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# The Narrative of John Hutchins

*Edited by John Q. Anderson*

The hazards of pioneer life in Mississippi in the period of the American Revolution and the dramatic adventures of an exceptional young man are vividly described in a narrative written by John Hutchins, a document among the recently discovered papers of the Carson Family.<sup>1</sup> Hutchins was born near Natchez in 1774, and the following account is taken from reminiscences written for his grandchildren when he was about sixty years old.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1728 and 1730, John Hutchins (grandfather of the John Hutchins of the narrative) came from England with his wife, Margaret Pintard, a French Huguenot, to Long Island, New York, and later moved to Monmouth County, New Jersey, where a son, Anthony, was born and educated. Anthony Hutchins (father of the narrator) moved to the Peedee River district in South Carolina when he was twenty-one and married Ann White, daughter of an Irish father and American mother. Anthony served three years as sheriff and at the expiration of his term signed a bond for one of his deputies who was elected in his place. When the man defaulted, Anthony was held liable and had to sell his property to pay

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This article was originally published in the January 1958 edition of *The Journal of Mississippi History*. Some of the language may be offensive because the article is a product of its time and place. The article is reprinted verbatim to reflect the scholarship as it was presented at the time.

<sup>1</sup> John Hutchins was the maternal grand-uncle of Dr. [James Green] Carson, subject of John Q. Anderson's "Dr. James Green Carson, Ante-Bellum Planter of Mississippi and Louisiana," *Journal of Mississippi History*, XVIII (October 1956), 243-267. The Carson Papers were loaned to me by Mr. Joseph Carson of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from the Hutchins narrative appear in the large ledger book in which William Waller Carson, son of Dr. Carson, copied family information. It is not known whether he edited the manuscript as he copied it. Entries are given here as they appear in the Carson version. He omitted portions of the narrative, the original of which is thought to be among family papers in the possession of Mary Breckenridge, a descendant, and was not available to me.

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the obligation. By that time he had a family of four children. Concerning his father, John Hutchins later wrote:

Having the prospect of a large family with but a slender support he determined to try his fortune in a new country and with that view he left my mother and children and came by land to Natchez, sometime in the year 1772 . . . . He explored the surrounding country: his first location was on the bank of Saint Catherine Creek, near Natchez. The country at that time was a wilderness, yes, it was a dense and almost impenetrable canebrake, in his rambles through which he fell in with a young Indian of the Natchez Tribe. This young Indian became attached to my father and became his follower. He told my father that he had made a bad location as a residence; said he would soon die there and advised his leaving it, that he, Tom (that was the name given him by his new leader) could show him land of a better quality, and water, that if he drank of it, would make him live always. My father went to look at the land and water thus described.

With Tom and the four young apprentices, who came with him from Carolina, they set out for the land of promise and after twelve hours walk through the cane, they were brought to . . . White Apple Village, formerly occupied by the Prince White Apple, of the Natchez Tribe and within three miles of Ellis' Cliff . . . . After opening a small piece of land and building a few log cabins, he left his plantation in the care of Indian Tom and the four apprentices and returned to his family.

Early in 1774 Anthony Hutchins with his family, three slaves, wagons, saddle horses, and "horned cattle," started from South Carolina on the trek to the land he had bought in the Natchez area. Along the route through Georgia, they camped in a family tent and had milk and fresh meat from their own livestock. After about three months, the Hutchins family arrived at the new home in the wilderness in May, 1774. A few other families made the trek with them, and in response to letters written back to South Carolina others eventually came until about fifteen families were scattered over an area of one hundred miles. In that first summer in the wilderness, John Hutchins, the fifth child, was born on July 26, 1774, and within the next seven years four more children were born into

the family, all nine of them living to maturity.<sup>3</sup>

The difficulties of obtaining food and shelter in those early years were graphically recalled by Hutchins as follows:

Natchez was a wilderness, a canebrake, a hunting ground of the Indians and the white man, where the buffalo, the bear, the panther and the wolf had their hiding places, indeed the whole country was a thicket of timber and cane in tangled masses, there was not the footprint of a man on land, not a survey made of a single tract of land, not an ear of corn with the exception of an acre here and there planted by the hands of savages for present use . . . . Our houses were very rude and rough, built and covered without nail or hammer . . . . Very few farm utensils were brought by the emigrants. In consequence we opened the land slowly and were many years without bread, living on the wild roots and on the wild animals of the forest, which were in vast numbers . . . .

For several years we were almost without bread, or milk or butter. Fortunately the country was well supplied with wild game. Our board was composed of the Indian Potatoes which after being boiled were mashed and minced in about equal parts with dried and pounded venison and baked on a board before the fire: sometimes a little bear oil was mixed with it . . . .

There was no corn in the country, with the exception of a small quantity raised on my father's place. The wild animals and Indians were so numerous as to consume the whole crop, with the exception of a small part saved by the providence of Indian Tom. He would select the top of a ridge of land, there he would dig a hole, and line it with bark from a tree, in which he would deposit the corn. Then full bark was laid over it on which dirt was thrown, covering it with leaves. This gave the new colony that came with my father, seed for the next year . . . . when we began to get open land, so as to admit of raising corn, there was no mill to grind it in. If we wanted meal we had to grind it in a wooden mortar after night; the day was spent in clearing land, or

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<sup>3</sup> The children of Anthony Pintard Hutchins and Ann White Hutchins listed in the narrative were: Samuel and Mary (twins), Thomas, and Elizabeth, all born in South Carolina before 1773; John (the narrator), born in 1774, Nancy, 1776, Magdeline, 1777, Charlotte, 1779, and Celeste, 1781, all born in Mississippi. Entries in the Carson Family Bible show that Mary Hutchins, born February 4, 1768, married Abner Green in Mississippi on November 1, 1784. Their daughter Caroline, born October 8, 1794, married Joseph Carson in Mississippi on May 17, 1814. Their son, James Green Carson, born March 8, 1815, married Catherine Waller of Kentucky, July 28, 1835.

hunting wild game to supply our table . . . . My father built the first grist mill in Mississippi: every one in the country came to see it and to praise it. It gave signs of better times, of better living . . . .<sup>4</sup>

There was not one man in the country with money enough to buy a barrel of flour. We had to join purses to do so and divide the flour according to sums paid. Flour was very high and scarce. The price of flour in New Orleans was \$25.00; the freight to Natchez was \$5.00 making it \$30.00. This flour came from France, there was no boats then descending the river from above, the hostile Indians on the Ohio formed a complete barrier to all entrance. We were shut up and had to depend on ourselves . . . . I will give you a few items to let you know something about the price of articles of necessity in this country in early times. One pair of thin three print blankets \$12.00; one yard of Scotch Osnaberg, 75 cts.; one pound Brown sugar, 50 cts.; one pound coffee, 75 cts.; one pound tea, \$12.00 . . . . First cost of one barrel salt at New Orleans \$20.00 . . . .

Clothing and covering were scarce and such as we had was of the coarsest and roughest kind made by our mothers and sisters from the spinning wheel and the loom. As soon as we had opened land enough for the purpose of raising bread there were cotton patches planted for clothing, the seed was picked out at night and carded and spun and woven on a loom, stuck up in an outdoor cabin on fork and stick . . . . If we went to visit a neighbor it was generally on foot, when the ladies would fill their aprons with cotton to amuse themselves with on the road by picking out the seed; then, we had no gins, our looms were made with great simplicity and any farmer boy could make a spinning wheel. All the looms and harness were made at home.

In addition to the difficulties of obtaining food and shelter in the wilderness, the Indians, though not hostile in the beginning, were a nuisance because they felt free to raid the corn patches and even to take food from the settlers' tables. "Very often it so happened," Hutchins said, "that after dinner was prepared and the family assembled to partake of it the Indians would step in and sweep the platter. We then had to submit, owing to the disparity in numbers. It was one in a hundred." Some years later when only his mother and sister were at home,

A large Indian came to the door and demanded a blanket, being

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<sup>4</sup> W. W. Carson omitted the description of the mill given in the original manuscript.

refused by my mother he stepped into the house and drew from a bed a blanket. At the same moment my mother ran to the fire place, picked up a large poker and belaboured him so stoutly as to make him drop his prize and retreat outside the door. He was a stout young fellow, full six feet high and as well made as an Indian. He was called Kentucky John, could speak very good English. There he stood heaping every epithet of abuse that he was master of on them; his object was to draw my mother outside the house while he could recover his prize. She knew Indians too well for such tricks to succeed. At length he went away.

Kentucky John shows up again in Hutchins's story as will be seen subsequently.

At least one time the Indians became more than a nuisance to the settlers. The narrative describes this incident as follows:

During all this time there was a small garrison of Englishmen at Fort Rosalie at Natchez. Our few horses were frequently stolen by the Indians, who always returned them by the offer of a large reward, but, by and by they demanded a price so high that our people refused to submit to such piracy. Five young men of the highest courage determined to pursue the Indians and take the stolen horses by the force of arms. They met the Indians about two hundred in number, a combat ensued, the Indians were driven back, the horses retaken. We lost a noble young fellow, he fell in the first on-set, three of the Indians were killed. To avenge their loss they determined on a general massacre under such circumstances we had to run to the post where we remained for eight months in a very suffering state, with very little provisions and almost naked. During this time the Indians destroyed all our domestic animals and burned our houses, consumed our corn and left us destitute of everything that we could not carry on our backs in our retreat.

When peace was concluded and we returned to our houses we there found no shelter, our houses were burned and to shelter ourselves we had to build bark camps, such as the Indians occupy. Our farming tools were gone, what could we do? During the dilemma we found one axe, one foot adz and one mattock. With the axe we cut saplings and built houses; with the mattock we could grub the cane and bushes, after which we turned it into a plow, by which means we could scratch the mellow soil. The foot adz we used as a hoe to cut the most stubborn

weeds and each child was furnished with a staff of hard wood to beat down the young cane and tender weeds among the corn. When our tools became dull we had once a year to send them to the smithshop above named.<sup>5</sup> The way we used the mattock as a plough was as follows: a wooden stock was made in all respect like the common plough: near the fore end of the beam, a hole was made, through which the handle of the mattock was passed; this brought the axe fast in contact with the beam at about the right place to give the hoe the position of a shovel plough; the axe part was inserted in the beam.

The settlers had hardly recovered from this blow before a new problem arose when their area was transferred by the treaty of 1782\* from British to Spanish rule, a move which affected the Hutchins family directly and almost brought disaster, as the narrative shows:

A change of government took place and in place of our British rulers, we had the Spaniards. Many of our citizens were persecuted by them, some were taken prisoners, while others escaped their clutches. Among the latter was my father . . . as well as I can remember the circumstances I will give you some account, how the English got possession of the Fort at Natchez, at the time I now allude to it was garrisoned by a Spanish officer and sixty men well armed. In the night my father and five men assembled on an elevated piece of the ground, having a commanding view of the fort and within cannon shot. Four of his men were placed, two standing in front of two, behind those and in regular order there was stuck up several stakes about the height of men, which were covered with military hats and coats giving them the appearance of soldiers. In front was placed a large log, which had the appearance of a cannon; several bright muskets were stacked in full view of the fort, near which the British flag was hoisted. All this preparation being made, a soldier was sent with a flag and a letter demanding a surrender of the fort, at the same time announcing that a mine had been sprung and combustibles sufficient to blow up the

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\* Editor's note: The Treaty of Paris that concluded the American Revolution was finalized in 1783. Under the provisions of the treaty, Florida, which included the Natchez District, was returned to Spain by Great Britain.

<sup>5</sup> Hutchins previously stated: "The only blacksmith, then within the limits of the state, was located on the Bayou Pier [*sic*], then, as the path went past every man's house, it was distant about one hundred miles from the White Apple Village."

fort were deposited. They were commanded to lay down their arms and march out. This they did do. Then my father and his five men took possession, leaving his dummy men and cannon in their places.

The fort did not long remain in their possession; Pensacola, the metropolis fell into the hands of the Spaniards and with it the whole Country. Now you can readily see why the Spaniards were so hostile to my father. They persecuted him from that time forward. Finding that he had neither peace nor safety among them, he built wagons in which he deposited the few articles of clothing, bedding, and some provisions, with the family and his cattle and started for Georgia. I rode behind one of the stock drivers. I was without shoes or pants but on my head was placed my father's hat, and I wore his coat, which was red, with blue facing, with an epaulet on the shoulder. I suppose I would have fought like a soldier if necessary. When we had gone about two hundred miles on our road we were overtaken by a messenger from the Spanish Government, with a letter of apology to my father, advising him to return and promising him protection. We did return and things went on very well for a short time. My father had sent two ox wagons to Natchez to take in a load of meat, when, by order of the government, both of the oxen and drivers were detained and put to work on the road. He mounted his horse, rode to town and ordered his teams and their drivers home. This gave offense to the Governor. That, with several like offenses, caused them to persecute and pursue him from place to place until at length his friends advised him to leave the country.

His route was through the wilderness to Pensacola, living on snakes and worms and nuts. At Pensacola he got on board a British cruiser and was gone from his family about seven years. He did not return until a settlement of the two hostile governments by a treaty. After he returned things went on much better, people on both sides became more reasonable. The mad career of war and its consequences had ceased.

After the arrival of William Dunbar, called Sir William, who settled at the present residence of his estimable son Dr. William Dunbar [sic]. From that time forward Sir William and my father, by commission from the Spanish Government, had the settlement of nearly all the difficulties and disputes that occurred among the people and their estates.



Meanwhile, during the first months of Anthony Hutchins's absence as a refugee from the Spanish, the following incident occurred:

Shortly after he left we were visited by a band of robbers headed by a man named Willing, under a forged commission from the Government of the United States. I remember him well, when he demanded of my mother her gold and silver, and such other articles as he might wish to place his hands on. She refused to obey his orders, he lifted from his belt a pistol and pointed it at her breast. I remember well her reply, it was this—"Shoot coward, I am but a woman." This was a damper he returned his pistol to its place and seeing a large chest in one of the corners of the house threw open the lid and running his hand to the bottom he got hold of a leather bag of bullets. From the weight he took it for specie, he pocketed it, after which his countenance seemed to change: he ordered his men to cease searching the house, he took his illgotten spoil and after mustering twenty-three slaves, all we had, with the exception of one woman then in childbirth and marched them away. My mother and her children in a wilderness country with no protection and a large family to feed, surrounded by savages who, if they did not murder, would steal all they could lay their hands on: well, she was a woman of high mettle and was not to be discouraged; she saw her helpless situation; she gathered her children together and told us our situation. We told her that we could work and we did work; we all worked, the girls in spinning and weaving and the other household business. My mother and her three sons cultivated the field and when father returned we had supplied the place of the slaves taken away by Willing.

Interspersed throughout the Hutchins narrative is much personal detail which illustrates vividly what pioneer life in the early days of Mississippi was like for a boy and young man. This material has been selected and arranged chronologically to form the following account:

Every boy was raised with a gun in his hand, which he commenced using before he was strong enough to hold it in position, the young hunter carried in one hand a stick, one end of which had a sharp point to stick in the ground, a fork at the other to rest the gun on.

A boy of seven or eight years in this way used to hunt, often killing

bear, panthers, deer, and turkey. From the age of four or six years the boys were made useful in picking up brush in the clearing and kindling fires under logs until they were burned. And in that way boys did what is now performed by men . . . .

When a keel boat was expected from New Orleans it was my business to watch the landing to receive the freight: I generally went on foot. My father would say, "Now John, don't waste your time, you are wanted in the field." I always took my gun on my shoulder and on one occasion I took in my hand a spy glass. It was a pretty good telescope and very long when drawn to its focus. I found a large camp of Indians at the landing, suppose there might have been about one hundred. I sat my rifle down against a tree, drew out my spy glass, regulated it to its proper place, when a boat hove in sight from above. I pointed the instrument towards the boat when I was asked by the Indians if I was going to shoot the boat. I told them no, that I was only bringing her closer to me that I might look into her loading. I handed the glass to one of them, he looked and with a scream of terror pronounced the word medicine man. In less than five minutes there was not an Indian to be seen.

On another occasion, there was a large number of Indians; men, women and children encamped within a quarter of a mile from my father's house. I was told by my father to drive them away. I took my pony horse, which I used as a strek [?] horse to drive our cattle home. I was soon at the camp, the Indians looked formidable. I found their Chief with his large tin medal; I addressed myself to him, told him that my father had sent me to tell him that he must move his people off his land. He turned to me with a look of contempt and scorn and said, "The land is free to all, it is as much mine as it is your father's. Go home boy and tell your father that I say I won't leave this spot until I please." I remarked to him that he had a great number of dogs; his answer was, "Yes, bear dogs." I said "Say fat dogs. I think you feed them on white people's hogs and cows." "No, I feed them on venison," was his reply. I urged that Indians killed our stock; he protested that it was not true. I observed that if I was right by sunrise next morning his dogs would begin to die. "Let it be so," was his reply. "If my dogs die by that time I will move."

With that understanding I rode home. At that period of time our country was infested with wolves in great numbers; we trapped some,

shot others and resorted to poisoning with *nux vomica*. I soon had a quantity prepared, inserting a dose wrapped up in a small piece of thin paper in a mouthful of fresh meat, at least to the amount of one hundred pieces, and at twilight that evening I rode around the camp, dropping piece after piece, until my sack was empty. On the next morning at the appointed hour I made my appearance on horseback at the camp, all was bustle and confusion and hurry. They were packing up as if to move. I soon found the chief and asked him what was the matter. "Going away," says the Indian holding his head down and exclaiming, "Dog die too fast." I asked if I had not told him so, he said, "Must be some bad Indians, I go away." The above circumstances confirmed them in their opinion that I was a great medicine man . . . .

I remember when I was about ten years old that two of our hunters were in the woods and saw an Indian shoot down one of our cows. They instantly caught the Indian and gave him a sound thrashing. The next morning we got information that he had lodged a complaint with his Chief, Spaniky, who gathered about him three hundred young men with an intent to demand and enforce satisfaction. Our spy gave us but short notice of their intentions. My father's house was the place of rendezvous on all alarming occasions, all the inhabitants that were near, both white and black were soon collected. The Indians soon came, our men were ready, about fifteen men in number: our women and children were put in the house and the doors closed. The Indians took their stand in front of the house and about fifty yards distant. Our men, some with guns, some with axes and others with hoes, formed a line in front of the door. So matters stood for sometime: at length my father directed our interpreter to state to Chief Spaniky, the circumstances relative to the shooting of the cow by one of his men. During their conversation on this subject, I saw, among the Indians, a boy and the only one among the hostile Indians. He was well armed with a bow and a small quiver of arrows and as I thought there was war, I thought I would have a hand in it, so I stepped up to the Chief's son, the boy, and snatched from his hands his implements of war and before he had time to attempt its recovery I shot him in the abdomen. This mad act caused an immediate rush and the Indians advanced. They were checked by a word and the pointing of a finger towards me at the same time crying out medicine man. I stood firm by my father's side: the presence of a medicine man in the person of a small boy upset all

their courage. A few blankets were given them and peace was restored. From that day forward I did assume the place of a medicine man. I had but to give an order it was immediately obeyed . . . .

At the age of thirteen, having studied the character of the Indians, I became expert at all their games and particularly at handling the hatchet. I also learned their weak points and much about their superstitions. I soon became with them what they call a medicine man. I worked on their fears, until I could command them at pleasure and as I practiced my talents improved until I was so well known as to make my name a terror to them . . . .

I will try to amuse my grandchildren with a panther story<sup>6</sup> that occurred when I was about thirteen years of age. My father had two small tobacco plantations, distance from each other about one mile. I had the management of them both. We sometimes worked at one, then at the other as circumstances required it. The country was covered with cane, and the neighborhood scattering, our nearest neighbor was four miles from us. We had two large barns; one on each place in which we hung up our tobacco to dry. Our house was built of small poles or split punchins from a large tree. The cabins were all connected and under one roof with an oaken door to each apartment, which was hung by wooden hinges and fastened at night by a wooden latch on the innerside. On this occasion my father was with me, our people were left on the western place, the cooking and provisions and cooks were all there. After supper was over my father and myself went to bed. After he had fallen asleep I recollected that I had omitted giving an order for the next day's business. I quietly got up, put on my moccasins and clothes, but having left my gun and dogs with the men at the other place, I hesitated going unarmed and without protection or means of defense thru a wilderness of tall cane with only a narrow road filled with stumps and cane stubble and from each side the tall cane bent its tops like a saloon over the road and the night as dark as pitch. While a slight fear disturbed me and caused me to hesitate I was encouraged in the performance of my duty by the recollection that a brand of fire would assist in lighting the road and perhaps driving off wild animals. I did not deliberate long. I had not been otherwise than accustomed

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<sup>6</sup> A copy of this story was given to renowned Texas folklorist, J. Frank Dobie, who is collecting panther stories. Mr. Dobie used the tale in his weekly column in the Austin *American-Statesman*, the Houston *Post*, and other newspapers on Sunday, October 23, 1955.

to do my duty. With this I stepped into the old cook's apartment and took from the embers an oaken chunk. The noise I made waked the old African who hollowed [sic] out, "What mischief now Massa John?" On I went and I had not gone one hundred steps, after crossing the fence, when hearing a shrill scream behind me, I turned round and shook the fire brand. It threw off many sparks which discovered to me the glaring eyes of a panther in a crouching position. I shook the fire, I put my other hand up to push my hat down as it appeared to rise, I moved sideways, first looking at the panther, then the stubble and stumps fearing that if I fell that the animal would be immediately upon me. I moved on cautiously but slowly. I had not gone far in the way before it gave several hideous screams and came bounding at me as though it would tear me in pieces. I shouted aloud and shook my fire with violence, when again it assumed its couchant position. It was so near me that I could see every part of it. Oh! how terrible was its eyes and gnashing teeth and the movement of its tail, giving indications of its springing on me. I sweated like a horse. Every hair on my head appeared to rise, but still I shook the fire and again began to move slowly, when all of a sudden it bounded thru the cane and placed itself in front of me. I was now almost filled with despair. If I turned back there was my aged father and an old African woman without weapons. I at once determined to make an effort to reach my gun and dogs, and with this forced resolution I made a rush at the panther. It sprang from the road. I passed it on, it did not stop there. It followed me up and at twenty or thirty steps would spring at me as it did at first. At length when we came to within one hundred yards of the negro cabins, it then appeared to venture on a nearer approach, when I threw the fire brand in its face. I then took to my heels. I was not slow. I ran with my best speed, jumping against one of the cabin doors. I burst it open, immediately closing it. I felt the stroke of its paws against the door, against which I placed my back holding it fast and at the same time calling to all in the house to secure the doors telling them that a large panther was in the yard. As soon as everything was all fastened I inquired for the black men, the answer was that they had gone out to hunt coons and opossums. It was not long before my dogs came in. When they made an attack on the panther who fought well before they could drive him from his intended victim. Very soon the black men came in with my gun when we all started out in pursuit of the

dogs and panther. They gave him, or her rather, a chase some time around the field, when at last they came near the spot where I threw the fire in its face. It was in a thicket of cane and brushwood among which was a large hollow poplar tree that had fallen. It was about five feet in diameter and was hollow. In this hollow my panther had crept, the tree was open at one end only. We were impressed with the belief that she had young ones, so we went to work and got rails and poles and stuffed them in the end until we filled it up. Then with axes we drove in others until it was wedged in tight and secure. She was now safe as if she had been in an iron cage. We lit up several torches of dry cane and with an axe we cut small holes in the top of the log, through which we introduced lighted torches. As soon as the lights were introduced she would spring at them and extinguish them. You could hear her crunching the cane as a dog would a tender bone. In her frequent and quiet movements from place to place to attack the lights, she hurt one of her young. It set up a catish cry, which appeared to arouse her anger to a high degree. She tore the log with her paws and gnawed and gnashed her teeth. At one time we had determined to let down a rope and to enlarge an opening as to let her head out, then by fastening two ropes to bring her out, but we wisely thought of the danger that would attend such an experiment. So we concluded to fill the log with dry cane and set fire to it, which we did. When we introduced the fire she appeared to redouble her efforts to escape. She gnawed at our stoppers, but all in vain. The cane burnt with such rapidity that she was soon suffocated. All was quiet now and we returned home to get a little sleep. We were all up pretty early in the morning. Our log was burned to ashes. We could see the skeleton of the panther. It was large. We found near where we had heard the cry of one of her young a pile of burnt bones, which would have measured two or three bushels. The panther is a very dangerous animal . . .

Sometime in the year 1788 or 9, I was then between 14 and fifteen years old, my father made two little improvements at about one mile distance apart and five miles from his own dwelling place, on which he cultivated tobacco. At that time this country was but partially settled, particularly the surrounding lands for a large extent were covered with heavy timber, under which was an almost impenetrable canebrake, through which was open a cart road, the cane hanging over it so as to form a canopy.

A few huts were built at each place, in which the negroes resided. The country abounded in wild game, such as bears, deer, panthers, cats, and many smaller quadrupeds. I had from necessity become a hunter and was accustomed to roam at large through the woods in quest of game, having on such occasions several fine dogs, a good rifle, a tomahawk, and a butcher's knife. With such arms of defence I always felt perfectly secure and would roam through the woods for days together, sleeping near some brook or pond. If the season was wet, I would erect a camp which was the work of only a few moments, particularly if I had a bear or deer skin. If not cane tops tied in bundles with the bark from some tree into a few poles, and a comfortable house was soon made, where I would remain as long as game was plentiful in the neighborhood.

The flesh of the bear or of the deer was cut from the bones into thin slabs and salted in a sack made of the bear or deer skin, with thongs of the same. This was suspended to the top of a sapling until a sufficient quantity was obtained, when with a butcher's knife I would cut a part large enough to pass a loaded horse thru, in this way our meat and skins were taken home. The bear's oil was rendered out and the bladder and intestines after being well cleansed were filled with oil. I had on such occasions, a camp kettle for the purpose of rendering the oil and for cooking, but the most common practice among hunters was to stick a strong cane in the ground, leaning it toward the fire, on the end of which a piece of meat was stuck to broil three canes placed in that way one above the other. On the upper one was placed a piece of fat bear's meat, on the next a turkey and under that a loin of venison, as the heat of the fire would cause the rich gravy to fall from the bear meat to that under it, plunging a knife in them so as to spread the gravy. Cover each of them occasionally, a little salt thrown. As soon as the outside was done our meal was ready and a delightful meal it was. Our appetites were fine. We ate heartily, generally three times a day and once at mid-night. In those days we knew nothing of the present fashionable complaint called 'Dyspepsia.' We had neither aches nor pains, no sleepless nights, a bear skin for our bed, a limb of a tree for our pillow, a worn and threadbare blanket as our covering, a large fire at our feet and we wanted no more. At the break of day our faithful dogs would give us their signal yelp. We were already clothed, a leather hunting shirt and pantaloons was our dress in which

we generally slept, our moccasins the only changeable part, then put on and well secured about the ankles, and then all was ready for the delightful day hunt.

My father's black man, the first and most faithful slave he ever had, was my constant companion and brother hunter. He taught me my first lessons in hunting. When our dogs started a bear, he would say, "Well, Massa John, didn't I tell you so? I know how my dream would turn out, we shall kill one or more large fat bears today." The very bark of the dogs told him what they were after. "Look sharp, he is a large fellow, he won't climb a tree, he fights the dogs, old scampering, if run after us, mind and pop him through the heart, give him certain shot. You shoot first, if you don't kill him, den old Toney give him a pop. I be bound he no tar old man ball." In this way we amused ourselves, often killing from one to four or five in a day; to save, as, we could not take it to camp, from the wolves, we would bend down a sapling and suspend our meat until we could salt and carry it to camp. During the winter seasons we would kill and save meat enough to last the family as salt provisions until next winter. Venison could be killed at any season and was always good. The spring, summer and fall of the year was spent in laboring on the plantation, cultivating tobacco and corn . . .

The largest winter hunt ever made was one hundred and seven bears. As to the deer and turkey and other game we kept no account . . . We hunted and killed and brought in the meat during the day and cut up, salted and dried and stretched the skins at night and, if there was any spare time after our business was over, then I got my class board, which was shaved smooth and with a piece of charred wood for a pencil, the old man would teach me to write and cipher . . .

In the month of May, 1789, I had cleared the timber from several acres of land situated on the North fork of Coles Creek, and had a few log buildings finished for the negroes and also one for myself, which was floored with hard ash puncheons. A day had been appointed to give a few select young ladies a fish fry. The spot selected was distant about a quarter of a mile from the house. After the company had met and took some refreshments, we concluded to have the horses put up and walk to the fishing grounds. The road, or path led through a beautiful shady grove of ash and elms. The company consisted of several young ladies, four lads from twelve to fourteen years old. I was



the only male adult in the company, excepting one stranger, a person uninvited. After accommodating all the ladies with hook line and bait, taking their positions along a smooth beach ten or fifteen feet apart. All had thrown their line in the water, cheerful, jocose conversation was going on when Miss \_\_\_\_\_ drew up a large sunfish. At that moment a large tiger cat sprung on her shoulder and commenced the work of destruction. He had tasted her pure blood and to beat him off was no easy matter. I ran to the rescue with no better weapon than a piece of drift wood which I picked up. I drove him from his prey. Collecting the scattered people together, I got them in the road leading to the house. No sooner than the first move was made, he sprang into the crowd and commenced tearing the shoulder of Miss P. I beat him off again and finding that she was his intended victim, I placed myself between him and having picked up a sounder stick was able by frequent blows to keep him off. I had no assistance whatever, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ keeping himself at a distance. At length we reached the house and threw the door open until the ladies and children got in, then I entered. The cat kept close and crept under the floor. I attempted to remove the slabs, which were not joined or fastened down. I got a hatchet from my tool box which was in the house, prized two planks apart far enough to allow him to get his head thru, when with one blow I sank it into his brain.

Miss P. was badly lacerated about her neck and face, from which she never lost the scars. No one but herself received the slightest injury. Sometimes he would jump over me to get at her, his eyes were like balls of fire and his large sharp teeth would chatter and strike against each other, like the panther when about to jump on his prey.<sup>7</sup>

When John Hutchins was about eighteen years old, the incident occurred in which the Indian named Kentucky John attempted to steal a blanket from the house when only John's mother and sister were present. The outcome of that event as John Hutchins described it follows:

In the evening I went for my mother, she told me all about the Indian, I really believe I could have shot him if I had seen him on that day. I knew Johnny well and had often hunted in his company. I did not forget John's abuse; I prepared a whip, put a twisted vine last to it and loaded it with lead in the handle, carried it wherever I went. Several

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<sup>7</sup> Hutchins's story of the wildcat also appeared in Mr. Dobie's column on November 13, 1955.

months after, I was in the tobacco field I espied John stealing water-melons: the tobacco was nearly as high as my head, John had filled a large sack which he fastened to his back and taking up a large one on one arm and his gun on the other (I had no gun with me) Indian like I followed John, overtook him and with the butt end of my whip I felled him to the ground, seized his gun, threw out the priming and sent it as far from the scene of action as I could, used on his naked skin my vine lash. When John would rise I would down him with the butt end of my whip, and flog him with the other end. John could not stand it, he broke ground, I after him. I had the speed of him and that he well knew. He reached the fence and sprung at the top rail; it broke when I gave him a little more timber, and suffered him to leap the fence. I returned to him his gun, after rendering it incapable of present use and threw it over the fence to him. I really believe it cost my father a full half acre of tobacco which was broken in the scuffle.

Several years later I was descending the Mississippi River in a large flat boat loaded with flour, sent down by one of the contractors for some United States Troops from Pittsburg. One stormy night I had landed the boat for safety and as there was but little room, for our oars were then worked on the outside of the boat, we had kindled a fire on the shore and were drying our wet clothes when who should I see advancing with a quiet step but this same Kentucky John with his rifle in hand. I had but little time to think what was to be done. I placed my right hand on a good sized stick that had been burned leaving it two or three feet long. The blaze of the fire lit up on his face and I could see his eyes. I watched his every motion, intending to do the only thing in my power, that was if he should present his gun I intended jumping to one side and by so doing defeat his aim and then, if I could to have made the best possible use of my stick. He halted within ten feet of me, and dropping the butt of his rifle to the ground and exclaiming, "John Hutchins, how do you do?" He held out his hand, I received it, and from the hearty and long shake he gave me I was sure I had nothing to fear. We had a long talk, he told me that from the time of our tobacco field exploit that he had absented himself from the gaze of human eyes, as he was ashamed of the marks left on his back; that he had lived ever since in the swamps and alone. He invited me to his camp, I excused myself inasmuch as I had the charge of a valuable boat load belonging to one of my friends, intrusted to my

care. This seemed to satisfy him that I did not distrust him. He went to his camp and soon returned with a quantity of venison for which I gave him the bacon and flour in return and, when parting, I gave him what was of great use in the place where he lived, a mosquito bar. I left him that night since when I have never seen Kentucky John . . . .

I had applied to my father for permission to leave him. I had worked all the previous part of my life in supporting my mother and as he was now rich, having at that time about one hundred slaves, I had a wish to settle myself and go to work and marry a wife and do something for myself; like King Pharoah he did not like to part with me. I urged my cause before him, observing that at a much younger age he had given my elder brother a large fortune and that I was dragging out my time in a service that was not really necessary. My mother also opposed my leaving them on the ground that I was a speculator and would soon spend my little property that might be put in my possession. When I found that all I could say amounted to nothing, I told my father that I must leave him; he told me, "Go, if you will I have nothing to give you." I replied, "I go," and taking his hand bade farewell to both my excellent parents. I had gone but a short distance when he called me back, I obeyed the call, he said that I might occupy the land that my youngest son now lives on. It was a fine piece of land, with a few log cabins and a barn with about fifteen acres of cleared ground and one mile from that place, but on the same tract, was another field of about twenty acres of open land and a fine frame tobacco barn. That place now belongs to James G. Carson.<sup>8</sup> I thanked him and left him. I went to see one of my brothers-in-law to consult him about the course I ought to pursue. He told me to accept my father's proposition. I asked him what one man alone could do? He said that something might turn up and that I had better try it and laughingly offered to sell me one of his black men, then in the woods as a runaway. I told him that I had no money to pay him, however, we soon struck up a bargain for his runaway man, Tim. I saw and conversed with several of his slaves who told me that if I would buy Tim, he would immediately come in. I bought him and gave my note to the amount of five hundred dollars, payable when I was able. Well, Tim came in and I bought at the same

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<sup>8</sup> W. W. Carson notes at this place in the narrative that his father, Dr. Carson, left Mississippi in the winter of 1845-46 and states that the Hutchins account was written before that time. Hutchins was sixty years old in 1844.

time a small pair of hand mill stones. x x x x<sup>9</sup>

There was on the plantation one milk cow, one ox some pigs and I bought on credit from my father's negroes some poultry; and among other things, I bought a small pot to boil meat in. We brushed up our cabin, which was a double one, I occupied one room and Tim the other. Until we could set up our mill, we pounded our corn in a mortar and baked our bread on a board before the fire. We were content, I milked the cow; our milk vessels were calabashes, our plates were made of wood and homemade at that. A cane fork and a hickory bark spoon with our hunting knives, such was our poverty. I had one horse, I had raised him from a colt: he was given me by a traveler who did not wish the trouble of taking care of him on his journey. He was a noble horse. My father had, not long before I left him, given to each of his children an English saddle and bridle, richly plaited. One day I had returned from town, I was very much fatigued, so I hung my saddle and bridle under the shed of the barn, fed my horse and left him at liberty to go about the field. Supper over I went to blanket, bed I had none. In the morning I walked out to see my usual business, when I missed my saddle and bridle. The first thing I did was to look for tracks. I stepped back to the house to get my rifle and knife, that done I looked to see if my horse was safe. Of that I had little doubt, as he would only be caught by his master. I called to my side my trusty dog, pointed to the Indian foot marks, he soon understood me, on we went, he with his nose to the ground and I with my eyes on all sides. Some hours were spent and miles walked, when Lion, for that was my dog's name, made a loud growl, he was under fine command, I looked to where I saw his eyes directed and there was my Indian. I was on one ridge, he on another distant about one hundred yards. He was moving along in a walk, astride my fine saddle. I did not want to kill him so I raised my rifle and took aim at his thigh knowing that if I should miss him my bullet would strike his horse's neck. I fired, his horse sprung forward and fell, my Indian raising at the same time a tremendous whoop. My dog seized him and held him fast while I, with a small cord, made him fast to a tree, his horse was dead, I had broken his neck. I cut some switches which I used in teaching Indians to let me alone. I took my

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<sup>9</sup> In this way W. W. Carson indicated omissions he made in copying the Hutchins narrative. His method of showing ellipses has been retained in order to distinguish them from my own, conventionally shown with periods.

saddle and bridle and the Indian's gun and went home.

Tim and myself worked hard all day and cooked our victuals at night, so as to save time. x x x x I planted a little orchard and made a garden, and now I will tell you how I made a substitute for sugar. I planted a large patch of watermelons and when many of them were ripe I borrowed from one of my neighbors several kettles and had plenty of fire wood to make fires and a bag ready. We brought in about three hundred ripe melons, cut them open and strained the juice through the bag; it was clear and beautiful, as we strained and poured it into the pots, so we boiled it as fast as we could, skimming when necessary and conveying it left to right to our largest kettle and filling up the empty ones with fresh juice. Our finishing kettle was the largest. I did not attempt to bring it to sugar, but we had fine thick molasses and of an excellent quality.

In those days we had no honey bees in this part of our country, but it was not many years before they came and when they did they were very thrifty as it was a country of flowers. x x x x

We ginned out our crops, put it in round bags and sold it in New Orleans and I had the pleasure of paying all my debts . . . .

It may have been on the money received from his first cotton crop that John Hutchins, probably not yet twenty years old, sailed from New Orleans for New York with his money hidden for safekeeping "in a keg of butter." His narrative covers only the latter part of his year's adventure:

From New York I went to see the birthplace of my much respected father. I found it in the possession of one of my half uncles. Everything about the place was quite familiar to me; my old hunting companion who was the first slave my father ever owned, had described everything with accuracy. I could tell my uncle where the spring was, where his woodland lay and the direction and distance to Washington, Lookout Mountain, and describe the big rock behind which he used to stand when viewing the English and American armies. I remained one month with my uncle, he harnessed up a pair of fine horses and hitched them to his wagon. He accompanied me as far as Princeton. I stopped there to look at the College buildings. Now my sons, had I been wise I would have used my money at that place in acquiring an education, I did not do so. From thence I went to Philadelphia. x x x I did not remain but

a few days when I set out for Baltimore.

I had in New York exchanged my specie for bank notes, which I fastened around my waist. While at that place I became acquainted with the High Sheriff and he was so kind as to invite me to a room in his house. I had occupied it for some time and he assisted me in the purchase of some colored people. He had a son by his first marriage, he was grown to manhood, appeared to be pleased with my society, he was an intelligent young man. At length he proposed taking a part of my [room] to which I made no objection. My room was on the second floor and at one side of the top of the steps. We went to bed talking until we, or I at least, fell asleep. I at length awoke and felt the young man's hand on my purse, supposing it to be an accidental thing, I turned over. The next day he appeared more kind and friendly than ever. At the night we went to bed, I was aroused from sleep by a severe cut on my ribs, our windows were up, the street lights shone through them; the young man's hand instantly grasped my throat, a scuffle ensued and I got him under me. I could see blood and felt the pain of a mangled side. I throttled him and dragged him to the door, which with one hand I closed and bolted. Our noise awoke the family. His father came to the door and demanded entrance, which I refused. I threatened calling the watch if he persisted in coming in. I suspected the father as an accomplice. He protested that he was innocent. At length I told him if he would leave my door I would turn his son out, he did so and as soon as I heard his foot touch the floor below I opened my door with one hand and dragged my unworthy friend after me and hurled him down the steps. After closing my door securely I went into an examination of my wound. He did not intend taking my life, he only wanted my money, which was enclosed in a leather case which resisted his knife, cutting through a part only and sliding over and making a gash in my side several inches long. I took off my belt and dressed my wound, sitting up the balance of the night.

Next morning I met the old man, his father, and the old lady and their three grown daughters all in tears. The occurrence of the night was talked over, I promised them that I would not speak of it, so as to make them known. I have been as good as my word. I left the house and found other lodgings. I now completed my business and with several servants and a horse set out for Pittsburg.

On the first day while journeying my horse took sick and died. I

had no money to spare to buy another, we all footed it. I had with me a pair of first rate belt pistols and hung to my side was a leather scabbard in which was a hunter's butcher knife. I did not shackle or chain my people, as was the custom, they walked side by side with me on our long, rough road. When our journey was about half over I was met by five men, they stopped me and protested my taking blacks further and at the same time ordering them to leave me, on which I drew both my pistols and cocked them, one in each hand, declaring that the first man who resisted me, I would shoot him down. This was a [word left out]. I saw that they quailed beneath my eye, so I ordered my people to proceed, and on we went. The next day I was so unfortunate as to fall down and cut my right knee on a rock. I had to bind it up with a handkerchief and walk with a stiff knee. It was a rugged road, in those days. At length I reached Pittsburg and put up at the sign of the Bear. I soon made arrangements with one of the contractors to take charge of a boat load of flour. While things were preparing for the voyage I was told by one of my black men that at twelve o'clock that night a white man would make his appearance and they all agreed to leave me. I turned the matter over in my mind. I was not long at a loss how to proceed. I had no friend, was a stranger to every one. My people occupied a large vacant house near the stable. I went in the evening to an apothecary shop and bought some laudanum. I also purchased a bottle of whiskey. I knew how to make this medicine, having compounded medicine for two years under some doctors that had lived in my father's family. I mixed a portion of each together and at ten o'clock I gave each man a portion, at eleven I repeated the dose according to circumstances required. I did not give Solomon any part of the dose, he was a trusty fellow. They were all now in a pleasant sleep, I kept a light burning in the room and the door left half open, behind which I took my station. Now the clock struck twelve, which was the appointed hour for running way; soon the white man made his appearance, he gave the signal, it was answered by Solomon, he came in, then I shut the door and stood with a pistol pointed at his head. Before I let him out I made him swear on the Cross which I made on the floor, aye, and made him kiss it, that he never would in any manner or form whatever interfere again with anything that concerned me or mine. The oath taken I let him out; the next day I embarked on the boat and in thirty days I landed at St. Catherine's Creek, near Ellis Cliff.

It was on that trip that I had my best adventure and also met with Kentucky John . . . .

I had been absent from home twelve months and my friends had never heard one word from or about me, until I entered my father's door. The family were at the table, I was like a ghost to them, they had mourned like affectionate parents at my untimely death. I had sailed from New Orleans in the ship Olive, this my parents knew. About the time that our ship, in the usual voyage ought to have reached New York, a vessel in the docks of that place was burned, where all on board had perished. They never expected to see me again, but like a bad penny I did return . . . .

x x x Three years elapsed and I determined I would visit England. I embarked at New Orleans on board a brig, which was chartered and loaded with cotton, belonging to two of my brothers-in-law. I went as a super-cargo and passenger free. I took with me one hundred bales of very superior cotton on my own account. We had a long voyage, nothing occurred on our road worth relating. On the seventy-fifth day we went into the harbour of Liverpool. x x x x

At length our stage reached London. The next morning I waited on a gentleman to whom I had a letter from my father, he received me with much kindness. I also had a letter with me from Captain Percy of Louisiana to a Mr. Middlemast, his brother-in-law, he was a lawyer with whom I lived. I was quite at home in his house, I had two large fine rooms, one a parlor, the other a bed-room on the second floor. He had a fine wife and several children. With them I lived six months. x x x x

I spent my time as pleasantly as could be expected. Considering as I was from the backwoods. I became much attached to Mr. Middlemast and family, they watched over me as though I had been their son and I must say of London that it is so large and so many curious things in it to crowd my mind that I am prevented from saying more about it. The time came for me to think of leaving for home.

x x x There was great excitement in England. Bonaparte [*sic*] had threatened to invade England with a large army, which was to be transported in a flotilla made by chaining a fleet of boats together, in which his army was to cross. I remember there was one hundred thousand militia wanted and a draft was ordered, when three hundred thousand offered their services, I concluded that these people were not to be whipped. Wherever I went in England I was treated with the



greatest kindness. There was but one American ship in Shrevesport [?] Harbour, not one at London. The old ship Thomas Chalkley of New York. I supposed her to have been of 700 tons burden, she had taken in her lading. We immediately applied to her Captain for our passage, she was to clear for New Orleans, we immediately wrote to London for passports. At this moment an embargo on all foreign vessels was decreed, things remained so for three months, during which our ship lay in the docks with her cargo on board, which was principally cheese and cordage, the rats were attracted by the cheese in such numbers that all times both day and night you could see and hear them in great numbers. At length our passports came and our vessel was permitted to hoist sail. x x x x

The leakage increased with the storm and the pumps were manned and after three days driving before the wind the storm abated and was succeeded by a dead calm. Our rudder became useless and every moment we expected to founder and go to the bottom. At length it was suggested to the Captain to fasten some board planks to the end of a long spar and by running it over the stern and roping it well, we could steer the ship as the Kentuckians do their boats. In this way we got her around with her bow to the waves, which were running very high. We at length got our rudder in its right place, but the leaking increased fast and the hands were nearly worn out. There were now but three passengers on board, one of whom was very ill, and so weak a state of health as not to be able to leave berth, the other an Englishman and myself. We went to the pumps, we worked manfully and after the sailors got a little rest, it was proposed that we should undergird the ship, as St. Paul's ship had been and with the use of the deep sea lead, which has a strong ring attached to it, we raised 700 lashings around the body of the ship and several from stern to stern, longwise and heaved up tight by the power of blocks but after all this work our ship still leaked badly.

We had all worked and labored until we were nearly exhausted from constant pumping and loss of sleep, when the weather became more mild we brought our ship on her course again and spread our sails to the wind, but soon had to shorten sail, owing to her fresh leaks. As we did this the leaking ceased, just now a ship hove in sight. It was a French cruiser of thirty-six guns and three hundred people. They boarded us and after examining our papers took from us four casks of

water and then left us, after which, fearing we would be short of that indispensable article, we examined our cask and our water had nearly all been wasted. We had it drawn off and put into demijohns. There was at that time thirty-five gallons all told; this when divided was to each man on board not quite two gallons per man. It was all put under lock and apportioned daily at the rate of one gill per day. We had no wine or beer on board the ship: no fresh provisions, no tea nor coffee, and no water for any use as above stated. In this way we sailed on for seven days, when in sight of the Island of St. Domingo, two barges left the shore, merging from a cove in the land and under care directed their course for our ship. The wind was light, we were sailing about two miles per hour. There were seventy-five men in each boat, we soon discovered that they were pirates. Our Captain called all hands on deck and apprised us of our situation, putting it to the vote whether we would submit and walk the planks or would we defend ourselves. We unanimously answered we would fight to the last man. We prepared for defense first by crowding all the sail we could, we then arranged ourselves on deck, some with guns and pistols, others with hand and two strong sailors were furnished with crow bars of iron, to which was fastened a rope to each, intending with them to drive holes through the boat, pulling them back with the ropes and repeating the blows. I had my rifle. I put a bullet in my mouth and filled my pockets with others. I was to fire at the officers and begin to fight as soon as they came in gun shot. We intended to sell our lives as dearly as possible. Suddenly the pirates turned their boats toward the shore and rowed back from whence they came. We were for some time at a loss for this strange movement, when one of our sailors cried out, "A ship astern." It proved to be a British 74. x x x x

Thus the narrative of the exciting life of John Hutchins breaks off. He, of course, returned to Mississippi, married, and became one of the respected citizens of the state. It is fortunate that he recorded his reminiscences since they so vividly describe a way of life in a significant period of the nation's history. As John Hutchins wrote, "I can tell you my young friends that the times then tried what stuff men were made of."

