

Summary of *John W. Tillman of Delaware and Pennsylvania: Freedom Seeker, Agricultural Laborer, Soldier in the U.S. Colored Troop, and Family Man*

John W. Tillman was born a slave in Delaware in 1827. His story is particularly noteworthy because the biography his son wrote of him later in his life is one of the few documents regarding the cooperation of black and white abolitionists in the operation of the Underground Railroad in Delaware. His biography, *Life and Travels*, discusses his early life and escape from slavery, as well as his service in the Army and his life in Pennsylvania after the Civil War. The book was probably written when Tillman was seventy years old, and a number of spelling mistakes imply that the work was transcribed during interviews Tillman gave to his son. This means that Tillman's memory should be questioned, as there are a number of inconsistencies and inaccuracies in Tillman's narrative. There is enough information to corroborate the major events of his life, such as the location of the farm he escaped from as well as his enlistment in the Army. He explains how his family was broken up when his master sold his mother and brother to different people, and describes his grief at being separated from all of his family members. Tillman's master rented him out as a field laborer to a man named Samuel Foreakers, who greatly mistreated him. Much of Tillman's narrative is dedicated to his thoughts on his masters, among whom Foreakers was one of the most despised. On one occasion when Tillman was still a child, Foreakers tied him to a post and whipped him savagely over the course of an entire day, then washed his wounds with saltwater so he couldn't lay down. He reported this to his master, George Cummins, who sent him back to his home and made him a house waiter. Even there he was abused by Cummins and his wife, though apparently not as badly as Foreakers had.

Tillman attempted to escape slavery twice, first unsuccessfully in the mid-1840s and again in 1850. His first attempt was unplanned, and he simply walked off the farm without any food. He resorted to eating turnip peelings he found on the road north to avoid starvation. Eventually he came to a town called Canton's Bridge, where he took shelter in the home of a black freeman named Philip Bennson. Unfortunately for Tillman, Bennson betrayed him and reported Tillman's location to a Quaker that brought the message to Cummins, who had a constable arrest him and drag him back to the Cummins farm. There are a number of historical records that make parts of Tillman's story unlikely. Firstly, Tillman likely misremembered the name of the actual town of Cantwell's Bridge as Canton Bridge. Secondly, there are no records of a Philip Benson living in Cantwell's Bridge at the time of Tillman's escape, but there was a man named William Benson. Tillman claims that Benson reported him to a Quaker named Daniel Corbett, but records show his name was actually Daniel Corbit. Corbit was also a known agent for the Underground Railroad, and therefore was likely not the one that reported Tillman's escape to the authorities. While there are a number of theories as to who reported him, definitive proof has never been found. When Tillman returned to the Cummins farm, he was whipped but continued to work in the house instead of being returned to field laborer duty. Sometime after this event, Cummins gave Tillman to a man named William Rothwell to cover a debt from a lost bet. Rothwell was a much more wealthy farmer than Cummins, and owned over 2000 acres of land across multiple farms in Delaware and Maryland. Rothwell mistreated Tillman, whipping him frequently, forcing him to work long hours and providing poor food, clothing, and living arrangements. After serving Rothwell for five years, Tillman planned and executed his second escape attempt. He brought sufficient food for his journey, and made his way first to Port Penn. He then used the

cover of a thunderstorm to make his way north to Wilmington, where he attempted to blend in with the freemen in the city. He was eventually brought to the house of an Underground Railroad Station Master named Thomas Garret, who coordinated Tillman's travel down a route of safe houses and into Pennsylvania. He had a close run-in with slave catchers outside West Marlborough but was able to escape. He eventually made his way to Valley Forge, where he began work as an agricultural laborer. He moved around frequently, and at one point fled to Philadelphia after believing that he had caught the attention of slave catchers, but eventually moved back. After marrying and settling down, he had even more encounters with slave catchers despite his precautions, causing him to move several times, once all the way to New Jersey, though he eventually moved back.

When the Civil War broke out, Tillman enlisted in the 127th US Colored Infantry Regiment. Tillman's description of his service is very brief and without any details, though military records give some clue as to his whereabouts. His motivation for enlistment was a desire to see the abolition of slavery. It is not known in what battles he saw combat, though he was hospitalized twice for non-combat-related wounds. These wounds made it difficult for him to walk and work. He received help from neighbors in the years after the war but his health continued to deteriorate. After the war, he began identifying as a citizen of the United States and was a proponent of equal rights for African-Americans. He became highly involved in politics, and personally organized a rally for the 1884 Republican presidential candidate, James G. Blain. In addition to politics, another activity Tillman spent a lot of his time on was hunting down relatives that he had lost touch with. He found his mother living in Pennsylvania as well, having escaped even earlier than he had. He found one of his brothers in Friendship, Delaware and

another in Franklinville, New Jersey. Another pastime of Tillman's was visiting places and people that he had known as a slave. He visited the Cummins farm and spent time with the family there, before traveling to the house he had been born in, where he received a number of souvenirs from the new owner. He settled in West Marlborough and died in 1904.