

Slave Narratives

From *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*

The Library of Congress: The Federal Writers' Project

Source: <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

Other potentially helpful sources:

- <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/resources/wpa.html>
 - **Description:** Comprehensive directory of WPA Slave Narrative sites
- <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/html/mss/gr7999.html>
 - **Description:** The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920: The Ohio Historical Society presents 27 interviews with former slaves that were collected by the Federal Writers' Project but never deposited in the Library of Congress.

How to navigate the LOC site:

- The “**Search by**” tool on the homepage allows you to search for specific narratives by narrator name or keyword. If you click on the “**Narrator**” hyperlinked text (“Browse Narratives by Narrator”), you will be directed to the “**Narrator Index.**” This index is alphabetized by narrator.

- To view a selection of narratives, click on “**Voices and Faces from the Collection**” on the homepage. This will give you a list of a few sample narratives. Click on a person’s name to locate their interview transcript.
- To read the full text of the narrative, click on the hyperlinked text that says “**Read the rest of this narrative.**” This will bring you to another page that provides citation details about the interview. Click on the hyperlinked text that says “**View page images**” at the top to view the full typed interview.

Website description:

Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938 contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves. These narratives were collected in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and assembled and microfilmed in 1941 as the seventeen-volume *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*. This online collection is a joint presentation of the Manuscript and Prints and Photographs Divisions of the Library of Congress and includes more than 200 photographs from the Prints and Photographs Division.

Interview Excerpts

Betty Cofer: “Yes’m, I saw some slaves sold away from the plantation, four men and two women, both of ‘em with little babies. The traders got ‘em. Sold ‘em down to Mobile, Alabama. One was my pappy’s sister. We never heard from her again. I saw a likely young feller sold for \$1500. That was my Uncle Ike. Marse Jonathan Spease bought him and kept him the rest of his life.”

Anna Maria Coffee: “I wuz sold on de block more’n onct, en I wuz owned by ‘leven diffu’nt owners. I wuz sold fum my mother en father when I wuz jes sech er little tot dat I can’t hardly ‘member em a tall.

“Sale day come. De market place wuz ‘bout er city block big, with seats fixed roun’ like er race track. All de boys and men wuz fixed on one side; de big ones first, en so on, down ter de little ones. De ‘omans en girls dey wuz fixed de same way on er udder side de market.”

John W. Fields: “In most of us colored folks was the great desire to [be] able to read and write. We took advantage of every opportunity to educate ourselves. The greater part of the plantation owners were very harsh if we were caught trying to learn or write. It was the law that if a white man was caught trying to educate a negro slave, he was liable to prosecution entailing a fine of fifty dollars and a jail sentence . . . Our ignorance was the greatest hold the South had on us. We knew we could run away, but what then? An offender guilty of this crime was subjected to very harsh punishment.”

Robert Glenn: “All the slaves on marster’s plantation lived the first year we spent in

Kentucky in a one room house with one fireplace. There was a dozen or more who all lived in this one room house. Marster built himself a large house having seven rooms. He worked his slaves himself and never had any overseers. We worked from sun to sun in the fields and then worked at the house after getting in from the fields as long as we could see . . . I have never seen a jail for slaves but I have seen slaves whipped and I was whipped myself. I was whipped particularly about a saddle I left out in the night after using it during the day. My flesh was cut up so bad that the scars are on me to this day.”

James Green: “I never knowed my age till after de war, when I’s set free for de second time, and then marster gits out a big book and it shows I’s 25 year old. It shows I’s 12 when I is bought and \$800 is paid for me. That \$800 was stolen money, ‘cause I was kidnapped.”

Sarah Gudger: “Ole Marse strop us good effen we did anythin’ he didn’ lak. Sometime he get hes dandah up an’ den we dassent look roun’ at him. Else he tie yo’ hands afoah yo’ body an’ whup yo’, jes lak yo’ a mule. Lawdy, honey, I’s tuk a thousand lashins in mah day. Sometimes mah poah ole body be soah foah a week.

“Ole Boss he send us niggahs out in any kine ob weathah, rain o’ snow, it nebbah mattah. We had t’ go t’ de mountings, cut wood an’ drag it down t’ de house. Many de time we come in wif ouh cloes stuck t’ ouh poah ole cold bodies, but ‘twartn’t no use t’ try t’ git ‘em dry. Ef de Ole Boss o’ de Ole Missie see us dey yell: ‘Git on out ob heah yo’ black thin’, an’ git yo’ wok outen de way!’ An’ Lawdy, honey, we knowed t’ git, else we git de lash. Dey did’n cah how ole o’ how young yo’ wah, yo’ nebbah too big t’ git de lash.”

Matilda Hatchett: “Didn’t git no chance to learn nothin’ in slavery. Sometimes the children would teach the darkies ‘round the house their ABC’s. I’ve heard of folks teachin’ their slaves to read the Bible. They didn’t teach us to read nothin’. I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never seen it, that some folks would cut off the first finger of a nigger that could write.”

Mary Reynolds: “The conch shell blowed afore daylight and all hands better git out for roll call or Solomon bust the door down and git them out. It was work hard, git beatin’s and half fed. They brung the victuals and water to the fields on a slide pulled by a old mule. Plenty times they was only a half barrel water and it stale and hot, for all us niggers on the hottes’ days. Mostly we ate pickled pork and corn bread and peas and beans and ‘taters. They never was as much as we needed.

“The times I hated most was pickin’ cotton when the frost was on the bolls. My hands git sore and crack open and bleed. We’d have a li’l fire in the fields and iffen the ones with tender hands couldn’t stand it no longer, we’d run and warm our hands a li’l bit. When I could steal a ‘tater, I used to slip it in the ashes and when I’d run to the fire I’d take it out and eat it on the sly.”