

Samuel Bell
Enslaved in Kentucky (unknown part)
Interviewed in Evansville, Indiana

Samuel Bell was born a slave in 1853. His master, whom Samuel served for twelve years, was John Bell, who owned a plantation in Kentucky. At the age of twelve, Samuel was taken—along with his parents, brothers, and sisters—to a contraband camp [a camp within Union lines where slaves escaped to or were brought to during the Civil War] at Clarksville, Tennessee. Samuel said that he was well taken care of at the camp, where he was taught to read and write. After his father died at the camp, his mother asked to be allowed to return to Kentucky, and her request was granted. She found a job in Hopkinsville and later returned to the camp to reclaim her children, whom she continued to support while their grandparents looked after them. After her death a few years later, her children were returned to the camp in Clarksville, Tennessee. Samuel, however, soon became tired of camp life and asked permission to leave to earn his own living. After leaving the camp, he farmed for a while and worked on a large cotton farm on the Cumberland River. He recalled that the cotton farm included 100 cabins and two cotton gins. After working in the cotton fields for twelve months, he traveled twenty miles to Brenton, located ten miles from Ashville, and for two years worked there as a houseman with the Newland family. Finally settling in Evansville, he worked as a janitor in a local bank for a number of years, joined the Masons, and became a highly respected citizen. Samuel's narrative follows:

“[John Bell] ... was a good and a just man and fed his slaves well. He only used the lash when it was absolutely necessary. You know how it is in the court! Well, it was the same way on the plantations in slavery days. A good slave was seldom punished, but mean ones had to be punished to prevent their taking advantage of their master and the other slaves. Slaves were not subject to the laws of the land, and this punishment had to be governed by a slave's deeds and errors. The master's will was the only law he was compelled to obey. When a slave refused to work, he was flogged until he was willing to work. The master had to feed and clothe him and expected him to repay with work. The government was not well founded, and the Freedmen's Aid Society cared for the Negroes [in the contraband camps]. Colonel Eaton was in charge of the Freedmen's Aid Society in Tennessee, and the contraband Negroes were well treated in camp. I have never been misused by the white man of America. He has always been my friend. The Newland family wanted to give me an education and make me fit for a lawyer, but I worked

against my own interest and refused to obey their wishes. I have been in bondage and orphaned by the death of my parents. I have lived in the contraband camps and toiled for both rich and poor, but I have never been given abuse. [The happiest time of my life was] when Jesus saved my soul and gave me the hope of eternal life. I was given the promise at a revival conducted by the Reverend W. H. Anderson in the Old McFarland Church at Evansville. Green McFarland baptized me, and I have lived a Christian life since that day. Religion is worth the greatest fortune. It explains why man must labor and suffer, and his trying experiences make him more worthy of the great reward promised by the kind Father. When his years of sorrow are fulfilled, he will understand and appreciate the reward, which is heaven.

From Baker, Ronald L.. Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless. Indiana University Press. Kindle Edition.