

Bond, Hannah ^[1]

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Bond, Hannah

By Crystal Rodriguez, North Carolina State University, 2013

ca.1830s? – ca. 1880s?

Hannah Bond was an enslaved African American woman who escaped bondage and wrote the earliest known novel written by an African American woman. The unpublished novel was not rediscovered until it was purchased at an auction by Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 2001. Published in 2002, it became a New York Times bestseller.

She lived on the plantation of [John Hill Wheeler](#) ^[2] in Murfreesboro, North Carolina before escaping and wrote the semi-autobiographical novel, *A Bondwoman's Narrative*, under the pen name Hannah Crafts. Written between 1855 and 1861, the novel is a description of what being a slave was like in the antebellum south. Hannah's writing style is unique among the known slave accounts, drawing influences from Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* (1817), and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

Hannah was likely born and raised in Virginia. She was taught how to read and write by an elderly white couple that lived on one of the plantations she was enslaved at, but they soon came into conflict with the law, as it was against the law to teach slaves how to read or write.

Hannah Bond went through the hands of a number of slave owners; however sufficient evidence is not available to know clearly which slave owners she was owned by. She was a house slave and therefore describes explicitly the differences of that of a house slave to those of a field slave. At one plantation the mistress decided she should marry a field slave. This did not go over well with Bond, who concluded the only way to avoid the marriage was to run away.

However, Bond was caught by a slave trader, Mr. Trappe, who sold her to John Hill Wheeler, a plantation owner, congressman, and writer himself. Wheeler bought Hannah as a house slave to assist his wife, Ellen Wheeler, in errands and other personal duties. Bond traveled to Washington, D.C. and Wilmington with Wheeler when his wife traveled with him. It is likely that Wheeler's plantation library is the source of the majority of books she mimicked in her writing style.

Hannah Bond successfully escaped from the Wheeler's Murfreesboro plantation in early May 1857. She disguised herself as a man, assisted by John Hill Wheeler's nephew, John Wheeler, who gave her men's clothing. Using the Underground Railroad, she journeyed to central New York, taking refuge on the farm of the Craft family, from whom she likely took her pseudonym. She went on to move to New Jersey, where she became a school teacher and married a minister.

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Additional Resources:

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