

# [Biography of bass reeves: the slave who became a legend](https://assignbuster.com/biography-of-bass-reeves-the-slave-who-became-a-legend/)

Bass Reeves: The Slave Who Became a Legend

When people talk about legendary lawmen of the oldwest there are a few names that most likely will be discussed. The majority ofpeople are aware of the Earp brothers, the most famous being Wyatt. Pat Garettand Bat Masterson are a couple other names that are synonymous with the oldwest. There is one man, however, that few people are aware of that deserves asmuch recognition as all the other lawmen. Bass Reeves was born a slave, but becamea legend.

### Growing Up Bass

Bass Reeves was born in Crawford, county, Arkansassometime in the year 1838. The boy was raised as a slave in Grayson, county, Texas with his owner, William S. Reeves, who was a farmer and politician. Basstook the surname, Reeves, from his master as it was customary for slaves duringthat time period. As a slave, Reeves worked as a water boy, quenching thethirst of the other slaves. When he was old enough he ended up working as afield hand. As a young adult Bass Reeves became a personal valet, companion andbodyguard for George Reeves, William’s son. He would work in this capacityuntil the Civil War broke out. At this point George would go to fight for theconfederacy, and he took Bass with him. 1

Very little is known about what exactly Reeves didduring the Civil War. One theory is that he served under Colonel George Reeves’command in several battles, to include; Pea Ridge and Missionary Ridge. Othersclaim that he had escaped slavery during that time. One popular notion is thatBass and George got into a struggle over a card game, and he used thatopportunity to flee to Indian territory. Being a mountain of a man, standing at6’2, this idea seemed highly plausible.

Reeves took refuge with numerous tribes, to includethe Cherokee. While living with the indigenous people he developed a greatunderstanding of their customs, language, and mastered their tracking skills. Reeves also used this opportunity to enhance his firearm talents. He becamevery deadly accurate and swift with his revolver. The Indians trusted Reevesmore than the white lawmen in the territory because of his skin color. Theyfelt more of a kinship with him. When Reeves learned that he was a free man, due to the Emancipation Proclamation, he bought some land in Arkansas and becamea successful farmer and rancher. It was here that he met and married NellieJennie with whom he fathered ten children. 2

### The Legend Begins

It was during this point in Reeves’ life that itreally became interesting. While working as a rancher he was hired on severaloccasions as a guide and scout for the U. S. Marshals to execute warrants in theIndian territories. In May of 1875 the FederalWestern District Court was supervised by Judge Isaac Parker. 3 As hisfirst official act, he appointed U. S. Marshal James F. Fagan to head up 200deputies to patrol the territory. The Oklahoma Range covered over 75, 000 squaremiles. 4 Because of his extensive knowledge of the area and itspeople, and his ability to speak several tribal languages, Reeves was hired asa permanent U. S. Deputy during this period. 5 Thad Morgan explainsthat, “ Upon taking thejob, he became thefirst black deputy U. S. marshalwest of the Mississippi.” 6 Reeves was illiterate but it did not hinder his performance. He would havesomeone read the warrants to him and he’d have them memorized before they rodeout. When he issued a warrant for an arrest, he would produce the correct oneeach time. 7

The federal laws stated that every marshalhad to be joined by at least one posse member. Since Reeves worked in IndianTerritories, he often used just one Indian for assistance. He would often ridealone toward the end of his career. From his short stint in the civil war tohis 35 years as a marshal, and short term as a policeman, Reeves’ life had beenin danger many times. He was in several gunfights with outlaws and he hadsurvived numerous assassination attempts. Miraculously, Reeves had never beenshot or seriously injured. Reeves was a large and imposing figure as he rodehis white horse. He was always a fancy dresser with shined boots and constantlywore a large hat. Being ambidextrous he permanently had his two colt revolversready for a quick draw, and he rarely missed. 8 He would often useother identities and disguises as a way to issue warrants or capture outlaws. Even though he had a very intimidating appearance, he was known as a polite andcourteous man with honesty and integrity. He was a fair lawman and treated his detaineeshumanely and with respect. While transporting his prisoners, accompanied by acook and a at least one posse man, he would ensure that they were well fed andwould even deliver a sermon after each meal. 9 Even though Reeves wasvery fast and accurate with his guns, he did not draw unless he had to. In hisobituary, the Shawnee Herald expressed that, “ BassReeves always said that he had never shot a man when it was not necessary forhim to do so in the discharge of his duty to save his own life.” 10

### Accomplishmentsand Accolades

One of the mostfamous tales of Reeves’ accomplishments was how he captured two outlawbrothers. He had used his disguise mastery to pose as a weary outlaw on the runfrom a posse. He convinced the mother of the two brothers to allow him to staywith her until the men returned home. When the to two outlaws arrived at thehouse, they were none the wiser, and were planning to join forces with the manto continue on with more illegal shenanigans. Before the two siblings awoke thenext morning, he had them locked in handcuffs ready to take them. The mother ofthe two men cursed Reeves for miles as he escorted the criminals to theawaiting posse. 11 Probably the most emotional pursuit for Reeves wasarresting one of his own children. His son, Bennie, murdered his wife, and Bassdecided it should be him, that brought his own son to justice. He was tried andconvicted to life in prison. Bennie was later pardoned and spent the remainderof his life as a model citizen. 12 Bob Dozier was a criminalmastermind of his day, but was no match for Bass Reeves. Dozier had committedvarious crimes, ranging from cattle rustling and bank robbing to murder. He hadeluded many lawmen until Reeves used his superior tracking skills to locate himin the Cherokee Nation. Dozier refused to surrender, and was ultimately killedby Reeves in a gunfight between the two men. 13 Another show of hisincredible skill was against Tom Story. Story was the leader of a gang of horsethieves. Reeves confronted him to serve an arrest warrant. The outlaw wascaught off guard and panicked. He drew his weapon on the famed marshal, but Reeveswas much faster and shot the man dead. 14 Although Reeves shared abond and felt close with some of the tribes in the area, it did not deter himfrom chasing Indian outlaws. One of the most famous ones that he tracked downand arrested was a Seminole named Greenleaf. The man was responsible forkilling seven people and had eluded capture for nearly two decades until Reevesgot him. He also pursued a Cherokee outlaw named Ned Christie, but wasunsuccessful in his capture. 15 The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannicainform people that, “ Reeves killed14 outlaws and apprehended more than 3, 000 throughout histenure.” 16

### Trials and Tribulations

Reeves was arrestedfor being falsely accused of killing a cook, one of the members of his ownposse in 1887. He stood trial before Judge Isaac Parker, the same manresponsible for launching his career over a decade prior. Reeves wasrepresented by his friend, U. S. Attorney W. H. H. Clayton and was ultimatelyacquitted. Probably the lowest point in his life was when his wife of 30 yearspassed way in 1896. Even though he remarried in 1900 to Winnie Sumter, Nelliewas his first love and the mother of his children. Oklahoma gained statehood in1907 and Reeves was no longer able to remain a deputy marshal. It was notbecause he wasn’t physically able to do the job, but it was due to new statelaws that wouldn’t allow African-Americans to hold that position. At this pointReeves became a police officer in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Although it isn’tofficial, it was considered that during this time period there were no crimescommitted on his patrol. Two years later, Reeves was diagnosed with Bright’sdisease, which is a chronic inflammation of the kidneys. This ended his lawenforcement career and later his life on January 12 th , 1910. 17

Due to his closenesswith several Native American tribes and his ability to exist among them soeasily, and the fact that he often rode alone say for an Indian escort, therehas been conjecture that Bass Reeves may have been the basis for the LoneRanger. Many people have considered that there are many key similarities amongthe exciting fictional character and the real-life legend. One essentialelement to this theory is many of Reeves’ prisoners were incarcerated at theDetroit House of Corrections. This was the city where, in 1933 the world heardthe first radio broadcast of the Lone Ranger. 18 Both of these heroesdemonstrated the same moral compass, and similar skill sets. EncyclopediaBritannica claims, “ While there is nodefinitive proof of the connection, Reeves is sometimes speculated to have beenthe inspiration for the fictional character theLone Ranger.” 19 Whether or not Bass Reeves really was the inspiration for such an iconiccharacter, he himself was truly a legendary hero in his own right.

### Notes

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2. Matt Helm, “ Reeves, Bass (1838 – 1910),” African American History in the West, accessed October 30, 2018, https://blackpast. org/aaw/reeves-bass-1838-1910.
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6. Quoted in Thad Morgan, Was the Real Lone Ranger a Black Man? , History. com, Feb 1, 2018, https://www. history. com/news/bass-reeves-real-lone-ranger-a-black-man
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9. Marshall Trimble, “ Bass Reeves: U. S. Marshal,” True West Magazine,  October 2, 2017, https://truewestmagazine. com/bass-reeves-u-s-marshall
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11. Trimble, Bass Reeves.
12. Helm, Reeves, Bass.
13. Weiser, Bass Reeves.
14. Weiser, Bass Reeves.
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16. Quoted in Encyclopedia Britannica, Bass Reeves, American Lawman , Accessed October 28, 2018, https://www. britannica. com/biography/Bass-Reeves
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18. Morgan, Lone Ranger.
19. Quoted, Encyclopedia Britannica.

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