



RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

of enslaved African Americans in the southern United States

Selections from the WPA interviews, 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 were these on religious practice:

- Did the slaves have a church on your plantation?
- Did they read the Bible?
- Who was your favorite preacher? Your favorite spirituals?
- Tell about the baptizing: baptizing songs. Funerals and funeral songs . . .
- What do you think of voodoo?

Due to the nature of the questions, and because the interviewees were enslaved from the 1820s to 1865, their responses relate primarily to Christian practice (except when addressing the inquiry about voodoo). Although Muslim Africans were captured and transported to the Americas, primarily in the 1700s, no reference to Muslim practice was found in the WPA narratives during the research for this Resource Toolbox,

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.

■ Fourth Sundays was our meetin' days, and evvybody went to church. Us went to our white folks' church and rid in a wagon 'hind deir car'iage. Dere was two Baptist preachers — one of 'em was Mr. John Gibson and de other was Mr. Patrick Butler. Marse Joe was a Methodist preacher hisself, but dey all went to de same church together. De Niggers sot in de gallery. When dey had done give de white folks de sacrament [Communion], dey called de Niggers down from de gallery and give dem sacrament too. Church days was sho' 'nough big meetin' days 'cause evvybody went. Dey preached three times a day; at eleven in de mornin', at three in de evenin', and den again at night. De biggest meetin' house crowds was when dey had baptizin', and dat was right often. Dey dammed up de crick on Sadday so as it would be deep enough on Sunday, and dey done de baptizin' 'fore dey preached de three o'clock sermon. At dem baptizin's dere was all sorts of shoutin', and dey would sing *Roll Jordan Roll*, *De Livin' Waters*, and *Lord I'se Comin' Home*.

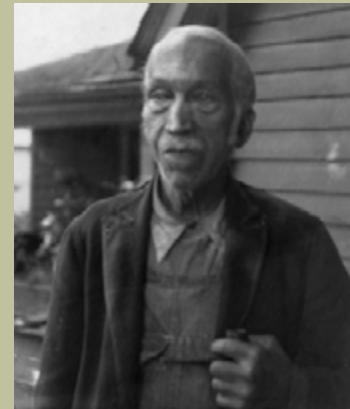
ROBERT SHEPHERD, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ We went to the white folks' church, so we sit in the back on the floor. They allowed us to join their church whenever one got ready to join or felt that the Lord had forgiven them of their sins. We told our determination; this is what we said: "I feel that the Lord have forgiven me for my sins. I have prayed and I feel that I am a better girl. I belong to master so and so and I am so old." The white preacher would then ask our miss and master what they thought about it and if they could see any



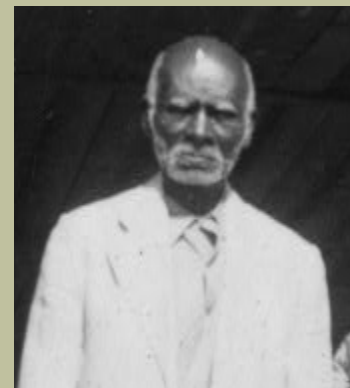
Jenny Proctor, ca. 1937

"Dey wasn't no church for de slaves but we goes to de white folks arbor on Sunday evenin'."



W. L. Bost, ca. 1937

"The white folks feared for niggers to get any religion and education, but I reckon somethin' inside jes told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter."



Anderson Edwards, ca. 1937

"When we prayed by ourse'ves we daren't let the white folks knows it."

change. They would get up and say: "I notice she don't steal and I notice she don't lie as much and I notice she works better." Then they let us join. We served our mistress and master in slavery time and not God.

SARAH DOUGLAS, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ We had the bes' mistress an master in the worl' and they was Christian fo'ks and they taught us to be Christianlike too. Ev'y Sunday mornin' ol' master would have all us niggers to the house while he would sing an pray an read de Bible to us all. Ol' master taught us not to be bad; he taught us to be good; he tol' us to never steal nor to tell false tales an not to do anythin' that was bad. He said: Yo' will reap what yo' sow, that you sow it single an' reap double. I learnt that when I was a little chile an I ain't fo'got it yet. When I got grown I went de Baptist way. God called my pa to preach an ol' master let him preach in de kitchen an in the back yard under th' trees. On preachin' day ol' master took his whole family an all th' slaves to church wid him.

MILLIE EVANS, enslaved in North Carolina ■

■ Before freedom we always went to white churches on Sundays with passes but they never mentioned God; they always told us to be "good niggers and mind our missus and masters."

CLAYBORN GANTLING, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ Niggers was very religious and dey had church often. Dey would annoy de white folks wid shouting and singing and praying and dey would take cooking pots and put over dey mouths so de white folks couldn't hear 'em. Dey would dig holes in de ground too, and lie down when dey prayed.

Old Master let us have church in de homes. We had prayer-meeting every Wednesday night. All our cullud preachers could read de Bible. He let dem teach us how to read iffen we wanted to learn.

JAMES SOUTHALL, enslaved in Tennessee ■

■ We didn't have no place to go to church, but old Master didn't care if we had singing and praying, and we would tie our shoes on our backs and go down the road close to the white church and all set down and put our shoes on and go up close and listen to the service. Old master was baptized almost every Sunday and cussed us all out on Monday.

GEORGE KYE, enslaved in Arkansas ■

■ De slaves went to church wid dey marsters. De preachers always preached to de white folks first, den dey would preach to de slaves. Dey never said nothin' but you must be good, don't steal, don't talk back at your marsters, don't run away, don't do dis, and don't do dat. Dey let de colored preachers preach but dey give 'em almanacs to preach out of. Dey didn't 'low us to sing such songs as "We Shall Be Free" and "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing." Dey always had somebody to follow de slaves to church when de colored preacher was preachin' to hear what wuz said and done. Dey wuz 'fraid us would try to say something 'gainst 'em.

LEAH GARRETT, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ You know we was neber 'lowed to go to chu'ch widoutten some of de white folks wid us. We wan't even 'lowed to talk wid nobody from anudder farm. Iffen you did, you got one of de wus' whuppin's of your life. Atter freedom Massa Jim tol' us dat dey was 'fraid we'd git together an' try to run away to de No'th, an' dat dat was w'y dey didn' wan' us gittin' together talkin'.

MARY ELLA GRANDBERRY, enslaved in Alabama ■



Sarah Douglas, ca. 1937

"We served our mistress and master in slavery time and not God."



Millie Evans, ca. 1937

"Ol' master . . . taught us to be good; he tol' us to never steal nor to tell false tales an not to do anythin' that was bad."

■ Us niggers never have chance to go to Sunday School and church. The white folks feared for niggers to get any religion and education, but I reckon somethin' inside jes told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter. We would sneak off and have prayer meetin'. Sometimes the paddyrollers catch us and beat us good but that didn't keep us from tryin'.

W. L. BOST, enslaved in North Carolina ■

■ Marster Tom was always good to us and he taught me religion. He was the best man I ever knew. When Saturday noon come, they blew the horn and we quit workin'. We went to church one Sunday a month and we sat on one side and the white folks on the other.

GEORGE SELMAN, enslaved in Texas ■

■ De white folks 'fraid to let de children learn anythin'. They fraid dey get too sma't and be harder to manage. Dey nebber let em know anything about anythin'. Never have any church. Effen [If] you go you set in de back of de white folks chu'ch. But de niggers slip off an' pray an' hold prayer-meetin' in de woods den dey tu'n down a big wash pot and prop it up wif a stick to drown out de soun' ob de singin'. I 'member some of de songs we uster sing. One of dem went somethin' like dis:

“Hark from de tomb a doleful soun’
My ears hear a tender cry.
A livin’ man come through the groun’
Whar we may shortly lie.
Heah in dis clay may be you bed
In spite ob all you toil
Let all de wise bow revrant head
Mus’ lie as low as ours.”

Then dey sing one I can hardly remember but dis is some of de words:

“Jesus can make you die in bed
He sof’ as downs in pillow there
On my bres’ I’ll lean my head
Grieve my life sweetly there.
In dis life of heaby load
Let us share de weary traveler
Along de heabenly road.”

FANNIE MOORE, enslaved in North Carolina ■

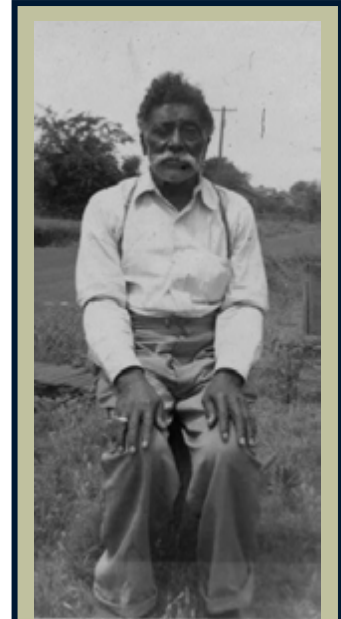
■ No suh, we never goes to church. Times we sneaks in de woods and prays de Lawd to make us free and times one of de slaves got happy and made a noise dat dey heered at de big house and den de overseer come and whip us 'cause we prayed de Lawd to set us free.

ADELINE CUNNINGHAM, enslaved in Texas ■

■ When de niggers go round singin' "Steal Away to Jesus," dat mean dere gwine [going to] be a 'ligious meetin' dat night. Dat de sig'fication of a meetin'. De masters 'fore and after freedom didn't like dem 'ligious meetin's, so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewheres. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.

WASH WILSON, enslaved in Louisiana and Texas ■

■ I have heard it said that Tom Ashbie's father went to one of the cabins late at night, the slaves were having a secret prayer meeting. He heard one slave ask God to change the heart of his master and



George Selman, ca. 1937

“We went to church one Sunday a month and we sat on one side and the white folks on the other.”



Adeline Cunningham, 1937

“. . . de overseer come and whip us 'cause we prayed de Lawd to set us free.”

deliver him from slavery so that he may enjoy freedom. Before the next day the man disappeared, no one ever seeing him again. . . When old man Ashbie died, just before he died he told the white Baptist minister, that he had killed Zeek for praying and that he was going to hell.



Litt Young, ca. 1937

"She had him preach how we was to obey our master and missy if we want to go to Heaven, but when she wasn't there, he come out with straight preachin' from the Bible."



Anthony Dawson, ca. 1937

"Mostly we had white preachers, but when we had a black preacher that was Heaven."

SILAS JACKSON, enslaved in Virginia ■

■ She built a nice church with glass windows and a brass cupola for the blacks and a yellow man [light-skinned black man] preached to us. She had him preach how we was to obey our master and missy if we want to go to Heaven, but when she wasn't there, he come out with straight preachin' from the Bible.

LITT YOUNG, enslaved in Mississippi and Texas ■

■ We had church wid de white preachers and dey tole us to mind our masters and missus and we would be saved; if not, dey said we wouldn'. Dey never tole us nothin' 'bout Jesus.

MARGRETT NICKERSON, enslaved in Florida ■

■ When the white preacher come he preach and pick up his Bible and claim he gittin the text right out from the good Book and he preach: "The Lord say, don't you niggers steal chickens from your missus. Don't you steal YOUR MARSTER'S hawgs." That would be all he preach.

RICHARD CARRUTHERS, enslaved in Tennessee and Texas ■

■ Dey had a li'l church for de niggers and preachin' in de afternoon, and on into de night lots of times. Dey have de cullud preacher. He couldn't read. He jes' preach from nat'ral wit and what he larn from white folks.

CHRIS FRANKLIN, enslaved in Louisiana ■

■ Black preachers couldn' preach tuh us. . . De white preacher would call us under a tree Sunday evenin tuh preach tuh us. Dis is whut his text would be: "Mind yo mistress." Den he would ceed tuh preach — "Don't steal der potatoes; don't lie bout nothin an don' talk back tuh yo boss; ifn yo does yo'll be tied tuh a tree an stripped neckid. When dey tell yuh tuh do somethin run an do hit." Dat's de kind uv gospel we got.

EMMA TIDWELL, enslaved in Arkansas ■

■ Dey wasn't no church for de slaves but we goes to de white folks arbor on Sunday evenin' and a white man he gits up dere to preach to de niggers. He say, "Now I takes my text, which is, nigger obey your marster and your mistress, 'cause what you git from dem here in dis world am all you ev'r goin' to git, 'cause you jes' like de hogs and de

other animals, when you dies you aint no more, after you been throwed in dat hole." I guess we believed dat for a while 'cause we didn' have no way findin' out different. We didn' see no Bibles.

JENNY PROCTOR, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ Old Master was a fine Christian but he like his [mint juleps] anyways. He let us niggers have preachings and prayers, and would give us a parole to go 10 or 15 miles to a camp meeting and stay two or three days with nobody but Uncle John to stand for us. Mostly we had white preachers, but when we had a black preacher that was Heaven.

We didn't have no voodoo women nor conjure folks at our 20 acres. We all knowed about the Word and the unseen Son of God and we didn't put no stock in conjure. Course we had luck charms and good and bad signs, but everybody got dem things even nowadays. My boy had a white officer in the Big War and he tells me that man had a li'l old doll tied around his wrist on a gold chain.

ANTHONY DAWSON, enslaved in North Carolina ■

■ My family didn't believe in conjure¹ an' all that stuff, 'though they's a heap of it was going on and still is for that matter. They had "hands" that was made up of all kinds of junk. You used 'em to make folks love you more'n they did. We used asafetida² to keep off smallpox and measles. Put mole foots round a baby's neck to make him teethe easy. We used to use nine red ants tied in a sack round they neck to make 'em teethe easy and never had no trouble with 'em neither.

JANE MONTGOMERY, enslaved in Louisiana ■

■ De old voodoo doctors was dem what had de most power, it seem, over de nigger befo' and after de war.

Dey has meetin' places in secret and a voodoo kettle and nobody know what am put in it, maybe snakes and spiders and human blood, no tellin' what. Folks all come in de dark of de moon, old doctor wave he arms and de folks crowd up close. Dem what in de voodoo strips to de waist and commence to dance while de drums beats. Dey dances faster and faster and chant and pray till dey falls down in a heap.

De armour bearers hold de candles high and when dey sways and chants dey seize with power what sends dem leapin' and whirlin'. Den de time dat old doctor work he spell on dem he wants to conjure. Many am de spell he casts dem days. Iffen he couldn't work it one way, he work it 'nother, and when he die, do he stay buried? No, sir! He walks de street and many seed he ghost wavin' he arms. . . .

De power of de rabbit foot am great. One nigger used it to run away with. His old granny done told him to try it and he did. He conjures hisself by takin' a good, soapy bath so de dogs can't smell him and den say a hoodoo over he rabbit foot, and go to de creek and git a start by wadin'. Dey didn't miss him till he clear gone and dat show what de rabbit foot done for him.

"O, Molly Cottontail,
Be sho' not to fail,
Give me you right hind foot,
My luck won't be for sale."

De graveyard rabbit am de best, kilt by a cross-eyed pusson. De niggers all 'lieved Gen. Lee carried a rabbit foot with him. To keep de rabbit foot's luck workin', it good to pour some whiskey on it once in a while.

If you has a horseshoe over you door, be sho' it from de left, hind foot of a white hoss, but a gray hoss am better'n none.

PATSY MOSES, enslaved in Texas ■

■ I could be a conjure doctor and make plenty money, but dat ain't good. In slavery time dey's men like dat 'garded as bein' dangerous. Dey make charms and put bad mouth on you. De old folks wears de rabbit foot or coon foot and sometimes a silver dime on a fishin' string to keep off de witches. . . . But I don't take up no truck with things like dat."

LORENZA EZELL, enslaved in South Carolina ■

■ We call dem [voodoo doctors] "two-headed negroes." You know dat if he could do any tricks he would keep dem from whipping him or selling him and dey couldn't do dat or dey would have done it long time ago.

DAVE HARPER, enslaved in Missouri ■



Patsy Moses, ca. 1937

"Dey has meetin' places in secret and a voodoo kettle and nobody know what am put in it, maybe snakes and spiders and human blood, no tellin' what."



Lorenza Ezell, ca. 1937

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¹ conjure: conjuration, folk magic, etc.

² asafetida: a gum resin derived from parsley varieties, used for medicinal and culinary purposes.

■ Dey was a lot of talk 'bout conjure but I didn't believe in it. Course dem darkies could do everything to one another, and have one another scared, but dey couldn't conjure dat overseer and stop him from beating 'em near to death.

BERT LUSTER, enslaved in Tennessee ■

■ One cunjur-man come here once. He try his bes' to overcome me, but he couldn't do nuttin' wid me. After dat, he tole my husband he couldn't do nuttin' to me, 'cause I didn't believe in him, and dem cunjur-folks can't hurt you less'n you believes in 'em.

FEREBE ROGERS, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ 'Member de Lawd, in some of His ways, can be mysterious. De Bible says so. There am some things de Lawd wants all folks to know, some things jus' de chosen few to know, and some things no one should know. Now, jus' 'cause yous don't know 'bout some of de Lawd's laws, 'taint superstition if some other person understands and believes in sich.

. . . De old folks in dem days knows more about de signs dat de Lawd uses to reveal His laws den de folks of today. It am also true of de cullud folks in Africa, dey native land. Some of de folks laughs at their beliefs and says it am superstition, but it am knowin' how de Lawd reveals His laws.

WILLIAM ADAMS, enslaved in Texas ■

■ Us all de time heard folkses talkin' 'bout voodoo, but my grandma wuz powerful 'ligious, and her and ma told us chillun voodoo wuz a no 'count doin' of de devil, and Christians wuz never to pay it no 'tention. Us wuz to be happy in de Lord, and let voodoo and de devil alone. None of us liked to hear scritch owls holler, 'cause everybody thought it meant somebody in dat house wuz goin' to die if a scritch owl lit on your chimney and hollered, so us would stir up de fire to make de smoke drive him away. . . .

Us didn't have no separate church for colored folkses. De white folkses had a big Baptist church dey called Mill Stone Church down at Goosepond, a good ways down de road from Marse Billie's plantation. It sho' wuz a pretty sight to see, dat church, all painted white and set in a big oak grove. Colored folkses had dey place in de gallery. Dey won't 'lowed to jine de church on Sunday, but dey had reg'lar Sadday afternoons for de slaves to come and 'fess dey faith, and jine de church. Us didn't know dey wuz no other church but de Baptist.

MARTHA COLQUITT, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ We didn't had no church, though my pappy was a preacher. He preached in the quarters. Our baptizing song was "On Jordan's Stormy Bank I Stand" and "Hark From The Tomb." Now all dat was before the War. We had all our funerals at the graveyard. Everybody, chillum and all picked up a clod of dirt and throwed in on top the coffin to help fill up the grave.

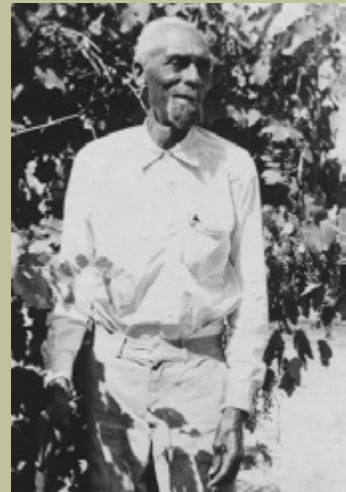
HARRIETT ROBINSON, enslaved in Texas ■

■ If anybody died, they would tell some of the other slaves to dig the grave and take 'em out there and bury 'em. They jes' put 'em in a box, no preachin' or nothin.' But, of course, if it was Sunday the



William Adams, ca. 1937

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Austin Grant, ca. 1937

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AUSTIN GRANT, enslaved in Mississippi ■

■ On our place when a slave died dey washed de corpse good wid plenty of hot water and soap and wropt it in a windin' sheet, den laid it out on de coolin' board and spread a snow white sheet over de whole business, 'til de coffin wuz made up. . . White folkses was laid out dat way same as Niggers. . . When de niggers got from de fields some of 'em went and dug a grave. Den dey put de coffin on de oxcart and carried it to de graveyard whar dey jus' had a burial dat day. Dey waited 'bout two months sometimes before dey preached de fun'ral sermon. For the fun'ral dey built a brush arbor in front of de white folkses church, and de white preacher preached de fun'ral sermon, and white folkses would come lissen to slave fun'ral. De song most sung at fun'ral wuz *Hark from de Tomb*. De reason dey had slave fun'ral so long atter de burial wuz to have 'em on Sunday or some other time when de crops had been laid by so de other slaves could be on hand.

. . . de white folkses wuz buried in a graveyard on de farm same as de Niggers wuz, and de same oxcart took 'em all to de graveyard.

WILLIS COFER, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ All de coffins for slaves was home-made. Dey was painted black wid smut off of de wash pot mixed wid grease and water. De onliest funeral song I 'members f'um dem days is:

“Oh, livin' man
Come view de ground
Whar you must shortly lay.”

ELISHA DOC GAREY, enslaved in Georgia ■

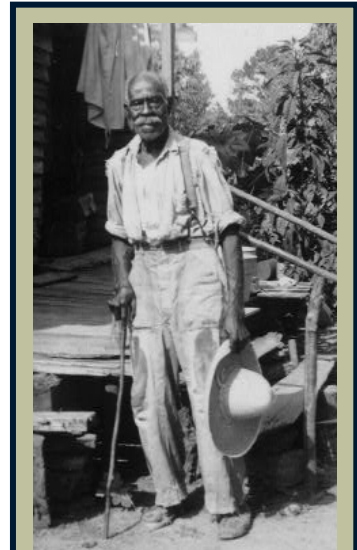
■ Them circuit ridin' preachers come to the white church and tries to make the white folks bring their slaves to preaching. Preacher say, “Nigger have a soul to save same as us all.” Massa allus went to church but I don't 'lieve it done him any good, 'cause while he there at meetin' the niggers in the field stacking that fodder.

REEVES TUCKER, enslaved in Alabama and Texas ■

■ A white preacher allus told us to 'bey our masters and work hard and sing and when we die we go to Heaven. Marse Tom didn't mind us singin' in our cabins at night, but we better not let him cotch us prayin'.

Seems like niggers jus' got to pray. Half they life am in prayin'. Some nigger take turn 'bout to watch and see if Marse Tom anyways 'bout, then they circle theyselves on the floor in the cabin and pray. They git to moanin' low and gentle, “Some day, some day, some day, this yoke gwine be lifted offen our shoulders.”

WILLIAM MOORE, enslaved in Alabama and Texas ■



Reeves Tucker, 1937

“Preacher say, ‘Nigger have a soul to save same as us all.’”



William Moore, 1937

“Some day, some day, some day, this yoke gwine be lifted offen our shoulders.”