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Daryl Cumber Dance

University of Richmond, ddance2@richmond.edu

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DARYL CUMBER DANCE

Long Gone

*The Mecklenburg Six
and the Theme of Escape
in Black Folklore*

The University of Tennessee Press

KNOXVILLE

Prologue

On May 31, 1984, six condemned men (Linwood Briley, James Briley, Earl Clanton, Jr., Willie Leroy Jones, Derick Lynn Peterson, and Lem Tuggle) incarcerated in the Mecklenburg Correctional Center in Boydton, Virginia, engineered the biggest, the most daring, the most ingenious, and the most spectacular Death Row escape ever attempted. In a brash and bold move they, with the help of some fellow inmates, took absolute control of the Death Row area, posed as prison guards, ordered a van, directed that the gates be opened, and drove away from the penitentiary, issuing one final command, "Close the gates!" Their astonishing escape was accomplished without any violent confrontations or injuries. The guards were caught so off guard and lured and entrapped so cunningly that they had no opportunity to offer any effective resistance. Indeed the feat was effected with such finesse that one escapee, Linwood Briley, would later insist, "We didn't *break* out of prison. . . . We walked out" (quoted by Reverend Odie Brown, interview, Richmond, Virginia, June 17, 1985). Even the escapees were incredulous at the success of their act: escapee Lem Tuggle asserted, "We couldn't believe that they had actually let us out like that" (conversation, Richmond, June 28, 1985).

The magnitude of the escape, the sheer audacity of it, and the notoriety of the escapees, particularly the infamous Briley brothers, coupled with the terror it inspired throughout the state of Virginia, up and down the East Coast, and even into Canada, evoked memories of the numerous exploits of fugitives and outlaws on the run in Black folktales, Black toasts, Black music, and Black literature. The participants, the escape (frequently dubbed "The Great Escape"), the search, the capture, daily recorded in

papers and TV news stories, constantly recalled to mind characters and echoes and lines and themes from numerous such accounts. At the same time that traditional, recorded lore prophesied and foreshadowed and echoed each unfolding scene in the drama, contemporary bards recorded and responded to this spectacular coup with familiar new poems and tales and toasts. The response of the folk made it quite clear that not only was the escape replaying the oldest and most enduring theme in Black folklore and literature, but it was also introducing fascinating new, but at the same time familiar, variations on that theme.

As the six desperate men drove out of Mecklenburg's famed maximum security unit at 10:47 P.M. on May 31, 1984, and headed toward North Carolina, they were also entering history and legend—whether they knew it or not—and bards were already poised to begin to record and immortalize their exploits (as well as to satirize and lampoon their blunders).

Late one night in the heat of May
Six brave comrades made their getaway.

Joseph Jones, Virginia State Penitentiary
August 6, 1984