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Freed slaves with a Union soldier, South Carolina, 1862

## *“We was free. Just like that, we was free.”*

Emancipation through Union occupation and victory: 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).

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

■ The end of the war, it come jus’ like that — like you snap your fingers. “How did you know the end of the war had come?” asked the interviewer. How did we know it? Hallelujah broke out —

“Abe Lincoln freed the nigger  
With the gun and the trigger;  
And I ain’t goin’ to get whipped any more.  
I got my ticket,  
Leavin’ the thicket,  
And I’m a-headin’ for the Golden Shore!”

Soldiers, all of a sudden, was everywhere — comin’ in bunches, crossin’ and walkin’ and ridin’. Everyone was a-singin. We was all walkin’ on golden clouds. Hallelujah!

“Union forever,  
Hurrah, boys, hurrah  
Although I may be poor,

National Humanities Center, 2009: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/). Text and photographs of interviewees courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division: WPA Slave Narrative Project, Federal Writers’ Project, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA). Digital images of the typed transcribed interviews at [memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html). Bracketed annotations and some paragraphing added, and several typographical errors corrected by NHC when necessary for clarity. Complete image credits at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm).

\* For more narratives on the African American experience in the Civil War, see Resource Toolbox, *The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865*, at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/index.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/index.htm), specifically IDENTITY #7: Soldiers; EMANCIPATION #5-7: Civil War I & II (Slaves and Soldiers), Emancipation: 1864-1865.

I'll never be a slave —  
Shoutin' the battle cry of freedom!"

Everybody went wild. We all felt like heroes and nobody had made us that way but ourselves. We was free. Just like that, we was free. It didn't seem to make the whites mad, either. They went right on giving us food just the same. Nobody took our homes away, but right off colored folks started on the move. They seemed to want to get closer to freedom, as they'd know what it was — like it was a place or a city. . . .

We knowed freedom was on us, but we didn't know what was to come with it. We thought we was goin' to git rich like the white folks. We thought we was goin' to be richer than the white folks, 'cause we was stronger and knowed how to work, and the whites didn't and they didn't have us to work for them anymore. But it didn't turn out that way. We soon found out that freedom could make folks proud but it didn't make them rich.

FELIX HAYWOOD, enslaved in Texas,  
interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

■ I think — now I don't know, but I think I was bout six or seven when they surrendered. . . . When we went down to the gate to see the soldiers, I heard Miss Judy say (she was old mistress' sister), I heard her say, "Well, you let 'em beat you" and started cryin'. I cried too and mama said, "What you cryin' for?" I said, "Miss Judy's cryin'." Mama said, "You fool, you is free!" I didn't know what freedom was, but I know the soldiers did a lot of devil-ment. Had guards but they just run over them guards.

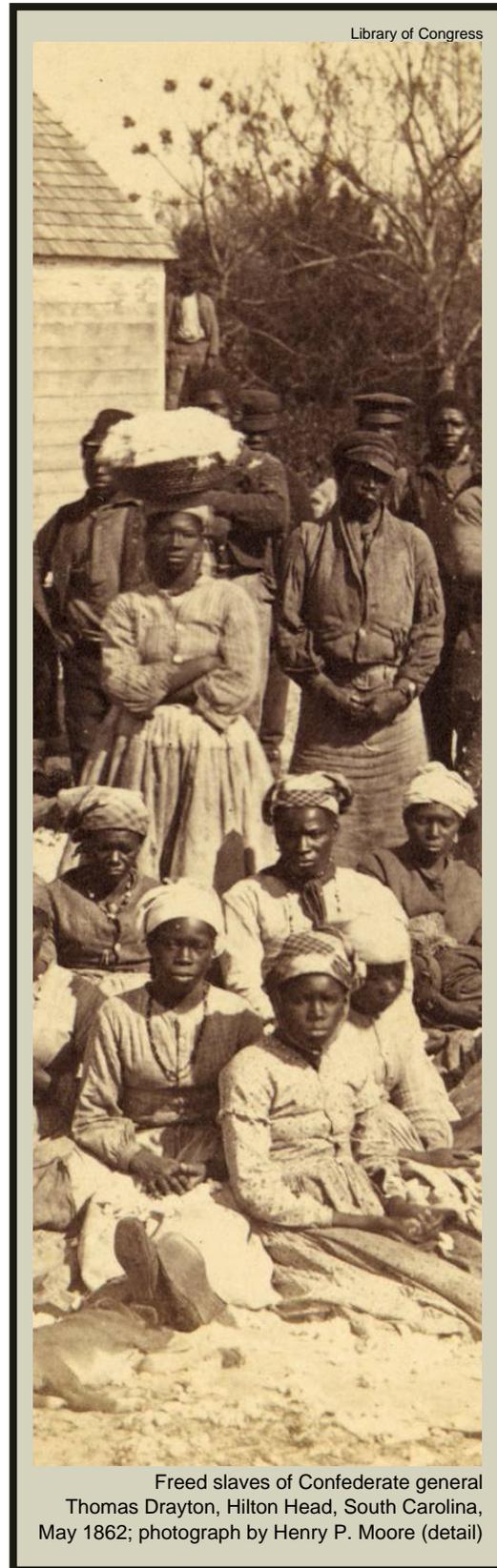
I think Abraham Lincoln wanted to give the people some land after they was free, but they didn't give 'em nothin' — just turned em loose.

Course we ought to be free — you know privilege is worth everything.

SUSA LAGRONE, enslaved in Mississippi,  
interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937 ■

■ I was living in Bartow County in north Georgia when freedom came, I don't remember how the slaves found it out. I remember them saying, "Well, they's all free." And that is all I remember. And I remember some one saying — asking a question, "You got to say master?" And somebody answered and said, "Naw." But they said it all the same. They said it for a long time. But they learned better though.

SARAH JANE PATTERSON, enslaved in Georgia,  
interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937 ■



When the war ended mother went to old marster and told him she was goin' to leave. He told her she could not feed all her children, pay house rent, and buy wood, to stay on with him. Marster told father and mother they could have the house free and wood free, an' he would help them feed the children, but mother said, "No, I am goin' to leave. I have never been free and I am goin' to try it. I am goin' away and by my work and the help of the Lord I will live somehow." Marster then said, "Well stay as long as you wish, and leave when you get ready, but wait until you find a place to go, and leave like folks." Marster allowed her to take all her things with her when she left. The white folks told her goodbye.

HANNAH PLUMMER, enslaved in North Carolina, interviewed in North Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

When President Lincoln issued his proclamation, freeing the negroes, I remember that my father and most all of the other younger slave men left the farms to join the Union army. We had hard times then for awhile and had lots of work to do. I don't remember just when I first regarded myself as "free" as many of the negroes didn't understand just what it was all about.

MARY CRANE, enslaved in Kentucky, interviewed in Indiana, ca. 1937 ■

Yes sir, I was 'bout fourteen years old when President Lincoln set us all free in 1863. The war was still goin' on and I'm tellin' you right when I say that my folks and friends round me did not regard freedom as a unmixed blessin'.

We didn't know where to go or what to do, and so we stayed right where we was, and there wasn't much difference to our livin', 'cause we had always had a plenty to eat and wear. I 'member my mammy tellin' me that food was gittin' scarce, and any black folks beginnin' to scratch for themselves would suffer, if they take their foot in their hand and ramble 'bout the land lak a wolf.

DANIEL WARING, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in South Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

You ain't gwine [going] to believe dat de slaves on our plantation didn't stop workin' for old marster, even when they was told dat they was free. Us didn't want no more freedom than us was gittin' on our plantation already. Us knowed too well dat us was well took care of, wid a plenty of vittles to eat and tight log and board houses to live in. 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 in South Carolina, interviewed in South Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

The Master he says we are all free, but it don't mean we is white. And it don't mean we is equal. Just equal for to work and earn our own living and not depend on him for no more meats and clothes.

GEORGE KING, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in Oklahoma, ca. 1937 ■

The day of freedom come around just [like] any other day, except the Master say for me to bring up the horses, we is going to town. That's when he hears about the slaves being free. We gets to the town and the Master goes into the store. It's pretty early but the streets was filled with folks talking and I wonder what makes the Master in such a hurry when he comes out of the store.

He gets on his horse and tells me to follow fast. When we gets back to the plantation he sounds the horn calling the slaves. They come in from the fields and meet 'round back of the kitchen building that stood separate from the Master's house. They all keeps quiet while the Master talks! "You-all is free now, and all the rest of the slaves is free too. Nobody owns you now and nobody going to wup you anymore!" That was good news, I reckon, but nobody know what to do about it.

The crops was mostly in and the Master wants the folks to stay 'til the crop is finished. They talk about it the rest of that day. They wasn't no celebration 'round the place, but they wasn't no work after the Master tells us we is free. Nobody leave the place though. Not 'til in the fall when the work is

through. Then some of us go into the town and gets work 'cause everybody knows the Allison slaves was the right kind of folks to have around.

That was the first money I earn and then I have to learn how to spend it. That was the hardest part 'cause the prices was high and the wages was low.

WILLIAM HUTSON, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Oklahoma, 1937 ■

■ Marse Bob knowed me better'n most the slaves, 'cause I was round the house more. One day he called all the slaves to the yard. He only had sixty-six then, 'cause he had [di]'vided with his son and daughter when they married. He made a little speech. He said, "I'm going to a war, but I don't think I'll be gone long, and I'm turnin' the overseer off and leavin' Andrew in charge of the place, and I wants everything to go on, just like I was here. Now, you all mind what Andrew says, 'cause if you don't, I'll make it rough on you when I come back home." He was jokin', though, 'cause he wouldn't have done nothing to them.

Then he said to me, "Andrew, you is old 'nough to be a man and look after things. Take care of Missus and see that none the niggers wants [lacks for anything], and try to keep the place going."

We didn't know what the war was 'bout, but master was gone four years. When Old Missus heard from him, she'd call all the slaves and tell us the news and read us his letters. Little parts of it she wouldn't read. We never heard of him gittin' hurt none, but if he had, Old Missus wouldn't tell us, 'cause the niggers used to cry and pray over him all the time. We never heard tell what the war was 'bout.

When Marse Bob come home, he sent for all the slaves. He was sittin' in a yard chair, all tuckered out, and shuck hands all round, and said he's glad to see us. Then he said, "I got something to tell you. You is jus' as free as I is. You don't 'long to nobody but you'selves. We went to the war and fought, but the Yankees done whup us, and they say the niggers is free. You can go where you wants to go, or you can stay here, jus' as you likes." He couldn't help but cry.

The niggers cry and don't know much what Marse Bob means. They is sorry 'bout the freedom, 'cause they don't know where to go, and they's allus 'pend [always depend] on Old Marse to look after them. Three families went to get farms for theyselves, but the rest just stay on for hands on the old place.

The Federals has been comin' by, even 'fore Old Marse come home. They all come by, carryin' they little budgets [pouches], and if they was walkin' they'd look in the stables for a horse or mule, and they jus' took what they wanted of corn or livestock. They done the same after Marse Bob come home. He jus' said, "Let them go they way, 'cause that's what they're going to do, anyway." We was scarer of them than we was of the debbil. But they spoke right kindly to us cullud folks. They said, "If you got a good master and want to stay, well, you can do that, but now you can go where you want to, 'cause ain't nobody going to stop you."



Andrew Goodman

*"Then he said, 'I got something to tell you. You is jus' as free as I is. You don't 'long to nobody but you'selves.'"*



George Simmons

*"We didn' know what to do and we didn' know how to keep ourselves."*

The niggers can't hardly git used to the idea. When they wants to leave the place, they still go up to the big house for a pass. They jus' can't understand 'bout the freedom. Old Marse or Missus say, "You don't need no pass. All you got to do is jus' take you foot in you hand and go."

ANDREW GOODMAN, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

■ Massa, he tell us when freedom come, and some of stays 'round awhile, 'cause whar is we'uns goin'?' We didn' know what to do and we didn' know how to keep ourselves, and what was we to do to get food and a place to live? Dose was ha'd times, 'cause de country tore up and de business bad.

GEORGE SIMMONS, enslaved in Alabama and Texas, interviewed in Texas, 1937 ■

■ Old Marster was too old to go to the war. He had one son was a soldier, but he never come home again. I never seen a soldier till the war was over and they begin to come back to the farms. We half-grown niggers had to work the farm, because all the farmers had to give — I believe it was a tenth — of their crops to help feed the soldiers. So we didn't know nothing about what was going on, no more than a hog. It was a long time before we knowed we was free. Then one night Old Marster come to our house and he say he wants to see us all before breakfast tomorrow morning and to come on over to his house. He got something to tell us.

Next morning we went over there. . . I just spoke sassy-like and say, "Old Marster, what you got to tell us?" My mother said, "Shut your mouth, fool. He'll whip you!" And Old Marster say, "No I won't whip you. Never no more, Sit down thar all of you and listen to what I got to tell you. I hates to do it but I must. You all ain't my niggers no more. You is free. Just as free as I am. Here I have raised you all to work for me, and now you are going to leave me. I am an old man, and I can't get along without you. I don't know what I am going to do." Well sir, it killed him. He was dead in less than ten months.

Everybody left right now, but me and my brother and another fellow. Old Marster fooled us to believe we was duty-bound to stay with him till we was all twenty-one. But my brother, that boy was stubborn. Soon he say he ain't going to stay there. And he left. In about a year, maybe less, he come back and he told me I didn't have to work for Old Goforth. I was free, sure enough free, and I went with him and he got me a job railroading. . . .

I remember so well how the roads was full of folks walking and walking along when the niggers were freed. Didn't know where they was going. Just going to see about something else somewhere else. Meet a body in the road and they ask, "Where you going?" "Don't know." "What you going to do?" "Don't know." And then sometimes we would meet a white man and he would say, "How you like to come work on my farm?" And we say, "I don't know." And then maybe he say, "If you come work for me on my farm, when the crops is in I give you five bushels of corn, five gallons of molasses, some ham-meat, and



all your clothes and vittals while you works for me.” Alright! That’s what I do. And then something begins to work up here (touching his forehead with his fingers). I begins to think and to know things. And I know then I could make a living for my own self, and I never had to be a slave no more.

ROBERT FALLS, enslaved in North Carolina, interviewed in Tennessee, ca. 1937 ■

After the War, Master Colonel Sims went to git the mail and so he call Daniel Ivory, the overseer, and say to him, “Go round to all the quarters and tell all the niggers to come up, I got a paper to read to ’em. They’re free now, so you kin git you another job, ’cause I ain’t got no more niggers which is my own.” Niggers come up from the cabins nappy-headed, jest lak they gwine to the field. Master Colonel Sims say, “Caroline (that’s my mammy), you is free as me. Pa said bring you back and I’se gwina do jest that. So you go on and work and I’ll pay you and your three oldest chillun \$10.00 a month a head and \$4.00 fer Harriet,” that’s me, and then he turned to the rest and say “Now all you’uns will receive \$10.00 a head till the crops is laid by.” Don’t you know before he got half way thoo’, over half them niggers was gone.

HARRIET ROBINSON, enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Oklahoma, 1937 ■

Now do you know why dey [Confederate regiment] raised dat white flag? Well, honey, dat white flag wuz a token dat Lee had surrendered. Glory! Glory! yes, child the Negroes are free, an’ when they knew dat dey were free dey, Oh! Baby! began to sing:

“Mamy don’t yo’ cook no mo’,  
Yo’ ar’ free, yo’ ar’ free.  
Rooster don’t yo’ crow no mo’,  
Yo’ ar’ free, yo’ ar’ free.  
Ol’ hen, don’t yo’ lay no mo’ eggs,  
Yo’ free, yo’ free.

Sech rejoicing an’ shoutin’, you never he’rd in you’ life.

FANNIE BERRY, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Virginia, 1937 ■

[After freedom was declared] I went down to Augusta [Georgia] to de Freedman’s Bureau to see if twas true we wuz free. I reckon dere was over a hundred people dere. De man got up and stated to de people: “You all is jus’ as free as I am. You ain’t got no mistis and no marster. Work when you want.” On Sunday morning Old Marster sont de house gal and tell us to all come to de house. He said:

“What I want to send for you all is to tell you dat you are free. You hab de privilege to go anywhah you want, but I don’t want none o’ you to leave me now. I wants you-all to stay right wid me. if you stay, you must’ sign to it.”

I asked him: “What you want me to sign for? I is free.”

“Dat will hold me to my word and hold you to yo’ word,” he say.

All my folks sign it, but I wouldn’t sign. Marster call me up and say: “Willis, why wouldn’t you sign? I say: “If I is already free, I don’t need to sign no paper. If I was workin’ for you and doin’ for you befo’ I got free, I kin do it still, if you wants me to stay wid you.”

My father and mother tried to git me to sign, but I wouldn’t sign. My mother said: “You oughter sign. How you know Marster gwine pay?” I say: “Den I kin go somewhere else.”

Marster pay first class hands \$14.00 a month, other hands \$10.00, and den on down to five and six dollars. He give rations like dey always have. When Christmas come, all come up to be paid off. Den he calls me. Ask whar is me? I was standin’ roun’ de corner of de house. “Come up here, Willis,” he say. “You didn’t sign dat paper but I reckon I hab to pay you too.” He paid me and my wife \$180.00. I said, “Well, you-all thought he wouldn’t pay me, but I got my money too.”

“UNCLE WILLIS” [no surname given in records], enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Georgia, ca. 1937 ■

I ’lieve they ought to have gived us somethin’ when we was freed, but they turned us out to graze or starve. Most of the white people turned the Negroes slam loose. We stayed a year with missis and

then she married and her husband had his own workers and told us to git out. We worked for twenty and thirty cents a day then, and I fin'ly got a place with Dr. L. J. Conroe. But after the war the Negro had a hard struggle, 'cause he was turned loose jus' like he came into the world and no education or 'sperience.

TOM HOLLAND, enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

■ The war was begun and there were stories of fights and freedom. The news went from plantation to plantation and while the slaves acted natural and some even more polite than usual, they prayed for freedom. Then one day I heard something that sounded like thunder and missus and marster began to walk around and act queer. The grown slaves were whispering to each other. Sometimes they gathered in little gangs in the grove. Next day I heard it again, boom, boom, boom. I went and asked missus "is it going to rain?" She said, "Mary, go to the ice house and bring me some pickles and preserves." I went and got them. She ate a little and gave me some. Then she said, "You run along and play."

In a day or two everybody on the plantation seemed to be disturbed and marster and missus were crying. Marster ordered all the slaves to come to the great house at nine o'clock. Nobody was working and slaves were walking over the grove in every direction. At nine o'clock all the slaves gathered at the great house and marster and missus came out on the porch and stood side by side. You could hear a pin drop everything was so quiet. Then marster said, "Good morning," and missus said, "Good morning, children." They were both crying. Then marster said, "Men, women and children, you are free. You are no longer my slaves. The Yankees will soon be here."

Marster and missus then went into the house, got two large arm chairs, put them on the porch facing the avenue, and sat down side by side and remained there watching. In about an hour there was one of the blackest clouds coming up the avenue from the main road. It was the Yankee soldiers, they finally filled the mile long avenue reaching from marster's house to the main Louisburg road and spread out over the mile square grove. The mounted men dismounted. The footmen stacked their shining guns and began to build fires and cook. They called the slaves, saying "You are free." Slaves were whooping and laughing and acting like they were crazy. Yankee soldiers were shaking hands with the Negroes and calling them Sam, Dinah, Sarah, and asking them questions. They busted the door to the smoke house and got all the hams. They went to the icehouse and got several barrels of brandy, and such a time. The Negroes and Yankees were cooking and eating together. The Yankees told them to come on and join them, they were free.

Marster and missus sat on the porch and they were so humble no Yankee bothered anything in the great house. The slaves were awfully excited. The Yankees stayed there, cooked, eat, drank and played music until about night, then a bugle began to blow and you never saw such getting on horses and lining up in your life. In a few minutes they began to march, leaving the grove which was soon silent as a grave yard. They took marster's horses and cattle with them and joined the main army and camped just across Cypress Creek . . .

When they left the country [area], lot of the slaves went with them and soon there were none of



marster's slaves left. They wandered around for a year from place to place, fed and working most of the time at some other slave owner's plantation and getting more homesick every day.

The second year after the surrender our marster and missus got on their carriage and went and looked up all the Negroes they heard of who ever belonged to them. Some who went off with the Yankees were never heard of again. When marster and missus found any of theirs they would say, "Well, come on back home." My father and mother, two uncles and all their families moved back. Several of the young men and women who once belonged to him came back. Some were so glad to get back they cried, 'cause fare [food] had been mighty bad part of the time they were rambling around and they were hungry. When they got back marster would say, "Well you have come back home, have you," and the Negroes would say, "Yes marster." Most all spoke of them as missus and marster as they did before the surrender, and getting back home was the greatest pleasure of all.

MARY ANDERSON, enslaved in North Carolina,  
interviewed in North Carolina, 1937 ■

■ The master's name was usually adopted by a slave after he was set free. This was done more because it was the logical thing to do and the easiest way to be identified than it was through affection for the master. Also, the government seemed to be in a almighty hurry to have us get names. We had to register as someone, so we could be citizens. Well, I got to thinking about all us slaves that was going to take the name Fitzpatrick. I made up my mind I'd find me a different one. One of my grandfathers in Africa was called Jeaceo, and so I decided to be Jackson.

MARTIN JACKSON, enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Texas, 1937 ■

■ Lawd, Lawd, honey! It seems impossible dat any of us ev'r lived to see dat day of freedom, but thank God we did.

When ole marster comes down in de cotton patch to tells us 'bout bein' free, he say, "I hates to tell you but I knows I's got to, you is free, jes' as free as me or anybody else whats white." We didn' hardly know what he means. We jes' sort of huddle 'round together like scared rabbits, but after we knowed what he mean, didn' many of us go, 'cause we didn' know where to of went. Ole marster he say he give us de woods land and half of what we make on it, and we could clear it and work it or starve. Well, we didn' know hardly what to do 'cause he jes' gives us some ole dull hoes an' axes to work with but we all went to work and as we cut down de trees and de poles he tells us to build de fence 'round de field and we did, and when we plants de co'n and de cotton we jes' plant all de fence corners full too, and I never seen so much stuff grow in all my born days, several ears of co'n to de stalk and dem big cotton stalks was a layin' over on de ground. . . we was a gittin' goin' now and 'fore long we was a buildin' better houses and feelin' kind of happy like.

JENNY PROCTOR, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

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Jenny Proctor

*"It seems impossible dat any of us ev'r lived to see dat day of freedom."*



Martin Jackson

*"One of my grandfathers in Africa was called Jeaceo, and so I decided to be Jackson."*

■ The Yankees didn't come around our plantation during the war. All we heard was "They'll kill all the slaves," and such hearing was a plenty!

After the war some man come to the plantation and told the field negroes they was free. But he didn't know about the cabin we lived in and didn't tell my folks about it. They learned about the freedom from the old Master.

That was some days after the man left the place. The Master called my mother and father into the Big House and told them they were free. Free like him. But he didn't want my folks to leave and they stayed, stayed there three year after they was free to go anywhere they wanted.

The master paid them \$200 a month to work for him and that wasn't so much if you stop to figure there was two grown folks and thirteen children who could do plenty of work around the place.

But that money paid for an 89-acre farm my folks bought not far from the old plantation and they move onto it three year after the freedom come.

MATTIE LOGAN, enslaved in Mississippi, interviewed in Oklahoma, ca. 1937 ■

■ When the word get to us that the slaves is free, the Mistress says I is free to go anywheres I want. And I tell her this talk about being free sounds like foolishment to me — anyway, where can I go? She just pat me on the shoulder and say I better stay right there with her, and that's what I do for a long time. Then I hears about how the white folks down at Dallas pays big money for house girls and there I goes.

ESTHER EASTER, enslaved in Missouri, interviewed in Oklahoma, ca. 1937 ■

■ After de war we stayed until old Master died. It broke us all up for we knowed we had lost de best friend dat we ever had or ever would have. He was sort of father to all of us. Old Mistress went to live with her daughter and we started wandering 'round. Some folks from de North come down and made de cullud folks move on. I guess dey was afraid dat we'd hep our masters rebuild dey homes again. We lived in a sort of bondage for a long time.

De white folks in de South as well as de cullud folks lost de best friend dey had when Able Lincoln was killed. He was God's man and it was a great loss when he died.

God created us all free and equal. Somewhere along de road we lost out.

JAMES SOUTHALL, enslaved in Tennessee, interviewed in Oklahoma, 1937 ■

■ When I was freed I felt like I was goin' into a new world. It was de daughter of de old mistress what told me I was as free as dey was. It was dangerous around de house durin' of de war. So de old mistress broke up de old place and us boys was given to our godmother. Mary was my godmother and it was here I was told dat I was free. We was little and didn't know which way to go. My mistress said, "Now Peter, you are free and de first chance we get we are going to send for your aunt to come and get you." Dere were four of us brothers bein' taken' care of by four sisters, when we was free. My uncle was in de army and served two years and had come home. He asked my aunt, "Where are dose boys?" My aunt said, "Dey is still with de white folks." So my uncle come to get us. When he come he rid up and we was so glad to see him we run out and met him. He said, "Boys, I've come after you."

We walked up to de house. Den de white folks was just as glad to see Uncle Julius as if he had been their brother. Den Uncle Julius said to my godmother, Mary, "Well, Miss Evely, I come after Pete." She said, "Julius, I'm awful glad you've come to get him, I hate to give him up, but take him and take good care of him."

PETER CORN, enslaved in Missouri, interviewed in Missouri, ca. 1937 ■

■ When freedom come I asked my old owner to please let me stay on wid dem, I didn't have no whar to go no how. So he just up and said "Ann, you can stay here if you want to, but I ain't goin to give you nothing but your victuals and clothes enough to cover your hide, not a penny in money, do no nigger get from me." So I up and said, "why boss, dey tells me dat since freedom we git a little change," and he cursed me to all de low names he could think of and drove me out like a dog.

ANNE ULRICH EVANS, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Missouri, ca. 1937 ■

Frank Mason was a young man when de War started, living wid his mother [in Richmond, Virginia]. Dey had lots of slaves, maybe a hundred, and dey always try to take good care of 'em; even after de War was over he worried 'bout trying to get us settled so's we wouldn't starve. . . .

All de way from Richmond to a place dey call Waco, Texas, we traveled by ox-wagon and boats, and den de Master figures we all be better off over in Arkansas and goes to Pine Bluff.

What wid all de running 'round de slaves was kept clean and always wid plenty to eat and good clothes to wear. De Master was a plenty rich man and done what his mother, Mrs. Betsy Mason, told him when we all left de Big Mansion, way back dere in Richmond. De Mistress said, "Frank, you watch over dem Negroes cause dey's good men and women; keep dem clean!" Dat's what he done, up until we was freed, and den times was so hard nobody wanted us many Negroes around, and de work was scarce, too. Hard times! Folks don't know what hard times is. . . .

I was at Pine Bluff when de Yankees was shooting all over de place. De fighting got so hot we all had to leave; dat's the way it was all de time for us de War — running away to some place or de next place, and we was all glad when it stopped and we could settle down in a place.

We was back at Waco when de peace come, but Master Frank was away from home when dat happen. It was on a Sunday when he got back and called all de slaves up in de yard and counted all of dem, young and old.

The first thing he said was, "You men and women is all free! I'm going back to my own mammy in old Virginia, but I ain't going back until all de old people is settled in cabins and de young folks fix up wid tents!"

Den he kinder stopped talking. Seem now like he was too excited to talk, or maybe he was feeling bad and worried 'bout what he going to do wid all of us. Pretty soon he said, "You men and women, can't none of you tell anybody I ain't always been a good master. Old folks, have I ever treated you mean?" he asked. Everybody shout, "No, sir!" And Master Frank smiled; den he told us he was going 'round and find places for us to live.

He went to see Jim Tinsley, who owned some slaves, about keeping us. Tinsley said he had cabins and could fix up tents for extra ones, if his own Negroes was willing to share up with us. Dat was the way it worked out. We stayed on dere for a while, but times was so hard we finally get dirty and ragged like all de Tinsley Negroes. But Master Frank figure he done the best he could for us.

After he go back to Virginia we never hear no more of him, but every day I still pray if he has any folks in Richmond dey will find me someway before I die. Is dere some way I could find dem, you s'pose?

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Mary Crane

*"I don't remember just when I first regarded myself as 'free' as many of the negroes didn't understand just what it was all about."*



Felix Haywood

*"We soon found out that freedom could make folks proud but it didn't make them rich."*

LIZA SMITH, enslaved in Virginia and Texas,  
interviewed in Oklahoma, ca. 1937 ■

