

A Letter About a Former Master

by Louis Mitchell

Columbus County was formed in the year 1803 from Brunswick and Bladen Counties. It is in the southeastern section of North Carolina, - the headwater district, - and surrounded by the border of South Carolina, and by Robeson, Bladen, Pender, and Brunswick Counties. The present area is 939 square miles. Whiteville was laid out on James B. White's land in 1810 and public buildings were ordered to be erected there. Whiteville now serves as the county seat.

Also in 1810 the dividing line between Brunswick and Columbus Counties was established. The next year saw a further annexation of land from Brunswick to Columbus . Finally in 1821 another section of Bladen was added to the county, with the law stating:

That all that part of the County of Bladen which lies where the Lake Road leading to Wilmington crosses, thence on the north side of said road to the drain of Buckhead Bay, thence a direct line to where the road leading from Manly Westbrook's to Gabriel Holmes's crosses Saspan Drain, thence a direct line to where the line that di-

vides Bladen and Columbus Counties is supposed to run, thence along said line to Samuel Swindell's plantation, and thence on the southwest side of said plantation to the mouth of Slade Swamp, be, and the same is hereby annexed to, and shall hereafter form a part of Columbus County; and all that part of the country lying northeast of the said line shall form a part of Bladen County.

In short, that was how Columbus County was formed. It was here that the fruitful Spaulding family had its late 18th century origin on Sam Swindell's plantation, and it is here that we begin our tale.

History tells us that Ben Spaulding, ^{born 1773} was the father of eight sons and one daughter: Emanuel, Iver, John, David, Strong, Washington, Benjamin Jr., Henry, and Eliza. That body of study also tells much of this man's resistance to his white father's endorsement of the institution of slavery. Lastly, local history records the manner in which young Ben Spaulding, what with "the blood of his white master coursing through his veins," as John Henry Moore would have it, was set free. Half-white, half-black, known to the community as Uncle Ben, he then purchased one thousand acres from his former owner, Sam Swindell, with money that he had earned on his own after winning his freedom. Though it was known that his former master was his father, it was never formally acknowledged by Swindell himself.

Ben Spaulding in time became the patriarch of his own large family, but, filled with compassion that comes from shared experience, he added to it by buying one of his father's slaves. His name was Curtis.

Curtis had always been an unhappy child. Perhaps that was why Uncle Ben Spaulding's heart was stirred to sympathy. Having had the same plantation experience doubtlessly served to intensify his instinct to pro-

fect the younger man. Like Ben before him, Curtis also resisted being owned; he hated the cruel commands, the condescending attitudes, the abominable food, the disrespectful references to the color of his skin, the punishments arbitrarily given, and, above all, his master's continual invasion of what little privacy Curtis could snatch in the woods, in the quiet of his bed, in the peace of the fields, and in the tranquility he discovered behind an old abandoned barn on the farthest outpost of the plantation.

About ninety feet in back of that barn, Curtis had erected a wooden tower for the daybirds to perch on and for the owls to fly around at night. He would secret bits of grain or leftover bread in his shirt and take it to the tower which he would place for the birds to eat. And after sunset, when he could get away from his quarters, he would steal out to his haven and place a small candle at the top of the tower. He imagined that it shone like a soft glow-worm in the distance, so that if seen from the plantation it would not look too suspicious. He feared the tower's being discovered because even so harmless a diversion as feeding the birds was sure to bring about Sam Swindell's ire.

Sometimes Curtis would climb to the top of the tower (he had made ladder-steps on the side himself), and he would imagine himself free, master of all he surveyed. His moods changed with the land in the various seasons, and, likewise, in his imagination the land changed with his moods. Sometimes the open untilled fields were the sea, the distant "land beyond the River", somewhere "Over Jordan." When the fields were the sea, Curtis sailed on that water back to where his mother had lived across the Atlantic. Sometimes he imagined the fields were the sky, and he would mount a honey-suckle blossom and fly off to "that City called Heaven." And when it was

firm land, he imagined the day when he would ride Mr. Swindell's pet mule off into the distance to the horizon where the earth meets that "great gettin' up morning."

One evening after eating his nasty rations, Curtis stole away to his own little Calvary. He imagined the tower to be the cross, - the story of Christ's crucifixion was of all the Bible stories he knew the one story that moved him most deeply. He lit the candle, imagining people gathering about, saw the sky darkening and the world becoming ready. Christ was crucified on dogwood. Curtis knew this because he had learned to read, and ever since he read from the Bible every day. He had taken a shabby Bible from Mrs. Swindell's small library and he kept it in a hollow in a three-leafed maple deep in the woods. Such an act of independence would have gone against the grain with Mr. Swindell, if he had known. Curtis would go to the tree whenever he could to re-read the stories that gave his life meaning. Trees were also an important part of his life; they represented nobility, strength, freedom. They made a fence around the best part of his life where Mr. Swindell could not enter. He knew of the changes of the seasons by the hues on their bark, the rushing of the sweet sap through the roots. His soul moved like the sap through the branching arms of the tree in the spring when they changed their nakedness for a covering of blossoms and greenery. In spring his soul blossomed, too, and Curtis thought that his great Jehovah, the Lord God, had grown up like a tree from the sun-soaked earth, giving bud to His children who would be with Him someday soon in heaven. First, there must be atonement, however: to Curtis, this was the winter. God's children like blossoms would then be blown by the cold breezes; Curtis felt that winter and death were con-

tained in one wind, to be feared and yet ever to be yearned for, since it offered relief, justice, and a better world of "plenty good news", as the Gospel song says, and in the end God's children would inherit the earth as the Father had determined a long time ago.

Curtis breathed deeply as he thought of all this and stood admiring his towering Babel. The whipporwills sang and adding their caroling to the songs of the bob-whites, the redbreasts, and the thrush overhead. Sunset was just settling on this peaceful scene, when, as in another evening long ago, the centurio^{ns} came to destroy the tranquility. In this case, it was Mr. Swindell and his overseers. The tower was knocked down and there was nothing Curtis could do, except listen to Mr. Swindell's fury: "Ah's been lookin' fur you fo' 'most an hour, an' Ah's foun' you now, nigger, an' this is the en' of yo' defahance. Ah's sick o' yo' mangy ways. Thinks you's independent? Ah's 'bout to sell you soon, then you won't go sneakin' off. Cain't put up with this hyar conduct no longer." Curtis was whipped all the way down the hill and into the tumbling cabin that was used for slave quarters.

The young man lay on his bed swearing never to forget this outrageous crime against his dearest dreams, his innermost reveries, his private world, his only hopes.

Ben Spaulding meanwhile had noticed the way Swindell seemed to pick Curtis out as his whipping-boy from all the other slaves, and he had observed also the gentle, rather poetic, sensitivity of Curtis. Finally, not long after Curtis's most recent whipping, Ben Spaulding decided to buy Curtis. His wife had just delivered their second son and whatwith her caring for the babies she could no longer work in the fields. But it was not

for his service that Ben Spaulding bought Curtis; it was because he wanted to set him free. The young man came to love the people who treated him as if they were his new mother and father. They treated him with the gentility that he had always dreamed of, with the respect he had always read about in the Bible, and with the mercy that seemed to be the province of Ruth, above all the other Old Testament characters. Curtis responded to love as the trees respond to rain and sunshine. He no longer worked in the kitchen where his former master had put him. Now he labored by the side of his new father in the fields, in the woods, and on the roads, keeping the farm in order.

His concerns now were helping to pay for the property by producing enough goods to be sold at market as well as feed the thriving family. He studied by day and by night, reading in the fields and sometimes on horseback. Ben Spaulding never tried to alter Curtis's direction, for he knew that the scars of bondage, the bruises of chains, and the hurt of humiliation could only be cured by independence. Fatherly advice he would give when he could. Of the crops in the fields, he was extremely knowledgable. For example, one day when he came on Curtis just as he was about to bite down on a red, wrinkled vegetable, he stopped him. "Don't eat that, Son," he said, "unless Ah miss mah guess that thar thing is a poison-weed called nahghtshade. Throw it away. As a matter of fact, Ah guess you better go get the shovel and dig the whole plant up and destroy it. Ah'd hate for any o' the chillun to git sick."

"Sho thing," said Curtis, "Ah'll dig it up. Ah just thought

they was ole tomatoes that got wizzened up by the sun." Curtis did not mind taking order from his new father, because they were given in a courteous manner that encouraged Curtis. He not only appreciated encouragement, he seemed to hunger for it. On more philosophical matters, Ben Spaulding was less able to help the boy, but he was always frank, always honest, and when he did not know the answer to his son's questions, he would admit it. "Ah do not know, Son," he would often say, "you will have to fahnd the answer for yo'self."

They would talk long hours into the night, - long after Mrs. Spaulding went to bed, - reliving the pains, the agonies, and their once dim dreams of another life. They sometimes spoke with religious fervor of their vision of the day when all their people would be free and respected among men. They both knew, although they never stated it, that even though they were free the indelible mark of hatred and pain could never quite be erased from their hearts. It would have to be carried to the grave. They also felt that somewhere along the winding path of life, justice was waiting to interrupt the evil trip of their former owner, and Ben Spaulding's father, Sam Swindell. It was bitter for Ben to feel no love for his father, but he saw his father's disrespect for the nature of man and disregard for the nature of God as being close to unforgivable. He knew that Sam Swindell carried a heart and soul gone wrong everywhere he went. "He must atone," Ben told Curtis, "or spend all eternity in hell-fire." Curtis eyes flashed at this. "All men must be punished for their sins," said Ben Spaulding, and Curtis could not help wishing that

Sam Swindell would be punished like the Philistines, smote with the jaw-bone of an ass. He felt that destiny and justice would destroy Sam Swindell.

After a number of happy years at his new home, one day Curtis had to go to his beloved father, Ben, to tell him that he had decided to go back to Swindell's farm and hire himself out as kitchen help. This may seem strange but Curtis had good reason. "Ah want to marry Minerva," he said to Ben, "and, Papa, Ah donot know any other way. May Ah have your blessing?"

"You sho kin," replied the kind old man. "Ah knowed you was sweet on her, an' Ah knows you wants to help her git away from that place. Lawd, Ah ünderstan'. Jess so that ole mean man is payin' you, Son, you ain't nobody's slave. Jess you 'member that, you ain't nobody's slave no mo'." Curtis was pleased, and a few days later he left. "You has mah blessin' an' that o' yo' Ma, " said Ben. "Jess let us know how you is an' whar you is." Curtis bid his parents farewell and went back to the familiar grounds of his cruel childhood. Only for Minerva would he venture back into that den of despair and desolation.

He worked by Minerva's side in the huge kitchen for a year and a half, until he had earned enough money to be able to buy Minerva. The day of their leave-taking, their last working-day, Curtis seemed to Minerva to be very nervous to go as quickly as possible. In fact, he insisted that they depart that very night. All through the day he seemed doubly uneasy

whenever Mr. Swindell would address him. But it was a happy ride away from the Swindell farm and a happier arrival in Clarkton. During the entire trip, Curtis and Minerva talked about their plans for the future, and she could see his spirits rise. They delighted in the thoughts of the number of children they planned to have, - the first boy would be called Ben. Minerva wondered why he had seemed so ill at ease and it is possible that she never found out, for as it happens she never saw Mr. Swindell or Ben Spaulding again.

A few nights later, they were in their room at Clarkton. "What are you doing?" Minerva asked of Curtis. "Why don't you come on to bed, Honey. It's mahghty late an' that thar lamp is jess 'bout give out."

"Ah'll be right there, Minerva," said Curtis consolingly. "Ah have a few more words to add to this letter to Papa Spaulding. He deserves a letter from me. Ah've been promising myself to write and now Ah'm gonna finish this thing. It's a letter Ah've good reason for writin'. Ah'll be right there. Get some rest, you are tired, dear."

Curtis completed the letter and reread it before sealing it:

Dear Papa and Mama,

Only you and God can forgive me for what I have done. I am sorry for it now, but it is too late. It appears that everything I have ever done in my life has been too late, except for living with you and being a part of your lives. I even think that I have married Minerva too late but the Lord will take care of her. She is free now. She is smart and capable of handling her own affairs.

Remember, Mama and Papa, whatever I tell you and whatever I have done does not change the fact that I love you very much and have never had any desire to disgrace you. Perhaps this will, - but I have not intended it to turn out that way. All I know is that since I can remember I have had a burning desire to right wrongs, to turn justice

around, and to help the wrath of God to descend upon those who have persecuted me, upon those who have taken my mother and father away and sold them into distant servitude and disgrace. I do not seem to be able ever to forgive Mr. Swindell for his many floggings of me, for his spitting insults, and his inhuman punishments. I have told you about his ways of punishing me, - starvation, isolation, beating, and sun-scorching my thin mulatto skin. Yet, it is only now that I have begun to realize that my hatred for him has poisoned my soul irrecoverably, for hating another human being is to love oneself less. Let me explain, dear family.

From my position as cook at the side of Minerva in Mr. Swindell's kitchen, I have observed a great deal. None of it has aided me in abandoning a profound hatred of him. In fact, that secret post has only served to intensify my utter disgust with his style of living, his shallow existence, and his foul conduct towards other human beings, - yes, even to whites on his own level. (As to "levels", I must say, however, that I deem most of his slaves surpass him, but there is bias in that observation, I know.)

Mr. Swindell, as you know, has always been a man of firm convictions about his own worth and that of those around him. His God for Sunday is the Almighty, he claims, and for the rest of the week I say that it is either cruelty or money, - but they are hard for me to separate in the type of world he occupies. He likes his sweets, his meats, and above all his vegetables. He has serious problems with his teeth, - they do not appear to work very well, - but then he gums most of his victuals and that leads to his heavy moments of indigestion. He often eats by himself because he is so contrary that the rest of his corpulent family choose to eat earlier or later in order to avoid his cranky, irritable nature. I have respect for the sense of cleanliness, - something they always preached to us, - and I would suggest that the other members of the family would object to his presence because of his lack of it. However, such cannot be the case since they all dip snuff to an inordinate degree, chew tobacco everywhere and spit anywhere, smoke to the point of burning up all the clothes that Lula Belle makes for them. They wash seldom and it is no wonder that their white flaky skin dries and falls from them for the lack of soap and water's attention.

Their breaths are foul, their fingers stained,
and their bodies odoriferous from sweat and decay.

Of late Mr. Swindell had been sorely afflicted with a cold in his large blond head which has seriously served to impair his ordinarily poor sense of taste even more than usual. On our last night at the farm, urged by my intense detestation of the man, I dared serve him a seemingly delicious ragout of delicate and fine beef, onion, and potato. I mixed in a delightful ingredient of my own choosing. Yes, Papa and Mama, I subtly added in the deep scarlet flesh of the lethal nightshade.

I must admit that it is a difficult thing to live with now, but I have no choice any more. I felt that it had to be done, for the sake of justice. But now I am not so sure. I have begun to doubt whether I have done the right thing. I have called myself honorable until now, but I wonder about my judgment. I have serious doubts about it now, about my own sanity. The effects of slavery have me mixed up. Who suffers the most? Who is truly the victim and who is the victimizer? Who is the slave and who is the owner? Is anyone ever truly free? I thought I was a free man, and yet, what is the power that compelled me to kill this man, who, thought the lowest of scoundrels, was still a human being. I can no longer even justify my act by saying that I did it for God or for my people. I have deprived myself by this act of all human dignity. Please forgive me, Papa and Mama. Now I must go. You probably will not hear from me again. I ask your blessings now as I did before I left home. It is only that I need them more now, as I need your forgiveness.

Your son,

Curtis

P.S.

By the time you receive this letter, Mr. Swindell will be with the devil that he has entertained for these many years. For fear of what the white man does to Negroes who have committed crimes against their fallacious society of sin and hatred, I shall take my own life. I am an expert with the knife; death will not be painful. I leave the fate of the better half (this marriage to her naturally-endowed trait of survival. She is a free woman now, and, like the rest of our people, she will be able to learn what to do to survive. As for me, I ask nothing of fate and reputation. By coming here, I hope I have separated my deed and my name from your good name, your fine acts, your bravery, and your generosity.

Curtis

When Ben Spaulding received this letter, - after the delay that is common with the slowness of rural mail, - he and his wife grieved deeply over their loss. They tried to find out the news from Clarkton, but this was impossible. Minerva had never learned to read or write and Ben Spaulding and his wife did not know how to find her. In their charity, their emotions even went out to the Swindell family. "We must go there," said Ben to his wife, "to pay our respects. After all, though Ah did not love him, he was mah father, and it is only rahaght that we pay our respects."

The evening was sweet and clear as they rode in their buggy towards the Swindell plantation. It was warm and the air was permeated with North Carolina fragrances which only the harvest of autumn can inspire.

The Swindell plantation house was aglow with candle-light and at the door stood a large slave peering intensely at the Spaulding buggy pulling up to the front door. Uncle Ben and his wife mounted the colonial steps and were immediately greeted warmly by Old John, the footman slave. In back of Old John, - to their great shock, - suddenly there appeared Mr. Swindell in full evening dress.

"Ah thought you was daid," blurted out Uncle Ben. "Ah thought you was daid." His voice was nervous and his heart was almost in his mouth.

"Naw, Ah'm all rahght. Had a little bit of indigestion 'tother nahght. As a matter of fact, it was Curtis's last nahght. Ah think it was the red peppess he put in that thar stew. Didn't agree with me, at all. But Ah feel fahne now."

Ben Spaulding and his wife were too stunned to speak.

"But, tell me now, Ben," asked the old farmer, cordial for once, "how's Curtis?"