

Landon

“There is one man 35 years old, said to be a blacksmith, he is whipped in a horrid manner which is a great eyesore and renders him less unsalable. I value him at eight hundred dollars.” This was the valuation by R. H. Dickinson, an auctioneer in the firm of Templeman & Dickinson, setting prices for the 29 inmates in the Virginia Penitentiary who were sentenced to transportation outside the limits of the United States.

Landon, a runaway Slave the property of William Bower of Fauquier County, was arrested in the evening of the 9th day of February 1839 and confined in the Brentsville, Virginia jail. The next morning being Sunday about “one half hour by sun” Overton, a Slave who was working in the jail, said he passed by the cell door and the prisoner asked for a coal to light his pipe. Overton asked him if he could wait until after breakfast and Landon said yes. After breakfast and with the permission of George Clifford, the jailor, he was given a hot coal.

About a half hour later William Fewell, J. A. Evans, and James Purcell arrived at the jail with the intent of questioning the prisoner. Fewell reported that he got to the head of the stairway and called to Landon who replied that the house was on fire. When asked where, he said he didn't know. They sent Overton to get the key to get into the cell. The fire seemed to have been confined to the Landon's cell and the ceiling of the adjoining one but the fire originated in the room of the accused.

John Gibson was the attorney for the Commonwealth and William T. French Esq. was assigned counsel for the prisoner Landon. Gibson read the following: “that he wanted the court to understand and be informed that a certain Negro man Slave named Landon, late of the County aforesaid, the property of one William Bowers of the County of Fauquier, on the tenth day of February, not having the fear of God before his eyes, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil, with force and arms, and within the jurisdiction of this court did feloniously, willfully and maliciously, set fire to the jail of the County of Prince William, situated in the town of Brentsville against the peace and dignity of the Commonwealth.” Gibson further charged that Landon set the fire by stuffing a piece of cloth into a hole and used the hot coal to ignite the cloth. The cell adjacent to his was empty making him the only person who could have started the fire.

The court was unanimous in the opinion that Landon was guilty of setting fire to the jail. He was remanded back to jail where he was to remain until the day of his execution. The hanging was to take place on the fourth Friday in April 1839 between the hours of 10 o'clock in the morning and 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The court also recommended Landon to the mercy of the Executive. Governor Campbell honored this recommendation and changed the sentence to transportation beyond the limits of the United States.

Ron Turner

