



“What Do *I* Think of Slavery?”

Selections from the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved African Americans, 1936-1938

Over 2300 former slaves were interviewed during the Great Depression of the 1930s by members of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal agency in the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Among the suggested questions was “Now that slavery is ended, what do you think of it?”

Note: Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms now considered offensive. Some white interviewers, despite project guidelines for transcribing the narratives, used stereotypical patterns of representing black speech. See “A Note on the Language of the Narratives” at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and “Guidelines for Interviewers” at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf.

QUESTION: “Now that slavery is ended, what do you think of it?”

■ What I likes bes, to be slave or free? Well, it’s dis way. In slavery I owns nothin’ and never owns nothin’. In freedom I’s own de home and raise de family. All dat cause me worryment and in slavery I has no worryment, but I takes de freedom.

MARGRETT NILLIN, enslaved & interviewed in Texas

■ Was I happy? Law Miss. You can take anything. No matter how good you treat it — it wants to be free. You can treat it good and feed it good and give it everything it seems to want — but if you open the cage — it’s happy.

TOM ROBINSON, enslaved in North Carolina & Texas, interviewed in Arkansas

■ And I is thankful they ain’t none of my children born slaves and have to remember all them terrible days when we was ruled by the whip — like I remember it, just like it was yesterday.

DANIEL WILLIAM LUCAS, state of enslavement unidentified, interviewed in Oklahoma

■ I’m pretty old and can’t work hard anymore, but I manage to get along. I’m glad to be free and I don’t believe I could stand them slavery days now at all.

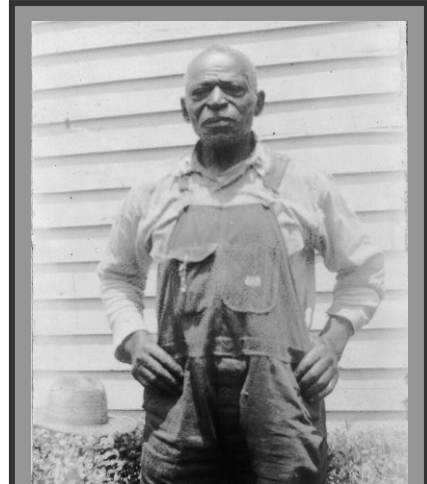
I’m my own boss, get up when I want, go to bed the same way. Nobody to say this or that about what I do.

Yes, I’m glad to be free!

MATTIE LOGAN, enslaved in Mississippi, interviewed in Oklahoma

■ What do I t’ink ob slavery? I t’ink slavery is jest a murdering of de people. I t’ink Freedom been a great gift. I lak my Maussa and I guess he was as good to his slaves as he could be, but I ruther be free.

SAM MITCHELL, enslaved & interviewed in South Carolina



Henry Bobbitt



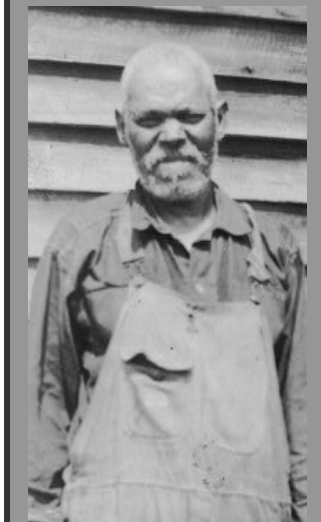
Margrett Nillin



Jenny Proctor



Lula Wilson



Charlie Crump



Delia Garlic

■ Slavery time was tough, Boss. You just don't know how tough it was. I can't 'splain to you just how bad all de niggers want to get dey freedom. With de "free niggers" it was just de same as it was wid dem dat was in bondage. You know there was some few "free niggers" in dat time even 'fore de slaves taken outen bondage. It was really worse on dem dan it was with dem what wasn't free. De slaveowners, dey just despised dem "free niggers" an' make it just as hard on dem as dey can. Dey couldn't get no work from nobody.

TINES KENDRICKS, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Arkansas

■ I never had a hard time as a slave, but I'm glad we was set free. Some times we can't figger out the best thing to do, but anyways we can lead our own life now, and I'm glad the young ones can learn and get somewhere these days.

GEORGE KYE, enslaved in Arkansas, interviewed in Oklahoma

■ If all slaves had belonged to white folks like ours, there wouldn't been any freedom wanted.

HARRIET MCFARLIN PAYNE, enslaved in Arkansas & Texas, interviewed in Texas

■ Lots of old people lak me say dat dey was happy in slavery, and dat dey had de worst tribulations after freedom, but I know dey didn't have no white master and overseer lak we all had on our place. Dey both dead now I reckon, and dey no use talking 'bout de dead, but I know I been gone long ago iffen dat white man Saunder [overseer] didn't lose his hold on me.

It was de fourth day of June in 1865 I begins to live . . .

KATIE ROWE, enslaved in Arkansas, interviewed in Oklahoma

■ I was born in slavery, and I belonged to a Baptist preacher. Until I was fifteen years old I was taught that I was his own chattel-property, and he could do with me like he wanted to, but he had been taught that way too, and we both believed it.

ALLEN MANNING, enslaved in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas; interviewed in Oklahoma

■ I's had a right hard life, but I puts my faith in de Lawd an' I know ever'thing gwine come out all right. I's lived a long life an' will soon be a hund'ed, I guess. I's glad dat slav'ry is over, 'cause de Bible don't say nothin' 'bout it bein right. I's a good Christian. I gits sort-a res'less mos' o' de time an' has to keep busy to keep from thinkin' too much.

DORA FRANKS, enslaved & interviewed in Mississippi

■ I think slavery was a mighty good thing for mother, father, me and the other members of the family, and I cannot say anything but good for my old marster and missus, but I can only speak for those whose conditions I have known during slavery and since. For myself and them, I will say again, slavery was a mighty good thing.

MARY ANDERSON, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ Was I glad when dat was over? Wouldn' you be?

ADELIN CUNNINGHAM, enslaved & interviewed in Texas

■ I been blind and mos' helpless for five year. I'm gittin' mighty enfeeblin' and I ain't walked outside the door for a long time back. I sets and 'members the times in the world. I 'members now clear as yesterday things I forgot for a long time. I 'members 'bout the days of slavery and I don't 'lieve they ever gwine have slaves no more on this earth. I think Gawd done took that burden offen his black chillun and I'm aimin' to praise him for it to his face in the days of Glory what ain't so far off.

MARY REYNOLDS, enslaved in Louisiana, interviewed in Texas

■ I couldn' exactly tell you which de better times dese days or in slavery time. I know heap of de colored people fared better when dey belonged to de white folks cause dey had good owners. Didn' have to worry bout huntin dey clothes en somethin to eat in dat day en time. Just had to work. Now dey have to hunt it en get it together de best way dey can. Oh, honey, peoples has so much worrytions dese days. Dat how-come dey ain' live a long time like dey used to.

SALLIE PAUL, enslaved in North Carolina, interviewed in South Carolina

■ Those were awful times. Yet I have heard many of the older Negroes say the old days were better.

Such talk always seemed to me but an expression of sentiment for some good old master, or else the older Negroes were just too handicapped with ignorance to recognize the benefits of liberty or the opportunities of freedom.

But I've always been proud of my freedom, and proud of my old mother who faced death for her freedom and mine when she escaped from the Bradford plantation a long time before freedom came to the Negro race as a whole.

WILLIAM WALTERS, enslaved in Tennessee, interviewed in Oklahoma

■ I's hear tell of dem good slave days but I aint nev'r seen no good time den.

JENNY PROCTOR, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Texas

■ I have often considered writing the history of my life and finally decided to undertake it, but I found that it was more of a job than I had expected it to be, and then too, I would have to tell too much, so I though it best to leave it alone.

MARY COLBERT, enslaved & interviewed in Georgia

■ Every time I think of slavery and if it done the race any good, I think of the story of the coon and the dog who met. The coon said to the dog "Why is it you're so fat and I am so poor, and we is both animals?" The dog said: "I lay round Master's house and let him kick me and he gives me a piece of bread right on." Said the coon to the dog: "Better then that I stay poor." Them's my sentiment. I'm lak the coon, I don't believe in 'buse.

STEPHEN MCCRAY, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Oklahoma

■ Slavery wuz a bad thing an' freedom, of de kin' we got wid nothin' to live on wuz bad. Two snakes full of pisen. One lyin' wid his head pintin' north, de other wid his head pintin' south. Dere names wuz slavery an' freedom. De snake called slavery lay wid his head pinted south an' de snake called freedom lay wid his head pinted north. Both bit de nigger, an' dey wuz both bad.

PATSY MITCHNER, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ We wuz glad ter be free, an' lemmie tell yo', we shore cussed ole marster out 'fore we left dar; den we comed ter Raleigh. I'se always been a farmer an' I'se made right good. I lak de white folkses an' dey laks me but I'll tell yo' Miss, I'd ruther be a nigger any day dan to be lak my ole white folks wuz.

CHARLIE CRUMP, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ They say slavery was wrong but what 'bout hard times? Dat is de worse kind of slavery, I thinks. All dis hollerin' 'round 'bout freedom they has, shucks, all dat kind of talk ain't nothin'. When you has work and some money in your pocket so you can go to de store and buy some meat and bread, then you has de best freedom there is, don't tell me.

JANE JOHNSON, enslaved & interviewed in South Carolina



Mary Reynolds



Green Cumby



Adeline Cunningham

■ Slaves didn' know what to 'spec from freedom, but a lot of 'em hoped dey would be fed an' kep' by de gov'ment. Dey all had diffe'nt ways o' thinkin' 'bout it. Mos'ly though dey was jus' lak me, dey didn' know jus' zackly what it meant. It was jus' somp'n dat de white folks an' slaves all de time talk 'bout. Dat's all. Folks dat ain' never been free don' rightly know de *feel* of bein' free. Dey don' know de meanin' of it. . . .

Law! It sho' was turrible times. Dese old eyes o' mine seen more people crippled an' dead. I'se even seen 'em saw off legs wid hacksaws. I tell you it aint right, Miss, what I seen. It aint right at all.

JAMES LUCAS, enslaved & interviewed in Mississippi

■ Slavery wuz a good thing den but de world jist got better an' outgrewed it.

HENRY BOBBITT, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ I think by Negro gittin' educated he has profited, an' dis here younger generation is gwine to take nothin' off dese here poor white folks when dey don't treat dem right, cause now dis country is a free country; no slavery now.

CHARLES CRAWLEY, enslaved & interviewed in Virginia

■ Life was kiner happy durin' slavery 'cause we never knowed nothing 'bout any yuther sort of life or freedom. All we knowed was work from one en' of de year to de yuther, 'ceptin on holidays. . . .

. . . When slavery was goin' on it was all right for me 'cause I never had it hard, but it 'jes wan't right to treat human bein's dat way. If we hadn't a had to work an' slave for nothin' we might have somepin' to show for what we did do, an' wouldn't have to live from pillar to post' now. . . .

Ever'body worked hard enduring dat time. Dat was all we thought we was 'spose to do, but Abe Lincoln taught us better'n dat. Some say dat Abe wan't intrusted so much in freein' de slaves as we was in savin' de union. Don' make no diff'ence iffen he wan't intrusted in de black folks, he sho' done a big thing by tryin' to save de union.

WILLIAM HENRY TOWNS, enslaved & interviewed in Alabama

■ It's all hard, slavery and freedom, both bad when you can't eat. The ole bees makes de honey comb, the young bee makes de honey, niggers makes de cotton an' corn an' de white folks get de money. Dis wus de case in Slavery time an' its de case now. De nigger do mos' de hard wurk on de farms now, and de white folks still git de money dat de nigger's labor makes.

ANDREW BOONE, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ I reckon dat hit wuz better dat de slaves wuz freed, but I still loves my white folkses, an' dey loves me.

JENNYLIN DUNN, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ I didn't know what dey fightin' 'bout for a long time, den I heard it 'bout freedom and I felt like it be Heaven here on earth to git freedom, 'spite de fac' I allus had de good marster. He sho' was good to us, but you knows dat ain't de same as bein' free.

GREEN CUMBY, enslaved & interviewed in Texas

■ Slavery didn't teach you nothin' but how to work and if you didn't work your back would tell it. Slavery taught you how to lie, too. Just like your

master would tell you to go over and steal dat hog. Den de other master from who I stole de hog would say, "Peter, why I've lost a hog; did you ever see him anywhere?" I would say, "No, suh." Of course if I did not lie I would get a whippin'.

De white people did not want to put us in a state to ourselves after de freedom 'cause dey couldn't do without us. De colored people done come up too high now to back 'em and dey got a better chance. De conditions now of de colored people is of course better now cause dey is somebody."

PETER CORN, enslaved & interviewed in Missouri

■ In all de years since de war I cannot forget old massa. He was good and kind. He never believed in slavery but his money was tied up in slaves and he didn't want to lose all he had.

I knows I will see him in heaven and even though I have to walk ten miles for a bite of bread I can still be happy to think about the good times we had then.

GUS BROWN, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Alabama

■ Course I's born in slavery, ageable as I am. I's a old time, slavery woman and the way I been through the hackles, I got plenty to say 'bout slavery. Lulu Wilson says she know they ain't no good in it and they better not bring it back.

LULU WILSON, enslaved in Kentucky, interviewed in Texas

■ Yes, I was a slave. And I'll say this to the whole world; Slavery was the worst curse ever visited on the people of the United States.

JOHN RUDD, enslaved in Kentucky, interviewed in Indiana

■ You want to know what they did in slavery times! They were doin' jus' what they do now. The white folks was beatin' the niggers, burning 'em and boilin' 'em, workin' 'em and doin' any other thing they wanted to do with them. 'Course you wasn't here then to know about nigger dogs and bull whips, were you? The same thing is goin' on right now.

ALICE JOHNSON, enslaved in Mississippi, interviewed in Arkansas

■ Does I 'member much 'bout slavery times? Well, dere is no way for me to disremember, unless I die.

SAMUEL BOULWARE, enslaved & interviewed in South Carolina

■ Before the war you belonged to somebody. After the war you weren't nothin' but a nigger. The laws of the country were made for the white man. The laws of the North were made for man.

Freedom is better than slavery though. I done seed both sides. I seen darkies chained. If a good nigger killed a white overseer, they wouldn't do nothin' to him. If he was a bad nigger, they'd sell him. They raised niggers to sell; they didn't want to lose them. It was just like a mule killing a man.

HENRY BANNER, enslaved in Virginia & Tennessee; interviewed in Arkansas

■ De slaves, where I lived, knowed after de war dat they had abundance of dat somethin' called freedom, what they could not eat, wear, and sleep in. Yes, sir, they soon found out dat freedom ain't nothin', 'less you is got somethin' to live on and a place to call home. Dis livin' on liberty is lak young folks livin' on love after they gits married. It just don't work. No, sir, it las' so long and not a bit longer. Don't tell me! It sho' don't hold good when you has to work, or when you gits hongry. You knows dat poor white folks and niggers has got to work to live, regardless of liberty, love, and all them things.

EZRA ADAMS, enslaved & interviewed in South Carolina

■ I think slavery wuz wrong. I have a horror of being a slave. You see all dis lan' aroun' here. It belongs to colored folks. Dey were cut off wid nothin', but dey is strugglin' an' dey are comin' on fast. De Bible say dat de bottom rail will be on top, and it is comin' to pass. Sometime de colored race will git up. De Bible say so.

SARAH HARRIS, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina



Sarah Harris



William Henry Towns



Parker Pool



John Smith

■ Me I'se sho' glad Mr. Lincoln sot us free. Iffen it was still slav'ry time now old as I is, I would have to wuk jus' de same, sick or no. Now I don't have to ax nobody what I kin do. Dat's why I'se glad I'se free.

FRANCES WILLINGHAM, enslaved & interviewed in Georgia

■ Dar's dis much, we ain't worried 'bout livin' den lak we does now, an dar's dis much for bein' free, I has got thirteen great-gran' chilluns an' I knows whar dey everyone am. In slavery times dey'd have been on de [auction] block long time ago.

JACOB THOMAS, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in North Carolina

■ If I had my life to live over, I would die fighting rather than be a slave again. I want no man's yoke on my shoulders no more. But in them days, us niggers didn't know no better. All we knowed was work, and hard work. We was learned to say, "Yes, Sir!" and scrape down and bow, and to do just exactly what we was told to do, make no difference if we wanted to or not. Old Marster and Old Mistress would say, "Do this!" and we done it. And they say, "Come here!" and if we didn't come to them, they come to us. And they brought the bunch of switches with them.

ROBERT FALLS, enslaved in North Carolina, interviewed in Tennessee

■ Dem days wuz hell.

DELIA GARLIC, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Alabama

■ Den we has de song 'bout dis:

"Rabbit in de briar patch,
Squirrel in de tree,
Wish I could go huntin',
But I ain't free."

"Rooster's in de henhouse,
Hen's in de patch,
Love to go shootin',
But I ain't free."

MILLIE WILLIAMS, enslaved in Tennessee & Texas, interviewed in Texas

■ Slavery was bad. Workin' the colored people over two hundred years without giving 'em anything but dere food an' clothes. Yes slavery was bad.

JOHN SMITH, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ I think some o' de slaves wuz better off when dey had owners and wuz in slavery den dey is now. De colored people are slaves now more den dey wuz den. . . De nigger in de South is jest as much a slave as ever.

PARKER POOL, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ It jes lak dis, I t'ink dis uh better day we lib in dese times. When we b'long to de white folks, we lib, en a'ter we wuz free we lib right on. I t'ink being free de best time to lib. Better to be loose den tied cause don' care how good yo' owner, yuh hadder be under dey jurisdiction. Ain' dat right?

WASHINGTON DOZIER, enslaved & interviewed in South Carolina

■ Yassum, I kin tell you things about slavery times dat would make yo' blood bile, but dey's too turrible. I jus' tries to forgit.

AMY CHAPMAN, enslaved & interviewed in Alabama

■ I feel like I growed up with more freedom now since we has no slavery. I believe if de colored people had never been brought to dis country dey would be further developed den dey is this way. Our people has been under bondage in dis country for over 200 years. Being in de bondage has been a great hardship on our race. Dis condition might have some effect today with some people. Dey might say "Well, dis fellow will never amount to nothin' 'cause his parents was slaves."

JOHN MCGUIRE, enslaved & interviewed in Missouri

■ What I seed of slavery was a bad idea, I reckon, but ev'ybody thought dey marster was de bes' in de lan'. Us didn't know no better. A man was growed plum' green 'fo he knew de whole worl' didn't belong to his ol' marster.

OLIVER BELL, enslaved & interviewed in Alabama

■ Yes, mam, dese has been better times to me. I think hit's better to work for yourself and have what you make den to work for somebody else and don't git nuttin' out it. Slav'ry days was mighty hard. My marster was good to us (I mean he didn't beat us much, and he give us plenty plain food) but some slaves suffered awful.

FEREBE ROGERS, enslaved & interviewed in Georgia

■ I think slavery was wrong because birds an' things are free an' man ought to have the same privilege.

W. SOLOMON DEBNAM, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ I'se glad my race don't have to suffer now what we did on that plantation. Some of my old friends tells me they had good homes an' wuz took keer of an' all that, but from my own 'sperience, I'se glad my chillun never knowed slavery.

EMMA HURLEY, enslaved & interviewed in Georgia

■ A lot of de niggers in slavery time wurked so hard dey said dey hated to see de sun rise in de mornin'. Slavery wus a bad thing, 'cause some white folks didn't treat dere niggers right.

RIA SORRELL, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ I think slavery wus a mighty bad thing, though it's been no bed of roses since, but den no one could whup me no mo.

JACOB MANSON, enslaved & interviewed in North Carolina

■ Here's the idea, freedom is worth it all.

MOSES MITCHELL, enslaved in Arkansas & Texas, interviewed in Arkansas

