seized their freedom and eventually relocated to Dayton, Ohio. Four months after the war

ended, Colonel Anderson learned of Jourdon's whereabouts and sent him a letter urging him to return to work on the farm, promising to treat him well. Jourdon's tongue-in-cheek reply reveals both the complexities of emancipation and the resilience and courage that many freed slaves displayed.

"Letter from a Freedman to His Old Master," New York Daily Tribune, August 22, 1865.

The following is a genuine document. It was dictated by the old servant, and contains his ideas and forms of expression. [Cincinnati Commercial.]

DAYTON, Ohio, August 7, 1865.

To my Old Master, Col. P. H. ANDERSON, Big Spring, Tennessee.

SIR: I got your letter and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this for harboring Rebs, they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Col. Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear at your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again and see Miss Mary and Miss Martin and Alion, Esther, Green and Leo. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville Hospital, but one of the neighbors told me Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here; I get \$25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy (the folks here call her Mrs. Anderson), and the children; Milly, Jane and Grandy, go to school and are learning well; the teacher says Grandy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday School, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated; sometimes we overhear others saying, "Them colored people were slaves" down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks, but

I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to belong to Col. Anderson. Many darkies would have been proud, as I used to be, to call you master. Now, if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free-papers in 1861 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department at Nashville. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you are sincerely disposed to treat us justly and kindly—and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old sores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years, and Mandy twenty years, as \$25 a month for me, and \$2 a week for Mandy. Our earnings would amount to \$11,680. Add to this the interest for the time our wages been kept back and deduct what you paid for our clothing and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams Express, in care of V. Winters, esq., Dayton, Ohio! If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night, but in Tennessee there was never any pay day for the negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up and both good looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine.

I would rather stay here and starve and die if it come to that than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood, the great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

From your old servant, JOURDON ANDERSON.

P. S.—Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you learn from this letter about the experience of enslaved African Americans in transitioning from being the property of others to being free?
2. Based on the information in the letter, how would you describe the conditions of being a slave in the former Confederacy?