Resource #7. Benjamin Holmes, enslaved

Benjamin Holmes was a teenager in 1862, when his refusal to leave Charleston with his owner caused him to be sold and taken by his new owner from that city to Tennessee.

> *I was born* **. . .** *on the 25th of September, 1846, or 1848, at Charleston, S. C. My father taught me my letters. In 1853 I was bound as an apprentice to Mr. Weston, a colored tailor. I was so small then I could hardly see over the bench. I studied all the signs and all the names on the doors where I carried bundles, and asked people to tell me a word or two at a time; till, in 1860, I found I could read the papers. My mother told me if I would learn to write she would give me a gold dollar. A part of my duty was to sweep the store in the morning, and I took some time to look in the measuring books to see how the writing letters were made. In this way I learned to write. On Sundays, in 1860, the men in the store hired me to read the New York* Tribune *or* Herald*. I did not care much for the news myself; only the better the news the more they paid me. In 1862 the Yankees were near Charleston, and our owners wished to take us to the country. As we were not inclined to go, we were privately sold to a trader. During the day we were kept in the slave mart, ready to be examined, and were fed upon cow's head, boiled grits, and rice; at night we were locked up. I read the papers to the keeper, and in consideration for that he would give me permission to go down on the wharf in the morning, and I never failed to look for the Yankee boats. I read Lincoln's Proclamation in the prison. Such rejoicing as there was then! One old man held a prayer meeting right there in the mart. I was finally sold to Mr. Kaylor, who gave me five dollars, told me to go and bid my mother good by, and meet him at the depot; but the trader would not allow me to leave the pen. The next day Mr. Kaylor took me out himself, granted me a few hours with my friend, and then sent me on to Chattanooga.*

J. B. T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (Boston, 1880), cited in John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977), pp. 618-20.

Resource #7. Benjamin Holmes, enslaved (cont'd)

Questions for Students:

- In what ways was Holmes' owner trying to control him?
- In what ways did Holmes and his family resist his owner's control? (Consider the ways he used situations to his own, rather than his owner's, advantage).
- What were the consequences of his resistance?