

February 2024 Newsletter

HOW MANY ESCAPED?



Hello:

I met some wonderful people during my last presentation of, “A Promise Moon,” and we had a thought-provoking discussion about the Underground Railroad. One of the gentlemen posed an interesting question: How many slaves escaped during the Civil War? Let’s start with three escaped slaves who changed history.



In 1861, Major General Benjamin Butler refused to return three escaped slaves to their owners. Prior to Butler's inspired decision, (or legal loophole) the Union Army didn't have a policy regarding escaped slaves. Some commanders granted the escapees refuge and others returned them to their owners. Butler, however, realized the strategic importance of granting conditional freedom to the escaped slaves, since the Confederates were dependent on slave labor in their war effort. Classifying escaped slaves as "contraband" assigned them strategic value—like ammunition or firearms—and granted them legal asylum. These escaped slaves were commonly referred to as: "Contrabands," and "Contraband Soldiers." Ultimately, an estimated 40,000 escaped slaves achieved freedom under these terms. And if you appreciate poetic justice, Arlington, the seized estate of Robert E. Lee, leader of the Confederate Army, was turned into a Contraband Camp.



Freedman's Village, a Contraband Camp, at Arlington, now the National Cemetery.

Ultimately, nearly 90,000 "contraband," or escaped slaves served in the Union Army.

Close to 30,000 escaped slaves reached Canada before the thirteenth amendment outlawing slavery was passed.

For perspective, the 1860 Census lists a total population of 31,443,321 people in the United States, of which 3,953,760 were enslaved.

So, although the number of escaped slaves is somewhat muddled, the number of successful escapes via the underground railroad is generally believed to be approximately 100,000.

For truly insightful, first-person accountings, the Library of Congress has digitalized, *[Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project](#)*. This contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves.



Pictured above: *Self-Portrait With Bandaged Ear*, Vincent Van Gogh, January, 1889

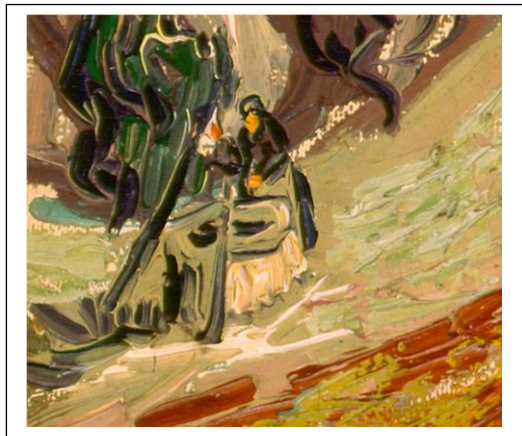
Meanwhile, I've been reading Vincent Van Gogh's letters while working on my current novel-in-progress, "Saving Van Gogh."

In a letter to his mother in October, 1889, Van Gogh writes, "I am ploughing on my canvases as they do in their fields." He is referring to the painting pictured below, that he completed from his room at the asylum near Saint-Rémy, entitled: *Landscape with House and Ploughman*. This painting was once part of the German Industrialist Otto Krebs' collection, until his house was turned into a Soviet military headquarters. This painting, along with three more Van Goghs, five Cezanne's, six Monets, ten Renoirs, five Pissarro's, four Gauguin's, a Picasso, and twenty-two other masterpiece paintings were thought to be lost until they were unveiled at the Hermitage Museum fifty years later. (This is also a plot point in "Saving Van Gogh.")



Vincent Van Gogh: Landscape with House and Ploughman, October 1889

Part of what I find fascinating about Van Gogh is the detail he adds to his work. Did you notice the woman drawing water from a well in the middle of the painting on the left side? Here she is again, pictured below.



Please mark your calendars:



This speaking engagement comes with breakfast! Saturday, May 18th, 10am, I will be reading excerpts from my book, "[A Promise Moon](#)," and discussing the Underground Railroad in

Kentucky at the Jack Jouett House Historic Site, 255 Craigs Creek Rd. Versailles, KY 40383. The [Kentucky Humanities Speakers Bureau](#) is sponsoring this talk.

Thursday, June 6 at 6:30 pm, I will be speaking about “Let The Earth Breathe” at the Erlanger Branch, Kenton County Public Library, 401 Kenton Lands Road, Erlanger, Kentucky 41018. The [Kentucky Humanities Speakers Bureau](#) is also sponsoring this talk.

Tuesday, November 12 at 11:00 am, I will be visiting the Owl Creek Garden Club to speak about “Let The Earth Breathe.” We are meeting at City Hall in Anchorage, KY, 1306 Evergreen Rd, 40223

I hope you’ve enjoyed this edition of my newsletter. If you haven’t already, please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon. It is really helpful with sales. Here is the link to my latest book, “[Stealing Picasso](#).”

If you know of anyone who is looking for a speaker, the [Kentucky Humanities Speakers Bureau](#) is great about helping to subsidize appearances. I’m available as a speaker to talk about “[Stealing Renoir](#),” and how World War II was the largest art theft in history.

Or, if Kentucky history is appropriate for audiences, the [Speakers Bureau](#) will subsidize my appearance to discuss the findings from my research grant into the Underground Railroad in Kentucky.

The Speakers Bureau will also subsidize my appearance to talk about gardening with native plants and how this led to the publication of “[Let The Earth Breathe](#).” If you or anyone you know would like to schedule a talk, here’s the [link](#).

[Here is a link to my previous newsletters.](#)

Happy reading.

Stephen Allten Brown

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